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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter XXI. Excursion to Babylon

CHAPTER XXI.

EXCURSION TO BABYLON.

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THE site of ancient Babylon is on the Euphrates, about sixty miles southwest from Bagdad. The ruins cover a large tract on both sides of the river, and near them is built the modern town of Hillah. The country lying between the Tigris and the Euphrates, except a narrow belt bordering on each stream, is now a sandy desert. In ancient times this great plain was most populous and

fertile, covered with groves of palm trees and beautiful gardens. A complete network of canals and water courses spread over the plain carrying fertility to hundreds of

towns and villages, which are now heaps of rubbish. These canals were neglected and became gradually choked up, vegetation ceased, and a vast arid desert, parched by the burning sun, in time replaced the fertile gardens and teeming population of this part of Mesopotamia.

But Babylon, though in ruins, is classic, indeed sacred ground. Here was the resting place of the first families of our race. Here Nimrod built his tower to Belus, and called down upon himself the wrath of the Almighty. In these deserted halls Nebuchadnezzar boasted of the glories of his capital, and was punished for his pride. Here Belshazzar feasted and beheld the writing on the wall, while the victorious Persian was thundering at his gates.

My excursion to these great ruins was undertaken under difficulties, and had nearly ended in disaster to myself. In some villages a few miles below Hillah, a disease, rapid and fatal in its effects, had lately made its appearance, which had been pronounced to be *the plague*, and the panic had spread even to Bagdad. It was rumored that a quarantine would soon be declared, cutting off communication with all that neighborhood, to prevent the spread of this terrible disease. It was now the second week in May, and the weather would soon be too hot to make such an excursion possible. My friend, Mr. Finnis, could not accompany me, and I must either give up my project, or go alone. But to visit this country without seeing Babylon would be leaving the part of Hamlet out of the play, and after considerable hesitation, I decided to go, trusting to my uniform good fortune to see me safely through.

My friends were by no means agreed as to the prudence of this decision, some predicting difficulty from the flood as well as the threatened pestilence. The unprecedented high water in both rivers had flooded some portions of the plains, and I must be prepared to wade, or perhaps to

swim. This, however, did not frighten me, but what was more to be dreaded, was being caught within the *cordon* of the quarantine, in case one should suddenly be declared.

This matter of quarantine is one of the things most to be dreaded in Turkey. Once on the wrong side of the line, and not even all the power of the Pasha could save me until I had served out the forty days.

On the other hand it was not fully decided that the disease was the plague, and a commission of medical men were to start in a few days for the infected district. It did not seem probable that any quarantine would be established until their report was received, and this was the impression in official circles when I called at the palace to make inquiries. The Pasha's Secretary assured me that I should have a week before the commission returned, which was all the time I required.

My preparations being made, and armed with credentials from the Pasha and letters to the Nāwāb, Agha-Dowlah, a wealthy Indian nabob residing at Kerbella, I found myself on Tuesday morning before sunrise, in a *goopha* with my servant and guide, Yusef, and all my baggage, to cross the Tigris to the west side where our horses had been taken the day before. As I gaily said *au revoir* to the friends who had come down to see me start, I had for a moment the feeling that I was taking too much risk. But it was now too late to turn back, nor was I inclined to show the *white feather*. We were quickly paddled across the rapid stream, and found Hassan, our Arab muleteer, waiting with two horses and a pack mule on the opposite bank. I had left preparation of the outfit to Yusef, whose experience in such matters rendered him thoroughly competent to manage my small caravan. He is a Mosulie Christian, from near Mosul, far up the Tigris, a man of energy and resource equal to any emergency, well acquainted with all

the places on our route, and speaks Arabic, Persian, and Turkish, as well as sufficient English to make himself understood. As the "traps" are being landed from the *goopha*, under his direction, let us take an inventory of the outfit: An English saddle, bridle, riding whip, and sun umbrella; a thin cotton mattress, quilt and pillow, rolled up tightly in a Persian carpet and around it a waterproof blanket; a small satchel containing a change of clothing and a few toilet articles of the simplest campaign character. Next come large Arab saddle-bags, well stuffed with the commissary stores, tea, sugar, coffee, salt, knife, fork and spoon, cold chicken and sandwiches, half a dozen bottles Bass' ale, one ditto brandy, a tin tea-pot, and a supply of Persian tobacco for my *chibouk*; then two unglazed water jars, called *cudjees*. My kind and hospitable friends seem determined that I shall be neither hungry or thirsty on the desert. The last articles are a large clumsy Arab saddle for Yusef, and a roll containing his bed clothing. My own kit is all white, an Indian pith hat, and high riding boots.

My horse was first saddled, and mounting my "Arab steed," I watched with curiosity the operation of packing these various sized bundles upon the mule. The art seems to be to arrange all into pairs as nearly equal as possible in weight, so as to balance each other on the animal, then tie them on so securely that if he should take a notion to lie down in the road, or bolt off at a tangent with heels in the air, he cannot get rid of his load. All being secured Hassan climbs up from the rear, perches himself on the top, guiding the mule with a halter decorated with cowrie shells, and in his hand a persuasive argument in the shape of a stout, sharp-pointed stick.

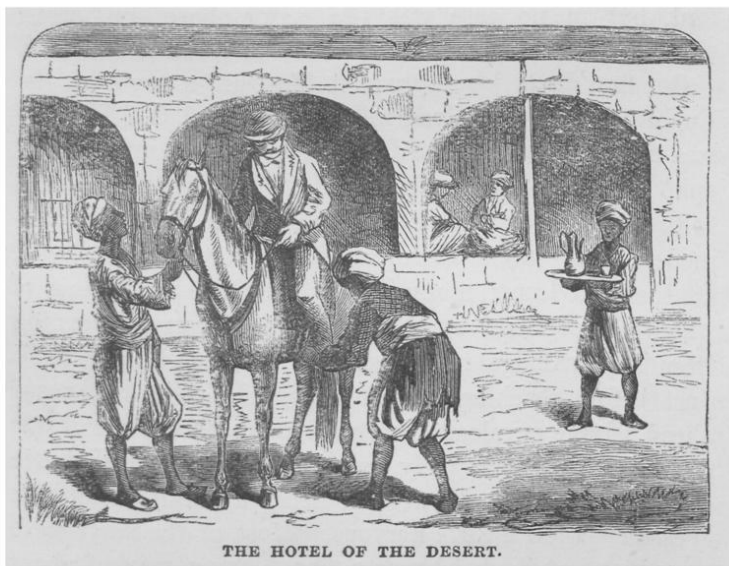
We thread the narrow streets single file, Yusef leading the way, and the sun is just rising as we pass through a gateway in the half ruined wall, and emerge upon the open

plain. These Eastern people are early risers, and the road is already alive with caravans—camels, horses, mules and donkeys by the hundred—Arabs on foot, leading pack animals with enormous loads of fresh cut grass or faggots towards the city—Bedouin horsemen scouring along the road, armed with guns, swords, or long, quivering spears. They pass us at full speed without deigning a glance, their long, dark *abbas*, or cloaks, and the ends of bright *kaffeahs* tied round their heads, streaming out behind like banners.

Our course for the first hour is along the river's bank, among date groves and through fields of waving corn. Then diverging to the right, leaving behind the strip of cultivated land, all vegetation disappears, and we are fairly launched upon the desert. It rained last night and there is no dust, the road is a mere track across the sandy plain, and, exhilarated by the pure, clear air and the novelty of the situation, I touch my horse with the spur and he darts ahead at a fast gallop, leaving my little caravan far behind. A caravanseraï is within sight four or five miles ahead, a conspicuous object standing alone in the desert, and here in the shade of its low walls I wait for them to come up.

These *Khans* are built at intervals of six or eight miles along all the main roads throughout Arabia and Persia for the free accommodation of travelers. They are usually of brick, one story in height, with an open court in the centre. The gates are very heavy and strongly barred, and the outer walls are loopholed. The arrangements inside are most primitive. Stone or brick platforms about five feet from the ground, covered with an arched roof for protection from the sun and rain, and open to the courtyard, where the animals are secured, are the only apartments they furnish. On these the traveler spreads his carpet and makes himself at home. On his ar-

rival here, no dashing hotel clerk holds out a pen for him to register his name, nor scans with lordly disdain his dusty and travel-stained garments, while the poor fellow submissively waits to be shown to the meanest room in the topmost story.



THE HOTEL OF THE DESERT.

As I ride through the arched gateway of the *Khan-a-Ziad* an Arab holds the stirrup for me to dismount, loosens the saddle girth and walks my horse slowly up and down in the shade. Another piles some fresh cut grass on the stone platform, on which I sit while he brings me a small cup of strong black coffee. Then he offers me a bowl of fresh water or sweet milk, and brings a live coal to light my *chibouk*. Not a word is said except the first respectful salutation of "*Salaamar*."

Soon after Yusef and Hassan came up, took their coffee, and in half an hour we were again on the road. As Yusef paid the bill I noticed how pitiful a sum it was, and told

him to give them as much more for *baksheesh*. A short distance beyond this *Khan* we came to a *wallah*, or hollow place, nearly a hundred yards in width, which the Tigris, overflowing its banks, had filled with water. This, and several others in the course of the day, we were obliged to ford, but in no case was the water above our horses' girths, so that they were not considered a serious obstacle.

Our first day's journey was to Moseyib, a town on the Euphrates, forty very long miles from Bagdad. The sun was now getting hot, and I began to feel its influence in spite of pith hat and umbrella. Leaving Yusef as a guard to the pack mule, I pushed on towards the Khan Moham-medeah, half way to Moseyib, which I reached about noon. On the road I met many parties on horse-back, most of whom I recognized by their dress as Persians returning from a pilgrimage to the shrines at Kerbella and Kifil. Just before reaching the half-way *Khan* I discovered ahead a large cavalcade, and as it approached I saw it was no ordinary caravan. My servants were a long distance behind, and my only weapon being a small "Smith & Wesson" I felt a little nervous. Most of the party were armed, and at the head rode a fine looking man of about thirty, mounted on a beautiful full-blood Arab horse. As he came up I touched my hat with a courteous *salaam*, and was startled at his suddenly reining up, and saluting me in English with "Good morning, sir; are you going to Hillah?" We exchanged a few words and rode on. In the center of his armed band, and surrounded by black servants, was a large *howdah*, covered with bright scarlet cloth and carried on four mules. Through the partly open curtains I could see that it contained his wife, and as I passed I caught just a glimpse of a pair of flashing black eyes peeping curiously out from beneath a veil that covered her face. I knew it would be resented as an insult to stare in that

direction, or to turn in my saddle and look back. Behind the *howdah* were several females, probably servants, riding on mules, and seated on double panniers of light wicker-work. A dozen or more well-armed horsemen brought up the rear. It was the Nāwāb Agha-Dowlah, to whom I had letters, coming from Kerbella to Bagdad. When the Nāwāb met Yusef and ascertained who I was, he sent a man back with his compliments and regrets that he should be absent, and said that so soon as he reached Bagdad he should telegraph to his steward to place his house at Kerbella at my service.

We stopped but a short time at the Khan Mohammedah, as we had the hardest and hottest six hours ride yet before us, and it was necessary to reach Moseyib before dark, so as to secure a boat for the night to go through the Kerbella canal. The sun was pouring down its fiercest rays and the air seemed stifling. I stopped at two other *Khans* only long enough to secure a cup of coffee, while I waited in the shade for Yusef and Hassan to come up.

During this afternoon's ride I saw for the first time the wonderful effects of a *mirage on a desert*. Far away across the sandy plain, under the quivering rays of the sun, was a *Khan*, but between me and it was a river, which receded as I approached, and then suddenly disappeared, as if by magic. The deception was so complete that I thought several times that the Euphrates was in sight. Then the exhibition took another form. Clumps of palm trees and long processions of camels could be seen raised several degrees above the horizon. These objects were usually reversed, the trees upside down, and the camels standing upon their heads. I can realize now what I have often read of the poor weary and thirsty traveler on the desert, who sees before him the green oasis and sparkling water, enticing him

on with tantalizing mockery, then suddenly vanish, leaving him to drop down exhausted and perish.

It was after sunset when we reached Moseyib, a large town surrounded by palm trees and gardens. Riding through the narrow streets and bazaars, down to the banks of the river, we stopped at the guard-house, where a crazy bridge of boats crossed the Euphrates to the house of the governor on the opposite shore. I sent Yusef with my letter from the Pasha of Bagdad, and requested the governor to furnish me a boat for the canal. Yusef speedily returned with the message—"The governor send plenty salaams, and says you have boat in half an hour." A large *marhallah*, or river boat, of eighteen or twenty tons, was promptly forthcoming. My carpet and mattress were spread upon her deck, and I threw myself down completely exhausted with my twelve hours' ride. Yusef prepared for me a cup of tea, but I was too tired to eat.

My plans were to go that night to Kerbella, where I should spend the next day, and thence by the Hindeah canal the next night to Kufil, the ancient capital of the Kufic Empire, and to Kifil, where there is a shrine very sacred to Mahometans, being the burial place of Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet. Our horses, under the care of Hassan, were to meet us at a place called Nejif, whence we could ride to Hillah and the ruins of Babylon.

But now Hassan comes in a fright, having been told that the Turkish soldiers are seizing all the horses in the neighborhood. So I again dispatch Yusef to the governor with my compliments, and a request for a protection for my animals as far as Nejif. He returns with the startling news that the governor has just received a telegram from Bagdad, declaring Hillah in quarantine, as the plague has broken out in that town; but I might go as far as Kerbella, that place being outside the *cordon sanitaire*. Here was a

dilemma. Prudence dictated an immediate return to Bagdad, but pride and a desire and hope to yet see Babylon opposed that course. I appealed to my man Friday. "Now Yusef, what shall we do?" "Whatever you please, Sahib," was his reply. "Are you not afraid of the plague?" "No, Sahib, no fear it, no catch it." I commended Yusef's philosophy, and determined to push on that night for Kerbella, a very interesting place, almost within sight of the Birs Nimroud, or the tower of Babel, see what I could the next day, and return the night after to the horses. Our luggage was all on board, and in five minutes more we were off toward the "infected district."

The boatmen hoist the large lateen sail, and we cross the rapid stream diagonally towards the mouth of the Kerbella canal. I can just discern in the dim twilight, the plain where more than twenty centuries ago the battle of Cunaxa was fought, which proved so disastrous to the younger Cyrus, as minutely described by Xenophon in the *Anabasis*. Visions of that text book, whose smooth and elegant Greek was never a hard task in my younger days, rise before me, and I wonder whether the unfortunate expedition against Babylon in which the 'ten thousand' took part is not an unlucky omen for my present raid in that direction. And shall I be as fortunate in my retreat as were the Greeks under the wise leadership of Xenophon.

Once under weigh I half repented my decision, but it was now too late to turn back. Yusef filled and lit my *chibouk*, and I made myself as comfortable as circumstances would permit. The *marhallah* was drawn by four Arab trackers, who walked along the bank pulling the heavy boat by a long rope attached to the mast.

The *Reis*, or captain, was close behind me steering the boat, and continually shouting to the trackers on the bank,

whose monotonous chanting was by no means soothing to the weary traveler.

As we passed through the mud villages hundreds of dogs took part in the concert, which was varied on the open plains by the howling of jackals, whose cries at times were a perfect imitation of the wailing of infant children. Add to all these, the blood-thirsty *zip* of mosquitoes by the million, and it can easily be seen that in spite of fatigue, sleep was impossible.

The night was warm and clear, and for hours I gazed up at the bright stars overhead, my only coverlid, and recalled the incidents, as related to me by an old resident, almost the only European survivor, of the plague of 1831, which in two months carried off one hundred thousand of the inhabitants of Bagdad.

The people of the West have no conception of the horror which the very name of the *plague* suggests to Oriental nations. We think of it only as a disease which in remote ages afflicted humanity—or possibly we may remember reading of the “great fire” and the plague, which within the same century ravaged London, over two hundred years ago. But in several countries of the East the plague is endemic, and the dread of it is ever present. Scarcely a year passes that some alarm or rumors of this frightful disease do not spread through Persia and Arabia, or the Turkish ports of the Mediterranean. It is strictly contagious, very rapid in its progress, and fatal with two-thirds of the persons attacked. Complete isolation is the only preventive, and upon its appearance the people shut themselves up in their houses, provisioned as for a siege, and hold no communication with friends or neighbors until the “Angel of death” has passed by.

In the Spring of 1831, when the plague broke out in Bagdad, the city contained about one hundred and fifty

thousand inhabitants. The ruling governor, Daoud-Pasha, had largely increased his army, and being ambitious and very popular, he was suspected of an intention to throw off the yoke of the Sultan, and follow the successful example of Mohamet Ali in Egypt. He kept up a brilliant court, encouraged commerce, and the city was rapidly increasing in population and wealth.

The terrible disease was brought by Persian pilgrims to Kerbella, and a more frightful detail of human suffering can hardly be found on the page of history. The Pasha, by a mistaken policy, to prevent undue alarm, prevented the egress of those who would have fled, so that the disease had full scope within the city walls. The daily mortality rapidly increased to five thousand; many houses were emptied, and no one was to be met, except the persons employed to drag to the river's bank the dead bodies thrown over the walls of the dwellings into the streets. Many dying parents exposed their young children in the streets, hoping to attract the sympathy of the charitable; but at such a time all feelings of humanity seemed deadened, and the helpless little creatures were left to perish.

When the mortality was at its height, the misery of the wretched inhabitants was increased by the river overflowing its banks, bursting through the walls and undermining the mud-built foundations of the houses, of which seven thousand fell in a single day, burying in their ruins many of the sick, the dying and the dead.

Nor was the Pasha better off than his subjects. His palace was in ruins; his guards were dead, or had fled, and he was indebted to the bounty of a poor fisherman for a little food to save him from starvation. The British Minister and his family escaped down the river. Of the eighteen Sepoys and servants left at the Residency, but two survived, and some whole sections of the city were left

without a single inhabitant. Other towns in the neighborhood suffered frightfully. Hillah, which contained ten thousand people, was entirely depopulated. Some, no doubt, had fled, but the greater number fell victims to the disease.

Such are some of the horrible details of the pestilence in 1831, within the memory of many of the inhabitants of Bagdad now living. In 1772 the plague was still more destructive of human life. At that time it is supposed that over a million people perished in this section of Arabia and Persia.

Revolving such pleasant fancies in mind, I lay awake until long past midnight. But tired nature at last triumphed, and I fell into a sound sleep. I awoke with a start to find the bright sun shining in my eyes, and Yusef standing by with a cup of coffee in one hand, and my lighted *chibouk* in the other.