

# The Asil Horse and the



“*The world survives with people;  
And people survive by animals  
And the best of the animals is the horse*”

Qabus Nameh (Qabus-e Voshmgir)



*Caption of Map:  
Greatest Extent of Persian Empire, circa 500 B.C.*

*Caption picture of background:  
Tribute Bearers bring horses and Equipment to the Great King,  
Apadana Stairway, Persepolis*

■ by **Monika Savier**  
photos by Monika Savier

*The history of the world-spanning Persian Empire is immediately connected to the development of the Persian horses. In Asia Minor and the Orient, conquering was done by horse, not on foot, from the 2nd millennium BAC on at the latest, as proven by historic finds from the Persian Elamite epoch (2400 BC to 539 BC): cave carvings and the tombs of the rulers who had fallen in battle with their horses, and who were, of course, buried together with their noble partners.*

*The word "horse" is apparent even in the oldest of the Persian books of religion, the Avesta, and with the Achaemenides (550 BC to 330 BC), horses were called „aspa". The word appears four times in Darius the Great's rock carvings at Bisootun in Southwest Persia. (1) Other horse finds were made in the prehistoric tomb sites of Kerman, where tiny equestrian statuettes dating to the 2nd millennium BC have been found.*

*The world had never seen a more vast empire than the Persian Empire at the time of the Achaemenides kings.*

# Empire of Persia





From the Eastern part of the Mediterranean (today's Libya, Egypt, and Turkey) to Northeast Asia with the Indo-European tribes (Aryans and Scythians) and to what is today Khazachstan, and in the southeastern direction to Pakistan and the border to India, that's the area the empire spanned. When Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon in 539 BC, bringing Mesopotamia (the country between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers) into the fold of "Parsa" (as Persia was called the Persians), the social climate of the region changed dramatically. Cyrus claimed for himself the title of „King of the World“, declaring that “he would be benevolent, merciful towards the conquered, and tolerant of local religions. Release of the Jews from Babylonian captivity was one result of his edict; [that's one reason why] the bible calls Cyrus “God's anointed one”. Cyrus's pronouncements echoed Mesopotamian royal traditions, but his treatment of the defeated set a new standard” (2).

During the almost 800 years of Achaemenides rule, the famous Royal Road was built, a road connecting the whole of the empire from the West to the East. Later on, it was to gain popularity as the Silk Road, the trading route between Europe and Asia. Riders mounted on fast horses served courier duty on the road. We have been given a description by the Greek historian Herodotus who recorded the performance of the Achaemenidian riders and their horses in his history books on his travels across Persia: „Neither snow, nor rain, nor

heat, nor gloom of night stays these courageous couriers from the swift completion of their appointed rounds. “ This sentence, adopted from Herodotus and taken up as an adage by New York city's main post office, still decorates their main entrance. He goes on to write: “[These couriers ferrying oral or written messages] galloped in relays between rest stations of the Royal Road: 1600 miles in nine days”. (3)

All those tribes united under the Persian rule had one thing in common: early on they had realised that in times of war as well as of peace, success and development were only possible if they had good horses at their disposal, horses that were top performers and highly attached to people. For transporting people and goods on the trade routes, camels and donkeys were good enough if there was no special hurry. But for military success, horses were needed and they had to meet two important criteria: horse and riders had to be highly trained, and superior horse breeds suitable for battle had to be bred systematically.

For attack as well as for defence, the level of cooperation between horse and rider was the one thing that was crucial for success. There was a corresponding emphasis on the training of horses and riders, as the warriors were loaded with shields and swords or with bows and arrows, which did not leave any of their hands free for taking up the reins. They rode with

refined aids, using their voice and shifts of weight – usually at high speed and while overcoming their fear in the face of battling forces. Almost any writings on the subject of warfare with horses, from ancient to modern times, testify to this symbiosis of horses and riders, and to the gratitude the riders, if they were lucky enough to survive those murderous battles, felt towards their horses. Numerous reliefs, statues and frescos of riders and horses, from prehistoric times to the 20th century, serve as testimonies.

Another just as important aspect in the use of horses, for warfare as well as for civilian purposes, was careful and well-aimed breeding, developing specific potentials of various horse breeds for the respective different requirements of the times. Horse trade flourished between the various regions of the empire. The Persian Kassites, a tribe of Bedouins from the high Zagros plateau in Southwest Iran,



*Tribute Bearers bring horses and Equipment to the Great King, Apadana Stairway, Persepolis*



were among the first tribes well known for their success in breeding and training horses. (4) They exported their Aryan (5) horses to Mesopotamia, the region that is today Syria, Northern Iraq, and East Anatolia. To do that, they had to ride their horses across the Zagros Mountains towering up to 4500 metres, for selling them on the Babylon markets. That's how their horses also reached Egypt, for there is proof that the Hittites, Assyrians, Elamides and Egyptians kept horses for their respective cavalries from about 1500 BC on. During the reign of the Achaemenides, which lasted for more than 800 years, horses took ever more important functions. A stone was found near the then capital of Persepolis, quoting king Darius the Great as saying that "[this land is] possessed by good people and good horses".

We get other testimony from Herodotus, the Greek, who noted in his diary: "Persians carefully instruct their children to ride, to draw the bow and to speak the truth". (6) His diaries also contain records on the extent of Archaemenidic horse breeding. 160,000 horses, he says, lived on the royal pastures in between the cities of Hamadan and Kermanshah. When Alexander the Great conquered the area in 333 AC, he found only 66,000 horses. Herodotus goes on to write that the most expensive horses were the grey-coated Nisa. They

belonged to the king, were fast and were not only ridden, but also pulled the chariots. It was customary in those times to deliver horses to a king as a tax



Horse and Groom, Esfahan school circa 1606 A.C.

payment from his provinces. The relief of Persepolis depicts delegates from seven out of the 23 provinces of the Persian Kingdom bringing horses as tax payment. Armenia alone paid 20,000 horses to the kings, while others gave horses, mules, and sheep, and the Satrap tribe from Cilicia brought 360 noble grey Nisa horses of their own breeding. According to Xenophon, the Nisas were the horses of the kings, occasionally getting offered to the gods as sacrifices. The Avesta says that it is a grey Nisa horse who pulls God's chariot: "Four all-white horses, immortal and fed on ambrosia, their front





*hooves shod with gold and their rear hooves shod with silver, draw the chariot of Mithras". (7)*

*In the course of time, however, the horses took their places in the everyday lives of the normal population. The Parthians (247 BC–224 AC), a plains tribe from the middle of the Persian Empire, were well known for their mounted archers. They reached the Mediterranean and even challenged Rome with their fast horses and their poisoned arrows. Others write about them: „They ride on horseback all the time, on horseback they go to feasts and attend to public and private business, stand still and converse... This is the difference between freemen and slaves, the latter walk and the former ride." (8) Together with the Achaemenides, the Parthians formed a gigantic cavalry unit, but after the battle against Marc Anthony, only 50,000 horses were left.*

*In the following period of the Sassanides kings (224 AC to 641 AC), horse breeding was developed even further. Texts on horse nutrition were written and there were instructions on how to care for horses and to train them. The middle-sized Nisan horse was still considered the most noble breed. When in 641, Arabian warriors arrived in Persia, intent on spreading holy Islam, and defeated the Sassanides, they found excellent horses there. These Arabian Bedouins were rather more used to camels, for reasons of climate and geography, but they were quickly enchanted with the Iranian horses. Only a short time later, the importance of horse breeding and management was even mentioned in holy Quran. In the Hadith, the prophet says: „My reward is promised to all who treat horses well". (9) But it was not only the speedy horses that impressed the new Arabian rulers. They were*

*also taken with the Persian model of efficient large-scale administration and took it on for themselves, in order to be better able to administrate their expanding empire.*

*The level of quality that had been established for horse breeding during the times of the Persian Empire was to perpetuate the centuries to come. When Marco Polo (1254–1324 AC) travelled Persia, he wrote: "The best and most beautiful horses of Asia are found in Persia. Foreign merchants bring the horses from Persia to India for quite a price." (10)*

*Louis IV, the king of France, arranged with the Sultan Hosein (1694–1722) for the yearly import of 8000 Iranian horses from Persia to France, „in order to improve the cavalry". (11)*

*The French adventurer Chardin, departing for Persia in 1665, wrote on the subject of the horses: „Persians horses are the best and most beautiful of their kind: a delicately small head, thin balanced legs, very proportionate body structure, timid and patient in character and reasonably content with any type of good". (12)*

*Up to today, there are large groups of the Arabian population living in the Bedouin tribes of the Khuzestan province, West of the Zagros Mountains in the area around the historic city of Susa, formerly the most important city on the Royal Road. This is the cradle of the Iranian Arabian horses, who for the most part have been entered in the national stud books with their pedigrees. Iran is an official member of WAHO, meaning that this historic gene pool of Arabian horses of Iran, horses who need not be afraid of finding their equals in toughness and speed, has been and will be preserved for breeders and fans from all over the world.*

### **Footnotes and Bibliography:**

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- (7) Xenophon: *The Persian Expedition*, Middlesex, 1949
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**Thanks to: Parviz Tanavoli: Horse and Camel trappings from tribal Iran, Teheran 1998**  
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# Iran's Asil Arabian Horses Today

*It is all but impossible to write about Iran and Iran's Asil horses without encountering "Mary". For the people in Iran, Mary Gharagozlou is a role model even today, a pioneer, an adventurer displaying an unbelievable amount of courage and horse sense. She was the voice of Asil Iranian horses, and what is more, she demonstrated that a woman was able to take an important part in the internationally visible part of horse breeding even in the Islamic society of Iran.*



*Mary Gharagozlou with  
Hilda Benjamin*



*Shery's Stud*



*"On 14th September 2001, Mary Gharagozlou passed away. She had been a member of WAHO since the early 1970s. Her father, Naqi Khan, was a doctor who came from a long line of Persian landlords and statesmen descended from the Gharagozlou tribe, brought from Central Asia to Northwest Persia by Tamerlane in the late 14th century. Her mother was Katherine Ladd, an American librarian at John Hopkins University, Baltimore. Mary grew up to become Iran's foremost expert on dry farming and a tireless worker for the benefit of the nomadic tribes of Iran. In due course Mary married Majid Khan Bakhtiari, a chief of the Bakhtiari tribe, who introduced her to the Asil horses of Khuzestan that were to become her passion. After his death in a plane accident, and for various other reasons, Mary's circumstances changed greatly but she never gave up her work to bring the Arabian horses of Iran to the attention of WAHO and the world." (WAHO)*

**Sharzad Amir Aslani**, an Iranian breeder of Asil horses, member of WAHO, ECAHO judge and one of the organisers of the first ECAHO show in Iran, has written down the story of Mary Gharagozlou, as this is partly her own story as well, and the story of Iranian Arabians during the last 30 years.





■ by **Sharzad Amir Aslani "Shery"**  
photos by Elisabeth Auer, Monika Savier

## The Asil Horse in Iran

*When I decided to come back to Iran, the first thing I had in mind was getting involved with horses again. At that time Iran was fighting an endless war with Iraq, and Tehran, the capital, was being bombed daily by Iraqi planes. Little did I know that in those frightful days, a genuine horse lover, Mary Gharagozlou, travelled often to the war zone in Khuzestan in the South of Iran, in order to maintain an up-to-date record of newly born foals.*

*In those days, I was oblivious to the existence of this Iranian treasure, the Asil horse. It was the beginning of spring, when at a friend's house, I met R.G Nezzam Maafi, who at that time was Mary's partner in her stud farm. He introduced me to the history of the Arabian breed and explained that the principal herd of Asil horses belonged to generations of Bakhtiari tribe leaders. (In her journal, Lady Anne Blunt, while travelling through Khuzestan, makes mention of "the famous Arab stud of Hossein Ali Khan Bakhtiar," which she was never able to see firsthand). The last head of the Bakhtiari tribe was Sardar Mohtasham, whose son, Majid Bakhtiar, inherited the herd. He married Mary Gharagozlou and the two of them established an important agricultural enterprise in the province of Khuzestan which was the winter quarters of the Bakhtiaris. In summer when the heat was at its peak, the tribe moved the livestock to the abundant pastures of higher altitudes, near the Zagross Mountains. Mary was having the time of her life, breeding horses, training them*

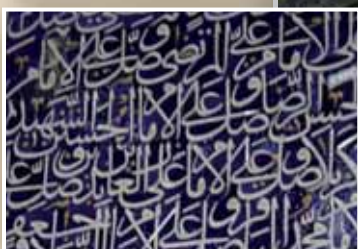
*to gazelle hunting and getting herself involved with tribal matters. She spent a great deal of her time with the Bakhtiaris and the Ghashghais, a tribe living between Shiraz and Ispahan, teaching them the basics of modern breeding and introducing them to vaccines, wormers and other new drugs.*

*Unfortunately, Majid died in an airplane crash and his children donated a part of the herd to the Royal Horse Society. Shortly after, Mary compiled the first Iranian Stud Book, as a result of which after an inspection in 1975, Iran became a member of the WAHO organisation. A few years later, when the revolution swept the country, Mary found herself obliged to give some of her beloved horses away and to find suitable homes for others.*

*When things had settled after some more years, she began to round up what remained of her horses and invited me to visit them. A gentleman from the Southeast, the owner of one of the best Arabian mares in Iran with two of her fillies, introduced Mary as the lady of the Asil Horse in Iran, explained that during the first years of the revolution, when the Royal Horse Society became the National Horse society, she used to sneak inside with the help of old grooms, in order to check upon the newly born so as to maintain her records properly. Mary was trying to do two things: gather in one place the best of the Arabian breed, in order to generate interest by breeders, and record the pedigrees and genealogy required for a Studbook.*







Mary used to travel to remote places, using impossible roads or even putting up with the lack of a proper trail, sometimes stuck for hours in mud, just to check upon a single mare. There are no big studs in Khuzestan. The tribesmen have owned Asil horses for centuries, having inherited them from their fathers and forefathers, and they are not interested in the outside world. Convincing them to allow their mares to be branded in order to be part of a Studbook was one of the biggest challenges accepted by Mary. She tried to explain to them the importance of being recognised by foreign countries and being part of an international organisation. They used to tell her that their horses did not need to be approved by foreigners. She had to give up temporarily, only to try again the following year:

Mary has covered every inch of Khuzestan, gathering information on the horses. She has done it in two fazes. The first started in 1973, the year before she was to



attend her first WAHO meeting in Sweden, and continued to the end of 1976. The information was put into forms for the WAHO inspection team. During that time, she covered the area near the Iran-Iraq border; from Dashteh Abbass, the Northern border of Khuzestan and Lurestan, down to Sussangerd. This area encompasses the lands of the following tribes: Bani-Lam, Sorkheh, Chennaneh, Khasraji, Bani-Saleh, Bani-Turuf and part of the Bani-Tamin. She visited village after village, even a single tent or home, seeing over 600 horses, almost all with defined strains and sub-strains references, but she only completed 378 pedigrees. Mary's requirement for a complete pedigree



was that each horse had to be traceable on both sides to a tribe famous for the given strain. 3 years proved not to be sufficient to cover Shadeghan, Howezeh and the environments of Ramhormoz.

The second faze started in 1989 and continued until the last WAHO conference held in Australia. During that time, Mary went back over all the areas she had known before, checking present living animals against previously gathered pedigrees. In some cases the original animals were still living.

Hopefully, the people of Khuzestan have now understood the importance of written records in order to maintain the purity of the breed. At the WAHO conference in Australia, Mary presented what she liked to call "her lifetime work", which is a Studbook containing some 500 foundation horses. In that, she was fighting two fronts. She had to convince WAHO that these were the original foundation horses, but on the other hand, she lacked the cooperation of the Iranian owners and breeders, who did not quite understand the purpose of an internationally approved Studbook.

I don't know of any other Studbook with so much hard work and dedication in it. I once asked Mary why she was doing it, and she answered: "Because I think these horses are very special and they are worth every minute of my efforts".

## Mary's Horses

It was the end of the summer of 1989 when I decided to go and meet this extraordinary person. Her stud was located in Cordan, some 45 km from Tehran. To my delight and surprise, the buildings were traditionally Iranian, made with loam and bricks and dome-shaped ceilings. It was simple and beautiful. Mary was gone for a ride with half of her herd. Left in the stables were the mares with very young foals. It was my first encounter with Arabian horses and what particularly surprised me that first day was the gentleness of the breed. I couldn't believe how they turned to me, even with a foal at side. I decided right then that I was going to buy an Arabian mare.

Mary's coming back to the stables with her herd of Arabians was a small-scale version of Cleopatra's entry into Rome. In front of the herd, a few well-bred Dobermans were running and barking, announcing their arrival. Racing behind them were some 14 to 15 yearlings and then some fillies. Coming in at a slower pace, there was a grey mare next, ridden by a charismatic lady with a white turban on her head: Mary Gharagozlou. She was followed by eight to ten horsemen mounted on beautiful mares and accompanied by

their foals. What a sight! I will never forget this picture till the end of my days. The horses went into a small paddock, with an inquisitive look towards me and my car. You could see in their eyes all the curiosity of youngsters.

This was my first encounter with a person who actually changed my life. From then on, my story is pretty much standard for anyone bitten by the Arabian bug - my first purchase has been transformed into a whole herd. Those first years around Mary were some of the best years of my life. Everything was a novelty and the excitement of new experiences was endless. Among her herd of some 30 brood-



Mary many years ago

mares, Mary had two favourites which she usually choose for riding. The first one was a black mare to which she paid a lot of attention. I saw her picking her hooves by herself when she had so many grooms. When I asked her about that she smiled and said "There is a special thing about this mare and her strain that scares me a little." The mare's name was Khabiseh which meant "the wicked one" and she was from the "Khersan Mir" strain, which is a derivative of the Wadnan Khersan from the Mir tribe. Her dam was given to Mary as a wedding present by her late husband, Majid Bakhtiar, and from old Bakhtiaris Mary heard the





odd tales linked to that particular strain. Because of the excellence of the breed, in order to keep away the "evil eye", the owners used to name their horses with wicked names. Of course, a very sceptical Mary didn't pay attention to these superstitions and gave her foal an ordinary name. A few months later, the foal died in a freak accident. Needless to say that Mary was puzzled, but she didn't want to believe these old tales and the next foal died as well. She finally decided to listen and thereafter her foals lived. Actually the third foal, called 'Ibliss' which means "Devil", turned into a great and powerful black stallion. All of Khabiseh's foals have not only an odd name but are also very special.

There are other superstitions linked to this strain. Mares are never to be sold, only given as a present or exchanged for another horse. When money and greed get involved, bad luck will befall the owner. On the other hand, if good care is taken and the horses are well provided, the owner's life is changed for the better. To this day, I have witnessed that Mary has never sold a single female progeny, and thanks to God or other deities, despite some up and downs, Mary's life has always been a pleasant one. And odd as it might sound, there are some tales about lives ruined because people mistreated this particular strain.

When travelling through the Southwest of Khuzestan, Mary became well acquainted with the chiefs of the Mir tribe. She had special reasons to know them better, as their Wadnan Khersan had for many centuries been famous and known as the Khersan Mir. Many tales were in fact woven around the strain, not only of endurance, ability, nobility of character, but also of powers verging on the supernatural. The tribe had only 5 Khersani Mir mares left at that time. Mary told me that the people of this unusual tribe were very tall, with light complexion, light hair and eyes. They consider themselves to be the descendants of the brother of Ali, son-in-law of the Prophet. They never, for any reason, gave away their mares. They don't follow the Arab tradition of making a present at weddings or deaths, as a tribute, or even out of friendship. The only way to obtain a Khersani mare was to steal her or take her in a raid – which is what Majid's father had done.

Mary's second favourite mare was a grey mare named "Hoori" from the Obayan Sharak strain. In this case her name means "angel" and to Mary's belief, horses from this strain have the best movements in the breed. She used to compare Hoori's ride to a Cadillac. Even as foals, they all have that floating motion which makes you wonder if their feet touch the ground at all.

Mary told me that the preferred strain of Sardar Mohtasham, Majid's father, were the Khersan, in which he too had superstitious beliefs, and the Obayan Sharak. Majid himself esteemed the Obayan Sharak above all.

## Today's Asils

Thanks to Mary who has been a true inspiration, my involvement with the Asil horse has grown stronger. These great horses look quite like the first ones imported to the west. Some have very pretty heads, with a pronounced dish, depending on the dam line, while others are more coarse. But they all have an excellent conformation which gives them great stamina. Most of them have long shoulders with a great depth of girth and a strong topline. The soundness of their legs is amazing. Even in old age, they have clean pasterns and although they usually are never shod, they have healthy, strong and hard hooves.

Some years ago, an endurance ride was held in the area of Shousha (Susa), where the ruins of the former Elamite temple Tchogha-Zanbil are situated. An old grey mare, so very thin that her ribs were easy to count, was the winner of the ride. Actually despite what might have looked like a poor condition, she had a very low heart beat and to the vets' general opinion, she was very sound and happy. Her owner was a young boy who obviously loved her. He told us that she had never been fed grain. She was turned loose to provide for herself and she had never been sick in her entire 18 years of life. These horses, maintained on scanty nourishment and always ready to perform, are in far better condition than those living in stables on rich diets. Their toughness and soundness are incomparable. The search for better type which can win international show has resulted in close inbreeding in a small equine population and ended in the loss of some of the admirable characteristics which made the Arabian horse so popular. These horses might not win in the show ring but they sure can perform and in times of need, they can soundly carry their owners for great distances.

For an Iranian breeder, a horse's Strain is his most important trait, as it actually says almost everything





*you want to know about a horse. Those Westerners who take colour as the main distinction between strains, with every grey deemed a Seglawi and every bay a Koheilan, miss a lot. A few years ago, when I first visited the province of Khuzestan, horses had no names and were only referred to by their Strain name. Now, people are naming their horses in order to be part of the Iranian Studbook. I have also read more than once that combining different Strains by breeding has resulted in the lost of the characteristics of these particular Strains. While on the other hand, breeding into the same Strain is considered impure and has always been avoided by the Arabian breeder. I must disagree with that concept and explain that breeding within the same Strain is a way of linebreeding and the resulting foals usually are of great quality. There is also a continuity within the Strain, inherited by the foal from its dam side, with particular traits of the Strain brought out generation after generation.*

*Having learned more about the Asil horses and their history, I once asked Mary why these horses are so little known. It has never ceased to amaze me that literature abounds in Arabian horses of the region but has somehow neglected the Arabian horse of Iran. There are in fact no historical frontiers to separate the breeds, as they are from the same origins. These horses were bred in Mesopotamia, in ancient Syria, Persia, and the Arabian peninsula. In fact*



*the province of Khuzestan and the foothills of the Zagross Mountains have the best environment for the breed, with the soil containing rich minerals which are imperative the skeletal health. Many related and divided tribes live on both sides of the border, moving back and forth. One might come to the conclusion that Asil horses must have changed hands more than once.*

*Mary told me that she too was puzzled that not many travellers had the courage to cross the border into Khuzestan. She suspected there had to be a practical reason. When an English anthropologist who had come to the Bakhtiari with her later tried to visit the tribe on his own and was literally stripped, it occurred to her that it was not as easy or safe to wander around in Iran, particularly the south, as it was to wander about in Arab country. The only equine enthusiast who ever tried was Lady Blunt. The Blunts' route took them to the fringes of the Asil area and Lady Blunt makes complimentary comments on the horses she saw.*

*It would have been to the advantage of our horses if other travellers had ventured later. The lack of international interest, their isolation from fame, the non-interest of our tribes in racing or selling are the reasons that the Asil horse of Iran seems to be untouched by time. It would be so natural for the Iranian-bred Arabs to find their rightful place among the internationally recognised Asil horses.*





# Tales of the Asil Horses from Khuzestan Iran

■ by Mary Gharagozlou  
photos by Monika Savier



## **Laila and the Hamdanieh Mare**

*It is said that some hundred years ago there were two cousins of the Al Kathir tribe, known then and now for the Hamdani Semri. To avoid confusion I give them names, which may not have been theirs, Khalid and Adnan. Khalid was passionate about horses. He owned a herd of mares of the Hamdani, Saglawi, and Wadnan strains, but his ambition was to breed a superior Hamdanieh mare, the pride of his tribe. Adnan, his cousin, had little interest in horses, and was more interested in material gain, therefore since trade in horses was taboo among any Arab of standing, he concentrated on increasing his sheep and camels. Naturally, he did own mares and did produce, but only to the extent that he needed them for transport for himself and his retinue.*

*Among the Moslems, the Festivity of Fetr, which marks the end of the month of fasting of Ramadan, is an important occasion for celebration, particularly among the Arabs of Khuzestan. It is the custom for all relatives to visit each other; each tribe to visit its neighbour; but first and foremost everyone, including all sheikhs of sub-tribes plus their menfolk to pay their respects to the Sheikh-al Mashayekh (the sheikh of sheikhs) who is the chief of the whole tribe. On such occasions everyone will mount their best horses, put on the finest trappings they have, wear their best clothes, carry their best arms. From all directions riders will appear; each group joining another; till often more than a hundred riders can be seen, group after group, approaching the "mozif" (guest room) of the Sheikh al Mashayekh. On such a day Khalid and Adnan who, each one, though young, had separate settlements and were sheikhs in their own right, find themselves riding together. After the traditional greetings and exchanging of news, Khalid looks over the mare ridden by Adnan. The mare is magnificent, of a dark bay color known as komeit, a favorite among many breeders of the Asil. The more Khalid inspects it the more he falls in love with his cousin's mare, who moreover is a Hamdanieh, better than anything Khalid has been able to breed. He emits a deep sigh, saying first: "Mashallah! Mashallah! God preserve her for you! (This is to avoid giving her the evil eye.) I breed and breed and every time a*



*filly is born I hope I will have produced the perfect Hamdanieh. But you, you who care for camels and sheep, God has given her to you!"*

*Adnan laughs and shrugs; "As long as she is comfortable and strong it makes no difference to me what she looks like. If it does to you, we can make an exchange. Give me fifty camels and one hundred ewes and you can have her." Adnan is surprised when Khalid accepts without hesitation. Now Adnan not only possessed this fine mare, he also had as his wife the daughter of the sheikh of all Al Kathir, who was famed for her gentility and beauty, by the name of Leila.*

*Several days later, towards evening, Adnan and his wife are busy with the sheep, when she looks up and sees a swirl of dust approaching accompanied by several riders. "What is that?" she asks her husband.*



*He screws up his eyes, lifting his hand to shade his eyes from the glare of the setting sun, and replies: "It must be the sheep and camels Khalid is sending me".*

*"You did not tell me you had bought sheep and camels from Khalid."*

*"did not buy them, I exchanged them with the komeit Hamdanieh"*

*. "You did what?" she exclaims, but since he is looking sheepish and does not reply, and the cavalcade is now fast approaching, she mumbles something about going in to prepare sherbet for the riders, and disappears. Shortly the sheep and camels arrive. After the confusion of putting them in their respective enclosures, the men settle down in the mo- zif, where sherbet, then coffee is served to them. Meanwhi- le, Adnan spies his wife putting a silver chain halter, and a hand embroidered blanket on the mare. He excuses himself, going to her: "What are you doing, Leila?"*

*"Do you intend to so dishonor her as to send her naked! These belong to her, and with these she will go."*

*Later, as the moon starts to come up, the men, having eaten, insist that they must leave, for Khalid has said he will wait for their arrival. As they leave the mo- zif Leila appears from the women's section. She greets them, explaining that since she has raised this mare, she will be the one to hand her over. She unties the mare and leads her towards the waiting men. What no one has no- ticed is that she is carrying a bundle. As she comes close to them she suddenly vaults onto the mares back. While they all look at her astonished, she turns to- wards Adnan and says quietly: "Since you do not value the breeding and be- auty of your mare, likewise you cannot value me, for we are similar in our assets, so where she goes I go!"*

*Having made this announcement she rides off, taking the mare to Khalid. What happens later is not part of the story, but, if true must have made a dreadful fuss!*





## Jassem and the Saglawieh Mare

During the later period of the Quajar reign of Iran one of the princes, by name Zelli-i Soltan, who was often governor of this or that province, had a tremendous greed for horses. However, unlike Abbas Pasha of Egypt, he never paid for them but took them by force. He comes on an official visit to Khuzestan. On his way to the town of Shushtar, where he is to inspect the fortifications of the castle of Salasel, he notices an Arab riding a mare that catches his fancy. He tells the officials accompanying him to see that the mare is brought to him.

The owner was a member of the Al Kathir tribe, young and not particularly well known. The officials had felt embarrassed at stopping the rider there and then, so promised they would contact him and convey the Prince's pleasure, as the Prince apparently considered the owner should feel honoured that his mare had found favour. When finally the envoys succeeded in locating the Al Kathir, who for convenience shall be called Jassem, they found he felt no such thing. He answered: "Tell the Prince I congratulate him for his good taste, but as for the mare she is *mobarak* to her owner". (This is a difficult word to translate. It is a mixture of welcome, congratulation, and well fitted. It is used for newly weds, a new house, something fine someone owns and, in the context used here, it means the person has no intention to part with it.)

The officials were put into a very difficult position. The Prince would leave, but they would stay. If they used force they would later have trouble with the Al Kathir tribe. If



they failed to get the mare for Zelli-i Soltan, they would incur the wrath of the Prince. They decided somehow to deter him from requesting the mare. They told the Prince a long, sad story of how this mare was all the young man owned. That he was shortly to be married and if he lost the mare he would be refused his bride. None of this had any effect on Zelli-i Soltan, except to make him more determined to have the mare. Jassem was approached again. Again his answer was the same, worded less politely. Again they tried to dissuade Zelli-i Soltan, but, to no avail. The third time they threatened Jassem. Jassem lost his temper, calling Zelli-i Soltan the son of a loose woman, born under a bush, the son of a "burnt" father, with other insults suitable to the occasion, adding for good measure appropriate curses. There were many witness to his tirade, and it was duly reported with embellishments to the Prince. This time military men were sent to arrest Jassem. His mare was brought with him and he was taken to the Salasel Fort, an impressive construction with a moat, raised above the city, two cannon guarding its gates.

The mare was taken to a large courtyard where the mounts of Zelli-i Soltan's retinue were tethered. Jassem was taken





to an underground room where he was put in irons and attached by a chain. "You are a stupid idiot to risk your life just for a horse! Zelli-i Soltan is the grandson of the King and has an official title in the army. You, you fool have insulted both. You will not get out of this easily," said the guard, shaking his head, as he closed the door, leaving Jassem in darkness.

Towards evening he was taken up a long cobbled path to the pavilion which was the residence of visiting important personages. The pavilion stood close to the edge of the sheer cliff wall that dropped straight down into the swirling waters of the Karoun river. The situation had been chosen as there was no possibility of ascent, therefore safe and not in need of guarding. A large area in front of the building was paved with big flagstones. The Prince, dressed in a colorful coat, was striding back and forth before the pavilion. When Jassem was brought before him he looked him over coldly.

"You are a foolhardy, uncouth lout", he said. "You have insulted the royal crown, and for that the punishment is death. Afterwards your body shall hang where it can be seen as a lesson to others who are as barbaric as yourself."

Jassem hung his head and uttered not a word.

"I see you are dumb now. It would have been better for you if you had been so sooner. Tell me, I would like to know, what was so precious about your mare that it has brought you to this pass? What is so special about her, that you did not feel honored to present her to a prince of royal blood? After all, she is not a rare gem, but simply a yaboo."

"Yaboo", meaning a horse of no breed, aroused Jassem. He raised his head, and with as much control as he could muster, replied: "Sir, she is no yaboo. She is an Asil Saglawieh and her strain has been in my family since my fifth ancestor, maybe even longer. To me, and my family she is worth more than any amount of jewels. Maybe to your excellency she is only another horse."

This time Zelli-i Soltan hung his head, but when he looked up there was no relenting in his look. "Tomorrow, at the call of the muezzin you will be hung. However, in accordance with the law of Islam I shall grant you one last request. What shall it be?"

Jassem hesitated only slightly, then replied "Allow my mare to be brought here now, and let me mount her one more time. If you allow to bring my aba (cloak), so I am not naked."

"Granted", said the Prince, gesturing to one of the attendants, "bring her."

The flea-bitten Saglawieh mare was led up the cobbled path. The surroundings and man leading being unfamiliar, she was snorting and prancing as she came, her tail turned over on her croup. She had a new blanket and halter on her, the smell of which she did not like. On seeing Jassem she whinnied in recognition. She was brought before the Prince who nodded his head towards Jassem. Jassem took her halter, passed his hand over her forehead and caressed

her muzzle.

He then made reins out of the rope, threw the aba over his shoulders, and quietly saying a "Bismillah al-Rahman al-Rahim" (invoking the blessings of God) he tied the two back ends of her blanket across her back and vaulted up. He turned her and cantered to the far side of the paved court, then cantered back. He cantered several times in a circle, then again to the furthest part of the court and stopped her. She stood still, but quivering, her ears pointed back expectantly. Suddenly, with a cry of "Ya Allah" (calling for the help of God), he dug his heels into her and took off from a halt to a full gallop straight at the sheer drop to the river. The Prince and attendants scattered out of his way. The mare reached the edge, could no longer stop herself, and leapt off the cliff. Immediately the Prince and retinue rushed to the precipice, not knowing what to expect. What they saw enraged Zelli-i Soltan. The horse and rider were safely swimming in the river. Only the aba was displaced, and that was hanging on the tail of the mare.

"Shoot! Shoot!" Zelli-i Soltan commanded. They shot, but either by chance or on purpose neither the mare or Jassem was hit. The sun suddenly descended, as is its habit in the heat of Khuzestan. Men were sent after Jassem, but, they could not find him, not then, and not later! It is said that he crossed the border and joined relatives there. □



Homa and Momayun,  
painting of Joneid, 1396 A.D.