

THE NORSEMEN STORY OF BALDER THE BEAUTIFUL

AND

THE IRANIAN STORY OF ASFANDYAR THE BRAZEN-BODIED (RUIN-TAN). *

Read on 5th March 1924.

In the December 1923 issue of the *Nineteenth Century*, there is an interesting article (pp. 875-79) from the pen of Mr. G. Clarke Nuttala, on the Mistletoe which "has always been associated with Christmas festivities and decorations" in England, where the halls of the rich as well as the cottages of the poor are said to be decorated with branches of this plant. The article connects this plant with the Norsemen's legend of Balder the Beautiful. This legend reminds me of the Gaz tree which is connected with the Iranian story of Asfandyâr the Brazen-bodied (ruin-tan), as described by Firdousi.

Introduction.

I.

I will, at first, speak of the mistletoe and its connection with the Legend of Balder the Beautiful. The mistletoe, which is a parasite, growing generally upon oaks, is said to be "the most venerated of plants in England, being the sacred plant of the Druids." It is known here as *âkâsh-vel* (आकाश वेल), i.e., the sky-plant or the heavenly plant. Shakespeare speaks of it as "baleful mistletoe", on account of its being a kind of destructive agent in the story of Balder the Beautiful—the Sun-god. The story runs as follows: "Balder, the son of Odin and Frigga, dreamed that his life was threatened and that he would shortly die. So, Frigga prevailed upon all living things to swear not to harm her son, but she overlooked the insignificant mistletoe growing on the oak at the gate of the Valhalla. One day, the

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gods were at play, and with the laughter and sport, they began to cast missiles of all sorts at Balder, believing him immune from injury. But Loki, his secret enemy, had discovered the omission of the mistletoe from the oath ; so he, made a shaft from its wood and gave it to Balder's brother, blind Hother to throw. Hother threw boldly, but, to his horror, instead of laughter there was a shriek, and Balder fell." It is from this story that an idea of balefulness has been associated with the mistletoe.

II.

Now, the Iranian story of the death of Asfandyâr, the Brazen-bodied, is described by Firdousi in his Shah-nameh. Before describing it, I will first describe, as an introduction to that story, the story which says, why Asfandyâr was invulnerable like Balder the Beautiful, and why, therefore, he was spoken of as *ruin-tan* (روين تن) or the brazen-bodied. Asfandyâr was the eldest son of Gushtâsp, the king of Persia, who was the patron of the religion of Zoroaster. He was to that religion, what Asoka was to the Buddhist religion and Constantine to the Christian. Zoroaster, when he was in (Gustasp's) Court, performed the liturgical ceremony of Darun (the Sacred Bread), on the 29th day Marespand of the last month of the year, Asfandârmad, the day known as the Jashan or Festival of Mino Mârespand and gave four substances of the offerings, consecrated in the ritual, to four different persons¹: These four things were : Wine (مې), Flowers² (بوي lit. Fragrance), Milk (شير) and Pomegranate (انار or نار). He gave the consecrated wine to King Gushtâp, and the drinking of it gave him the miraculous

¹ *Vide* the chapter headed :

درون يشتن زراتشت و نمودن چهار برهان ديگر

(i.e., The Consecration of the Darun by Zoroaster and showing four other proofs (of his Revelation) in " Le Livre de Zoroastre (zartûsht-Nâma) de Zartûsht-i Bahram ben Pajdu, publié et traduit par Frédéric Rosenberg (1904). Text p. 60, Translation page 58.

² Rosenberg takes this word for "incense," but, I think it refers to fragrant flowers, which are often used and consecrated in the ritual.

power of leaving his body here in this world for three days and taking his soul to the next to see Paradise. He gave the fragrant flowers to Jamasp, the Iranian Daniel, the Prime Minister of the king, who thereby was enabled to prophecise the future. He gave the milk to Peshotan, the Dastur or High-priest, who thereby forgot the thought of death (نیامورد از سرگ یاد). Lastly, he gave to Asfandyâr, a grain of the pomegranate, and the eating of it made him invulnerable. He became brazen-bodied so that no weapon could injure any part of his body.

Now, we come to the story in Firdousi's Shâhnâmah. Asfandyâr, after having defeated, on behalf of his father Gushtâsp, the Turanian army of Arjâsp, asked from his father the throne of Iran in his life-time. Gushtâsp had led his son to expect the throne as his reward, if he defeated Arjâsp. But, when Asfandyâr asked for the well-nigh promised throne, his father tried to put him off, and asked him to go and fight with Rustam, the national hero of Iran, who was believed to be invincible. He said, he would give him the throne if he brought before him Rustam with hands tied. So Asfandyâr went to fight with Rustam who had grown old in the service of his country. Rustam, out of loyal feelings for his lord suzerain, offered, of his own accord, to accompany Asfandyâr to the court of his royal father, in any subordinate position he liked and thus tried to avoid a fight with the royal prince; but Asfandyâr, counting on his belief that his body was invulnerable, insisted upon fighting and taking him to his father's court as a captured person with tied hands. Rustam, on no account, liked to be degraded. In the end, he had to fight with the prince whom he soon found to be invulnerable, and very strong as a young man. He, on the other hand, had lost most of his juvenile strength. In the fight, Rustam and his well-known horse, Rakhsh, both were severely wounded. When Rustam returned to his camp, his father Zal was much grieved to see his son wounded. So, he thought of consulting the Simorg, the bird which had nourished him on his

birth and had brought him up.¹ He burnt a few feathers upon fire and the bird appeared and healed the wounds of Rustam and his horse. The bird then asked Rustam to take the following course to kill Asfandyâr, whose body, as referred to above, had become invulnerable to weapons, as the result of eating the consecrated pomegranate in the holy communion communicated By Zoroaster.

There grew in the country, bordering on the Chinese Sea, a tree named *gaz* (گَز) which grew very dense (مصطبر). The tree was watered with poisonous water (آب زهر).² The bird Simorg directed Rustam to the place where the tree grew, and itself, sitting on the top of it, pointed out to him a particular branch and asked him to cut it. It then said that the death of Asfandyâr was destined to occur by means of that piece of wood. The bird gave several directions as to how to straiten the piece and prepare arrows from it. It then added, that the body of Asfandyâr was made weapon-proof by Zoroaster, by the recital of an incantation (*nirang*), whereby his body was proof against a sword or spear.³ It then directed that Rustam should aim the arrows prepared from the wood of this tree directly towards the eyes of Asfandyâr putting himself, as it were, in the position of a worshipper who worshipped the tree standing before it.⁴ Rustam carried out all the instructions of the bird and killed Asfandyâr, by aiming a double arrow of that particular wood to his eyes.

1 For this story and its somewhat parallel story of the wolf-boy of Agra, *vide* my paper entitled "Recorded instances of Children having been nourished by wolves and birds of prey" in the Journal of the Natural History Society, of 1889.

2 *Shahnameh*, Mecan's Calcutta edition, Vol. III, p. 1212. *Vide* Vuller's Text, Vol. III, for this portion of the story, p. 1706.

3 *Vide* the Text of the *Shahnâmeh* of Kutar Brothers, Vol. VI, p. 226.

4 The Tree *gaz* is the Tamarisk, and it appears from what Firdousi says that it was worshipped by people :

از چشم او راست کن هر دو دست
چنان چون بود مردم گزپرست

“The word Druid,” referred to in the above Norsemen story, “one form or other of which is used in early Celtic records to designate a class of priests corresponding to the Magi or wise men of the ancient Persians, is of uncertain etymology. The derivation from the Greek $\delta\rho\upsilon\varsigma$ an oak, though as old as the days of the elder Pliny, is probably fanciful” (James Macdonald in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Vol. VII, 9th ed.). The probable derivation of this word is Avesta

𐬨𐬀 Sans. 𐬀 Eng. tree (K. E. Kanga, *Avesta-English Dictionary*, p. 273 n.) They “held the mistletoe in the highest veneration. Groves of oak were their chosen retreats. Whatever grew on that tree was thought to be a gift from heaven, more especially the mistletoe. When thus found the latter was cut with a golden knife.” Irrespective of the parallelism of the stories of Balder the Beautiful, and Asfandyâr the Brazen-bodied, we find some parallelism in the fact that both the mistletoe and the *gaz* were objects of worship. Again, the ancient Druids, with whose ritual the mistletoe is connected, are supposed by some to have some connection with ancient Persia. The botanical name of mistletoe is *viscum* and the plant belongs to the natural order of *Loranthaceæ*. It is still regarded as a sacred plant and is much used in Christmas in certain mysterious rites instituted by St. Cupid”¹ by a priest clad in a white robe, two white bulls being sacrificed on the spot. The name given it by the Druids signified in their language, ‘All Heal’ and its virtues were believed to be very great (James Macdonald).

1 Beaton's Dictionary.