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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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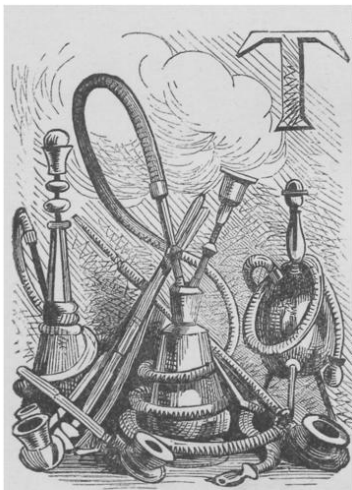
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Chapter XVIII. Street Scenes in Bagdad

CHAPTER XVIII.

STREET SCENES IN BAGDAD.

The Bazaars, Market Places, and Coffee Houses—The Water Carriers—Female Costumes—Beauty or Ugliness Safe Behind a Mask—A Glittering Picture—The Turkish Merchant—Camels, Mules, and Donkeys—The Narghileh—Persian Tobacco—Arabian Coffee—How it is Prepared—"Mocha" the only Variety—All others Classed as "Beans"—Social Amusements—Story Tellers—An Incident in Damascus—Backgammon—I Play with an Arabian Gentleman—I Lose and Propose to Pay the Score—Expressive Pantomime—Cheap Recreation—Honesty without a Precedent in Christian Lands—The Corn Market—Date Palms—Mahomet's Injunction—Bassorah Dates Unknown in America—A Delicious Fruit.



THE street scenes in Bagdad, the bazaars, market places, and coffee houses, are more unique and curious than any I have ever before seen. They deserve a more minute description than space will allow me to give. I have strolled through all parts of the city, at first accompanied by my servant, Yusef, but latterly alone, as I have become more familiar with the streets and localities. Every where I have been treated with civility, without the scowls that I have sometimes detected on the faces of the Chinese, when the "foreign barbarian" invades their seclusion. I

have picked up a few words of Arabic, but of course I cannot understand any comments or remarks that may be made by the people about me. It is a national trait of these Arabs and Turks, never to show any surprise or curiosity.

The bazaars in every Eastern town are interesting, and especially so here, where they are very extensive, and seem crowded at all hours of the day with the most varied and heterogeneous mass of humanity that the sun shines on. It can best be likened to the constantly changing views of a kaleidoscope.

Everywhere, in streets and bazaars, you meet trains of donkeys laden with water-skins. Many hundreds must be employed in this business, as all water used in the city is brought from the river in this manner. .

The attractions of bright colors and gaudy costumes all belong to the male sex. The street dress of the women is the extreme of ugliness, being the same hideous wrapper of black or white cotton, enveloping them from head to foot. Sometimes a dainty little yellow boot peeps out from under this disguise, and one is tempted with sacrilegious hand to lift the veil that *perhaps* conceals a face of ravishing beauty, such as romance associates with the ladies of Bagdad.

The females here wear in the street a peculiar black mask of thinly woven horse hair. It effectually conceals the face, but allows the free circulation of air, and through it they can see all that passes before them. Behind this friendly screen, youth and age, deformity and beauty, are alike safe from prying curiosity or insulting stare. I have sometimes laughed, when an accident has deranged one of these veils, to see behind it a face blacker than the mask itself.

The lower class of Arab women go abroad unveiled.

They are very ugly, their arms being tattooed with blue marks, and the married ones wearing on the side of one nostril a gold or silver ornament like an immense filigree-work button, and large anklets and bracelets of silver or brass, according to their means.

The indoor dress of the wealthy ladies of Bagdad is spoken of as singularly rich and beautiful in color and material, but as I have never had the good fortune to see the *penetralia* of a Turkish house, I shall not attempt to describe it.

These Eastern people are fond of any shade of red and other bright colors, and there is always a glittering stir, in which gay-colored flowing robes, shawled turbans, silver-hilted daggers, swords, and pistols, make up a lively picture. The Persian, the Bedouin, the Arab, the Turk, the Jew, and the Christian, each has his characteristic dress, and to describe all the different costumes that pass me every half hour, would fill a small volume.

The principal bazaars are in a triple range, and are shaded from the sun by a lofty, arched roof of brick and mortar. Each kind of merchandise and branch of trade has its own section. Here can be seen the beautiful fabrics of Persia and Cashmere, the jewels of India, the spices and perfumes of Arabia, and the more familiar manufactures of Europe. The languages spoken are as various as the costumes of the people.

In the center of a stall sits a bearded Turkish merchant, with his legs crossed under him, as stately and motionless as a statue, waiting with true Oriental resignation, while he slowly puffs his *chibouk*, for Providence to send him a customer. If you stop to look at his wares he silently displays the goods required, and names the price with seeming indifference whether you purchase or not. If you pass on without buying, he quietly resumes his pipe, and without

showing the least disappointment, he smokes on until another customer calls his attention.

The bazaars are none of them over twelve feet wide, and while we are gazing about, half bewildered at the curious scenes, we are in danger of being trampled on by a train of loaded camels, mules, or donkeys, or from the heels of a mettled Arab horse, whose rider, a Bedouin from the desert, looks neither to the right nor the left, but goes his way with an air of fierce independence, as if lord of the soil.

A long procession of donkeys loaded with wood, remind me of the lady in the "Arabian Nights," who by falsely attributing the wound in her cheek to a blow from the pannier of that animal, endangered the lives of the whole respectable community of wood drivers.

The coffee shops are very numerous, and on the large benches, covered with straw matting, there is always a crowd of loungers. I am told that wine, forbidden by the Koran, and *arrack*, a fiery spirit distilled from dates, are sold in many of these places, but I have never seen a person here who seemed intoxicated.

I have often stopped when alone, at one of these shops, where room would be made for me on one of the divans, and an attendant would bring a little egg cup, holding not over a tablespoonful of strong, black coffee of most delicious flavor. Then a *narghileh*—a supply of which is always kept ready for use. This pipe, which in India is called a *hookah*, and in Persia a *killion*, is made here in the form of a letter V without the long flexible tube common in Damascus and Constantinople. The mouth-piece is a reed, and the water through which the smoke passes is held in a large cocoanut shell. The tobacco used for the *narghileh* is of a peculiar kind, and is wet before being lighted, in doing which they always use a piece of live charcoal. The

smoke is deliciously cooled and purified by passing through scented rose water. For this entertainment, I pay at the coffee shops two *comrais*—about five cents.

The *narghileh* is as universally used among Europeans residing here, as by the natives. It is brought in after every meal, among the wealthy people being richly ornamented with silver, and placed upon a little stand by your side.

These two articles, coffee and tobacco, are so intimately associated with life in the East, that they may be called the habitual refreshment, and only want of a Turk or an Arab. They are the chief mediums of social communication and hospitality, being offered as a matter of course, to every visitor and stranger on his arrival.

The tobacco of Arabia and Persia is lighter colored and milder than that grown in Syria and Egypt. The soothing weed of Persia does not satisfy the craving of English residents here, accustomed to the use of wines and strong stimulants. They use *narghilehs* and *chibouks* only as preliminary to the more rank and powerful narcotic that has come across the Atlantic from Virginia.

The story of the wandering Arab who built his fire beneath a wild shrub on the edge of the desert, and thus first inhaled the delicious fragrance of the roasted berry, is probably as authentic as that told by the "gentle Elia" of the accidental burning of a Chinaman's house, by which "roast pig" came to the knowledge of mankind.

The reader may be curious to hear a little about Arabian coffee, and how it is prepared, although it may be tantalizing to a devoted lover of the fragrant berry. Palgrave, in his "Travels in Arabia," says that the *only real coffee* is that grown in the Arabian province of Yemen, and commonly called "Mocha," from its main port of exportation. Of this but a small proportion ever reaches the Mediterranean. It is picked over and over by hand, sifted and

resifted, the hard, rounded, half-transparent, greenish-brown berries being selected, grain by grain, for home consumption. It is only the flattened, opaque and whitish berries that find their way to Europe. According to this authority, the list of coffees begins and ends with "Mocha," and the produce of India, Java, and South America should be classified as *beans*. It is well in these days of rye and chicory that all of us have not so refined and delicate a taste as Palgrave.

In an Arab house, to prepare and pour the coffee is the special duty of a favorite servant, as it forms so important a part of the domestic economy of the household. A large coffee pot about two-thirds full of water is placed close to the fire and becomes gradually warm, while the other operations are in progress. Two or three handfuls of unroasted coffee are in the meantime taken from a niche in the wall close by, carefully picked over, and being poured into a large open iron ladle, are placed over the glowing charcoal. They crackle, redden, and smoke a little, but are withdrawn long before they turn black or become charred. They are then pounded in a mortar till they are coarsely broken, but not reduced to powder. A smaller coffee pot is then half filled with boiling water from the larger one, and the coffee poured into it. A few aromatic seeds or saffron are added, and the boiling process is not allowed to be long or vehement. Last of all the liquid is strained off through some fibres of the inner palm-bark, placed for that purpose in the spout. It is served very hot, in this country without sugar, in small cups which are never more than half filled. In Egypt and Syria it is made very sweet by adding sugar while boiling. It is considered etiquette to sip but a single mouthful, and return the cup to be frequently refilled. In the coffee shops the preparation is not so elaborate as here described, but the flavor

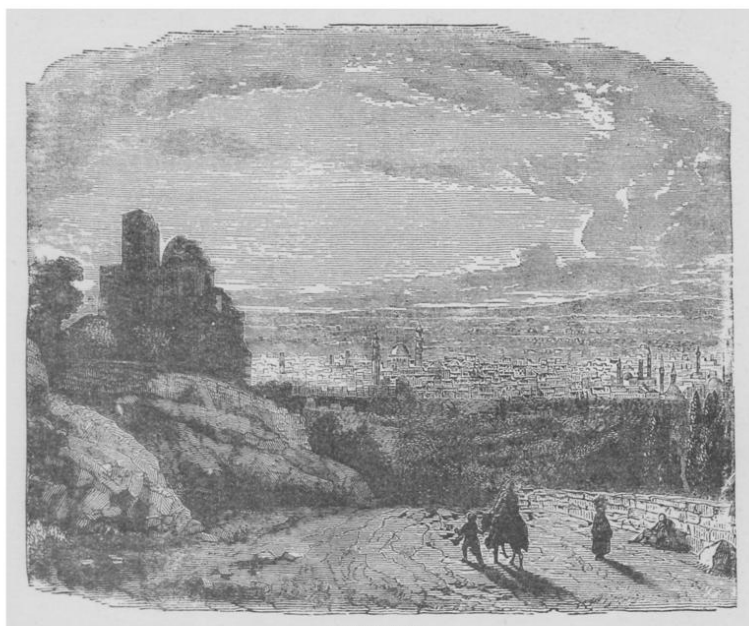
always seemed to me more delicate than any I ever tasted in Europe or America. Whether this is to be attributed to the mode of preparation or to the quality of the berry, I am unable to say.

The social amusements of the people, both here and in other Oriental cities, are very few and simple. Cards are unknown, but chess, draughts, and a game called *mangala*, are frequently played in the coffee houses, and in the open air around the market places. The latter game is by far the most common, and it consists of a table or board, with about a dozen holes, into which the players drop cowrie shells or small pebbles. The more domestic amusements are singing, dancing, and story telling. Of the latter they are excessively fond, and the professional reader, or teller of stories located in the golden age of the Caliphs, is sure of a circle of eager and attentive listeners.

Some years ago when in Damascus, which next to Bagdad is the most thoroughly Oriental city of the world, I strolled out one day alone, and entered a large public garden, where several hundred people of the better class were seated under the trees, enjoying the delicious coolness and shade. The waters of the Abana and the Pharpar, the beautiful rivers of Damascus flowed through the garden, and sparkled in many a fountain, as beautiful now as in the time of Naaman, the Syrian. I wore a *fez* and no one stared at me, although I was known, of course, to be a *Frank*, or European.

I stopped for a moment to watch a game being played by two well dressed Arabian gentlemen, which seemed identical with our common game of back-gammon, except that no boxes were used, the dice being thrown by the hand. Presently one of the players rose, and the other with a courteous salaam motioned me to the vacant seat. I accepted the invitation and played nine games, winning four

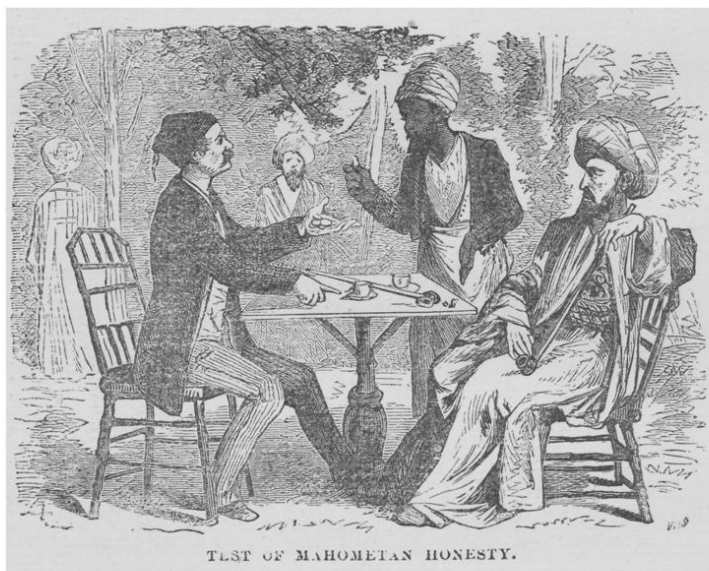
of them, but losing the others. In the meantime I ordered *narghilehs* and coffee for both of us. My opponent was very polite, and at the end of every game with its varying result, his pleasant nod and smile were as full of meaning as any words could possibly be. My knowledge of Arabic was very limited, and my companion could speak no French or English ; but whatever our conversation may have lacked in brilliancy was amply made up by the most ex-



DAMASCUS.

pressive pantomime. At the close of the play, the majority of the games being against me, I called the attendant, and being the losing party, I proposed according to Western customs, to pay the score. This my Arabian friend at first strenuously opposed, but I insisted, and holding out to the servant a dozen or more silver coins of various denom-

inations from a *piaster* (five cents) to a *mejeide* (about a dollar) I pointed to the *narghilehs* and coffee, and by pantomime, told him to take his pay. Having no definite idea of the proper charge, I should have been entirely satisfied if he had chosen the largest coin in my hand. To my surprise he selected a two-piaster piece. Thinking that he had made a mistake, I again pointed to the table, *narghilehs* and coffee, and held out my hand for him to take the proper sum. But he only made a low salaam, and held up the trifling coin as all right.



The result of such a trial to the honesty of a waiter in Europe or America can readily be imagined. In the one case he would certainly have selected the largest piece offered him—but in an American restaurant I fear the waiter would have shown his advance in knowledge since he landed on our shores, by taking all the coins in my hand, and perhaps asking for more.

Some whole streets in Bagdad are devoted to provisions and fruits. Rice, barley, and wheat are stored in great quantities in a quarter of the city called the "Corn Market." Oranges, melons, and cucumbers are very abundant, and many kinds of fruit of which I do not know even the names. But no one fruit as an article of food or commerce, compares in importance with the product of the date palm. It is sometimes called "the bread of the land, the staff of life, and the staple of commerce." Mahomet said to his followers, "Honor the palm tree for she is your mother." There are more than a dozen varieties of dates, the choicest being of a rich amber color and semi-transparent. The yearly product of a date tree is from one hundred to three hundred pounds, worth from four to ten dollars. Some of the date groves number thousands of trees, growing quite closely together, and requiring very little care or attention. The dates exported from Bassorah, near the mouth of the Euphrates, are very large and of fine quality. I am told that no Bassorah dates are sent to America. Our supply comes entirely from Muscat, which produces a smaller and inferior variety. This fruit, which when fresh is about the size of a large plum, is juicy and of delicious flavor. During the date season, August and September, it forms the staple article of food for all classes of people.

It bears no more resemblance in looks or taste to the mashed and sticky mass sewed up in matting, that is familiar to us under that name, than a bunch of fresh grapes to a box of raisins.