Here we stepped into the twentieth century. The master of the house was an engineer who had travelled in Egypt: his young brother, in a beret and very baggy flannels, studied law in Alexandria; and his wife, who was also coming with us, had shingled hair and a little French headdress under her veil. They had no misgivings, they said, so long as I did not speak, for my accent would betray me. They had taken Christians into the shrine before, but no Europeans, though several European women have been inside at one time and another. We drank coffee and ate sweetmeats, and presently set forth with a servant and lantern ahead to light the gaping pitfalls of the street; for we had left the twentieth century again, and were moving under dark overhanging houses into the dark bazaar. Dim figures, squatting silent by their closed booths, with rosaries over their idle fingers, peered at us passing; the shadowy gate and its high threshold, where in the daytime so many jealous faces had prevented our approach, now stood before us, the entrance to a world incredibly unchanged and old.

We crossed the threshold under a looped chain that one touches, for it confers a blessing, into the great court or piazza of the sanctuary. It seemed enormously spacious: the whole constellation of Orion hung above it in black depths of sky.

And now we came to a gilt porch on slim wooden columns, the outer door of the shrine itself. A man crouching there took our shoes and added them to others in rows. I had just advanced to enter under the heavy curtain, when a Sayid in green turban, one of the descendants of the Prophet, called me back, giving me a very unpleasant shock. One of my companions, clutching at my abba with a shaking hand: the Sayid, however, was only calling us because he knew our host and wished to do us honour. “You belong to the House,” he told him. “I myself will take you round.”

And so, as we stood on the step before the heavy curtain, he called the blessing upon us—of Ali and Muhammad and the two Imams of their family—in a voice so beautiful, chanting its invocation in the night air for us who were about to enter the sanctuary, that I have rarely heard anything more impressive and more appealing. “Allah is great,” he said, and motioned us to enter.

We first came into a gallery roofed with stucco and work of mirrors, glittering dimly, and with mirrors let into cheap and bad woodwork round the sides: and then coming to another curtain between very tall double doors of beaten silver, with thin models of the hand of Abbas cut out in silver sheets and nailed across the design here and there—we stepped into the inner sanctuary of the tomb.

It was a very high room with two great silver doorways at right angles to each other. Glass chandeliers in numbers hung from the ceiling. The walls were adorned with arabesques in colours on a dark ground. On the floor were carpets poor in quality. All this was but the setting for the tomb.

It stood in the middle within its triple cage, whose outer silver more than half-way up is constantly polished by the hands and the lips of the faithful, passing in endless procession. The bars of beaten silver worked in patterns are like window gratings framed in pointed arches, so that the tomb looks as if it had five windows on the longer and three on the shorter side. It must be about ten feet high. The top is decorated with horizontal mouldings to soften the uncompromising squareness, and surrounding all are the little green flags of the house of ‘Ali.

If you stand at the grating, with your face pressed against the silver bars, you see dimly, through another grating of iron and through a case of glass, the two carved wooden coffins of the Imams. To do this, people will walk from Afghanistan and India and the remotest provinces of Persia. Swarthy bearded men were here, and almost hairless Mongolian faces; the lean drooping Persian, and flat-faced Shi‘i of Iraq. Sitting in complete abstraction before great beaten candlesticks on the ground, pilgrims with heavy turbans chanting the holy verses, swaying softly. Women were in one corner, murmuring together in their black draperies on the floor. I followed the Sayid, pressing my hands against the bars, moving slowly from right to left round the tomb. A woman beside me sobbed desperately, and kissed the polished silver, and pressed her hands to every knoll she could reach. Thousands, millions of these hands pass over that indifferent surface smoothing it away with their hopes and prayers, the pious faith of mankind.

In that room the very atmosphere was electric with emotion. One could not stand there without feeling the passion of it, its utter completeness, its ancient cruelty behind that quiet calm of prayer, behind those figures standing with upturned palms and faces, lost in their ecstasy. An alien discovered here, I reflected, would scarcely reach the outer gateway; and then there would be the bazaar, and what a nasty mess for the police. My little friend ahead of me was still trembling, hurrying through her pilgrimage with rather unseemly haste. This was not the atmosphere even for the Westernized Oriental this was the Old East, incommunicable with all we bring and do: it was they or us, and they would have a right to murder us if they found us, here where the old law held.

We had reached the short side of the tomb, farthest from the door. The Sayid again chanted a prayer, while we stood with upturned palms: again the beauty of the words, the passion of devotion all around me, made me forget that I was a stranger: there is but one accent of faith, after all.