

# **Marijuana - The First Twelve Thousand Years**

## **Hashish and the Arabs**

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The Arab countries are hot. Hot and dusty. But mainly hot. It is only in recent times that a privileged few have found some respite from the heat through the miracle of air conditioning. The rest of the people are not so fortunate. Like their forefathers, they must endure temperatures that often soar to over 100 F. The excessive heat dictates that the people work only in the mornings and the evenings ("Only mad dogs and Englishmen go out in the noonday sun").

The sun also dictates the kinds of animals and plants that will survive. The camel has adapted in a way that allows it to go without water for days. Not only can it store large quantities of water in its body, but the camel also does not sweat. By a similar adaptation, plants are able to survive by being able to retain their water. It is because of this capacity to minimize evaporation that plants such as cannabis are able to live in the parching Arabian heat.

The means by which cannabis accomplishes this amazing feat is by producing a thick, sticky resin that coats its leaves and flowers. This protective canopy prevents life-sustaining moisture from disappearing into the dry air.

But this thick stocky resin is not an ordinary goo. It is the stuff that dreams are made of, the stuff that holds time suspended in limbo, the stuff that makes men forgetful, makes them both sad and deliriously happy, makes them ravenously hungry or completely disinterested in food. It is a god to some and a devil to others. It is all of these things and

more. This resin, this shield against the sun, this sticky goo... hashish.

## The Discovery of Hashish

Little is known of the first Arab who discovered the marvellous properties of hashish. There is no shortage of legends, however, to fill in the dark, long-forgotten memories of that eventful moment. One of the most colorful of these stories tells how Haydar, the Persian founder of a religious order of Sufis, discovered hashish in A.D. 1155.[1]

According to the legend, Haydar was an ascetic monk who lived a life of rigid privation and self-chastisement in a monastery which he built in the mountains of Persia. For ten years he lived in this distant retreat, never leaving it for even a brief moment, seeing no one except his disciples.

One hot summer day, however, Haydar fell into a state of depression and, contrary to his custom of never venturing out of his monastery, he wandered off into the fields to be alone. When he returned, his disciples, who had become alarmed at his unusual absence, noted a strange air of happiness and whimsy in his demeanour. Not only that, the hitherto reclusive monk even allowed them to enter his personal chambers, something he had never done before.

Astounded by this dramatic change in their master's character, his disciples eagerly questioned the monk about what it was that had put him into this frame of mind. Haydar responded to their curiosity with amusement and proceeded to tell them how he had been wandering in the fields and had noticed that of all the plants near the monastery, only one had not been standing motionless in the oppressive heat of the day. Unlike its torpid and inanimate neighbors, this unusual plant seemed to dance joyfully in the sun's warmth.

Overwhelmed by curiosity, Haydar picked a few of its leaves and ate them to see what they would taste like. The result was the euphoric state his disciples now observed in him.

Upon hearing of this wonderful plant and desirous of sharing their master's pleasure, Haydar's pupils entreated him to show them this strange plant so that they too could partake of its marvellous virtues. Haydar agreed, but not before he made them promise under oath that they would not reveal the secret of the plant to anyone but the Sufis (the poor). So it was, according to legend, that the Sufis came to know the pleasures and contentment of hashish.

After his discovery, Haydar lived another ten years, allegedly subsisting on cannabis leaves. Shortly before his death in A.D. 1221, he asked that cannabis leaves be sown around his tomb so that his spirit might walk in the shade of the plant that had given him such pleasure during his lifetime.

Such is the legend of Haydar and his discovery of the powers of hashish. It is a simple story, amusing and entertaining, and, of course, apocryphal.

### The Smell of Death

Although sometimes called the "wine of Haydar", hashish was known to the Arabs long before its alleged discovery by the ascetic monk. In the tenth century A.D., an Arab physician, Ibn Wahshiyah, wrote of it in his book *On Poisons*, claiming that the odor of hashish was lethal:

If it reaches the nose, a violent tickle occurs in the nose, then in the face. The face and eyes are affected by an extreme and intense burning; one does not see anything and cannot say what one wishes. One swoons, then recovers, then swoons again and recovers again. One goes on this

way until he dies. A violent anxiety and fainting occurs until one succumbs, after a day, a day and a half, or more. If it is protracted, it may take two days. For these aromatics, there is no remedy. But if God wills to save him, he may be spared from death by the continuance of vomiting or by another natural reaction.[2]

While Ibn Wahshiyah was more ignorant than knowledgeable of the properties of hashish, he was at least superficially familiar with some of its effects. In general, however, Arab physicians before and after Ibn Wahshiyah had very little to say about the medicinal virtues of cannabis and most of what they did say was taken from Galen.

### The Hippies of the Arab World

The apocryphal oath by which Haydar entrusted his disciples not to reveal the secret of hashish to anyone but the Sufis underlies the close association between the drug and the Sufi movement in the Arab community.

The origin of the name Sufi is connected with the wearing of undyed garments made from wool (suf) rather than cotton. Such clothing was originally worn as a symbol of personal penitence, but was condemned by religious leaders because it suggested that such people were dressing in imitation of Jesus rather than Mohammed, who wore cotton.

The Sufis were the hippies of the Arab world. Their origins were in Persia where they began as a group of ascetics who banded together to discuss religious topics and to recite the Koran aloud. Some of these bands eventually formed fraternities and established monasteries such as those founded by Haydar.

Although the original leaders of the movement were

orthodox in their religious principles, their successors and the new members who were drawn to the movement adopted a more mystical approach toward religion which was contrary to Islamic orthodoxy. Furthermore, since most of the new devotees came from the lower and middle classes, the socio-political attitudes of this new sect were increasingly regarded with distrust and suspicion by the upper classes and by the authorities.

Religious leaders were unfavorably inclined toward them because the mystical philosophy of the Sufis taught that divine truth and communion with God cannot be imparted to others. Instead, it had to be experienced directly. To the Sufis, the mind was simply incapable of articulating such understanding; it had to be acquired by oneself through experience.

One of the ways the Sufis encouraged the attainment of these spiritual insights was through the arousal of ecstatic states. There were several different ways of achieving this condition, but the one most commonly resorted to was through intoxication by means of drugs such as hashish. It was because of their frequent usage of hashish that the Sufis were credited both with the dissemination of the drug and with the downfall of Islamic society. For the Sufis, however, hashish was merely a means of stimulating mystical consciousness and appreciation of the nature of Allah. To the Sufi, a Moslem critic wrote, eating hashish is "an act of worship".

Sufism was much more than a heretical religious movement. It represented a counterculture within the Arab community in the same way that the hippies of the 1960's represented an ideological and behavioral counterculture within American society. Both were peopled by "drop-outs" who rejected the

dominant economic system in favor of communal living and sharing of material goods. Both had their symbols. For the hippies, it was long hair and beads; for the Sufi, garments made of wool.

Since neither the hippie nor the Sufi had any interest in advancing himself in society or in economic gain, both were looked down upon by the Establishment in their respective eras as being lazy and worthless. In many cases, their behavior was attributed to the effects of drugs.

More than intriguing, the dominant drug in both countercultures was made from cannabis. For the hippie, it was marijuana; for the Sufi, hashish.

Since the drugs were similar, it is not surprising that many of the accusations levelled at cannabis have a familiar ring. Both marijuana and hashish were accused of sapping the user's energy, thereby robbing him of his willingness to work. This "amotivational syndrome", as it is presently called, was regarded as a threat to the dominant culture since it undermined the work ethic.

Insanity was another evil attributed to chronic use of these drugs. Hashish drove men to madness, its Arab critics declared, by drying up the moistures in the lower parts of the body. This resulted in vapors rising to the brain, thereby causing the mind to weaken and be destroyed. Many critics contended that hashish produced physical dependence. As a result of this dependence, the hashish addict spent all his time and efforts looking for more hashish.[3]

A second feature common to both the hippies and the Sufis was their physical withdrawal from the dominant culture. The country commune of the hippie and the remote monastery started by Haydar were both created to remove each group

from the hostility of the Establishment. In these retreats, the devotees could follow their own way of life without incurring the wrath of those who disagreed with their ideas. These communes were also similar in their devotion to spiritual leaders who were looked up to as fountainheads of enlightenment. Timothy Leary and Haydar both enjoyed the respect and admiration of their followers. Both also recommended drugs as a means of expanding consciousness. They were heroes to the counterculture, false prophets to nonbelievers.

The hippie and Sufi movements were also similar in their attitudes toward family and contemporary sexual morality. Both went to extremes, but in this case they went to opposite extremes. The hippies were accused of being promiscuous; the Sufis, of being effeminate and homosexual. In both cases, however, cannabis was blamed for their sexual deviations. Marijuana, the critics of the twentieth century declared, caused hippies to become sex-crazed. Hashish, on the other hand, was accused of diminishing the libido, causing men to turn from women to other men.

Further parallels between the hippies and the Sufis could be drawn, the point being that despite the 1000-year gulf between them, the two movements resembled one another in more ways than they differed. But perhaps the most interesting parallel of all is the answers the Sufis and the hippies gave in response to those who criticized their use of cannabis.

Both ardently maintained that cannabis gave them otherwise unattainable insights into themselves. It allowed them to see new and different meanings in what appeared to be otherwise trivial experiences. It made them feel more witty and gave them deeper understanding. It caused them to see

beautiful colors and designs in what seemed commonplace to others. It increased their pleasure in music. It gave happiness, and reduced anxiety and worry.[4]

The one comparison that breaks the link between the Sufis and the hippies is social background. In contrast to the hippies, many of whom came from well-to-do middle-class families, most Sufis were from the lower classes. One of the main reasons the Sufis chose hashish over other intoxicants like alcohol was that hashish was cheap. Although proscribed in the Koran, wine was always available to those who could afford it. But wine was a luxury, the intoxicant of the rich; hashish was all the poor could afford.

Their heretical religious stance and their refusal to conform to the standards of Arab society combined to make the Sufis pariahs in the Arab world. And because hashish was so much a part of the Sufi's everyday life, it came to be looked upon as the cause of their unholy, contemptible, and disgusting behavior. By eliminating hashish, the Arab world felt it could rid itself of a loathsome drug habit that encouraged defiance, insubordination, and a general disregard for the status quo. While the efforts to eliminate hashish were often quite dramatic, all attempts proved futile. Every society seems to have evolved its own escape route from reality. For the Sufis, that escape route took the form of hashish.

### The Gardens of Cafour

Although hashish was well known in the eastern Arab countries by the eleventh century A.D., it was not until the middle of the thirteenth century that it was introduced into Egypt. For this information, we are indebted to a Moslem botanist named Ibn al-Baytar (d. A.D. 1248).

Ibn al-Baytar was born in Malaga in Spain, apparently the son of wealthy parents for he was able to afford to travel to far-off lands. Generally, the early sightseers in the Arab world left home to make the honored pilgrimage to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. This was a religious duty required of every Moslem, but the farther away from these holy shrines, the more difficult was such an undertaking. For those who could afford the pilgrimage, however, the trip offered a wonderful opportunity to visit other countries and meet new people.

In the course of his journey, Ibn al-Baytar passed through Egypt where for the first time he observed hashish being eaten. The main users of the drug, he noted, were the Sufis.

According to Ibn al-Baytar, the Sufis had a special way of preparing their hashish. First they baked the leaves until they were dry. Then, they rubbed them between their hands to form a paste, rolled it into a ball, and swallowed it like a pill. Others dried the leaves only slightly, toasted and husked them, mixed them with sesame and sugar, and chewed them like gum.

The sight of these people and their unconventional clothes and behavior unsettled Ibn al-Baytar, and he voiced his opinion in his diary. "People [i.e. the Sufis] who use it [hashish] habitually have proved its pernicious effect," he writes, for "it enfeebles their minds by carrying to them maniac affections, sometimes it even causes death." Ibn al-Baytar then adds: "I recall having seen a time when men of the vilest class alone dared to eat it, still they did not like the name takers of hashish applied to them."<sup>[5]</sup> This latter comment reflects the attitude of the upper-class Moslem's opinion of the Sufis and their use of hashish. It also shows, however, that by the twelfth century, the label "hashish user"

had become so derogatory that even the Sufis were upset at being so taunted.

One of the favorite gathering places for hashish users in Egypt was the "gardens " of Cafour in Cairo. "The green plant which grows in the garden of Cafour replaces in our hearts the effects of old and noble wine," states a poem written in tribute to the renowned gathering place of hashish connoisseurs. Another poem coos: "Give me this green plant from the garden of Cafour, this plant which surpasses wine itself in the number of people it enslaves."

The authorities felt differently. Unwilling to tolerate the rabble collecting in the city's garden spot, the governor of Cairo ordered out the troops. In A.D. 1253, all the cannabis plants growing in the area were chopped, gathered, and hurled onto a massive pyre the flames of which could be seen for miles around. "A just punishment of God," was the pronouncement of the more pious citizens of Cairo, as they watched the fire destroy the plants.

With Cafour gone, hashish devotees had to go elsewhere to obtain their heady rations. Their inconvenience was only temporary. Seeing an opportunity to make some easy money, the farmers on the outskirts of Cairo began sowing cannabis seeds.

At first this was a legitimate enterprise, since these farmers paid a tax for the privilege. But in A.D. 1324, the new governor decided that the situation had once more gotten out of hand. Troops were summoned into action. Every day for an entire month, the army foraged into the countryside on search-and-destroy missions; the enemy - hashish plants.

After this show of force, the fields remained barren of cannabis for a few months. Cultivation then resumed as

before. There was just too much money to be made to give up production permanently. To protect themselves from renewed interference, growers and merchants offered bribes and it was business as usual.

But in A.D. 1378 another order came down from the office of the governor to destroy the cannabis fields. This time the farmers decided to resist. Not one to back down, the governor dispatched Egypt's version of a S.W.A.T. team against the hashish farmers. But the farmers were determined to preserve their lucrative business, and eventually the troops backed off and instead of fighting, decided to place the area under siege, hoping to starve the farmers into submission.

The people held out for several months, but the outcome was never in doubt. When the soldiers finally broke through the defences and poured into the valley there was no alternative but to capitulate. The resistance crushed, the soldiers placed the valley under martial law. Fields were set ablaze. Towns were either razed to the ground or placed under strict surveillance. Local cafes which had previously been known as centers for the hashish trade were closed. Proprietors of these businesses were hunted down and killed. Patrons of these shops who were known to the authorities had a different fate in store for them. All known hashish addicts were assembled in the town square, and in full view of all the townspeople, the soldiers wrenched out their teeth.[6]

By A.D. 1393, however, the hashish business was once again a thriving enterprise, a situation which prompted the Egyptian historian Maqrizi, who was a contemporary, to write: "as a consequence [of hashish use], general corruption of sentiments and manners ensued, modesty

disappeared, every base and evil passion was openly indulged in, and nobility of external form alone remained in these infatuated beings." [7] But deplore the situation though Maqrizi might, hashish had become too much a part of the Arab way of life for it to be forsaken, whatever the criticisms and pressures against it.

### The Diary from Prison

They came from all parts of Genoa in Italy to listen to these fantastic tales of far-off lands, of strange customs and wealth beyond the imagination. They came not to the theater, or the palace, but the dungeon.

From the damp, dimly lit underground prison, a Venetian merchant was dictating to a copyist the details of a fascinating journey he had just completed, a journey that had taken him from Venice to the court of the Kublai Khan, great emperor of China. He had been gone twenty-five years and had travelled thousands of miles. Now he could only travel the length of his cell.

At first the jailers and townspeople laughed. This Venetian must think that the inhabitants of Genoa were mad. Who could believe these incredible stories of cannibals, shark charmers, and houses built of gold and silver? But the laughter soon gave way to a hushed awe as the storyteller repeatedly checked his notes to make sure that his facts were accurate. His sincerity, if not his sanity, could not be doubted.

The storyteller was a merchant named Marco Polo. The year was A.D. 1297. Venice and Genoa were at war. Polo had been taken prisoner during a sea battle on his return from the Far East. Now, as he awaited his fate, he was recording memories of the eventful expedition he had just completed.

Whatever his fate, he would leave behind a record of all the marvellous things he had seen and heard.

Even after his release from prison and the publication of his travel record, few people were willing to believe Polo sane. Nevertheless, the book was one of the most fascinating adventure stories of the day and it was widely copied and circulated. Two centuries later, it was to excite the imagination of an Italian visionary named Christopher Columbus and made him dream of a similar journey to these far-off lands. Only instead of going overland, he would go by sea, sailing westward around the world.

Columbus was not the only person to be influenced by Marco Polo's travelogue. Seven centuries after Polo's death, the Congress of the United States and the American public were once again treated to an excerpt from Marco Polo's writings. It was an excerpt that was widely cited in the 1920s and 1930s as proof that hashish was a drug that incited fanaticism, lust, and uncontrollable violence. The irony of this presentation was that Marco Polo himself had never even heard of hashish.

### Marco Polo's Version of Paradise

As Marco Polo was passing through northern Persia on his way to China, the people of the area told him an amazing story about a legendary ruler known as the "Old Man of the Mountains" and his ruthless band of cutthroats known as the Assassins. For two centuries, beginning around A.D. 1050, these daggersmen had struck fear into the hearts of even the most powerful Arab leaders. It was only in A.D. 1256 that their stranglehold over the Middle East was finally ended at the hands of the Mongols.

According to Marco Polo's diary,[8] the terrorist leader kept

his minions blindly loyal to his will by brainwashing them; should they die in his service, they would be certain to enter Paradise. To convince sceptics of his ability to make good such a promise, he gave each potential candidate a foreshadowing of what lay in store for him.

According to the legend, he accomplished this ploy through a beautiful garden landscape in his mountain stronghold of Alumut, the "Eagle's Nest". The garden was filled with exotic flowers and fountains brimming with milk and honey. Sensuous girls strolled this oasis ready to grant even the slightest wish. Everything was designed for the immediate gratification of any whim. But before he could enter this magnificent garden spot, the potential convert was required to partake of a powerful drug which rendered him unconscious. In this comatose state he was carried into the garden. When he awoke, he could gratify himself to his heart's content.

After being allowed to savor "Paradise", the recruit was drugged once again and brought before the "Old Man". When he awoke, the novice begged to be readmitted. The "Old Man" promised to do so, provided his orders were followed meticulously and without question.

Such was the story told by Marco Polo. Although a mere fantasy with little truth to it at all, there was an "Old Man of the Mountains", and there was a group of fanatics called the Assassins who were completely devoted to him. What, then, was the truth? Before answering this question, there are a number of points worth noting about Marco Polo's account, the most important of which is the mysterious potion referred to by the explorer.

The first point is that the potion is never identified. Marco

Polo makes no mention of hashish at all, and yet most retellings of this story always identify it as hashish.

Second, whatever the drug, it was not given to anyone who was sent out on a mission. The potion was given only before entry into the garden and before being taken out.

Third, the mysterious potion was soporific. It put its users to sleep. There is no mention of delirium or excitement connected with the drug.

### The Origins of the Assassins

The roots of the fraternity of Assassins go back to A.D. 632, the year in which the prophet Mohammed died without leaving any designated heir. The religion of Islam, which Mohammed founded, began in the year A.D. 622, following the entry of the prophet into the city of Medina. It was the culmination of a meteoric career that saw a penniless unknown emerge to forge a religion that would unite a disorganized nation of nomads into one of the greatest empires of the world.

Born some time between A.D. 570 and 580, Mohammed became an orphan at a very early age and was raised in the city of Mecca by his grandfather. Although born into poverty, he became wealthy and respectable by marrying the widow of a rich merchant and taking over his business.

It was not until he was about forty years old that Mohammed began to feel the proverbial "call to religion". Dissatisfied with the tribal religions and idolatry of his fellow Arabs, and unable to accept either Judaism or Christianity, he began to preach against the evils of the old Arab religion and announced the coming of a new era. While he initially had no idea that he was beginning a new religion, he did succeed in

converting a number of people to his way of thinking. Foremost among these new converts were his wife and his cousin Ali, who was later to become Mohammed's successor.

The more he criticized the existing religion, the more his activities came to the attention of the authorities, who looked with disfavor upon this challenge to their own position. Persecuted, Mohammed and his tiny band of converts fled to Abyssinia. From this relatively safe haven, Mohammed continued to preach his message, and the more he spoke, the more the people listened. When at last he felt that he had a strong enough following, Mohammed brought his entire religion to Medina in present-day Saudi Arabia, an event celebrated today as the starting point in the Arab calendar. From that time on, the religion became so widely accepted that Mohammed was able to overcome all opposition.

### The Blood Feud

The religion of Islam which Mohammed founded was based on the recognition of the one god, Allah, and his prophet Mohammed. When Mohammed died in A.D. 632, the new religion faced the difficult problem of choosing a successor (caliph). Among those nominated was Ali, cousin to the prophet and one of his first converts. Also in Ali's favor was the fact that he was the husband of Fatima, Mohammed's only surviving daughter.

But Ali was not chosen. Instead, the office was given to an elderly man whom Mohammed had once asked to lead the daily prayers. This first caliph did not live very long, however, and a new successor had to be chosen. Again Ali was skipped over. Two more caliphs were elected before Ali was finally chosen in A.D. 656. Five years later he too was dead,

the victim of a feud between Arab factions that supported him as caliph and those who refused to accept his appointment.

The bloodletting associated with the succession issue eventually split Islam into two main sects, the Sunnis and the Shiites. The Sunnis saw themselves as the upholders of orthodoxy in Islam. They contended that the people had a right to elect whomever they wished to be caliph. The Shiites, on the other hand, insisted that the only legitimate successors were those in whom the blood of the Prophet himself flowed. This meant Ali and his descendants.

Although the differences between the two parties appeared to rest on the problem of the rightful heir to the office of caliph, the animosities were much deeper and involved basic differences in racial background and ancient traditions. Racially, the Shiites were mainly Persians of Aryan ancestry. It was their custom, based on a tradition that reached back to the time of the great Persian empire, to be governed by a hereditary monarchy. The Sunnis, who represented the majority of Arabs, were Semitic in origin. Their custom was to elect leaders on the basis of personal merit., not blood line.

Since the Sunnis far outnumbered the Shiites, they exerted the dominant influence in Islam. The Shiites, however, refused to accept the caliphs chosen by the Sunnis, and instead pledged their allegiance to the family of the Prophet. These descendants were treated as divinely inspired and divinely appointed interpreters of the faith. Obedience to their commands, whatever these might be, was regarded as an integral part of the religion of Islam.

Ali's descendants were many in number, however, and while the Shiites agreed on the fundamental principle of hereditary

succession, they were often unable to agree on who that legitimate successor ought to be. This internal disagreement resulted in a schism within the Shiite party which eventually led to the creation of the Ismaili sect, the party to which the Assassins belonged.

### A House Divided against Itself

The precipitating event in the Shiite schism occurred during the reign of Caliph Jafar-i-Sadiq. According to Shiite custom, the eldest son succeeded his father to the office of caliph. However, one day Jafar-i-Sadiq discovered his eldest son, Ismail, drinking some wine, an act expressly forbidden by the Koran, the holy book of Islam. Outraged at this abomination, the caliph announced that his eldest son was unfit to serve as his successor and he designated his younger son, Musa, for the job.

While most Shiites accepted the nomination, a small group remained loyal to Ismail, claiming that the succession belonged to the eldest son. In response to the accusation that Ismail had violated the proscription against drinking alcohol, these supporters pointed out that the successor-designate was divine and without sin. If he drank wine, it was to teach his followers that the statements in the Koran against drinking alcohol were to be taken figuratively, not literally. Wine, they argued, was a symbol for pride and vanity. It was these traits of character that the Koran forbade, not the juice of the grape.

But Ismail had few followers compared to the majority of the Shiites who recognised Musa as leader. After his death, Ismail's supporters went underground and continued in relative obscurity while the faithful waited for a new leader to reveal himself and restore the House of Ali to its rightful heir.

Their patience was finally rewarded in the tenth century when the Fatamids, a dynasty loyal to the Ismaili doctrine, seized the throne of Egypt. Soon after their accession to power, they began sending out missionaries throughout the Arab world to make converts to Ismaili orthodoxy. One of the converts eventually won over to their side was a young Persian named Hasan-ibn-Sabah, who was to become known to his enemies as the "Old Man of the Mountains".

### The Old Man of the Mountains

The two men strolled along the walls of the mountain fortress silhouetted against the clear Persian sky. The year was A.D. 1092. One of the men was a personal envoy of the sultan. The host was Hasan-ibn-Sabah, the "Old Man of the Mountains". The envoy had come to demand the surrender of the fortress. There was no use in resisting, he attested, for the sultan had more than enough soldiers to capture the garrison. Surrender and he and his men would be treated with compassion; resist and they would meet Allah long before their time.

The ruler of the mountain stronghold listened to the offer in silence. When the envoy finished his message, Hasan pointed to a guard standing watch high atop a lookout post. The envoy watched as his host signalled to the guard and blinked in disbelief as the man saluted and threw himself from his post down into the chasm a thousand feet below. There were 70,000 more like him., Hasan told the startled envoy, all prepared to lay down their lives at his slightest bidding. Were the sultan's minions any match for these devoted followers? Shaken, the envoy took leave of his host wondering if anyone would believe what he had just witnessed.

Apparently the sultan did not believe, for he sent his armies against Hasan. It was a mistake. Soon after the abortive attack he was murdered, poisoned by one of Hasan's henchmen.

Who was this incredible leader for whom men were prepared to kill themselves and others at a mere wave of a hand? Although villainized by his enemies, there is no question that Hasan-ibn-Sabah was a man of exceptional abilities and self-discipline. He was intelligent, ambitious, and ruthless, a political opportunist who believed that the ends justified the means. He was a man totally lacking in compassion. He demanded blind obedience and was prepared to sacrifice those who loyally served him without giving their deaths a second thought.

Born in A.D. 1050, Hasan was the son of a Shiite merchant who withdrew from society to a monastery and sent his son to an orthodox Moslem school. Two of Hasan's classmates were also destined for prominence in the Arab world. The first was Nizam-al-Mulk, prime minister to two sultans of the Arab empire, and the second was Omar Khayyam, tent maker, astronomer, and unparalleled poet of the Arab world.

One of the reasons his father had sent Hasan to this particular school was the widely held belief that all who studied there would eventually attain great importance. The students were also aware of this belief, and one day Nizam, Omar, and Hasan made a pact that whosoever of them would fulfil the prediction first would do his utmost to help the other two.

The earliest of the three to advance his career was Nizam-al-Mulk who rose to a high position in the court of the sultan. As he had promised he tried to help his friends. When Omar

Khayyam came to him for support, Nizam obtained a pension for the poet generous enough for him not to be burdened with earning a living, and the poet was able to compose his famous Rubaiyat poems without distraction.

Next, Hasan presented himself at court. Nizam cordially received his other friend and got him an interview with the sultan, who took an immediate liking to him and made Hasan his chamberlain. But Hasan was overly ambitious. And an ingrate. As soon as he had his foot in the palace door, he tried to undermine Nizam in the sultan's eyes and install himself in his erstwhile friend's place.

Hasan thought he saw his opportunity when the sultan asked Nizam to draw up a record of all the income and expenses of the empire. Asked how long such an undertaking would require, Nizam estimated a time no less than a year. At this point Hasan jumped in and challenged that he could do it in forty days. The sultan was greatly pleased at such a possibility and gave him the job instead.

True to his word, Hasan had the accounts ready within the designated period. But Nizam was not one to be brushed aside so easily. By some trick he managed to alter the records, and when Hasan presented the accounts to the sultan they were so distorted that he was banished from the court for his impertinence. Although he protested his innocence, Hasan could not explain how his records had been doctored since they were written in his own script.

Humiliated but not discouraged, Hasan next journeyed to Egypt where he allied himself with the Fatamids and was introduced into the secret doctrines of the Ismaili sect.

If Hasan had been searching for some way to gain power, Egypt was a well-chosen starting place. The Fatamids had

founded a school in which they trained recruits in the Ismaili doctrine and in the art of assassination. The techniques he would learn at this school subsequently proved invaluable to Hasan.

The Egyptian rulers welcomed Hasan to their court when they learned of his arrival. A recent member of the sultan's personal retinue could bring only prestige to the Fatamid court. But Hasan once again involved himself in some chicanery at court and he was arrested and thrown into jail. But the moment he entered the prison, a minaret broke in two and crashed to the earth. The event was seen as a sign that Hasan was no ordinary man. Apprised of the coincidence, the Egyptian ruler immediately released Hasan and sent him away laden with gifts.

Hasan next made his way to Syria by boat. It was aboard this ship that he made his first two converts. These conversions renewed his confidence in himself, and immediately upon disembarking, he began to spread his message, which became known as the "New Propaganda".

Asserting that Islam and the Ismailis had grown decadent, Hasan promised to bring both back on a more righteous course, true to Allah's ways. There would have to be sacrifices, however. The Ismailis would have to renounce all worldly pleasures. They would have to rid themselves of all those things that other men found pleasurable. Since the Ismailis at that time were a poor, oppressed, discontented people seeking some meaning in a hapless existence, Hasan's injunctions entailed little self-denial on their part.

Hasan himself was no hypocrite. An ascetic for most of his life, years later he expelled one of his followers from the fold for flute playing, and executed his own son for a minor

frivolity. He set the example, and he expected his disciples to follow it.

To those who asked how Allah's ways were to be made known to the Ismailis, Hasan answered that a true understanding of that divine plan was not possible for the ordinary mind to comprehend. It was only possible for a divinely appointed representative to understand and make known Allah's ways. Mohammed had been such an intermediary. He, Hasan, was another such representative.

Hasan repeatedly emphasized that Allah's ways were too profound to comprehend through reason. Utilizing techniques he had learned in Egypt, Hasan created doubt in the minds of his audiences concerning orthodox Islamic teaching. The more confusion he was able to sow, the more dependent on him would his followers become, since he was the only source of wisdom. Only through faith and blind obedience could they be assured of obtaining salvation.

Once he had convinced a small number of Ismailis that he alone comprehended Allah's ways, Hasan instructed them on how to win over new members. Each convert thus in turn became a proselytizer.

Captivated by Hasan's dynamic personality, his utter confidence in himself, his self-assurance, his conviction that Islam had grown decadent and that salvation could only come through him, converts began pledging their lives in increasing numbers, often leaving behind their wives and children to make their way without husband and father.

Hasan's next move was to order his men to infiltrate the mountain fortress of Alamut, the "Eagle's Nest", and to make converts of the soldiers stationed there. Then, after carefully laying some preliminary plans, Hasan approached the

commander of the garrison and offered him 3000 pieces of gold for all the land under his control that could be covered by the hide of an ox. The commander thought Hasan mad to make such an offer, but who was he to look Allah's gift horse in the mouth? A wide grin appeared on his face as the last gold piece was counted out and handed over to him. But the grin quickly disappeared as he watched Hasan cut the hide into thin strips. The bargain was off, he shouted, as he watched Hasan sew the strips together and then march around the fortress.

However, Hasan, was prepared for such a contingency. After surrounding the fortress with the ox hide, he produced an order signed by a high-ranking government official, a secret convert to the "New Propaganda", which ordered the commander to honor the terms of the bargain. The commander dutifully obeyed and marched out, leaving Hasan in possession of an impressive stronghold. The year was A.D. 1090.

Immediately upon moving into Alamut, Hasan inaugurated a series of building measures to strengthen the fortification. Canals were dug to carry water to the fortress, the fields that surrounded it were irrigated, fruit trees were planted, and storerooms were erected.

The point of these improvements was lost on Hasan's enemies who, in later generations, mistakenly assumed that he was constructing a sort of Paradise to entice new followers to his ranks. These mistaken stories were eventually recorded by European travellers such as Marco Polo, and through them, Hasan's fortress became known to Western readers as a palatial mansion filled with lush and exotic plants and populated with beautiful and sensuous women.

There were other fantastic stories told about the ruses Hasan used to win over new converts. According to one legend, Hasan had a hole dug deep enough for a man to stand in with only his head above the ground. The hole was then filled in and a tray was fitted around his neck. To increase the effect, fresh blood was splashed around the "severed" neck.

Potential candidates were then brought into the room and, after fixing each man with his steely gaze, Hasan announced that the head would speak to them of the marvellous life that awaited them in the other world if they were to obey his commands without question. At this point, the confederate opened his eyes and began to tell them of the Paradise his soul had recently been admitted to as a result of serving Hasan.

The scene made a profound impression on all those who witnessed it, and they went away pledging their lives to Hasan. Shortly after they left the room, the confederate was actually decapitated and his head was prominently displayed so that no one would ever have second thoughts about having been duped. In this story, however, there is no mention of any drug being administered to either the initiates or the unfortunate victim.

### The "Devoted Ones"

With Alamut as his base of operations, Hasan began to organize his followers into various grades or degrees of office. At the top he naturally placed himself, giving his position the title of grand master. Next came the grand priors, the overseers, who directed the activities of the sect and apprised Hasan of all important developments. Below them came the dais, or missionaries, who disseminated the

"propaganda" of the sect throughout the Middle East. The fourth and fifth orders made up the bulk of members of the sect. They admitted their allegiance to the grand master and supported the movement in various ways, usually through donations. The sixth group was called the fidais, the "devoted ones". These were the enforcers. It was their job to carry out the orders of their superiors.

Once a fidai received his orders, he was committed to only one purpose - carrying out those instructions, no matter what the obstacles or the consequences to his own life. He would persevere for months, waiting for the right moment to strike. No matter that he would be captured and killed on the spot. The only thing that mattered was the mission. To die in the performance of his duty was a privilege and a ticket to Paradise. This disregard for death made the Assassins the most feared gang of cutthroats in the Middle East.

Arab sultans, princes, and prime ministers as well as many eminent Crusaders all fell victim to these daggersmen. With the assassination of Conrad, marquis of Monteferrat, however, the reputation of the "Old Man of the Mountains" spread far beyond the Middle East to the far reaches of Western Europe. The fidai responsible for the murder spent six months disguised as a monk in the camp of the Crusaders, waiting for just the right opportunity. Finally, the moment came and, in full view of the marquis' attendants, the assassin plunged his dagger into Conrad's body.

Once their reputation had spread throughout the Middle East, it was no longer necessary for the Assassins to liquidate their enemies. Often, all that was required was a threat. On one occasion, for example, Saladin, one of the most able Arab generals of that era, decided that the Assassins had to be put in their place and he mounted a campaign to take the

Alamut fortress. Shortly before the siege, however, he awoke one night to find a dagger stuck in the ground beside him. Attached to the knife was a curt message advising him to reconsider. Saladin wisely changed his mind and directed his efforts elsewhere.

How was it that Hasan was able to enlist such a devoted band of selfless followers who were more than willing to lay down their lives at his bidding?

According to Marco Polo, Hasan kept his men blindly loyal to his will by convincing them that should they die in his service, they would be certain to enter Paradise.

This theme appears also in the story of the "severed" head and in an anecdote related by an emissary to the emperor Frederick Barbarossa in A.D. 1175. According to this report,

[Hasan had] many of the sons and daughters brought up from early childhood... These young men are taught by their teachers from their earliest youth to their full manhood, that they must obey the lord of their land in all his words and commands; and that if they do so, he, who has power over all living gods, will give them the joys of Paradise... When they are in the presence of the Prince, he asks them if they are willing to obey his commands, so that he may bestow Paradise upon them... They throw themselves at his feet and reply with fervor that they will obey him... Thereupon the Prince gives each one of them a golden dagger and sends them out to kill whichever prince he has marked down.[9]

In all the stories about Hasan's ability to instil blind loyalty in his followers, the one common element is the promise of entering Paradise in return for serving the grand master. Only in Marco Polo's account is there any mention of a drug.

## What's in a Name?

One of the most puzzling questions about the Assassins is how they got their name. The members of the sect never referred to themselves as such. They called each other *fidais*, "devoted ones". Only their enemies called them Assassins.

In a report to Frederick Barbarossa, ruler of the Holy Roman Empire, they are called *Heyssessini*. William, Archbishop of Tyre, wrote that "both our people and the Saracens called them *Assissini*," but, he adds, "we do not know the origin of the name."<sup>[10]</sup>

By the thirteenth century, however, the word "assassin" and its variants were being used in Europe in the sense of a paid professional killer. The word was derived from the name of the sect, but no one suggested that they got that name because of their usage of hashish, although a twelfth-century friar, Abbot Arnold of Lubeck, did state that the Assassins used hashish: "hemp raises them to a state of ecstasy or falling, or intoxicates them. Their sorcerers draw near and exhibit to the sleepers, phantasms, pleasures and amusement. Then they promise that these delights will become perpetual if the orders given them are executed with the daggers provided."<sup>[11]</sup>

Travel books such as the seventeenth-century *Purchas His Pilgrimis* repeated Marco Polo's story about a mysterious potion but made no mention of hashish. Another writer of that era, Denis Lebey de Batilly, wrote only that the name given to the sect by its enemies was Arabic for hired killer.

Various other explanations were subsequently proposed, among them that the name was derived from "asas", a word meaning foundation, which was applied to the religious leaders of Islam; that assassin was derived from the Arabic

word hassas, which, among other things, meant "to kill"; or that the name was applied to the followers of Hasan.

## The Tale of the Hashish Eater

Between A.D. 1000 and 1700, a collection of stories from the Arab world came into being which today are known as The Thousand and One Nights. Although loosely joined, the thread that holds the collection together is the delightful fantasy of how a wily young harem girl enchanted the sultan and saved her life. It was through these stories that most Europeans first learned of hashish.

According to the storyline, the sultan Shahriyar had ordained that each of his future wives was to be put to the death the morning after consummating their marriage nuptials. This ritual went on through several wives until Scheherazade, the daughter of the grand vizier, tricked the sultan into revoking this postamatory rite.

The ruse she used consisted of telling the sultan an amusing story on the night of their marriage and then breaking it off in the middle, promising to finish it the next night. But each night she also started a new story, breaking that one off as well so that it would have to be ended the next night. In this way she succeeded in delaying her execution for a thousand and one nights, until at last the sultan became so enamored of this spinner of tales that he fell in love with her and decided to cancel his former edict.

One of the stories Scheherazade amused the sultan with was called "The Tale of the Hashish Eater", and in it she recounted the saga of a hashish user who had been reduced to poverty as a result of wasting his savings on his drug and on women. Yet by means of his cherished drug, he was able to escape into a dream world where he was no longer a

beggar but a handsome and prosperous lover.

One day this pauper took some hashish in a public bath and dropped off into a dream in which he was transported into an enchanting room filled with beautiful flowers and the smell of exotic perfumes. All this time, however, he sensed that this was only a dream and that it would not be long before his presence in the public bath would be noticed and he would be beaten and thrown out. Even so, he continued to enjoy the dream.

As he fell deeper into his reverie, he saw himself being carried to another luxurious room filled with soft, plush cushions where he was sexually aroused by a sensuous slave girl. Just as he was about to embrace the girl, he was awakened from his dream by the laughter of the patrons in the bath who had become highly amused at the sight of this tumescent beggar. And just as he foresaw, he was beaten and ejected from the premises.

Readers of this story were not only amused by it, they were also able to appreciate the state of "double consciousness" the beggar found himself in as a result of taking hashish. In this state, the hashish user hallucinates, but he is also aware that he is hallucinating - he does not lose complete touch with reality. Hashish causes him to dream, but it enables him to remain conscious of his dream so that he can appreciate the images and themes his mind is producing. It was this aspect of the hashish experience that was later to intrigue European writers, especially the French Romantic authors of the middle and latter part of the nineteenth century, for in this mysterious drug of the Arab world they saw untold possibilities of delving into the hitherto buried niches of the human mind.

The debasing influence of hashish was not the only theme in popular Arab literature. The ways in which the drug corrupted high officials also delighted audiences and readers. One such favorite anecdote tells of a hashish "pusher" who was apprehended and brought to court to appear before a judge presiding over a community that did not permit the use of hashish. This "pusher" had been fined on many occasions for his illegal activities, but to no avail. He simply paid his fine and went back to selling his illegal wares.

Fed up with this unrepentant drug peddler, the judge finally threatened him with a huge fine if he did not permanently cease his offensive activities. Faced with the threat of an exorbitant penalty, the "pusher" agreed to find another means of earning a living. To make sure that there would be no misunderstanding, the judge made the man swear an oath in which he enumerated all the different names and preparations, many were completely new to him and he suggested that since the judge knew so much about the subject he ought to administer the oath to himself as well![12]

A similar story tells of the hypocrisy and quick thinking of a Moslem priest. During a wild and animated sermon in which he was haranguing his audience on the evils of hashish, his tunic opened and a bag of the vile drug fell to the ground right before the startled eyes of the onlookers. Without hesitating an instant, the priest pointed to the bag and shouted, "This is the demon of which I warned you; the force of my words have put it to flight, take care that in leaving me, it does not throw itself on one of you and enslave him." The crowd continued to listen to his sermon, but their eyes were glued on the hashish. Yet no one dared to pick it up. After the priest finished, the parishioners dispersed, leaving only the priest and the bag of hashish, which the holy man

promptly picked up and stuffed back into his tunic.[13]

## Hashish and the Arab World: Summary

Every culture has some kind of escape hatch, some ersatz respite from the overburdening realities of everyday existence. For over a thousand years, hashish has been this escape hatch for a large segment of Arab society.

The earliest groups to use hashish on a large scale were the Sufis, an economically and socially despised sector of Moslem society, who justified their use of the drug, to themselves at least, as a way of communicating with their god.

The association of hashish with the Sufis had the effects of identifying it as a contemptible substance, a drug that sapped a man's energy and his willingness to work, a drug that made him a pariah rather than a contributor to his community. The lowly social standing of the poor was attributed to their use of hashish, and the very term "hashish user" became an insulting epithet for what the upper classes regarded as the social misfits of their society. Thus, when the Arabs spoke of someone such as Hasan or his followers as "ashishin" (or Assassins, as the Crusaders pronounced the word), they were referring to them figuratively and abusively. Whether the Assassins did or did not use hashish was immaterial.

Nevertheless, it was because of the association of this term with the infamous band of cutthroats, the resourceful terrorists of the Middle Ages, that many centuries later hashish gained for itself a reputation as a drug that inspired mayhem.

Curiously, the Arabs themselves have never regarded hashish as a drug which inspires violence. Perhaps the Arabs are simply too familiar with the actions of hashish to attribute violence to its seemingly endless list of effects. Yet in America, a country with a history of violence and little familiarity with cannabis as a mind-altering substance, hashish was to become known as the "killer drug".