

“on the Turks, as he is effeminate and given over to pleasures of the flesh. Some days ago he took 25 Armenian girls for his concubines and has made them Muhammadans. He allows the Religious to live in peace, but has no regard for them nor even for ambassadors from Europe. . . .”

Bishop François Picquet of Baghdad has left a more detailed description of the way in which this ‘rape of the Sabines’ occurred in his letter from Isfahan to the Cardinal Prefect of the Sac. Congregation, 25.3.1683;¹ readers will recollect how Shah ‘Abbas I on 16.1.1620 had been to watch the Epiphany ceremonies of the Armenians on the river bank and was so interested as to act as ‘master of the ceremonies’: with his descendant the interest had a different motive, or, at least, effect:

“Some time ago” (i.e. in February 1683) “there happened here something which caused sorrow among the Armenians and deserved tears. They have a custom at their feast of the Epiphany to bless the water for the baptismal fonts, and for greater solemnity they go very often to bless the water in the river, not only by a simple blessing, but also by pouring into it the sacred oil: and they perform this ceremony with such pomp and circumstance that all the people of the city flock there. The king himself has been there at other times to see those Christians throw themselves after the benediction into the cold, icy water and bathe together, playing and laughing and indulging in tricks, while the bishop and all the priests robed in copes stand on the banks of the river, they too laughing at the foolishness of their people.

“This king, wishing to enjoy that sport in the company of his ladies, who number over 500, ordered that the Christian women and girls should come to one of his palaces, or gardens, outside the city, where there are magnificent water-tanks and fountains, giving instructions that the very same ceremony should be carried out by the women and girls clothed in the copes, dalmatics and vestments of the priests, and that they should learn the ceremonies of the blessing well from their husbands and fathers. The order was executed: the women and girls came to the garden clothed in the vestments of the priests: they did what they could in the water. The king with his concubines enjoyed it and immediately afterwards gave them all a banquet: and at the end sent back the greater part of those women, keeping only a hundred of the more pretty and youthful, whom he retained in his palace for five or six days. Then, making a second selection of twenty-seven, he sent the rest to their homes. These twenty-seven are without any hope of returning ever: some of them are married off, the others not. At once a command was issued for them to be dressed in gold and silk stuffs, and their own clothes should be sent back to the houses of their relatives together with a little money for the poorer ones, none for the richer. One of the principal men in Julfa has laboured with all his might to get back his daughter, offering a thousand Tumans; but it was not possible. The final and greater disgrace is that they have been made to profess the Muslim faith, some of them by trickery, some by force. Each one is shut up in a little room, working away at sewing or some other labour, deprived of all liberty, even of visiting and speaking to the others, save with the permission of the eunuch deputed to stand guard over them, which he gives very rarely, more often chastising them with his stick—more sharply still, should any of them be caught making the sign of the cross or praying in Christian fashion. Although in the king’s house, these poor victims are not raised to the throne, not even taken to his bed, except for perhaps two or three of them of exceptional prettiness. All the rest will be given in marriage to his servants, even to some of the lowest and vilest of them. This the Shah does, considering that thereby he is doing service to God, and deceived by his Mullas or chaplains, who praise such deeds as being pleasing to heaven and to their prophets Muhammad and ‘Ali. From this first misfortune there ensues another very onerous for all the relatives, viz. the loss of the inheritance and household goods; because immediately

¹ *S.R.*, vol. 490, p. 252.