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The Main Characters

The shah

Mahdolia, mother of the shah

Taj Olsultan, daughter of the shah

Mirza Kabir, the grand vizier, the prime minister

Sheikh Aqasi, the shah's spiritual vizier

Jamal Khan, leader of the resistance group

Mirza Reza, Jamal Khan's right-hand man



Introduction

In the tea houses of Persia, tales of the ancient kings have been the constant fare of storytellers for the last thousand years. The storytellers played fast and loose with chronology and gave their fantasy free rein so the history they depicted would be strong and colourful. They re-located events, made the occasional omission and sometimes added a thing or two.

They were elaborating on the narrative art that had been perfected by the great medieval Persian storytellers. When the Persian Empire fell fourteen centuries ago, however, the stories also came to an end. Persian pride was dealt a fatal blow.

But then life brought forth the poet Ferdowsi. Ferdowsi wrote a great book called the *Shahnameh*, or *The Tales of the Kings*. In order to cover the vast number of events that had taken place in the former kingdom, Ferdowsi created the hero Rostam. He had Rostam live for about nine hundred years, thereby rescuing the nation's lost heritage from oblivion.

The teller of this story is following in that poet's footsteps.

1. *The Kings*

In the beginning was the Cow, and the Cow was with God, who bore the name Ahura Mazda.

The Cow did not yet produce milk. Ahura Mazda blessed the Cow, saying, ‘We have appointed no one to have dominion over you. We have created you for those who care for the four-footed beasts and for those who tend their pastures.’

A few thousand years later, life brought forth the man Kayumars. One evening, as Kayumars was standing near his cave, he looked up at the stars and the moon, casting their light on the cattle and people in the never-ending pastures. ‘Someone should take command of this mystery,’ he thought.

As he was standing once again near the mouth of his cave on a sunny afternoon, dark clouds appeared without warning and torrential rain began to fall. Churning rivers destroyed the pastures and swept away people and cattle alike.

‘Someone should take command of the rivers,’ Kayumars thought.

On another day he saw the men fighting and beating each other to death with sticks. He saw that the women were afraid and the children were crying, and he said to himself, ‘Someone should take command of those men, and protect the women and children.’

One morning, just as the sun was coming up, the women

and their children came to him and gave him a crown of young branches and fragrant blossoms. He put the crown on his head, stretched out his arms to the sky and spoke the following words: 'Ahura Mazda! Grant me your strength, that I might take command of everything that is motionless and everything that moves upon the earth.'

Then he went down from the mountain.

Kayumars reigned for seven hundred years. Many kings came after him. One of them was Astyages, the king of the Medes and ruler over the Persians. Astyages had a dream that a grapevine grew out of the belly of his daughter Mandane, casting a shadow over the whole world. He asked his dream interpreters what this could mean. They said that his daughter, who was the wife of a prince of the subjected Persians, would bear a son who would topple the king from his throne.

Astyages ordered that as soon as his daughter gave birth to a son, the child be put to death. But the child, who had been named Cyrus, was secreted away to be raised by a shepherd. Later, when Cyrus was fully grown, he killed Astyages and became the new king.

Cyrus conquered the whole world during his reign. He left behind a clay tablet bearing the following words written in cuneiform script: 'I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, mighty king, king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the four quarters.

'All the kings who sit upon thrones, from the Upper Sea to the Lower Sea, and those who live in districts far off, and the kings of the West who dwell in tents, all of them brought their heavy tribute before me and in Babylon they kissed my feet.'

* * *

Cambyzes, the son of Cyrus, succeeded his father. After Cambyzes there were three more kings until Darius the Third came to power. He established a strong empire on which the sun never set, and he built a network of new roads that brought together all the corners of his kingdom. He then decided to conquer Greece. Commanding an army of Indians, Ethiopians, Moschians, Thracians, Kissians and Assyrians, he entered the harbour of Athens.

Greece was terrified by his divine presence. The Greeks knew they could never win the war, but the gods were on their side. Defying all expectations, they broke the invincible army of the Persians and the king fled.

The flight of Darius the Third was an embarrassment to the gods of the East. They would sooner have seen him fall in battle, be taken prisoner or be hacked to pieces – anything but fleeing. There is an old saying that perfectly sums up what Darius did: a dead lion is still a lion, a wounded lion is a lion too, and a captured lion in a cage is a lion nonetheless. But a lion that flees from his enemy is not a lion.

After this the gods turned their backs on the kings of Persia and the decline of the empire began.

Later Alexander the Great dealt a staggering blow to the Persian Empire. He set all the palaces on fire and plundered the vast royal coffers. Then he left for India to subjugate that land as well.

A few centuries after this the Muhammadans, with their freshly written Quran, descended on the weakened Persian Empire. They managed to seize power in three weeks. The deposed king, Yazdegerd, mounted his horse and galloped to the farthest eastern border, to Herat. There he planned to revive his disintegrated army and to drive the Arabs from

his land. Deep in the night, the exhausted king sought rest at a mill. The miller strangled him in his sleep and stole his royal robes and jewels. Thus the great Persian Empire was brought to an end by a miller.

Later still Genghis Khan journeyed from east to west, laying such waste to the land of the Persians that nothing remained of its former glory. It wasn't until the Safavids came to power that Persia underwent a revival, but it was short-lived. The land fell into decline. The tribes fought each other for power.

At the beginning of the nineteenth century one of those tribes succeeded in gaining control.

This story is about one king of that tribe: Prince Naser.

2. *Prince Naser*

Once upon a time there was a Persian prince who later on, after he had become king, went to visit Paris.

While meeting with a group of French businessmen he was introduced to the engineer Gustave Eiffel. No one suggested they go and see the great iron tower, however, since neither the city council nor the people of Paris were particularly happy with that useless pile of scrap.

The prince's official name was Naser Muhammad Fatali Mozafar. These were the first names of his father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather and his great-great-grandfather.

His mother, Mahdolia, was a powerful woman.

The prince had 374 brothers, for his father had married over 1,200 wives over the course of his long life – 1,235 to be exact.

Tehran had become the capital of the country during the reign of the prince's grandfather. Before that it had been a large village at the foot of the Alborz Mountains. In no time at all it had grown into a city of magnificent palaces, with the bazaar at its vibrant heart.

In the northern part of the city there were princes living in exquisite country estates, while in the centre wealthy merchants had built spacious houses for their large families. The rest of the inhabitants worked for the merchants in the bazaar or they had little shops or workplaces where they busied themselves with handicrafts. There was also

a mass of unemployed people who had left their villages and come to Tehran to seek their fortune.

At that time Persia was bounded by Russia to the north and India to the east. To the south was the Persian Gulf, where the British sailed their big ships to India and back.

The country was wedged between two great powers. Now that the old king was dead and a new king was about to ascend the throne, both Russia and England were trying to wrest some of the power for themselves.

Although the late king had 375 sons, only eight of them were of any consequence. These were the sons whose mothers were from the same tribe as the king. In keeping with tradition the king had appointed each of these eight sons *uāli*, governor, of the most important districts. The crown prince was always the *uāli* of Tabriz.

Prince Naser was the crown prince. His mother Mahdolia was the cousin of the late king and had been his favourite wife and closest kin. Accordingly she enjoyed special status in the royal household.

Following tradition the crown prince resided in Tabriz. This city, which lay close to the Russian border, was the second most important in the country.

On his deathbed the king had arranged for both Russia and England to recognise and support the crown prince as his heir. After the king's death the Russians – with hundreds of horses and coaches – would accompany the crown prince from Tabriz to Tehran, where his coronation was to take place. This caused great irritation among the British. They too wanted to play a prominent role in the transfer of power.

Prince Naser was an adult when he became shah and he had acquired sufficient life experience, but the real power lay in the hands of his capable vizier, Mirza Kabir. So the vizier arranged for a British army brigade to escort the

prince from the city of Qazvin to Tehran. This seemed to satisfy the British embassy. Word got around that England would cover the ceremonial costs as a gesture. In an elaborate and elegant ritual held in Golestan Palace, the prince placed his father's crown on his own head, ascended the throne and was given the official title of Shah Naser. The Russian and British representatives in Tehran congratulated him and personally presented him with gifts from Moscow and London.

The festivities in Tehran continued for forty days. The bazaar was decorated and the army musicians played day and night in the bazaar square with great enthusiasm. Many tents were erected in the middle of the city where people could come and eat.

While the shah made merry, Mirza Kabir governed the country. On the forty-first day after the coronation the vizier went to the palace to discuss the most important affairs of state with the shah. At the end of a long talk he alerted the shah to one burning issue.

'The British and the Russians may have reached an agreement with your late father to support you, but they are also supporting your brothers in an effort to promote their interests in India.'

'Which brothers?' asked the shah anxiously.

'All seven. The brothers have risen up in revolt. They have declared their independence. The three brothers who are governing the border regions – Mozafar Khan on the Russian border, Muhammad Khan and Jafar Khan on the borders with Afghanistan and India – have established open contact with the British. The country is in danger of splitting apart.'

'What is the nature of this support?'

'The Russians and the British are providing them with money and weapons.'

'Traitors!' cried the shah.

The vizier urged him, as commander-in-chief of the army, to give the order to crush all pockets of resistance, ruthlessly and without delay. After Shah Naser had signed the order the vizier bowed to his king, put the paper in his leather bag and walked to the inner courtyard where his horse was saddled and waiting for him.

Now that the long period of festivities had come to an end the shah was finally able to rest. He withdrew to the official sleeping quarters, where a special bed had been prepared, one in which all the kings of his tribe had spent their nights.