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HEROIC TALES

RETOLD FROM

20
FIRDUSI THE PERSIAN

BY

HELEN ZIMMERN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY

L. ALMA TADEMA, R.A.

AND A PREFATORY POEM BY

EDMUND W. GOSSE

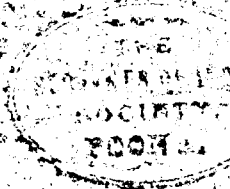


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*The first Edition of this work was published under the title of "The
Table of Kings." In issuing this New Edition for Younger Readers,
it has been considered advisable to give it a more distinctive title.*

2697



PREFACE.

IT has been my endeavour in this book to popularize the tales told by the Persian poet Firdūsi in his immortal epic. Three circumstances have embarrassed my task: the great length of the "Shah Nameh" (far exceeding that of the "Iliad" and "Odyssey" together), the English reader's ignorance of Firdūsi, and my own ignorance of Persian. The last difficulty was of less account, as I designed a paraphrase and not a translation. All I needed, therefore, was at hand in the form of Professor Jules Mohl's French version. This, the only complete rendering of the "Shah Nameh" into a European tongue, is pronounced by all scholars to be a truly perfect piece of work, reproducing so faithfully the very spirit of the original, that to have read Mohl is almost to have read Firdūsi. It is little to the credit of the greatest European power in the East to have suffered France to provide funds for this magnificent enterprise. It is pleasant to know that the best

version of the Persian text, which has become much corrupted in the course of ages, is due to an Englishman, Turner Macan. That with one exception and a few tentative efforts, no translation or adaptation of Firdusi's immortal poem has reappeared in English is certainly strange. The exception is an abbreviated version of the "Shah Nameh" published in 1835 by Mr. James Atkinson. His epitome was, however, not made from the original poem, but merely from one of the numerous abridgments of it that exist in Persian. Whether the fault be Mr. Atkinson's or that of his forerunner, it is certain that the omission of numerous passages and episodes seriously injures the interest of the narrative. This version, which is half in prose, half in verse, alternately ambitious and monotonous, possesses few attractions for the general reader; moreover, it has long been out of print. I may therefore be permitted to hope that it has been reserved for me to make more widely known some of the immortal beauties contained in Firdusi's poem. It is obvious that my design must have necessitated considerable abridgment, but I have never, I think, omitted essential portions, and I hope that it has not suffered too much in the process of compression. I have tried in all ways to preserve the peculiarities of Eastern style and allusion. With a view to reproduce the epic character of the original, I have ventured upon some liberties in the simple language of the age of

Shakespeare and the English Bible, in order by thus removing them from everyday speech, to remove them from the atmosphere of to-day.

In conclusion, I have many debts of gratitude to acknowledge. First and foremost my warmest thanks are due to Mr. Alma Tadema, R.A., for the value he has imparted to my book by his etchings, and for the kind encouragement and sympathy he has given to me from the first planning of the work. For encouragement and sympathy I have also to thank my kind friend Mr. Robert Browning. I am further deeply indebted to Mr. E. W. Gosse for his prefatory poem as well as for his kindness in reading the proofs. I am also grateful to Miss Mary A. F. Robinson for assistance in revision and for the metrical versions interspersed. Last, but not least, I desire to express my obligations to Mr. Richard Garnett of the British Museum, to whom I owe my first introduction to the beauties of Firdusi.

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LONDON, August 1882.



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ETCHINGS

BY

L. ALMA TADEMA, R.A.

"And seeing a water-bird fly upward, he took his bow and shot it through the heart, and it fell among the rose-gatherers."

PAGE 45

"And they gazed upon each other and knew that they excelled in beauty, and the hours slipped by in sweet talk while love was fanned in their hearts."

PAGE 46



INTRODUCTION.



EPICS, in the truest acceptation of the term, are written in the infancy of a race or people, at a time when national self-consciousness has awakened sufficiently to take root and blossom, but before the march of civilization has brought its reason to bear upon tradition, and has disentangled myth from reality; in fact, has destroyed the very element that alone makes national epics possible. Of such epics the world owns but few. Indeed it has been said that there are but six, of which two fall to India, the "Mahabharata" and the "Ramayana;" two to Greece, the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey;" one to the North, the "Nibelungen Lied;" and one to Persia, the "Shah Nameh." These six epics certainly have this in common, that they are not the inventions of an individual, but are founded on national traditions.

The materials of an epic are found among all nations, namely, those traditions, half fact, half fiction, concerning national heroes whose mighty deeds are handed down from generation to generation by oral

tradition. Such only exist during the non-literary age of a nation, and while it is still in what Comte terms its supernatural stage. Only then have traditions their true national ring and flavour, only then can they be put into form and preserved so that they reproduce for all time that peculiar, inimitable fragrance, that aroma of the childhood of the world. But in order that they should be thus fixed, it is needful that at the moment when the lay of the native bard is growing silent or corrupt, there should arise a poet, great, large-hearted, national enough to weld into an organic whole the tangled mass of tradition, who having one foot firmly planted upon the ground of the past, rests with the other upon the ground of his own time. Such poets are rare; it is therefore that true epics are rare also. It is the same throughout all things in life. Only when the man and the moment meet can great things be achieved. Now, among the scanty number of true epics is enrolled, as we have seen, the "Shah Nameh," or Book of Kings, the poem that embodies the early history of the great empire of the Persians. It is strange that, except to scholars, this epic is almost unknown, and yet it in nowise yields to those more familiar in dignity and fire; it reflects a nation's life as truly as that which Homer sang or the Northern Skalds recited.

As the Greek national epic has become identified with the name of Homer, so has the Persian with that of

Firdusi. Various Persian kings had attempted to gather into one sheaf the blades of tradition that were scattered broadcast over the land. Nouschirwan caused them to be called from all ends of his kingdom, and Yezdejerd, the last king of the Sassanian race, ordered these materials to be arranged. That Persia, a land of such vast extent, such great conquests, owning such splendid monuments, should be rich in epic traditions is not amazing. These traditions were preserved by the Dikhans, who, according to Jules Mohl, held rank analogous to that of the English county families, and jealously guarded the songs and legends that told of the great deeds done of old by their ancestors. Hardly was this collection completed than there followed the Arabian conquest of Persia, the conquerors as usual striving to obliterate among the conquered all memory of their ancient grandeur and traditions. The Persian faith had to give way to the Arabian, and it seemed as though the Kaliphate had crushed out of existence the ancient Iranian life. But by-and-by came signs that showed that the throne of the Kaliphs was not firmly fixed, and this weakness encouraged the Persians to bring about a reaction in favour of their nation. Various princes of Iranian lineage declared themselves independent of their Arab suzerain. In order to rally around them the interest of the people, and to revive enthusiasm for their native land, they fell back with subtle wisdom upon the ancient traditions of the nation. It was then that the

MSS. collated under the Sâssanians were remembered. These MSS. meantime had gone through many vicissitudes, having been condemned to be burned by the Arabs, having been lost and dispersed, and finally, it is said, found their way to Abyssinia, and hence through India back to Persia. Be this as it may, at the time that the throne of the Kaliphs was tottering, various versions of the old half-mythical history of heroic Persia were attempted, though none fulfilled all requirements, because none owned that ineffable spirit of true epic verse which could alone fire the imagination of a people. It was during the reign and under the ægis of Mahmoud of Ghaznin that the Persian national epic first took that shape which allowed its creator to say that he had penned

"What no tide
Shall ever wash away, what men
Unborn shall read o'er ocean wide."

Mansur ibn Ahmad, for this is the real name of our poet, was born at Tous in Khorasan of a Dikhan family. The exact date of his birth cannot be determined. Mohl places it about 1010. Indeed all our knowledge concerning Firdusi is somewhat obscure. Tradition relates that when he was born his father in a dream saw the infant standing with his face to the west and lifting up his voice, the echo of which reverberated from every quarter of the globe. On awaking he applied to an interpreter to expound this dream, and was told that the fame of his son and his poetical talents would be

the theme of the universe. Whether this induced the father to give his boy the best education the place and time could afford cannot be ascertained, but it is certain that he did so. The boy was soon known for his ardent application to learning, and for his poetical gifts, which were early perceived and fostered. He was known, too, throughout Tous for his fondness for sitting and dreaming for hours beside the canal that flowed through his father's grounds. This canal was destined to play a large part in the history of the poet. It was fed by the river that watered Tous, but at times it would run dry owing to inundations that carried away the earthen dykes that formed the river's channel. The boy often beheld the destruction that resulted, and it became his ardent wish that the dyke might be built of stone. And this wish was accomplished by his means, though he did not live to see it. Little is known of the earlier years of Firdusi's life except that he married at about the age of twenty-eight, and that he was early engaged in versifying the traditions of his nation. These poems, he appears to have recited to his fellow-townsmen, and it was perhaps owing to them that the fame of Firdusi's poetical gifts spread to Ghaznin. Mahmoud seems to have been one of the most accomplished monarchs that ever sat upon an Eastern throne. His Court was the seat of the Muses, he patronized poets both from a genuine love of letters and for his political purposes. Seven poets were already engaged by him to put into

verse the annals of the Persian Empire, of which his library contained the most complete existing records, when it chanced that he heard that this task was being attempted by a native of Tous, who, however, had come to a standstill for lack of material. Thus it happened that Mahmoud and Firdusi came together, each having planned a national poem unknown to the other, the one having the gifts, the other the matter. It was some time, however, before Firdusi conquered the royal favour, for his brother poets were jealous of him and prejudiced the monarch. Chance came to his aid. To cause him public discomfiture he was challenged to find a rhyme to a word supposed to have none, and brilliantly defeated his enemies. He was then called upon to improvise a poem before the Sultan, and acquitted himself so well that Mahmoud turned to him, saying, "You have made my Court as resplendent as Firdus" (*i.e.* Paradise). From that day the poet had gained the royal favour, and henceforth was to be known to the world as Firdusi, *i.e.* the Paradisiacal. He was intrusted with the execution of the "Book of Kings." Rooms were set apart for him in the royal palace, every facility for work was afforded him, and for a time he sunned himself in the royal favour. The Sultan poured gifts upon him, and further offered to bestow upon him a thousand pieces of gold for each thousand distichs. Firdusi, however, prayed that this money might not be given to him until his great work was completed, for he

wished to think that at the end of his labours he might count upon a sufficient sum to realize the darling wish of his life, the erection of a dyke that should save his native town from inundations. Thus it came to pass that Firdusi's glorious epic was the result of royal patronage, and was the work of a poet laureate, two circumstances that usually quench poetic power. But the poet was to learn, as his successors Spenser and Tasso learned, what the royal Psalmist already knew, that it is vain to put confidence in princes. The favour accorded to Firdusi had made him many enemies during the twelve years he resided at the Court of Mahmoud, and when, after fifty-three years of labour, he was able to lay his great work, completed, at the feet of the Sultan, it was to meet with contumely.

The poem contributed by Mr. Gosse to this volume takes up the thread of the poet's life from this point, and we need not therefore go over the ground again. What he has not told us is that the long-delayed payment was offered to Firdusi's only daughter, who rejected that which had been refused to her father. A relative, however, accepted the gold, and built with it the dyke Firdusi had dreamed of, and a house of refuge for travellers. Time has long since destroyed both embankment and refuge, but the "Shah Nameh" will remain, and must remain, his monument to the end of time. Till quite recently a cupola of blue glazed tiles was shown to travellers at Tous as the tomb of Firdusi. It

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appears that he was buried in a garden, and a characteristic story of his burial is preserved, showing that intolerance and fanaticism are the same in all ages. The Sheik had refused to read the customary prayers over Firdusi's grave because the poet had spent his life praising the false religion of fire. But a dream was vouchsafed to him in which he beheld Firdusi enthroned upon a seat of honour in Paradise. He marvelled at this and questioned. Then an angel told him that Firdusi enjoyed great favour in the sight of God for his poem, and that he would have earned this if only for one couplet therein; and the heavenly vision then recited Firdusi's lines in praise of God:—

“Thou art whate'er exists, above, below.

What is, Thou art; what Thou art, who can know?”

The angel of the Sheik's dream showed fine critical perception in his rebuke. Nothing more distinguishes the “Shah Nameh” than the tone of true religion that pervades it. It is free from all mythology, all superstitious rites; there is no notice anywhere of a religious ceremony. The old Persian faith was singularly simple, pure, and strong, and it is wonderful how completely the Mahomedan, Firdusi has apprehended it. Only here and there, quite rarely, the Mussulman peeps forth.

Many, long and learned, are the disquisitions written by Oriental scholars upon the genesis of the legends that form the basis of the “Shah Nameh;” but as these

authorities differ widely from one another, it is not needful for us to follow their devious paths here, where we desire only to deal with that which has sprung from these obscure sources." Be their origin what it may, we possess the poem, which happily is a reality, and a magnificent one. Sufficient for us that what Sæmund Sigfusson did for the poems of the Skalds, reconstructing them and saving them from destruction, Firdusi did for the traditions of his land. It would lead us too far in this Introduction to trace the many and curious analogies that exist between this poem and Western traditions, but to students of comparative mythology here should be a rich field. Thus to indicate a few. Rustem with his dying strength shoots at his murderer, like Siegfried flinging his spear at Hagen's shield. The story of Saiawush is the old tale of Phædra and Hippolytus. The combat of a father with his unknown son meets us at many turns, notably in the "Hildebrand Lied." Mr. Matthew Arnold, in his fine poem "Rustem and Sohrab," misses one of the most exquisite points, owing to his having derived his story, not from Firdusi direct, but from a corrupt version. The labours of Rustem recall those of Hercules. And when it is borne in mind that the epic is contemporaneous with the "Chanson de Roland," it is curious to note that notwithstanding such vast differences of time and place, so many analogies occur with the tales of Charlemagne and the Knights of the Round

Table. There existed in those days in Persia a sort of feudalism that brought about analogous conditions. The Iranian Pehliva much resembled the knights of the West; honour too was his highest aim, his steed his friend, his weapons his greatest treasure. The Simurg has been deemed the origin of the Griffin, which found its way into Europe through the writings of the Spanish Arabs, but got transmuted from a beneficent being to a terrible beast. The tamarisk branch fatal to Isfendiyar recalls the mistletoe that destroyed Baldur, and so forth.

The Book or Epic of Kings has for its theme the rise, combats, and death of the Persian nationality. Contention is said to be the needful foundation of an epic, and here we find it in full vigour, though in this case the combatants are two races, two civilizations, and two worlds. The scene of action of this vast poem is Central Asia; it is an inland, mainland epic, and in this respect alone differs widely from its compeers. It sings a people extending their dominion from the Caucasus to the Hindoo Koosh; its theme is the old Persian civilization, the cultus of fire, sung by a descendant of those who overthrew this worship. It was given to Firdusi to new create the Persian nationality and blend into one conquerors and conquered. Adumbrated by poetical and popular legends, we learn in the "Shah Nameh" the wars of the peoples that succeeded each other in the Persian Empire. Thus

the history of Zohak probably represents the invasion of some Semitic people into Iran; the combat of the descendants of Tur against those of Irij signifies the long wars waged by the kings of Persia against the Tartar and Scythian peoples of the north, wars signalized by many vicissitudes. And this Zohak is held by some to be the Nimrod of the Hebrews; Kai Khosrau is identified as the Cyrus of the Greeks; Gushtasp, the Darius Hystaspes; Isferdiyar, the Xerxes; while the fabulous lengths of the reigns of the various kings are held to represent periods in the history of Persia.

This may be so, but it is best to regard the "Shah Nameh" once for all as history clouded by fable, and dismiss its earlier half as being as historically obscure as the time that preceded the Trojan war. It does not like the "Iliad," deal with one single grand event, but consists of a series of narratives beginning with fabulous times and going down to the period when the old civilization gave place to Islamism.

But if unity is wanting in facts, it is there in ideas; and if the "Shah Nameh" seems to present various heroes, it has in reality but one, and that Iran, the native land of the singer and the sung. The poem falls, however, into two very sharply-marked divisions, probably undesignated by its author, but impossible to ignore. The one ending with the death of Rustem is the true epic, the second is a mere poetical chronicle in which facts are often transmuted by Firdusi's patriotism.

Thus Alexander the Great, according to him, is not the conqueror of Persia, but a Persian king. In this second half Firdusi still shows flashes of his old poetic power and vivid imagination, but the whole is tamer, more fragmentary, pervaded by a more serious tone. He is singing of the disasters of his nation; the old heroes are dead, the old might is inclining to its fall. But whether as a part or a whole, few works have so many claims to interest, whether as a poem, a history, or a record of laws and customs; for though chronology and geography are constantly violated, it is none the less a faithful picture, reproducing if not the facts, the spirit of a land closely connected both with sacred history and classical associations. Yet even in its own country the immense extent of the work has been an almost insuperable obstacle to its popularity. This, however, applies more to the second part, for we are also told that the earlier tales of Firdusi are in the mouth of the rudest Persian. As the Venetian gondoliers have been heard to sing the verses of Tasso, so the common people of Persia cite Firdusi. It is further told that in our own days they marched to battle against the Turcomans repeating his verses. The popularity of his tales is sufficiently shown by the fact that towns and villages to this day bear the names of his heroes. In Mazinderan no less than three hundred villages are called Rustem. More modern tradition narrates that when the province of Seistan was devastated by Tamerlane, a voice was

heard crying to the shade of Rustem, "Arise, lift up thy head from out of the sepulchre, and behold how Iran is fallen into the hand of thine enemies, even into the hands of the men of Turan." It was deemed that even from beyond the grave the very name of Turan would arouse the warlike ire of the Iranian champion; for the combat of the good and evil principle, that dualism which is the foundation of the Zoroastrian theology; is also the soul of Firdusi's poem. Iran is throughout identified with light; it is the kingdom of light, as Turan is the kingdom of darkness. As the Israelites deemed themselves the champions of Jehovah, so the Iranians regarded themselves as the soldiers of Ormuzd, while Ahriman aided the troops of Turan. And by men of Turan the Persians meant all fair peoples. For the Persians hated white, it was to them a colour antagonistic to the sun; hence they speak of white Deevs, and Saum casts forth his son as a child of the evil one because his hair is white. According to Herodotus, they even chased white pigeons as pariahs out of their borders.

There certainly is a sublimity and simplicity about the worship of Fire that makes it a suitable basis for an epic; there is a wild grandeur, a fitness in the adoration of the Deity through His most brilliant creation, the sun, the dispenser of light, life, and joy. We feel the work to be more written in a country of sunshine, so different in this respect from the Norse "Eddas" and the "Nibelungen Lied," that are pervaded

by the rude, chill atmosphere, the watery sunlight of the north. Heine has said of the "Nibelungen Lied," that it is a poem hewn out of granite. Of the "Shah Nameh" it might be said that it is carved out of marble. It is more luminous, more polished. Moreover, it has been more touched by civilization. There is nothing that is austere about it, as is so often the case with the older poems, removing them from our modern sympathies. The "Shah Nameh" is pervaded by an antique grandeur mingled with what might be called a modern spirit, but which is in reality the expression of its intense truth to human nature, the element that renders it of and for all time. The colossal figures of its heroes and their super-human actions are presented with a force and realism that deprive them of all preternatural semblance. Indeed, like Homer, Firdusi rarely introduces a truly supernatural mechanism, and when he does employ it his grave straightforward manner, his energetic simplicity, free from all Oriental exaggeration and whimsicality, force us to believe while we read. We are not dumb-founded when the ass of Balaam lifts up his voice, neither are we astonished when Rakush speaks. The Persians were a less imaginative people than the Greeks and the Indians, though in some respects akin to both, and this is admirably seen in Firdusi's pages. He disdains all bizarrerie, all strained metaphors, the usual sin of Orientals. His imagination is removed from extravagance, and though he has few equals

in fulness and variety of imagery, his similes are concise and striking. The absence of such profuse ornament, as we find in later Persian poets, makes Firdusi more like a writer of the Western world. Like Homer, he sings a rude time of personal valour; like Homer, he writes of the heroic age of his country. Hence he unrolls before us alternate scenes of carnage, of banquets and splendours, of love passages and adventures, all told with an invention now rapid and exuberant, now sober and subdued. Like Homer, he too nods at times; but this is rare, and it is rather a cause for marvel how he maintains such a constant height of excellence. The reason is that he represents and embodies, and is in turn borne along and supported by, the spirit of his nation; and the spirit of a great people, so long as it is not fatally degenerate, is like a great ocean, which has, indeed, its partial and alternate ebbs and flows, but is substantially, and as a whole, ever equal and the same.



PREFATORY POEM.

FIRDUSI IN EXILE.



FIRDUSI IN EXILE.

I.

Now God who flames the buckler of the sun,
And lights that lamp of heaven, the glorious moon,
In the proud breast of Mahmoud had begun
To stir remorse, and, like the loud typhoon,
Shame blew his thoughts in gusts about his soul,
Remembering that old man whose sandy shoon
Pressed the low shores where distant waters roll,
And all his wrongs, and unrequited boon.

II.

For, greatest poet whom the world contains,
Firdusi, on whose tongue the sweet Fārsī
Sounded like whispering leafage when it rains,
Who loved the ancient kings, and learned to see
Their buried shapes in vision one by one,
And wove their deeds in lovely minstrelsy,
For all the glory that his name had won
To Persia, was in exile by the sea.

III.

In vain through sixty thousand verses clear
 He sang of feuds and battles, friend and foe,
 Of the frail heart of Kaous, spent with fear,
 And Kai Khosrau who vanished in the snow,
 And white-haired Zal who won the secret love
 Of Rudabeh where water-lilies blow,
 And lordliest Rustem, armed by gods above
 With every power and virtue mortals know.

IV.

In vain these stories of the godlike kings,
 Whose bodies were as brass, their hearts as fire,
 This verse that centuries with wasting wings
 Will never harm, though men with gods conspire—
 In vain the good Firdusi, full of years,
 Inscribed this treasure to his Shah's desire;
 For Mahmoud, heedless of the poet's tears,
 Forgot his oath, nor gave the promised hire.

V.

For each sonorous verse one piece of gold:
 Such was the promise that the Shah had made,
 But when the glorious perfect tale was told,
 The file of laden elephants delayed;
 For Hasan, that black demon, held the ear
 Of Mahmoud, and spoke tenderly, and said,
 "The end of this old man, my lord, is near;
 For gold let silver in the sacks be weighed."

VI.

Thereat Firdusi, when it came, was wroth,
 And being within the bath, where all might see,
 Called the two serving-men, and bid them both
 Divide the silver for their service-fee,
 And told Ayaz, the false Shah's chamberlain,
 "Returning to thy master, say from me,
 'Twas not for silver that I toiled amain
 And wove my verse for thirty years and three."

VII.

Then round him came his friends and bade him fly
 From Mahmoud's vengeance, and the murderous sword;
 But he, being placable of heart, would try
 For peace, since enmity his soul abhorred:
 So in the garden where the Shah was used
 To breathe the spice that many a rose outpoured,
 Firdusi met his master as he mused,
 And bowed down at his feet without a word.

VIII.

Yet grudging was the pardon, faint the smile,
 And when that evening in the mosque he lay,
 A veiled dervish, muttering all the while,
 Crept near Firdusi, while he seemed to pray,
 And whispered, "Fly from Chazmin, fly to-night,
 The bowstring waits for thee at break of day.
 Thou shalt not 'scape because thy beard is white—
 Begone!" and like a snake he slipped away.

IX.

Then, when of worship there was made an end,
 Firdusi rolled his prayer-mat up, and turned
 To that bright niche where all believers bend,
 And by the light of lamps that round him burned
 Wrote on a blue-tile, with a diamond point,
 Two couplets that may yet be well discerned,
 Though all the mosque be crumbling joint from joint,
 By long decay and mouldering age inured :

X.

"The happy court of Mahmoud is a sea,
 A sea of endless waves without a coast ;
 In my unlucky star the fault must be
 If I who plunged for pearls in it am lost."
 Then to his house he went, weary and sad,
 And called around him those who loved him most,
 And gave them all the treasure that he had,
 Soft silken raiment that a king might boast.

XI.

But in a saintly gaberdine set out
 And crossed the moonlit streets, and left the town,
 Nor stopped to hear the lonely owlet shout
 His dreamy menace from the turret's crown,
 But where the cypresses and myrtles hoar
 Hid the white house of Ayaz, stooping down,
 He thrust a letter underneath the door,
 And faded in the shadow broad and brown.

XII.

That letter bade the chamberlain beloved
 Before the dawn to seek his master's face,
 And plead until his blandishments had moved
 The Shah to grant him twenty days of grace ;
 In twenty days a paper folded fair
 Should Ayaz in his master's fingers place,
 Which to the gracious Sultan would declare
 Firdusi's secret wish, and plead his case.

XIII.

The Sultan vowed : but for those twenty days
 The Sultan yawned upon his peacock throne ;
 The rebeck and the Turkish minstrel's lays
 With their sweet treble jarred him to the bone.
 All night he tossed in fever, all day long
 Far from his blithe hareem he paced alone,
 Or scowled to hear the trampling and the song
 Where down the cool bazaar the lanterns shone.

XIV.

At last, at last the twentieth morning broke,
 And Mahmoud, flushed with pleasure, rose and cried
 For fair Ayaz, who from his slumber woke,
 And brought the sealed letter, white and wide.
 In Allah's name the Sultan broke the seal ;
 His long-pent wishes satisfied, he sighed,
 But reading on, he stared, and seemed to reel,
 And crushed the leaf, and gazed out stony-eyed.

XV.

It was that scathing satire, writ in fire,
 And music such as the red tiger makes
 Over a man, the food of her desire,
 When she lies down among the crested brakes—
 That satire which the world still shudders at,
 Whose cadence in the hearer's sense still aches,
 At bare recital of whose singeing hate
 The conscience of forgetful kings awakes.

XVI.

"O Mahmoud, of the whole world conqueror,
 You fear not me?—fear God!" The Sultan fell
 With outstretched arms before the chamber door,
 Ashen with rage, and his breast's heave and swell
 Was like an earthquake; no word passed his lips,
 But curses from the foulest pit of hell,
 Till evening brought his soul through that eclipse,
 And he rose up, and drank, and feasted well.

XVII.

But old Firdusi, bearing eastward still,
 Through many a Tartar camp, his woven mat,
 At last, one evening, climbed a scarpèd hill
 From whence he saw the white roofs of Herat:
 Downward he passed, and in a garden, sweet
 With roses and narcissus, down he sat,
 And wondered if his mountain-weary feet
 Might dare to rest where earth was smooth and flat.

XVIII.

Then suddenly his tired eyes laughed at last,
For he remembered, by the gift of fate,
Where once he lodged in merry days long past
At Herat, in the arch above the gate.
There Abou'lmaani sold his ancient books,
A man discreet and old, without a mate,
And there Firdusi oft, in dusty nooks,
Had chanted verses till the night was late.

XIX.

To Abou'lmaanj in the dusk he went,
And found him still more wrinkled than of yore,
An owlish figure, angular and bent,
But hearty still and honest to the core.
So there among the rolls of parchment serene
Once more he drank the mystic Dikhan lore,
But never sought the daylight streets, for fear
Of treachery, and the hatred Mahmud bore.

XX.

And little rest he had, and brief delight,
For rumours from the court at Ghasnin ran,
And with a short farewell he fled by night
Across the mountains to the Caspian ;
A gentle Sultan ruled from Astrabad
The jessmine-gardens of Mazinderan,
And to his little court, humble and sad,
One morning came a white-haired minstrel-man.

XXI.

Like parrots, one and all, with shrieking tongues
The poets knew their lord, and screamed his name,
Bitter with hate ; but his sweet learned songs
Had touched the Sultan with their sacred flame ;
He bade the jealous poets all make way,
And did Firdusi honour to their shame,
And asked by what fair accident that day
From stately Ghaznin such a stranger came.

XXII.

But when he knew, and heard of Mahmoud's rage,
He trembled, and his fingers stroked his beard ;
For scarcely could his pastoral province wage
Safe war with one whom all the nations feared ;
So blushing much, as one who loathes his task,
He bade his guest, whom meat and wine had cheered,
To grant the boon that he could scarcely ask
Of one so deeply loved, so long revered.

XXIII.

Firdusi rose and sighed, and went his way,
But ere he reached the gate of Astrabad,
The Sultan sent three men in rich array
Laden with gifts, the lordliest that he had,
And camels, that the bard might ride at ease,
And lutes, and a Circassian serving-lad ;
So after many days he passed with these
Far down the lordly Tigris to Baghdad.

XXIV.

Here underneath the palm-trees, full of shade,
The poet tasted peace, and lingered long ;
The Master of the Faithful he obeyed,
And searched the Koran for a theme for song.
The vizier lodged him in his own fair house,
Where wise men gathered in a learned throng,
And when the Khalif heard his pious vows,
He gave him gifts and shielded him from wrong.

XXV.

There in a white-walled garden full of trees,
Through which there ran a deep cold water-brook
Fringed with white tulips and anemones,
Among the tender grass he wrote the book
Of Yousouf and Zuleika ; not one word
Was there of all the windy war that shook
Iran of old, nor was the ear once stirred
With any name the Faithful might rebuke.

XXVL

Nine thousand Persian verses told the tale,
And when the perfect poem was set down,
He rose, and left the plaintive nightingale
That long had tuned her throat to his sweet moan ;
Before the Khalif on a broad divan,
To sound of rebecks, in a silken gown,
He sat in state, and when the dance began
Declaimed aloud that song of high renown.

XXVII.

Its music sank on well-tempered ears ;
 The Khalif lounged upon his throne, and cried,
 " Lo ! I this day am as a man who hears
 The angel Gabriel murmur at his side—
 And dies not." At the viewless hareem-door
 The screen was swayed by bending forms that sighed,
 And scheikhs and soldiers, young and old, for more
 Still pressed and wished, and scarce would be denied.

XXVIII.

Ah, palmy days were those for singer's craft !
 Now every worldling flings his cap in rhyme,
 And from an easy bow lets fly a shaft
 At verse much honoured in his grandsire's time ;
 Now many a ghazel, soft with spices, trips
 Along the alien mouth with frivolous chime,
 And lightly rises from unhonoured lips
 The ancient rhythm sonorous and sublime.

XXIX.

But great Firdusi met with honour then,
 Garments and jewels, and much store of gold ;
 Till one, the basest and the worst of men,
 Rode out by stealth that Hasan might be told :
 Who, when he heard in Ghaznin that his toe
 Sat, robed and glorious, as he sat of old,
 Stirred up with whispers to a fiery glow
 The rage of Mahmoud, which was wellnigh cold.

XXX.

So Mahmoud sent to Baghdad embassies
Demanding speedily Firdusi's head,
Or else the town among her ancient trees
Must look for instant war, the missive said ;
The stately Khalif rose in wrath and pride,
And swore that till each faithful heart was dead,
His hospitable sword should leave his side,
And rolling Tigris blush in Persian red.

XXXI.

But ere the messengers with garments rent
Fled back to Ghaznin at the trumpet's blare,
Firdusi to the warlike Khalif sent
His little servant with the flowing hair,
Who scarcely knowing what he said, by rote
Repeated, " Master, have no thought or care
Of old Firdusi ; he can dive and float
A fish in water and a bird in air.

XXXII.

" The quail upon the mountain needs no host
To guard her covert in the waving grass ;
And though Mahmoud and all his ships be tost
On lake or sea, the little trout will pass.
Stain not thy sword for such a guest as I,
For God, before whose sight man's heart is glass,
Will see the stain that on my soul will lie
If life-blood gush from helmet or cuirass.

PREFATORY POEM.

XXXIII.

"I go my way into the lion's mouth,
And as I journey, God will hold my hand ;
Whether I wander north or wander south,
There is no rest for me in any land ;
The serpent's fang will find me though I fly
To Frankistan, or Ind, or Samarkand ;
I will go home again, for tired am I,
And all too old to wrestle and withstand."

XXXIV.

"So send the Persian envoys back in peace,
For, whilst these words are spoken, I am gone ;
Though thou shouldst scour the lands and drain the seas,
Thou shalt not find me, since I wend alone ;
For all the days that I have loved thee well,
My heart is myrrh, that kindles at thy throne,
And I am sadder than my tongue can tell,
That I must leave thee with the end unknown."

XXXV.

So with a single camel, clad to sight
Like some poor merchant of the common sort,
Firdusi left the town at morning light,
And passed the gate, and passed the sullen fort,
Unnoted ; and his face was to the east,
Towards Hasan and the hateful Persian court,
As if contempt of life were in his breast,
And loathing of his days, so sad and short.

XXXVI.

But sure some angel had forewarned him well,
 And murmured in his ear the name of "home ;"
 For through this perilous journey there befell
 No evil wheresoever he might come.
 And Mahmoud guessed not that the foe he sought
 Had turned upon his track and ceased to roam,
 But sent out scouts, and bade his head be brought
 From Bahrein by the vexed Arabian foam.

XXXVII.

At last one night, as lone Firdusi rode,
 The dawn broke grey across the starry sky,
 And far ahead behind the mountains flowed
 A sudden gush of molten gold on high ;
 The glory spread from snowy horn to horn,
 Tinged by the rushing dawn with sanguine dye,
 And Tous, the little town where he was born,
 Flashed at his feet, with white roofs clustered nigh.

XXXVIII.

His aged sister fell upon his neck ;
 His girl, his only child, with happy tears,
 Clung to his knees, and sobbing, with no check
 Poured out the story of her hopes and fears.
 Gravely his servants gave him welcome meet,
 And when his coming reached the townfolk's ears
 They ran to cluster round him in the street,
 And gave him honour for his wealth of years.

XXXIX.

And there in peace he waited for the end ;
 But in all distant lands where Mahmoud sent,
 Each Prince and Sultan was Firdusi's friend,
 And murmured, like a high-stringed instrument
 Swept by harsh fingers, at a quest so rude,
 And chid the zeal, austere and violent,
 That drove so sweet a voice to solitude,
 And bade the Shah consider and relent.

XL.

And once from Delhi, that o'erhangs the tide
 Of reedy Ganges like a gorgeous cloud,
 The Hindu king, with Persia close allied,
 Sent letters larger than the faith he vowed,
 Smelling of sandalwood and ambergris,
 And cited from Firdusi lines that showed
 Friendship should be eternal, and the bliss
 Of love a gift to make a master proud.

XLI.

So while these words were fresh in Mahmoud's brain
 He went one night into the mosque to pray,
 And by the swinging lamp deciphered plain
 The verse Firdusi, ere he fled away,
 Wrote on the wall ; and one by one there rose
 Sad thoughts and sweet of many a vanished day,
 When his soul hovered on the measured close
 And wave-beat of the rich heroic lay.

XLII.

Mourning the verse, he mourned the poet too ;
 And he who oftentimes had lain awake
 Long nights in wide-eyed vision to pursue
 His victim, yearning in revengeful ache,
 Forgot all dreams of a luxurious death
 By trampling elephant or strangling snake,
 And thought on his old friend with tightened breath,
 And flushed, remorseful for his anger's sake.

XLIII.

Back to his court he went, molten at heart,
 And all his rage on faithless Hasau turned ;
 For when he thought him of that tongue's black art,
 His wrath was in him like a coal that burned.
 He bade his several ministers appear
 Before his throne, and by inquiry learned
 The cunning treason of the false vizier,
 And all his soul's deformity discerned.

XLIV.

Hasan was slain that night ; and of the gold
 His monkey-hands had thieved from rich and poor,
 The Sultan bade the money should be told
 Long due as payment at Firdusi's door ;
 But when the sacks of red dinars were full,
 Mahmoud bethought him long, and pondered sore,
 Since vainly any king is bountiful
 Not knowing where to seek his creditor.

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Since vainly any king is bountiful
Not knowing where to seek his creditor.

XLV.

But while he fretted at this ignorance,
 A dervish came to Ghaznin, who had seen,
 In passing through the streets of Tous, by chance
 Firdusi in his garden cool and green ;
 At this Mahmoud rejoiced, and, with glad eyes
 Swimming in tears, quivering with liquid sheen,
 Wrote words of pardon, and in welcoming wise
 Prayed all might be again as all had been.

XLVI.

But while Firdusi brooded on his wrong,
 One day he heard a child's clear voice repeat
 The bitter jibe of his own scathing song ;
 Whereat he started, and his full heart beat
 Its last deep throb of agony and rage ;
 And blinded in sharp pain, with tottering feet,
 Being very feeble in extremest age,
 He fell, and died there in the crowded street.

XLVII.

The light of three-and-fourscore summers' suns
 Had blanched the silken locks round that vast brow ;
 If Mahmoud might have looked upon him once,
 He would have bowed before him meek and low ;
 The majesty of death was in his face,
 And those wide waxen temples seem to glow
 With morning glory from some holy place
 Where angels met him in a burning row.

XLVIII.

His work was done ; the palaces of kings
Fade in long rains, and in loud earthquakes fall ;
The poem that a godlike poet sings
Shines o'er his memory like a brazen wall ;
No suns may blast it, and no tempest wreck,
Its periods ring above the trumpet's call,
Wars and the tumult of the sword may shake
And may eclipse it—it survives them all.

XLIX.

Now all this while along the mountain road
The mighty line of camels wound in state ;
Shuddering they moved beneath their massy load,
And swinging slowly with the balanced weight ;
Burden of gold, and garments red as flame,
They bore, not dreaming of the stroke of fate,
And so at last one day to Tous they came
And entered blithely at the eastern gate.

L.

But in the thronged and noiseless streets they found
All mute, and marvelled at the tears men shed,
And no one asked them whither they were bound,
And when for very shame discomfited,
They cried, " Now tell us where Firdusi lies !"
A young man like a cypress rose and said—
The anger burning in his large dark eyes—
" Too late Mahmoud remembers ! he is dead !

LI.

"Speed ! haste away ! hie to the western port ;
 Perchance the convoy has not passed it yet !
 But hasten, hasten, for the hour is short,
 And your short-memoried master may forget !
 Behold, they bear Firdus to the tomb,
 Pour in his open grave your golden debt !
 Speed ! haste ! and with the treasures of the loom
 Dry the sad cheeks where filial tears are wet !

LII.

"Lead your bright-harnessed camels one by one,
 The dead man journeys, and he fain would ride ;
 Pour out your unctuous perfumes in the sun,
 The rose has spilt her petals at his side ;
 Your citherns and your carven rebecks hold
 Here when the nightingale untimely died ;
 And ye have waited well till he is cold,
 Now wrap his body in your tigers' hide."

LIII.

And so the young man ceased ; but one arose
 Of graver aspect, not less sad than he.
 "Nay, let," he cried, "the sunshine and the snows
 His glittering gold and silk-soft raiment be ;
 Approach not with unhallowed steps profane
 The low white wall, the shadowy lotus-tree ;
 Nor let a music louder than the rain
 Disturb him dreaming through eternity."

LIV.

“ For him no more the dawn will break in blood
No more the silver moon bring fear by night ;
He starts no longer at a tyrant's mood,
Serene for ever in the Prophet's sight ;
The soul of Yaman breathed on him from heaven,
And he is victor in the unequal fight ;
To Mahmoud rage and deep remorse are given,
To old Firdusi rest and long delight.”

EDMUND W. GOSSE

