Taking the million dollar magic Persian carpet ride

by Jack Goldfarb

WHEN CYRUS the Great, ruler of "all the kingdoms of the earth" fell in battle 2500 years ago, the grief-stricken Persian royal court buried him with all the lavish splendour it could well afford. Magnificent carpets, enriched with gold, covered the floor of the crypt where Cyrus was laid to rest on a solid gold sofa.

A couple of centuries later, when Alexander the Great stopped at Cyrus' tomb to pay his respects, his accompanying historians were so impressed by the elegance and durability of the rugs they recorded: "carpets of the finest material . . . a thick luxuriant pile . . ."

Dead or alive, Persian monarchs have had a passion for handsome floor coverings since long before old Cyrus knotted together the world's first empire.

The kings of Persia fostered this native art by providing royal workshops and generous subsidies. Obscure craftsmen, submitting new pattern ideas and work samples to the palace, could receive court appointments and special privileges.

Artistic weaving was so valued in those days that foreign invaders who swept into Persian cities, slaughtering the inhabitants wholesale, often spared the rugmakers, carrying them off to work their looms in far-off enemy towns.

Carpets woven for the Persian palace floors have been among the costliest, most luxurious works of art ever walked on by man, in his bare feet, of course.

Such a rug was the "Spring Carpet of King Khosrau". A fabulous 84-foot-square floorpiece adorning the audience hall in Ctesiphon Palace, it was fashioned of silk, gold, pearls, emeralds, and a treasure of lesser jewels. Depicting a garden scene of flowers, birds, and fruit trees, this opulent rug, worth more than $200 million, staggered foreign envoys and local satraps alike as a symbol of the power and wealth of the king.

Unhappily, a conquering enemy caliph later carved up the "Spring Carpet" and distributed swatches to his victorious 60,000-man army. But the memory of this glorious rug lived on, inspiring generations of weavers to imitate its design and quality of craftsmanship.

Still largely intact, however, is the world's most famous carpet, which once graced the floor of the Ardebil Mosque. This masterpiece survives as one of a pair that required 34 years to weave their 34 million knots, plus six years more for the finishing touches. Woven for a shah in the 16th Century when Persian carpetmaking was at its peak, the superb creation hangs in London's Victoria and Albert Museum today.

Less sumptuous carpets have been used for many purposes in Persia since the time when nomads first "invented" rugs by covering the hard earth inside their tents with round mats of woven wool.

Persian carpets served as peace offerings, tributes, and a bulky form of currency. Proud of their colourful designs full of meaningful symbols, the ancient Persians used carpets as canopies, blankets, tapestries, saddle covers, and even hung them from windows as banners on festive days.

A less charming use was in a grisly style of execution with the victim rolled tightly inside a carpet and trampled to death by horses.

In Iran today almost every household owns one or two beautifully designed rugs which take an average of a year or two to make. No carpets are woven by machine in Iran, in contrast to the United States, which produces a billion dollars worth of factory-made rugs a year, the world's largest output.

Standards of Persian rugs began to decline some years ago when foreign importers demanded greater quantities, cheaper prices, and more "Westernized" patterns. Until then, Persian rug designs had changed so seldom it was often difficult to determine the exact period when a rug was made.

Responding to commercial pressures, Iran's weaver families began to alter the age-old patterns of graceful curves, shaded colour tones, and classic motifs of animals, flowers, and leaves.

Many of these designs had originally been influenced by illuminated books and ivory miniatures, two other renowned Persian art forms. In speeding up production, weaving became looser, the nap longer, and designs lost their meaning.

However, the Iranian Government stepped in again, as the old-time kings had done, establishing design schools and subsidies to preserve Persian folklore and quality workmanship. In the matter of dyes, customarily derived from natural sources—indigo, pomegranates, walnuts, cochineal, and saffron—the Government invoked a ban on harsh, less stable chemical dyes.

With the quality of Persian rugs recently fully restored, world demand has been growing by about 20 per cent a year. But skilled weavers, earning less than a dollar a day, are finding other jobs in a society becoming industrialised.

Their children, who also used to sit long hours at the loom, are now attending compulsory public school. Hand-crafted rugs are thus becoming scarcer and higher-priced. By conservative estimate, their value increases at least 10 per cent a year.

To most Iranians it is unthinkable that their carpets will ever be woven by machine. But when it comes to cleaning, machines are making inroads against the long-standing rule that carpets should be washed only by hand.

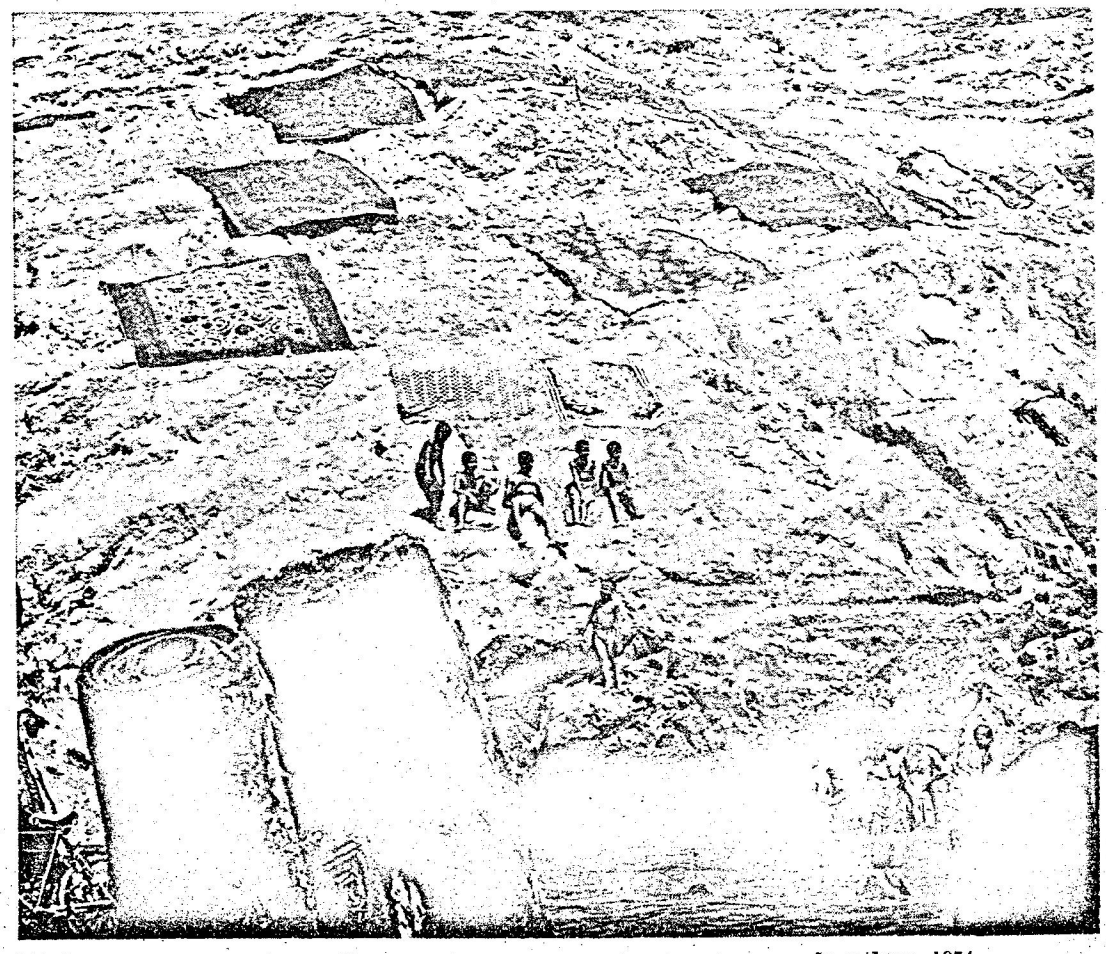
For centuries, at *No-Ruz* time — the Persian New Year on the first day of Spring—carpets have been washed in local streams and watering places. One of these famous washing wells, still very much in use today, is *Cheshmeh Ali* (Ali's Fountain) in the 5000-year-old town of Rey, a few miles south of Tehran.

The spot is a "natural laundry" with water flowing into a wide pool from a nearby spring, and draining off into a small stream. The sloping pool bottom forms a "washboard" while an adjoining rocky cliff facing the sun all day is an ideal "clothesline".

The washermen who cart rugs here from neighbouring towns claim the real asset of *Cheshmeh Ali* is the unique mineral content of the water which restores the natural lustre of the carpets.

Early in the morning at *Cheshmeh Ali* washermen soak their dusty carpets in the clear water to the accompaniment of loud grumbling from the village housewives doing their family laundry on the other side of the pool. Squabbling for washing space has been going on for as long as Ali's Fountain has been gurgling.

With hands, feet, and a wooden scraper, the carpet washers soap, scrub, and ultimately shoul-



Mosaic of hand-washed carpets drying in the sun on a rocky cliff at *Cheshmeh Ali*, popular carpet-washing site in the ancient town of Rey, outside Tehran. A centuries-old bas relief is carved into the cliffside.

der the cumbersome, water-logged rugs up the cliffside to spread them on the bare rocks for drying out in the sun. The array of patterns and colours decorates the cliff like a giant patchwork quilt. The washers are careful, however, to bring the rugs down before the strong midday sun glares on the delicate fabrics.

The *Cheshmeh Ali* veterans, some of whom have been sprucing up rugs for 25 years, claim that carpets washed by "ungentle" machines survive only half as long. They admit that some of their business has fallen off, but insist that their sons and grandsons will be carrying on the same trade. Except in the big cities, they say, practically all Persian carpets are still hand-washed.

But in Tehran, largest city and capital of the country, householders have yielded to the modern trend of having carpets cleaned mechanically.

At Tehran's "Magic Carpet Cleaning Factory", largest in Iran, a battery of sophisticated machines, reinforced by a battalion of electric brush wielders, restores up to 150 carpets a day in an assembly line system.

A huge, multi-paddled rug-beating apparatus batters out hundreds of pounds of dust each week. In keeping with the best ecological practices, the dust is mixed with the soil of the factory's gardens, which produce flourishing crops of vegetables, fruit trees, and pasture grass.

Completing the ecological cycle, flocks of company-owned sheep grow fat on the pasturage, are sold for mutton, and the factory re-invests the profit in new machinery.

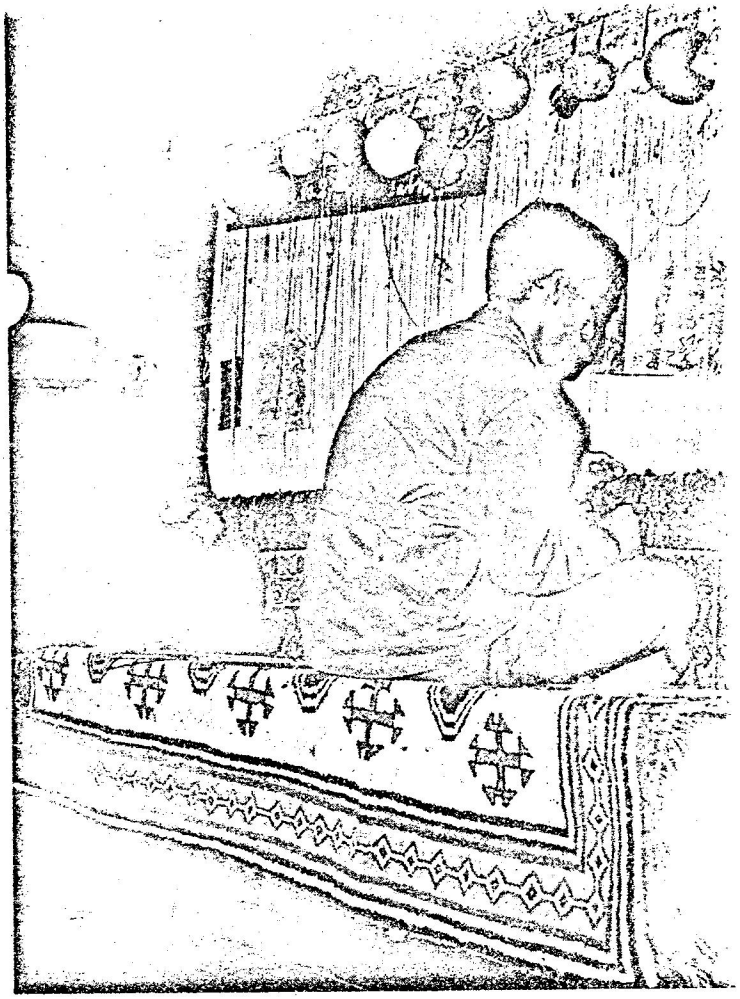
After the dusting, the rugs are worked over by electric shampooers and brushes, and occasionally scraped with an old-fashioned wooden scraper.

Drying the rugs is simple. By pushing a button on a centrifugal spin-dryer, one operator eases the water out of seven carpets in five minutes flat. The rugs are then hung on racks in a heated, fireproof room to dry them thoroughly.

Buying a rug in Tehran means going to the fashionable stores on the main streets, or the Government-sponsored rugweavers' outlet, or, more likely, "Rug Row" in the Great Covered Bazaar, where one finds the world's largest collection of Persian carpets.

As closely-crowded as the tightly woven knots in the carpets, are the hundreds of merchants plying their trade in the sprawling Rug Market honeycombed with passageways and alleys. These thoroughfares are "paved" with carpets for passersby to tread on. The traffic actually improves the colour of the rugs and forestalls deterioration by keeping them in use.

In the more spacious showrooms and in the tiniest stalls, phlegmatic salesmen steadily flip stacks of rugs like magazine pages, displaying them to customers who are trying to select.



A carpet takes shape under the skilled hands of craftsmen who still follow the trade of their ancestors. Weavers are abandoning employment in this renowned Persian art for jobs in Iran's industries, making Persian carpets scarcer and more valuable.

The knowledgeable buyer counts the number of knots per square centimetre (the more the better), holds the carpet up to the light looking for worn spots, and examines the strength of the foundation threads. He is also wary of a sheen which may be artificially induced by treatment with chemicals.

The prudent purchaser knows too that a rug should lie flat and its edges must not be perfectly parallel.

He makes sure the tufts tilt at a 45-degree angle toward one end, a hallmark of genuine Persian carpets. Finally, he only looks at carpets before lunchtime when the daylight is at its brightest.

After the buyer has chosen his rug, he must engage in a long, hard, bargaining session, periodically eased by little glasses of tea.

In the midst of the beauty and luxury of such Persian rugs as Kermans, Kashans, Isfahans, Qums, or Na'ins, which require years of patient toil, a purchase is never rushed, and often calls for dialogues stretching over days. Time, in a Tehran bazaar, is not the Money it is in a Fifth Avenue or Regent Street department store.