

When the epidemic began its work of destruction in Nasretabad the mushtehids and mollahs thought that they could drive away and exorcise the plague demon by marching daily round the town wall with a sacrificial goat at the head of the procession. They carried the Koran and read prayers from it; they had music and black flags, or rather a square piece of cloth stretched between two poles, and when the circuit was completed the goat was offered up to Ali. These processions became very popular, and the people believed in their effectiveness. They embodied, so to speak, in the eyes of the credulous the divine powers, and the priests in their white turbans and long kaftans appeared imposing as mediators and intercessors with God. In reality they helped to a large extent to spread the epidemic. How many who walked in these processions came straight from plague-stricken houses and gave the infection to those who walked beside them? Exorcising processions, under the protection of Allah, were nothing but dances of death—a march to the grave.

Afterwards, the processions ceased, not because they were useless, but simply from lack of people and goats. People died instead, and the custom died out; people fled from the infected town, and at length there was no one left who cared or had the means to pay for the goats.

Those who were left resorted to another expedient. The chief mushtehid of the place, Mollah Mahdi, collected the people to *rosa-khaneh*, or prayer-meetings, in the square before the mosque which bears his name, Meshid Mollah Mahdi. There tea and kilians were passed round among the guests, and the blinded and obstinate men found another means of spreading the plague by means of gatherings.

The Englishmen tried in vain to bring this Mollah Mahdi and the other priests in Nasretabad to reason. With their assistance it would have been easy to extirpate the plague in a month; but nothing could be done with them, for their chief aim was not to lose their hold and influence over the people. As far as possible deaths were kept secret from Englishmen, and most of the burials took place at night. When Macpherson and I were out one day for a walk we met some men bearing a coffin, and