

SOME OF THE wasting babies lay in cribs, three or four jammed into a space meant for one. Older infants sat on shelves like blackbirds on a wire, jammed shoulder to shoulder, legs swaddled, prevented from falling off by a seat-belt arrangement made of iron piping. All day long they sat there, stinking skeletons in dripping diapers that were changed once daily, cruelly scabbed on head, face, and arms.

"I mustn't get sick," nurse Gay Currie told herself. They had been through other rooms like this and would go on to others. The Teheran Foundling Home, designed for 250 children, held 680 infants, all three years old or less, almost none able to walk, each desperately malnourished and ill of diarrhea.

She had come to the home by accident. Director Ahbtin of the State Public Health Department had rumbled into the office of the chief American health official in Iran. "I want to show you something terrible," he warned; and Gay Currie, full of enthusiasm for serving her country as a public-health nurse in the backward land once called Persia, drew the assignment. It changed her life. It also changed the lives of countless orphans of that ancient kingdom.

"What can we do about this?" the Iranian official asked. What could they do? The facts were disheartening. Trained help was not available. No reputable physician, Gay learned, would attend the institution because of its inept policies. Its staff consisted mostly of ignorant slatterns who worked 24-hour shifts for \$10 a month.

Yet the orphanage staff did not mean to abuse those tots from the gutters. With knowledge, they could do better. Given instruction, they would respond.

"Could I open training courses for your help?" Gay asked. This could be the beginning, she hoped, of better treatment for foundlings.

The government approved her idea of a training course. She taught 30 of the brightest girls in the home, demonstrating the latest equipment for baby care. After six weeks, a pleased government celebrated their graduation day with ceremonies and fanfare. Now things would be better. But the nurses went back to their posts and found the same filthy utensils and inadequate equipment. Their superiors were content with the old. "It's our way," they said.

Nurse Currie excused them, saying: "We must make them understand that new ways are better." She organized seminars which brought together staff members from the home and prominent pediatricists for professional discussions. Their communication was strained and unproductive. She asked for lists of the drugs and foods dispensed. They revealed many odd facts. Drugs, foods, and materials had been purchased and used—but evidently not by the orphanage. Highly placed medical men only shrugged at her story. "Don't get us involved," they said.

She Finds an Ally

Her frustration and her dogged persistence in seeking a way through indifference and red tape won the sympathy of a young American named Joe Fox of the U.S. Information Service. He shared his knowledge of Eastern ways and wiles and bolstered her spirits. He would soon become an invaluable ally.

But their every effort was thwarted. When they enlisted help of the community, the obstacles soon discouraged all but the most dedicated. When they tried a model ward, unsympathetic administrators denied Gay its use.

"I hated myself for failing," she recalls. "I'd been in Iran for months, and those babies were still starving."

At the end of her tether, she prayed. Gay Currie's faith is such that her communication with God is constant, close, and unquestioning: "I asked Him to show me a way out."

Director Ahbtin of the Health Department swept into her office one day bursting with good news. "I'm going to move 250 babies," he said. "I've wangled enough money to rent

Our "Orphan in Iran

By CURTIS MITCHELL



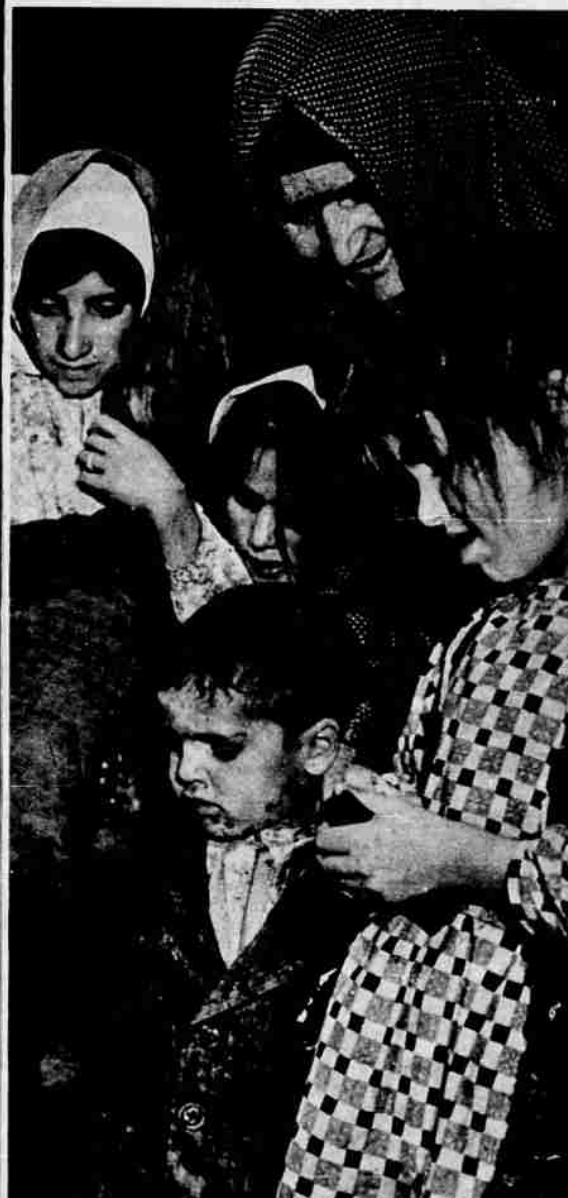
Gay Currie chats with an orphaned Iranian boy. She soon discovered many like him, homeless and



Lady"

Gay Currie is an American with her own kind of aid for underdeveloped countries—a faith and understanding that give foundlings a new life

ill-fed. But her work changed their lives—and her own.



another home. Please come and see it." The building they visited was dark and cavernous, and Gay's imagination filled it with all the old horrors—but she had an idea.

Were not well babies more important to Iran than sick? she asked. The words came unbidden. "Sir, you should set up a model home. You should take 50 babies and prove that modern methods have merit. You can train nurses' aids, administrators, nutritionists, and interns, and serve all Iran."

Director Ahbtin threw up his hands. "But how will we finance this miracle?"

"We'll work night and day," Gay promised. "The money will come."

When the proper house was found, the wives of ambassadors, generals, and business tycoons got down on their knees with stenographers and schoolteachers to scrub it clean. Everywhere in Teheran, people began to talk of the Well-Baby Center, even in the royal palace. Now the tide really turned. At the old home, Queen Soraya walked in one day and cried with indignation. Soon, the directors resigned, and the Queen's own charity organization took over.

Moving day was Oct. 7, 1957. Led by Director Ahbtin, ladies of a dozen nations drove to the old foundling home. On that first trip, their quota was 30 babies.

Gay checked them in, keeping careful records. Swiftly, she noted that her quota of 30 had grown to 31. An American mother confessed: "He was lying there all fat and clean—somebody had just delivered him at the old home—so I brought him along." They called him their "stolen baby." Later, he would become the first to be adopted.

Babies Need Parents of Their Own

As her protégés blossomed, Gay looked ahead. They needed names and parents of their own. In Iran, adoption was frowned on by the religion of Islam. An adopted child had no legal status; it could not inherit property. Foreign adoptions were permitted, however. An American couple asked for a child. "We'll even take twins," they wrote. The home had a homely, hairy, button-nosed pair.

Gay said, "I have your twins but they are not pretty; indeed, I'm afraid they're downright ugly." That week, a second set as beautiful as alabaster dolls arrived. She wrote immediately to the Americans, offering them the dream pair.

They replied, "Your first letter brought us so much joy that we began thinking immediately of your 'ugly' twins as ours. We do not wish to change."

Inevitably, childless Iranians who had money and position, but no offspring, came to plead their cause, and Gay found a little-known custom that allowed a man to bring a child into his home if he declared it his blood offspring. Iranian husbands were soon eagerly declaring themselves the actual fathers of orphans.

The roster of the Well-Baby Center has a glorious record; more than 115 orphans have been adopted, 58 by Americans, a score by Iranians, the remainder by other nationalities.

Last February, Gay Currie left Teheran. In May, she went to a chapel near her home in Montreat, N.C., and married the same Joseph Fox whose wit and wisdom had cheered her through her worst moments in Teheran. They now live in Washington, D. C., while he prepares for another overseas assignment. Wherever he goes, she will go, too, as wife or nurse or both.

Today, Currie-trained girls are serving with unprecedented skill in many Iranian orphanages and clinics. Young pediatricians are abler because of their internship at the Well-Baby Center. And Iranian women by the score, released from futility and wornout customs, are serving the unfortunate.

Before Gay left Teheran a high-ranking Iranian came to the center to say good-bye. His words were those of a simple Moslem benediction. "God speed you, Gay Currie," he said. "And God speed us all, and God be praised that I have lived to see this day."

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