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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter XXIII. The Return from Babylon

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE RETURN FROM BABYLON.

Inconvenience of not Knowing Turkish—I invite the Governor to taste English Beer—A Happy Thought—He Returns with me to Moseyib—Bass' Ale as a Solvent—The Governor Melts—Winning my Way—Effect of English Arrack in Small Doses—Undeveloped Musical Talent—A Medley of Songs—Great Applause—Invited to dine with the Governor—We reach Moseyib—How Turkish Officials Transact Business—Suspicious Circumstances—The Force of Habit—Dinner a la Turque—A Picture for an Artist—A Moonlight Flitting—"The Desert is Liberty"—An Arab Breakfast—Fording the Stream—A Refreshing Bath—Convenience of an Umbrella—Bagdad in Sight—A Warm Welcome.



HE captain of my boat, in obedience to the Governor's orders, was detaching the tow rope, and I began to feel desperate. But I could not give up without an effort. I showed him my letter from the Pasha of Bagdad, and he then recognized me as the traveler who had applied to him for a boat. He could speak only Turkish, so that all our conversation had to be interpreted by Yusef.

I would have given all I know of other tongues (except the vernacular) if I could only talk with the Turk in his own language, and try my powers of persuasion and eloquence.

We had been standing in the hot sun, and I invited him

to a seat beneath my awning. Then, with the instinct of hospitality, I asked him if he would drink some English beer. The Governor shrugged his shoulders and nodded assent. A bottle had been towing astern to cool, which Yusef quickly opened, and filled a large glass with foaming Bass' ale. The Governor took it down at a gulp, and held out the glass for more. Now, theoretically, at least, no Mussulman can drink wine, beer, or spirits; but the Turks are not very strict observers of the Koran in this respect. It was plain that my guest was no ascetic. In reply to his inquiry I told him I had two more bottles of beer and one of brandy, "all of which were at his service."

A happy thought seemed to strike him. He called his secretary, and after a short consultation announced that he would return to Moseyib in my *marhallah*, and send his own boat on to Kerbella, which was but a few miles distant, with letters and dispatches. His soldiers and servants, carpet, cushions, *chibouk*, etc., were transferred to my boat, and four Arab idlers, who had collected on the bank, were impressed, in Turkish style, to man an extra tow rope. We were soon spinning along towards Moseyib at a rapid rate, with the prospect of reaching that place before dark, instead of at midnight, as I had expected.

The Turk now made himself comfortable. It was awfully hot, so he doffed his heavy military coat, rolled up shirt sleeves, kicked off his patent leather gaiters, called for his *chibouk*, and squatted on his carpet and cushions which had been spread under the awning. I did the hospitalities to the best of my ability. Perhaps never before did I exert myself so much to please a guest.

I made Yusef spread out the remains of yesterday's lunch, to which I added the basket of sweetmeats sent me by the ex-queen, and another bottle of ale. With the

second bottle, the Governor began to melt, and asking to see again the Pasha's letter, he apologized for not calling upon me when I was in Moseyib, and invited me to dine with him that evening. The third bottle made him quite sociable. He repeated his apologies, renewed his invitation to dinner, and said he would manage some way to get me through the quarantine.

I exerted all my powers to please and entertain him. I showed him my pictures, my little revolver, which he admired very much, and I thought seriously of presenting it to him on the spot. But we were getting on swimmingly now, and I held it back in reserve for an emergency.

Having finished the ale he signified a wish to taste the English *arrack*, which I told Yusef to administer in very small doses, as I was fearful of its effects. But my fears were groundless, for he proved to be thoroughly *seasoned*, and never got beyond the point of feeling social and good humored.

When I told him that I had been in Constantinople and had seen the Sultan, his respect for me was immensely increased. He was lamentably ignorant about America—did not know whether we were ruled by an Emperor, King or President—and I gave him the first lesson he ever had in the geography of the New World. He did not even know our flag, so I drew the "Stars and Stripes" on paper, but he would not admit that any flag was handsomer than the "Star and Crescent."

As all this had to be done through an interpreter, or by pantomime, it was no easy task, but I saw that by winning his good will I had a chance of escape, and I succeeded even beyond my expectations. Only once, when the Governor proposed that I should sing, I felt that he had me at disadvantage. Now, my talents as a vocalist had never been developed, and I needed as much urging as if I had

really been a first-rate tenor. But the Turk insisted, and by way of an encouragement volunteered to hum an air he had heard in a *café chantant* at Pera. This was so horribly discordant that I yielded at once, and gave him the "Star spangled Banner," mixed up with "The beautiful star." As my audience understood neither the words nor the tune, it is not surprising that I achieved a wonderful success, and elicited great applause. The version was so entirely original, that if my audience had understood English, it would perhaps have been encored. Elated at this unexpected success, I tried "Rally round the flag," "Old John Brown," and "Marching through Georgia." Then a medley of negro songs closed the entertainment. The whole performance was so comically absurd, that I laughed as heartily as the Governor himself. He slapped me on the shoulder and said: "You are a good fellow; I like you. Come and dine at my house—then we drink *arrack* and have more songs. When the moon rises I let you go to Bagdad." I saw a twinkle in Yusef's eyes as he translated this speech, and he said to me in English: "We are all right now, Sahib."

Before dark we reached Moseyib. I at once sent Yusef across the river to look up Hassan, and bring the horses to the palace, so as to be in readiness for a moonlight flitting, as soon as it should be light enough to see the road. I followed the Governor through the gateway, where the guard presented arms, and up to the reception room, where, motioning me to a seat on the divan, he excused himself and retired to the harem, when I presume he dipped his head into cold water, for he soon returned looking as fresh as if Bass's ale and English arrack were his daily beverages. He had exchanged his uniform for a striped silk robe, a Cashmere shawl tied round the waist, the inevitable red *fez*, and loose white trowsers. Calling for his *narghi*-

leh, he tucked his bare feet under him on the divan, and looked every inch a Turk.

A servant had drawn off my boots and replaced them with a pair of embroidered slippers, and I was curled up at the other end of the divan, puffing away at a long-stemmed *chibouk*. Quite a large crowd was waiting for an audience with the governor, and I was an amused spectator of the way business is dispatched by a Turkish official.

I could not understand a word that was said, but heard "*quarantina*" often repeated, and as each one in turn was admitted and stated his business, I inferred that they were soliciting permits for themselves or their goods to pass the lines. The Governor seemed to generally deny their requests, but several times there was a little by-play. The applicant would whisper a few words to the secretary; then there would be a private confab with his Excellency, and the man would go away apparently satisfied.

It is the common impression that all Turkish officials, from the highest to the lowest, are open to bribes. I can only say that what I saw looked suspicious. The Turks have a horror of the plague, and the quarantine is their only method of checking its ravages. Remissness of duty on the part of any subordinate would be fatal—while in the matter of customs and taxes all such *peccadillos* as bribes are considered pardonable. So strong is this impression, even among those who denounce all the officials as a set of "blackmailing scoundrels," that I was warned before leaving Bagdad that once within the quarantine, neither money nor influence could relieve me. But perhaps the force of habit is strong with my friend the Governor, and he presumes that the quarantine regulations are not yet firmly established.

It was nine o'clock before the last applicant was dismissed, and in the meantime Yusef had returned and

whispered to me that Hassan and the horses were in the court-yard below. Dinner was now announced, and was as unique an entertainment as my breakfast at the Nāwāb's, or my *tiffin* at the house of the ex-Queen of Oude.

A servant brought in a large round tray, which he placed on the divan between the governor and myself. In the center was a dish of stewed chicken, and on each side a napkin, fork, and spoon. My host, inviting me to follow his example, tucked the napkin under his chin, seized spoon and fork, and went in with a good relish. Thinking of the old adage, which will suggest itself to the reader, I followed suit. This dish was removed, and others followed in quick succession, but whether fish, flesh, or fowl I could not always tell. I dipped into each as a matter of courtesy, although the flavor was sometimes far from agreeable to my taste. The last course was boiled rice and curry, then came small cups of coffee, and the tray being removed, two servants came in, one holding a towel and a large basin, while the other poured water from a ewer over our hands.

The dinner was now over, and the Governor, who had evidently enjoyed the repast, fell back into his corner of the divan. *Narghilehs* of the Turkish pattern, with long, flexible tubes, were brought in, and *arraack* in small wine-glasses passed round. My host again urged me to sing, but I had made reputation enough in that line for one day, and excused myself on the ground of fatigue. It was now getting late, and the governor seemed tired and sleepy. So I told him, through Yusef, not to sit up on my account, as I would rest on the divan until it was time for me to leave. He called an officer of the guard, gave some directions about allowing me to pass, then cordially shook hands and pointing through the window in the direction where

the moon would rise, by pantomime wished me a good nap, and retired to his own apartments.

I tried in vain to sleep. The exciting events of the day, my narrow escape, the uncertainty of reaching Bagdad, for there was a possibility of being quarantined at its very gates, the breakfast *a la Indienne*, the dinner *a la Turque*, all passed in review before me. The divan was in the projection of a large open window, and beneath it the wide, swiftly-flowing river. It was yet dark, but I could hear the ripple of the water against the boats of the floating bridge, and across the broad stream I could discern the outline of the higher buildings of the town, and the masts of vessels moored along the banks. At last the moon rose from behind the city, deepening the shadows and forming a weird-like picture, bringing out dome and minaret, palm-tree and mast, in bold relief, and sparkling brightly, like silver, as its rays touched the rippling water.

I awoke Yusef, who was asleep in the outer room, and in half an hour he came up to tell me that all was ready. We quietly descended, mounted our horses, rode through the gate past the sleepy sentinel, filed across the bridge, and turning to the left, so as to avoid the town, soon struck the road leading out on the plain.

Once more fairly on the desert track, I cared nothing for the long, weary ride before us. I was free from the horrors of quarantine and plague, and felt elated like a Bedouin escaping from the restraints of city walls, to whom the "desert is liberty." Then came drowsiness. For three nights I had slept scarcely as many hours. We could only ride at a foot pace in single file. For the four hours until sunrise it was with the greatest difficulty that I could prevent myself from falling asleep in the saddle. At length the sun appeared, slowly rising above the horizon of sand, and I struck out at a faster pace towards a *Khan*

two or three miles away. Here I got a cup of Arab coffee and a draught of fresh new milk, and as it was advisable to reach the half way station as early as possible, I pushed on towards the *Khan Mohammedeah*. The Arabs recognized me, and spreading an *abba* on one of the stone platforms, I was asleep long before my caravan came up. Yusef very considerably did not disturb me, and after two hours refreshing sleep I awoke to find a breakfast prepared, that tasted infinitely better than the Indian sweetmeats, or the most elaborate products of the Turkish cuisine. Arab bread, unleavened, and baked in thin, wafer-like cakes, new sweet butter, white cheese from goats' milk, a bowl of roasted wheat coarsely ground, and plenty of fresh new milk. This was a regular Arab meal, and I did it full justice.

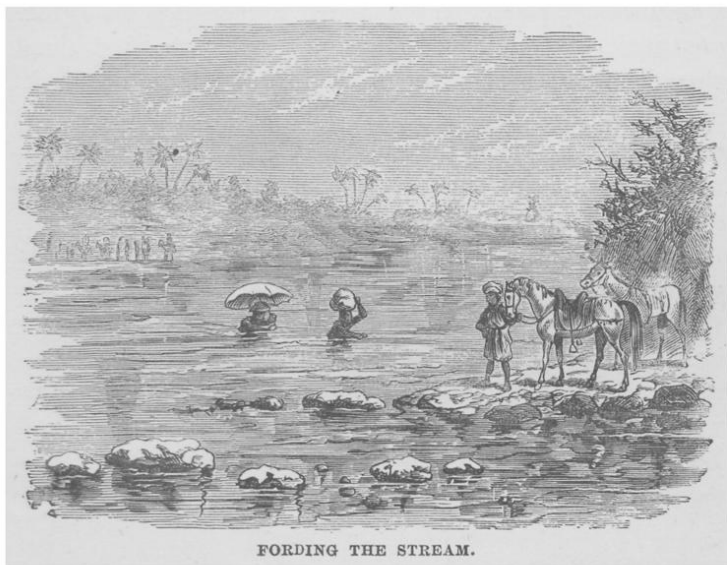
Before noon we were again in the saddle, with the hardest and hottest part of our journey yet before us. The quarantine had put an embargo on travel, and the road, on which a few days before we had met an almost constant stream of caravans, was now deserted. With the increasing heat the same wonderful exhibition of *mirage* appeared which I have before described.

When we reached the *wallah*, which we had forded on our way out with no difficulty, we found that another rise in the river had caused the water to flow back on the plain, and it was now fully five feet in depth. I sent Yusef in to explore, and the water in the deepest part came up to his neck. Here was a fix ; but there was no way getting round it, and it must be bravely met.

While we were deliberating a small caravan of Arabs, in which there were four women carried on mules in wicker panniers, came up the opposite bank, and we watched their proceedings before making the attempt ourselves. The men stripped off their clothes, rolled them

into bundles which they carried upon their heads, and boldly dashed in, leading the horses by the bridles. Then they returned and carried the women over, holding the panniers above the water.

Following their example, I first sent the animals across, where they were left in charge of Hassan, who spread out the wet packs to dry in the sun. Then Yusef came back for me, and I took to the water, Arab fashion. He carried over my clothes rolled up in a bundle, and with the umbrella to keep off the sun I went in. It was rather embarrassing, as the Arabs delayed starting. We heard them laughing, and Yusef said they were chaffing the



Sahib, and calling out "good," "good." I thought I detected in the sound more *silvery* tones than the hoarse voices of men, but my umbrella answered a double purpose, and I rather enjoyed the bath, as the water was refreshingly cool. After an hour's delay, we are again on

the road. Before sunset the welcome date-groves and above them the domes and minarets of Bagdad came within sight.

Passing through the gates without question as to whence we had come, we hurried down to the river banks, where our horses were left, and our baggage transferred to a *goopha*. Crossing the river I jumped on shore and hastened to the *Khan*. My friends received me with open arms, and welcomed me almost as one risen from the dead.

The unexpected declaration of quarantine on the same day that I left Bagdad had taken everybody by surprise, and they had given me up, and were even consulting as to what message should be sent to my friends at home by the next mail. As I glanced into a mirror for the first time since I left, I scarcely recognized my own face, so black and sunburnt had it become. Thoroughly exhausted by my sixteen hours in the saddle, I threw myself down on a divan and drank cup after cup of tea, the best thing to quench one's thirst.

A bath, clean clothes, a good dinner, a most sincere welcome from my friends, followed by a sound night's sleep in a clean bed, and the next day I was as well as ever. But not the sight of all the ruins in the world, present or prospective, from the tower of Babel to the time when the New Zealander shall sit upon the ruined arch of London bridge, would tempt me again to repeat my adventures in search of Babylon.