

SOANE AT HALABJA : AN ECHO

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*Reprinted from the "Journal of the Royal Central
Asian Society," Vol. XXIII., October, 1936*

PUBLISHED BY
THE ROYAL CENTRAL ASIAN SOCIETY
77 GROSVENOR STREET, W. 1

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I

THERE has just (1936) been published at Sulaimani a small collection of poems, in Kurdish and in Persian, by Tahir Beg Jaf,* a poet of some repute among the Southern Kurds. The following is an extract from the introduction in Kurdish :

Tahir Beg, the well-known, celebrated, melodious and word-sweet poet, was the son of Osman Pasha, son of Muhammad Pasha, Jaf. The stock and family of the Jaf Begzadas were accounted among the great and celebrated Kurdish Amirs. One hundred and fifty years ago they held the chieftainship of the Jaf tribe. Later, on the encouragement of the Baban† Government, they came to Sharazur, and from the time of the Baban Government until the formation of the 'Iraqi Government they continued to hold the leadership of the Jaf.

Tahir Beg came into this world in the year 1295 of the *Hijra* (=A.D. 1878), and departed from it in 1337 (=A.D. 1918). He died in Sulaimani; they brought his body to Halabja; he was buried in the village of Ababailê, so named after one of the Companions of the Prophet, one hour's ride up-hill from Halabja.

Tahir Beg did not study in a big or high school, but only passed through a local village school. Nevertheless, his understanding, general knowledge and sagacity did not correspond with the degree of his studies; they were ten times higher.

Tahir Beg composed poetry in four languages—Kurdish, Persian, Turkish and Arabic. He produced a vocabulary of these four languages in rhymed verse. We have expended great effort and trouble, but

* The Jaf are a typical Kurdish nomad tribe numbering several thousand tents. They spend the winter in the Kifri region as far south as Qara Tappa, and the summer in the mountains of Iran, east of Bana. Their range of migration is thus some 130 miles. The settled Jaf are even more numerous than the nomads, occupying many villages throughout the length and breadth of the migration routes. The members of the ruling family are referred to as Begzada. These Jaf of 'Iraq are known as Jaf Muradi; other sections remained in Iran.

† See my article, "A Kurdish Lamponist," in Part I. of the *Journal* for 1935.

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unfortunately we have not been able to lay hands on that rare book. The fragments of his work that we have been able to obtain we owe to his sister, Nahida Khanum, who sent them to us. We request those who have any more works of this personage in their possession to send them to us for inclusion in the second edition.

The sagacity of Tahir Beg was on this wise. In the time of the Turkish Government, fifteen (sic) years before the Great War, the well-known Major Soane came on a journey to Kurdistan in 'Iraq. After spending several years in this manner he went to the house of Osman Pasha, the father of Tahir Beg. He became his servant and remained in his employment six or seven months. He called himself Ghulam Husain. This Ghulam Husain, who was Major Soane, worked very well at his duties as servant. Tahir Beg also, on account of his good service, treated him with the greatest respect and liked him.

From certain peculiarities of the behaviour of this Ghulam Husain Tahir Beg conceived some doubts; for he observed that his manners were not like those of other servants, so polite and conscientious was he.

One day Tahir Beg was looking at a French book. Ghulam Husain (Major Soane) said to him, "Sir, I suppose that your Honour knows French?"

Tahir Beg replied, "Yes, I know a little; and you, don't you know any?"

He said, "Yes; some six or seven years ago in Persia I was servant to a Frenchman; through him I know a little."

When Tahir Beg knew that, he always talked to him in French about any secret matter. One day when they were talking there slipped from the tongue of Ghulam Husain (Major Soane) instead of the word *na*, the word *new*—no. Tahir Beg was puzzled at this and concluded that this man named Ghulam Husain was English, because the word *new*—no is the English for *na*.

Then Tahir Beg called to Ghulam Husain and said, "What is your name?"

Ghulam Husain said, "May I be thy sacrifice; what do you mean, what is my name? My name is what you called me by."

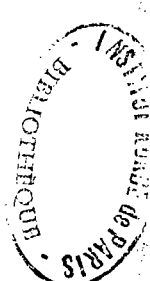
T. B. "No, you have changed your name; you are English."

G. H. "How do you know?"

T. B. "It is obvious from your speech."

G. H. "You are right; I am English; my name is Major* Soane;

* The Editor may be excused this naïve anachronism; at this time, of course, Soane was a civilian and had no connection with the Army whatsoever.



for some years now I have been travelling about 'Iraq, 'Iran and Turkey."

When he knew this, Tahir Beg asked him not to stay there, lest he should fall foul of the Government. Major Soane went away and wrote a book of travel, in which he praises highly the sagacity and cleverness of Tahir Beg.

If her Honour Nahida Khanum, sister of Tahir Beg, will oblige, we shall print after this the *Diwan* of their brother, Ahmad Beg.*

II

Perhaps the most entertaining pages in the late E. B. Soane's delightful book *To Mesopotamia and Persia in Disguise* are those describing his time at Halabja, the little Kurdish township situated at the south-eastern end of the Sharazur plain, under the shadow of the great range of Hewraman.

In 1909 Soane's *Wanderlust* had brought him without any definite plans to Constantinople. Here a chance meeting with a Kurd styling himself Shaikh-ul-Islam of Senna suggested to his mind the project of going on to Southern Kurdistan. Resuming his earlier disguise of a Shirazi and the characteristic Persian-Shi'a name of Ghulam Husain, he travelled by way of Beirut, Aleppo, Diarbekir, Mosul, Arbil and Kirkuk to Sulaimani, where he was befriended by a Christian merchant of Mosul named Matti. From there, after a stay of four days, he pushed on to Halabja, then under the rule, nominally of Osman Pasha Jaf, but in fact of his wife, the remarkable Lady Adila.

The traveller, in accordance with the custom of the country, went boldly to the house of Tahir Beg, the Lady's eldest son,† and announced himself as a Persian scribe and merchant. By her order he was assigned an upper room in Tahir Beg's house, but later he moved across to a downstairs room in the house of the Lady herself, to whom he gradually assumed the post of Persian secretary.

There is no mention in Soane's narrative of any discovery of his identity by Tahir Beg; so far from hurrying him away, he says that they, and in particular the Lady, who wished to keep him as Persian tutor for her two younger sons, put every obstacle in his path when

* For a short example of Ahmad Beg's verse see my article, "A Kurdish Newspaper," in Part I. of the *Journal* for 1925, p. 88.

† By a curious error Soane describes Tahir as the Lady's stepson. There was a stepson Majid, but Tahir was the eldest of her own three sons.

the time came for him to go. But he was not entirely free from occasions for anxiety.

The first cause of embarrassment was a certain Amin Effendi, a renegade of German origin, who had set up as medical adviser to the Lady. Rendered apprehensive by the presence of a traveller who, although a Persian, had spent several years in Europe and might expose his quackery, Amin Effendi set to work to sow suspicions in the mind of Tahir Beg; but these seem to have been directed to the motives and business of the stranger rather than to his race and religion.

The second arose out of the arrival in the neighbourhood of the above-mentioned Shaikh-ul-Islam of Senna, who had known Soane at Constantinople in the character of an Englishman, and whom Soane now rather rashly sought out at Biyara, a village on the Persian border some ten miles to the north-east. The Shaikh, who at their earlier meetings had refused to believe that he was English, now professed himself unconvinced of his *bona fides* as a Muslim. Indeed, after Soane's return to Sulaimani, the Shaikh visited Halabja and created a sensation at the Lady Adila's daily reception by publicly denouncing him as a Christian. But according to the account brought by Soane's servant Hama, who was there, she and her son had stoutly stood up for him, quoting his Shirazi accent and the fact of his having been seen saying his prayers.

Soane records that before leaving Kirkuk for Baghdad he divulged his identity to Matti, the Christian of Mosul.

III

The present writer once asked the Lady Adila if she had ever had doubts about Soane when he was staying with her. "Indeed," she said, "I remember that my son Tahir did come to me one day and say that he suspected that Ghulam Husain might be a European. But I replied that he was our guest, and that we should not pry into what concerned us not."

She may or may not have been wise after the event. In any case this evidence from the Kurdish side confirms the merit of Soane's remarkable performance. Even the panegyrist of Tahir Beg's sagacity claims no more than that he penetrated the disguise after six or seven months of constant companionship.

