

THE TAJ MEHAL.

BY A. CHRISTINA ALBERS.

ON the plains of Agra and Oudh, where the Jumna sends her yellow waters seaward, there stands a building of marvellous beauty, a dream in marble, a structure so lofty in its snowy white splendor, that it would seem the heavens had opened their portals and dropped one of their mansions down to the earth. Unrivalled in design and workmanship stands this wonder of the world, defying all that art has ever produced, finding not in all the lands of the earth its equal. "The Moghuls designed like Titans and finished like jewelers," goes an old saying. And who seeing this gigantic product of delicate marble carvings and graceful designs of inlaid stones,—but realises the truth of this saying.

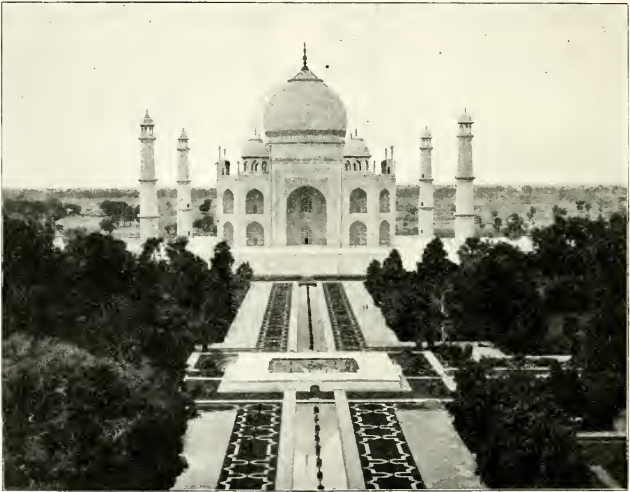
And this mansion of beauty is a tribute to the dead—a Mausoleum. Under this canopied pall of marble slumbers in the last long sleep the beautiful Mumtaz-i-Mehal—the Exalted of the Palace,—the fair Queen of Shah Jehan, one of India's most famous rulers of the Moghul Dynasty. And beside her, placed there many years later, rests the mighty Emperor himself, at rest at last, from strife and warfare, released from "life's fitful fever,"—in death near her whom on earth he so fondly loved.

Thus runs the legend: The Queen, looking forward to the ordeal of motherhood, heard the child cry beneath her heart. The world, alas! is short for them who hear the cry of the unborn infant,—the deathknell, forsooth, to the young mother. Known was the signal to the Queen, therefore she called her Lord to her chamber. Tenderly she informed him of the signal of death and enjoined him to bear up with manly strength under the fate that was inevitable.

"Many, my Lord, are the years," she continued, "that it has been granted me to be by thy side,—years of imprisonment and sorrow,—years of honor and royal power. May then my soul de-

part in peace, since now the Almighty has granted thee a kingdom. But ere the hour strike that the world will know me no more, grant me, my husband, two boons. Let no other woman stand beside thee as thy queen, lest children be born to dispute the rights of the sons and daughters I bore thee. And let thy Queen be placed in a tomb that excells in beauty all the world has ever known before." Overawed by her words stood the King, speechless, tears mounting to his eyes, and silently he granted the boons.

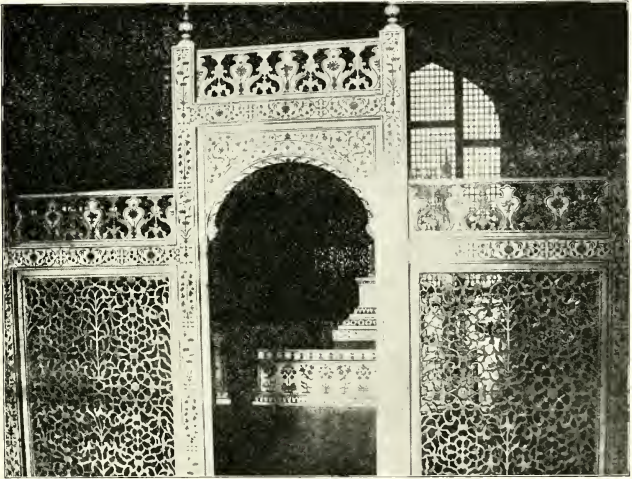
True proved the oraculum; for when the young infant was placed in his mother's arms the Queen expired, and the light that had illumined the life of her consort for so many years, went out



THE TAJ MEHAL. (After a photograph.)

for evermore as her life-breath fled hence. Unbroken remained the word of the King. Neither in his heart nor on the throne did ever woman take the place of Arjamand, the beautiful. But troubled was he in mind, for where could he find the design of the tomb fit for the Queen who on earth knew not her equal in beauty? When, lo! in a dream the heavens opened before him and showed him the mansion he sought. Long was his struggle to find a draftsman who could draw for him the plan, yet even him at last he found.

Eighteen long years labored the workmen to complete this temple of art,—and to-day, after more than two centuries and a half after its completion, the Mausoleum stands as perfect and shining in its marble splendor as though it were erected but yesterday. The King resolved to build for himself a tomb of black marble equal in beauty to the first, and have the two united by a silver bridge. But frail is the will of man against the powerful hand of destiny. Incarcerated in a castle he himself had built, Shah Jehan, the marble builder, died a prisoner of state, imprisoned by his son,—the son of the mother for whom he had built the tomb. But such, alas! is only too often the fate of kings.



INTERIOR OF THE TAJ MEHAL. (After a photograph.)

On a raised platform stands the Taj, built of the purest of Jaipur marble, a lofty minaret towering heavenward at each corner. The aerial, unrivalled grace of its domes, the perfect symmetry of the whole, impress themselves on the mind of the beholder and make him stand in marvel, while the marble has retained its pristine purity and shines in the splendor of newly-fallen snow when it dazzles under the rays of the sun.

Silently we enter the sanctuary. It is here "the architect ends and the jeweller commences." Fret-work of marble, exquis-

itely carved and of rare designs grace the interior. On the walls, the ceiling, the floor and above all on the stately sarcophagi themselves—everywhere the marble is inlaid with stone, delicately shaded and exquisitely graceful in its curvings. Smaller and smaller grow the designs on the latter, the nearer the top, till finally they are barely visible. This is to symbolise the passing of life into the Eternity beyond. And on the sides are engraven, in Persian characters, lyrics in praise of her who slumbers beneath this stone, written by the King himself to immortalise her virtues and her beauty.

“Allah,” calls the guide, a venerable follower of the Moslem, with flowing beard as white as the Taj itself. “Al-l-a-h” resounds the echo from the dome overhead for at least five minutes unbroken. Wondrous is this sound and wondrous also is the silence in this place. A prayer sent up in this sanctuary—thus have I heard—will not remain ungranted.

Surrounding the Mausoleum extends a beautiful park and from the colossal gate two paths of marble lead up to it, running between which is a brook of crystal waters. The whole seems like a dream, a vision not of this world, and peace reigns over the Castle of Sleep of fair Mumtaz-i-Mehal—the Exalted of the Palace.