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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

Fogg, William Perry

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Chapter XXVI. Social Life of Natives and Foreigners

CHAPTER XXVI.

SOCIAL LIFE OF NATIVES AND FOREIGNERS.

Climate of Bagdad—In Cellars by Day, and on the Roofs at Night—No Ice—*Cudjees* a Substitute—Population and Currency—Antiques from Babylon and Nineveh—Slavery among the Mahometans—No Colorphobia—White Donkeys—The Pariah Dogs—Noises of Bagdad—Abdallah Advertising his Band—Municipal Regulations—Social Life among the English Residents—The English Minister, Colonel Herbert—Dr. Colville—Officers and Civilians—No Hotel—Americans Rarely Seen—A Dubious Compliment—A Day's Routine—Story by Abbe Huc—"Our American Cousin's" Experience of Bagdad Hospitality—Routes Home—The Dromedary Mail—Foundered in the Desert—The Only Line of Retreat for the Writer.



THE climate of Bagdad, generally speaking, may be deemed a healthy one. The great heat is at times almost insupportable, and yet it is said that the least sickness prevails during the hottest summers. While the air on the Persian Gulf is very moist, with heavy dews at night, and consequently sickly, here the air is remarkably dry and pure, so that the whole population sleep in the open air during the hot months. In winter it is one of the finest climates in the world, the thermometer standing at fifty degrees, the air cool, yet mild and invigorating. The ancient Persian Kings preferred these plains bordering on

the Tigris to any other winter residence. During the hottest summer months the range of the thermometer is from ninety to one hundred and twenty-five degrees; in the middle of the day usually as high as one hundred and five degrees. When the *shammāl*, or north wind, blows, it is quite cool and comfortable; but during the "date season," or August and September, it is frequently a dead calm, and the heat is suffocating. Sometimes a *sirocco* will blow from the south, and then all business is suspended, the people shutting themselves up in their houses until the "hot blast" is over.

The underground apartments, or *serdābs*, are peculiar to Bagdad. About the first of June the desks and furniture from offices and parlors, are transferred to these unique rooms with high arched ceilings, the *punkahs*, or fans, are suspended from above and kept constantly in motion, and here the hot hours of the day are spent. The dim light streams down through grated windows near the ceiling, the temperature is cool and uniform, and much less humid than in such cellar-like apartments with us. After the sun goes down they ascend to the flat roofs, or terraces, where they have the evening meal and sleep.

People who at home object to city-built houses, where they "eat in the basement and sleep in the attic," would call this living in the cellar and sleeping on the roof. No one goes out of doors, if it can be avoided, during the heat of the day. Business is transacted and exercise taken during the early morning or after sunset.

To those of us who are accustomed to a supply of ice during our comparatively temperate summers, it would seem impossible to live comfortably without a particle of this luxury with the temperature at one hundred and five degrees. But a wise provision of nature comes to the aid of people living in tropical countries. Evaporation

produces cold. Water is always kept in porous, unglazed earthen jars, called *cudjees*. These are made of every shape and size, and are in universal use. The evaporation from the exterior of these *cudjees* keeps the water from ten to twenty degrees colder than the air, and quite cool enough to be wholesome to drink. Milk, butter, wine, and every article that can be immersed in water is cooled in this way. It is only when I think of the delights of a *long iced drink*, or a dish of ice cream, that I miss the article considered so indispensable to comfort at home.



Bagdad contains a population of about one hundred thousand. Nowhere, perhaps, in the world, can there be seen an admixture of so many races, and in no city can be heard such a diversity of language. At the table of the English Resident, where the guests sometimes comprise many different

nationalities, a medley of thirteen languages has been counted in one room.

The coins in ordinary circulation are as various as the speech of the people. Very curious Persian, Indian, and Turkish coins are mixed in the change given me in the bazaars, with European, and especially Russian money. I can no more tell whether my change is correct than I could decipher the cuneiform inscription on an antique from Babylon. To the "specimen bricks" from Nineveh and Babylon, and many other interesting antiques which I hope will reach home in safety, I shall be able to add some very curious coins for the collections of any of my friends who are interested in numismatics.

Slavery in the East is quite a different institution from our idea of this "relic of barbarism" as it existed in the Southern States. The Turks are very lenient in their treatment of slaves, and they frequently occupy important positions of honor and trust. Color seems to have very little to do with the matter. By Mahometan law slave families cannot be separated, and all slaves taken to Mecca become free. The slave mother of a child by her master, not only becomes free, but, together with her child, is entitled to a share in his estate. The mothers of all the Sultans of Turkey have been Circassian or Georgian slaves, and some of the most devoted and faithful officers under the Viceroy of Egypt were slave boys whom he has educated. So far from opposing, the laws encourage the education of slaves, and the institution as it has existed here from time immemorial, is free from many of those obnoxious and inhuman features which, under the influence of avarice and *colorphobia*, were developed in America.

In Bagdad the very black slaves are preferred as household servants. We frequently see them very richly dressed in attendance upon their masters and mistresses. The

supply of these fashionable black slaves has hitherto come from Zanzibar and Madagascar, but lately the English have in a great measure put a stop to the traffic. They wear no air of abject misery, but strut through the bazaars, better fed, and more insolent and conceited than the free Arabs around them. Their beauty consists in its special and perfect ugliness, and they seem to be valued on the same principle as Isle of Skye terriers.

The white donkeys of Bagdad are famous all through the East, and sell at high prices. Some of them are of considerable size, and fancifully dyed with henna, their tails and ears bright red, and their bodies spotted, like the heraldic talbot, with the same color. As in ancient times, they bear the chief priests and men of the law, and the ladies prefer them to any other animal. They are splendidly caparisoned, and each one has his nostrils slit—a practice prevalent also in Persia—which is supposed to make them *longer winded*. I never hear a donkey bray without thinking this quite unnecessary.

The dogs of Bagdad are so important and prominent a feature in the life of the place, that they almost deserve a chapter by themselves. They are all *pariahs*, that is, they have no especial masters or owners, but here, as in other oriental cities, they are considered a public institution. They number many thousands, and are the scavengers to whom the inhabitants are indebted for keeping the streets clean from offal. You see them basking all day in the sun, stretched in the middle of the thoroughfare, where there is a constant stream of camels, horses, and mules. But they seem to escape all these perils, and if disturbed, they sneak away with a cowed and suspicious look. They are of a light dun color, and their appearance betrays their wolfish descent. These neglected curs have regular quarters to which each one belongs. They are divided into repub-

lies, and woe betide a foreign dog who crosses the frontier of his own territory. He is set upon tooth and nail, and is glad to beat an ignominious retreat. It is a curious fact that in this great multitude of half-starved dogs, hydrophobia is unknown. It is said that at night the jackals from the desert come into the city over the ruined walls, and join their brothers hardly more civilized, in doing duty as scavengers. These dogs seem to sleep during the day, but when night comes the howling and barking is incessant. They have no attachment to persons, and nothing amongst the canine tribes of the East is to be heard like the honest bark of the faithful house dog, when he gives a cheerful welcome to his master on his return home.

Bagdad is certainly the most noisy place I was ever in. The only quiet time is at midday. Then for an hour or two everybody and everything, except flies and mosquitoes, seem to be asleep. An Arab never talks except at the top of his voice, and I at first supposed they were quarreling, when in fact, they were only conversing in their ordinary tone. During the day and often until late in the evening, there are constant processions headed by *tom-toms* and *dulcimers*,—an ear piercing wind instrument something like a clarinet. The occasion of these processions I could not always tell. Sometimes they were weddings or betrothals, and sometimes funerals. In the latter case, the body was carried on men's shoulders, and followed by the mourners, some the relations of the deceased, and others professional howlers, who vied with each other in their wailings and mournful cries. Add to these the official town criers, the beggars and *fakeers* soliciting charities "in the name of Allah and the Prophet," the *muezzins* calling the faithful to prayer from the gallery of the minarets, professional singers practicing their voices, and every morning the heavy bass drum

of Abdallah, who is the conductor of a band, and goes through the streets to advertise his calling and solicit orders. Many of these sounds, together with the howling

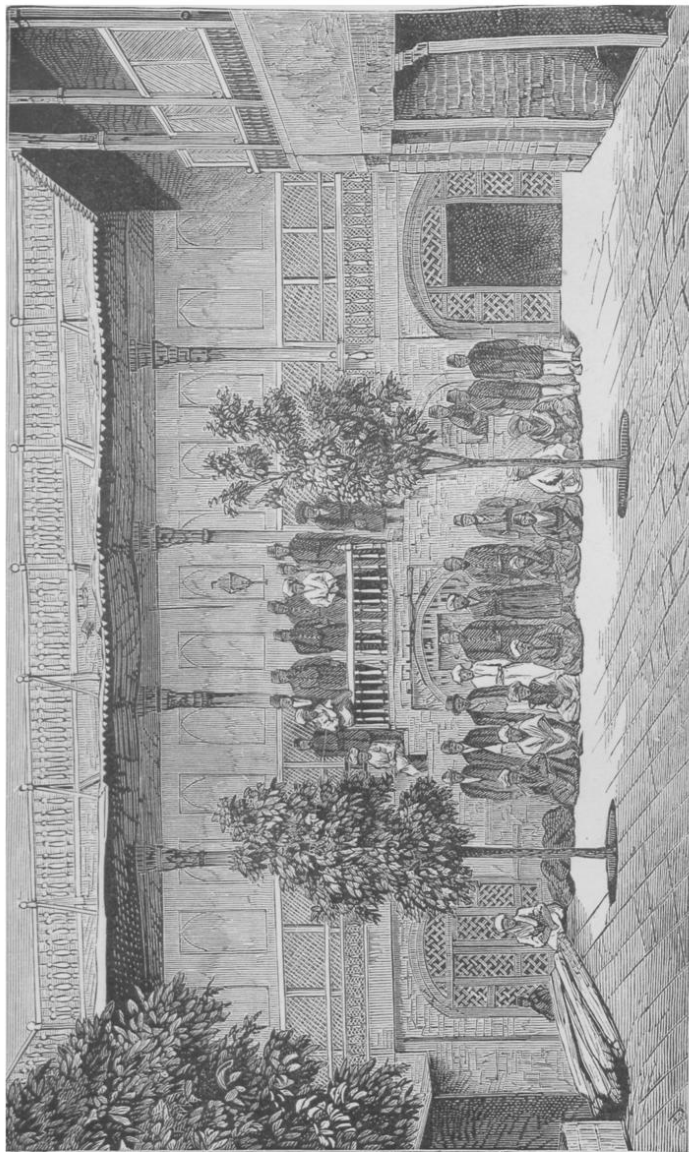


of dogs and braying of donkeys, are kept up half the night. But one gets used to all noises, and after the first night I think they never deprived me of a minute's sleep.

Much of the space within the walls once covered with houses, is now laid out in gardens and date groves. These are surrounded by walls eight or ten feet high, made of tenacious mud mixed with cut straw. In my walks among the gar-

dens, I noticed frequent recesses where the walls were set back about three feet, and in some places where they had fallen, the workmen were rebuilding them that distance back from the street line. This I found to be a municipal regulation. Whenever a man permits his wall to fall he must rebuild it three feet from the street. This regulation is calculated to make land owners keep their walls in repair, and in course of time will widen many of the narrow streets of the city.

Of the social life of the English colony at Bagdad it is pleasant to speak. In so small a circle the distinctions of rank, which would obtain at home, are in a great measure lost sight of, though not entirely ignored. The British Minister Resident and his charming family are, from official position, as well as eminent social accomplish-



INTERIOR OF ENGLISH RESIDENCY.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

ments, the head of the English speaking community. That generous hospitality, which in all foreign lands characterizes the representatives of the English government, is here maintained in a style befitting the great power, wealth, and commercial importance of the English nation. The accomplished Surgeon to the Residency, and the officers of the gunboat "Comet," are gentlemen whose genial qualities would be appreciated in any community. Dr. Colville's long residence in the East, his familiarity with the manners and customs of the people, his knowledge of the many languages spoken in Bagdad, as well as his eminent skill as a physician, give him great influence with the best class of people of all the different nationalities. His official duties are only nominal, but his house is often filled with people who seek his professional advice. I do not know how lucrative his practice may be, but his kindness of heart never permits him to turn away from his door the sick and needy who ask his assistance. Besides these, the manager of the great commercial establishment of Lynch & Co., the only English merchants in Bagdad, and the several young men attached to the house, are important elements in the social life of the place. It is not unlikely that the coming of my friend, Mr. Finnis, as the first visit to Bagdad of a member of the firm since the senior partner returned to London some years ago, is looked upon as an important event in the little community. There are no hotels here, and the few visitors and travelers are the welcome guests of the foreign residents. So rarely does an American find his way here that I have several times been asked, much to my amusement, whether I knew Mr. W——, who, I would be told, was an American from Philadelphia, and spent a few days here some four or five years ago. Of course, I do not know Mr. W——, but I have heard so much about him, that I should almost

recognize him were I to meet him in the street or on a train of cars at home.

A few days ago one of my English friends said to me at dinner, intending it doubtless as a compliment: "Why, my dear sir, you don't seem to me like an American." In reply, I said that he must not suppose every American talks through his nose and "guesses" in every sentence like the stage Yankee; that I am always and everywhere an American, but I trust never offensively so; that I have too much respect for the prejudices and opinions of others to make my republican ideas unduly prominent, while I am the honored guest of those who conscientiously believe in the "divine right of kings."

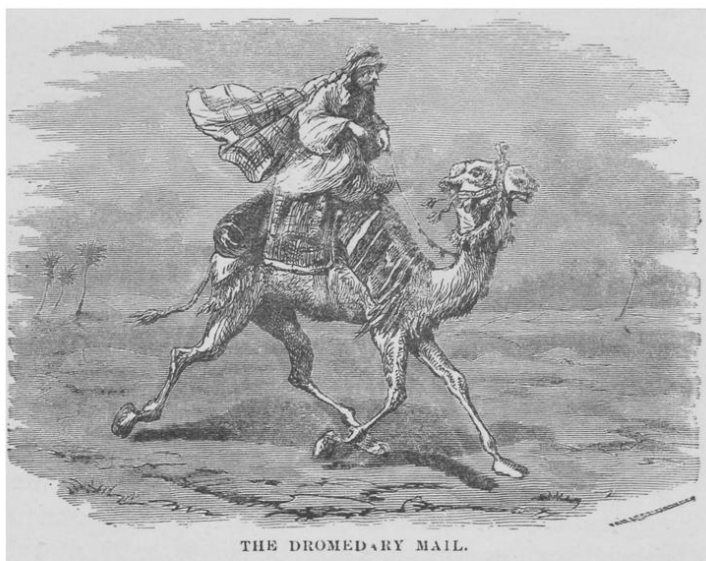
It may be interesting to know how the day is spent in this out of the way place, where the mail and the daily newspaper form no part of the routine of life. We sleep upon the terraced roofs in the open air, and half an hour before sunrise it is the duty of our servants to wake us, and bring a *chibouk* of fragrant Persian tobacco and a small cup of tea or coffee. Then we hastily dress and mount our horses, which are ready saddled in the courtyard below. We slowly thread our way, single file, through the narrow streets, already filled with people, towards the half-ruined South gate, leading out upon the open desert. Our horses are restive, and, from a bad habit they have of kicking and biting each other, must be kept well apart. No sooner do we emerge upon the plain than off we dash at full run, our horses wild with delight and excitement, sometimes rearing, and the next moment with their heels in the air. It requires skillful horsemanship to keep one's seat, and *spills* are by no means infrequent. But these tough, wiry young Englishmen, accustomed to field sports, make light of such accidents. A wild ride of half an hour and we return to the town by the East

gate, invigorated in frame and spirits by the pure morning air. Then a bath and a light meal of bread, eggs, and tea. Now we are ready for the day's work, provided we have anything to do. If I have no writing on hand I stroll through the bazaars, or make a morning call. At noon comes the regular breakfast, consisting of several courses of meats and vegetables, washed down by Bass' ale. Then a *siesta* until two o'clock, after which another hour or two is given to business. As the sun gets low and the oppressive heat is no longer felt, the horses are again in readiness, or we take a quiet walk through the "green lanes"—sometimes a game of croquet or quoits in a date garden, or a sailing party on the river is made up, in which the few ladies will join, and occupies the time until dark. At eight we dine on the terrace, never alone, but by previous arrangement, with some of our friends, or on the cool deck of the "Comet." Dinner to an Englishman is always the event of the day, and if at the Residency, it means full dress. At the bachelors' quarters it is not so ceremonious. Dinner over, whist always follows, which lasts until midnight. Each person has his own personal servant, who accompanies his master when he goes out to dinner, waits upon him at table, prepares and lights his *narghileh*, and when the party breaks up, escorts him home through the dark and narrow streets, carrying a lantern.

It is related by the Abbé Huc in his *Travels in China*, as an instance of the inconvenience of not understanding the habits and customs of a strange people, or the rites and ceremonies of well-bred natives, that a country cousin coming unexpectedly from a great distance, was invited to dine by his city relative. After waiting some hours and seeing no signs of the meal, he ventured to hint that it was getting late and he was very hungry—upon which his relation and host burst into a torrent of abuse. "What?" said

he, "Are you so ignorant and rustic as not to know that it was my duty to ask you, but by the same rites and ceremonies it was your duty to refuse the invitation?"

The experience of "our American cousin" at Bagdad has been so different from that of the "Heathen Chinee," that had he been of their own flesh and blood, his English friends could not have treated him with more kind and generous hospitality. My best wish to any of my countrymen who may come after me, is that they may meet as cordial a reception. If the railway from Alexandretta to Aleppo shall ever be finished, and the navigation of the



upper Euphrates prove a success, this part of the world will lose the charm of novelty, and be overrun with cockney tourists. But with the present facilities for travel to reach the Mediterranean is almost as difficult as it was to Xenophon and his ten thousand Greeks. The shortest but

most dangerous route is to Damascus and Beyrout, via Palmyra—the “city of the desert.” The English residents of Bagdad maintain a fortnightly mail with Europe by this route, which is carried on a fast dromedary in eighteen days to Damascus, six or eight of which are without water. Occasionally both mail and rider disappear, never being heard from after they leave port, like a ship foundered at sea.

They are supposed to be gobbled up by the wild Bedouins, who care nothing for the letters nor the Arab rider, but rarely miss a good opportunity to appropriate a fast camel or dromedary.

Another route is up the Tigris three hundred miles to Mosul, near the site of ancient Nineveh, thence via Diabekia and Aleppo to Alexandretta. This involves a fatiguing journey of nine hundred miles on horseback, subject to all the annoyances of stopping at the public *khans* at night, and traveling by day under a burning sun.

The third and most attractive route is eastward through Persia to Teheran, its capital—thence to the Caspian Sea, in all a horseback journey of seven hundred miles—by steamer up the Caspian and the Volga through Russia to eastern Europe. I give these several routes for the benefit of any future wanderer in these strange lands. The season is now so far advanced that they are all impracticable to me on account of the heat. The best line of retreat open to one who has no dread of a sea voyage in the tropics, is the route by which I came, down the Persian and Arabian Gulfs, and up the Red Sea to Egypt, thence across the Mediterranean to Europe.