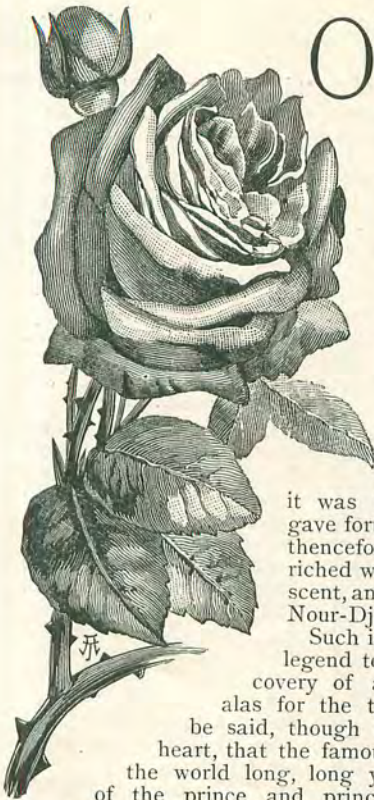


ATTAR OF ROSES.

ORIGIN AND HISTORY OF THE FAMOUS PERFUME.



ONCE upon a time there lived in Persia a beautiful princess named Nour Djihan, who was betrothed to a handsome prince named Djihanguyr. Walking with him one day in the lovely gardens of her father's palace, she noticed that on the rose-water eddying in the stately fountain basins, there were floating drops of some yellow oily substance. Calling her attendants the princess ordered them to collect the globules with feathers; this was done, and lo! it was found that the drops gave forth a glorious odour, and thenceforth the world was enriched with a new and delicious scent, and it was called the Attar Nour-Djihhan-Djihanguyr.

Such is the delightful Persian legend to account for the discovery of attar of roses. But, alas for the truth thereof! it must be said, though it bleed the romantic heart, that the famous scent was known to the world long, long years before the birth of the prince and princess with the tongue-entangling names.

Some time ago there was disinterred in Egypt the mummy of an Egyptian princess of one of the ancient dynasties, and in the sarcophagus were found several sealed vials, and in the vials genuine attar of roses. So much for all modern claims for the invention of this popular perfume.

In the whole floral realm there is no flower of more venerable antiquity than the rose. In the Biblical writings it is mentioned by the poetic King Solomon in a way that indicates it was already long-established as a thing of beauty and joy, and his contemporary (or nearly so), Homer, mentions the fragrant essence of the flower in his *Iliad*. No other species of the floral kingdom is indigenous to such an extensive area. Every continent in the world, with the exception of Australia, produces its wild roses. From Greenland to Cape Colony, and from Mexico to the confines of India, there are periods of the year in which the scented blossoms throw forth their welcome fragrance.

Its cultivation as a commercial commodity is a staple industry to a vast and varied multitude of the human race. The valley of Damascus, the vale of Cashmere, Central India, France, Italy, Sicily, Algiers, and especially the south-east of Europe, are all districts famous for their cultivated varieties of the queen of flowers. For many years now the production of roses for attar manufacturers has been one of the chief sources of wealth to the inhabitants of Bulgaria and Roumania. In the latter country especially, open as it is to the balmy breezes of the Mediterranean, and protected by the Balkan range from icy northern blasts, the rose flourishes under the hand of

the husbandman with singular richness and luxuriance. A whole district, comprising nearly five thousand square miles, is practically devoted to the growth of a particularly fine variety of the red rose.

We in our country are familiar with the annual scenes attending the hop harvest, but they are as nothing compared to the stirring spectacle to be witnessed during the rose season in Roumania. Whole armies of people of every age and condition, and of both sexes, congregate there from all parts of the country and neighbouring provinces. The work brooks no delay, for the rose harvest must be gathered quickly or not at all. For miles and miles, as far as the eye can see, the blossom-laden fields are covered with workers in their picturesque native costumes, all busily employed in rose-picking. Greeks, Albanians, Russians, Servians, Turks, Bulgarians, and even emigrants from Armenia and other districts beyond the Bosphorus, throng thither in their thousands. There is work for all, none are turned away, and all can earn good money. Picking begins in the morning as soon as it is light, and while the dew is still on the flowers. Should the weather be dull, the work continues all day, but when the hot southern sun is shining, labour ceases at 11 or 12 A.M., to be renewed in the afternoon at 4 or 5 o'clock. Everyone is paid by results—so much a pound. Baskets are provided which, when full, are emptied into sacks. The sacks, after being duly weighed by the checkers, are slung across the backs of donkeys, and thus conveyed to the central depôts.

The manufacturing process of attar-making is simplicity itself. Rows of copper retorts are fitted up in sheds. Under each retort is a furnace. Into each is put about seventy quarts of water, along with twenty pounds of rose petals. An hour's stoking of the furnace suffices to complete the process of distillation. The product is received in flasks, and consists of condensed water, on the surface of which the precious attar oil is found floating.

There is a popular idea that it takes a vast quantity of roses to produce a very small amount of the attar oil. This is indubitably correct, but the quantity varies according to the district and the nature of the season; also according to the variety of the roses. In the best districts it is computed that the petals of 300,000 roses are required to produce one ounce of the essence, while in France and some other countries in which the climatic conditions are not so congenial, the number would increase to 400,000. It is not generally known that attar of roses can only be extracted from the red variety of the flower. The yellow and white species apparently lack the essential oil.

Considerations like these will show how well-grounded is the popular impression that attar of roses is one of the most costly commodities in existence. It is literally worth a good deal more than its weight in gold. Solid gold is priced at about £4 per ounce, but the same quantity of attar would cost the purchaser £20 to £30. The value of the annual yield from the Balkan district alone is about £80,000.

Like all other commodities of the expensive order, attar of roses is liable to the abuse of adulteration. Its own properties, however, are such as to make a certain amount of dilution necessary. In its original purity the perfume is altogether too overpowering for use. A single drop of the essence is sufficient to impregnate a whole pint of hair-oil with the well-known odour. For this reason it not infrequently happens that a purchaser of so-called pure attar of rose, really gets nothing but a measure of olive oil with a few drops of the powerful scent added.

