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EDWARD HENRY PALMER (1840-1882)

R.L.Bidwell

Edward Henry Palmer was born in Cambridge in 1840, the son of a schoolmaster who died very young, leaving his son little more than 'a tendency towards asthma and bronchial diseases'. He was, however, adopted by an aunt, who sent him to the Perse School in the city, where he quickly discovered an unusual interest in languages, spending nearly all the money given to him for sweets on buying drinks for gypsies in return for being taught their lore and the Romany tongue, in which he became very proficient and remained interested for the rest of his life.

Palmer left school at the age of sixteen and went to work in the office of a wine merchant near St Paul's in London, and once again he spent most of his free time and money picking up languages -- this time by frequenting the docks and talking to sailormen. He worked entirely by ear, taking a particular interest in dialects, and soon mastered several in French and Italian. During his London days he became friends with another poor young man who was to win fame as the greatest of English actors, Sir Henry Irving, and Palmer himself appeared on the stage; histrionic skills are doubtless a great advantage to a linguist. During these years also he suffered a very serious illness from which he was cured by a herbalist, and later he was to claim that he had in fact died and been brought back to life.

In 1860 Palmer returned to Cambridge, where he became friendly with an Indian, Sayyid Abdoolah, who had hoped to teach oriental languages at the University, but who was denied an official position because these could be given only to members of the Church of England. In 1863 two Fellows of St John's heard of this unusual young man and arranged for Palmer to receive a sizarship -- a position which enabled him, in return for certain domestic services, to study for a degree. In fact, he spent much of his time in cataloguing the oriental manuscripts in the University library -- a collection of which the Librarian had written,'No words are sufficient to express the mass of confusion which our collection presented, and which brought down on us the well-deserved censure of Orientalists'. Palmer produced the basis of the catalogue of Arabic and Persian manuscripts and later went on to those of the libraries of Trinity and King's. His achievements in this field were later described by G.F.Nicholl, Professor of Arabic at Oxford, as 'the most arduous and wonderful works'. He wrote an Arabic poem in the metre *ramal,* describing the cataloguing and ended it by fitting his own name and that of Trinity into the metre. This was characteristic of Palmer, who, as one of the first major Islamic scholars not to be in religious orders, felt free to introduce some humour into his work. In six years he acquired such a knowledge of oriental languages that although his application for a post as an interpreter in the

Legation in Tehran was rejected, the Persian Ambassador stated that he both spoke and wrote the language to perfection.

Despite the fact that he achieved only a poor degree, he was consoled by election to a Fellowship at St John's, qualifying by translating the famous passage in Gibbon on the Prophet Muḥammad into Persian rhetoric. In the same year, 1867, he published his *Oriental Mysticism,* curiously dedicated to the Emperor Napoleon III. He had become interested in Sufism while preparing his catalogues of manuscripts, and book summarizing the works of Aziz b. Muhammad al-Nasafi with carefully chosen paragraphs. Arberry says that Palmer made several important mistranslations and that he was wrong to assume that it had originally been written in Turkish and translated into Persian, but nevertheless the book is of value.

During the next few years Palmer expanded his interests, writing poems and essays in Persian and Urdu for Indian newspapers, including an immensely lengthy account of a state visit by the Shah with many topical jokes, translating poetry from Finnish and Danish in addition to becoming an authority on legerdemain (on which he contributed an article to the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*), table-turning, thought transference and mesmerism, by which he succeeded in curing a man dying of hiccups. He was a knowledgeable ornithologist but took little interest in other outdoor activities, although it is recorded that once in his life he played cricket, swinging his bat so wildly that the wicket-keeper had to be carried off on a stretcher.

In 1867 Palmer went to the Middle East for the first time, working for the Palestine Exploration Society trying to trace the route by which the ancient Israelites had crossed the Sinai Peninsula and identifying the place-names. His *Desert of the Exodus* (1871) was a result, and the following passage shows the pleasant, unpedantic way in which he wrote. On arrival at St Catherine's Monastery 'there issues forth from the gate at the side an old gentleman, reverend though fuddled in mien, dignified though unsteady in gait -- with a patriarchal beard, and the most mediaeval of serge costumes, who, if such attention be not dexterously avoided, will fall upon your neck and greet you with a patriarchal kiss. This is Brother Jacobus, the *oeconomos*, or bursar, of the convent, once a flourishing Smyrna merchant, but now, either because he is tired of the world, or, more probably, because the world is tired of him, brought here to end his days'.

This expedition was followed by a second, when, taking with him a tent and three months' supply of tea, flour, bacon, onions, tobacco, sugar, Liebig's extract and brandy (and a camera), he travelled in the Levant, meeting Richard Burton, who was then Consul in Damascus. He also met Arminius Vambéry and, as a result of his journey, produced two books, one *The*

Secret Sects of Syria, and the other a work on Jerusalem, written in conjunction with his future biographer, Walter Besant. Neither book contains significant new information, but each is lively and easy to read.

Despite these achievements and his first-hand knowledge of the Middle East, the electors to the Sir Thomas Adams's Chair of Arabic at Cambridge preferred to appoint the more conventional scholar W.A.Wright. This, says Besant, was 'never forgotten or forgiven' by Palmer. He was, however, somewhat consoled by being appointed in 1871 to the Lord Almoner's Chair at the University, which was the gift of the Dean of Windsor as Lord Almoner to the Queen. It brought a stipend of only £40 a year in return for which the incumbent was bound to deliver two lectures. This, with his Fellowship, brought Palmer's income up to £350 a year, and, he felt, it enabled him to get married.

There followed a busy decade at Cambridge, lecturing in Arabic, Persian and Urdu, and Palmer was partly responsible for the setting up of the Semitic and Indian Languages Tripos, which remained practically unaltered until within living memory. He published in 1876 the poems of Bahā'al-Dīn Zuhayr -- said to have been the first complete edition of any Arab poet published in England -- and prepared a work on oriental penmanship which was published after his death. Another major work, said by some to be his most important, was a revision of Henry Martyn's translation of the New Testament into Persian.

The demands of scholarship had, however, constantly to compete with those of supporting a family, and Palmer was forced to undertake great quantities of hack work in order to earn money. He wrote a history of the Jewish nation for the SPCK, which added nothing to material already published, and his *Haroun al-Rashid* is charming, but not a piece of research. He had to work fast and did not have time for reflection, and, when caught in error, had to admit 'perhaps my rendering is not as precise as it might be'. The general urgency for publication made him slipshod in proof-reading and unable to spare the time to verify a reference or resolve a doubt. His *Koran* has many errors of detail but still manages to convey the authentic atmosphere.

Palmer published an Arabic grammar and a Persian dictionary, both of which are still not without value. He had strong views on learning languages, detesting all rules and believing that they should be studied without grammar and that, by stressing vocabulary, the student acquires the grammar insensibly. He declared belligerently, 'either you want to learn a language or you do not. If you do not, follow the way of the English schools', and he believed that any intelligent person should be able to read a new language in a few weeks and speak it within a few months -- although he did make an exception for a person's first oriental language. He became

editor of a series which aimed at teaching languages without grammar; 'reduced to the simplest principles, the accidence and syntax can be thoroughly comprehended by the student on one perusal, and a few hours' diligent study will enable him to analyse any sentence in the language'. The series subsequently included the famous grammar of the Revd. G.W.Thatcher, so editorial policy must have changed! Nicholl wrote of Palmer's own grammar that it was designed for those who knew no Latin or Greek at a time when all potential learners of Arabic had received a classical education and that it was 'far from superseding its predecessors' and contained 'many deficiencies and errors'.

In 1881, having remarried after the death of his first wife, Palmer found himself poorer than ever. He decided that he was tired of teaching and hoped 'to get time to work at something better than teaching boys the Persian alphabet'. And so he resigned all his Cambridge posts, except for the undemanding Lord Almoner's Chair, and settled in London to make a living as a journalist. He could write easily upon demand, and the topics that he covered included French slang, Dick Whittington, the wandering Jew, modern Indian magic and trained elephants, but he was still struggling when he was offered a chance to achieve substantial wealth and national recognition.

In the summer of 1882 Whitehall decided that an invasion of Egypt was the only way to extinguish the dangers to British interests represented by the nationalist movement that had formed around Aḥmad ʿUrābī (Col.Arabi, or Arabi Pasha). It was planned that the expeditionary force should land, not upon the Mediterranean coast, but attack by means of the Suez Canal, and it was obviously important to find out what would be the attitude of the Sinai tribes in its rear, what links existed between ʿUrābī and the Ottoman forces in Syria and to assess the effects of a possible proclamation of jihad. Palmer was approached by the Government to go to Sinai, revive his past contacts and report. According to Wilfrid Scawen Blunt, a prejudiced and always unreliable reporter, Palmer was offered £500 in advance and led to hope that he might receive at least a further £2,000 and a decoration. Whether this is correct or not, he certainly accepted with alacrity. In June he was on his way, and early in July he was at Jaffa and a few days later set out from Gaza in the character of Shaykh ʿAbd Allāh, a Syrian official of importance. He rode across the Peninsula, reached Suez in safety and reported that there was indeed talk of a jihad, but that for £20,000 or £30,000 he could buy the allegiance of the 50,000 Bedouins of the area.

The money was made available and Palmer set out again, ostensibly to purchase camels, for, naturally, the British Government could not descend to bribery or corruption. He was accompanied, in order to show that his mission was official, by two officers in uniform, one of whom, Lieutenant W.M.Gill of

the Royal Engineers, had already made a considerable reputation as a traveller in the Caucasus, China, Tibet, and Libya and held the Gold Medal of the Royal Geographical Society. Gill had the further task of cutting the wires of the telegraph between Cairo and Damascus. They were accompanied by a Jewish cook but had no military escort.

Two days after their arrival in Sinai, on 12 August 1882, the party was led astray by a treacherous guide into an ambush of Ḥuwayṭāt Bedouins. A friendly tribesman offered £10 for their release, and, although he subsequently raised this to £30, it does not seem a great sum for a Cambridge Professor! It was rejected, and the four men were cut to pieces with swords, although it was said that they had previously been offered the choice of being shot or thrown over a precipice. Their bodies were left for the vultures. Subsequently thirteen tribesmen were brought to trial, of whom five were sentenced to death.

In September the forces of Sir Garnet Wolseley landed and defeated ʿUrābī's men at Tel el Kebir. The statement by an Egyptian author that one of ʿUrābī's scouts had been suborned by Palmer seems as improbable as his own biographer's claim that the victory was made possible by Palmer's ensuring that there would be no attack in the rear, for, by the time of the battle, Palmer had been dead for over a month.

In October a search-party found remains of the two officers, including one of Gill's socks with his foot still in it, but there was no identifiable trace of Palmer. There were hopes that he was still alive, held as a captive, and, as a result of public pressure, the Foreign Office decided to send the doyen of Arabian travellers, Richard Burton, then Consul in Trieste, to go look for him. Burton, now over sixty and long deprived of an active role, responded with enthusiasm and arrived in Cairo sharpening an ancient cutlass and refurbishing long-outdated pistols. His first demand was for a gunboat, and British officials on the spot, terrified at the thought of what he might do, managed to detain him until orders could be obtained from London for his recall to Trieste. The search was put in the hands of the less flamboyant Colonel Warren, who had known Palmer in the Palestine Exploration Society, and in November he was able to confirm that the professor had died at the same time as his companions. The remains were put in a tin-lined box, brought back to England and solemnly interred in St Paul's Cathedral between those of Nelson and Wellington. Despite this pomp, the Government naturally denied that Palmer had been on a secret mission and maintained its story that his sole task had been to buy camels.

The Times, in an obituary, referred to Palmer as 'a scholar whose attainments have been equalled by few and whose work has been surpassed by none' and ended rather oddly, 'if spared he might have remedied the confusion of Babel, and restored to the

human race, after learning all languages, the primitive tongue'. His biographer claimed that his work, particularly in Sinai 'will never be forgotten by future generations'. These claims are excessive, for the circumstances of his life prevented Palmer from making any very significant contribution to oriental studies, despite his undoubted brilliance as a linguist. The Times praised him for being 'the least bookish of men...[without] a single trace of pedantry', but, alas, these are the very qualities which make a great orientalist. Palmer, however, has his place in history, as perhaps the first professor of Arabic to put his gifts at the disposal of his country in practical politics, and certainly the only one to be commemorated in St Paul's Cathedral. Many of his contemporaries, and indeed successors, felt that Arabic and Persian were merely vehicles for long-dead poets -- there was little difference between Ḥāfiẓ and Virgil -- but Palmer showed that they were living tongues used by ordinary people for the everyday purposes of life. Although clearly he was not one of our greatest scholars, one may agree with Arberry that he was 'one of the most romantic figures in the history of Oriental studies'.