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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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London [u.a.], [1875]

Chapter XIX. The Pasha of Bagdad

CHAPTER XIX.

THE PASHA OF BAGDAD.

A Despotic Ruler over a Large Province—Inundation Threatened—The Pasha Equal to the Emergency—The Whole Population Impressed—My Credentials from the Grand Vizier—A Formidable Document—My Visit to the Pasha—The *Fez*—In Bagdad worn only by Turks—The Palace—Guards Everywhere—The Interviews—Personal Appearance of Redif Pasha—Complimentary Speeches—I Decline a Guard of Soldiers—Venality and Corruption of Officials—Improbable Stories—The “Far East” not Unlike the “Far West”—Dishonesty the Exception, not the Rule—The Christian Churches of Bagdad—An Armenian Bishop—“Yankee-*donia*,” an Arabic Word—A Jewish Family—The Wealth of the Jews their Protection—The Ex-King of Oude—The Richest Man in Bagdad.



HE Pasha of Bagdad is Governor of a Province three times as large as the State of New York, and containing a population of about two millions. He is an absolute and despotic ruler, subject only to his master, the Sultan of Turkey. He has the command of a large army stationed in Bagdad and other large towns within the Pashalic, which is bounded on the east and south by the Persian frontier and the Gulf. More than once, ambitious men holding this position so remote from Constantinople, have been suspected of designs to render themselves

independent sovereigns, as was successfully accomplished by Mohamet Ali, Pasha of Egypt. The present governor is Redif Pasha, who has occupied this post for about a year. He was a successful general in the late campaign of the Turkish army against the revolting Arab tribes in Yemen, and is a man of unquestioned energy and ability. As he is supposed to be hostile to foreign influence and projects within his province, he is not popular with the foreign residents and officials.

Since I have been here, he has had an opportunity to show his power as a despotic ruler, and has acted with a nerve and energy worthy of all praise. About two weeks ago the Tigris, which has been on the rampage for the past two months, reached a point unprecedented within ten years, and the city was threatened with inundation. The water broke through the dikes ten miles up the river, and the torrent swept down with irresistible force, doing great damage to crops, and in a single day turning the broad plain back of the city, into an immense lake. Since then Bagdad has been an island, having no communication with the country, except by boats. The water was only kept from flowing into the city by a broad embankment, or *sud*, just outside the walls, which in many places is out of repair. Great alarm was felt of such an inundation as occurred in 1831—the year of the plague—when seven thousand houses were undermined and fell in a single day.

Here was an emergency for prompt action. The Pasha issued an order closing all the bazaars and shops, and for four days impressed the whole male population (foreigners excepted) to work on the dikes. Half the force was sent up the river, and the balance set to work under the direction of the officials to repair the embankments around the city. I rode out in that direction one morning, and the scene was a lively one. Several thousand men were at

work, and the Pasha himself was on the spot, surrounded by a brilliantly uniformed staff, superintending the operations. These energetic measures saved the city. The break in the dike up the river was stopped and the water gradually subsided. But much sickness is sure to follow, as the lake outside evaporates under the scorching heat of the sun.

Before I left Cairo, at the suggestion of Mr. Beardsley, our Consul General to Egypt, who informed me that there were no American officials, ministers or consuls, in the countries I was about to visit, I enclosed a letter of introduction kindly given me by Hon. John M. Francis, late United States Minister to Greece, to the United States Minister at Constantinople, with the request that he would forward to me at Bagdad such credentials to the Pasha as would be of service in any excursions I might desire to make to Babylon or other places of interest in Mesopotamia. I found awaiting me at Bagdad an envelope of portentous size, containing a very polite note from Mr. Boker, and a *firman* from the Turkish Government. This document was addressed to the Pasha of Bagdad, and written in Turkish characters, on a large sheet of heavy official paper. The translation reads in English as follows :

"To Redif Pasha, Governor General of Bagdad :

"Excellency :—

"The bearer, an American Citizen of distinction, intends to resort to Bagdad in order to visit the country round that city. The American Legation has consequently requested me to address a letter of recommendation to your Excellency.

"The voyage of foreigners having always been considered as an object of protection and special deference, I request you to treat the said traveler with all honors on his arrival at Bagdad, and to afford him all possible facilities, under any circumstances, which may be in conformity with existing treaties ; and to extend to him your protection and hospitality.

"I am, Sir, etc., etc."

Seal of the Grand Vizier.

"Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Constantinople, Feb'y 19th, 1289." *

* (The date, 1289, being of the Hegira.)



THE WALLS AND MOAT OF BAGDAD.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

About a week after my arrival, armed with this formidable document, and escorted by two *Cawasses* from the Residency in showy uniforms, I started to pay my official visit to the Pasha.

Declining the offer of a horse, as the narrow streets and bazaars can be threaded with more convenience, if less ostentation, on foot, I proceeded to the *Serai*, or palace, accompanied by my armed escort, who cleared the way through the crowded streets with, as it seemed to me, unnecessary rudeness. But the officials strutted on, regardless of remarks, not complimentary, I fancy, hurled at them by persons whom they jostled out of the way. As a compliment to the official I was about to visit, I wore my Turkish *fez*—a plain red cap with long black tassel—such as are frequently worn by travelers in Egypt and Syria. In Cairo the *fez* is worn by every officer and soldier, from the Khedive down to the drummer boy. It is considered a matter of etiquette never to remove it at dinner, ball or opera, neither in the presence of the highest officials, nor in the mosque. Even the Sultan, when I saw him going from his palace on the Bosphorus to the mosque, wore a *fez*, in appearance the same, though perhaps of finer texture than that on the head of his meanest subject. But here in Bagdad the *fez* is considered the distinctive mark of a Turk; and it is seldom worn by foreigners, and never by a native Arab, unless he is in some way connected with the government. While wearing my *fez* in the streets of Bagdad, I have sometimes noticed a scowl as an Arab glanced towards me, such as I never saw when I had on my much more comfortable Indian *pith* hat, and was taken for an Englishman.

The Palace is not an imposing building, but its situation on the river's bank is very pleasant. Adjoining it are the barracks and arsenal, built a few years ago by a former

pasha,—large and handsome structures in modern style of architecture. The *Serai* is only occupied by the Pasha during the day for the transaction of business. An elegant palace two miles up the river, surrounded by gardens, is his private residence. Passing through the guards at the gate and an outer court, where several horses saddled and bridled were held by grooms, past more guards, we entered a large court-yard, filled with groups of soldiers and surrounded by long two-storied buildings, with verandas facing the court, occupied by officers and clerks. I sent in my credentials and card by one of the *cavasses* and requested an audience with his Excellency. He quickly



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returned, accompanied by a handsome young Turkish officer, *aid-de-camp* to the Pasha, who ushered me through an ante-chamber where several officers were waiting, the doors guarded by soldiers with fixed bayonets, into a large

and handsomely furnished audience room overlooking the river. Wide divans covered with silk ran around the lofty room, and the hangings over the doors and windows were heavy and of rich materials. The Pasha was seated at the further end of the apartment, and near him was a large table, on which were writing materials and piles of papers. As I advanced down the long room he rose to receive me, shook hands, and courteously motioned me to a seat beside him. He is a large man, tall and quite portly, perhaps forty-five years old, with a brown beard, full face, and eyes sharp and piercing. His dress was entirely European, except the *fez*, without even a button to indicate his rank. His countenance indicates energy and firmness, and his manners are very courteous and pleasant. Several officers of rank standing near were presented to me, but none were seated except the Pasha and myself.

As he spoke only Turkish and Arabic, Mr. Stanno, a Levantine in the service of the government, was summoned to act as interpreter. Our conversation was necessarily slow, but the questions and replies were very readily translated, and I felt quite at my ease. The Pasha enquired by what route I had come, how long I intended to stay, etc., and seemed gratified when I told him that I was better pleased with Bagdad than with Cairo or Constantinople. I took occasion to compliment him on the energy and efficiency of the measures he had taken to prevent an inundation. Taking up my credentials, which mentioned me in complimentary terms as a traveler, he made very intelligent enquiries regarding the countries I had visited, and seemed fully to comprehend that England and America are two distinct and separate countries. He kindly offered me every facility for seeing Bagdad, and said that, as I was the only American who had visited him, he hoped I should

receive a favorable impression. When I mentioned my plans for visiting the ruins of Babylon, he offered me an escort of soldiers, and letters to the governors of the different towns on the route. I accepted with thanks his offer of letters, but said that a guard of soldiers was quite unnecessary, as under his efficient rule the country was everywhere safe to a peaceful traveler.

In the meantime, a servant had brought in coffee and sherbet on a silver tray, and long, jasmine-stemmed *chibouks*. My audience lasted about an hour, and as I rose to take leave he again shook hands with me and renewed his offers of anything in his power to render my visit to Bagdad pleasant.

I left with a very agreeable impression of the courtesy and politeness of a Turkish Pasha. The next day Mr. Stanno brought me a document in Turkish, similar in appearance to the one before given, addressed to the governors and other officials on the route to Hillah and Babylon, and commending the "American Traveler" in the strongest terms to their attentions and protection. How this *firman*, which I still retain as a souvenir of my journey, saved my life, perhaps, in a position of great difficulty and danger, will be told hereafter.

The traveler in the East often hears the most extravagant statements as to the venality and corruption of officials—that they are open to bribery from the highest to the lowest,—that foreign goods are admitted without paying duties,—that fraudulent contracts are made in behalf of the government, etc. I have heard of a former Pasha of Bagdad who paid off his soldiers in tobacco and soap at exorbitant prices, which the poor fellows were obliged to dispose of in the bazaars at half their cost. A story was once told me with a sober face, that a Persian governor of Bushire once cleared off the arrears due his

men with *bricks*, a species of "hard currency" not convenient to handle, but easy to obtain in a town where half the buildings are in ruins. I cannot put faith in such stories. An Englishman's standard of official integrity is very high, and I honor them for it. But it is hardly fair to judge an Oriental people by their ideal. Government officers are nowhere in this country held to such strict accountability as in Europe.

The rulers of provinces distant from the home government, and with difficult means of communication, are especially liable to temptation, with no fear of "Investigating Committees" before their eyes. And yet I believe that dishonesty is the exception, not the rule.

Corrupt officials are not the exclusive outgrowth of Oriental barbarism. As extremes sometimes meet, the "far East" and the "far West" may have much in common. Pashas as well as Members of Congress sometimes get rich during their terms of office. The Turk feels justified in pocketing a "retainer," and so does the M. C. But it is neither charitable nor just to infer that all officials on either continent are equally corrupt.

The person who is always on the lookout for a rogue is apt to overlook an honest man when he meets him. It has been my good fortune to meet a large proportion of honest and conscientious people of every nationality, in different parts of the world. A far pleasanter retrospect this will ever be to me, than a long row of thieves and rascals, whom I might perhaps have detected, had my attention been specially directed to the dark side of human nature.

Every Sunday morning the English Episcopal service is read by Colonel Herbert at the Residency, to a congregation of about twenty persons, which comprises nearly the whole Protestant-population at Bagdad. I visited the different Christian places of worship one Sunday afternoon

with Doctor Colvill, who has resided here for a long time, and speaks Arabic and Persian like a native. In the East no class of foreigners have so much influence as physicians. The doctor is welcome alike in the *Khan* of the wealthy merchant and the tent of the Bedouin Sheik.

We first called at the Latin (Catholic) church, attached to which is a school for children. The entrance is through a heavy iron-studded door in a blank wall, then a narrow passage leads to a court, in which are the church and school buildings. The priests are French and their flock is composed of the few residents in Bagdad from the Catholic countries of Europe, some of whom are married to native women. The church is neatly fitted up, with the usual tinsel decorations on the altar, and there are several paintings on the walls, none of any especial merit, except one of the Virgin and child, of which the priests are very proud.

From here we went to the Chaldean and Armenian Churches, of which there are two distinct sects. The orthodox Armenians comprise many of the oldest and wealthiest Christian families.

The other Church of this ancient race acknowledges the Pope as its spiritual head, and includes within its fold a large population of Chaldeans and Copts. This church is large and handsome. Adjoining is the residence of the Bishop upon whom we called, and Dr. C. being his special friend, we were received and entertained with much honor. The Bishop is a fine looking man, wearing a full black beard, with a bright intelligent face and courteous manners. He was dressed in a robe of purple silk, with cap and shoes of the same color. He visited Rome at the time of the Ecumenical Council five years ago, and was invested with the rank of a Cardinal. He is the head of all the churches of his denominations in Arabia. Coffee

and cigarettes were brought according to the universal custom, and the Doctor acting as interpreter, a very interesting conversation followed. I was introduced as an American, and the Bishop expressed a great desire to visit that country, and was only prevented from fear of the stormy Atlantic. During the interview I detected the word "Yankeedonia," and my friend, being a native of the "land o' cakes," I supposed it was of his own invention to signify America. But I learned that this is a proper Arabic word and means the "New World."

Leaving the Christian prelate, we next called at the house of a wealthy Jew, and were presented to the whole family, from the aged patriarchal grandfather, down to the youngest children, with each of whom we in turn shook hands. They were very hospitable and polite, the ladies were quite good looking, and the children handsome and well bred. One of the ladies was disfigured by the "date mark," a scar the size and shape of a date, resulting from a boil, to which all the people of this country are subject once in their lifetime. Every European who remains here any length of time has to pass through this ordeal. When it appears on the face the scar it leaves is especially unfortunate.

The Jewish population of Bagdad is about twenty thousand. Here as elsewhere, they are the principal *serafs*, or money changers, and brokers, and are confidentially employed by all classes in the money transactions of the place. Their great wealth, which in former times was a temptation to rob and oppress them, now commands the respect even of the most bigoted Turk and Mohametan.

Our last call was on the ex-King of Oude, who is called here *The Nawab*. He is very rich, and besides his private fortune, receives a pension of \$60,000 a year from the English Government. His name is *Akbar-ood-Dowlah*, and he

is addressed officially as "His Royal Highness." His house and grounds are on the banks of the Tigris and very beautiful. He fortunately yielded his royal dignities and palaces in Lucknow to the English, before the breaking out of the Sepoy rebellion, and has ever since resided here, enjoying the protection of a British subject. The *Nawab* entertained us with coffee, sherbet and *narghilehs*. He understands English and has traveled all over Europe. In England he was received by the Queen with the honors due to his former rank. He is an old man of about sixty-five, but still active and vigorous, and has the courteous manners of a cultivated gentleman.