

HASAN AND HUSAIN: THE PASSION PLAY OF PERSIA—A CONTRAST.

BY BERTHA JOHNSTON.

THE stream of pilgrims which this decennial year flows from all quarters, from all lands, into the little valley of Oberammergau, has probably reached a height never before attained, because the impressive and artistic merit of that most daring of dramatic productions is known now as never before.

It is perhaps familiar to few of those who have seen or read of the wonderful Oberammergau play, that one great division of the followers of Mohammed has also developed a miracle play, given annually in both Persia and India, requiring ten days for its presentation and awakening intense emotion, and impassioned grief wherever played.

A brief comparison of these two tremendous dramas, whose characters, scenes, and the lessons therein taught have become in each case an integral part of the adherents of their respective religions, woven into the very thread and fibre of their being, cannot fail to be of interest to all "who love their fellow-men."

The origin of the play of Oberammergau is familiar to all, so we will restate it briefly. In 1633 a pestilence raged in this region and the villagers made a solemn vow that if its progress were stayed they would perform the Passion Play every tenth year. This vow has been faithfully observed.

Like other great folk-plays and epics this production as at present given has been a matter of growth and evolution. As it stands now it may properly be regarded as the production of the scholarly Geistlicher Rath Daistenberger who for thirty years prior to 1889, trained the villagers, and rewrote, remodelled, added to and eliminated from the drama until it assumed the form in which it is now presented, a masterpiece in the expression of strong religious

feeling and a consummate effort when measured by the severest standards of dramatic art.

As presented at Oberammergau, there are nineteen principal performers in the play, including the Choragus, who gives the numerous explanatory prologues.

The language is for the most part simple, direct, to the point, as in the New Testament, although as occasion demands, words, sentences and paragraphs have been judiciously interpolated in order to carry on the story intelligently. Both as regards color harmonies and composition, the many tableaux are wonderfully effective, and the singing of the choruses, the acting of the performers, have reached the highest degree of perfection.

Preceding every scene is given a tableau of a corresponding incident in Old Testament history which serves to emphasize the particular lesson conveyed. Thus, the Council of the High Priests is preceded by the tableau of Joseph cast into the pit, and the parting at Bethany is prefigured by the departure of Tobias from his home.

As for the characters and the scenes selected for dramatization—here we see exhibited malignant jealousy, revengeful greed, frenzied finance, cruel spite, craven irresolution, determined will, sign-seeking superstition, pious hypocrisy, back-sliding fear, traitorous betrayal, much as we meet them on every hand to-day. And on the other side, are most wonderfully expressed faithful affection, tender forethought, agonizing repentance, frightful remorse, unselfish service and the noblest heights of pure redeeming love, unexampled love of humanity, understanding of its weaknesses, comprehension of its aspirations and noble possibilities, forgiveness of its wrongs.

Humanity in its weakness and its strength, its vices and its virtues stands before us and those who see the play must needs leave that judgment hall in all meekness of heart and with renewed self-pledges to devote life, talent, money to the service of even the least of these little ones—knowing that “where love is, God is.”

And what of the Persian Passion Play, its origin, manner of presentation and influence?

As with Christianity, so with Islam, schisms arose and sects appeared soon after the death of the founder of the new faith. In Christendom the divisions came about through dissensions over dogma and the correct interpretation of texts not uninfluenced by political motives. Among the Mohammedans the grand schism was occasioned by disputes not only over which of the traditions were

or were not canonical, but over the proper succession to the caliphate.

The claimants to the caliphate were four, Ali (first cousin to the Prophet and also husband to his daughter Fatimah) and his three fathers-in-law, Abu Beker, Omar, and Othman. The latter three succeeded in turn to the high office, being upheld by the Sunnis or traditionalists, who were found mostly among the Turks and Arabs. When Persia was overcome by the Saracens, she, hating her Turkish conquerors, upheld the claims of Ali and his descendants and affiliated with the great Shiah sect, whose major article of faith is that the descendants of Ali are the rightful sovereign pontiffs.

On the plains of Karbala, A. D. 780, Husain, grandson of Mohammed, was killed in battle, his brother Hasan having been poisoned by the Sunnis ten years before. In time the Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain evolved, centering around the martyrdom of these two sons of Ali and grandsons of the Prophet. The main characteristics are thus summed up by an English official long resident in Persia and India and who has published a translation of thirty-seven of the scenes.

"It is singular in its intolerable length; in the fact of the representation extending over many days; in its marvelous effects upon a Mussulman audience, both male and female; in the curious mixture of hyperbole and archaic simplicity of language, and in the circumstance that the so-called unities of time and space are not only ignored but abolished. The Prophet Mohammed and his family are at once the central figures and moving spirits of the whole, whether the scene may be that of Joseph and his brethren on earth, or of the Patriarchal Family at the Judgment Day. Mohammed appears on the scene at will; and with him as with the Creator, it seems to be a universal Here and a universal Now."

As we study this lengthy drama, we obtain interesting and illuminating glimpses into the strange life of the Orient. The portrayal of simple, primitive passions, of fierce hate and generous, self-denying love, of family fealty and clannish devotion, brings us back to the period when our ancestors led the nomadic life and were swayed by the most elementary emotions.

At the first cursory superficial reading the play impressed one as the outgrowth of fanatical sectarianism. It seemed as if the primary object of its creators was not so much the dissemination of the light of Islam, as an intention to cut deeper the lines and build higher the walls that separate the two great Mohammedan denominations; to make the Shialis hate with an ever-increasing

hatred the successors of those whom they considered responsible for the deaths of Hasan and Husain. So virulent is this feeling that some of the more bigoted Shiah's will have the sign of Omar tattooed upon the soles of their feet that they may thus continually tread it under foot; a feeling paralleled by the fanaticism of those Christians who would still persecute the Jews because their ancestors were in part responsible for the death of Jesus. The Persian Passion Play is not calculated to moderate this bitter antagonism.

But the sufferings of Ali and his family, grievous as they were, were no worse than befall any soldier in any war. In what then consists the great merit of the death of Ali and his family? What is it that arouses in an entire people from Shah to common laborer such a passion of sorrow and excited grief?

Although the two great Passion Plays seem at first comparison as far apart as the two poles, we know that, far apart as the poles are, they are each a part of our great globe, our common Mother Earth, and these two folk dramas are not in essential spirit, in their deeper meanings, quite as different as external characteristics would seem to indicate.

We find two main correspondences between the two dramas. Ali and his two sons are unwarlike in spirit, disinterested, gentle, pious, forgiving, uninterested in mere politics and intrigues. Even his arch-enemy Yezid is quoted as saying of his defeated foe, "God loved Husain but would not suffer him to attain anything." At the final battle of Karbala, when all were suffering agonies from thirst and the river but a short distance away, one by one Abbas, Ali Akbar and two younger brothers in vain try to get to the river and back with the precious water for their loved ones, and in remembrance of this suffering and sacrifice young men of the highest rank carry around water-skins with which to supply the needs of even the poorest of the audience during the play. Love, pity, gratitude, are the emotions stirred as at Oberammergau. Again, throughout the play we are reminded that all the sufferings, all this anguish, is endured by Husain, in order that those who are his followers may be saved on the Day of Judgment from eternal torment.

But let us study the play more in detail.

In a volume before us, the introductory chapter or scene takes us back, as in the Oberammergau play, to the parting of Jacob from Joseph and the casting of the latter in the pit. As Jacob bemoans the loss of Joseph apparently he foresees the future and wonders "what will be the feelings of Fatimah, the mother of Husain, when she sees her son's blood-stained coat after he shall have been put

to death in a most cruel manner." And Gabriel reminds him that his sufferings are as naught compared to those of Husain who sees his relatives killed before his eyes, just before he himself is slain.

One scene pictures Fatimah with the little Husain seated on her knee as she combs his locks. The pulling of a hair causes him to cry out and then the angel Gabriel reminds her of the greater anguish to come. Later, in this same scene while the children are happily digging a well in the sand, a group of boys stone them, these boys being their victorious and cruel enemies in the days to come. Thus are we reminded of events pictured in the Apocrypha of the New Testament.

Another strange and pathetic chapter shows the death of the little son of Mohammed, who is made to converse with the Prophet and the angel of death, Izrail, having first asked permission of his schoolmaster to return home and prepare for a long journey from which there is no return, and begging pardon for past faults and neglected duties. In reality the child at the time of his death was less than two years old.

Another scene brings before us the disobedient son who has for his unfilial conduct been consigned to the torments of hell. Mohammed is much distressed at his cries of anguish, and he, Ali, Fatimah and Hasan, implore his mother to forgive him and for the sake of their agonies to release him, but she is obdurate until when Husain rehearses his sufferings at Karbala and an angel threatens her with swift punishment, she relents and the forgiven son comes out of the grave.

Many times the Prophet's children suffered from lack of the very necessities of life, and we can imagine how affecting would be that scene in which the two boys, Hasan and Husain, ask their parents in vain for food. Finally Fatimah decides to appeal to her father although as she says "I am ashamed to complain to my father respecting Ali my husband." Later, Mohammed and the children return to the mother's home, but the boys are so faint they can hardly move and we hear their grandfather saying, "O Husain and Hasan, ye lights of the eye of God's elect, ye two ornaments of the shoulders of Mohammed, the chosen of God, come and ride both of you on my back, that I may take you to your mother." And he offers the prayer "O God, I adjure Thee by the merit of my cousin, the Lion of God, and by these two dear things I am supporting on my shoulders, freely have mercy on Ali's followers in the Day of Resurrection, as I voluntarily suffer ignominy in this world for their sake." Arrived at home, the larder bare, angels from Paradise

supply their needs with fresh dates. Ali meanwhile has gone out to find employment and meets a youth who is seeking to kill him, to whom Ali magnanimously offers his head when he learns that the young man is in love and wishes to give it as a dowry to the father of the lady of his love. The youth is impressed by this self-abnegation and becomes a convert. "Better generosity than this none has ever seen, that one should freely give his head to another man," which seems a paraphrase of that noble utterance of Jesus under far more impressive circumstances, "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends."

We are permitted to be present at the deathbed of Mohammed, where, before he expires he addresses in turn each beloved member of his family, telling them of the particular woes in store for each and asking if for the sake of their people they are willing to endure this great suffering. Great indeed must have been the devotion of Fatimah who for the service of God is willing that even her best-beloved Husain shall be given up to sorrow; great indeed the love of Husain who besides his own woes must endure to give up his brother Abbas and to see his son Ali Akbar slain before him. As the Prophet dies he exclaims, "Oh! let me suffer the severity of death, instead of my people. Give all the afflictions and sorrows of my followers to me alone to bear."

Here and there in the dialogues we are surprised by allusions to Christ and Mary and are thus obliged to remind ourselves that Jesus is revered by the Mohammedans almost as much as by the Christians. In a pathetic conversation between Ali, Fatimah and the other members of the "Family of the Tent," as they are called, we hear the family crying in chorus to their father, "When thou openest thy mouth thou givest us life; thou makest the dead live by thy *Christlike* influence. Tell us, O Ali, our adventures; after we have heard them thou wilt see what patience we each of us possess."

Having just heard both Mohammed and Ali foretell what are to be the peculiar sufferings of each of the martyr family, we are somewhat surprised in the succeeding paragraphs to hear them imploring their enemy to refrain from his cruel usurpation, and acting in each case as if the deed were quite unexpected. Throughout the play there is this curious mingling of past and present and future; of willing acceptance of what must be, and pathetic if not violent reproaches cast upon those responsible for all the suffering.

Thus, the murder of Ali, in the mosque by the traitor Ibn Muljam, seems to come as a tragic surprise to his devoted family and the scene gives us sad but pleasing glimpses into a united family

life, in which Hasan and Husain and their sisters, Zainab and Kulsam, mutually mourn and sympathize with each other.

Moawiyah, Governor of Bussorah, is one of the bitter enemies of the Family of the Tent, and he induces Hasan's wife to poison her husband. Hasan expires in agony, surrounded by his bewailing sisters, brothers and children. He reproaches without betraying her, the wife who was responsible for his death, and when another brother would fain draw his sword at the grave to destroy the guilty people, Husain replies, "Nay, my brother; it is better to have patience with them for a while; for thus has Hasan enjoined, saying, 'You must take care not to excite the people, or provoke them to jealousy, lest there should be bloodshed over my bier.'"

Still another martyr was Muslim, an envoy of Husain's, sent to Kufah to find out the feeling of the people and discover if they would be true to certain promises made. He is executed by the city's ruler, but before this happens our sympathies are excited by his two little boys whom he has brought with him and who become tired of the town and ask their father to take them on an excursion to the river. Later, when danger threatens, the oldest one is heard saying, "Dear father, seeing alms avert calamitous events, and sacrifices prevent impending misfortunes, offer then, thy two sorrowful sons to the living God as acceptable sacrifices, that thy Lord may have mercy on thy youth and save thy soul from death." The children wander around disconsolately, each weary and hungry, but thinking ever of the other's comfort. In the succeeding scene they are both murdered. And here again there is a loving rivalry between the brothers, as to who shall suffer first, the elder hoping that if he be killed first their enemy's wrath may be appeased.

We cannot make even a brief reference to all of the many chapters or scenes which continue the long drama; but there are several in which we become acquainted with little Sukainah (daughter of Husain) whose years however it is difficult to determine as is the case with the other children, for what they say often indicates the little child, while the language is most mature and dignified. Passages between the little maid and her aunt Zainab show the loving relation between them and the trial it was for those who loved each other to be hopeless to assist or make them comfortable or happy. The little one longs for her father who comes and tenderly holds her in his lap.

Just before battle one of his foes, although he knows that Husain is on the losing side, becomes converted and comes to his defense, followed by his son and brother, preferring imperishable

to the perishable riches, and thus throughout the entire story we see love and pity triumphing over the sterner passions.

As the final scene draws near, Kasim implores his uncle Husain's permission to enter the conflict, although only a youth of sixteen, but desiring martyrdom and its eternal reward. Husain finally consents but first desires that Kasim shall espouse his daughter Fatimah, and thus we are brought face to face in almost the same breath with the two events that stir so deeply all our emotions. The marriage ceremony takes place, the youth mournfully yet determinedly separates himself from his beautiful bride, and hurries into battle.

The final catastrophe comes at last. Husain is killed and the women, with heads uncovered (so dreadful a situation to the Eastern woman) are led through the streets of the conquering city, having previously suffered cruel beatings from their brutal foes. They are imprisoned, but the sovereign's wife visits them and becoming interested asks mercy for them and is herself forthwith executed for her temerity.

The final scene presents to us the Judgment Day, when the angel Gabriel receives the order to blow his trumpet for calling up the dead, and we learn how unavailing are any other means of salvation than the martyrdom of Husain. Abraham is the first to arise, imploring rescue from the flames of torment, no matter what becomes of his beloved Isaac; and Isaac beseeches that he be saved even if his father must continue to suffer; Jacob appears and has forgotten all about his dear Joseph of the first scene. All that he thinks of is his own suffering and rest therefrom; and when Joseph rises from the flames he thinks not of his father, but only how he himself may be relieved of his agony. All this of course is to lead up, by contrast, to the difference between even the ancient fathers, and the wonderful loving sacrifices of the Mohammed-Ali faction. In turn Mohammed, Ali, Fatimah, and Hasan appear and because of their vicarious sufferings ask that their believing followers be saved future pain and sorrow, but the Most High will not listen until at last appears Husain, recounting all his many sorrows, willingly endured for his people, and the sacrifice is accepted.

Thus runs the strange, powerful story, which annually affects millions of men and women to a frenzy of excitement and demonstration of utmost grief and passion, whether in the large cities of India or the isolated desert towns of Persia. And yet the stage setting is of the simplest, the arrangements in many particulars reminding us of the European drama in its beginnings.

In Persia all of the larger houses have their own *tabut* or *tazia* (a model of the tombs at Karbala) among the wealthier Shiah's these being beautiful fixtures of silver, gold, ivory, inlaid work or other rich material. The stage is a kind of movable pulpit covered with rich materials, and with no wings to conceal the coming and the going of the actors; thus again recalling early English conditions. With this play, a lion skin, suspended, reminds the on-lookers that this is a scene in the desert; a silver basin of water symbolizes the river Euphrates, whose cool waters are so desired by the thirsty martyrs; a little heap of chopped straw represents the ashes or earth with which the woeful mourners bestrew their dishevelled hair; and without apparently disturbing the train of thought the master of ceremonies will himself at the proper moment, in view of the audience, place in the hands of the right person the straw needed or will give a timely suggestion to the children who play their parts with rare and touching seriousness, for it is a most solemn occasion to the little ones; these frequently come from the most influential families who feel honored to have them thus take part in the sacred function.

The actors are regularly trained for their parts, and to them too it is a sacred office which they perform. It is said that they throw themselves into it with great and serious feeling. Indeed, strange to say, so real is the suffering and rare patience of the martyred ones that even those who take the parts of the tyrants break down and sob as they perform their cruel offices. The martyr family speak always in a lyrical chant; the language of the persecutors is prose.

The Oriental style of speech with its extravagant similes and comparisons, its formal modes of address even when between those who are most intimate, the number of words necessary to make a most simple statement, all sound strange into our ears, accustomed to the most direct, matter-of-fact modes of communication. We have given a few quotations; here are a few examples of quaint and unusual comparisons which however give us a peep into the Oriental households. When Hasan is about to die Kulsum complains, "Let me know if heaven has rolled up the carpet of my life." In the same scene Kasim says, "Time has pelted the bottle of my heart with cruel stones"; and Hasan himself, "The pot of my life has ceased from its natural ebullition."

A maiden is as beautiful as the moon on the fourteenth night, and the zephyr becomes as "musk passing through her hair." Hasan is the "disembarking Noah of the present generation." The Euphra-

tes is "restless as quicksilver"; the head is "cloven asunder like the point of a pen." Curious indeed is the affirmation "I am a doorkeeping dog in the street of thy affection and faith"; another quaint simile is that which compares one's life with "a tattered page in sorrow's volume." We alluded above to references to Christian saints, and in another place we find Mohammed saying to Fatimah, "Thou being in God's sight the Mary of this people, the Creator will give thee patience."

These quotations might be continued indefinitely but enough has been given to indicate something of the language and spirit of the play as presented in the translations* to which we have had access. In his *Essays in Criticism* (1865) Matthew Arnold includes a study of the Persian Passion Play, but at the time there was no English translation. His knowledge was derived from the observations of the French traveler and Orientalist Gobineau, and it is necessarily incomplete. But the philosophic mind of the great English essayist, enriched by much thinking, reading and travel, has enabled him to understand and sympathize with the universal need of the human heart that called the play into being. The need of an ideal, pure, unselfish, innocent of transgression, long-suffering, willing for the sake of righteousness and of humanity to suffer to the end.

The two-volume play seems crude, strained, artificial in many of the situations, especially when without the accompaniment of dramatic action that makes it so real to the people whence it originated. But in its earlier form the Christian Passion Play was equally crude, with much of coarseness in many of the scenes enacted. There is nothing in this drama of the vulgar humor so conspicuous in our former miracle plays and moralities. In its present form, that of Persia is a true expression of popular feeling, and is encouraged by the popular friars but is condemned by the regular ecclesiastical authorities of the Moslem Church as being heretical and "addressed to the eye," thus coming within the confines of the forbidden. Nor is it approved by the more restrained and critical judgment of those who esteem themselves above the common crowd. Its effect upon the people seems to resemble the violent hysterical excitement aroused at some of our revival meetings.

During the first ten days of the first month (Mohurrum) of the Mohammedan year (the anniversary of the ten days of suffering) the people dress in mourning, carry black flags and keep Mohurrum fires lighted (if only a nightlight in a simple basin) all through the

* *The Miracle Play of Hasan and Husain*, Pelly and Wollaston.

period. The scenes of excitement and of self-inflicted injury recall the Flagellants and other zealots of times past and present, before the folk awaken to the truth, ancient but ever young, that justice and judgment and mercy are more acceptable to the Lord than sacrifice and self-mutilation.

It is said by our compiler that "up country in India where the *tabuts* in the final processions are brought to the Mohammedan cemeteries and Sunnis and Shiahhs meet face to face before the open graves of Hasan and Husain, the feuds between them which have been pent up all the year are often fought out to a bloody end." We know similar scenes of violence take place wherever the real spirit of religion is forgotten in race hatred or sectarian bigotry. Mohammedans forget that Hasan forbade bloodshed at his grave as Christians forget that Jesus said "Forgive them, they know not what they do."

It is certainly interesting to observe the general resemblance between these two great expressions of religious feeling in the principal ideas upon which each rests. They spring from the same human heart that cries for light and love wherever man is found. What we miss most in the Moslem is that sense of things spiritual which raises the modernized German play far above its Persian counterpart. Mild, tender, loving, self-sacrificing, as are the Mohammedan victims, they fall short of the ideal of the Christ. There is a lack of constructive righteousness, of hunger for the ideal; no expression of sorrow for evil done or temptation conquered. One dies to save people from sinning, the other from the results of their sinning; and the Heaven of the Christian orthodox faith is assuredly more spiritual, rests on a higher plane, than that promised by Mohammed to his followers.

But perhaps we are drawing finer distinctions than really exist. It might be more just to compare the Persian Play with the Christian one in its earlier form. When it comes to final arbitrament as to which is the true religion we find the answer in Lessing's inspired Play "Nathan the Wise," where he tells the story of the three rings. Real religion is seen in the lives of those who profess it. Where are found truth, righteousness, purity, love, continued aspiration for the higher life, there is the real Passion Play. Which audience is most inspired to forgetfulness of injuries, to loving service, "to deeds of daring rectitude"? That is the final test by which both plays must be judged.