

S. M. JORDAN D. D.
President.
ARTHUR C. BOYCE, M. A.
Registrar
and Treasurer.
ELGIN SHERK, B. A.
Director of
Physical Education.

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE
OF
TEHERAN

R. C. HUTCHISON, Ph. D.
Director of
Religious Education.
WALTER A. GROVES, Ph. D.
Secretary.
HERRICK B. YOUNG, B. A.
Director of
Resident students.

کالج امریکائی تهرآن

Teheran, Persia.

July 23, 1926

8/21

Dear Mother;-

This week has been the so-called vacation week that I mentioned in my last letter. At least it has been a vacation from the boys for four days, but aside from that I cannot claim any other vacation. In those four days I was supposed to get ready for this Religious Education Conference, but the boys are back, the four days or relief are passed and I cannot say that I am anywhere near ready for the Conference. The explanation seems to have been that everyone heard that the boys were going to be away and hence they took the opportunity to visit us at a time when we had "nothing to do". Monday was not so bad. We got in a little work but I was just fairly started. Tuesday Mr. Payne dropped in for a little while and gave us the good information that the new house for us had been rented. He had not soon left than Mr. Neilson, the American Consul at Teheran with a Mr. Morgan secretary to Dr. Millsbaugh of the American Finance Commission, arrived. They simply parked themselves for the day and there was nothing for it but for us to pitch in and entertain them. They were having their Moharram holiday and naturally expected that we were also. Wednesday was the 10th of Moharram, the day on which we had decided to go to the city to see the sights of the religious celebration, of which more at length in a minute or two. That was an all day affair and no work was accomplished on that day. Yesterday at tea time a Mr. and Mrs. Fairley, some English people dropped in to see us and stayed for a while which knocked out one of the best hours in the afternoon. Mr. Fairley is the head of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company Offices in Teheran and about second in command in Persia, I believe. They seemed to be very sociable people. It was really the first opportunity that I had to talk with them although I had met them long before this at Church and elsewhere. The boys began to stream back even before these folks had left and the four days respite was over with about one day's work done. I have tried to pitch in to-day somewhat, but there have been so many other things that I have not had a chance to get back to the religious education stuff. But now for the big day in town, Wednesday. Teddy has given her side of it in her letters home, but my story will probably differ from hers somewhat.

One thing we gained from Mr. Morgan's visit on Tuesday and that was a ride to the city on Wednesday morning in his automobile. He very kindly drove to Adireesh where we met him at 5.30 in the morning and thence to the American Legation. Our program was somewhat complicated. The orders were to be on hand at six o'clock to watch the performance. This came through the American Legation inasmuch as we were going with Mr. Philip and Mrs. Philip. The Teheran police reserve a section for the Europeans from which they can watch the performance and do not know yet why the early hour unless they were anxious to have us in place before the show really started. I suppose too they wanted us in place before the crowd gathered, thinking maybe that there was some danger in our going through the streets

after the crowds had gathered and the processions had started. Accordingly we were up at 3.30 a.m. on our way to Tadjreesh at 4.45 and in the auto at 5.30 after a 45 minute walk, and in the Legation grounds in the city at 6.00 where Mrs. Philip had kindly invited us to have breakfast with them. Needless to say we had eaten breakfast before the brisk three-mile walk and 30 minute auto ride but were ready for another by the time we arrived in the city. Unfortunately for the early start the Philip's themselves did not get down from Tadjreesh until nearly 7 a.m. and breakfast was awfully slow so that it was eight o'clock before we finally got away from the Legation grounds and 8.30 before we arrived at our parking place. We found ourselves ushered to a roof in one of the open market squares, at the northern entrance to the bazaars. The processions were starting from the southern end of the city and marching north out of this north entrance through the open square where we were and shortly after that they broke up and returned to their homes. The processions had been going for some time when we arrived, but inasmuch as there was a good deal of repetition in it all and also since the first two hours or more were processions of the head cutters, I was just as glad to arrive at the tail end of that part and see as little of the blood as possible.

As we were being led to our place on the roof we had to brush by one group of these gory fellows and barely escaped without becoming somewhat bloody ourselves. As I have said all of this is in mourning for the death of Husein, the son of Ali, who in turn was the nephew(?) of Mohammad, and the 4th Caliph to succeed Mohammad. Husein was to have been the 5th Caliph or Imam, but in a war of succession he was killed and the Caliphate went to another and more distant branch of Mohammad's family in the person of Yazid. This religious mourning is a commemoration of the brave fight which Husein put up for his own rights, though he was far outnumbered, and the death which followed. Curiously enough the Persian Mohammedans in remembering the death of Husein have adopted many Christian teachings, especially the idea that Husein died for their sins and that his death was foretold and that the angels ministered to him just before his death, and that he refused their divine help, when he could have had it because he knew his death was for the people and without the death there would be no atonement. Of course all of this has been borrowed from Christianity but it shows how hungry the people are for a Saviour who can really save them from their sins.

The lamentable thing is that their saviour is dead and they mourn his death with the most frenzied and fanatical mourning. Tears are not sufficient only shed blood is the real evidence of the sorrow at such a loss. My language teacher told me to-day that these mourning practices were in vogue in Persia long before Mohammad and Husein, and that they simply have been taken over from a more primitive religion and used by Mohammedanism. But to get back to the procession; the first in line were the "head-cutters" who are thus expressing their sorrow. Their performance is most terrible and ghastly to behold but in actuality is not nearly so bad as it looks. In the first place these men have taken a vow, probably at some sickness from which they have recovered, or their mothers have taken the vow for them at their birth probably because she has been childless or in some other way afflicted, and the result of the vow is that they will join the procession and cut their heads in mourning for Husein. As I have indicated most of the headcutters are men, but many of them are small boys and in one instance we saw a very tiny child with some small scratches on the top of its head. These men and boys gather for days beforehand in the Mosques or in a meeting place and under the guidance of a Mollah they listen to the story of the death of Husein, and in the reading and chanting they begin to work themselves into a frenzy. In Meshed this performance

S. M. JORDAN, D. D.
President.
ARTHUR C. BOYCE, M. A.
Registrar
and Treasurer.
ELGIN SHERK, B. A.
Director of
Physical Education.

THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF TEHERAN

R. C. HUTCHISON, Ph. D.
Director of
Religious Education.
WALTER A. GROVES, Ph. D.
Secretary.
HERRICK B. YOUNG, B. A.
Director of
Resident students.

4.

کالج امریکائی تهرآن

Teheran, Persia.

starts a month before the actual day though in Teheran it hardly starts more than a week ahead of the actual day. On the night before the big day these men gather in the "esjed" (Mosque) and this time they beat the tops of their heads with their palms, the hair having been shaved off in the front and sometimes altogether. After several hours of this their heads become sort of puffy on top. Early in the morning they start off in groups chanting some religious phrase and repeating it over and over again until they are actually drunk with frenzy in many instances. Meantime they have equipped themselves with a long white robe, something like a butcher's apron, because that shows up the blood best and everyone can see how much they have bled, and a sword, dagger or long knife of some description. The leader carries the chant and then at a signal he brings the sword down on his head, but not too hard, just enough to prick the puffy surface and cause the blood to flow which it does most readily. Nowhere are the bloodvessels more sensitive than on the top of the head and especially after they have been treated to this special slapping process for hours before hand. Most of the people are very careful not to hurt themselves but the trouble comes when some individual gets a little too excited and really gives himself a real slash. The result is that he bleeds so profusely that before the procession is over he has become faint and weak and not unusually passes out cold. It is reported that twelve died last year after the procession from lack of blood and other things. The government provides first aid stations along the line of march and when the men drop out of line they are carried to one of these places, bandaged up and sent home. The worst cases were carried off to the government hospital. Friends of the men in the line usually go along with the procession and render such help as is thought necessary. When it looks as if the individual has had sufficient the friend pulls him out of line. This year the police kept a good watch out and if no one pulled a man out when it looked as if he had enough they went in and took them out by force.

This matter brings out another feature of the processions, namely the vast array of works of merit that are made possible by these people. Giving of water, or sugar, the rendering of aid at any time, such as wiping the blood from their faces, the holding of their sword, sometimes the prevention of a man from striking himself any further by ~~putting~~ holding a stick over the head of the person about to cut himself in order to prevent the sword from cutting the head any more, carrying the bloody to the aid stations, etc. are all works of merit for the person that does them.

As a matter of fact the whole procession was so well guarded and extreme fanaticism discouraged by the conduct of soldiers in dragging men from the line that there was little danger of anyone doing real damage. However, we saw not less than 15 men or more drop out of line to get treatment, about five of whom fainted, while two or three had to be carried off the hospital. That was in the place where we were standing and I judge that there were several other first aid places scattered along the line of march so that these numbers of casualties would be greatly increased were all to be taken into account.

Fortunately for my nervous and digestive system this bloody part

was about finished when we arrived, and the interesting part of the procession came after that. These groups resembled bands of strolling players in that they represented the various characters that had figured in the battle and death of Husein and his brother Hassan. There were the enemy soldiers, in chain armour and gloriously mounted on horses, Shahr, the general who led the soldiers of Yazid against Husein, the captive children of Husein, the beheaded body of Husein on a stretcher, the man who first found the dead body of Husein, the dead bodies of the followers of Husein slung across the backs of horses and literally covered with imitation spears like pin-feathers, numerous riderless horses of Husein's loyal band, the horse that carried the body of Husein and refused to leave it (This last horse was worshipped by a large group of mourners who were a part of the procession), etc., etc. All of these characters and representations were so arranged as to carry out the main features of the battle and when the processions stopped the people acted their parts in pantomime to the tune of great lamentations from the spectators. The lamentations were not always howls by any means, but consisted of the recitation of chants and responses somewhat after the manner of many of the Psalms of the Old Testament, only much more primitive and limited in their expression.

Intermingled with these playing-processions were large groups of "chest-beaters". These formed the bulk of the procession. They came along, literally in droves at a time, beating their chests in unison to the tune of some chant. At certain intervals the beating became quite severe and more hurried and frantic. One had only to see the bared chests of these men to realize that they had given themselves some severe punishment in the course of the morning. Two men in particular I remember had struck themselves so frequently and so hard with the open hand that their chests were raw. All of them revealed a large red blotch where the hand had been striking. All the while that this beating was going on the men were saying "Husein! Husein! Husein koshte shod!", the last part meaning "Husein has been killed". One could hear the blows, struck in unison, a square away. Variety was given to the performance by the scattering of mud and straw over the faces of the chest-beaters as they walked along.

I was so interested in all that was going on that I did not have time to become disgusted or to think of laughing at anything that was taking place. There was, however, one sight in connection with all this outburst of fanaticism and religious frenzy that was sickening and that was a group of mollahs (Mohammedan priests) who were watching the thing from the sidelines. They were pretending to shed a few bitter tears and had their handskerchiefs out to give the right effect while they gently waved their hands back and forth in the direction of their chests. The poor people in the procession seemed to take on renewed enthusiasm when they saw these mollahs who themselves were too proud to be in the line with the mourners. I would like to see one of them think of cutting their heads. The whole thing would last about three years of these religious pharisees were made to head the procession of head cutters each year all over the country. I have never seen a more accurate case of men laying on other people "burdens too heavy to be born" while they themselves do not lift a finger.

Another impression was the power that lay behind the whole thing. I could not help thinking of that great crowd on the march for Christ and what a change he would have made in their celebration and the miracle that he could work in their ignorant minds. But before us was a procession, miles in length, which is at the present time unalterably opposed to the idea that Christ is the Saviour of the World. True they know Him only in a very distorted manner, and yet how he could have answered their cry for religious satisfaction did they only know it. It seemed to me that half the grown male population of Teheran was in that procession all of them trying to find satisfaction for their souls in their frenzied expressions of sorrow for one dead long since.