

The Mystery of the Damavant

By Henry Iliowizi

As a somewhat distant offshoot of the Elburz the Damavant is a solitary pile, of imposing proportions, generally admitted to be Persia's most graceful mountain. Seen from a vantage point in Tehran, cloud-crowned Damavant appears to be the real shoulder of sky-bearing Atlas, losing its head in ether and its foot in a forest of the semi-tropical varieties, dense to the degree of inaccessibility. The wild beast is here at home; the tiger, bear, wolf, panther and wild boar, finding in these jungles an abundance of food, a safe retreat, and a cool spring to satisfy thirst. While the gentler slopes are covered by extensive, fruit-bearing orchards, there are crests and hollows in the Elburz system which the eagle's eye alone has seen, and there are peaks which, but for the sinuous furrows cut by the wild torrents after heavy showers, no human foot could ever ascend. Spirits are believed to haunt the caves and impenetrable thickets of those mountains, a belief sustained by mocking echoes and multiple reverberations started by the least noise; and the simple Iranian folk look up to him with awe, who dares sojourn above the settled line of demarcation dividing the earthly from the unearthly. The history of religion, poetry and superstition is inextricably intertwined with the weird mystery which hangs over the unapproachable heights and deeps of mountains.

It was through a bewildering gorge, which heavy rain transforms into the bed of a wild torrent, that, in the year 410 of the Hegira, two men of note, preceded by four experienced mountain-climbers, were toiling uphill determined to penetrate into the seemingly impenetrable wonderland of the Daniavant's south-easterly acclivity. The attempt implied hard work and great risk, and the wonder of it was that one of those two men betrayed the unmistakable signs which indicate high age. Clothed in the habit of a dervish, the white-headed climber assisted his infirmity by a strong staff, but now and then had to be helped over an impediment by the brawny arms of the vigilant attendants. His companion, who was a much younger and stronger man of dignified bearing, wore the garb of nobility and the air of command, leaving no doubt as to his being one in power and authority. At every step he took in advance his eye reverted to the decrepit figure back of him. "The return will be easier," said he to the older man with a sympathetic smile.

"Thou hast spoken truth; the return is the easiest part; the coming hither, and the *being*, that is the trouble," answered the other, his luminous face marked by the deep furrows of age and sorrow.

"With Mahmud of Ghaznin out of thy mind, Firdusi, would that still be thy mood?" inquired the younger man in a soft voice.

"Mahmud's court is the sea of evil which swallowed my island of happiness. Whom did I murder that I should be a footsore fugitive like the blood-stained son of Adam?" cried the old man in a faltering tone, having stopped to take breath.

"Thy ethereal spirit has murdered grossness, giving this world a foretaste of Eden. Thy *Shah-Namah* is the song of the skies, and Eblis, who revels in discord and confusion, took vengeance on thee by poisoning Mahmud's mind, O, Firdusi.—Thy own version shows not that thy enemy is Mahmud, but his envious treasurer. It shall end well, however. Nasir Lek's message will not leave Mahmud unmoved," said the younger man, who was the Governor of Kohistan, a friend of the Sultan of Ghaznin, and a boundless admirer of Persia's famous poet, Firdusi.

“May Allah bless thy kindness; yea, it shall end well; it is well that things here come to an end,—or with poverty to sting, with oppression to harass, and the dread of the executioner’s axe to torture one, life were a hell without redemption. Ah, I have emptied the cup of bitterness to its dregs! But it cannot now last long; my human frame’s time of final crumbling has been nearly reached. May Firdusi’s misery be Mahmud’s pillow!” cried the poet, turning his liquid eyes heavenward.

By this time the men had ascended to a height of over nine thousand feet above the sea level, and Tehran spread far away, like a patch covered with all kinds of mushrooms. The sun was near the end of his course and the golden flood turned the vast reaches into a magic picture of light and shade, under a dome suffused with rippled waves of translucent purple, crimson, silver and gold. With their faces turned toward the East, the Moslems knelt and lay prostrate in prayer. This done, the escort was ordered to await their lord’s return where they stood, and the two men soon disappeared in a labyrinth of crags, rocks, loose boulders, and heaps of stone, with no vestige of vegetation. Firdusi had the question at his tongue’s end, how could a sentient being live in so inhospitable a region, in a temperature so freezing that it chilled him to his marrow? But he said nothing. The cold grew with the dreariness of the surroundings, and now they plunged into a sea of dense fog, still climbing higher and higher, the younger assisting his older friend. At last Nasir brought forth a horn to which he gave wind. The blast reverberated with appalling effect, followed by a profound silence. There was no answer. Another blast startled the echoes of the mountain a thousandfold, ringing like muffled drums, and lo! there came a note in response,—a shrill note like that of a whistle.

“We are welcome, and thou wilt be rewarded for thy toil, Firdusi,” said Nasir.

“He is thy mystery of the Damavant,” observed the poet skeptically.

“Thou wilt face a man who might pass for the spirit of this mountain; as to his occult power, thou shalt thyself be judge,” suggested Nasir.

“Is one permitted to ask him questions?” inquired Firdusi.

“Ask nothing until his revelations are spread before thee; thou wilt have little to ask. The juggler’s art has often amused me, but Almazor’s alembic has almost translated me from one state of being to another.—There he is; say nothing; he knows my purpose, and will read thy mind,” said the lord of Kohistan nervously.

Firdusi, looking in vain for the outlines of a human form, almost fell into the arms of a something that wore a cloak, was very long-bearded, very tall, very attenuated and pale as the moon, the pallor being enhanced by a whiteness of hair which rivaled new-fallen snow. The only dark feature in the hermit’s face was one glaring eye hemmed in by a cavernous socket, the other orb being sightless and covered with skin like the rest of the countenance.

Almazor could indeed pass as a prince of ghosts rather than a creature held alive by the circulation of warm blood, and his speaking by pantomime added to the awe inspired by his inscrutable nature. He stood in the curve of a semi-circular enclosure before an aperture that was not large enough for a man to enter without crouching low.

Without a salaam or any ceremony, Almazor turned and slipped like a serpent into the gaping hole of the rock, the others following him. It was brighter within than without, although there was nothing in sight to account for the brightness. The nimbleness with which the fleshless hermit ascended and descended steep and winding galleries, bridges, and tunnels, leading now up now down into the core of the mountain, was less surprising than the lightness with which the men behind him kept up the pace, as though carried by a force beyond the law of gravitation. Their impression grew that the top of Damavant could not be very far above them when the

speechless guide stopped in a brightly illumined space of considerable size and height, irregular as caves are, but beautified by a long vista, slanting upward not unlike a funnel of polished silver, at the upper end of which shone, in its fullest circumference, the broad disk of the full moon. A stalagmite of pure crystal sparkled in the moonlight like a reflector, affording seats for perhaps a score of people; at its foot stood the bowl of an unusually large chibouque, its green stem hanging like a snake over the back of the glittering divan, and a box of sandal-wood completed the equipment of the magic laboratory.

The opening of the sandal-wood box brought to light a strange herb, cut and dried like tobacco, but diffusing a sense-blunting odor; and being put into the fire-bowl of the chibouque and ignited, the mysterious herb filled the space with a golden smoke and a somnolent atmosphere. Mechanically complying with a motion of the hermit's hand, Firdusi seated himself next to the chibouque, turned his eyes in the direction of the moon's shining disk and, before he knew it, had the mouthpiece of the pipe between his lips. As the smoke followed the smoker's breath, and rose in puffs and ringlets above his head, he lost consciousness of his environment, and realized a sense of bodily expansion, as though his frame was undergoing a transmutation from the solid to the ethereal form. At the same time the lunar orb assumed prodigious dimensions, swelling, spreading, and changing from a mottled globe to a continent of glaring peaks and black abysses, its enormous bulk seeming to draw nearer and nearer the beholder, who felt that, by an unaccountable process, he was being translated from one world to another. Utterly and willingly helpless, Firdusi allowed himself to be tossed and twirled lightly, and his next sensation was of alighting on massive ground brilliantly illumined.

In his most daring flights of imagination the poet had never dreamed of the possibility of such a sight as the lunar world presented to his eyes. The height he stood upon dwarfed the forest of pointed pinnacles around, and afforded him an insight into numberless pits as black as the surface was dazzling,—if this name be applicable to an endless agglomeration of spires, turrets, crests, rocks, crags, precipices, varied by bottomless abysses, the whole torn, broken, wrenched, twisted by tremendous agencies into most fantastic shapes—a terrific waste of awful confusion and eternal silence. The death of death ruled here supreme. Glass of all shades and no shade; masses of all colors and no color; fissures, clefts and chasms of all forms and no form, with none of the elemental conditions which create and further life, characterized the appalling desolation. How and wherefore did this come to be? A sea of once molten ores, tossed about and blown upon by interstellar forces, and chilled into iron rigidity while sweeping through a freezing zone, hangs forever in radiant gloom, the celestial mirror of the sun's unebbing light, when his face is turned away from our globe, thought the poet; and his eye swept afar in search of relief from the fierce light not less than from the abysmal deeps buried in darkness.

With the sigh of an uneasy heart, Firdusi looked up to the source of the unendurable effulgence. The blackness of the infinite space on high was intensified by the enormity of the flaming sphere, convulsed by fiery oceans in tempestuous agitation, upshooting, breaking and bursting, like furious billows hurled one against another by battling hurricanes.

While the beholder compared this aspect of the sun with his milder face as seen from the earth, the stormy fire-ball began to sink visibly. Night hurried from the opposite heaven to swallow his last ray. He disappeared, as if devoured by a monster, leaving no trail to mark his march through the black dome of the universe. Overawed by the stupendous phenomenon, Firdusi closed his eyes in fervent prayer, praising Allah the Most Merciful. A more pleasing sight was another sphere which now rose in distinct outlines above the black horizon, much larger than the moon as seen from below, and as much sweeter, presenting a figured disk of beautiful shadings, zones

and fields of color approaching those most familiar to the human eye. how gracious He who gave man that blessed world, said the poet to himself, and feasted his eyes on its configurations, which grew more distinct as the globe rose higher, mildly radiant and sublimely impressive.

There was no possibility of discerning distinctly one thing from another, but Firdusi's poetic fancy endeavored to locate the blue oceans, to recognize the green zones, and trace the mountain ranges and the great deserts. And as the world wherein man is king and slave, saint and sinner, angel and demon, happy and wretched, grew more and more glorious in ascent, the suffering bard, feeling in his grief the woes of the race, allowed his tears to flow before speech came to his relief.

“The Universe is thy secret, Power Divine, but O, for that peace which dwells with Thee alone, that sight which reveals the great mystery, and the life which knows no beginning, no withering, and no end! Who am I, and wherefore thrown on that shore of time, that isle of space, to struggle with a myriad myriads of my like, toiling and sighing, with death as the dark end of a dark nightmare? If man must perish like the worm, then happy the worm who knows not his misery. Alas, in shreds scattered are the golden webs of hope here. Who knows that my dreams of Paradise are less illusory? That splendid world has much to sweeten life made bitter by the serpent in the human breast. Why is man so akin to the brute? Am I a spirit fallen, sent yonder to atone, and by atonement to be redeemed? Or am I risen from things below the worm to my present state, and progressing toward a higher,—ay, perchance the highest life and form, like Him who traced my pathway through the vale of sorrow and the shadow of death? Or are the worm and I but infinitesimal incidents in endless time and space, called forth by a cruel fate to wriggle in agony and sink into everlasting night? Power Divine, forbid this black thought from blighting the last flower of hope, lest chaos swallow what is bright and sane in this little world of mine.”

As though responsive to the mood of the bard, the terrestrial globe began to undergo a phenomenal change. Lurid and livid hues overspread its luminous shadings with frightful velocity, rushing in like an ever-thickening pall, and giving the appearance of a red ball engulfed in a cloud of cinders, with black space as the background. But the moon, although obscured by the darkening of her superior luminary, did not remain in total obscurity. The reason of which became manifest to Firdusi the moment he sent his eyes elsewhere to account for the shimmer. What he beheld was too much for him to contemplate without a shudder of reverential awe, a consciousness of nothingness in face of the sublime eternal; and yet it was but a glimpse of the starry heavens. For every blinking star visible to the eye from sublunar ground there shone now a score of constellations, clusters of wheeling spheres, the nearest of which exceeded the rainbow in circumference, transcending it in brilliancy. The interstellar darkness acted as a frame to set off the glowing galaxies, so that the empyrean suggested the idea of an ethereal tree, spreading its sun-bespangled crown throughout immensity.

And the vast grew vaster, and the depths deeper, and the wonders multiplied, as host after host emerged from the bosom of infinity, wheeling and circling in celestial grandeur, stirring boundless ether with soul-enraving strains. Firdusi's great heart thawed in felicity; from his eyes rolled the tear of rapture, not unmixed with a blunted sense of pain, springing from a lingering apprehension that it was all but a vain vision. To his ear the music of the spheres spelt man's inscrutable destiny, his real woes, his elusive hopes, his unrealized dreams, and his dark end. But there was a healing solace, an intuitive appeasement in the heavenly exhibition, so that the poet, realizing the balm of faith, muttered resignedly

“Power Divine, infinite as are Thy eternal glories, even I am interwoven in Thy impenetrable design, whatever Thy purpose. In Thy perfection Thou hast created no being to be forever imperfect, or to utterly perish after a ray of Thy intelligence has once irradiated his mind.”

Firdusi’s lips trembled as he lisped this conviction. His hand moved instinctively toward his eyes, which were veiled by a dimness that made everything swim vaguely before his vision. The sense of coming down headlong from another world made his weak frame writhe in convulsions of horror. When he opened his eyes he found himself in the arms of his friend, Nasir.

Great as was the poet’s creative faculty, it required some time for him to recall his original situation, especially since the cave presented nothing of its previous features. There was neither a bright vista nor a moon to look at, but a dingy hole out of which they had to grope their way, with no hermit to lead them.

When they issued from the mountain’s mystery it was broad daylight; they had stayed therein the whole night. Soon the attendants answered the call of Nasir’s horn, and the descent was made in perfect silence. They arrived before the gates of the palace simultaneously with a courier, who, springing from his saddle, respectfully delivered a package to the ruler of Kohistan. “It is Mahmud’s answer to my appeal in thy behalf, Firdusi,” observed Nasir with a beaming countenance, “and I know not the Sultan of Ghaznin if the devil triumphed this time.”

They were no sooner within the Governor’s residence than Nasir broke the seal of the message to learn its purport, and he read as follows:

“In the name of the only true, most merciful God! From Mahmud of Ghaznin to his friend Nasir Lek of Kohistan, in behalf of Abul Casim Mansur Firdusi. Peace and friendly greetings. God alone is great. May truth and mercy prevail.

“As thy soul hath spoken, so hath my heart answered, moved by the pleadings of thy fairness. Yea, there is no sweeter singer than Firdusi, and the blame of his wrong is mine to the extent of having lent mine ear to the slander of his enemies, whose mischievous head, Hassan Meimendi, has fallen under the blow of the executioner’s axe. The all-knowing Allah never errs, but how can a ruler of nations escape error when misled by them whom he believes to be just, wise and true? Once enlightened, Mahmud will neither withhold the prize nor the honor due to him who glorified Iran’s immortal heroes, inspiring the sons to emulate their sires. However great, the dead were dead forever, but for the bard whose magic wand reclaims them from the dust to robe them in unfading splendor, and Persia’s national song was forced to wait the coming of Firdusi.

“As God is merciful, the singer of the *Shah-Namah* shall hereafter have no other grievance than the remembrance of a past wrong. A load of gold larger than the one promised shall be delivered at his bidding; and if sympathetic regrets expressed by his whilom friend and sovereign will give him solace, Mahmud of Ghaznin herewith conveys his sorrow for his unworthy treatment of Abul Casim Mansur Firdusi, who is welcome at my court, welcome as far as my rule extends.”

Bent, sad and silent, did Firdusi listen to the message of the monarch who had blasted his happiness, the tear alone betraying his inexpressible heartache. The generous host understood the cause of his friend’s grief. The author of Iran’s great epopee and of *Yusuf* and *Zuleikha* had little to expect of this life, fear, want and homelessness having been his share at an age when the laurel crown ought to have graced his head in a home of ease and plenty. He had survived his only son, and was separated from his only daughter. And that vision of stars soaring, as it did, before his fiery imagination, served but to intensify his melancholy. On earth his career was drawing to its close, what was there to hope for beyond the grave?

Nasir took alarm at the change he perceived in the face and manner of his friend, whose look was suggestive of approaching dissolution. "Thou art in need of refreshment, after the exhausting ascent," said the host sympathetically.

"Let me, I pray thee, abstain from taking food until the craving demands it, lest it choke me, being overfull," replied the poet with ill-suppressed emotion.

Having appeased his own hunger by a meal served by slaves, Nasir surprised his friend by asking him in a tone less reproachful than anxious, "So, have the good tidings not broken thy gloom, O, Firdusi, nor the mystery of the Damavant added to thy spiritual wealth, thy ethereal dreams?"

"Thou art good, and I ought to be happy in my magnanimous friend, but happiness ever frowned at my courting, and fled never to return. Friend, I stand on the brink of my grave, with precious years wasted in undeserved disgrace, unmitigated wretchedness.— Ah, and that vision revealed to me in the recesses of the Damavant! If thou knowest its nature thou canst draw thy conclusions," returned Firdusi deeply moved, adding: "Thy hermit is more than thou dreamest of him."

"That is what I looked for thee to say; but Almazor is a secret bequest of my father, and that horn of mine is the only signal he will respond to; otherwise he is not to be found, and Tehran knows no more of him than thou didst before I led thee thither. He is the mystery of the Damavant, more ghost than man, living no one knows how, a spirit among spirits, unaffected by hunger, thirst or cold," explained Nasir with impressive earnestness.

"A great secret and a precious heirloom all in one," mused Firdusi.

"Thou hast said it; my father's father blew the horn I sounded yester-night, and saw peradventure the things thou and I have seen," continued Nasir.

"Those are sights to unhinge reason," asserted the poet.

"What thou hast seen is thy secret, O, Firdusi, and thou hast been vouchsafed no more than thy spirit can assimilate. Strange were the words thou hast spoken in the trance caused by the smoke of the mysterious herb, as it passed through thy system. That herb crops up where no earthly plant can exist, in a spring which is half liquid and half vapor, warm when everything around is frozen, and cold when the sun's heat beats against it like the deadly simoom. Invisible in daylight, the herb betrays itself at rare intervals in the dead of the darkest night by its phosphorescent nature. From my father I have it that, infused into the human frame in any manner, the mind will see whatever it is capable of grasping. Under its influence I had a glimpse of paradise, a clime and a region impossible to describe," imparted the host confidently.

A transient smile flitted over the poet's countenance as his eyes met those of his communicative friend, and then rang a voice deep, sonorous, fluent and suave, conjuring before the entranced hearer sights appalling to think of, illuminated horrors rolling in ether, a world of dismal deserts, dead mountains and black abysses: petrified chaos grinning in the face of a burning and seething sun. But when, passing from the lunar desolations to the empyrean hosts, the master of epic melody gave full play to his inspired genius, bidding the stars to march forth as he had seen them before the spirit's eye, Nasir fell into an ecstasy of delight, sinking on his knees, weeping, and kissing the hands of the white-headed singer he so loved and revered, and crying. "And all this fails to make thee happy, divine Firdusi!"

In this enthusiastic exclamation of his devoted admirer the poet heard a reproach. Is not faith, blind faith, preferable to endowments which engender doubt? He had had his share of fame and favor, but proved too frail to accept trials with the resignation enjoined by Islam. Revolt against Allah's unsearchable decree is unworthy of the true believer. Zarathustra lay prostrate in

adoration before the sun, because to his mind the Universe reveals nothing grander as a symbol of divine Omnipotence; how much deeper ought he to be impressed who has witnessed the sublime progress of a billion suns in the midst of their countless planets and satellites?

“Thy words are not meant as a reprimand, yet am I startled at what they imply,” spoke Firdusi in a deliberate tone. “Even at my age theories may be revised, and new conclusions reached. Though fire-worshippers are the heroes of my *Shah-Namah*, my faith is that of the Prophet. But alas! how banish doubt which steals into one’s head like the demon of insanity? If we must have a theory let us build on the postulate that life and death point to harmonizing relations. The self-evident relation of the tiniest blade of grass to the great sun is not clearer than that of the rain-drop to the cloud and the ocean, and both prove that of the human soul to the universal Spirit. If the outer world reveals to us little more than the form of things, a glimpse into their inner nature is granted us in our inner world of thought and inspiration. When land and sea, mountain and valley, field and desert, lake and river, tree and blossom, fish, brute, bird and insect,—when the elements of earth and the stars of heaven, are recognized as the visible manifestations of an impenetrable design, with man as the crowning work in this nether creation, and God as the All-in-All, the All-above-All throughout the Universe, then does the soul pass from her inner world into the supernatural domain, inspiration passes into revelation, and the mind’s peace and the heart’s felicity insure a foretaste of heaven; the dissonance of doubt succumbs to the harmony of faith, and the rain-drop, long lost in the dark cracks and crevices of the rugged rock, bounds forth in a crystal spring, rushes into the rivulet, the river, eager to mix with the ocean’s vast.”

Whether Nasir understood his friend’s metaphysics or not, he was the last to question a man’s ideas, whose superior wisdom he never doubted. Moslem friendship is kindred to Bedouin hospitality, and Nasir, who had received the poet with all the marks of distinction, made arrangements to signalize his departure in royal form. After a feast given in his honor to the notables of the province, the famous bard, mounted on a fine dromedary, followed by another one loaded with valuable presents, and escorted by a magnificent cavalcade, issued hopefully from Tehran’s gate, accompanied by his loyal friend.

“If Allah’s mercy grants me the joys of paradise, I will pray that Nasir Lek share them with me, unless thy meed be above mine, who am less generous than thou,” were Firdusi’s last words of gratitude, addressed to his magnanimous host.

On reaching Tus, the place of his birth, Firdusi found that the Sultan’s promised gold had not arrived, and he was greatly troubled, lest Mahmud’s apologies were intended as a snare spread for his destruction. His apprehension was not allayed by hearing incidentally a child in the street lisp a verse of the pungent satire in which he taunts Mahmud as the base-born son of slaves. The trend of the lines was, that had that potentate’s progenitors been of noble blood, instead of cheating him of the prize he had promised for the *Shah-Namah*, he would have set a crown of gold on his aged head.

Heart-wringing self-compassion moved the decrepit man to tears. His grievance is the plaint of Iran, breathed by innocents into the ears of sympathetic mothers. Once more he lived through the fearful moments of his life; the hours of that night when daybreak was to see him trampled under the feet of Mahmud’s elephants, because he had resented the Sultan’s meanness in sending him sixty thousand pieces of silver instead of gold, *dirhems* in lieu of *dinars*, as agreed; the moment when, fleeing from the wrath of the tyrant, he sought a refuge at Mazenderan, where Kabous, the prince of Jorjan, durst not harbor him for fear of the implacable persecutor; and that most painful of hours when El Kader Billah, the Caliph of Baghdad, at first delighted with the genius of the fugitive, asked him to depart when Mahmud of Ghaznin demanded his extradition. Whelmed

with grief, the broken man returned to his daughter's home to die in her arms, resigned to the inscrutable decree of destiny.

Just as Firdusi's body was carried out through one gate of Tus, the camels which bore the Sultan's gold entered the city through another. His daughter refused to accept it, but an aged relative remembered his cherished wish to see his native place improved by public works, especially a healthy and plentiful supply of water. To comply with the poet's generous wish, the treasure was taken and invested for the benefit of his lamenting townsmen, whose descendants have during the successive centuries continued to celebrate the passing of Iran's immortal singer.