

'crosses' (the equivalent of the Armenian word just used) were plunged into the water of the Zaiyandehrud river, just as on the Epiphany in other Eastern rites the waters are solemnly blessed each year by the metropolitan or bishop after celebration of the liturgy casting a cross into the sea:

'The Shah had guards placed on the roads leading from Isfahan to Julfa, so that no horses, except those of persons of consideration, should disturb the processions. More than a hundred crosses of silver and rock-crystal escorted by the clergy of the ten<sup>1</sup> Gregorian churches in Julfa and two in Isfahan city, no cross with an escort of less than four clerics in copes of cloth of gold of various colours, attended by bearers of candles, were brought in procession to the bank of the river and thence to a small islet in the midst of the shallow water, while a large concourse of Armenians and Persians from the city lined the banks and watched the ceremony. The interval of waiting for the arrival of the Shah, who came late accompanied by his sons and ministers, was filled by games and dances.

'When 'Abbas I arrived, he preceded the Armenian Patriarch Melchisadech across the water and, restless person that he was, took on himself to play the master of ceremonies for this Christian religious ceremony: here was the Patriarch to stand, there were the rites to be performed, here the clergy were to be aligned, and the throng accompanying the crosses, so that there might be no crowding: and many other details were similarly supervised.

'The actual rites consisted of prayers, pouring the oil of chrism into the water, and then plunging all the crosses into it, when many persons out of devotion stripped and entered the river.

'Then, the ceremony ended, 'Abbas I stood, still surrounded closely by the bearers of the crosses, questioning the principal Armenian whether his race considered Georgians or Franks the better Christians, to which Khwajeh Nazar diplomatically replied that the former observed fasting the better. To this Shah all fasting was repugnant, and so he more precisely stated that he asked the question as to observance of the religious laws, and performance of the rites: whereupon Khwajeh Nazar praised the Latins. Next 'Abbas wanted to know from the Vicar Provincial of the Carmelites whether in his opinion Armenians or Georgians were the better Christians, and Father John Thaddeus gave his vote for the Armenians (an opinion from which Pietro della Valle, also present and who also related the incident, radically differed on the ground that in the view of Catholic authors of distinction the Georgians had never departed from the Catholic Faith, such errors as they have being derived from the orthodox Greeks, whereas the heresies of the Armenians are graver than those of any other Christian race in the East).

'The rain increasing and the streets becoming muddy, the Persian monarch adjourned with his immediate entourage and three of the Catholic missionaries to the house of the late Khwajeh Safar, the principal Armenian, and there spent the rest of the day and the night. Here, in the conversation on religious matters which filled the hours before night, Shah 'Abbas several times asserted that 'whoever did not believe in Jesus Christ, and did not believe that Jesus Christ was the Spirit of God, was a "Kafir"—an infidel. In addition he wished to see and caused to be fetched to him certain relics of saints, which had been brought from Armenia when the people of Julfa were transplanted to Isfahan: and, when some priests, vested in copes and with lights and tapers brought them in reverently, 'Abbas rose, kissed the relics and placed them on his head; then he bade those standing round to stand reverently before such holy objects, paying them indeed almost as much honour as a Christian sovereign might have done.

'Even more astonishing—in a Muslim monarch, and that the Armenian clergy tolerated it with such equanimity, for the two Augustinian friars present were scandalized—was that the Shah took it into his head that he would make a gift of a piece of the relic of S. Ripsima, the famed virgin and martyr of Armenia, to Fr. John Thaddeus, and not

<sup>1</sup> By 1620 there were thus only ten schismatic churches in Julia.