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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter XXII. Hospitalities in Babylon

CHAPTER XXII.

HOSPITALITIES IN BABYLON.

Arrival at Kerbella—A Hospitable Reception—The Nāwāb's Palace—Shrines of Kerbella—Mosque of Abbas—"Clay of the Saints"—Indian Nabobs as British Subjects—Visit in State to the Bazaars—We Call on the Ex-Queen of India—A Royal Indian Entertainment—Sweetmeats and Hubble Bubbles—Babylon as Described by Herodotus and Benjamin of Tudela—The Ruins, as they appear To-Day—The Three Great Mounds—Last Relic of the Hanging Gardens—An Arab Tradition—Daniel's Lion—The Birs Nimroud, or Tower of Babel—Burial Place of Ali—I Commence my Retreat—Stopped by a Turkish Governor—Alarming Intelligence—Ordered Back to Kerbella—I am Inside the Quarantine.



O my great surprise I found that we had already reached Kerbella. My *marhallah* was moored alongside many other boats of various kinds, and all around us were the bustle and activity of a large town. After a simple "canal toilet" I followed Yusef to the residence of the Nāwāb, where I found every preparation had been made for my comfort by Mirzah, the head steward, to whom the hospitable proprietor had sent a telegram the night before.

Refreshed by a bath and two hours sleep in a cool, darkened room, I was invited to a breakfast of coffee, sweets,

and a great variety of curious dishes. Then Mirzah showed me through the different apartments of the house, which is the finest in Kerbella. That portion occupied by the ladies, called the *harem*, was separated by a wall from the reception rooms for male visitors, and was built round an open court, paved with marble, in the center of which was a beautiful fountain. We passed through these elegantly furnished rooms, now unoccupied, to the top of the house, from which we had a fine view of the city.

Kerbella is a great resort of pilgrims from Persia and India. These Mahometans are all of the *Sheah* sect, who revere the memory of Ali almost as much as the Prophet himself. In this place are two very sacred shrines of Abbas and of Hassein, grandsons of Mahomet, who are buried here and worshiped as saints. Thousands of the devout come here to die, as the Hindoos resort to Benares, their sacred city, to drown themselves in the Ganges. The two mosques containing the ashes of these saints are very beautiful. I could only see the outside, as no "dog of an unbeliever" is ever permitted to enter the sacred precincts. The mosque of Abbas has an immense dome and one of its minarets is entirely covered with plates of burnished gold. The dome and minarets of the other mosque are beautifully ornamented with glazed tiles of various colors arranged in arabesque designs, and with passages from the Koran. No mosque in Cairo, Damascus, or Constantinople will compare with these in richness of exterior decoration. From the number of devotees buried at Kerbella, the soil is full of human bones. Pilgrims carry away as relics small pieces of the "clay of the saints," upon which they rest their foreheads in saying their prayers.

Here is the residence of several hundred nabobs from India, some of whom are very wealthy. Many of these are from Lucknow the capital of Oude and were relatives of

the former ruling princes of that province. When the English seized that most important kingdom in India, they granted liberal pensions to all connected with the royal family. They reside here, protected as British subjects, and are all Mohametans of the same sect as the Persians.

After breakfast I was called upon by another Nāwāb, who proposed to show me through the bazaars. Our procession as we passed along the crowded streets was decidedly showy. My ideas of republican simplicity were rather shocked at the uncereemonious manner in which the *Cawasses*, who marched ahead, armed with swords and in showy uniform, pushed aside the people. Next came the stranger with a dignitary on either side, and a dozen or more servants and *Cawasses* brought up the rear. The bazaars were very interesting, but I was myself too much an object of curiosity to make it comfortable to stop and examine the shops. I presume at that time there was not another European or foreigner nearer than Bagdad.

On our way back, we stopped to call on the widow of one of the ex-kings of India—an old lady over eighty years of age. She receives a pension of six thousand rupees (three thousand dollars) a month from the English government, and maintains a large establishment. Of course, I did not see the ex-queen herself—that would not be according to etiquette—but as I was being conducted through a long passage towards the reception room, I caught a glimpse of a very old and wrinkled face peering through a half opened door, and am inclined to think that she saw *me*. I was received by her brother and cousins, and seated myself on a cushion placed upon a large Persian carpet. Five or six officers of high rank were located around me on the carpet, while those of lower grade sat upon the marble floor farther down the room.

After exchanging elaborate salaams, coffee was brought

in and offered to me on a silver tray, then a dish of preserved fruit. A *narghileh* came next, richly decorated with gold and silver filagree work, and prepared with rose-scented water. Supposing this to be the end of the entertainment, I now made a movement toward my hat—but my conductors politely intimated that more was yet to come, so I resigned myself to see the end of the play.

A large tray was brought in, on which was a bowl of pink-colored sherbet, from which the servant filled a glass with a curiously carved ladle of sandal wood; and some very sweet cakes were a part of this course. Again came the "hubble-bubble" pipe, but this time of a different pattern. The last course consisted of four dishes of sweetmeats, which were urged upon me by my hosts, as especially *Indian* preparations; so as a matter of courtesy I had to taste of each. It is impossible to describe them, or to tell of what they were made, but they certainly were very delicious. Another bowl of sherbet of a different color and flavor, and then a *chibouk* with amber mouthpiece and long jasmine stem closed the entertainment.

We took leave of the ex-royal family with the usual amount of bowing and *salaaming*, and returned to the Nāwāb's, where I found a lunch spread, consisting of tea, coffee, and more sweetmeats. Now, I have confessed a weakness for this sort of condiments, but here I began to feel a surfeit. As an article of exclusive diet I would prefer something else to sugar.

It was now past noon, and I began to feel anxious to get started towards Moseyib. From what I had heard that morning about the plague being in the immediate neighborhood of Kerbella, and the evident panic among the people there, I was not inclined to waste any time after I had seen everything of interest in that place. So I took leave of my kind hosts, who insisted upon accom-

panying me through the hot sun down to my boat. Here I was surprised to find, as a present from the ex-queen, a neat willow basket containing the last four dishes of sweetmeats which I had tasted and praised at her house. The *Reis* and his men were fast asleep, but Yusef roused them without ceremony, and urged an immediate departure.

But before we leave this, the nearest point I shall attain to ancient Babylon, and within sight of the loftiest tower that marks these ruins, I must give the reader a brief description, gathered from eye witnesses and the records of other travelers.

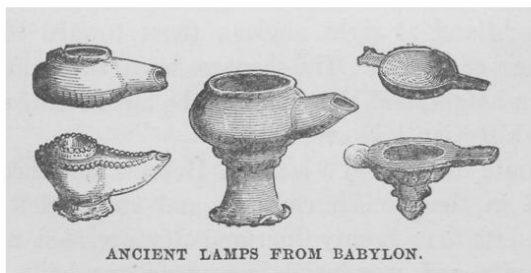
According to Herodotus, the only ancient writer who has left a description of Babylon from personal observation, the city formed a square of which each side was twelve miles long. It was built on both sides of the Euphrates, which was spanned by a bridge of stone, and the banks of the river were lined with bricks. In the midst of one quarter stood the royal palace and hanging gardens, in the other the temple of Belus. The city was surrounded by a double wall of hard-burnt bricks, and between them was a wide and deep moat. The streets were all straight and at right angles; those toward the river had gates of brass. The houses were three and four stories in height, and Babylon was the most richly adorned city the historian had ever seen.

Benjamin of Tudela, a learned Hebrew traveler, visited Babylon in the twelfth century, and states that in his time no less than twenty thousand Jews resided near the ancient city, and worshiped in a synagogue built, according to tradition, by the prophet Daniel himself. These Hebrew families claimed to be descended from the Jews of the Captivity, and traced their lineage from the princes and prophets of Judah. Their chief, who lived at Bagdad,

was called the "Lord Prince of the Captivity," and traced his descent from King David.

Let us take a rapid survey of the ruins as they appear to-day, which in extent seem to warrant the most extravagant descriptions of the glories of Babylon under the successive dynasties of the Assyrians, the Chaldeans, and the Persians.

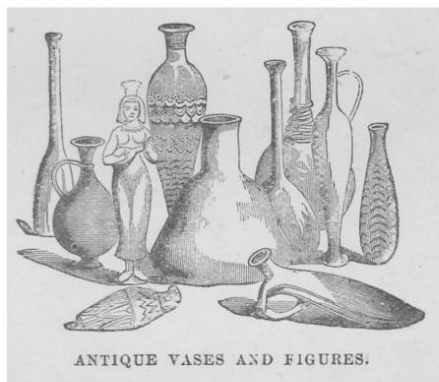
Coming from Bagdad, which in a direct line is fifty miles distant, three immense mounds appear in succession, which have the appearance of natural hills. But close examination shows that they are composed of bricks, and are the remains of large buildings. These are on the eastern side of the Euphrates, and the largest is about one hundred and fifty feet in height. They are supposed to be an ancient citadel that defended this part of the town, the royal palace, and a temple. How immense must the original buildings have been, when it is considered that these mounds have been the storehouses from which for twenty centuries bricks of the finest description have been taken to build the great cities of Ctesiphon, Selucia, and Bagdad. Fragments of alabaster vessels and



ANCIENT LAMPS FROM BABYLON.

images, fine earthenware, marble, and great quantities of enameled tiles, the glazing and coloring of which are still surprisingly fresh, can yet be found in these mounds. On the face of every brick is stamped in cuneiform characters

the name and titles of Nebuchadnezzar. They are all laid face downward, and the cement in which they are imbedded is so hard that they can only be detached with the greatest difficulty. Near these ruins are the remains of



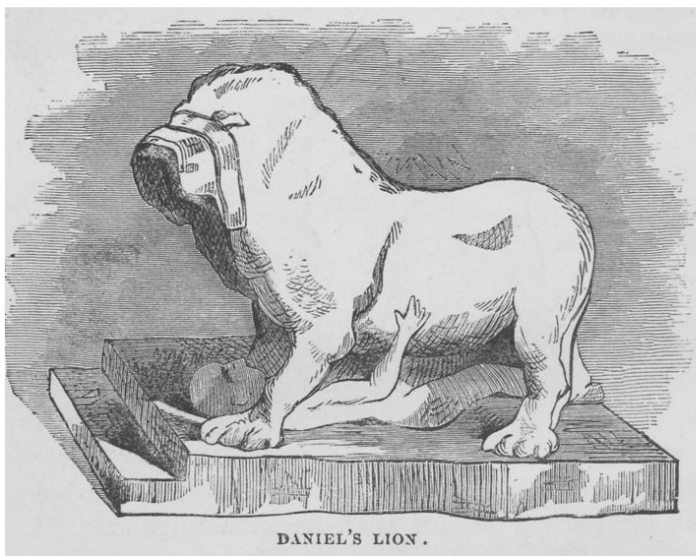
pillars and buttresses that supported the celebrated hanging gardens and terraces which were numbered among the wonders of the world.

Among these ruins stands a solitary tamarisk tree, a species strange to this country. It bears every mark of great antiquity, its originally enormous trunk being worn away and shattered by time. Travelers early in the present century have described its spreading evergreen branches, adorned with tress-like tendrils, as very beautiful. This is perhaps the last descendant of the trees that decorated the hanging gardens of the Chaldean monarch.

The Arabs have a tradition that this tree was saved by God at the general destruction of the city, that Ali might rest beneath its shade after the defeat of the enemies of the prophet at the great battle of Hillah.

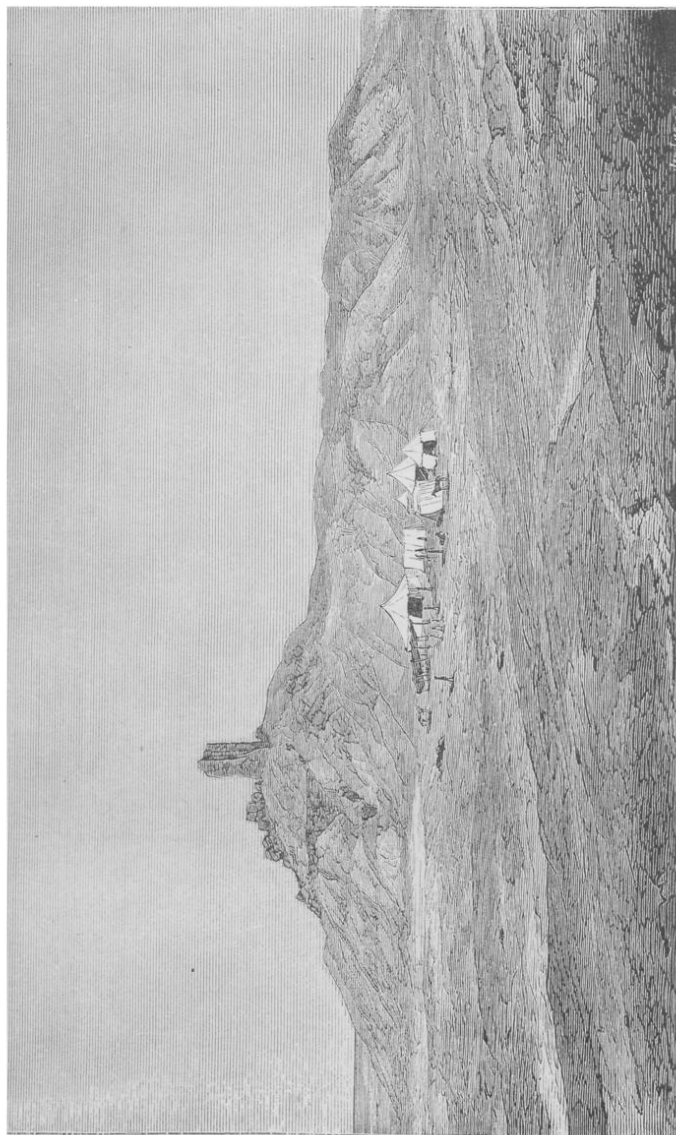
The enormous stone lion, described by Rich, still lies half buried in the ruins. Some imaginative travelers see

in the group a representation of Daniel in the lion's den, as it stands over a man with outstretched arms.



On the western bank of the river, and several miles below the ruins above described, is the largest monument that yet remains of ancient Babylon. It has the appearance of an immense oblong hill. It is nearly half a mile in circumference at the base, and rises about one hundred and seventy feet above the plain. Upon its summit is a tower forty feet high, of beautiful masonry. The whole mound is composed of kiln-burnt bricks, and the ruin upon the top appears to have formed the angle of some square building, originally of much greater height. This ruin is rent nearly from top to bottom, as if struck by lightning.

This great mound is called the Birs Nimroud, "palace of Nimrod," by the Arabs. By the Jews it is called the "Prison of Nebuchadnezzar." But most Christian travelers recognize this as the veritable remains of the Tower



BIRS NIMROUD.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

of Babel. It can be seen many miles away across the plain, and was pointed out to me while it seemed but a speck upon the horizon. Fragments of stone, marble, and basalt are scattered among the rubbish at its base, and show that it was adorned by other materials besides the kiln-burnt bricks of which it was composed. The cement which connects the bricks is so hard that it is impossible to detach one entire from the mass, and shows the perfection of Babylonian masonry.

An early traveler says: "The Tower of Nimrod is sublime even in its ruins. Clouds play about its summits. Its recesses are inhabited by lions." Thus the words of the prophet are fulfilled. "Wild beasts of the desert shall lie there. Jackals shall feed in their palaces, and the wild beasts in their pleasant places."

Within sight from the top of Birs Nimroud is the shrine of Nejjif, sacred to the Jews as the tomb Ezekiel, and a few miles beyond in the same direction is Kifil, where Ali was buried. After his death, in accordance with the orders he had given, his devoted followers placed his body upon his favorite mare, and buried it on the spot where she laid down to rest. A splendid mosque covers his remains, and a large town, half buried in date trees, is the resort of thousands of pilgrims. After Mecca and Medina it is the most sacred shrine to the Sheah Mahometans.

And now leaving behind us these grand ruins of ancient Babylon, which from the Mosaic records and the accounts that have come down to us from later historians, must have been for many centuries the most magnificent city in the world, we will return to the *marhallah*, on which I was slowly retreating towards Moseyib.

An awning had been spread over the deck and I was fast asleep. In my dreams *hubble-bubbles* and sweet-meats,

narghilehs, and *chibouks* were mixed up with nabobs and Nāwābs in inextricable confusion.

I was suddenly awakened by Yusef, who pointed to a large boat, rowed by six men, on which I could see officers and soldiers in uniform, coming rapidly down towards us. In the stern was the Turkish flag, and Yusef, in evident alarm, told me it was the Governor of Moseyib. I quickly roused myself as the boat came alongside, and the Governor stepped on board my *marhallah*. He was a tall, fine looking man of about forty, with full black beard, and wearing the dark, gold-laced uniform of a Turkish officer. He said a few words to the *Reis*, who salaamed very low, and then courteously, but with rather a haughty air, saluted me. He held in his hand a dispatch which he read and Yusef translated. It was from Bagdad, and contained the alarming intelligence that Kerbella had been placed in quarantine, directing him to turn back all boats coming from that place, and to stop all communication between Moseyib and the capital. This announcement was indeed astonishing, and I felt that my affairs had now reached a crisis. Inside the quarantine—shut up for an indefinite period, with no countryman or European near, but the terrible pestilence all around me—the weather every day growing hotter, and no communication with my friends in Bagdad or at home.