

SOHEIL



OHEIL is the Arabic name of the star Canopus, to which a curious belief attaches. It appears that in some fashion known alone to Allah, the fate of the Arab race is bound up with the star. Where it sheds its light their empire flourishes, and only there. Why this is so even faith is powerless to explain, but so it is.

Doubts and questionings, changes of costume and religion, striving for ideals, improvements, telegraphs and telephones, are well enough for Christians, whose lives are passed in hurry and in hunting after gold. For those who have changed but little for the last two thousand years, in dress, in faith and customs, it is enough to know that Soheil is a talismanic star. Let star-gazers and those who deal in books, dub the star Alpha (or Beta), Argo, it is all one to Arabs. If you question knowledge, say the Easterns, it ceases to be knowledge. If this is so, the empiric method has much to answer for. Knowledge, and virtue, and a horse's mouth, should not pass through too many hands. Even argument itself, that argument which is almost deified in latter days, when applied too roughly, takes off authenticity from knowledge, as the bloom of peaches falls from rubbing in a basket.

Of one thing there can be no doubt whatever. When in the Yemen, ages before the first historian penned the fable known as history, the Arabs, watching their flocks, observed Soheil, it seems to have struck them as a star unlike all others.

Al Makkari writes of it on several occasions. The Dervish Abderahman Sufi of Rai in his *Introduction to the Starry Heavens* remarks that at the feet of the Soheil is seen, in the neighbourhood of Bagdad, 'a curious white spot.' The 'curious white spot' astronomers have thought to be the greater of the two Magellan clouds. Perhaps it is so, but I doubt if the Arabs, as a race, were concerned about the matter, so long as they saw the star. From wandering, warring tribes, Mohammed made a nation of them. Mohammed died, and joined the wife in paradise of whom he said, 'by Allah, she shall sit at my right hand, because when all men laughed, she clave to me.' Then came Othman, Ali, and the rest, and led them into other lands; to Irak, Damascus, El Hind, to Ifrikia, lastly to Spain, and still their empire waxed

waxed even across the 'Black Waters' of the seas, and still Soheil was there to shine upon them. In the great adventure, one of the few in which a people has adventured, when first Tarik landed his Berbers on the rock which bears his name; at the battle on the Guadalete, where the King Don Roderick disappeared from the eyes of men, leaving his golden sandals by a stream; to Seville, Cortuba, and Murcia, the land of Trodmir Ben Gobdos to which the Arabs gave the name of Masr, right up to Zaragoza, Soheil accompanied the host. A curious host it must have been with Muza riding on a mule and with but two-and-twenty camels to carry all its baggage. Thence to Huesca of the Bell, where King Ramiro, at the instigation of good Abbot Frotardo (a learned man), cut off his nobles' heads when they had come to give him their advice about the celebrated bell, to be heard all over Aragon, across the Pyrenees to France, to the spot in Aquitaine whence Muza sent to Rome to tell the Pope he was about to come and take him by the beard in the name of God. Then the wise men who always march with armies, looking aloft at night, declared the star was lost. Although they smote the Christian dogs, taking their lands, their daughters, horses and gold, on several occasions as Allah willed it, yet victory was not so stable as in Spain. Perhaps, beyond the mountains, their spirits fell from lack of sun.

When the conquering tide had spent itself and flowed back into Spain, at Zaragoza, almost the first Moorish state that rose to eminence was founded. Al Makkari writes that at that time Soheil was visible in Upper Aragon, but very low on the horizon. Again the Christians conquered, and the royal race of Aben Hud fled from the city. Ibn Jaldun relates that, shortly after, Soheil became invisible from Zaragoza. The Cid, Rodrigo Diaz, he of Vivar (may God remember him), prevailed against Valencia, and from thence the star, indignant, took its departure. And so of Jativa, Beni Carlo, and Alpuixech.

Little by little, Elche with its palm woods, and even Murcia, bade it good-bye, as one by one, in the course of the struggle, prolonged for centuries, the Christians in succession conquered southward. At last, the belief gained ground that, only at one place in Spain, called from the circumstance, Soheil, could it be seen. At Fuengirola, between Malaga and Marbella, exists the little town the Arabs called Soheil, lost amongst sand, looking across at Africa, of which it seems to form a part; cactus, olive, cane, and date palms form the vegetation; in summer, hot as Bagdad, in winter sheltered from the winds which come
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from Christendom by the sierras of the Alpujarra and Segura. Surely there, the star would stop and let the Arab power remain to flourish under its influence. There, for centuries, did it stand stationary. The City of the Pomegranate was founded, the Alhambra, the Generalife, the brilliant Court; the poets, travellers, and men of science, gathered at Granada, Córdoba and at Seville. Al Motacim, the poet king of Córdoba, planted the hills with almond trees to give the effect of snow, which Romaiquia longed for. He wrote his *Kasidas*, and filled the courtyard full of spices and sugar for his queen to trample on, when she saw the women of the brick-makers kneading the clay with naked feet, and found her riches but a burden. Averroes and Avicenna, the doctors of medicine and of law, laid down their foolish rules of practice and of conduct, and all went well. Medina-el-Azahara, a pile of stones where shepherds sleep and make believe to watch their sheep, where once the Caliph entertained the ambassador from Constantinople and showed him the basin full of quicksilver 'like a great ocean,' rose from the arid hills, and seemed eternal. Allah appeared to smile upon his people, and in proof of it let his star shine. Jehovah, though, was jealous. A jealous God, evolved by Jews and taken upon trust by Christians, could not endure the empire of the Arabs.

Again, town after town was conquered—Baeza, Loja, Antequera, Guadix, and Velez Malaga, even to Alhama, 'Woe is me, Alhama'; lastly Granada. Then came the kingdom of the Alpujarra, with the persecutions and the rebellions—Arabs and Christians fighting like wolves, and torturing one another for the love of their respective gods. The fighting over, tradition said that at Fuengirola the talisman yet was in view, and whilst it still was seen, there still was hope. A century elapsed, and from Gibraltar—from the spot where first they landed—the last Moors embarked. In Spain, where once they ruled from Iaca to Tarifa, no Moor was left. Perhaps about the mountain villages of Ronda a few remained, for, even to this day, the peasants use the Arab word 'Eywah' for 'yes' in conversation. But they were not the folk to think of stars or legends, so no one (of the true) faith could tell if Soheil still lingered over Spain.

Trains, telegraphs with bicycles and phonographs, adulterated foods, elections, elementary schools, and other herbage (*otras yerbas*), give a sort of superficial air of Europe to the land. The palm trees, cactus, canes, and olives; the tapia walls, the women's walk and eyes, the songs and dances, the Paso Castellano of the horses, the

Andujar

Andujar pottery, the norias, and the air of fatalism over all, give them the lie direct.

The truth is, that the empire of the Arabs, though fled in fact, retains its influence. The hands that built the mosque at Córdoba, the Giralda, the Alhambra, and almost every parish church in Southern Spain are gone; their work is mouldering or struggling with the restorer; and yet from every ruined aqueduct and mosque they seem to beckon to the Christian as if derisively. The reason, is it not set forth at length by economists, ethnographers, tourists, and by those whose business it is to write, for people who know nothing, of things they do not understand themselves? The real reason is, because at Cadiz Soheil is still in sight, though making southward day by day and night by night. That is why Spain is still an eastern country, and why the ways of Europe have no real hold upon her. Let her take heart of grace, the precession of the equinoxes will put things right.

In the dull future, when stucco is our only wear with Harris-tweeds and macintoshes, when Juan shall be as Pedro, Pedro as John or Hans or Pierre, and all appavelled in one livery; when trains shall run up every hill, and Volapuk be spoken from Hammerfest to Cartagena, Soheil will cross the straits, and all go as it should in Spain, as now it does in England, where gloom obscures all stars. There still remains Ifrikia; at Mequinez and Fez, and in the little towns which nestle in the 'falda' of the Atlas amongst the cedar forests, it may be that even the equinoxes may have mercy on Soheil, and let it rest.

Long may it shine there, and shine upon the wild old life, upon the horseman flying across the sands, upon the weddings where the women raise the curious cry of joy which pierces ears and soul, upon the solemn stately men who sit and look at nothing all a summer's day, upon the animals so little separated from their owners, and upon the ocean which is called the desert.

In the Sahara, Soheil will shine for ever upon the life as in the times of the Mualakat when first the rude astronomers observed the star, and framed the legend on some starry night all seated on the ground.

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