



BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE SOUTHERN GATES
OF ARABIA

"These two books ('The Southern Gates of Arabia' and 'The Valleys of the Assassins') will be read for many years to come. I do not see how they can avoid their obvious destiny—inclusion at last in the aristocracy of letters."—HOWARD SPRING *in the Evening Standard*.





*Freya Stark,
from a pencil sketch by Dorothy Hawksley.*

The Valleys of the Assassins

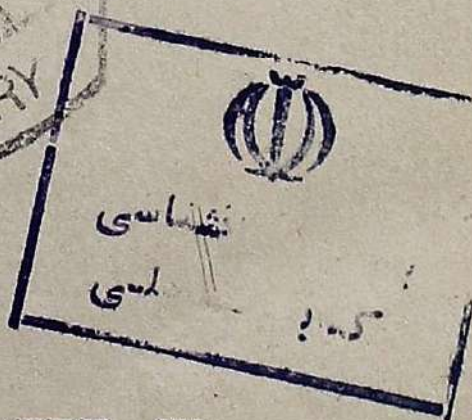
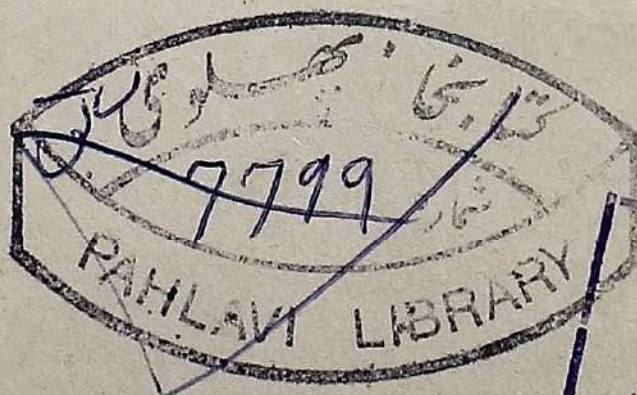
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Other Persian Travels

by

FREYA STARK

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To W. P. KER

In Loving Memory

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PREFACE

AN IMAGINATIVE AUNT WHO, FOR MY NINTH BIRTHDAY, SENT A copy of the *Arabian Nights*, was, I suppose, the original cause of trouble.

Unfostered and unnoticed, the little flame so kindled fed secretly on dreams. Chance, such as the existence of a Syrian missionary near my home, nourished it; and Fate, with long months of illness and leisure, blew it to a blaze bright enough to light my way through labyrinths of Arabic, and eventually to land me on the coast of Syria at the end of 1927.

Here, I thought, all difficulty was over: I had now but to look around me, to learn, and to enjoy.

And so it would have been had not those twin Virtues so fatal to the *joie de vivre* of our civilized West, the sense of responsibility and the illusion, dear to well-regulated minds, that every action must have a purpose—had not these virtues of Responsibility and Purpose met me at every step with the embarrassing enquiry: “*Why* are you here alone?” and: “*What* do you intend to *do*?”

I may confess at once that I had never thought of why I came, far less of why I came alone: and as to what I was going to do—I saw no cause to trouble about a thing so nebulous beforehand. My sense of responsibility was in effect deficient, and purpose non-existent. When excessively badgered, the only explanation I could think of for being so unwantedly

Preface

in Asia was an interest in Arabic grammar—a statement rarely accepted in that candid spirit in which I offered it to unconvinced enquirers.

I came to the conclusion that some more ascetic reason than mere enjoyment should be found if one wishes to travel in peace: to do things for fun smacks of levity, immorality almost, in our utilitarian world. And though personally I think the world is wrong, and I know in my heart of hearts that it is a most excellent reason to do things merely because one likes the doing of them, I would advise all those who wish to see unwrinkled brows in passport offices to start out ready labelled as entomologists, anthropologists, or whatever other -ology they think suitable and propitious.

But as this book is intended for the Public, and is therefore necessarily truthful, I must admit that for my own part I travelled single-mindedly for fun. I learned my scanty Arabic for fun, and a little Persian—and then went for the same reason to look for the Assassin castles and the Luristan bronzes in the manner here related. And here I would like to thank the much-tried, frequently accused, and not unreasonably perplexed officials who came across me, for much indulgence, not always unmixed with disapproval, but invariably kind.

I have given events and impressions as they occurred, as accurately as I could. This I am particularly anxious to say in regard to the Treasure Hunt in Luristan, which might otherwise be suspected of fantasy by readers unacquainted with lands so sensational: the only alteration made there is to disguise the situation of the treasure map and cave.

I have many to remember who were good to me in my

Preface

journeying, British, Arabic, and Persian, whose presence lives in the enchanted frame of days and whose kindnesses are beyond the possibility of recording.

FREYA STARK,

Villa Freia
Asolo
Italy

Apart from much help and encouragement, I must also thank the Royal Geographical Society for permission to use in this book two maps first published by them, and to reprint the article on Lamiasar.

Deagan and Muhl

PART I. LURISTAN

Chapter I. A Fortnight in N.W. Luristan

Chapter II. The Hidden Treasure



پیش از اتمام
کتابخانه ملی

No. 2442

Chapter III

A JOURNEY TO THE VALLEY OF THE ASSASSINS

THE ASSASSINS WERE A PERSIAN SECT. THEY WERE A BRANCH of the Isma'ili, who were a branch of the Shi'a, who still constitute practically the whole of Persia and give particular veneration to Muhammad's son-in-law 'Ali and the Imams of his house. The Isma'ili broke away from them over the succession to the seventh Imam Ja'far. But it is not their theology which is interesting so much as their politics. They were exploited by an able and unscrupulous Persian family then settled in Palestine, who devoted themselves to the undermining and gradual destruction of every kind of faith by a system of initiation subtly graded for all stages of superstition and belief till, in its highest ranks, it seems to have culminated in absolute free thinking. They established the principle of obedience to one of their own family as the depositary of the Divine Wisdom, and having seated themselves on the throne of Egypt, under the name of Fatimite caliphs, they increased in wealth and power, encouraged the love of learning for its own sake, and, alone among the nations of their day, practised religious toleration.

Egypt truly became for a short time the centre of civilization; and the Isma'ilian propagandist could be met with from Morocco to China. One such came into contact with a young Persian Shi'ite of Rei called Hasan-i-Sabbah, who joined the sect in the year A.D. 1071. He was to become the first Grand Master of the Assassins.

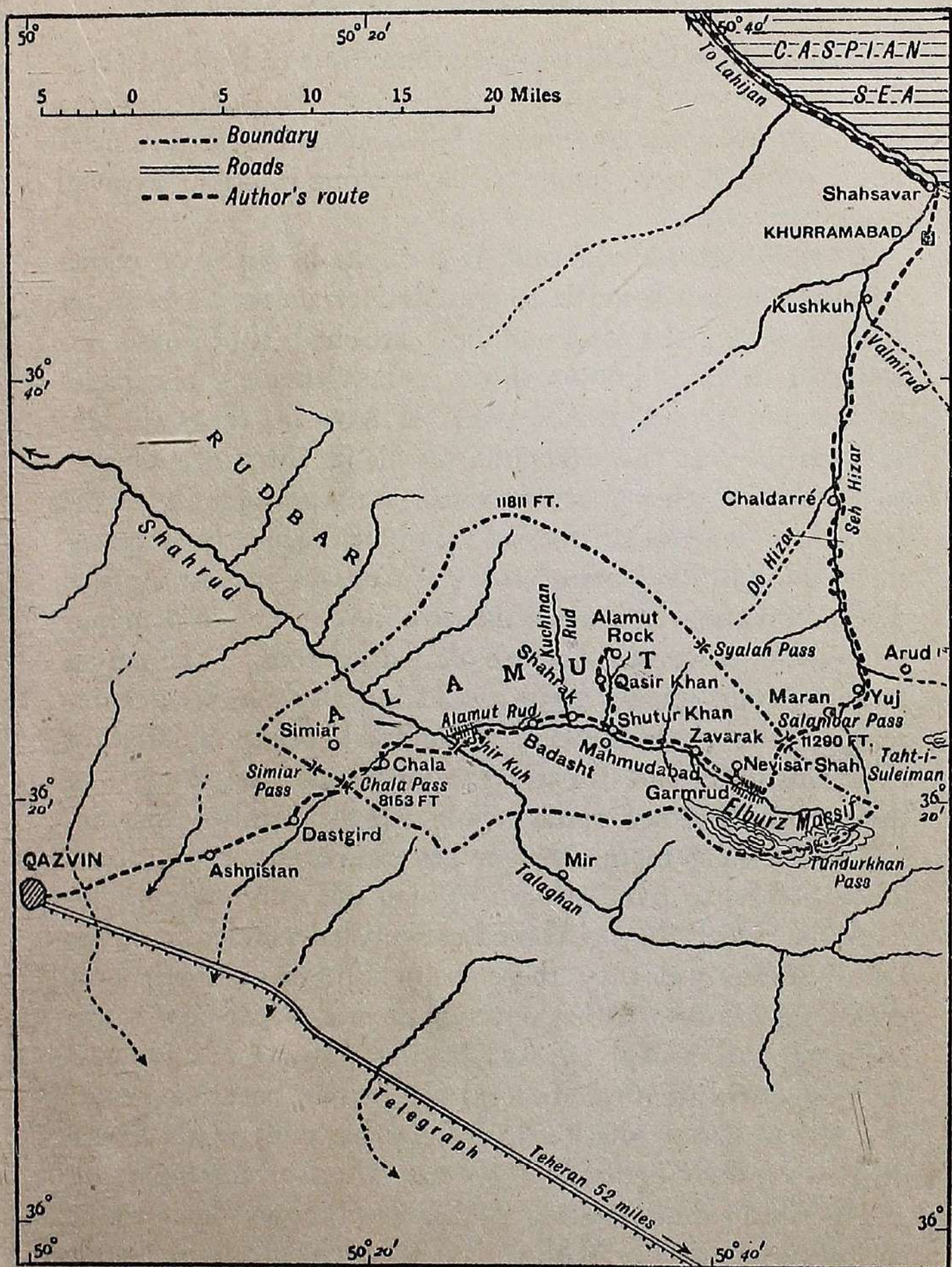
Such adventurers have ever been numerous in Persia.

A Journey to the Valley of the Assassins

But the young Hasan did more than most of his kind for—apparently out of his own inventiveness—he brought a new idea into the political science of his day and treated murder as the suffragette the hunger strike, turning it into an avowed political weapon.

Even in his own lifetime it brought him power which spread from north Persia to the Mediterranean. The secret garden where he drugged and attached to himself his followers became known through the Crusaders' chronicles in Europe, giving us our word of Assassin, or Hashishin. He was the fear and execration of his neighbours. Unable to touch him, they reacted against the whole family of the Isma'ilians, who had further added to their crimes by developing a bloodthirsty branch of Carmathians in east Arabia. The perfunctory censure of the orthodox turned to denunciation as the movement became more dangerous. The parent sect in Egypt, together with the Fatimite caliphs who represented it, now a feeble crew, paid for the unpopularity of their offspring and for their own degeneracy by going down altogether before the Seljuks and the family of Saladin.

The Assassins themselves, however, continued to prosper. They had taken over some Isma'ilian and other strongholds in Syria, which they governed as semi-independent colonies from Persia, and they there came into contact with the crusading princes. It has never been made clear how much the organization of the great Christian fighting orders owed to this unchristian confraternity. It has been suggested that the Order of the Templars was based in some degree on that of their opponents: a comparison of the hierarchy and general administration of the two shows them to be curiously identical; and this may have lent a certain colour to rumours and accusations which brought about the Templars' downfall when, later on, their riches tempted the



Emery Walker Ltd. sc.

[See also folding map of Mazanderan]

A Journey to the Valley of the Assassins

lawyers of Philippe le Bel. By then the Assassins had ceased to be an active power.

No longer independent, the Syrian Fedawis degenerated from martyrs into professional murderers. In the days of Ibn Batuta their crimes used to be paid for in advance: if they survived, they enjoyed their earnings, which otherwise went to support their families. They are now quiet country people, and talk freely of anything except their religion.

But in Persia the Mongol armies came from the east and in 1256 under Hulagu Khan took the Assassin fortresses one after the other. The central stronghold of Alamut might and should have held out. It stands in an impregnable valley south of the Caspian in the legendary mountain range of the earliest fabulous Persian kings. Hasan had come there when, nearing forty, a failure and an exile from both the Turkish and the Egyptian courts, he decided to carve his own way unaided, and had spread his propaganda for nine years through Persia and Khorasan: and the tale has it that after being the governor's guest and seeing the matchless strength of the position, he returned and obtained it in 1091, seemingly by friendly means; and never left it until his death thirty-four years later. He lived there with his secret garden and his devoted Fedawis around him, and combined assassination with the liberal arts in his efficient way. But after nearly two hundred years, madness and weakness came upon the sovereigns of Alamut. Rukneddin, a hostage among the Mongols, ordered his unwilling garrisons to surrender before Mangu the Great Khan caused him to be murdered as he travelled, a prisoner, through the passes of the hills; and his posterity, migrating southward to Qum and thence to Sindh, continued in the spiritual headship of the Isma'ilians who still exist scattered from India to Persia and Zanzibar. H.H. the Agha Khan receives, as head of the

A picnic by the road

sect, the tithe instituted by Hasan-i-Sabbah: his family's right to it was investigated and confirmed during a law-suit before the High Court in Bombay in 1866, wherein their lineal descent from the Old Man of the Mountains was proven: perhaps no one now living, and perhaps no one among the ruling families of the world, can boast so romantic and unusual an ancestry. But the Assassins' valley and the Rock of Alamut no longer know their ancient lords.

I had long wished to go there. But there were obstacles. One of them was that I could not find it on my map. There was Alamut district, but no Alamut village, nor indeed is there such a village, as I discovered when I reached the valley.

By dint of enquiries, I learned that Alamut has been visited eight or nine times at least by Europeans. One starts from Qazvin; one crosses the Talaghan range and reaches the Alamut River; and the castle is at a place called Qasir Khan on the left. That was as much as I knew: and with that I packed my bed and saddle-bags one May morning and started from Hamadan for Qazvin in a car with a Persian and two veiled ladies and a little girl, who were returning to Resht.

The day was fine; our party friendly. At noon we lunched by the roadside among young poplars, and bought eggs from an old man sitting in the dust. My fellow-travellers had been to a brother's funeral in Hamadan: they were now taking his small child home to marry their little boy later on: they would send her to school first, they said.

"In our country, if you marry them too young their children die," said I, trying to do the best I could for the little bride. She was seven years old.

"We shall wait another five years," said they.

The old lady, the brother's mother, dressed in the fashion

A Journey to the Valley of the Assassins

of her youth, with enormous full black trousers gathered and sewn into black socks so that she was encased altogether, was on her first journey. So was Fatima, and as gay over it as a sparrow. She and I amused ourselves by feeding a family of hens in the speckled shade of the young trees: her uncle gave us glasses of pale tea. Along the dusty road cars sped by: two British officers in sun helmets: they would be shocked if they noticed me sitting here like a gipsy. Luckily I was beneath their notice: I was free of all that: the empty Persian plains were around me, and crested mountain ranges: the beautiful world, full of surprises, rushing through space we know not whither, was mine to do what I liked with for a while.

That evening from the Grand Hotel in Qazvin I sent my letters of introduction.

One of them produced the landlord himself, an old Parsee with a business eye and the most discriminating taste in Shiraz wine. The second produced Mr. Sookias, of the A.P.O.C., who introduced me to Armenian society at his wife's house and devoted himself most kindly to my enterprise. The third was from Bahai friends in Baghdad, and gave me my most charming acquaintance in Persia, Dr. As'ad el Hukuma, to whom the very hand of Fortune herself must have led me blindfold, for he and his brother are the present owners of the Rock of Alamut.

Apart from these, the city leaders who run the local politics and gesticulate over the daily papers in the dining-room of the Grand Hotel soon heard the news and gathered round to discuss history and advice. For once in a while, the explanations I could offer for my travels were sufficient and reasonable. They knew about Hasan-i-Sabbah: they thought it natural that one should journey from England to see his castle. The Persian's mind, like

Kerbelai 'Aziz

his illuminated manuscripts, does not deal in perspective: two thousand years, if he happens to know anything about them, are as exciting as the day before yesterday; and the country is full of obscure worshippers of leaders and prophets whom the rest of the world has long ago forgotten.

In the East, too, one may yet travel disinterestedly to acquire wisdom only, and I have entered a mosque where Christians are not encouraged by pleading that I came as a "seeker after truth." But it is a reason which is never worth offering to the police. The Commandant of Qazvin, when he came for his evening *apéritif* and heard about it all, looked dubiously upon me. If I had not been surrounded and supported by most of the Town Council, there would have been trouble.

Next morning, one of the enthusiasts sent me a servant. I did not know what to do about it, for I did not want him. He was small and cringing and cadaverous. Everything, even his skin, hung loose about him. He was so apologetic for existing at all that he seemed to be trying to shrink out of his own body into some even more insignificant nothingness. If one had wished to hang him up on a peg and forget him, which one would do very soon, there was nothing stiff enough to do it by except his high starched collar.

The Doctor saved me. He alone had actually been in the Alamut valley, and assured me—as I knew before—that a servant from the town could only cause vexation and trouble among the hillmen. He brought a man of his own, Kerbelai 'Aziz of Garmrud, a *charvardar* or muleteer who spends his life between the Caspian passes and was to answer for my comfort and safety: a bit of a man, with a straight nose and shrewd little eyes as good-humoured in expression as I afterwards found him to be. He would "be like my mother," he said, and twirled his ugly peaked cap in his

A Journey to the Valley of the Assassins

hands while the Doctor, portly, urbane, and slow, wrote for me to his brother in Shutur Khan.

Next morning we started.

The caravan was larger than I had imagined. Not only had 'Aziz brought Ismail and The Refuge of Allah, two sub-*charvardars* from Alamut, to do the work while he himself rode like a gentleman: but his mother, an eagle-faced old woman under a white cotton *chadur*, and his small sick son, were also on their way back to Garmrud. It was not my affair. I paid two tomans (4s.) a day and was to be provided with all I required, including food, for as long as I wished; and I was pleased with the company of the old lady, who was cheerful and friendly, would leap a torrent when necessary as if she were seventeen instead of seventy, and after a day's riding over the hills, would turn her attention to *pilaus* full of almonds and raisins, of which, like Dr. Johnson with his lemons in the Hebrides, I carried a store at my saddle-bow.

Little Muhammad seemed to be in the last stages of illness, unfit for riding on mules, and for hard-boiled eggs and *chupattis*, and I feared that we might have to bury him by the way. I gave advice, which was agreed to sadly, and disregarded: he took my biscuits, and proceeded to eat them as well as all the rest: and strange to say, got better day by day. His grandmother held him on her swaying high perch above the corded baggage, and whenever I turned round I saw his little peaked face against the receding landscape of the Qazvin plain.

The city wall crumbles there amid vines and yellow roses. We went north-east, and left the road, and made by a rough track for Ashnistan in the foothills across the desert in flower. The mountains were on our left. A far peak that shone with melting snow just showed above the nearer range whose long unbroken ridge ran brown and level from

The track from Qazvin

west to east. We approached it slowly, rising gently across the plain.

Far-spaced villages under trees, like islands, stood with cornfields around them; and black oxen busy at the ploughing: the peasants' cries came to us as they turned at the furrow's end. Between the villages, the desert grass already withering into summer was thick with flowers of many kinds, so that it was a joy to walk over, and 'Aziz, perspiring beside me, for he was too polite to ride when I walked, begged me to mount in vain.

The track goes beyond Ashnistan to a place of pilgrimage: but we left it and stayed in the village land among the foothills to rest through the hot hours beside a leat of running water, where the village itself, with flat roofs and arched mud gateway on a rise, and vines and fruit trees and a grassy glade of old mulberry trees where the crows cawed like English rooks in a park, were all hidden from us by poplar trees and willows.

I sent Ismail for "mast" or curds; the village headman came back with him, carrying them in a blue bowl, not too cordially: I was a Christian; he would not share my meal. But his two wives by and by adventured their less important souls with a little chicken, while the men smoked, and I lay in the grass and wished I knew the names of all the birds. The peasants were not unkind. My mountaineers despised them, and apologized.

"To-morrow," they said, "we shall be among our own people in the hills."

I thought of the Qadi of Qazvin, who used to walk abroad in the days of the Assassins dressed in a coat of mail against the hillmen: no doubt the mutual opinions of highlander and lowlander are always much the same.

The rich land of Ashnistan ended with the suddenness

A Journey to the Valley of the Assassins

peculiar to the East, and we spent the afternoon climbing easily through folds of small uncultivated valleys, very barren. The sun shone in a pleasant loneliness. We met no human beings save two men with sticks and loose cotton trousers, travellers from the hills. An eagle on a rock turned his flat head and yellow eyes upon us, but did not move till Ismail, creeping up, frightened it with a stone, and came leaping back amused at my reproaches.

I liked my escort. I was their first European. They treated me with easy charming courtesy, as one of themselves, and tried to please me with stories and slow melancholy ballads and flowers brought with both hands outstretched in the pretty Persian gesture, which must surely originally be the same as the feudal giving of hands in homage.

When we reached some little trickle of water oozing out of the hillside among kingcups, The Refuge of Allah filled his black felt cap like a round bowl and offered it as the ballad knight his helmet. Black hair fell about his ears and made a wild frame for his high shaven forehead and brilliant eyes and meeting eyebrows. The tight blue cotton jerkin, a dirty old sash wrapped over it round the waist, a leather wallet behind for a knife, and the quaint black caps like overgrown skull caps, made these men look as if they belonged to some fifteenth-century Italian picture.

They were wild and simple and peaceful. They had not yet reached the point of sophistication where the miraculous is separated from everyday life, and were ready to believe anything in the vast and strange world. So they must have been when the philosopher of Rei tried his tricks upon them and gave them the dream of Paradise in exchange for their lives. They were faithful and devoted too. They separated the universe into two parts of which one was the Alamut valley: and by the third day I think they looked upon .

First day to Dastgird

me as having acquired its freedom, and took charge of my money and all that belonged to me far more carefully than I could have done for myself, and if we slept in a strange village of the plain, would group themselves round my camp bed on the ground, with their heads on the saddlebags, to guard my sleep—rather to my discomfort, I must say.

‘Aziz was superior to the other two, with a certain amount of knowledge picked up during his sojourns in Qazvin and Khurramabad on the coast—or Tanakabun as it is known locally. Between these two centres his life was spent like a weaver’s shuttle to and fro. He kept a shop, and could read and write, and has made the pilgrimage to the four Holy Cities of Iraq, walking stage by stage for a month across the Persian plateaux and ranges and the dreary Mesopotamian plain. He it was who ventured on a sardine out of my box, under the anxious gaze of all the party and several villagers, and with some nervousness of his own: that one should be able to carry these fish into the mountains seemed to all something so miraculously verging on magic that I had covert apprehensive glances from some who were not as sure of my harmlessness as my own *charvardars*.

In the late afternoon we reached Dastgird, at the foot of our first range. The Qazvin plain reappeared on the south, below the rounded foothills. Our mules had only walked for five hours, an easy first day’s stage, but the solitude and the slow dreamlike travelling in the sun already made it seem as if we were remote from the world’s business in some little backwater of time.

The village was small and poor, with a scanty supply of water which made its vines and apricots look stunted: and the people were fanatical and begged ‘Aziz in whispers not

A Journey to the Valley of the Assassins

to drink out of my cup—a piece of advice I was by no means unwilling he should take.

The Imams of Kadhimain seem to have scattered their families over this region: Musa's son Jacob has a little mosque here, with a tattered green shroud round the tomb and the hand of Abbas cut out in tin, all very poor and dilapidated: but the graveyard is grass-grown, surrounded by a low wall with the blue distance beyond it and a sycamore above, and this gives it an atmosphere of peace unusual to the bleak and dingy Moslem tombs.

'Aziz took me back through the village, a placid hen destined for *pilau* nestling in his arm, while the Elders, sitting over their long pipes in the sun, looked at us glumly. They did not come to call: they left us to the inferior company of the women, who were stingy with the melted butter, said the mother of 'Aziz after what sounded like a fight.

"They are people of the plain," she explained witheringly, the light of battle still in her eyes.

The highlands must have won again as usual, for when the *pilau* came she poured the butter over it in a rich stream amid a cowed but regretful silence. Sobs from a little girl whose parent had just saved her from my toffee added pathos to the scene. I was careful afterwards how I gave things to children, though I never met this sort of bigotry again.

Meanwhile it was depressing to sit in the midst of so much disapproval. It froze to horror when they saw me drinking tumblers of what 'Aziz told them was arak out of my water-bottle: and though my small gift next morning restored harmony, with embraces and protestations, I left Dastgird as prejudiced as any of the party against lowlands in general.

It was five-thirty, in the cool light before sunrise.

Men of Alamut

We climbed northward up a steep, open ravine or gully towards the Chala pass. The air grew more buoyant with the height, and fold upon fold of lower land gathered between us and the southern plain. On the shaly slopes there was little soil; hard thorny grass and flowers, larkspur and lavender, mignonette, lousewort, delicate frilled scabious, and a pink cruciform blossom, *æthionema*, which grew in tufts on the rocky ledges so thickly that it gave a faint colour to the snow- and sun-bleached valley. No plough land or human dwellings were here, except black nomad tents in a far corrie, where the wandering shepherd people take care of the village sheep through the summer.

"My flock is there," said 'Aziz, pointing to a far hill. "In the autumn they bring it back to me." He panted behind me, for I was leaping on, delighted with the mountain steepness underfoot.

We began to meet the stream of traffic which carries the Caspian rice across these passes. The rice is mentioned in a Chinese report of the second century, and is still carried along its ancient ways. The men from Alamut came striding down with their laden mules behind them. Their white frieze coats, fastened on one side, were wrapped tightly against the cold; the straight-stemmed Kurdish pipe stuck in their sashes; their henna'd red beards were trimmed short in the Moslem way. They had squarer faces than the townsfolk, with open brows and longish nose, straight or slightly curved, but not aquiline. They greeted us with jovial friendly greetings; looked at me wonderingly; and welcomed me to their country.

The small bells tied at the mules' hindquarters tinkled pleasantly through the still morning air as the long trains came down the zig-zag path. And after three and a half hours we came by the source of the stream; and after that

A Journey to the Valley of the Assassins

to the long whale's back of the ridge; and looked on the Alamut country below.

This is a great moment, when you see, however distant the goal of your wandering. The thing which has been living in your imagination suddenly becomes a part of the tangible world. It matters not how many ranges, rivers or parching dusty ways may lie between you: it is yours now for ever. So did those old Barbarians feel who first from the Alpine wall looked down upon the Lombard plain, and saw Verona and its towers and the white river bed below them: so did Xenophon and Cortez, and every adventurer and pilgrim, however humble, before them or after: and so did I as I looked over that wide country, intersected by red and black ranges, while the group of hillmen around me, delighted with my delight, pointed out the way to the Rock in a pale green cleft made small by distance far below.

There was the Assassins' valley, tilted north-eastward: before it, among lower ridges, the Shah Rud showed a gleaming bend. Beyond and higher than all, uplifted as an altar with black ridges rising to it through snowfields, Takht-i-Suleiman, Solomon's Throne, looked like a throne indeed in the great circle of its lesser peers. Its white drapery shone with the starched and flattened look of melting snow in the distance. The black rock arms of the chair were sharp against the sky.

Below it and nearer, but still above the snowline, were the passes: the Salambar where we hoped to travel, and the Syalan still blocked with snow. The Elburz summits were hidden by their own range on which we stood, but one could see the general trend of the land from the uninhabited region of the north-east, descending on either side of the Alamut valley, which it enclosed in steep slopes, until it

Difficulty of verifying names

sank north of us into the smooth untidy hillsides of Rudbar, beyond the Shah Rud below us, a region now green with transient grass, but waterless and barren, where many easy passes lead to the Caspian shore.

Hence descending, we left the Alpine air of the heights, and dropped through flocks of black goats grazing, by steep ploughed patches in hanging corries of the hills, and by more numerous streams, through a small sacred grove of junipers to Chala village, and decided to spend the night there, for the Alamut bridge below Badasht was reported washed away.

It was a steep hamlet hung over a ravine and small torrent that tumbled down to the Shah Rud and wore itself a rocky bed far below the tilted cornfields and walnut trees under whose shade I spent a lazy afternoon.

Towards sunset I wandered above the village, into the mud-built mosque where the children had finished school, and up among sweet brier and narrow terraces of corn and beans, till I could see the deceptive green landscape of Rudbar shining like Arcadia in the last light opposite, and a snowy peak behind.

Three boys came up and sat beside me while I asked them names of hills. They talked to me with the pleasant eagerness of youth.

"That," they said, "is Gavan Kuh behind Rudbar. The others we do not know."

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Gavan Kuh and Takht-i-Suleiman were the only two mountains marked on my map, which confined itself to a few villages near blue and red lines of rivers and paths, with shaded unnamed ranges in between.

Henceforth I made up my mind to collect my own names and fill them in as I went along, and began gradually to

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discover the joys and difficulties of a geographer, and the general inaccuracy of human beings which, I believe I have read in the *History of European Morals*, is the cause of half the troubles of mankind. I came to endorse this. Six people would each give me a different name for the selfsame hill: when in doubt they invented or borrowed one from somewhere else to please me. There was an economy to begin with: people had not sat down like Adam and Eve, who had nothing else to do, to look at objects and say: "What shall we call it?" They gave a name to a whole region, and then made it do for whatever village, river, mountain, or pass belonging to it they happened to wish to define. This explained the difficulty of locating Alamut, which is neither village nor castle but the main valley only, and by courtesy the river whose proper name is Alamut Rud.

By sifting and collating, by telling Ismail that he was a liar and getting 'Aziz to ask every likely man we met, I gradually got the landmarks of my line of march; and also acquired such a reputation for geographical curiosity that strangers would come up and bring me names unasked.

In the villages in the evenings I would show my map to the men squatting round the *samovar*, and explain how it is gradually made by the report of travellers who give what they can for the benefit of others after them, so that to offer a wrong name is like wilfully misleading a stranger when he asks the way. This they understood and became careful to tell me what I wanted, and even Ismail, whom I accused of being the father of every mistake printed between Alamut and the Caspian, occasionally managed to say something one could believe.

I returned to Chala to find him erecting my bed and mosquito net on our host's roof while all the young inhabi-

Night at Chala

tants sat in rows on the roofs opposite, like the audience in an amphitheatre. Europeans were seemingly not frequent here, but 'Aziz had been right, and the good mountain hospitality did not fail us, though the people were so poor that even the bride's clothes hung in rags about her, and her ornaments and jewels were but lead and glass.

Graves of Achæmenian or Sassanian kings, which provide beads and talismans for ladies as far east as Hamadan, are here unknown. The mud houses too were poor: an outer room; an inner *anderun* where the women slept among the year's sacks of grain; an inmost little storeroom, and a porch roofed with boughs and hardened mud where the rugs were spread for tea, was the extent of our house and one of the best in the village. Its furnishings were a few rugs locally woven, a few copper, tinned or wooden vessels, some quilts, a jug or two of the lovely Qazvin shape, and the *samovar* and little glasses for tea.

We sat over these while the *pilau* was cooking, and watched the oil wicks go out one by one in the Chala houses while our host and his sons in their dark-blue rags and old frieze coats talked to us with the grave good breeding of the hills and, between long pauses, while the pipes glowed in the dusk, told us of the snowbound winter life, when wolves in packs fight the village dogs; of bears and foxes and hunting; and of the mountain streams that swell in spring and wash away the small precipitous fields.

Next day we climbed down by the torrent, and by a steep descending crest came to the Shah Rud and the road which Hasan-i-Sabbah must have followed to reach his home. The ruins of an old brick bridge still show the way. Here, where the Alamut stream swirls out of a dark and narrow canyon, and the Talaghan comes to meet it from the south-east, a great ridge and headland of rock stands between the

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two and closes the valley of the Assassins as with a wall. It is, I believe, one of the "mountains" which Marco Polo mentions in his reference to the Assassins' home.

The entrance to the valley is so well hidden that Dr. Eccles and his party who came before me, did not notice it and had to wade upstream. But 'Aziz knew the ancient way, and we climbed from boulder to boulder over the face of the cliff up a path evidently used and neglected by many generations, the sort of path that in the Alps makes short cuts above and below the new road that has superseded it, and still retains a sort of dilapidated solidity from earlier days.

After an hour's climb it brought us out across the ridge into the sunlight.

Far below, flat and arid at our feet, gleaming with interlaced streams, was the Alamut valley, and Badasht its first oasis far ahead. Somewhere to the right a castle held the entrance: but 'Aziz, whose education was only beginning, said nothing about it, and took me past its dead sentinels unchallenged, downwards among steep slabs of granite where roses and jasmine and fragrant shrubs of many kinds gave us the same pleasure as to those earlier travellers who reported to Marco Polo seven centuries ago.

There is no cultivation in this first part of the valley, and the waterless gullies of Rudbar come down on the left nearly to the water's edge. Whatever ancient road there may have been is long since washed away, and indeed the valley road must always be carried down by floods here and there. Even in its broader stony bed above the canyon, the Alamut water lapped dangerously at the bridge below Badasht in muddy waves and washed away the earth from the flimsy poles which sagged in the middle.

The men got one mule over, but thought it safer to wade.



The Rock of Alamut.



Elburz in the background.

The legends of the Elburz

with the other two, and Ismail managed skilfully, taking the current slantwise, up to his thighs in water, while the old lady and I took the bridge as far as it went and paddled through the rest of the stream.

It was stifling enough now: the round white stones of the river bed and the red earth walls of Rudbar radiated heat upon us. We were glad to reach the willows and meadows of Badasht, where the water was channelled in smooth streams, and the grey-leaved sanjid tree in flower gave us delicate scent as we passed. Badasht—Bagh Dasht—is Garden of the Desert, an attractive name for the historical detective. But it is not nearly so much of a garden as Shahrak farther along, where there are vines and corn and walnuts, and a green valley opens northward to villages and poplar-fringed meadows. We had our lunch here by a spring; the wayside travellers joined our circle, and white and black magpies walked up and down before us.

In a barren country roads cannot alter much, for they are ruled by the wells of water. This one was light and clear, and no doubt Hasan himself and many travellers before and after sat here in the shade: merchants from China and India; messengers from Egypt or Syria; governors of scattered strongholds from Isfahan to the Kurdish hills. Not a memory of it all remained. The legends of the valley belong to Moslem Shi'a or to the old native myths of Persia; for this is the beginning of the Elburz country, which borders on the demon province of Mazanderan, where Rustum on his horse rode and fought and the early Persian kings waged superhuman wars. The memories of Hasan and his followers seemed to be non-existent except in the villages nearest the Rock, where foreigners probably have brought them back.

We left Shahrak and went again through burning reaches

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of red, hardened earth to Shutur Khan, where the Doctor's brother lives in summer and the Rock of the Assassins stands out like a ship, broadside on, from a concave mountain-side that guards it on the north. It was two hours' walk away up its own tributary, but it shone clearly distinct in the evening light, an impressive sight to the pilgrim. I contemplated it with the feelings due to an object that still has the power to make one travel so far, and then followed the mules to the low house of the laird beside a little terraced orchard and waterfall a few yards above the level of the path.

The laird was elderly, wrinkled and rosy-cheeked, with mild manners a little rusted over by the country, dressed in a long frock-coat and the new peaked hat. His newest wife from the city also came to me in the guest room, a blue satin bow in her hair; and presently the young policeman who lives at Mahmudabad across the river also arrived to look at me.

He was anxious to see my maps.

"So these are the pictures you take in your black box and show to no one?" said he, when he had examined them with attention.

My feeble attempt to explain the difference between a map and a snapshot was not believed for a moment. But he was politeness itself, and glad of novelty, for in all the district of Alamut and Rudbar, which is under his sole control, he has no distractions except the conversation of my host and the quarrels of the inhabitants, who keep him riding from village to village throughout the year. He knew no language except Persian, but he was intelligent, and must have had some character to stand the lonely life so contrary to his city tastes.

"Do you have a permit from my colleague in Qazvin?" he asked.

With the Laird of Alamut Rock

I remembered the scowl of the Commandant in the Grand Hotel, and lied boldly.

"It was not needed; he told me that you yourself would be able and kind enough to do all that may be necessary for my assistance here," said I rather unpardonably: but Persia is bad for one's morals.

Anyway, the speech had a soothing effect. The policeman, deciding to postpone suspicion till he had searched through my luggage in private, devoted himself to pleasant conversation for many hours, till the lamp and the *pilau* were brought out to us and we ate supper under the stars. When, after that, I went to give some last order to 'Aziz and Ismail, their obvious surprise at seeing me still able to make plans of my own showed me that I had done rather well with the "government" of Shutur Khan.

The sun was shining next morning, for I slept late. The waterfall made a pleasant noise outside my window, and the poplar trees glittered in a blue sky. I woke up with the delightful feeling of a pleasant day ahead, so near the journey's goal, and after tea and bread and honey on the terrace, set off with our own mules but with Ibrahim the major-domo to guide us, and Mahmud, the Arbab's twelve-year-old boy as company, across the sunken bed of the Qasir Rud to flowering wild meadows above, and northward towards the castle.

There the sentinel on the Rock might look down and watch who came and went along the slope till the path turned down into the ravine beyond a small white shrine, where I stopped to leave a coin on the tomb while 'Aziz kissed its stones. As I had been to three of the four holy cities, he and indeed all of the mountain people looked upon me as a sort of *hajji* regardless of the fact of my being a Christian. We were in the country of heresies.

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I walked with the sun at my back through this open pasture, and thought of what strange destinies had climbed the path before.

Hasan himself must have glanced up at the mass of the castle and the cliffs behind it with an appraising eye while the Fates and his own fearless spirit were weaving his future. The disciple strode down here unquestioning to murder his chieftain's son. Rashid-ed-Din came penniless and on foot from Basra, stayed to spend his youth in study with his young lords, and finally left to end as the equal of kings in Syria.

That was in the days of the third Grand Master Muhammad, when Hasan, the young heir, thought to throw away the last vestige of Moslem tradition and to claim divinity for himself as so many like him had done before. Many a time the two friends must have walked along these hillsides talking over their revolutionary plans and spreading them in the houses of the villagers, till the anger of the old chief put a stop to it all for a time and the reformers had to wait for his death. That was in 1162. Hasan then allowed wine to be drunk in the valley, and abolished the formal prayers, and renounced even the nominal allegiance to Egypt. The old books which he studied, written by his namesake and kept with many others in the library on the Rock, would throw much light on the ideas which governed the valley at this time, what Manichean or Magian heresy, with possibly some pagan survival of philosophy lingering as among the Sabæans of Harran.

Then the Mongols came, and their slant-eyed armies must have camped in these meadows through the winter months till the Rock capitulated and the devastating horde went by, and the heretical library was burnt and lost for ever. The castle fell to ruin till other obscure lords somewhere about the eighteenth century settled there again; of whom

The Rock of Alamut

nothing but a few shards of broken pottery remain to tell the story.

Meanwhile we had descended into the deep bed of the stream, and climbing out upon the western side, came into the lanes of Qasir Khan and to its village green under four great sycamores.

The village turned out with greetings for the young laird and Ibrahim.

People often came to see the castle, they said: someone came every year. They would call the man who always guided the strangers. This sounded rather like a tourist resort, but our expert examination soon reduced the crowd of visitors to two parties within the last two years and an "English Ambassador" and his wife from Teheran some years ago. The rules for the sightseeing were well established, however.

A red-bearded old Assassin appeared with a *samovar* under his arm, and another, grey-bearded and less important, with a pickaxe and shovel to make steps up the slope. The women, grouped together under the trees, unveiled and barelegged with short kilts, and white kerchiefs over their heads, shouted good wishes: and our mules started off again along the shaly hillside, across the Qasir Rud, now a small brook, to the steep ascent of the Rock.

The particular name of the Rock is not Alamut, as travellers ancient and modern seem to take for granted. It is they and not the inhabitants of the valley who call it so, and they have done it so effectually that now the people of Qasir Khan also begin to talk of it as Alamut to strangers, and only after questioning admit that this is not its proper name. It is the "castle" of Qasir Khan, on the Qasir Rud: and Alamut is the whole main valley with the Alamut Rud flowing through it: and as the matter might have some

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bearing on the old descriptions of the Assassins' stronghold, it is worth mentioning before the natural Persian amiability makes the people of the Qasir Rud valley rechristen their fortress to please the yearly visitor. Except for these, who had learnt it from foreigners, I met no one in the whole region who would know where to direct one if one asked for Alamut. "You are in Alamut now," they would say, and sweep their arm over the long reach of the valley in its mountain cradle.

Whatever its name, the great Rock looks a grim place. Mount Haudegan behind it rises in shaly slopes with granite precipices above. A green patch high up shows a small spring whence, said the guide, with obliging inventiveness, the castle's water supply was drawn in conduits. East and west of the rock, far below, run the two streams that form the Qasir Rud; they eat their way through scored and naked beds. There is no green of grass until, beyond a neck that joins the castle to this desolate background, one climbs under its eastern lee, reaches the level by old obliterated steps, and from the southern end looks down nearly a thousand feet of stone to the fields and trees of Qasir Khan, the sunny shallow slopes of the northern bank, and beyond the Alamut River, to the glaciers of Elburz in the south-east and the heights of Chala beyond Shirkuh in the west.

Here from some buttress in the castle wall, Hasan-i-Sabbah could watch for the return of his Fedawis. Here, no doubt, he would look out for his messengers when the benefactor and enemy of his youth, Nizam-ul-Mulk, the great minister, sent his army against him; and from here perhaps saw the emissary striding up by the Qasir Rud to say that the Assassins' work was done. Here as an old man he might stroll in the last sunlight and look on his lands already in shadow, peaceful below him with their crops. The place.

The Squire's Son

was now covered with wild tulips, yellow and red, among the stones and mortar. Patches of wall clung here and there to the lip of the rock and showed the extent of the enclosure: but nearly everything is ruined beyond the power of imagination to reconstruct, and the lower part of the castle, where rooms and a tank of water are dug out, were inaccessible without climbing-shoes which I had not brought with me.

Down there, so they say at Shutur Khan, seven black dogs guard the treasure and breathe fire, but fly—rather inadequately—as one approaches. The vine of Hasan spreads over the face of the Rock—perhaps of that second Hasan who released the valley from teetotalism; and the roses of Hasan grow on a narrow ledge whence my host had brought slips for his garden and gave me an Assassins' bouquet before I left.

We lit the *samovar* and sat round it in our coats, for a cool wind was blowing. I had chocolate with me, and persuaded the rather nervous party to share. Mahmud was the boldest, a proper descendant of the valley, and a true boy: our picnic was a joyful event to him. He had often climbed up the southern face of the Rock, he said, and had picked grapes from Hasan's vine.

When, after hunting for shards of pottery which lay all over the ground below, we returned to the village and went into our guide's house for tea, it was pleasant to see the people with their master's son, and his friendly young air of authority among them. It was very much like the squire's son in some old-fashioned English village. The men of Qasir Khan came one by one to sit in our circle, while the women stood beyond, and the children scrambled about on the wall; and they told us their stories of Hasan, but I thought they sounded like echoes of other travellers;

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the genuine note was only heard when they came to speak of Kaiumars, their legendary king, who first built the Rock, said they. No doubt in a winter's evening one might collect many an old tale, but I think that the lords of the castle would scarcely figure in them.

Meanwhile the sunlight came to us from the west. Through its level shafts we descended across the meadows, and talked of hunting-eagles with Mahmud, while Ismail, ahead of us with the mules, sang the melancholy ballads of the *charvardars*. They seemed to be hendecasyllables, three rhymes like the quatrains of FitzGerald, a long sad story of Miriam of Tanakabun. Here as among the Arabs song still springs naturally out of men's daily life; the incidents of the market, the gossip of the valley, are woven into ballads as they come: ever retouched and readapted to their modern background, they keep their original substance perhaps through centuries, like the ballad of Rosmunda the Gothic princess, which, in modern garb, is still sung by Italian peasants in the hills of Piedmont.

I had promised the policeman a visit, so that after a talk to the ladies of the house, and another futile effort for the baby's welfare, I went with the two boys across the riverlands to the police house in Mahmudabad. My luggage had been thoroughly gone through in my absence, and had disclosed nothing more criminal than a Persian grammar, so that I found both the police and the Arbab as cordial as possible. The little office contained a table and chair, but we sat independently of them on the floor, and were presently joined by an elderly unshaven man who proved to be not only interested but also intelligent in old castles, and told me so much of the one above Shirkuh and its reservoirs and the ruins of ancient water channels that I made tentative suggestions about a journey to investigate and was only

Cuckoos

dissuaded by noticing the consternation of the young policeman, whose suspicions were evidently returning in full force.

I had by this time decided to come back to Alamut some time or other, and left it at that.

The policeman's wife was not there; she could not bear the country life; but he brought in his two little girls, veiled in pink cotton *chadurs*. They were eight and nine years old, with pretty demure manners, very solemn. In spite of so much decorum, however, one of them had managed to fall off a ladder and scrape her knee; I took them home with me to dress the wound, and found that they turned into natural little human girls as they trotted with their hands in mine through the starlit valley now filled with damp night smells of earth after the ploughing.

The unshaven man joined us on the way and we discussed cuckoos, whose voices I had heard in Alamut for the first time that day.

"It is a useless wicked bird," I said, and told him how it grows in a strange nest.

"Is that so?" said he. "If your eye is diseased, and you smear ointment made from the cuckoos' eyes upon it, it will heal. Allah makes all things useful. This is written in a book called *The Peculiarities of Beasts*. It is true. You can buy it in the bazaar."

We were polite about it; but we neither of us believed the other. Next morning we left Shutur Khan. We were to follow the valley to its upper end, to 'Aziz's village of Garmrud, over the pass northward, and through the Caspian jungle to the sea.

It was another fine day. I found the Arbab dispensing judgments at his door: he squatted on the carpet and wrote on his knee in purple ink, while his villagers waited with a

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look of confidence on their wrinkled peasant faces. It was a rare and pleasant sight in Persia.

Something weighed on 'Aziz's mind. When we had left Shutur Khan a few hundred yards behind us he came up to me and asked whether I had given a present to the Arbab's servant.

"Yes, indeed," said I. "I gave him half a toman."

"That was more than sufficient," said 'Aziz. "But how was it that we did not see it given?"

"It is our custom," said I, "to give these gifts as quietly as possible, lest the master of the house should feel ashamed."

"Indeed," said 'Aziz, "that is a good custom, but not for our country, for Ibrahim will not tell his master of your noble generosity, and your face will be blackened. I will make it all right."

He hailed a passing hillman and spent a few moments murmuring earnestly.

"It will be well," said he as he rejoined me. "This man will tell the Arbab, and you will be fairly spoken of among them all."

We were now hailed by a woman at the side of the path who had evidently been waiting for us.

"My mother is ill near-by," said she. "Out of your mercy come to see her. There is no doctor here."

Which is true, for the nearest doctor or chemist is three stages by mule from the Alamut valley, and there is no track fit for a cart. Though I said I could do nothing, I dismounted and followed to a small group of houses off the road where a white-haired woman lay with a broken thigh. "Welcome," she said, with little hope. Beyond a rough splint to ease the pain, there was nothing to be done. I came away sorrowful and helpless to my party under the trees.

The Legend of Nevisar Shah

Our caravan was small now, for the Refuge of Allah had gone home and 'Aziz's mother with the boy had gone on to Garmrud the day before.

We rode for some time along the stony bed of the stream, admiring the caper in flower which spreads there from boulder to boulder along the ground, and which they call the Unbelievers' Flower, *Kafir-gul*. They use it in *pilau*.

"Is it true," I said to 'Aziz, "that the slope of Elburz is so rich in minerals that the sheep browsing there grow golden teeth when they happen to eat a certain herb?"

"I have not heard of it," said 'Aziz. "But Ismail belongs to that country: I will ask him."

Ismail, whose mule had strayed off the path, was busy with a short but vivid sketch of its family history; he paused with stick uplifted when 'Aziz questioned him, and thought the matter over.

"There are hot springs with healing waters up there," said he; "and also in the region of Takht-i-Suleiman. But I have never heard of the golden teeth. It may be true, but I think not."

"I heard it from the Arbab's daughter," said I. "Perhaps she exaggerated."

"It does not do always to believe," said 'Aziz.

"There is a true story about the Shah Nevisar here in the valley," he added after a while. "You can see its truth for yourself, for the landmarks all remain and his castle above Garmrud is still known as the castle of Nevisar Shah. He was an unbeliever, and our lord 'Ali blockaded him in his castle. Now you will see if we go there to-morrow that it is very steep, and there was only one gateway to pass in or out by. Our lord 'Ali placed a sentry before it and told him that no one was to be allowed to leave the castle, for he meant to capture the Shah Nevisar. But the Shah's

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mother was a witch, and she changed him and his son into a ram and a black dog, and they trotted out through the gate unsuspected by the sentry and fled. Down there across the river is a great rock cleft in two: they call it Kafir Kuh, and that is where our lord 'Ali overtook them and cut them down."

We had now left the bank, and, turning a corner, saw a rich green basin before us where the villages lay among rice-fields, overshadowed by the most beautiful walnut trees I have ever seen. All here was fertile and fragrant: roses, vines, and hawthorn grew in the tall hedges, and where the rice-fields ended, the corn began. Water ran everywhere in little channels which flooded the shallow plantations: and the shadows were full of birds' voices.

But the people in these villages are sick with malaria, a poor crowd compared with Qasir Khan or Garmrud which stand too high for the rice to grow and are free of mosquitoes. Quinine seemed to be unknown. Indeed, except for sugar and tea and paraffin, and rice, of which the home supply is inadequate, and which comes with the tea from the Caspian, the Alamut valley seems to be sufficient to itself.

In the next oasis, on which we descended from a narrow and dangerous path of sloping shale above the river, we came through the chief village of Zavarak, where there is a little booth filled with European odds and ends, which are gradually beginning to find their way among the home-made things.

The valley was narrower now. A rocky wall, 3,000 feet or more, ran along it on our left. On one of the pinnacles, invisible to the naked eye, 'Aziz pointed out the castle of Nevisar in front of us. On our right were narrow wooded glens with the snows of Elburz at their head. The lane

Conversation with a Bakhtiari

we rode along was almost over-arched by mulberries and walnuts. Well might the old travellers speak of this as a garden, when they came upon it from the bleak ranges on either side.

About half an hour's ride beyond Zavarak we found a meadow under trees, and had just spread the felt mule cloths, with my cotton quilt as a pillow, when a woman came to beg me to see her child and lured me back to Zavarak in the sun with the promise that her house was round the corner. By the time I had seen the invalid, uselessly as usual, and then seen about a dozen more, and given all the quinine and castor oil I could spare, and refused their poor offers of payment and left among blessings that I felt I had not earned. I made my way back to the resting-place, hot and exhausted, and promptly discouraged 'Aziz who was just ready to start off for his home.

Here we sat at lunch, and the folk of the house near-by joined us, together with a wayfarer or two as the custom is, for your food is free to all who come; and this in itself is an argument for not carrying more than is absolutely necessary, for if you share them with all the country-side your tins of biscuits last a very few days.

As we were sitting there in a circle, a stranger came up, a Bakhtiari with a peaked modern cap, the only one I saw worn in the valley except by 'Aziz and the Arbab. This was against the man to begin with, but he made matters worse by beginning to talk of Europe and its politics and asked me whether the British still consider Berlin as their capital, as they have done, said he, since the war.

"We have given that up some time ago," said I, but wished he would go and cease from troubling our less intellectual peace.

Might he have a pencil, he asked, to remember me by?

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I gave him the pencil, and he went: we were all polite to him: but two days after, when 'Aziz happened to mention the people whom his religion commands him to curse, he added after the names of Abu Bekr, Omar, and Yezid: "And the man to whom you gave the pencil, him I curse also." I then realized his feelings in the matter.

"He was a stranger in the valley," said 'Aziz. "He had no business to ask you for anything."

We came to Garmrud in the sunset. An immense precipice which closes it in at the back and through which the Alamut River finds a narrow cleft to enter, was shining like a torch in the last sunlight. The flat houses on the slope at its feet were also made rosy in the glow. No more stupendous exit could be imagined for the Assassins' home. Here was the second mountain of which the travellers spoke to Marco Polo: and there above it, "that none without his licence might find their way into this delicious valley," at the top of 3,000 feet of sheer rock, stood the castle of Nevisar Shah to which no Frank, so they told me, had ever climbed.

Anyone who wishes for scientific information about these matters is referred to the classics on the subject of the Assassins, Von Hammer Purgstall, Guyard, etc.; to Mr. L. Lockhart's article in Vol. XIV of the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies*; to Mr. Ivanow's paper, and to my own itinerary in *The Royal Geographical Society's Journal*, of January, 1931. What I write here is for pleasure, for other people's, I hope, but, in any case for my own, for it is always agreeable to go over the wandering days. History and geography, arguments and statistics are left out: I mention the things I like to remember as they come into my head.

My stay in Garmrud was among the best of them, for the whole village received me as a friend and made me as



Village of Garmrud in the Alamut Valley.

Stay in Garmrud

happy as they could. Not only was I their first European visitor for years, but I belonged, as it were, particularly to 'Aziz, and therefore to his village. His mother was on the house-roof to welcome us: his pretty wife stood behind her with the last baby tied into the shawl on her back as is the Alamut fashion; his sisters and cousins and aunts came greeting us one by one.

The house was at the lower end of the village with the Alamut torrent in front of it and the cliff at the back. It was a prosperous clean little place, with a tiny walled garden full of lettuce and beans, two good rooms and a few dark places below for stabling and stores. And the inner room was well furnished with rugs woven by the young wife, and bedding, and the baby's cradle, and various treasures pushed into niches in the white-washed wall. Here Ismail set up my bed while the women squatted on the roof (in Garmrud every front door gives on to somebody's roof) and picked over the rice for the *pilau*, and gave the news, and 'Aziz showed his friends, who soon came dropping in in twos and threes, what he had brought from Qazvin in his saddle-bags for his shop across the stream. The chief treasure was a print of the Shah, and an oleograph of a Victorian lady in a bustle, which the young wife looked at with interest, bending over it in her black trousers and frilled kilt and bright waistcoat, her twisted red kerchief tied at a rakish angle at the very top of her head.

She was furious with 'Aziz for staying away so long. She had to spend all her time in the shop. It was not fitting, she said—and should be his business. And what was he doing all this time in Qazvin? It was not a woman's place to sit in the shop. It was not that she cared particularly whether he were here or no. She knew that whenever a friend said "Stay" he stayed, and forgot about his wife. He could

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never say "No" to anyone. It was a poor affair to be a married woman, anyway. Perhaps if I did not mind I would let her sleep in my room that night? This harangue, delivered in a series of short attacks whenever the *pilau* in the next room could be left for a moment, and addressed in general to the circle on the floor, caused much amusement. The final threat and climax was addressed to me with a mischievous and engaging twinkle. 'Aziz continued to smile unperturbed.

We spent the evening discussing geography. When the guest room was empty Ismail, now well trained to the routine, gave instructions for hot water: the children were tucked to sleep under a quilt on the floor; and the rest of the family settled in the outer room.

'Aziz had never been to the castle of Nevisar Shah, nor had Ismail. It is, indeed, unvisited except by shepherds or hunters of ibex, and of these there are not many.

The only weapon I saw in Alamut was a muzzle-loading gun immensely long, which appeared next morning slung at the back of a tall long-faced man dressed in blue cotton who was to take us up. He was the village dyer and his hands were stained dark blue, but he was also a hunter, and took the rocks on our path with the slow easy stride of the hills while 'Aziz and Ismail panted behind him and the mules seemed to be standing on their hind legs. The path wound up to a green col where the old people of the fort were buried; their graves lay open, robbed long ago. There we left Ismail with the mules and the *samovar* and the water-jar, and climbed over shale and grass and slabs of granite, round corners where hands and feet were both required, where one could look down over the cliff of Garmrud into country even wilder and more desolate beyond, or eastward over spurs and pinnacles to

Castle of Nevisar Shab

the sunlit valley and Marco Polo's mountain of Skirkuh in the distance.

As I climbed, I saw a gleam of blue glaze among the stones, and picked up a shard of the selfsame pottery we had found at the Rock of Alamut two days before.

Thirteenth-century pottery in this deserted place, 3,000 feet above the nearest habitation! I seized on it as a proof required; for here without doubt must be Marco Polo's castle, at the entrance of the valley as he describes it. We hunted among the stones, and found more and more broken bits all corresponding to the early samples of Qasir Khan, and blessed the destructiveness of Assassin housemaids long ago.

There is nothing left of the buildings except a bit of wall here and there; a piece of the keep still upright with a loophole on the highest point; and masses of *débris* of masonry over all the top of the crest, which is a good-sized place and must have contained a little hamlet as well as the castle itself. On every side the natural walls fall away in precipices; and from the highest point, 10,000 feet at least, for my aneroid could rise no further, one can see the great half-circle of the eastern mountains covered with snow, nameless on my map.

People who know nothing about these things will tell you that there is no addition of pleasure in having a landscape to yourself. But this is not true. It is a pleasure exclusive, unreasoning, and real: it has some of the quality and some of the intensity of love: it is a secret shared: a communion which an intruder desecrates: and to go to the lonely and majestic places of the world for poor motives, to turn them to cheap advertisement or flashy journalism, jars like a spiritual form of prostitution on your true lover of the hills. The solitary rapture must be disinterested. And often it is stumbled upon unthinkingly by men whose

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business takes them along remoter ways: who suddenly find enchantment on their path and carry it afterwards through their lives with a secret sense of exile.

I did not think of this, however, nor of anything nor anybody: the loveliness of the world being enough in itself. I sat in the sun and rested my eyes in the sight of the hills. How hillmen love them everywhere. 'Aziz and the guide, lazily contented, stretched among the wind-flattened juniper, pointed to the mountains by their names.

"There is pasture," said 'Aziz; or "Here is water."
"There you will find ibex in winter," or "There is the pass to Talaghan."

The long saddles and sharp ridges, the black gorges and far vaporous snows began to group themselves in friendly lines.

We returned in the afternoon to Garmrud and rested, and were treated like heroes by the village, who do not often climb to Nevisar Shah.

Towards sunset I wandered out along the bank of the stream, and looked back at the cliff and the climbing houses against it, and wondered how the Mongols got into the valley, which is north of and off the usual route from Bokhara and Khorasan—the great route which saw the flight and death of Darius and the march of Alexander's men. Until the sixteenth century, when Shah Abbas built the causeway along the Caspian shore, the region between the sea and the great road must have been almost impossible for any army. Only a native and popular leader, wishing to cross north Persia unperceived, might use it and—like Bahram Gur with the White Huns—fall like a thunderbolt on the enemy from behind the screen of the Elburz.

This valley with its great walls should have been impregnable: north of it, over the passes, the country was so

Good-bye to Alamut

indeed. There, among forests and lagoons, the fleeing remnants of Persia found refuge from the Tatar hordes. When Hulagu's armies came from the east, they may have taken the Tundurkhan pass from Talaghan and forced their way through the ravine or over the shoulder of Salambar. It was not the first Mongol effort against Alamut, and there must have been those there who knew the ways.

While I loitered, considering these matters, an old man greeted me, who was cutting hay in his meadow by the stream. He strolled up with his sickle in his hand, to talk about the crops and the view. Then who should appear, as it were out of the ground to disturb the evening quiet, but the Bakhtiari of the pencil; insinuating as ever, with his air of superior information, he began to tell me of the castle in the hills, "up there, impossible to reach"; he waved a vague arm.

In the old man's eyes, surrounded by innumerable folds and wrinkles, there passed a little twinkle of a smile; it never reached his lips; it was like a far flicker of faint summer lightning scarcely seen; but it was extraordinarily friendly.

"She has been to the castle this morning," he said gravely. The interfering stranger was put in his place; and feeling it in some subtle way, took his departure and left us to stroll home through the shadows and the twilight peace.

In the evening we sat once more over glasses of tea and discussed the names and the passes of the hills. It was my last night in the valley of Alamut. Next day, beneath its high overhanging walls, we climbed out of the Assassins' country, over the pass, into the legendary forests of Mazanderan and down to the Caspian shore.