

Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Tirol

Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

Fogg, William Perry

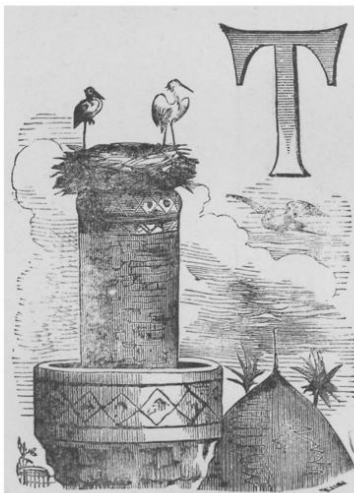
London [u.a.], [1875]

Chapter XVII. The city of the enchantress

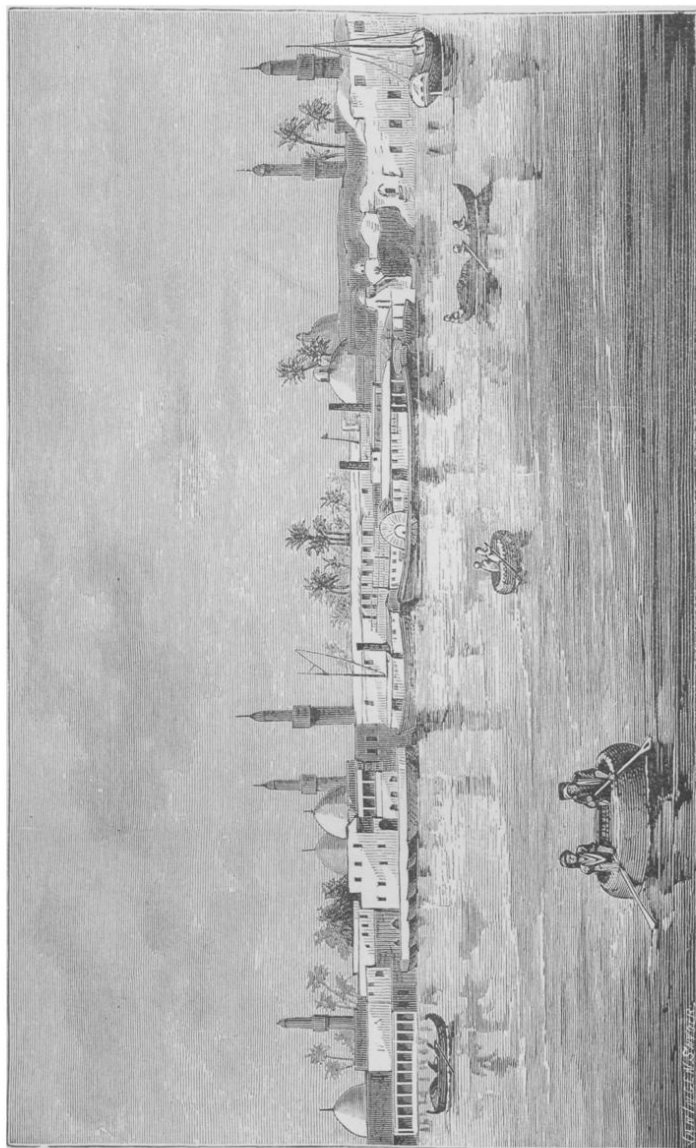
CHAPTER XVII.

THE CITY OF THE ENCHANTRESS.

Approach to Bagdad—Views of the River Front—The Residency—British Gunboat and Sepoys—The Goopha—A Unique Boat—The Kallek—Pasha's Palace—Arsenal—Half a Mosque—No Cook's Tourists—A Bird's Eye View—Kaithmain—Tomb of Zobeide—Akker-Goof—A Peep over the Scenes—Dwellings Unroofed—Domestic Life—Houses and Streets—Minar of the Storks—Reverent Birds—An Eclipse—Driving Away the Evil Spirits—Fakeers and Dervishes—Professors of the Black Art—Religious Jugglery—Repudiated by Intelligent Mahometans—Superstition of the Common People.



To receive a favorable impression of Bagdad, one should approach it, as it was my good fortune to do, in an early morning in Spring. For miles below we had been passing through groves of date palms and orange trees, and the fragrance of their blossoms was almost oppressive. The Tigris is here nearly half a mile wide, and flows in a broad, full stream, washing the buildings and gardens on either side. The city seems half buried in palm trees, which rise above the buildings in every direction, but far above the palms tower the cupolas and minarets, ornamented with colored glazed tiles, arranged in arabesque designs. The houses facing the river are



VIEW ON THE TIGRIS AT BAGDAD.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

not imposing in height or style of architecture. They are evidently dwellings and not places of business. The numerous lattices, projecting windows, and verandas looking out upon the stream, give them a picturesque and agreeable appearance. Many houses have small gardens facing the river, where one can see the bright spring flowers, and latticed awnings of wood or canvas, under which are seats and divans, suggestive of the coolness and comfort of an out-door lounge.

We steam slowly up the stream, past the Residency, with its beautiful garden, in which we see the uniform of Sepoy soldiers from India. In the river opposite the British Residency, is moored an English gunboat, the "Comet." Thus Great Britain everywhere in the East, leaves with her diplomatic representatives the emblems of her power by land and sea. The impression is a salutary one on both the people and the government. A short distance above we drop anchor near the custom house, where a floating bridge, resting on boats, spans the river. We are quickly surrounded by the most curious of boats, called *goophas*, which have been used on those rivers from the earliest times. Not even the original Noah's Ark would attract so much attention on the Thames or the Hudson as a Bagdad *goopha*. It is made of light wicker work and covered on the outside with a thick coating of black bitumen, and ornamented sometimes with cowrie shells. It is *perfectly round*, being slightly drawn in at the top, and from eight to ten feet in diameter. It suggested to me at once the nursery story about the "three wise men of Gotham who went to sea in a bowl." To an inexperienced eye it seems the most unmanageable of all boats,—but two men with short paddles propel it quite rapidly across the swift stream, and being light, its carrying capacity is very great. As many men as can

stand upright, or twenty sheep, and sometimes horses, are thus ferried across.

Near us there is moored to the bank another transport which is peculiar to the rivers of Mesopotamia. It is a raft of skins called a *kallek*, which has floated down the Tigris five hundred miles from Mosul. The timber and inflated goat skins of which it is composed, as well as the produce which forms its freight, all find a market in Bagdad.

Above the floating bridge, on the eastern bank, extend for a long distance the gardens and low buildings attached to the Pasha's palace. There one can see, scattered in groups over the grounds, or reclining on divans under the broad verandas, amidst wreaths of smoke, the officers and soldiers attached to the Governor's household. On the opposite shore is a large building with a tall smoke stack, the only un-Oriental object within sight. This is the government arsenal and machine shops, where they are constructing under the supervision of English engineers, a small iron war steamer. Still further up on the same side at the bend of the river, a singular object attracts our attention. It is a mosque cut in two by the undermining of the rapid current. One half its lofty dome still remains, leaving the innermost recesses of its places of prayer exposed to view.

This is the only interior of a temple sacred to Moslem worship which an unbeliever can see in Bagdad. The people here are not especially fanatics. The largest liberty in the exercise of their religion is granted to Jew and Christian, and this has been characteristic of Bagdad from the earliest times. It is rather pleasant to feel that I am outside and beyond the great stream of European travel. But when the enterprising Cook shall extend his "tours" in this direction, and the crowd of London cock-

neys, who follow in the wake of "Gaze & Co.," shall fill the streets, the power of *baksheesh* will probably open to the *Giaours* the most sacred precincts of the holy places.

To the stranger who arrives here by the river, the first impressions of Bagdad are curious sights, even if he has seen Cairo, Damascus, and Constantinople,—so that the charm of novelty lasts longer than in any other city in the East, and to describe a few of these is all that I shall attempt to do.

And first let me take the reader to the highest attainable point from whence the city can be viewed. It is the top of a half ruined minaret which overlooks the "cotton-thread market." The mosque to which it was once attached has all crumbled away and disappeared. The sacredness of the place being gone, we are permitted to climb its broken stairway to the gallery, about ninety feet from the ground, where six hundred years ago the *Muezzin* called the faithful to prayer.

From this point, we command a fine view of the whole city and surrounding country for miles in every direction. We trace the line of the crumbling walls which enclose an area of about six hundred and fifty acres, not over one-third of which is covered with buildings. Groves of palms and other trees fill large areas in the south-eastern part of the city, through which we can see the ruins of a once densely populated tract, as if nature was trying to cover from sight these sad relics of former grandeur. To the north and south as far as the eye can reach, the river, glistening in the morning sun, winds through dense groves of palm and orange trees, but in every other direction the desert sands come up to the very walls of the city. Six miles up the river the double gilded domes and four elegant minarets of *Kathmain*, rise high above the sombre foliage of the trees. This is the burial place of two

Imaums, direct descendants of Mahomet, and is visited every year by thousands of pilgrims, especially from Persia and India. A short distance from this shrine we see a pine-shaped cone of snowy whiteness which covers the tomb of Zobeide the lovely queen of Haroun-al-Raschid. Ten miles away, standing alone in the desert, is a tower one hundred and fifty feet in height called *Akker-goof*. A spiral way ascends on the outside, like the common ideal pictures of the tower of Babel. It is of great antiquity, and early travelers supposed it to be the work of the immediate descendants of Noah.

But while we have been scanning these interesting objects in the far distance, a scene is passing at our feet too characteristic of Bagdad to escape notice. The houses here are usually built two stories in height, with ranges of apartments opening into a square or inner court. Subterranean rooms called *serdaubs*, are occupied during the day for the shelter they afford from the intense heat, but the flat roofs are used for the evening meal and for sleeping on at night. From this lofty station hundreds of these bedrooms are exposed to view, and domestic scenes, illustrative of the habits and manners of the Bagdadées—such as we read of in Madrid, when “*Le Diable Boiteux*” unroofed the houses—are open before us. These people are early risers, and in most cases, it being now a few minutes after sunrise, the servants have rolled up the beds and carried them to the rooms below, to which the occupants have retired for the bath and to commence the occupations of the day. But a few late sleepers still linger on the terraces, and little suspect that the stranger is taking note of their movements.

The English traveler, Buckingham, who stood on this spot nearly fifty years ago, thus describes the scene in which half a century has produced no change. “Among

the more wealthy, the husband sleeps on a raised bedstead, made of light wicker work, called a *doeshick*. It has a mattress and cushions of silk or cotton, and covered by a thick quilt, but is without curtains or mosquito net. The night air is always dry, and towards morning there usually springs up a cool breeze that dies away soon after sunrise. The wife occupies a similar bed but always on the ground—that is, without a bedstead, and at a respectful distance from her husband. The children are scattered about on mattresses, and the slaves or servants sleep on mats, but all within sight of each other. In a few houses there are low parapets dividing off the sleeping apartments, but these are rare and probably occupied by Europeans. On retiring the natives do not divest themselves of the clothing worn during the day, except to lay aside the outer robes.”

“After rising the husband performs his devotions, and then seats himself on his carpet, where his wife serves him with a *chibouk* and coffee with her own hands, retiring at a respectful distance to wait for the cup, and sometimes with hands crossed, and even kissing his hand on receiving the cup from it—a mark of respect very common in the East. While the husband is lounging on the carpet or cushions enjoying his morning pipe the women of the family generally pray, going through the same forms and prostrations as the men, but the children under twelve years of age never join their devotions.”

But while we are lingering in our lofty perch the sun is getting uncomfortably hot, and we descend, groping our way down the dark stairway, and emerge into the narrow and crooked streets, as yet cool and shady. The walls on either side look solid and substantial. The building material is hard kilnburned bricks of a light dun color. Their rounded corners show that they have been used over and over again, taken from the ruins of one edifice to con-

struct another. New bricks are very rarely seen, and can readily be detected. The streets are narrow and unpaved and in wet weather are very muddy and disagreeable. There are few windows or other openings except heavy iron-clamped doors on the first stories, but *oriel*s, or projecting windows, frequently overhang the street, and you may chance to see a pair of bright eyes peering through the half closed lattice. Sometimes the projections cross the street and unite two houses on opposite sides.

As you glance within the open doors you frequently see the square court yard shaded by orange and lemon trees; or the leaning date palm overhangs the wall and its long pendant leaves droop down in the street. These date palms seem to spring up singly from the most crowded parts of the city, and must have a remarkable tenacity of life to flourish in such locations. They do not afford much shade, but their graceful forms and feathery leaves are a great relief to the eye.

On our way back to the *Khan* of Lynch & Co., we pass a tall minaret attached to a ruined mosque, called the "Minar of the Storks." On its summit these birds have built an enormous nest, and hold undisputed possession of the place. They are never molested, but held as sacred by all Moslems. During the winter months they migrate to some warmer clime, but it is firmly believed that at this time every year they make a pilgrimage to Mecca. These birds are so pious and reverent that if a number of persons cry out, "Allah!" "Allah!" as they fly overhead, they will drop to the ground and bury their heads in the earth. If once touched by human hands they never rise again but droop and die. I will not vouch for the truth of this, but the Mahometans all believe it most sincerely, and I have met Europeans of undoubted credibility, who assert that they have witnessed such a feat.

Shortly after my arrival, on the evening of the first of May, as we were dining at eight o'clock on the terrace, we were startled by a terrific din. We then noticed that there was a nearly total eclipse of the moon, and on consulting



THE ECLIPSE.—FRIGHTENING AWAY THE JIN.

an English almanac, we found that "it would be invisible at Greenwich, but a total eclipse in Australia and some parts of Asia." The tumult increased, and soon the whole population of Bagdad seemed to have assembled on the housetops, armed with pots, pans, and kitchen utensils, which they beat with a tremendous clatter, at the same time screaming and howling at the top of their voices. Frequent explosions of guns and pistols added to the turmoil, and it was kept up for nearly an hour, until they had succeeded in frightening away the *Jin*, or evil spirit, who had caught hold of the planet. It was a most amusing scene. Our own servants caught the excitement, and our host told us the next day that they well nigh knocked out

the bottoms of all his cooking utensils. It was a dozen New Years Eves, Fourth of Julys, and wedding serenades rolled into one, and the noise was sufficient to drive away a whole army of evil spirits, even at so great a distance.

The ignorant Mahometan population of Bagdad are exceedingly superstitious, and the Fakeers, Dervishes, and other mendicant orders, contrive to make a very comfortable living out of the charity of the faithful. The members of these societies do not openly or clamorously beg, although they do not refuse the gifts of the charitably disposed, but they elicit money by the performance of pretended miracles, giving charms against illness, wounds and evils of all kinds. One sect assert they are invulnerable to steel, and incapable of being burned by fire.

The Arabs are implicit believers in the efficacy of charms and other mystic arts. No species of knowledge is more venerated than that of the occult sciences, which afford maintenance to a vast number of quacks and ignorant pretenders. Some of the professors of the "black art" pretend to know what is passing in their absence, to expel evil spirits, cure diseases by laying on of hands, calm tempests at sea, and to be able to say their noon-day prayers at Mecca without stirring from their houses in Bagdad. A still lower class of mendicant *dervishes* and *mollahs* practice the art of jugglery, in which they are adepts. To the astonished spectators, they seem to pierce their bodies with spears, strike sharp pointed lances into their eyes, or leap from the roofs of houses upon poles shod with iron, which appear to run through their bodies, after which they are carried like spitted victims about the streets.

I have before described the weekly exhibitions of the dancing *dervishes* in Cairo, but their *howling* brethren in Bagdad far surpass these in wildness and frenzy. Edu-

cated and intelligent Mahometans repudiate these sects, but their hold on the ignorant and superstitious masses is so strong that not even the government dares interfere, except in extreme cases to preserve the public peace.

