

A SHORT BIOGRAPHY OF MAR BENYAMIN SHIMUN XXI

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Cover Story . . .

PROFILE

Mar Benyamin Shimun, the Patriarch of the Assyrian Church of the East, was thirty-three years of age at the time of his assassination. He had succeeded his predecessor at the age of eighteen, and for fifteen years had occupied the patriarchal See of Qoodchanis. His mother's name was Asyat, the daughter of Kambar of Eill, an Assyrian Malik and also a deacon in the Church of the East. His father's name was Eshai (Jesse), a blood member of the patriarchal family. He received his early education under a prominent scholar from Tkhooma, by the name of David, who was first a deacon in the Church of the East, and was later elevated to the office of a bishop and named Bishop Aprim (Ephraim). In addition to his great scholarship, Bishop Aprim was also known for his piety and devotion. The future Patriarch of the East therefore, could have been educationally and spiritually reared by no better instructor. He also took advantage of the presence of the Archbishop of Canterbury's mission representatives in Qoodchanis, and gained not a little knowledge from those learned missionaries. His great office, besides its requirements in theological and ecclesiastical training, made it incumbent upon him to make himself familiar with political science and world's diplomacy. He was fortunate in this realm of study, by having able English tutors who were deeply interested in the natural aspirations of his people, as well as in the spiritual welfare of his church. It has been conceded that, with the exception of "Mar Shimun the second," known by the distinguishing name of "Bar Sabbaee," and whose incumbency and martyrdom took place during the reign of Shapur the Magi, in the fourth century, a greater man than Mar Benyamin has not occupied the Patriarchal See of the Assyrian Church of the East. He possessed a most wonderful personality, which inspired both fear and love at the same time. It was his great magnetism that impelled both reverence and allegiance from all sectarian elements of his people, who had for more than a generation left their former fold, and affiliated themselves with other religious beliefs. His personality became thus a center, around which all the Assyrians rallied and presented a united front, both in the emergencies of the war, and in the pursuit of their national aspirations. Had he been spared the bullet of the assassin, and had the promises made to the Assyrians by their allies been fulfilled, Mar Benyamin, by common consent of all the people, would have been proclaimed either as a king or as the first president of the Assyrian nation.

All truly great men are humble and meek. Such was the young Patriarch of the East. The Russian generals gave him the homage of a king, and the little children would run to him as to a loving father. He elicited the admiration of the Grand Duke of Russia, who in conversing with his visitor felt as if he was in the presence of a crowned king, and he made himself the idol of his people, by the attention he paid

to the poorest and the humblest of his flock. He rode in the imperial carriage and received the welcome given to a Czar, when he visited Tiflis, and he, at the sight of the weary refugees of his people, whom he found limping on the roads, took their place by walking afoot and gave them the horse he had mounted. He was considered the most handsome man in the Assyrian nation; and yet, back of those charming features there lay the beauty of his character. The constant smile of his face radiated the sunshine of his soul. As a sincere Christian he commanded with authority, and yet his rebukes were fatherly, mingled with kindness and mercy. Undoubtedly, it was the sweet charm of his character that endeared him to all classes and all religious colors of the Assyrian nation. The Roman Catholics and the Protestants revered and loved him for his noble and love inspiring traits, and were forced to acknowledge him as their leader.

He possessed a most liberal mind. With the authority of a Patriarch he could have preserved the ecclesiastical fence, which for centuries had protected his church against intrusion and proselyting efforts; but with his democratic tendencies and broadmindedness he removed the fences, and gave freedom of thought and belief to his flock. One intense desire of his heart was that his people should be educated and enlightened; and with a most generous heart he removed all obstacles in the path of the various missionary bodies. The early custom of the Assyrian Church of the East was to select for the office of bishop-worthy men from monasteries and theological schools; but with the conquest of Islam, which destroyed both the monasteries and schools, and with the retreat of the Assyrians into the vastnesses of the mountains for self-preservation, the ancient custom inevitably ceased. And in order to maintain the religious system and carry on the church work, the existing bishops selected their successors from among their own kin, and dedicated them for the sacred office from their infancy. Mar Benyamin, however, installed a new system, by which the most worthy and capable men were selected for the office of a Bishop, irrespective of their degrees or family affiliations. During his incumbency as a Patriarch, he had prevented one of his own nephews from being dedicated to become his successor, making known his desire that even the Patriarchs of the Church of the East should thereafter be made the choice of the flock, and be selected by the church.

Notwithstanding his youthful age, he towered over all the leaders of his people in wisdom and statesmanship. Ever conscious, however, of his better judgment he never failed to consult his inferiors. He was open to conviction and ready to receive counsel and advice from others. He was barren of pride, and a living example of unselfishness. By his conduct he taught service and sacrifice. He thought immeasurably more of the relief and the uplift of his people than of all the honors that were heaped upon him. Human nature is suscep-

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tible to the perils of applause, and the greatest of men have often succumbed to the allurements of praise; but Mar Benyamin always emerged like the Hebrew exiles from such pits and furnaces, untouched by lions, and unscathed by fire.

His love of humanity gave him the tenderest heart toward his enemies. His constant advice to his officers and men was, to acquit themselves like Christians, and not return evil for evil. In the fearful whirlpool of the great war he never forgot to demonstrate the reality of the Christian religion, as well as its superiority over the superstitions of Islam. The great love of his heart made him believe all men; and it was his credulity that led him to his assassination and death.

Thus, the great Patriarch, like his great predecessor, laid down his life upon the altar of his Christian faith, and for the salvation of his afflicted people. Mar Shimun Bar Sabbaee, as the first Mar Shimun of the Church of the East, received his crown of martyrdom at the hands of the Persian Magi, who had sworn to eradicate the name of Christianity from the face of their empire, on the last Friday in the month of March, in the year 340, and in a southern province of Persia; while Mar Benyamin Shimun, as the sixteenth incumbent of the same See, and with the same name, drank the same cup, which was now prepared by the Moslems of Persia, who had likewise sworn to exterminate the followers of the same faith in Persia, on the first Saturday in March, in the year 1918, and in a northern province of Persia. And yet how incomprehensible, even though infallible, the wondrous ways of God! An ungodly nation still remains like an unbroken rib in the giant body of the wild beast of Islam, while a Christian nation of numberless martyrs, barely retains its national existence! There is but one solution, and only one. It is not the present possessions that count, but rather, the everlasting armies of the redeemed, gathered and prepared for the glorious and certainly not distant day, when the rightful owner of the earth shall descend with his saints to challenge the authority of Satan, bind the great enemy of God and mankind, and transform a Paradise lost into a Paradise regained!