

Joyce feared, and perhaps rightly feared, the reactions of the Dublin crowd to the world-famous exile, were he to return. (Thus in *Ulysses*, Mr. Bloom, thinking of a nostalgic wanderer's homecoming: 'Still, as regards return, you were a lucky dog if they didn't set the terrier at you directly you got back'.) Like many men of rare intelligence he had some curious phobias—of nuns in threes, of dogs, and, above all, of crowds. But I remember remarking that a French crowd troubled him little, whereas an Anglo-Saxon crowd inspired him with fear. For such a crowd, if perhaps less impulsive than a Latin one, is particularly liable to the mass-neurosis deemed righteous indignation—in part the outcome of its Protestant background, in which that monument of noble wrath and bloody vengeance, the Old Testament, bulks large; and, in part, due to its simple faith in hearsay. For all its vehemence, the French crowd has a saving, ingrained scepticism, deriving from the millennia of culture behind each individual; and Joyce had an instinctive sympathy with the sceptical mind. He was, in fact, of the lineage of Montaigne. 'The prevailing attitude of *Ulysses*,' as Mr. Budgen sees it, 'is a very humane scepticism—not of tried human values, necessary at all times for social cohesion, but of all tendencies and systems altogether.' And it was largely, I believe, this humane scepticism that drew Joyce to Paris, in whose congenial atmosphere he devoted his last twenty years to the composition of *Finnegans Wake*, that *summa profana* of world-history, culture, humanity and humour, his Testament and, it may be posterity will judge, his greatest work.

CHRISTOPHER SYKES

WHERE SHALL JOHN GO?

VI—PERSIA

MY DEAR JOHN,

There are (or were, and probably will be again) two ways of going to Persia: the western route by Syria, Baghdad, and Kasr i Shirin; and the northern route by Russia, arriving at the little Caspian port of Pahlevi. I would recommend the western route,

for arriving thus your first view of Persia is of immense ranges of hills, your first experience a weary climb on to a plateau, your first sentiment amazement at the radiant beauty of a gaunt and delicately coloured land. The whole of the immense area of the Iranian plateau (it includes South Afghanistan) is strangely uniform in structure and the landscape you will meet on the Road to Kirmanshah, wide plains set about with mountain ranges, does not differ in essentials from what you will see in the Gulf province or in Khorassan, nearly a thousand miles away. Before you leave Persia you should visit the Caspian provinces: the Turkoman prairie in Transcaspia and the great virgin forests on the southern shore, but these are exceptional places, no part of the geographical Persia; and so, as you follow the road to Teheran from Baghdad, look carefully, and make up your mind if you can bear to live with this landscape, because you are going to find precious little else.

Where had you better live? You have a familiar kind of choice before you: the semi-European life of Teheran or the more or less unchanged Persian life of one of the provinces. Twenty years ago you or I would have fairly plumped for the changeless, the profoundly national, but today belief in the *Zeitgeist* is stronger than it was and with it a fear that the act of burying oneself in a remote picturesqueness might mean missing all sorts of 'interesting modern movements'. Well, as far as Persia is concerned I should not let the interesting modern movements of Teheran unduly worry you. Although Persia has a deep racial unity and a habit of uniform servility to the State formed by centuries of autocratic rule, the political cohesion of the provinces and the capital is extremely weak. The Persians are very brilliant people, their abiding fault is superficiality, and if you live in Teheran you will soon form a wholly erroneous picture of a modernized country alive with political passions, a picture which will effectually obscure the fact that you are living in a primitive society. Perhaps I can best explain this by saying that although Persia has been civilized for far longer than we have, the idea, the primitive idea, that civilization is a question of ornament has never given way to a nobler conception, that their system of government has only very lately and, so far, ineffectively, turned aside from a career of barbarous autocracy, and that the effects of shallow philosophy and uninterrupted tyranny have resulted

in a stultification of the soul which will require many generations to overcome. Teheran might obscure this from you; provincial life will make it plain. I suggest that you begin by living in Teheran and then move to some of the provincial capitals. I would suggest Meshed, Yazd, and Isfahan.

And now I suppose I should tell you about the Persians. I am a little loth to do this as there are, you will probably agree, fewer more treacherous pitfalls into pretentious fatuity than generalizations on peoples. The Paphlagonians, we are assured, are intensely artistic, easily aroused to anger, have an ungovernable mania for cheese cakes, and ill-treat their mules. We accept it all open mouthed; but when some deep observer writes about ourselves we begin to see what drivel this sort of stuff can be. I was cured of the habit when I read, in a book on London by Paul Morand, that as fire engines drive through our streets an awful hush descends on the crowd while we go through the agonies of inherited memories of the great fire. Yet it is difficult in a letter to avoid generalizations, and if I make any I will ask you to take them with a pinch of salt.

One of the first things you will notice in your Persian experience is how often you are confronted with extreme contrasts. Persia is a land of great heat and great cold, of luxurious orchards and howling deserts, of feasts and starvation; and nowhere do these juxtapositions strike you more forcibly than in the characters of the people. You will of course read *Hajji Baba of Isfahan*, that great and unique English novel of Persian life. Although it was written by James Morier well over a hundred years ago, it remains still an authentic and strangely exact picture, but it is important to recollect that it is incomplete. Morier's sense of humour ran away with him and, as his other books show, there was a strain of the coarse bully in this wonderfully but so incompletely sensitive observer. He seems to have been largely unaware of the beauties of Persian art and literature and any flash of nobility in a Persian soul would have been dismissed by him as an hallucination. So don't, as so many people do, take Morier as infallible but rather as a great and tolerant recorder of human weakness. In Persia I have met, as you will, many men who might have stepped out of *Hajji Baba*, but I have also met there a few of the finest and most loyal men in the world. You will be shocked, as others have been, by faithlessness, treachery, a habit

of swindling, a detestable disregard for the truth. There is more amorality in Persian life than you will find in most other places. The commonest virtue, not the noblest one, is a laughing scepticism, but before you join the chorus of high-minded indignation of the European colony, just remember this: the Persians have lived through a period of more abominable tyranny under Reza Shah than any in their recent history: that old hoaxer succeeded in taking in a large number of Europeans with the 'vigorous new era' he was supposed to be introducing into his country, but he *never* succeeded in deceiving his own subjects. I agree that that is a negative virtue but would it not be most valuable nearer home today? Be prepared for complexity in Persian character, don't be deceived by apparent simplicity. Expect the worst always. You'll meet it, but you will get some pleasant surprises.

The Persians' own view of themselves is contradictory and revealing. They have no illusions about themselves, as a rule: their amorality is productive of a kind of honesty. It is a strange thing that the two most famous English books about Persia, *Hajji Baba* and Lord Curzon's great work, books in which overpowering denunciations of the Persians can be found, are greatly enjoyed in Persia, particularly *Hajji Baba*, which has frequently been translated. Persians will often tell you how wicked the Persians are. But the easiest error is to mistake this candour for pusillanimity or a wretched absence of self-respect. There is side by side with it an intense racial pride whose origins are lost in remote time. All the shocks to self-esteem which hard fortune, and the phenomenal incapacity of Persian governments over the last hundred years, have drawn upon the country, have been unable to shake a mystical and impressive belief in the Iranian Race—the Aryans of old (you can imagine how German propaganda got off to a flying start). This racial pride, this sense of being part of the aristocracy of mankind, is nearly always present. Centuries of use have shorn it of self-conscious arrogance: there is no 'colour-bar' nonsense in Persia, there is very little anti-Semitism. Lord Curzon talks of a racial anti-Turanianism. I may have missed it myopically, but I have never noticed it in present-day Persia. It may have vanished with the fall of the Turkish dynasty. Indeed, anti-Armenianism, which is very strong, and anti-Zoroastrianism (though only found in

Yazd and Kerman as far as I have been able to make out) are the only forms of unreasoning intolerance in which Persia, once a scene of continual and widespread persecution, now indulges. By intolerance I mean sentimental intolerance, it is many years since there has been an organized persecution of a racial or religious minority. In brief, I may conclude by saying that Persian self-esteem is not an unwholesome form of pride. I will have more to say about Persian self-criticism in a moment.

Let me now consider what the Persians will think of you. You are not on a wholly 'bad wicket'. When all is said and done England still enjoys an enviable reputation in Persia. We are still remembered as the people who obtained relief from autocracy in 1907, as the organizers and promoters of freedom and justice in the world. During the xenophobia of Reza Shah's reign indignation was often expressed that a predominantly British company should exploit the country's immense oil resources, but for all that Persians remain favourably impressed by the British company's fair dealing with its partners. I do not think I am being over optimistic when I say that at the present time most Persians see British participation in the Persian oil industry not as an affront to national sovereignty but as some guarantee of justice for themselves in the years ahead. Oh yes, I know dozens of Persians who feel differently, but, having recourse to your salt, I think you will find that generalization a not utterly preposterous guide. You need not feel shy or awkward, you will be accepted from the very first as an *ami de la maison*.

So, John, you may stroll in and hang up your hat and coat and warm your hands at the fire or ask for the window to be opened and so on without fear of seeming to take liberties, for your manners, like mine (and this the Persians do insist on), are perfect. But—and the size of the 'but' is stupendous—don't settle down in the armchair and drop off into a doze. Friend of the house you may be, but this is a terribly unhappy household; and in the unreasonable way of the unhappy they blame you for their unhappiness as confidently as they praise you for shining virtues which you hope you possess. From the very first you are going to come in for enormous doses of praise and blame. Make up your mind on entering Persia that your life, if it is to touch Persian life at all, is to be a hectically harassed

life, a life charged with responsibilities incurred through no fault of your own, few of them involving matters which you can influence in any way, most of them laid upon you through a process of calculation which you will find, and which indeed is, utterly fantastic. And yet you should not be too surprised at the great rôle you are called upon to play. When Charles Fox identified England with the principle of liberty, when Byron died in Greece for that principle, when Macaulay evolved the pleasing theory that English history is a slow but certain process of its realization, when Gladstone confirmed this theory in Acts of State, when a British government insisted in the early years of this century that a system of liberty in Persia was a sacred condition of friendship, they lit fires of hope which still burn with a great glow. That splendid identification of a principle with a people should be a matter of pride for every Englishman, so much so that if you recollect their origin you should not be over distressed at some of the extraordinary results. If you live in Teheran you will often, very often, be asked why the British Embassy (always 'the Embassy' which is assumed to be the power-house of all British policy) allowed So-and-so to be made Minister of Posts and Telegraphs. When you answer that the appointment of So-and-so is no concern of the Embassy, you will be met with sly smiles and head shakings—ah, you are deep—and your safest reply will be to refer your questioners, your continual questioners, to the Ambassador, who will not thank you. When you are in Isfahan be prepared to be asked why thingummy, a famous blackmailer, a proclaimed thief, the jackal of the jackals, was allowed by the Embassy to be appointed postman in the city. It is all extremely difficult, you are placed quite unfairly in an impossible position, and yet there is a kind of logic about it. Persian self-criticism looks with admiration, longing, and anger, at British Liberalism. In 1907—that is the date you must never forget—England did the unbelievable: she obtained a respite for Persia from the iniquitous autocracy, and so, it follows, England the cornucopia is now responsible for weal or woe. There was joy and acclaim when the fire was lit in Persia. That was gratifying to the admirable men who had produced the unspeakable novelty—a box of matches. But unfortunately for them and their successors a wail of agony, a howl of rage, a focusing of angry eyes upon them, follows the

failure to illumine and warm up every damp log. Have I made myself at all clear? Remember what is so little known in England, that British and Persian fortunes have been indissolubly bound together, in commerce, in politics, in moral problems, for over fifty years. I have been drawn into generalizations. Have another pinch of salt and read on.

You start off your Persian career in Teheran. Well, your first impressions will, I am sure, be good. Only ten years ago they would have been bad. At that time Teheran was a hideous semi-Russianized Asiatic village without one redeeming architectural feature, unless you allow a few artistically degenerate though picturesque mosques. The present town is an astonishing example of how modern planning and supposedly unadaptable artistic traditions can be beautifully combined. If ever a modern Islamic style will be evolved, Teheran and not Cairo or Ankara will surely witness the first flowering. And here I may briefly discuss literary and artistic movements in Persia today. Pull out the map please.

As you know, as is plain from the map, Persia is a kind of inland island. Cultural contacts with Western peoples, even with Russia, have always been of a rather tenuous kind, so you must not be surprised to find that the familiar modern influences in art and literature are hardly present at all. To begin with literature. I do not know Persian well enough to appreciate the beauties or subtleties of Persian poetry or prose except after much repetition of familiar passages, so that what I say on this subject is mostly at second hand. It appears to me that for a long time, for two hundred years, Persian poetry has been in that state of partly self-satisfied and partly irritated frivolity which succeeds a golden age. Almost any travel book you like to consult will remark on the extraordinary extent to which the classic poetry of the country is known to the people, educated or uneducated. You would be surprised to hear a lorry driver in England amusing himself on a long journey by reciting page after page of Shakespeare, Milton, or Pope. Translated into Persian terms such a thing is commonplace. Of no other nation in the world, perhaps, can the literature be so truly described as national; it is part of the everyday life of the people in a perfectly natural and awe-inspiring way. But this enviable state of affairs is not without disadvantages. Whoever writes must write in direct competition

with such Titans as Sa'adi, Rumi, Nezami and Omar Khayyám, or with that greatest of lyrical poets, Hafiz. The result has been a tendency either towards pedantry and ultra-conservatism, or towards frivolous breakaways. Opposed by the formidable achievements of the ancient poets, modern Western poets, even French ones, have made but the slightest impression on contemporary literature in Persia. (I say 'even French ones' because the strongest cultural influence in the country comes from France.) It is impossible for a foreigner to pass any sincere judgement on whether Persia, from the large mass of contemporary talent, a talent often brilliant, often satirical, but rarely deeply serious, will produce a new or great school, but I am prepared, with some diffidence, to make a guess. Persian literature has most strangely neglected the possibilities of prose. If you study Persian literature you will be surprised at how few writers have made a reputation as prose stylists. It seems possible that, in time, the example of Western prose will rouse Persian writers to a realization that all fields in the art of literature have not been conquered by them and that there are vast seas in their language for someone to be the first to burst upon. From the above I must not give you the impression that you are going to find no one to talk to about familiar literary matters. On the contrary, you will find many literary people in Teheran enthusiastic about them, but you will probably have the impression that in their Western aspect they discuss these things with you somewhat in the same spirit as you may discuss Islam with them, as something you may admire, if you like with longing, but in which you are not fitted to partake. You will find them still enthralled by that classic poetry which Theodore Watts Dunton declared might be worthy to take the first place in the lyrical literature of the whole world, were it not, in his fine phrase, that its 'wings are too heavy with beauty'.

Of music I cannot speak at all. I will only warn you that Persian music is very much more agreeable to Western ears than Arab music, largely, I think, owing to Russian influences via the Caucasus. If you are an amateur of music, I forget if you are, you may find this an exciting field of study. All Persian art, except literature, remains wonderfully receptive and never servile to foreign influences, and a musical renaissance, though I know of no sign of it, is quite a probable Persian phenomenon.

When it comes to the visual arts you will find much more sign of life, though (remember you will be on an island), not perhaps the life you will be expecting. As in literature you must not look for the effect of modern Western movements. It is true that the highly distinguished but transitory Armenian Isfahan School (finely patronized by the late Prince Firuz) owed much to French impressionist painting, but to understand the present situation of Persian artists and architects you would do well to forget the present day or its immediate forbears altogether and go back in spirit to the Gothic revival. By a complex of circumstances, very different from those of Strawberry Hill or St. Pancras, Persian artists have suddenly become intensely aware of the past. Partly owing to the violent nationalism cultivated in the reign of Reza Shah, and partly, I think more strongly, in revolt against the stupid Westernization which he ignorantly adopted as his major policy, Persians became emotionally conscious of the desirability of preserving the great monuments of their past. On the same impulse a school of painting, still thriving, grew up in Isfahan, and a State school of painting was instituted in Teheran. Miniatures poured forth as they had not done for nearly a hundred years, and the best of these productions are undoubtedly worthy to bear comparison with those of the exact and inspired Behzad. The traditions received new emphasis, but European influences, though not modern ones, continued to impose themselves slowly and subtly. With a revived interest in Persian painting and building it was inevitable that there should be a revival of tile making, which had fallen into a long and ludicrous decline. The modern tilework of Persia, except that it has not yet recaptured the glowing red of the Safawi schools (seventeenth century), is exquisite and splendid beyond praise. The mosques of Isfahan have been restored and without a trained eye it is now difficult to distinguish between the old and the new. These reconstructions and restorations are so astounding that they are apt to draw attention from what may be a more important manifestation: the modern tilework on the new buildings of Teheran in which you may see new designs emerging calmly from the interrupted imagination of the past. The buildings themselves may at first bewilder you. Let me very briefly turn to architecture. Three styles developed nearly simultaneously: first a western Russian style, then a revived ancient Persian style, and a revived Islamic style. The

Russian style: baroque, pretentious, amusing, and sometimes very endearing, has resided long and uneasily in Persia, and unless I am greatly mistaken has recently departed this life. The revived antique style was an unhappy product of Reza Shah's ignorance and nationalism. His subjects were told that Islamic art was an Arabian imposition and that the true art of Persia was only to be seen in the ruins of Persepolis. Fittingly enough the police, worthy colleagues of the Gestapo, provided the first occasion for a celebration of this stupendous misreading of history, they were housed in a huge reconstruction of what the palace of Xerxes might, with luck, have looked like. The national bank is a cleverer attempt to employ this unemployable style. Though I do not much believe in the Zeitgeist I think that *some* propitiation is due to this tiresome little deity, an opinion Persians share; no other Neo-Persepolis has been erected. The folly passed away with the fool who directed Persian art down this blind alley. Far more interesting than the Russian or the antique style is the revived Islamic school in which Persian architecture clearly has a great future.

For the sake of convenience it may be called an Islamic style because it started about eighteen years ago with the adaptation of mosque designs to non-religious building, the best example of which is, I think, the Municipality in Teheran. Since then considerable strides have been made. Domestic architecture in Persia has for hundreds of years conformed to simple conventions and designs. It was found that these could adapt themselves to modern notions of style with the greatest of ease, in many instances endowing empty novelty with a certain fulness and gravity of tradition; in consequence two styles began to develop rapidly, a new Perso-European style and a conservative Islamic style, the latter with its eye on the mosques, the former with its eye on the enchanting unpretentious houses of the Persians. As might have been expected the conservative style has enjoyed a calmer and easier career than the other, but the new style, owing to Persia's good fortune in having had intelligent European advisers and intelligent Persian students abroad, has been deflected into relatively few vulgarities. It is not a subject on which we can preach. And that, I think, is all I can say in a letter about architecture, art and letters.

I hope I have indicated that if you are interested in these things

and are prepared to explore an island far away from Bloomsbury or Montparnasse, you will, in Teheran at first, and later in Isfahan, find much to interest or excite you.

The immense artistic tradition of Persia is a dangerous guide however. Remember what I said about the superficiality of Persia. Her ancient civilization, her brilliant arts, her enduring grace, form a thin, dazzling, and perhaps indestructible crust, but no more than a crust. When you leave Teheran, and the splendours of Isfahan, Yazd or Meshed, you will see a nightmare world of poverty and human misery beyond imagination. Persia is no place for a quiet dreamy holiday except for an exceedingly insensitive person; for your own comfort I recommend that you have a distinct object in your travels and preferably one that you feel may, however indirectly, bring some alleviation to the ghastly wretchedness you will so often see about you. For the moment I am thinking more of your own comfort than of any humanitarian vision, for if you have never been to the East before, you are going to find the spectacle of unredeemed poverty a very painful one indeed. You will not find much 'social conscience' by way of compensation, no, on the contrary, you will find in its place an enchanting seduction of your own: Persia, more than any other society I know of, has wrought the poetry of relief from scarcity to the highest pitch of perfection. Nowhere in the world will you find so developed a sense of the oasis, the garden in the midst of the desert. You can see for yourself how this amoral ideal permits an indifference to cruelty and injustice if it is allowed to influence deeply the life of men. At the moment the poverty of the Persian poor, after the horrors of the revived autocracy, is worse than it ever was. Old travellers admired the decent standards of life enjoyed by the peasantry, and fifteen years ago, when I first saw Persia, these still obtained. It is possible that you may be able to admire them again, but I doubt it very much.

I could go on writing this letter for ever, but I question whether an infinite epistle could do more than suggest a few ideas as to what awaits you in this strange country. Persian travel used to be very cheap and is now very expensive, so before you set out let me know and I will try to get up-to-date information on the subject. You can find a flat easily enough in Teheran but it will be an eccentric flat with unlikely appointments. It is not a

comfortable country in the usual sense of the term, but very comfortable in unusual senses. Caviar is obtainable. Horses are very cheap. The landscape, except in the brief hot season in July and August, is noble and vast. It is said to bear a strong resemblance to that of Spain. Once having seen it, and this generalization I make with absolute confidence, you will, like many others, be haunted by it, and long to go back to it, for the rest of your life.

ROBIN IRONSIDE

COMMENTS ON AN EXHIBITION OF ENGLISH DRAWINGS

WE cannot, equitably, pass any comparative judgement upon the achievements of English painting; it is indeed a truism that this country has never brought forth, from that moment of its history at which its culture might rightly be regarded as national, any school of painting which, in magnificence of performance, approaches the level maintained by the schools, while they flourished at all, of Italy, Spain or France. But to labour, as so many do, this platitude is to encourage the propagation of a false conception of the nature of pictorial art by attaching to what is not more than a medium or a method a standard and entirely fabricated importance; it is sometimes necessary to attempt to disabuse people of the obvious error that artistic media may be graded and pigeon-holed according to latent æsthetic properties they are supposed to possess. Appeals to artists to cultivate a sense of paint, a sympathy with the material in which they are working, are appeals for the cultivation of affinities with nothing. Since paint, or stone, yields unquestioningly to the most diverse treatment, there can be no nicety of relation requiring establishment