ANNA AND SHAMYL: A LOVE STORY OF THE CAUCASUS

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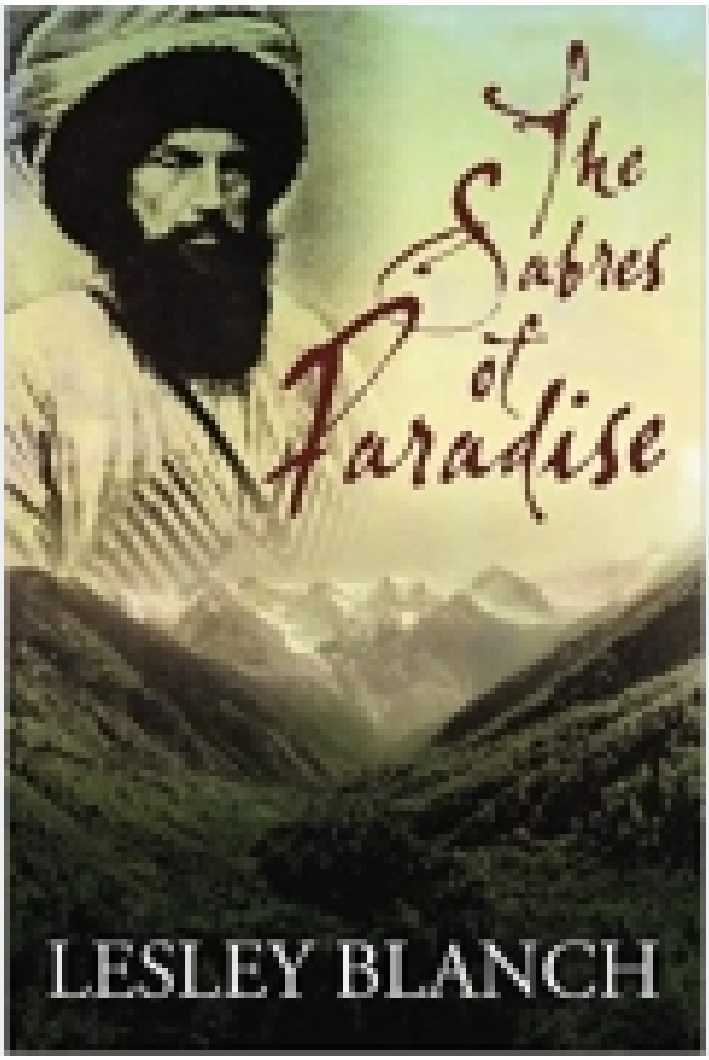

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January 2019

Edited from "The Sabres of Paradise" by Lesley Blanch, Viking Penguin Press, 1960

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Shamyl (1797-1871) was the political, military, and spiritual leader of several Caucasian nations which resisted Russian armies in the 19th century. Anna Ivanovna was abducted in Chechnya by one of Shamyl's deputies who presented her to the imam. She was sixteen and beautiful. Shamyl was forty-seven. The guerrilla leader had a fierce look and a long scarlet beard. Anna instantly fell in love. To marry him, she converted to Islam and changed her name to Shouanete.

Although Shamyl had four wives, Shouanete soon became his favorite. She bore him a daughter and remained his companion and solace, the rest of his life. He called her 'the Pearl'. She was tall, round-faced, blue-eyed and fair-haired. She lived and breathed for Shamyl till her death.

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Although Shouanete came from a well-to-do background and was used to city life, she adjusted to the primitive conditions Shamyl and his clan lived in the snowbound mountains. She adhered to the customs prescribed for a Moslem wife, wearing the veil, holding no communication with her family, and accepted her place in Shamyl's harem. When her family tried to buy her back, by offering a large ransom, she refused to return to them.

Her cousin Atarov (Atarian) decided to visit her. After protracted negotiations through go-betweens, Atarov set out to meet Shouanete. The Russians didn't expect to see Atarov again.

After more than a week of riding through almost perpendicular crags, Atarov, led by Shamyl's fighters, arrived in Dargo-Vedin, the rebels' aerie. The fortress lay on a plateau ringed by mountains and pierced by one narrow defile.

Atarov found his cousin well and happy. She was veiled, and only consented to remove her veil when they were alone. She also said that their conversation must be carried on in the Kumyk dialect, rather than in Armenian, lest the watchers think they spoke about the imam.

When suddenly the door opened, Shamyl stood on the threshold. Shouanete was overcome with confusion, blushed, stammered and hurriedly veiled herself. But the imam was at his most sociable. He sat beside his guest and complimented him for his courage in making the journey.

Atarov repeated the offers of her family, to buy her back with large sums of gold. Shouanete refused. She was a woman in love. She was happy in her adoration of Shamyl, asked no more than his love, and always stepped aside, playing a subservient role, to keep an atmosphere of harmony around Shamyl on the few occasions he was at home. The Imam merely smiled.

Next day, Atarov left, receiving a fine horse as a parting gift.

Shamyl continued to fight the Russians but by 1859 his forces were depleted and some of his allies had switched sides. By the summer of 1859, the Russians had completed their subjugation of approaches to Shamyl's stronghold. The Russian military leader (Bariatinsky) gave orders that Shamyl was to be taken alive, if possible. Shamyl was preparing to die fighting. Twice, Bariatinsky sent envoys to demand Shamyl's surrender. Each time, they were met with refusal. The third time Bariatinsky sent an ultimatum—unconditional surrender, or the bombardment of the fortress, and with it the death of Shamyl's followers. To spare the lives of his followers, Shamyl surrendered.

The Russians then sent Col. Lazareff (Lazaryan) to negotiate; he was an Armenian who had served with the Russians for many years and was known to Shamyl. He was respected for his bravery and justice. He also possessed the astuteness of his race. He bowed before the imam, and with a mixture of respect and authority, urged him to surrender, promising that Shamyl's life, that of his family, and the garrison would be spared, and that an honorable peace would be concluded. The last battle was lost, was nobly lost, he said. It was as Allah willed.

Shamyl's pale face showed no emotion as he mounted his horse and rode towards the Russian lines. Fifty fighters followed him. The Russian soldiers broke into wild cheer. Misunderstanding the cheers, Shamyl was about to turn his horse back to his garrison, when Lazareff again showed his usual astuteness and galloped to intercept him. He told Shamyl the soldiers were cheering him for his bravery. Shamyl dismounted and surrendered.

As he and his family traveled in Russia, Shamyl was cheered everywhere. Tsar Alexander II embraced him and welcomed him to Russia. He ordered that Shamyl be treated with utmost respect. The imam retired to Kaluga, near Moscow where he and his family lived in luxury.

Because he found the climate too cold, Shamyl asked to move south to Kiev. The family continued to live in luxury, attended cultural events, and met celebrated Russians. One of his closest friends was a young lieutenant Dimitri Astouroff (Astourian) who could speak Turco-Tartar. His sympathetic behavior won them over, even the grief-stricken Shouanet.

For a while Shamyl was worried Shouanete might return to Christianity. When asked whether he would still want Shouanet if she became Christian, Shamyl said he would. Shamyl wished his first wife Zaidate would convert so he would have the excuse to divorce her. Hadji, his closest friend said, "He loves Shouanete best."

When Shouanete wrote to her brother in Mozdok, she signed: "Shouanete, wife of the poor pilgrim, Shamyl."

Shamyl and Shouanete became part of Kaluga high society. Their closest friends were Major-General Chichagov's family. In the late 1860s seventy-three-year-old Shamyl sensed he had not much longer to live. He asked the tsar to allow him to make a pilgrimage to Mecca. Permission was granted and Shamyl, along with his wives, children and deputies set out on his pilgrimage. He arrived in Mecca a sickly man. Soon after, in 1870, Sofiate, his daughter by Shouanete died. Then his first wife passed away. Of his five wives, only Shouanete remained by his side. She nursed him and accompanied him to Medina when the imam expressed the wish to see the second-most important Muslim city.

On February 4, 1871, Shamyl woke up and with all his force shouted, "Allah! Allah!" and shut his eyes forever. He was buried in Mecca.

Shouanete and the family moved Turkey. For six years after Shamyl's death, "the Pearl" lingered on desolate and withdrawn, looking out through the lattices on a life she no longer lived. She died in 1876 at the age of forty-nine. Whether at the end she returned, in her heart, to the Christian faith, is not known. It would have been hard for her to die believing she could not rejoin Shamyl in Paradise.

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