

A NEW YORK TIMES NOTABLE BOOK

A NOVEL

THE PERSIAN BRIDE

JAMES BUCHAN

"A remarkable book, no less emotionally
than intellectually satisfying."

— *New York Times Book Review*

"Utterly transporting . . . part delightful romance,
part journey into a harrowing political labyrinth."

— *Entertainment Weekly*

MARINER BOOKS

*The
Persian
Bride*



James Buchan



A MARINER BOOK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
BOSTON • NEW YORK

First Mariner Books edition 2002

Copyright © 1999 by James Buchan

First published in 1999 by the Harvill Press as

A Good Place to Die

All rights reserved

For information about permission to reproduce selections from
this book, write to Permissions, Houghton Mifflin Company,
215 Park Avenue South, New York, New York 10003.

Visit our Web site: www.houghtonmifflinbooks.com.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Buchan, James.

The Persian bride / James Buchan.

p. cm.

ISBN 0-618-06740-X

ISBN 0-618-21923-4 (pbk.)

1. Iran—History—Pahlavi dynasty, 1925-1979—Fiction.
2. Separation (Psychology)—Fiction. 3. British—Iran—Fiction.
4. Married people—Fiction. I. Title.

PR6052.U215 P4 2000

823'.914—dc21 00-040790

Printed in the United States of America

QUM 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2

International acclaim for James Buchan and
The Persian Bride

"Unforgettable . . . grandly romantic . . . *The Persian Bride* can be read and enjoyed as a romantic thriller . . . but Buchan's adventure story is also an artfully detailed homage to Persian culture."

— *New York Review of Books*

"Intriguing . . . [Buchan's] story captures the cultural flavor and passions of a country where political chaos too often masks its heart."

— *USA Today*

"Breathtaking to read, an intoxicating mix of suspense and eros."

— *Salon.com*

"Buchan transports us to a world that is strange, puzzling, sometimes enchanting and often downright terrifying . . . There are passages of remarkable intensity [and scenes] rendered with a fierce, lyrical vividness." — *Los Angeles Times*

"The most romantic pages I've read in many years."

— Alan Cheuse, National Public Radio

"Hauntingly beautiful . . . A powerful and intensely moving story."

— *Baltimore Sun*

"Utterly riveting . . . a high-class thriller concocted with Buchan's distinctive ingredients — passionate love, political intrigue, picaresque adventures and thoughtful comment." — *Independent* (London)

"A superb novel . . . endowed with a startling emotional charge . . . Iran acquires an engrossing and magical reality." — *Observer* (London)

"Audacious, moving, often beautiful, and utterly compelling."

— *Scotsman*

"A book of astonishing intellectual grandeur and integrity . . . a work so original and rewarding in its tone of voice, so admirable for the intelligence with which it analyzes matters of high policy, of private feeling. There is really no word for it but 'masterpiece.'"

— *Spectator* (London)

Also by James Buchan

Fiction

A PARISH OF RICH WOMEN

DAVY CHADWICK

SLIDE

HEART'S JOURNEY IN WINTER

HIGH LATITUDES



Nonfiction

THE HOUSE OF SAUD

(WITH DAVID HOLDEN AND RICHARD JOHNS)

FROZEN DESIRE

THE MEANING OF MONEY

FOR MY TEACHER AND FRIEND,

Mehdi Moazzen Jami



PART ONE



Each night, says Molavi, the prisoner forgets his prison. Each night, he says, the tyrant forgets his power. Each night, when it seems the night will never end, when night appears to be the natural and unvarying condition of the universe, there is a breath of wind.

Invisible, the wind shows itself in a rattle of branches; and then, an instant later, in a coolness on my wrists and ankles, and where my daughter's cheek slithers on my chest. For that instant, I smell greenery and roses and water and methane and the scent of my daughter's hair to which I cannot give a name, except that it is the quintessence of sweetness, brought with her from wherever it is she came.

That breath of wind, which will not recur until this time tomorrow, is the only evidence of movement in my world: the sign that this house and garden, though I believe them to be stagnant and timeless, are subject to change. The wind, which originates out in the darkness, out beyond the town, in saltflats I have not seen, and passes through the town, blowing up sand at street-corners or flapping the tattered banners on the shrines of saints, exists both to make me happy and to remind me of the insufficiency of happiness.

The wind passes. My daughter, whose name is Layly, stirs against my chest as if she might recall the breath across her cheek and legs, as in a repetitive game, but it is gone: blown out through the curtained archway to the room where my wife lies sleeping. I sense, as I sense always at this time, that as the gust enters the mosquito net, passes over her as she sleeps, across her cheek that is creased by the rucked

sheet or stuck with a strand of damp black hair, or where the sheet has fallen away, and her skirt ridden up to her breast, for precisely this reason, that she might feel the wind over her sore belly; and as I hear her stir, open her legs so that the wind might cool the inside of her legs and dry the sweat that shivers in tiny droplets on the silken hair above them, I believe that a change is being worked in her. I believe that the pain of childbirth is receding from her, and in her sleep, which is not sleep as the world knows it, for it has no depth or freshness, she feels the impression of her husband. She stirs, turns, mumbles something from a dream. Her water cup tinkles. Something slides to the floor. I shiver. I kiss the child's soft head and whisper: Settle down, my darling, and then I'll put you in your crib, for your mother and I have something to discuss.

The child kicks out her feet, arches her soft back, sobs. My wife, whose physiology derives from Galen, says that Layly's stomach is cold. I believe that the baby's distress is caused by air that she has swallowed with her milk but yet may be dislodged by movement. I turn and continue my pacing across the floor, which is made of blocks of dead coral, smooth and warm with use and damp from my footprints.

For a year now, we have lived by window light. There is no moon tonight, only the flicker of a gas flare far out in the sea, and the premonition of dawn. By this light, and familiarity, I establish the room. Ahead of me is a framed print of the Shah in the character and uniform of Chief Scout of the Iranian Empire; and beside it, pendant to it, as it were, is a photograph of Stalin, hemmed in by country women wearing kerchiefs and carrying hay-rakes. Turning about, smartly, like a soldier, I confirm on my right a row of arches, closed by jalousies through which I can smell the sea; and in front of each pillar, a filing-cabinet, its drawers awry, spilling their contents. On my left is another arcade, and beyond it a terrace and a coral balustrade, a canopy of palm trees, a crazy wind-tower and a surging sun the colour of copper. Dazzled, and yet more sorrowful than dazzled, for

the night is over and our ordeal begun, I look along my copper foot-prints, to the door of my wife's room and beside it a table, covered in an old rug, and on top a coloured photograph in a frame that flashes back the yellow sun.

It is a portrait of a relation of my wife's, whose name she doesn't know, only his honorific: Amin ul Mulk, the Trustee of the Kingdom. What I know of him comes from a book he wrote or dictated called *Safarnameh*, or *The Travel Diary*, which was in the house when we came here, along with a Russian translation. I remember now that I look at this picture always at this time, so as to take strength to face the day.

In the spring of 1851, at about nineteen years of age, Amin travelled to Europe by way of Anzeli, Baku, Tiflis and Moscow. At St Petersburg, he stood for hours before the fountains of the Peterhof. He observed manœuvres at Potsdam. Sailing on an English warship from Kiel, he noted how the Captain led the sailors mustered on the fore-deck for their Sunday prayers. At Windsor Castle, he was troubled by the décolletage. For three weeks, each morning and afternoon he spent in the Hall of the Machines at Crystal Palace, where he was sketched by both *Punch* and *Vanity Fair*. He visited the ordnance yards at Woolwich, attended a review at Aldershot, danced a mazurka at Londonderry House. As a guest of Professor Paget at Holland Park, he received a succession of ex-Army men, seeking exclusive concessions in forests, mines, telegraphs, the cultivation of cotton, tobacco and opium, river navigation and railways, which gentlemen he answered diplomatically. In Paris, on 15 March 1853, he was photographed in Nadar's studio in the Rue St-Georges. At the Brenner, his carriage overturned, but he sustained no injury. He stayed a year at Istanbul, then took service with the Tsar and at Sebastopol, on the Malakoff, on Christmas Day, 1855, he was blown to pieces by a British mortar.

In the photograph, Amin is seated on an ornate armchair in an embroidered robe-of-honour and the green turban of a descendant

of the Prophet. He looks at the camera without surprise or curiosity, though I'm sure he'd never seen a camera or a photographer before. His left arm rests on a table draped in the kind of flat-woven rug called here a *gelim*; and though the photograph has been coloured by hand, it is certainly the same rug on which my wife has now placed the photograph. That congruence or echo, between the room that I am pacing with my daughter and the studio in the Rue St-Georges in Paris, never fails to unsettle me. Sometimes I don't know where I am or when or who.

With his left index finger Amin points at another silver frame, or rather this frame at an earlier period of its existence, which contains a piece of gibberish. At the end of each traverse of the room, I am drawn into that silver frame within a frame, am cast back and forth between them and between the centuries, in an infinite and darkling enfilade as when two mirrors are placed to face each other. In my vertigo, the writing is forever trembling on the lip of sense. I feel it struggle to take form as Arabic or Persian or old Turkish, and fly at me; and yet there is something hopeless about the writing, left-handed, disconsolate, dead, forgotten. When I ask my wife, she says: How can I know, being a poor ignorant woman?

Twelve paces up. Twelve paces back. I think that if I could read what Amin had written, it would help me, and help him, wherever he is. You see I think it is his message to posterity, which is my wife, and my daughter, and, because I have no other family, myself. I think if I could understand it, forget myself a moment and plunge into it, as into a mirror; of course you third-class English, it has been printed in reverse, you need a mirror, a mirror, a mirror.

My wife is beautiful, or so it seems to me, but she possesses no mirror. It is not that she isn't vain, for she is. She is absolutely certain of her beauty, intelligence, virtue, courage, piety, nobility of purpose and general superiority. I suppose she doesn't need a mirror. She possesses a knife, which she keeps clean, but she wears it on a string across her bosom and takes it off when I ask her. I possess a revolver,

which I also keep clean and always with me, and, raising my Layly high up on my left shoulder, and taking out the gun and blowing on the barrel and rubbing it on her shift, I read off Amin's message to posterity.

It is not Arabic, but Persian, which is written in Arabic letters.

Daftar: ledger, notebook, exercise-book, desk, office.

Adamiyatra: humanity, can't be anything else, like Adam and Eve.

Khali: empty, void.

Didam: I saw

I turn and my wife is standing in the doorway. It always shocks me that she looks as she does and that she married me. Her dress and shawl are open on her breast and knife-belt and belly, her hair to her waist, her eyes slitted with short-sightedness and sleep. She smells of sugar and milk. The warmth of her body beats at me in gusts. She says:

"'I have seen the ledger of humanity and it is blank'."

It is strange for her to speak in English. Indeed, she refuses to speak either English or French and if, at a loss for a word, I use those languages, she looks at me without comprehension. I do not know why she has broken her rule or what caused Amin to lose his optimism. I feel if he could see her and our daughter, even if only for a moment of a moment, we would restore it to him, wherever he is.

She reaches out for the child and her breast trembles. She shakes down the right shoulder of her dress. The baby stirs and whimpers. I am winded by jealousy. I open my mouth to whisper something, about how much I also want her, that I too am hungry for her and have waited for her so long, and would wait some more, as long as necessary or proper, but not for ever, but I cannot make a sound and she is smiling at the baby at her breast.

As a child myself, I dreamed often of prison. Each time, at the instant that I felt I could not tolerate my existence, that it would be better to be dead than continue in that prison, my dream would lose its shape, become ragged or dissolve and reform as my familiar

bedroom furniture; though traces of the dream remained, staining my desk or chair or in a pool in the corner by the wash-basin, acrid or caustic, even as the morning light re-established the room.

It is that sensation I have now, but in reverse, as in a mirror. My wife begins to lose her shape. She looks up from the baby's face and smiles at me, as if to say, as she once said: It's you I like in her, also, but she is retreating from me, perforated by a light that is not the light of the dream, but is none the less familiar. I reach out for them, but I have no reach for I too am retreating. Familiar sensations break in on me: grit against my cheek and bitter cold and the sound of doors banging, one by one by one. I believe I can save something of the dream, her scent or touch or at least that unmistakable sensation of herness, or the face of my little daughter, just as she looked at three months of age, but those, too, are going, going; and each crashing door shakes and shatters them, splinters them in the electric light, and, in a bang, in a burst of despair, I stand bolt upright, feet together, arms outstretched, head bowed, blindfold on.

In the spring of 1974, the year the price of oil went up and the British stayed at home four days a week for want of electricity, I went abroad for the first time. I waited for two hours at a drenched roundabout above the south-bound M1, and then travelled by car and truck by way of London, Dover, Ostend, Cologne, Munich, Klagenfurt, Belgrade, Salonika and Istanbul.

In a café called The Pudding Shop in Sultanahmet Square, I sat down across from a German boy in a Moroccan waistcoat. He was driving one of nine second-hand Mercedes diesels from Munich for a dealer in Tabriz. I joined the convoy, taking the driving with him in turns, although I had no licence. Tabriz was brilliant with electric light. After the darkness of the autobahns, there was something prodigal about the light, sweets, roasting kebabs, portraits of the Shah in splendour, wolf-whistles and long-winded jokes. I took a bus to Qazvin, where I drank a bottle of vodka with a traffic policeman and slept under a quilt with his sons. In Tehran, I cut off my hair, borrowed someone's degree certificate and, by pasting my name over his at a pavement photocopier on Ferdowsi Avenue, was taken on at a new school teaching English to Air Force cadets. That effortless achievement of my goals in existence – a university degree and a paying job – exasperated me.

I lived on the roof of a downtown hotel, where steel bedsteads were arranged in six straight rows, and overlanding junkies fixed each other up from plastic jugs of city water in the bathhouse. They stole

my camera and binoculars and Miss Spenser's Persian Grammar. It was Ramadan, and my seventy pupils slept, or dug out their ears, or glared like wolves at the wrapped sandwiches they'd brought with them to eat at sundown. My second payday, the school's owner, a major, threw an onyx ashtray and pen-set at an Indian who'd shown me how to teach. I thought that for whatever reason I had come to Iran, it wasn't to support its military; and I had heard that Isfahan was beautiful.

I found a new job in half an hour.

"I have given you my best class, Mr John. The University of Bedford, indeed!"

This was Mr Jamalzadeh, a middle-aged man with the air and shape of an elderly village woman. He drank water without cease. His school, the Zabankhaneh or House of Language, was directly across the street from the Youth Hostel in Chahar Bagh. I was now entangled in my lie.

"Thank you, Headmaster. I shall try to be worthy of you." The sunlight across the peeling windowsill behind him delighted me.

Mr Jamalzadeh took on an air of intense severity. "You must be strong as a lion and cold as a molla's arsehole!" He spoke with the slow, clear vowels of a newsreader or poet. "They will slay you, my dear. Your predecessors went out feet first."

"I can handle them, sir."

"That, alas, you cannot do, John, or I shall dismiss you." He sparkled at his sally.

At break, I was led by a servant to the sunny staff-room. It fell silent as I entered. I did not want to disappoint my colleagues.

"I cannot teach them, Mr Jamalzadeh. They are too beautiful."

The room shimmered in delight. Mr Jamalzadeh was beside himself with water and laughter: "Ladies and gentlemen!" He waved his arms for quiet, but could not himself keep quiet:

"Je meurs de seuf auprès de la fontaine

"Chaud comme fer, et tremble dent à dent."

"Villon, ladies and gentlemen." And he plunged his dipper into the water jar.

"You must marry, my dear," said Mrs Mohrabba. She took the infants in Persian.

"How can I, madame, if you are married already?"

"Oh, for shame," she said, and giggled.

"Take a goddam sigheh, man." Mr Parvin had studied in San Diego.

"What's a sigheh?"

"A concubine . . ."

" . . . a chick . . ."

" . . . for love only, not for marriage . . ."

"But not from the class, dear John, or I shall release you."

"Pauvre jeun' homme . . ."

"Aren't there any boys?"

The room disintegrated. I blushed.

"Enough!" shouted the headmaster, waving his arms. "We have embarrassed our dear friend." The klaxon rattled, and he led the way out and, as he passed me, I heard him mutter "... et tremble dent à dent."

The hilarity disgusted me. I thought the manners of the place were the natural consequence of oppression, of the seclusion of women and an autocratic regime, of all of which I advertised my disapproval. I hated the French tourists forever debarking from air-conditioned buses outside the Shah Abbas Hotel and the American officers picking fights at the Irantour on Thursday nights or sobbing for Indochina. I hated the Pahlavi crown picked out in fairy lights on the mountain to the south of the town. Boulevards had been smashed through the bazar, indifferent to rooms exposed in nude plasterwork and tinted glass, and I would collect fragments of a frieze under the eye of a cashmere-coated developer. In the vaulted alleys, the shopkeepers sat motionless within a musty mental quadrilateral of fabrics, money, iron weights and measures, and conjugal duty. Somewhere in there was God