

HAJI HOLMES
OR
YOU, TOO, HAVE BEEN IN AFGHANISTAN, WE PERCEIVE

by MARSHALL S. BERDAN

In the annoyingly brief recapitulation given after his dramatic—and for Watson at least, traumatic—reappearance in the guise of a whiskered old bookseller in their suite at 221B Baker Street in the spring of 1894, Holmes says only this of the first part of the third year of his Great Hiatus: “I then passed through Persia, looked in at Mecca, and paid a short but interesting visit to the Khalifa at Khartoum, the results of which I communicated to the Foreign Office.”

Much Higher Criticism has been written about the low probability of Holmes’s actually being able to “look in at Mecca,” and especially in the casual manner that these words suggest. But as the nineteenth-century British adventurer Sir Richard Francis Burton (not to be confused with the twentieth-century British adventurer with a remarkably similar name) had proven in September 1853, it was clearly not impossible.

In light of the heavy difficulties involved in infiltrating Mecca, it seems only logical therefore that Holmes would not only have studied Burton’s successful mission, but actually tried to recreate it to the best of his considerable ability.¹ Indeed, as a brief recapitulation of Burton’s Arabian adventure makes clear, Holmes’s only real chance of success lay in his being able to do what Burton had done: masquerade as a native Muslim. Not just as any native Muslim, but as an Afghan—an incognito that would have necessitated a brief residence not just anywhere in that then and still troubled land, but ironically in the very same part of Afghanistan where his old friend and colleague, Watson, had come literally within inches of passing beyond his own Reichenbach and thus forever from the annals of late Victorian jurisprudence and the hearts of Sherlockians everywhere in that fateful year of 1880. An amazing coincidence, to be sure, but one that no student of the Canon—or even literature, for that matter—could fail to appreciate. Let us see, therefore, if the facts don’t bear it out.²

Assuming that Holmes did not neglect to tell Watson about (or Watson record) a significant post-Tibetan detour (or that he completely falsified the main facts of his Great Hiatus), Holmes must have exited Tibet to the west, for this is the direction in which Persia (modern-day Iran) lies. But to get to Persia via anything that could be considered a direct route would have necessitated descending into India—both literally and cartographically—and then traversing what was

then (and still is) the rugged, dangerous, and barely civilized land of Afghanistan. (Until the partition of India in 1947, there was no Pakistan.)

In theory, of course, Holmes could have taken a ship from India to Persia, which has a substantial coastline along the Persian Gulf. But that would have increased the danger of his being recognized—the *Strand Magazine* was popular reading throughout the Raj—and hence compromising his undercover mission for the Foreign Office, which one assumes was at least monitoring, if not actually directing, his travels through the agency of Mycroft. In addition, the verb form “passed through” implies a border-to-border traverse.

There is an even more compelling reason why Holmes would have opted for the overland route: that he might acquire the one absolutely essential requirement of entry into the Muslim holy city, an Islamic identity, as Mecca was then—and continues to be—closed to nonbelievers.³

Sir Richard’s celebrated memoir, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to El-Medinah and Meccah*, first published in 1855, would have made that prerequisite abundantly clear. There can be little doubt that Holmes—like all of literate England—was familiar with this immensely popular, and hence frequently reprinted, travelogue. It would defy probability to posit that Holmes had failed to consult it—or, if he had been planning his own surreptitious pilgrimage to Mecca some time in advance of events at the Reichenbach Falls, perhaps even Burton himself, who died in Trieste, Italy in October of 1890 after a nearly 30-year “third” career in the British Foreign Service. It is certainly possible that Holmes stopped in Trieste en route from Florence to Tibet to peruse the late explorer’s copious private notes and his extensive personal library.

Contrary to persistent popular belief, Burton was not the first European to visit Mecca. There had been several before him, including an English seaman by the name of Joseph Pitt who had been taken there as a slave in 1688 by the Algerian pirates who had captured him in the Mediterranean. Nor was Burton the first to chronicle his journey in great detail: That honor belongs to Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, a Swiss-born but British-educated Orientalist who, disguised as a Syrian trader, spent several months in Mecca in 1815.

Burton was the first Englishman to undertake such an arduous journey incognito. He did so with the express purpose of documenting it in great detail, not only for his own edification and reputation, but also to fulfill his contract with the Royal Geographic Society, which had agreed to underwrite his entire trip for the sake of the knowledge that he would amass.⁴

Burton’s chances of success were substantially enhanced by the fact that he was a Muslim, having converted, more or less, during his seven years of service as an officer of the British East India Company, the majority of which was spent in the predominantly Muslim Sindh, what is now southern Pakistan. In theory,

therefore, he could have made the journey as a converted Englishman. He knew from his years of undercover experience that to do so would have largely thwarted his intelligence-gathering purpose, a purpose that Holmes no doubt shared, though whether in a personal, semi-professional, or composite capacity we shall never know.

The convert is always watched with Argus eyes, and men do not willingly give information to a 'new Moslem', especially a Frank (European): they suspect his conversion to be feigned or forced, look upon him as a spy, and let him see as little of life as possible.⁵

When he sailed from Southampton in April 1853 aboard the steamship *SS Bengal*, Burton adopted the persona of a Persian prince. It was a convenient choice. Burton's tall, lanky stature and relatively light skin and eyes were not uncommon traits among the ethnologically Caucasian Persians. He was fluent in Persian and sufficiently well versed in its culture, especially the minority Shi'ite strain of Islam that he himself had embraced sometime in the late 1840s. Lastly, the princely role allowed the sybaritic Burton to travel first class.

He discovered upon landing in Alexandria, where he would spend a month getting back into the Eastern ways, that his princely guise had some pronounced disadvantages: It attracted both unwanted attention and near constant requests for financial assistance. So Abdullah (literally "servant of Allah") the Persian prince was discarded in favor of Abdullah the Persian wandering *darwaysh* (der-vish), a disguise he had used during his many undercover missions in the Sindh.

No character in the Moslem world is so proper for disguise as that of a *Darwaysh*. He is allowed to ignore ceremony and politeness, is rarely questioned and in the hour of imminent danger, he has only to become a maniac, and he is safe; a madman in the East, like a notably eccentric character in the West, is allowed to say or do whatever the spirit directs. Add to his character a little knowledge of medicine, a 'moderate skill in magic, and a reputation for caring for nothing but study and books', together with capital sufficient to save you from the chance of starving, and you appear in the East to peculiar advantage.⁶

On his river journey up the Nile to Cairo (this time he traveled third class), Burton became friends with Haji Wali, an ethnic Persian from southern Russia. (The title "Haji" signifies that he had already fulfilled his obligation to visit Mecca.) It was Wali who eventually convinced Burton that being Persian in any way, shape, or form entailed the risk of being stoned to death as a heretic by the

Sunni Arabs, or being left to die by the roadside if he fell sick, and that he could count on paying treble what other pilgrims did. Burton wisely reconsidered.

After long deliberation about the choice of nations, I became a 'Pathan' (what we now more accurately call Pashtun). Born in India of Afghan parents, educated at Rangoon, and sent out to wander as men of that race frequently are, from early youth. I was well guarded against the danger of detection by a fellow countryman. To support the character requires a knowledge of Persian, Hindustani and Arabic, all of which I knew sufficiently well to pass muster, any trifling inaccuracy was charged to my long residence at Rangoon.⁷

Burton was equally well acquainted with the Pashtuns, having had an Afghan *munshi* (teacher) in the Sindh who had introduced him to, *inter alia*, the celebrated Afghan mystical poet, Abdu'r Rahman. In any case, it was highly unlikely that he would meet any "fellow" Pashtuns en route as he would be approaching Mecca from the west in the company of Egyptians and Arabs.

Securing the proper paperwork presented some unanticipated obstacles. When the British authorities in Cairo refused to accredit the disguised Burton as a legal subject of the Raj, Wali escorted him to the Persian consulate. They demanded a payment of £4, four times what Burton was willing to pay. (Burton obviously had the money, but had he paid it, he reasoned, his cover as an impoverished wanderer would have been blown.) The impasse was broken by Shaykh Mohammed al-Attar, Burton's current instructor in Sunni theology, now an impoverished druggist by trade, but once a prosperous teacher at Cairo's Al-Ahzar Mosque. Al-Attar took Burton to meet his former colleague, Shaykh Abd al-Wahhab, the principal of the local Afghan college.

Burton's next challenge was, at least, straightforward: Convince an Afghan that he was a fellow Afghan. Fortunately Al-Wahhab had been born in Muscat and raised in Mecca, and thus had little, if any, first-hand experience of his own native land. On the basis of Al-Wahhab's testimony, Burton was eventually certified as being "one Abdullah, the son of Yusuf, originally from Kabul." And it only cost him five piastres, one eightieth the "price" of the Persian visa.

The Pashtun persona served Burton well throughout his three-month journey, which took him by dromedary to Suez where he set sail with a boatload of Bedouin pilgrims for Yambu, and hence overland to Medina, Islam's second holiest city, where he spent a full month. It would have served him even better had he not allowed a destitute, but bright, 18-year-old native Meccan by the name of Mohammed el-Basyuni, who had spent time in India and become familiar with the ways of Englishmen, to join his personal entourage back in Suez.

How Mohammed's suspicions had first been aroused Burton never discerned, but by the time they reached Jeddah for the return voyage to Suez, the boy had correctly identified Burton as a *sahib* (white man) from India, quite possibly because Burton, his mission now completed, booked first-class passage. Fortunately, however, Mohammed didn't give the general alarm, preferring instead to relieve his benefactor of a sizeable portion of his wallet on the pretense of securing provisions for the trip.

In light of Burton's unprecedented success, it seems only logical that Sherlock Holmes, himself a master of disguise "plagued" with the same lanky stature, fair skin, and light eyes, would adopt the same ruse—or a slight variation thereof—when he, too, decided to "look in at Mecca" some 40 years later. As Holmes had little, if any, familiarity with Pashtuns, assuming his incognito would thus have necessitated the additional effort of spending some time in the Pashtun homeland in southern Afghanistan, around Kandahar. While he was there, could he have possibly resisted the opportunity to see—and observe—for himself the site of his trusted confidante and erstwhile suitemate's own near-death experience some twelve years earlier?

This does not mean that Holmes would have spent a great deal of time in southern Afghanistan—just enough to become conversant with Pashtun culture and manners, and to acquire a local wardrobe. His purpose, of course, was not to fool the Pashtuns themselves (or even other Afghans) but merely to convince the ruling authorities in Mecca that he was indeed a bona fide Muslim—and all the while hoping that he didn't come into contact with anyone familiar enough with his newly assumed "hometown" to expose him as an imposter. To that end, he probably wouldn't have actually adopted the persona of an Afghani dervish until he had actually "passed through Persia" and was en route to Mecca.

Had his disguise failed to convince some of his fellow pilgrims, Holmes would still have been accorded the benefit of the doubt inherent in the prescribed duplicity of the Arabic proverb "Conceal thy Tenets, thy Treasure, and Thy Traveling" and the Islamic injunction against questioning the belief of a pilgrim. His concern would have been not betraying himself as a nonbeliever.⁸

Leave that perpetually troubled corner of the globe to its own barbaric devices and return to the polite purlieus of Baker Street. Can we not envision the two comrades, spending several chilly nights in that most joyous of springs—the spring of 1895—in front of a cheery fire sharing stories of their separate but equal travels and travails among the Afghans? Perhaps we can even allow ourselves to imagine Watson, whose pawkish sense of humor might have once again risen to the occasion, turning to Holmes preemptorily and observing, "You, too, have been in Afghanistan, I perceive"?

NOTES

1. That Burton's 1853 pilgrimage served as the model for Holmes's subsequent journey has been posited before, though not in much practical detail. For example, see Donald Pollock, "Notes on a Journey to Lhasa and Mecca," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 25, No. 2 (June 1975), pp. 71–73, and John Farrell, "A Plethora of Surmise, Conjecture, and Hypothesis: Sherlock Holmes—Explorer," *The Sherlockian Meddler*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (15 Feb. 1978), pp. 18–23. And no Sherlockian discussion of the life of Burton would be complete without pointing out several other remarkable coincidences, such as the fact that after his pilgrimage to Mecca, Burton set off for East Africa in an attempt to locate the source of the Nile (he was convinced that his status as a haji would facilitate his penetration into those hostile, Muslim lands), and that when he first sailed for India in 1843, he insisted upon taking along a bull terrier.
2. This is certainly not the first time it has been hypothesized that Holmes passed through Afghanistan in getting from Tibet to Persia. H. Paul Jeffers, in "You Have Been in Peshawar, I Perceive," *BAKER STREET JOURNAL*, Vol. 41, No. 2 (June 1991), pp. 82–84, for example, recently declared it "elementary" that Holmes traversed the Khyber Pass and Kabul as he made his way across central Afghanistan.
3. In the author's own naïve attempt to "look in at Mecca" during an eight-hour layover in Jeddah in 1995, despite having a valid transit visa, the Saudi authorities refused to even let him out of the airport departure lounge.
4. The primary source of information about Burton's pilgrimage to Mecca is his own *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Medinah & Meccah* (Memorial Edition), London: Tylston and Edwards, 1898. Corroboration and ancillary background information comes from Edward Rice, *Captain Sir Richard Francis Burton*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1990, and Mary S. Lovell, *A Rage to Live: A Biography of Richard & Isabel Burton*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1998.
5. Burton, *Personal Narrative*, p. 23.
6. Burton, pp. 14–15. Who Burton is quoting is unclear.
7. Burton, pp. 44–45.
8. One of the preemptive precautions that Holmes would have had to seriously consider taking would be to have had himself circumcised, a mandatory Muslim coming-of-age ritual that is typically performed in the eighth year of a boy's life. Most nineteenth-century British males, however, were not circumcised, and Burton himself apparently underwent the procedure—which is much more painful and takes substantially longer to heal when done as an adult—shortly after his conversion to Islam in the late 1840s.