

## SOHRAB and the MASJID-I-SHAH MOSQUE



My name is Sohrab, brother of Rustam, and a native of my beloved Esfahan in the land of Persia. My parents were dreamers of the past and gave me a name that is a good name among the children of Persia for it is a Persian, and not a religious, name such as Mohammad or Ali. My parents loved and admired the history of our former greatness, and they thought to preserve a part of that greatness by giving me a name of ancient renown. My name might even be considered a classic name in Esfahan since there are many things that are classic about my city. The Masjid-i-Shah mosque overshadows the street on which I live. It is also anciently constructed at a time when the Kings of Persia (Shahs) were notable world figures – around four hundred years ago.

As a boy growing up, I heard the story of Rustam and Sohrab repeated many times from the ‘Epic of the Kings’ or, the *Shahnameh*. These were heroes and brave. But I want to tell you about my feelings of Persia and how the Masjid-i-Shah mosque affects those feelings. First of all, it is a gigantic structure with azure blue décor and many intricate patterns adorning its walls. The prayer towers stand as guards over our ancient city to plead the mercy of Allah on all who live here. During the time of Shah Abbas, there were polo games organized around the mosque’s ball ground that were attended by the royalty of Europe and many European polo-ist participated in the games. Our people took our faith quite seriously, but we did not allow it, in those days, to shut out the world from our understanding. We had great poets such as Rumi, Saadi, and Hafez. Even Edgar Allen Poe makes reference to our “poet of Shiraz.” When I view our great mosque from my low place on the ground, I am reminded by its vastness of the greatness of our land. I am reminded of Omar Khayyam and the beautiful poem

written of him by the pen of his own hand – perhaps a thousand years ago.

I am secretly in love with a young girl named Simin, but I do not know if she cares for me. I am not allowed to talk with girls since it is against the counsel of the mullahs. Why this is so, I do not know. I have watched Simin from a distance and see that she is sweet and kind. She walks with the grace of a beautiful sailing vessel. If only I could tell her what is in my heart, but Allah forbids it! I have watched the mullahs present the law of Allah many times at the great mosque, but it seems that Allah has many masks. Many years ago, he was benevolent and accepting of other peoples of the Book, but now he seems to have discovered that all people, except his people, are only worthy of death. I do not know why Allah changed his thinking, but I am sure he has good cause since the mullahs say that he does have. Perhaps feelings of love are not according to Allah's will?

Today, as I was walking to my madrasah on Abbass-abad Street, I chanced to meet Simin and her mother coming towards me. I was embarrassed, but I kept on walking. I tried to play the man and look Simin right in the eyes, but she was so very modest. Even though she was wearing a chador (veil), she averted her eyes away at the last minute. But, for some reason, I was so very happy for the rest of the day at seeing Simin. I dared to dream that I might actually be able, someday, to tell her how I felt and that she might respond in the same way; but who knows? Perhaps she is a devout Moslem who fears Allah and believes the latest mask that Allah wears forbids love and kindness to all who do not follow precisely his teaching from the Quran. Even though the merchants in the Bazaar are obedient to Allah, they still swindle people of their last rial by deceitful practices, yet these same people would never even think of stealing outright because Allah forbids it. I wonder: does Simin believe this way? In the past, the great mosque was the center of culture for the Shah and people of Esfahan, but the Shah is no more, and Allah seems to have the Masjid-i-Shah mosque all to himself. So there are no more polo games for Allah forbids that too.

Perhaps my fascination with the great mosque is that it holds the memories of great historical events of national importance as well as the stories of beautiful moments of literary accomplishment of times past within its mysterious and foreboding walls. It's beautiful hues of blue remind me of the Persian sky, filled with stars gleaming through the pristine air. It is a jewel of the high desert. Before its being built, there were many who called themselves 'Zoroastrians' who lived in our city. They still have a holy mountain on which a fire is kept and never allowed to go out. I wonder if Allah believes these people, too, were an unworthy people, for most of them left Persian and went to India or some other land. Now there is only Allah that remains, and his home seems to be the great mosque. Allah is not a teller of stories. He only speaks through the ancient words written in the Quran. The words are strong and beautiful, but do we not need food for our imaginations as well as our souls?

Since the Masjid-i-Shah mosque has stood in the same place for many centuries and has watched as kings and poets, warriors and merchants have passed beneath its tall towers, I wonder if it may not be the witness of another more wonderful masks of Allah in the future. Who knows what glorious history may yet be written on the sands of the high desert of Persia? I am sure the great mosque will approve of the beauty of the past being repeated in the lines of the future. But, Allah forbid, perhaps the wise poet, Omar Khayyam, has understood the matter aright:

*"The Moving Finger writes: and, having writ, Moves on: nor all thy Piety nor Wit  
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,  
Nor all thy Tears wash out a Word of it."*

In any case, that which will be, will be, Inshah-allah (if Allah wills)!

My name is Sohrab, brother of Rustam, and I live in the shadow of the great mosque of Masjid-i-Shah!

©2013 Jerry Ogles - While living in Iran, I was impressed with some of the virtues of the culture that were holdovers from the glorious past of Persia. I wrote this little story a few months back and thought you might enjoy reading it.