

On Teheran there is nothing to be said which has not been said a hundred times already. It is a town that has not the slightest glimmer of the fascination of antiquity, for it has had the honour of being the capital of Iran only during the Kajar dynasty. It also lacks the picturesqueness and rich colouring that still belong to the cupolas and minarets of Ispahan, Shiraz, and Meshed, and its site is uninteresting, on a plain 3700 feet above sea-level, from the soil of which, formerly desert, artificial irrigation has produced fruitful fields and luxuriant gardens. Only the view to the north, where Elburz presents a background changing with the weather and the illumination, and where Demavend, "the abode of spirits," raises its volcanic peak 18,600 feet high, is such that one is never weary of turning one's eyes in this direction. For the rest the town is a maze, an intricate confusion of uniform houses with flat roofs and windows and doors opening into courts, a conglomeration inhabited by 200,000 Shiites, an anthill where there is no activity, a town surrounded by a useless wall with five great gates and a dried-up moat. Among the simple houses of the citizens stand, here and there, palaces of the Shah, princes, and nobles, defectively built, pretentious, and commonplace, so different from the grand masterpieces of solid and tasteful architecture formerly erected by the great kings of Persia, of which there are some remains even now, after a lapse of 2400 years. A few mosques also break the monotony, but they do not charm the eye with elegant inlaid tiles, and cannot compare with the temples in the older Persian towns, and even the large, newly built chief mosque bears from its foundation the birthmarks of architectural decadence on its front.

And so there is no pleasure in wandering through the hideous streets of Teheran, where dirty, badly kept European tramcars and leaning lamp-posts form an unpleasantly crude contrast to the tones of Oriental life; and where European, Armenian, and Greek shops seem upstarts and intruders among the native bazaar crypts, with their subdued and dignified repose. Twenty years before, when I visited Teheran for the first time, in April 1886, the Oriental type was far less altered than now;