



Persian Heritage

is published quarterly by:
Persian Heritage, Inc.

110 Passaic Avenue,
Passaic, NJ 07055
Tel: (973) 471-4283
Fax: (973) 471-8534

Subscriptions:
\$16.00 per year (Domestic)
\$28.00 (Foreign)
All requests for permissions and
reprints must be made in
writing to the managing editor.

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Published by:
Persian Heritage, Inc.
A corporation organized for
cultural and literary purposes.

Printed 15,000
Picture on cover
Ms. Susanne Pari
Scarf designed by
Olivia Ebrahimi

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Summer 1998

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From the Editor's Desk

I am writing to you with a pen in one hand; the other hand placed on my side, trying to ease my pain. I just ended a telephone conversation. During that conversation I heard words that angered and hurt me so deeply that I was jolted from my bed, where I was recuperating from life threatening surgery. Despite the pain I needed to share this conversation with my readers and friends. In my worst hours, without you knowing, you become my friends and a shoulder to lean on.

The conversation was with a young, well educated, and respected Persian American couple. They had invented something that had made them millionaires. They were the pride of the Persian community. The news of their invention was reported in the media; they were celebrities. As the editor of this magazine, I felt it important to do a new article about them. I could have done this story without speaking to them directly, I felt our story needed to be fresh. We engaged in a lengthy conversation regarding their invention and their importance in the Persian community. They informed me that recognition and popularity were not what they were seeking. They did not want to be part of the news in any Persian magazine. I asked myself, if recognition is not what they sought, then why were they on the cover of a popular non-ethnic news magazine. I suddenly realized that what they were actually saying, was that they did

not want to be recognized as Persians in the American community. This was something I could not understand. Did they not know the impact their success would have on the Persian community? They could have been a source of inspiration to Persian American youth. Their heritage is not something they should hide. It is something to be proud of. They needed to know that being a Persian American today would not hinder their success. Losing a sense of their roots, in the long run leave them lonely. How lonely they would be in years to come living in shame of their heritage.

Did they not know about the six million Jews who died because of their pride in their heritage? Individuals who stood up for what they believed. Though millions died, they were successful; their plight and bravery will never be forgotten. Did they not know of the men, women and innocent children who endured the pain of persecution all in the name of their heritage? These were individuals who showed the world that they would

not deny their heritage even in the face of death. Did they not hear the guilt, pain and loneliness of those Jews who denied their heritage? We, as an ethnic group once discriminated against need to learn from them. We need to listen to their stories and bring this to our homes our children. Had this couple been part of Black, Jewish, Cuban or other ethnic group's and voiced this same indifference, they would not have been tolerated.

Though I wanted to say all of this to them, I knew it was not my place. Hopefully, they will read this editorial and receive my following message: with all my heart I hope that you will find a way back to your heritage. Our hearts remain open and our arms wait to hold you. I hope one day that everyone in our community, like other communities, will have the courage to "come out of the closet" and be willing to pay the price for honesty.

Shahrokh Alavi

Marco Polo in Persia



By: Dr. F. Dowlatshahi

Marco Polo (1254-1324), the most celebrated European traveler in the Far East, was born in Venice, Italy. His father Nicolo and uncle Maffeo, both affluent merchants had trading stations and interests in Constantinople in Cremlia.

At around 1260, when Marco was a child his father and uncle left Constantinople to pursue a business in Cremlia.

While Nicolo and Maffeo were staying in Cremlia a war broke out between Barka, and Hulagu, two powerful neighboring Tartar Khanates, and all the roads connecting Cremlia to Constantinople closed for a long period of time.

The Polo brothers who couldn't stay idle in their timeless and compulsory exile decided to get themselves and their goods out of the war zone through the only path which was still open to them. This was the highway leading to Bukhara, although that would sink them deeper in Constantinople and adding some hundred miles to their distance from Constantinople.

There was no choice and our travelers followed their destiny. Although the decision was made under stress, it proved to be a brilliant one. The Venitian brothers found a projectable market and many good customers for their merchandise

(which consisted of jewelry) in Bukhara. That is why it took them three years until they decided to abandon that hospitable city.

The historians tell us that the Polo brothers in their last days of residence in Bukhara, had a casual encounter with a party of envoys from Kublai Khan, the Emperor of China, to his brother Holagu, commander of Persia.

The chief of envoys (who were returning home) with regard to Kublai Khan had a desire to meet the Europeans, and invited the two merchants to join the group and travel to China.

Nicolo and Maffeo, who like their colleagues had a good sense for recognizing a great bargain, accepted the invitation.

The Khanbalik (Peking), the Polo brothers were warmly received, encouraged and rewarded. And at the time of their return from China they were also granted an audience. The great Khan made them vov to comeback to his territory and commissioned them to carry a letter from him to Pope Clement IV.

The Italian brothers left China around 1266 through the sea and arrived at Venice in 1269, after an absence of nine years. Nicolò's wife had been dead for several years. His son Marco, who grew up under the guardianship of an aunt and uncle, was an intelligent, well mannered, and well-educated seventeen year old young man.

Marco's First Passage Through Persia

On the second travel to the Far East, the Polo brothers were accompanied by Marco. This time the brothers decided to reach their destination by way of the sea. Therefore the party had to make a trip to Persia and follow a route which ends on the Persian Gulf, and famous sea port of Hormuz, where one could embark on a ship, going to India, China or other coastal terminals.

Maffeo, Nicolò and Marco sailing from Venice (in 1271), landed in Acre, a port on the eastern Mediterranean Sea. From there the party rode camels, proceeding

overland through Lebanon, Syria, Armenia, Turkey, and crossed the Persian border, not too far from where the city of Maku is standing.

The Polo's then made a short visit to Tabriz and continued their journey towards the Persian Gulf and the Hormuz Strait.

In his book, Marco Polo points out that "Tabriz" is a mercantile crossroads, doing much business with India, Baghdad, Mosul, and Hormuz. Many Latin merchants come here to buy merchandise imported from foreign lands. It is also a market of precious stones, which are found here in great abundance . . ."

From Tabriz the Polos traveled south through Yazd, Kerman and over deserts to the seaport of Hormuz where 'they hoped to find a ship to take them to China.

"Yasdi" (Yazd) is a considerable city in the confine of Persia, where there is much traffic. A species of cloth of silks and gold manufactured here is known by the appellation of yazdi, and is carried from thence by the merchants to all parts of the world.

. . . Those who travel from that city employ eight days in passing over a plain, in the course of which they meet with only three places that afford accommodation. The road lies through extensive groves of date bearing palms, in which there is abundance of game, as well beasts partridges and quails; and those travelers who are fond of the amusements of the chase, may here enjoy excellent sport. Wild asses are likewise to be met and very numerous and handsome. At the end of eight days you arrive at a kingdom named Kierman (Kerman) . . ."

Marco Polo then turns his attention to the city and state of Kerman, saying, that kingdom was formerly governed by its own monarchs, business but at the time of his visit was under the Tartars dominion. Marco talks about turquoises, the precious stones, also veins of steel and antimony found in the Kerman mountains and admires the great perfection and skill of the people in manufacturing warlike equipment of every kind such as swords, bows,

quivers and spurs.

Upon leaving Kerman, the Polos and their companions namely servants, muleteers and mercenaries traveled for many days along mountainous roads, through the deserts, thinly populated, without inhabitants, and sometimes dangerous from a multitude of robbers. At length, the party reaches the border of sea, where at no great distance from the shore stands a city named Hormuz.

HORMUZ A TURNING POINT FOR POLOS

As we mentioned before, Maffeo, Nicolò and his son, Marco, submitted themselves to a tough experience by making a long journey from the north to the south of Persia in order to embark on a ship and attain to a sea port of China and subsequently reach to the Court of Kublai Khan. To make the point clear let us thereunder quote a paragraph from Marco Polo's own writing:

"ships have one mast, one sail and one rudder and are not decked; when they have loaded them they cover the cargo with skins, and on top of these they put the horses, which they ship to India for sale. They have no iron for nails; so they employ wooden pegs and stitch with thread. This makes it a risky undertaking to sail in these ships. And you can take my word that many of them sink, because the Indian Ocean is often very stormy."

Thus, the Venetian brothers facing a difficult situation, specifically not being able to endanger the precious life of Marco, the young member of the family, by embarking in a fragile local ship, and not being sure about when, and where they may find a dependable sail to take them to their proper destination decided to retrace their steps to the north and continue their journey to China overland.

The return travel of the Polos and their companions kept them from Hormuz to Kerman, and Yazd. Then the party selected a new itinerary which led them to Tabas and then to Meshed.

Tabas or as Marco Polo calls it "queen of the desert" was, in those days, surrounded by date palms and

pine trees. Within the walls of that city one still could see the ruins of an ancient fortress that belonged to the sect of the assassins.

After a short stay in Meshed, our little caravan, left that great city, and event to Herat. The subsequent destinations and halting places of the travelers were as follows: Balkh, Badakhshan, Wakhan, upper Oscus, plateau of Pamir, Kashghar, Yarghand, Khotan Tangut and Shangtu.

POLOS IN PRESENCE OF GREAT KHAN

Shangtu was the summer quater of Kublai Khan, the ruler of China. It took the Polos more than three years and a lot of suffering and sacrifices to get from Venice, their home land to this destination.

The Great Khan was very happy and delighted to see the Venetian brothers to be back, and instantly developed a kind of liking for Marco, as if he was his own son.

In a short interval of time, Kublai Khan found much of perception and intelligence in the young man, and nominated him, as a second class commissioner, attached to Imperial Council. The subsequent promotions of Marco were fast to take shape. He was sent many times as the Great Khan's representations to a number of Chinese states, as well as to foreign lands and territories. For more than three years Marco Polo was governor of the Chinese City of Yangchoq.

Polos having now resided many years at the imperial court, and in that time having collected considerable wealth in jewels of value and gold, felt a strong desire to revisit their native country. It became more decidedly their object when they pondered on the very advanced age of the great Khan, whose death, if it should happen prior to their departure, might deprive them of public assistance which could help them to surmount the innumerable difficulties of so long a journey, and reach their homes in safety.

Nevertheless it was of no avail, to discuss the question modestly with the Great Khan. During the long period



Landing of Marco Polo at Ormus. From *Livre des Merveilles*. Courtesy Culver Pictures.

of the recent seventeen years that entreaty has been pronounced in the different occasions by one of the Polos, but never faced with a response.

It happened, about this period that Arghun Khan the ruler of Persia, a grand-nephew of Kublai lost his favorite wife. Her last wish was that her place be taken only by a lady from her own mongul tribe. Envoys and ministers were sent to the court of Peking to pick up and carry the new bride.

The action was taken in good part, and under the direction of the great Khan, choice was made up of a damsel aged seventeen extremely handsome and accomplished, whose name was Kukachin. The Persian envoys meeting the young lady expressed their high approval, and since the overland road from China to Persia was exposed to dangers of war, decided to return by sea.

Upon an order from Great Khan, a flotilla consisting of 14 dependable and best equipped ships, manored by hundreds of servants, sailors and warriors was composed in order to carry the bride and her companions to Persian sea ports. Making a long story short, we have to add here that as Arghun Khan Ambassadors met with the Polos, and came to know the depth of their knowledge with regard to the ships and navigation; became eager to profit by their experiences and insight, for safe return home. When the date of departure drew near, the said representatives, once in the presence of Kublai Khan, mentioned their thought and set forward their request.

Although it was very painful for the Great Khan to deprive himself of the valuable service of the Venetians, but since there was no choice the ruler agreed with the request.

The bride along with her

companions as well as Arghun representatives; also Maffeo, Nicolo and his distinguished son Marco Polo the envoys of Kublai Khan. with the rest of caravan left Peking (Khan Baligh) to get to ZAITON, a Chinese sea port on the edge of Indian Ocean, where all the passengers must get on board the ships.

The year was 1292. The difficult sailing took 27 month. When the ships cast anchor at Hormuz, Persian sea port in the Persian Gulf, two thirds of the passengers were lost.

Lady Kukachin as well as Marco Polo, his father and uncle were in good shape. But two of the three representatives of the Arghun Khans were found dead.

Nevertheless the death was not a calamity that only seized the sea passengers by the collar, because when our travelers disembarked from the ships at the Hormuz sea' port, they came to know that Arghun Khan, the bridegroom to be, had died before they left China and Kublai, the supreme ruler of China (The grand son of Genghis Khan) had died less than one year prior to their landing of Persia.

The Polos, as well as the only survivor of the Three Arghun's Ambassadors (sent to the court of Kublai Khan) lead the charming lady Kukachim and her remaining companions through Kerman, Yazd Tafahan to Tabriz the Persian capital of those days and residence of Ghazan Khan the son of Arghun and his successor to the power. Ghazan married Kukachim.

When the joyous festivities and gorgeous celebrations came to an end, Marco Polo, his father and uncle obtained permission, left Persia and followed a familiar route which took them to Venice, the beautiful city an their sweet homeland.

"OBAID ZAU' KAUNY"

**A Poet, A Writer of Prose,
A Farceur, State Advisor, Sociologist
and Philosopher**

"The Iranian Voltaire"

--French Orientalist, Prof. Forte

By: F.A. SADEGHPOUR

There is very little information about the birthdate of Obaid, however, there is some documentation that approximate the date of his death, circa 1400 A.D. He was a contemporary to many of the great personalities of his time. To name a few, Hafiz, whose sensuous rhyming odes and couplets are known to poem lovers. Sa'd Salmaun another well-known poet, and Ghot-be-Din Shirazi, the great music theorician. Not only were they his contemporaries, he also corresponded with them and they were his personal friends. At times, in his satiric writing, he borrowed from the couplets of Hafiz. Sa'd Salmaun, Ghot-be-Din Shirazi, and several others were also the object of his satirization and parody.

As a poet of odes, though he wrote relatively few, he reigned supreme. His prose was somewhat akin to the master of the Persian language, Sa'di, and are extremely fluent and delightful. From what I have gleaned and garnered from his verse and prose, whether serious for satiric, I will now share with you in the hope that we will be able to understand a great man, Obaid Zau'kauny.

It seemed from the very beginning, Obaid was defying all laws of heredity and probability. He accepted neither his parents ardent religious rituals nor the apodictic clerics' egregious falsehood and fatuity. He believed only in a man who could see, hear, smell, taste, or touch, then reasoned.

Apparently, his parents and teachers constant disagreements about his metaphysical upbringing ensured that he became simply a humanist who read literature. Obviously beyond the schools prescribed form and against the format of the day. When he was still a youngster, yet more violence had reached Kazvin. This violence was a



result of the spasms of long Civil War, and longer miseries that never truly ended; not even after his long life. History does not do justice to the reality of that time, his time, which in terms of demonic storms of brutality and inhumanity, scoured the bodies and souls of innocent and guilty alike.

It was as if some demented monstrous force had escaped from the gates of hell known as Mongolia, to ravage every last morsel of decency out of its last hiding place. It is hard not to believe with hindsight that an infectious morbidity of the soul had contaminated the whole Iranian nation with an insanity of blood lust thinly disguised as ideology and moral stance. There was a spreading sickness of ethical depravity that tore apart even the eternal calm of the countryside, and covered everything with a viscid slime of obscenity, viciousness, barbarity and cataclysm. Obaid's maturity was quickly gained by his travels and observation of people. In particular, the accultured, glabrous Mongols on one side, and the religious charlatans with long bushy beards on the other side. Some of the leaders considered themselves apothoses of the creed.

Of course after the advent of Mongolian misery, some preachers and Sheiks declared that such a calamity was sent by God. They believed that the people had forgotten their religious practice, and in particular, had refrained from their Islamic duty-not paying enough alms!

Adam was a man happy in Paradise
Until he sprouted whiskers: with surprise
The angles found him so bizarre
That banished him out to the Bazaar!

F.A.S.

If growing beard's mark of virtue and ego
Heavenly denizens would have done so!

F.A.S.

During his sojourns, he became attuned to the slightest quiver of the Id and Ego of clerics and preachers. He found their practice extremely nebulous at best, and this behavior potentiated his hostility toward them. Of course in order to maintain his outward equanimity, he resorted to composing his famous satires which, often were embroidered with inveterate obscenities, and sometimes very emotive, insinuating exhortatory. Why was it that Obaid felt such animosity towards self-serving religious luminaries with their long beards? Why was it that Obaid carried such a heavy responsibility to enlighten the people against these indolent characters who pretended to know all religious trammels and etiquette which he disliked and loathed? With guardian angles such as these, who needs a grim reaper?"

Unlike these characters, Obaid loved his country and countrymen. He even loved the salt desert whose heat in summer would bleach the bones of the living and split the red rocks into shards with a report of thunder clap as though from inside one's own head would reverberate the plates of the skull to shiver apart at the seams, or when he passed through the meadows and small settlements, could hear dogs howling and crickets chirr, and the gibbous moon slide shafts of pale rays upon the landscape, "my heart sings like a choir of spring birds." or in the quiet mornings under the Zagros cordillera sky, he heard the mellow chiming of goat bells, he was cheered and grateful that some flocks thrived; but the preachers would have declared, "the chiming of goat bells is where the demon dwells!" As he traveled, he must have felt a mysterious and mystical pride in the unapproachable Bakhtiari, Kurd, Lore, and Qashqai tribesmen in their partially rebuilt cities and towns. These tribesmen were working hard to create some patches of verdure.

As he saw more of the country side, the more acute his senses became. Obaid loved the people. It filled him with awe to see the sculpted bodies of the Roustaiis (farmers) with their molded muscles and viens etched in relief beneath sunburned skin like maps of rivers and ravines. He must have reflected that once, after all, the forefathers of these countrymen had fought indefatigably and undauntedly against the Mongol Hordes and succeeded to somewhat curb the invaders' hubris and incomprehensible cruelty. Perhaps he wished once again, like a man born out of time, for the return of such a fiery and magnificent spirit in the people who were now as venial as their forefathers had been

indomitable. He must have seen the obvious result of thievery and spread of superstition by the clerics. He must have reflected that the first step to gain the past spirit for his countrymen was to show the true character of these false, indolent, and morbid preachers with their loathsome, hirsute appearance, and their hideous, goitered necks and girths. They acted as viruses that ossified the mind and soul. The more he saw of them the more he abhorred them. These clerics had added more to the rampant insanity which was already prevalent. But Obaid was a man who truly believed that "hope springs eternal in the human breast". and by his picaresque ability, could lift the spirit of his countrymen by his satire, prose, and verse.

The Persian language is known for being the most poetic language in the world with its syntax, easy grammar and a rich vocabulary. Its mild uvular speech would fill the heart of any linguist with joy. Perhaps the poetic character of this language failed to make Obaid cautious or content. Out of a sense of solidarity with the naive and simple people who were still reeling from the shock of the Mongols, he went after the sanctimonious preachers, corrupt judges, false sheiks and their debaucheries. He knew a man such as himself needed an obsession or purpose to show his inner repugnance. In some of his writings, he manifested that men possessed a kind of obstinate stupidity that made them at once beastlike and godlike. Perhaps he wanted if he could, to change this obstinacy. He truly did not wish any more blood to be spilled, or resources to be squandered, and above all, no more hate, lies or depravities to be branded into the psyche of the coming generation.

His works show that when Obaid was overwhelmed by hurt and a deep sense of despair and doubt, he would resort to satire.

"The preachers, pitifully jejune
Daily babbling on as if in rune
To the poor souls who live in ruins
Who must hear their morbid tunes!"

F.A.S.

There were many rogues who were supporting Obaid and found his ribaldry amusing and a pretext for badinage. Obaid was told that these clerics who are innocently shepherding and preparing the poor souls for the after life are guided by spirits! "You do not know the spirits then" said Obaid. "The spirits know little more than they did in life and have the same faults including the audacity to lie!" He continued, "innocence you find only in their mules or donkeys that are suffering the fat backside of their masters who merely plod unsteadily in a herbivorous dream of metempsychosis." By reading his poems such as, "The Tale of Mouse and Cat", he was indicated that the mark of intellectual honesty is the solicitation of opposing points of view. He saw clerics with theatrical aplomb and temerity promenading or bestride their mules in the name of God perpetually uttered a panegyric to faith and brotherhood, yet with a lubricious eye on the poor and vulnerable pretty women and boys who easily could be cheated out of their virtue or their meager wealth, by uttering a hyperbolic pretext for "late alms"! In one of his satiric writings, he

indicated "the only way to struggle back to God was to diminish the devil's kingdom by preventing them to procreate; hence no gentle woman should have conjugal congress with these devils!"

"Worship any god or creed you wish,
Forget not benevolence and good deeds.
Not like the preacher, peevish
And ill-natured, that can barely read!"

F.A.S.

The following are satirical works of Obaid Zau'Kauny which will give you, the reader, some insight into the character of Obaid:

"The merit of Man is his honor
that gives distinction, spirit and valor."

F.A.S.

A rogue claimed to be God. The news of the claim reached the ruler of the land. The ruler ordered that he be arrested and brought before him. He told the man "last year a man claimed he was a prophet and I had him hanged.

The man responded, "you did right for I did not send him."

BEARDS

"Dearest, the nuisance that are called beards,
Would be an ugliness upon your face."

F.A.S.

A woman claimed to be a prophet. She was arrested and taken before the ruler. "Are you a Moslem?" asked the ruler. "Yes", answered the woman. "Then you must have read in the Koran that Mohammad was the last man to be a prophet." the ruler said. "Yes, but in the Koran, it did not say the last prophetess!" the woman answered.

"Woe to me, day and night
My constant chum is my debt.
For long I searched for salve
To soothe my pain and solve
This nuisance; free of debt again.
All my search and entreaty was in vain.
To cut the fetters of debt,
Not even a harridan I met
to deliver me from my debt!"

F.A.S.

A man was playing the drum and running as quick as he could. A rogue stopped him and asked the meaning of his playing the drum and running. "I've heard that the sound of the drum from a distance is pleasant, therefore I'm running the distance to hear the pleasant sound of my drum," the man answered.

"Reason has no vote or insight,
Love could lead to great might.
Loving's not for every heart
Not every mendicant knows the art.
To a lover mention not Paradise,
What better Paradise than beloved's eyes?
Never enter the domain of hypocrites
There, you'll find no one but pirates.
Avoid the pulpit of monastery

There, you'll find but mat and homily.
In our congress find ruby wine
Amongst preachers whim and whine.
Tavern's path open day and night
Preacher draws no friendly sigh.
How long endure a farce fardel?
Better to quaff with infidel."

F.A.S.

A soldier from Kazvin was going to war. He was equipped with only his bow without any arrows. Another soldier asked, "How are you going to shoot without any arrows?" "When the enemy shoots, I'll gather the arrows and shoot back." answered the soldier from Kazvin. "Maybe they won't shoot any arrows." rejoined his comrade. "There won't be any war then." answered the soldier from Kazvin.

A preacher was preaching vehemently from the pulpit. "Anyone who drinks hard and dies, drunk he will be buried. On judgement day, he will rise drunk to answer." A man from Khorassan said, "the wine he drinks I swear is worth a hundred gold Dinars, where can one find it?" □

Civil disorder and disrepair depressed Obaid's universe where death was a permanent resident and reigned supreme. There was an air of depression and farce seen and felt. On top of the usual miseries, a group of self-serving troglodite men in cleric's garb were leaching people dry. Nothing seemed to disturb the serenity of the remote and impregnable fortress of their positions. Obaid truly saw that his poor countrymen were so unmoored and so in need of help that he and some brave and honorable men, leavened with sympathizers, took it upon themselves to oppose the clerics. To make matters worse, these so-called holy men were in the habit of currying favors with any of the ascendant prince or power thereof. There was very little respite or caesura from the unrelenting martial rhythms of power hungry princes or certain lords. However, he tried as best he could to make people to understand that the world was still out there in all its imperfect beauty, and that they should strive for a happy life. Many men thought of him, and many still do, as an obsessive lampoonist, a hedonist, a libertine or just a shameless lothario who was not worth consideration. But today, by knowing his personality, we can safely say that he was a great humanist.

"I neither envy a prince nor a king,
Nor the treasures they cull and bring.
I have no avarice for treasure,
Gives me neither pith nor pleasure,
I think of hell not a shade,
I wish not for Paradise's gate.
I wish for not garden nor flowers.
Nor wish for a palace nor its bowers.
This sphere has taken my youth away,
This old age with pains now I pay.
The incessant aches, how I dread;
I envy those who're already dead.
The daily aches will be Obaid's bane;
Envy those who found cure for pain."

F.A.S.

PH

DAUGHTER OF CYRUS THE GREAT

By: F.A. Sadeghpour

Cyrus the Great, Conqueror of Ionians, my father;
 Founder of world's first great empire.
 Nobly, justice and compassion he sired.
 United the Medes, Persians, and Parthians; all Iranians.

The first author and champion of human rights
 Who opposed tyranny and bondage with his supreme
 might.

This phenomenal decree, now can be read on stone.
 His fiat prompted wayward nations to atone.

Conquered Babylon as his anointed duty,
 Preferred those who needed annuity;
 Helped to rebuild the Temple of Solomon
 Which was razed by the Assyrians.

Cyrus sired me, reared me and gave me guidance.
 Gave us women taste for art and elegance.
 I was born free, inured to liberty and self-reliance.
 I guarded our frontiers; I commanded with diligence.

In our land emulated my men who were heroic.
 I had borne men and women; idyllic,
 My father, the Great Cyrus inspired epic.
 I helped to govern a just empire, never empiric!

I sat in courts of justice: no easy feat
 On the high seat, strove as fair judge; dauntless to entreat.
 Let us remember, THIS WAS THREE HUNDRED SCORE
 B.C.!

I was the Daughter of a man who issued such fine decree.

Possessed my own metier, moor or land,
 When needed, I hired more working hands.
 Never had to ask permission for "I was woman!"
 Never was insulted that, I was "half a man!"

Hence, long ago on twenty-fifth day of our spring,
 One of us, Paurandokht, wore king's diadem ring,
 Which was the norm of our sovereignty; that we sing,
 "Iranian women rode the empyreal wing."

Full life was mine stood by my sons and men,
 Whenever foe appeared, defended with my might and main.
 With my brother, Cambuzia, traversed desert west to egypt,
 Who died young, high on the mount now, lies in royal
 crypt.



Then Darius was crowned; reigned as well as Great
 Cyrus our Sire; he believed in justice and Ahura's tenet.
 The Almighty Ahura*, protector of light, honor and
 reverence.

Aided the Iranian to live well, but never in idleness.

Darius the Great decreed building excellent roads and
 highways;
 Establishing postal service in every city, town, and byway.
 The first to initiate such service! During his reign
 Coined, "Our post never halts, either in snow, sleet or
 rain."

Darius noticed the paramount fortuity of an excavation
 For a canal in Egypt, the Isthmus, fit for navigation.
 A successful endeavor, this too, is hewn on two stones.
 DeLessepe* found them in sand next to ancient bones!

He built a cultural capital, Persepolis, to celebrate our largess.

An artistic monument befitting nation's selflessness.
Xerxes made it supreme; stored books and gathered literati.
More Iranians joined the fold; whether called Saka or Kausti.

With our beasts and chariots crossed Dardanelles median.
Xerxes commanded this force; the Greeks called us Persians!

We campaigned the Hoplites* and Peltast* duly arrived into Athens.

I noticed seven thousand free; served by five and twenty-fold slaves!

Proud of being Iranian; from a land where Great Cyrus' decree served,

"In any strata or stave, no one should serve as slave."
We lived by this, three hundred years with justice and happiness.

Then we became lazy and corpulent, lived in idleness.

My error, my lapse, should have reminded my kin of their noble task.

Woe, then came the hordes of Greek and Macedonian rot,
Commanded by one pederast warrior who cut the Gordian Knot.

They came to force me to veer habit and custom,
Just as meek as theirs, expected me tamely to conform.

I never did; I was Daughter of Cyrus whom I dearly harbor.

Year eighth Alexander died, the hordes left no fear nor lore.

Along with our men rebuilt the empire with unique ardor.
Arashk, a kindred son of mine, gained the Sash and Crown.

We did reach greatness, but our task was not done.

Expanded the remex of justice and liberty, fleet and brawn.

Later, the envious writers called us just, "The Parthian".

East to west, north to south, no one knew the breadth nor bourne.

One could live many years in glory and see many a golden morn.

Lo and behold: occidental side; Cornelia-gen* formed
A nascent empire, to the latecomers known, the Empire of Rome.

They craved expansion; conquering was their utmost norm!
Put their Eagle versus our Lion; to them respect was born!

Marched eastward confronting our forces;
Seething and bleeding, amazed by our resources!
Frenzied, legions regrouping to no avail;
While drifting, to us lost their Eagle!

More campaigns they carried,
At times they tarried,

New tactics they varied.
Nothing was earned but trifle!

Frustrated, Augustus cursed us
And called us "damn'd Parthinas!"
Poor Caesar and his fracas!

Imagined battling Germans by the river Rhine!
Enraged Caesar should have guessed
These fleet horsemen were Iranians.
Yea, I raised these kindred of Cyrus
Who was greatest of great Aryans.*

Parthians ruled sensibly for nearly five centuries.
'Til another kin, Arta Xerxes, established new dynasty.
To the historians known as Sassanid: to us as Sasanian.
They ruled with aplomb from Aral Sea to the Mediterranean.

They, too, ruled the Empire wisely for almost five centuries.

But the last Sassanian sovereigns behaved indolently
Causing estrangement between throne and the nation
Allowing the selfish Magi* to foment contentions!

The Magi forgot true vows and duty,
Bestiality was borne!
They should have known truly
To detach creed from great throne!

Country vulnerable; ignorantly
Sowing dissension's seeds!
Suddenly, from desert, arid, much sear'd,
Blew a tempestuous new creed,
Waned the old faith, nearly my mien;
Never my innate boon and breed!
Invaders shackled my wrists, fettered my feet;
I never uttered an entreat.

After all; forget not, I was Daughter of Cyrus the Great!

They invaded my country, fell upon it as thrips.
Made me ill by their greed and traits.
I never lost my spirit, my own counsel I kept, 'til the right day
We would rise up once again, and have our proper say!

Holy writ on their lips, burnous loosely fit,
In groups and bands, swords in hand,
Flint eye roaming and seeking
The wealth of my fatherland.

Rag on head, unshod feet,
House to house, town to town
They burned my books; my arts rebuked
Impervious to my rage and frown.

Pretending to cast a new faith
Footloose, pursuing loot finding in plenitude,

Caliph's share did constitute.
Kept the rest for their moods!

Their brood pried a book which survived the fire.
Noticing it, one of their men, Abu Al Sophian-,
"Stop behaving like an Iranian!", "Throw that on the pyre!"
He bawled and cried, "It's their mess and mire!"

They promised many a great deed
When forfeited the old faith indeed.
Bondage was our meed,
Sold us far and near for such defeat!
Had I deemed we would have such sordid condition,
Would have urged my kindreds a better preparation.

My error, my lapse, should have reminded my kin of their
noble task.

Finally they gained sentience
For our artistic achievements!
Whether carving or weaving,
Painting or writing on parchments,
Tile work, pottery, or architectural design;
Which seemed seraphs had defined;
With such color spectrum from nature's tome,
Since ancient time.

They acquired taste for our literature,
Music, mathematics, medicine, and chemistry,
Philosophy and physiology.
With no penchant for weaving
Nor talent for art's many strata;
Some of my kin incalcing,
Tutored them for new vista!

Since the advent of new faith,
Iranian acumen set the foundation
Which later erroneously was written,
The "Islamic Civilization!"
My claim is neither boastful
Nor bogus nor insultation.
Just the facts; not the misleading
Writings and interposition

For instance, Avicenna was born
And bred in Khorasaun*, died in Hamedan*.
Ironically he is known as "Arab Scientist"
In many a European lexicon!
Mohamad Kharazmi was born in Kharazm* district,
The father of Algebra.*
He is called "Al-Kharazmi", though he was
Born in Iran with Iranian Mantra!

To mention a few: Khaleel Ahmad
Taught them prosody and meter
For poetry and verses when they cared

To write their own books of letter.
Another kin from Shiraz*, Seebvich*
Who wrote their language's grammar!
And great Mardanshah Faraj of Khorasaun,
Their financial controller!

At the same time great patriots,
Such as Babak Khorramdin,
And his fair and fearless spouse
Until the bitter end stood by him.
Also, Azarak and Mauzyar
Commander Farkhaun of Tapurestan.*
Senbaud of Neishapour known as Commander
Peerouz and ostadsis of Khorasaun.

However painful for women to lose
Husbands, sons and brothers,
When needed, women did choose
To fill the depleted ranks of warrirs.
We, Daughters of Cyrus, fought
And won, proud and exalted;
With altered faith, to Iranland devoted,
Obdurate where we resided.

Gradually our home rebuilt.
Rewrote anew, restored our libraries.
My great kin, men and women of letters,
Wrote the future itineraries.
Once again, Iranian culture ascended
To its zenith from its nadir.
Due to our strife the country revived
Invader was pushed to his sandy border.

Yea, this is the land of Cyrus, my Heritage, my Niche, and
my altar.

By the guidance of Taher, the ambidextrous,
We had smitten the foes of Iran;
Along with valiant Amir Saman, Yaghoub Laith,
And his brother, Amr of Sistan*
Once again in synergy, the color
And symbol of lion of beloved Iran
Was raised with the help of brave kin from
Daylam * Khorasaun * and Azerbaijan*.

PH

- * Ahura Mazda: God Almighty for Zoroastrians.
- * Delessepe: Builder of Suez Canal, 1859-1869.
- * Hoplites: Heavily armed infantryman.
- * Peltast: Lightly-armed infantryman.
- * Cornelia-gens: Very famous Roman family.
- * Aryans, Arians: In ancient Persian, means faithful, free, hence Iran, Land of the free.
- * Magi: Plural; member of priestly cast of Pre-Islamic Iran.
- * Khorasaun: A province in Iran. (The land where sun rises.)
- * Hamedan and Shiraz: Cities in Iran.
- * Kharazm: A province of Iran. (The land where the sun battles the darkness.)
- * Algebra: The Guebre, (Gheber) or Zoroastrian's art of mathematical reasoning.
- * Sistan, Daylam, Khorasaun, Tapurestan, Azerbaijan: Provinces of Iran.
- * Seebvich: Iranian linguist. (Known as apple cheeks.)

INTERVIEW

PH Are you happy?

NK Yes. When I go to the theatre, I'm euphoric. It's amazing to see your work come to life, and to stand there, hearing the audience laugh.

PH Was the experience a positive one?

NK Mostly positive, yes. Always fascinating. And educational. I certainly am not as naive about this process as I was in the beginning. But even at the low points, there were still those stretches of euphoria.

PH Even after the reviews?

NK Well, the reviews did not make me happy. I guess that was the juncture at which I lost most of my naivete. I was totally unprepared for viciousness. I truly expected we'd get good write-ups. And we did get some great ones, particularly from people like Jeffrey Lyons, Larry King, Liz Smith, Art Buchwald, Kathy Lee and Regis- you know, people seem to love this show, even if some critics had problems.

PH Do you think that negative reviews impact a play?

NK Yes and no. I don't mean my answer to be vague, but both are true. Negative reviews influence the initial public impression, and that can hurt a lot, but if the audience comes despite the reviews and enjoys the show and spreads the word, then gradually the impact of bad reviews fade away.

PH Recently Larry King addressed the issue of critics. He feels that besides reporting their own experience, the critics should also present the audience's reaction. Do you agree?

NK Absolutely. For example, I admire what *New York* magazine has done. Their regular reviewer didn't like us, but their blurb describing us in the theatrical listings is unbiased- it



An Interview with

Nan Knighton

With every interview I do, I keep waiting for the one that will not live up to my expectations or leave me uninspired. It is certainly not the one that you are about to read.

*In the middle of her busy schedule, Nan Knighton took the time to speak with **Persian Heritage**.*

We thank her for her time, her wisdom and the gift of talent. She is witty and speaks frankly about her struggle to success in the theater and as a woman.

just says we're a fun, swashbuckling romance and adventure. To me that's fair- it steers people toward a genre they might like. I do think this industry often shoots itself in the foot, letting critics chase potential audiences away from a show that has popular appeal. I agree with Larry- there should be a way to let people know, "Hey, audiences adore this thing." People have a right to know that.

PH The Scarlet Pimpernel audience has seemed to defy the negative critiques.

NK From the beginning, we've been described as "audience-friendly." It's wonderful to see all these people leaping to their feet in the curtain calls.

PH Do you believe people will avoid a production based on reviews?

NK Sure. I've done it, especially with movies. It's too bad. Unless you know for a fact that your taste and sensibilities are identical to those of a certain reviewer, it's nuts to avoid or support a show based solely on his or her write-up. Art can't thrive unless audiences are willing to experiment as much as artists.

PH How much impact did the producers of The Scarlet Pimpernel have on the show?

NK We've been blessed in that area. Our producers are phenomenal- gusty, inventive, committed and great human beings. When the reviews came in, most producers would have thrown up their hands and closed the show. After all, the Minskoff is a big house and that makes it harder to recover from negative notices.

PH And did they?

NK Just the opposite. They believe in the show. Bill Haber comes to the theatre 3-4 times a week and sits in the back of the house and sees audiences loving it, and his commitment just seems to strengthen. He'd like it to run for years. He's

terrific. Our producers are largely responsible for my first Broadway experience being so positive.

PH Do you read your reviews?

NK I used to think people who said, "Oh, I never read my reviews" were lying. Now I understand. After opening night, I started to read a few and my heart was torn out. You just physically can't keep reading. Now I've asked them to only send me copies of good reviews.

PH Do reviews scare off potential talent from the business?

NK I guess the really brave artists (or the blind ones) just plunge in, no matter what. But there are a lot of artists out there who aren't quite so thick-skinned, and many of them may be scared to throw their hats in the ring. It's like politics today. How many talented people are being driven away because of fear? You know, it's not a lot of fun to get your heart torn out. And when we drive talent away, we're all losers.

PH Let's talk about the Tonys,

NK Oh, the Tonys! Okay. Naturally, if you get a nomination or win an award, it's great and it's going to help. But it's all fairly quirky. After a few years, the average film or theatre goer won't remember who won or lost, but rather they'll remember the big shows, the ones they killed. And look at Titanic. They had a critical response similar to ours- your basic tear-the-heart-out reviews. Then they won the Tony for best musical and the rest is history. Huge hit. It's certainly true that national exposure on the Tonys is extremely valuable to a show.

PH I guess it works the other way, too. Jekyll and Hyde had no exposure and yet is also a success.

NK The theatre is a bizarre world of shifting perspectives. People who were comforting me in November are now congratulating me.

PH Is the future of the New York

Theatre solid?

NK You know, for so many years everybody talked about how the theatre was dying, how it was going to become a rarefied art form like the Opera. That's just not going to happen. Theatre's been with us since the ancient Greeks. It's not going anywhere, and it's stronger than ever. Keep in mind, also, that New York in general is booming. One of the main reasons tourists come to New York is to see a show. This is the most exciting theatrical community in the world.

PH Are there more attempts to reach the younger population?

NK Yes, and I think it's working, and that's wonderful. When I go on the internet, the Playbill On-Line message board, most of the messages are written by teenagers, highschool students who have fallen in love with our show or some other show, and they're so wildly enthusiastic. The Theatre Development Fund also sponsors great school programs, and every Tuesday in February, kids under 18 can attend Broadway shows free, if accompanied by a paying adult.

PH Has The Scarlet Pimpernel done anything special for youth?

NK During previews, we had groups of school kids come to Wednesday matinees. After the show, they'd stay to ask the actors questions, and that's fun all around. Sometimes it's the first show they've ever seen, and oh, the look in their eyes- like their lives have just turned around a corner.

PH Let's discuss your cast.

NK Fabulous, the best.

PH I know your search was long. What were you looking for?

NK Talent, obviously, but it was also vital to us to cast good human beings, people we wanted to be around for a long time. We've been truly blessed with this cast.



PH Have any of them fallen short?

NK Quite the opposite. They constantly amaze me.

PH Could you educate our readers on the difference between a book and a book script in the theatre?

NK In the musical theatre, the script (all the dialogue) is referred to as "the book." Baroness Orczy wrote the original novel of *The Scarlet*

Pimpernel. If I'd adapted it for the stage without music, we'd call it a play. Having adapted it with music, a script is called "the book."

PH Is it easier to take an already written piece and adapt it to a musical or to write an original?

NK For me, adaption is easier, if not quite as exciting. It's like a gigantic jigsaw puzzle, where your already have all the pieces and you've just got to figure out how to piece them together. When you write an

original show, you're sitting there in open space with a million different choices. It's much more daunting.

PH How much license do you have in changing a piece?

NK If you own the rights, then you have quite a lot of license, and I did make a lot of changes. For example, in Orczy's novel, Percy is the Pimpernel from the beginning. I thought it would be more theatrical to show how and why he became the Pimpernel. I also wanted to really capitalize on the fact that Marguerite is an actress, and to emotionally flesh out Chauvelin, our villain. But no matter how many changes you make, your basic parameters are there in an adaption. With an original, you have to create from scratch your own jigsaw pieces and your own boundaries. I'm just now getting ready to do a second draft of the original musical *Open House*, and I've narrowed it down to 20 different ways of approaching it.

PH Is writing something that can be taught or do you have to have a natural ability?

NK Well, I do think you're either born with a natural ability to write, or you're not. Having said that, I think you can truly enhance that ability by studying with great writers. I studied with John Barth, the novelist, in graduate school, and really grew as a writer. I also studied with the poet Anne Sexton. Craig Lucas, the playwright, was in my class. Anne was an amazing influence. I really found my "voice" as a writer while studying with her, and my writing also sharpened so much via exposure to other writers in the class. So, yes, studying can improve your talent, but something must already be within.

PH Is there an age limit on creativity?

NK Oh no! My own mother is 82 and still paints and teaches. And there are innumerable instances of artists whose talents didn't even spring up till very late in life. Grandma Moses is the prime example there. So much

depends on where you are in life. Many people, because of family obligations, jobs, financial constrictions, or even fear or lack of confidence, have been unable to test the waters and explore their talents. Suddenly a door opens. Something happens to change their path in life and BOOM- they start harvesting that inner potential that's always been there.

PH *What inspires you to write? Do you pull from personal experiences?*

NK The times in my life that have been difficult, sad or frustrating, have a strange way of paying off later in my writing. It's like sense memory, if I'm sitting down to write an emotional song or a scene, I try always to pull from something I've genuinely felt. It's a mistake for me to try to write something without feeling the emotion. If you do that, it's just empty, pretty words, and the end result does not ring true to the audience or reader. People know instinctively whether you're writing from honest gut emotion, or from glib, synthetic greeting card sentiment. I think that makes all the difference in the world as to whether or not a song touches someone.

PH *What is your favorite subject matter in writing?*

NK I love it all, but I have the most fun writing comedy. I guess I'm just predisposed to have fun, and, hopefully, to make people laugh.

PH *What about "Falcon in the Dive" from The Scarlet Pimpernel?*

NK Well, that one's certainly not a "fun" song-it's a pretty wild one, and one that does draw from my own emotions, particularly feelings of pushing forward against the odds. I didn't want Chauvelin to be a typical villain. I wanted him to be psychologically complex, and I decided one of the things I wanted to use was his age. He's getting older but he's fighting it. He's revving himself

up to survive, to be just as strong as he once was. Even the "tremulous stars" are still glittering, and so will he. Before I wrote it, I knew I wanted a great title for this song. Usually I don't come up with a title until after the song's written. In this case I wanted a terrific image to soar into the song. I write a lot of poetry, and sometimes I go back to scan it over for any good images I could use. I found a poem I'd written which had the image of one person swooping down over another "like a falcon in the dive." Immediately that felt right to me- that was Chauvelin. Then I found an old piece of music of Frank's [Frank Wildhorn], which he'd forgotten about, but he was happy to use, and so the song developed.

PH *Was it easy for you to write words to the music of Frank Wildhorn?*

NK Other composers I work with, such as Howard Marren, will take my lyrics and write music to them. But Frank only works music-first. Thankfully, he and I are emotionally simpatico, particularly with ballads. When I listen to his music, it immediately hits a nerve, and I start jotting down images, phrases, feelings.

PH *Well, we talked about where you are now, but where did it all start?*

NK I was born and raised in Baltimore. My father was a doctor and my mother an artist. They're both still thriving and I have one older brother, all of them living in Baltimore. I always felt like I belonged in New York, so I chose a fabulous college a half hour from Manhattan- Sarah Lawrence. That's where I wrote and directed my first two plays. I got married to my first husband, a Harvard medical student, after my junior year in college, and spent my senior year at Harvard. My first husband and I had one daughter, Eliza, and John [Breglio] and I have another daughter, Nola.

PH *At what age did you realize that writing was your path in life?*

NK Very early. There was never really a choice. It was just always what I did. I remember being five years old, sitting at my kitchen table with paper and pencil in hand and a children's picture dictionary, teaching myself how to read and write. I had such a hunger for it. My mother saved all those poems and stories I wrote at five, six, and seven, and I still have them now. I guess I really can't conceive of life without writing, or without my family.

PH *When did writing become financially rewarding?*

NK When I was about 26, I landed a job with PBS for a nationally broadcast show called "Consumer Survival Kit." There were four staff writers, each of us assigned one show per month. We covered consumer topics via skits, songs, dramatic sketches, film segments, and so forth. It was wonderful to be 26 and on national TV and making money at the same time. Not good money, but a salary.

PH *Is money the most important reward in the creative world?*

NK You do not choose to go into the arts if money is what's important to you. The John Grishams of the world are few. If money comes, it's just icing.

PH *As a woman, was it difficult to break into this business?*

NK As a woman, I think it's difficult to break into any business. I'm old enough and have been through enough to feel that is a pretty valid statement. Having said that, however, I can not bear the thought of people feeling sorry for women, and I'm not really what people think of as "a feminist." I just think that, realistically, it is harder for a woman, and not simply because they're the ones who also bear and raise the children. By nature, we simply are the



less aggressive sex. We're gentler, and though we may look at the jugular, it's rare that we actually attack it. These are things that put you at a deficit when you're in the middle of a tough business meeting. It takes a long time to find the proper balance between holding back too gently and forcing yourself into coming on too strong.

PH Do you think art changes people's lives?

NK I know it does. When I was about 24 years old, I used to stay up

late at night, listening to Stephen Sondheim's song from *Follies*, "The Road You Didn't Take." I would listen to that song over and over again, tears coming down my face. I'd think about the road I didn't take until finally I said "Well, why don't you take that road?" So I did. The arts do change lives. They touch people, inspire and help them. What makes me happiest with *Pimpernel* is seeing people's faces as they leave the show, seeing them happy and smiling. It's incredible to think you may have touched someone else.

PH Do you look forward to your next project?

NK Very much so. I'm adapting the book for the musical of *Saturday Night Fever*, which will open in London's west end in May. And after that I will go back to my original musical *Open House*, with composer Howard Marren. But I guess I'll always think of *The Scarlet Pimpernel* as my rite of passage at this stage of my life. I learned so much.

PH We like to end our interview with an inspirational thought.

NK Well, for all those people who want to be artists but are daunted by obstacles- and believe me, there are tons of obstacles- I'd say: Keep plugging along. One of the things I love about this country is what we call "the American Dream," the idea (and reality) that, despite the givens in your life, it's possible to get where you want. But-and this is a crucial but-it takes a lot more than talent. It takes an enormous amount of discipline and self-motivation. Some people do get lucky breaks, but most people get there through sweat and sheer persistence. When it's not happening for you, it's easy to make excuses, or sit back and decide the cards are stacked against you, to just fall into that failure and self-pity litany. Or sometimes, I think, talented people really do try, but they just can't fight the battle. The fact is there is no way around the battle. If you want to get anywhere, you have to fight your way through. You have to be utterly determined. Finally, if you're not an optimist by nature, try to find a way to engender optimism within yourself. You'll need it.

PH