

# JEW OF PERSIA

## Remnants of Tribes Carried Captive to Babylon.

Not as Progressive as Those Whose Ancestors Returned to Palestine.

Hebrew prophets and poets have sung, in pathetic verses whose tearful sadness still moves the heart, the woes of Israel during that long captivity in Babylon. It is less remembered that when King Cyrus granted those exiles permission to return to their native land of Palestine and to rebuild Jerusalem, not all of them availed themselves of the offer. As a matter of historical fact, quite a large number of the desolate Jews left their wailing harps hanging on the willows and remained in Babylon—or rather in the Persia of to-day, for good and all.

The conquerors had dealt leniently with the Israelites, and a goodly number of thousands appreciated this by making the land of exile their new home. It was an interesting task for me, during my stay in Persia, to find out something about the descendants of these men, ascertain their present habitus, their location and their manners and condition. It is true that this fragment of the Jewish race has before now attracted the attention of some prominent coreligionists of theirs, and Sir Moses Montefiore and Baron Hirsch, as well as even the famous renegade, Disraeli—known to political fame as Lord Beaconsfield—have interested themselves in their fate.

For the larger part of the Jews of Persia have remained in Ispahan and the region thereabout, although scores and hundreds of them live scattered in the more southerly and eastern provinces, near Shiraz, Shuster and elsewhere. As everywhere else, they are a striking illustration of the vitality and racial persistency of the chosen people, for here they are, after the lapse of over 2,000 years, still as purely Hebrews in features and character as the Russian Hebrews are. In point of religious faith and observances, though, they are somewhat different from other Jews. They have remained monotheists, scorn both Jesus and Mohammed, and still believe in the Mosaic law. But all that later and



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more brilliant intellectual and moral development through which went the Jews who had returned to Palestine, was denied them, and during the centuries and centuries of warfare, internal upheaval and Mohammedan proselyting which followed in Persia, these Jews fared none too well. It is true that the Sassanide dynasty, in some respects the ablest and most brilliant, that ever occupied the Persian throne, dealt humanely by their Jewish subjects, and in more than one instance they selected men of that race for royal advisers and other high offices of state. Jussuf ben Sholem is a shining example in this line. But taken generally, the Jews in Persia were and continued to be a down-trodden race. Their intellectual and moral level was not raised, but distinctly and considerably lowered within the space of 2,400 years, the time of their residence in Persia.

They have temples—small, cheap buildings—in Persia, and they have



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some of the sacred books of their race in their keeping. There are still scribes and learned rabbis among them who know some Hebrew and are able to translate the Scriptures, but those are exceptions. Fully ninety-nine per cent. of them are steeped in the densest ignorance and are even morally lower than their oppressors, the Mohammedan Persians. The greatest worship and veneration is paid by them to the tomb of Esther near Ispahan, and once every year the devout Jew of Persia undertakes a pilgrimage to the grave of that beautiful queen whose intercession saved the neck of many a one of those same pilgrims' forefathers. The tomb is kept in a good state of preservation, and men and women of Queen Esther's race may be seen almost any day and night lying prostrate before it and beseeching the dim shadow to grant them some favor. Although the Moslem masters of Persia look upon the Jews—strictly in accordance with the Koran—as "unbelieving dogs" and stubborn rejectors of salvation, they, nevertheless, have repeatedly furnished funds for the restoration of the edifice itself and of the tomb inside, and similarly the Jews

have never been asked, at the point of the sword, to abandon their ancient faith and take to Mohammed.

It is curious, though, to note that the trading spirit, so strong in the other Jews the world over, has never taken root among those Jews of Persia. Out of the 50,000 that are reported to reside in that country, not one is a merchant. That would go to prove the assertion of Hebraic scholars that the commercial side of the modern Jew's nature was not an inheritance of his early ancestors, but rather an aftergrowth in his soul, bred and grown there by force of circumstances which shut him out of all other callings and pursuits but the mercantile one. The Persian Jew is quite different in disposition, in fact. He is an agriculturist, or a wine grower, a musician or a strolling minstrel and clown. Nearly all the wandering and domiciled musicians in Per-



ENTRANCE TO QUEEN ESTHER'S TOMB.

sia belong to the Jewish race. Their instruments are the fife, the heart-shaped Turkish guitar and mandolin, the high-keyed violin of three strings, the small drum and the large one, and the castanet. With those combinedly they produce that strange jumble of noises which delights the oriental ear. There is a rhythm, certainly, but barely any melody perceptible. They know no notes, and they always go on playing until told to stop. The burden of their lay seems as terminable and as indeterminate as Wagner's "endless melody." In this way they go about the country, playing to the grandees of the land—sheltered from observation behind a screen separating them from the beauties of the harem—and to the rabble in the streets, at weddings and at other popular gatherings.

But the characteristic calling of the Jews in Persia is that of wine grower. This they share with the Armenians, and together these two small fragments of the population grow all the wine that is raised in Persia, from the Shiraz wine of delicious flavor and high price to the common grape—the "vin du pays," which goes in thousands of huge casks into the adjoining provinces of Russia. For the orthodox Moslem in Persia is forbidden by his creed to drink wine, as well as to grow it. Nevertheless, a large part of the wine is consumed by the native Persians, whose religious fanaticism is often not proof against the allurements of the grape juice. Yet the callings of growing, making and selling wine is held way below par. The mere touch of the garment of one of these unbelieving wine dealers defiles and renders "Khaelal," or unclean.

By reason of the fact that the Jews there are not traders they are not wealthy. But they are not paupers, and beggary is rarer amongst them than among the Moslem population. But as I remarked, they are densely ignorant, and do not even have any knowledge of the later Hebrew literature. The Talmud is unknown to them, and so are all the other writings of a religious as well as a purely literary nature, that have made their appearance among the highly cultivated Spanish Jews of the middle ages, and since among the German, the French, the English and the American Jews.

In the matter of fossil laws and in the matter of cleansing themselves and their household, they are not nearly so strict as the orthodox Jews in Russia and Poland. Repeated efforts have been made by noblehearted and influential Jews of other countries to assist these coreligionists of theirs in Persia in rising to a higher level, and several extensive journeys have been undertaken among them for that purpose, but to little avail thus far. It is no easy task to counteract the effects of a couple of thousand years on a whole population.

Similarly situated as the Jews in Persia are the gypsies there. Despised, too, and made semi-savage by neglect and by a nomadic existence which has never enabled them to learn the useful arts of life, these gypsies to the number of 4,000 or 5,000 may be met with in every nook and corner of Persia. They are by all odds the most miserable and forlorn of their species anywhere. Not even the Russian gypsies, low as they are, stand on quite so low a scale as they. They do anything to live, from murder and rapine to juggling, begging, dancing, playing, etc. But fortune telling, oddly enough, is not comprised in their list of accomplishments, although the Persian is more superstitious than the European, and a larger harvest in money and kind could therefore be reaped of him.

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