



JOTTINGS IN SYRIA

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THOUGH fast losing its purely Eastern character, Damascus is still a delightful place. Chief among its charms I count the noble mansions, cool and silent, with bubbling fountains and terraced roofs. The older houses are architectural gems unspoiled by the hideous blue and red daubs of modern Syrian taste. It is a pity the same cannot be said for the new buildings, which though larger and handsomer in design are often disfigured by grotesque ships drifting across a turquoise sea on to crimson rocks, by blue castles perched in mid-air, by trees unknown to the botanist, by men taller than the loftiest poplars. Still worse is the practice of turning grand marble courts, fragrant with magnolia and orange blossom, into drying ground for the family linen, from behind which giggling slave-girls peep at the Frank guest.

But if the Damascene's love of art has degenerated, his hospitality remains fresh and green. One visit I paid was particularly interesting, as it bore testimony to the strictness with which Jews observe religious commands. It happened to be a Saturday afternoon, and not a mouthful had passed the lips of any member of the household since the previous evening. All manner of work being prohibited to masters and servants, Christians employed for the nonce brought in refreshments and pipes. The daughters of the house, and very fair they were to look upon, went so far, however, as to hand round cool sherbets and sweets; yet conscientious even in their attentions, they begged our interpreter to remove the coffee cups which contained grounds that had just been roasted. Numerous ladies favoured us with their presence, matrons in curly light-brown and shining wigs, unmarried girls in simple dresses and wearing their hair neatly plaited. Two or three of the latter were not without difficulty persuaded to dance, substitution for music being provided by a baby's tomtom, on which boyish fists strummed. The measure, accompanied by waving of arms and low nasal singing, was slow and dreamy, and I fancy that the venal damsel of old must have trod a brisker step before the throne of applauding Herod.

I also made a call on Mrs. Digby. With the earlier pages of that lady's romantic story I have neither right nor inclination to meddle, and even these lines could not, in accordance with her wish, have been penned were she still living. So great was her horror of interviewers that an introduction was somewhat difficult to obtain, and unless to a familiar face the servants replied in politest Arabic, "Not at home." Knocking at the gate, an instant reply came in the shape of a loud, angry roar.

The voice belonged to an enormous dog, whose furious bounds at his chains suggested an inhospitable spirit. And seemingly the brute's strength was equal to his rage, since it was all a couple of stout lads could do to drag him to an outhouse, whence his yells and shrieks of savage expostulation continued to preach prudence to our ears. His mistress received us in a pretty room far more cosily furnished than is usual in Syria, and hung with paintings done by her own hand. As a young woman she is said to have been very attractive; even then traces of beauty still lingered in the regular features, large, clear eyes and exquisitely shaped hands. Mrs. Digby in the course of our conversation wandered into reminiscences of her desert life, speaking with great vivacity and to the point. At that moment she was exercised about an inroad of the Aleppine Bedouins, who had been plundering her husband's tribe, and though for a long time she had not slept under canvas, she yearned to be with her "people" in their



GROUP OF BEDOUIN WOMEN.

need. But the Sheik, who shortly came in and was presented, had no notion of allowing any such proceeding. Generally the most easy-going of husbands, he insisted on his wife's taking good care of herself, and financial reasons justified his tenderness. A short, spare man was this Sheik, of black eyes and rather pronounced features, and with red Arab boots and bournous he had an air of being out of his element in a lady's boudoir. He appeared to feel it, too, as he sat on the extreme edge of a divan and smoked one of his wife's cigarettes. In the saddle he was doubtless quite a different man. Mrs. Digby fell in love with him during a visit to Palmyra under his escort, and possibly soon repented at leisure what she had done in haste. She took us out to see her Muscovy ducks and Arab mare, a lovely animal, which whinnied and struggled to come to her as we entered the stable. Several Bedouins were lounging about, muscular, well-knit fellows, who adored their "Queen," and she was evidently proud of their loyalty. She bade me not forget her if I returned to Damascus, adding that she should end her days there. Her one acknowledged sorrow was the Europeanizing "craze" of Midhat Pasha, who, taking

advantage of a fire, had commenced to run a wide, straight street through the ancient labyrinth of crooked lanes and blind alleys. "Fancy, he threatened to cut down our famous old beech; but we would not stand that."

From the artistic point of view Mrs. Digby was right, as I recognized ten years later. Even the bazaars had lost picturesqueness. One missed old Abou Antiqua (father of antiquities), deeming his place ill-supplied by an innkeeper, who hangs the gaudily-furnished new hotel with modern trumpery. As host this enterprising Syrian is all that could be desired, in the rôle of curiosity-dealer he does not show to advantage. Still there is plenty to occupy a week in the town and its neighbourhood. Hoping to learn how far the mollahs attached to the great mosque believe in certain traditions, I induced a talkative old member of their body to accompany me to the roof. It was labour and bakhshish well expended.

He pointed out the minaret upon which Christ is to descend, and professed no scepticism concerning the prophecy that at Damascus will be celebrated the marriage of Mohammed which shall reconcile Islam and Christendom.

Previous to the appointment in 1878 of Midhat Pasha, the sale of black slaves was carried on at Damascus with no further pretence of secrecy than that obtained by the jealous exclusion of foreigners from the market. We made our way into the bazaar, a large Khan with little cells opening on to broad balconies. The place was quite deserted, but that its abandonment had been recent crusts of bread and rinds of water-melon testified. A Moslem eye-witness told me that he had frequently seen exposed there at one time nigh three score negresses, principally girls and children, who squatted on mats in airy costumes amid a crowd of purchasers and idlers. For the most part sleek and plump, these dusky maidens used, according to my informant, to laugh and chatter in a fashion which suggested that they did not even feel mortified



DRUSE LADY, LEBANON.

at their position. Now and again, he admitted, sad faces might be observed and painful efforts to restrain tears by girls scolded for shrinking from rude stare or ruder touch, but the majority appear to have gone through the ordeal with feigned if not real indifference. Such a damsel on being spoken to would spring to her feet, perhaps actually smiling as inquisitive fingers parted her red lips and tried the muscles of her smooth, round arms.

Dan, our dragoman, was a fat little fellow with stubbly hair and twinkling black eyes set deep into his ruddy, good-tempered face. As a matter of course he inaugurated his engagement by seeking to impose upon us in divers ways, more especially with regard to the quality of hired horseflesh, but to do him justice he accepted defeat philosophically and bore no malice. A better travelling servant than Dan never bestrode pack-saddle. Thanks to his experience and forethought we were generally well fed, and, despite absence of tents and frequent changes of route, seldom slept without some sort of shelter if only a Bedouin's roof. In foraging he surpassed a

hungry Zouave, and so practical was his knowledge of cookery, that under his skilful hands the toughest hen grew tender and the rankest goat simmered into a savoury stew. No difficulties—and in the wilder regions we had our share of them—could disturb his equanimity. Storm or sunshine, feast or fast, invariably found him the same gay, untiring attendant, and prompted by an unerring mother wit, he would laugh or look grave, discover reasons for halting or necessity for pushing on, gallop down a mountain-side or cautiously dismount at a hillock as best fitted our capricious moods. Far from spoiling praise encouraged him to fresh exertions, and volleys of abuse, merited or the reverse, failed to ruffle his temper. It is true that the strong language in question was promptly rendered, unweakened through translation, into fluent Arabic for the benefit of subordinate muleteers and baggage lads, but like the sailor Dan meant no harm when swearing. His pet sin was a too constant devotion to the bottle, and his apology for it peculiar. People, he explained, incited him to indulge because wine brought out his amusing characteristics. Judging from the rather curious confessions with which at such times he was ready to beguile us, we admitted the force of his plea, the less reluctantly since whether drunk or sober he always managed to do his work. He had testimonials to suit every stamp of tourist. Rollicking youngsters declared him the jolliest rascal in Turkey, while pious pilgrims dwelt on his voluntary presence at evening prayers. To us it seemed that he preferred love-ballads to hymns, and he made no secret of his partiality for those who carried sound whisky in their flasks and would not stay to analyze his professionally involved accounts.

Near Damascus rises a range of rugged rocks looking from the distance like a triple of hoary ramparts with shattered fronts and broken crests. In the centre is a cleft through which the traveller and his beast must scramble as best they may up the exceeding rough and precipitous path of irregularly hewn steps to the sloping plateau, where stands a Greek convent dominating a small village. At an early period the inhabitants probably occupied the numerous caves which are now used for the storage of winter supplies, and in several of these grottoes may be found carvings and inscriptions quaint and old enough to delight the heart of an archæologist; indeed we met one there in high glee at the success of a few days' hunt. He had his note-book stuffed full of strange figures and characters, which after dinner he volunteered to explain. Expressing intense interest we settled ourselves comfortably to listen to his learned discourse to the music of gurgling narghilehs. Unfortunately the way had been long, a wood fire was sparkling and crackling at our feet, for the night air was



TURKISH WOMAN OF DAMASCUS.

still chilly, and the good fathers had entertained us with their wonted hospitality. When we woke our friend had disappeared, sketches and all, and he did not come to wish us farewell on the morrow. A queer little village that. Many houses are built on the steep hill-side right under the brow of the projecting cliff. Habit is said to be a second nature, but it would take a long time to reconcile me to dwelling in such a situation. In some cases huge boulders have actually rolled close to the doors, and we particularly noticed one cottage which the merest accident had saved from utter destruction by the sliding mass hitting against a rock in its path. The landslip at Naini Tal had not then occurred. Should the villagers ever hear of that terrible catastrophe they may perhaps awake to their danger and build in safer spots, if indeed any warning short of the crack of doom could rouse them from their apathy. It was just after quitting this place that we lighted on a sort of Moslem All Souls' ceremony. The rude cemetery, where sleep the forefathers of the hamlet, was crowded

with men, women, and children dressed in holiday garb, some standing by new-made graves, others loitering about among the tombstones.

As peril was afoot, Midhat Pasha kindly sent us under escort of a strong force of gendarmes ordered to punish the Aleppine Bedouins who had invaded Syria, committing havoc wherever they went. The troop consisted of a hundred picked men commanded by a stalwart captain. Fine fellows they all were, well mounted and equipped and under strict discipline. Their chief, as he sat erect and square on his perfectly-trained charger, looked the *beau idéal* of a light cavalry officer. Eager too was he for the fray. A major's epaulettes



BEDOUIN WOMEN.

dangled before his eyes, and that good steed had to be avenged which two years back had gone down shot through the heart twenty yards in front of the line as he bore his master at full career towards the hostile ranks.

Once we thought we had caught the foe napping. This happened at a little village surrounded by a mouldy wall and dry ditch which stood on the very edge of the desert. Here till quite recently, when the Government had put an end to the game, thievish Bedouins used to pass the night and sally out at early morn to ambush travellers from behind a range of low hills just off the highway. Tidings had reached our captain of flowing cloaks and tufted spearheads observed near the old haunt. Measures were instantly taken. Increasing our pace to a gallop, as we neared the spot we met the scouts sent on a short distance in advance returning with a report that the village was empty. This proved to be the case, though fires were still smouldering in the houses, and further signs of recent occupation visible. By and by women and children were discovered, and from them we learnt what had occurred. The rumour of an armed force in the neighbourhood had provoked a scare, and the males had vanished; but they were Syrian Bedouins, some of those we had come to aid. But at length the

enemy fairly turned to bay, and in the open plain offered battle to the gendarmes. Down they rushed, knees almost level with their chins, spears poised for the thrust, matchlocks blazing, Sheiks yelling, and horses, maddened by the sharp irons, straining every nerve in the race. Halting and forming front our captain coolly waited until they were within two hundred yards of his line. Fire! Out rang the winchesters, volley upon volley. The next minute saw the ground strewn with dead and wounded Arabs, and a mass of panic-stricken warriors spurring for dear life from the swords of the victorious troopers.

Midhat's gendarmes were splendid soldiers, admirably mounted and equipped and regularly paid. Indeed the whole vilayet bore witness to the fact that the constitutional Grand Vizier made an excellent governor. Aleppo did not enjoy the same measure of sound administration. You could mark the difference the moment the arbitrarily drawn line which divided the two provinces was crossed. Poverty seemed suddenly to take the place of wealth; natives on the road kept close to our escort, who for their part were plainly on the alert, and not without reason judging from the suspicious appearance of more than one group of gentry encountered by the wayside. Ill-favoured-looking ruffians were most of them, their belts stuck round with antique pistols and formidable knives, their eyes gleaming sullenly as they lighted on the dreaded revolvers. It was quite painful to say good-bye to our smart Syrians. Their successors were of a very different type, badly horsed, badly clothed and armed, and irregularly paid. The country was at that period infested with Bedouins and Circassian thieves who went unpunished except when the exasperated villagers in sheer desperation resisted. "A nest of brigands that," observed our serjeant, whose graveyard cough struck mournfully on the ear, as he pointed to a cluster of the quaint sugar-loaf-shaped huts common in those regions, and whilst he spoke a number of tall, dark-browed men drew near. But they had no idea of attacking us. Our men, though only armed with old pattern carbines, were too strong for ruffians who seldom care, unless possessed of wolf-courage born of hunger, to risk a fair fight, and the fellows contented themselves with prowling about our horses on pilfering intent during the halt for lunch. Their hard-featured women too were apparently moved with the same spirit, but their gait was spiritless, and they appeared harshly used and half-starved.

Caught by a heavy rain when near a Circassian settlement, we made for the shelter and rather unceremoniously entered the Sheik's house, if the simple hovel innocent of glass and flooring could be so styled. Instantly the master spread on the floor for our greater ease rugs and carpets, and commenced hospitable preparations as though for expected guests, unangered by the presence of a clever pony which had picked his way inside to escape the pelting shower. Vainly we pleaded haste and a late breakfast; no excuse was accepted. Further refusal would have seemed churlish and caused offence, so we submitted to our fate and tasted those never-to-be-forgotten dainties. Then came in an old man with beard flowing down to his girdle, and tottering steps. Salaaming low, he stood with his hands humbly crossed on his bare, hairy breast. Tears were dropping from his eyes.

"What does it mean? Why is he crying?"

"This man, *effendim* (the Sheik's words were translated as literally as possible), was the father of one of two young girls, that woman crouching in the corner the mother of the other. Last year, during a passage of a party of the Haj, these girls were standing near a cattle trough which had just been filled with water. Some Persians rode up and let their horses drink. 'If you are going to use all the water you should pay us,' said one girl. The answer was a cut with the whip. 'Why do you strike the girl?' asked a villager, standing near. 'We will do worse,' cried the ruffians, and shot both girls dead."

The country was in flames at the outrage, and though the Aleppine authorities failed to catch the murderers, the Syrian gendarmes managed later on to lay hands on and lock them up in Damascus jail. Hearing this, the other Persian hadjis beset their consul's house, threatening to kill him if their companions were not immediately rescued. Terribly agitated the consul hurried off to the governor, and pleading fear of his life induced him to allow the transfer of the accused to the Persian prison on the express condition that they were to be again surrendered as soon as the pilgrims had departed. This promise was deliberately broken, the miscreants disappeared, and no satisfaction could be obtained.