CHAPTER I

CYPRUS AT THE OCCUPATION

The flutter of sensation that exercised Europe when it became known that the Sultan of Turkey had ceded the island of Cyprus to England, flurried as sharply in the Near East as anywhere. Had a report gained credence that a rich gold mine had been discovered in the ancient classic isle, which shares with Cythera the distinction of having given the Mother of Love to Greek mythology, the excitement could hardly have been greater.

Indeed, one smart man from the Near East, a certain Mr. Zealous Zachariah Williamson, residing at the time in London, actually did advance something of the kind, in two or three letters he indited to a morning paper, which the editor naïvely, and apparently without any inquiry or research, printed in bold type immediately after the leading articles. In these delusive effusions, above the name of "Cyprus," the writer, who pretended he had been a consul in the island, boldly declared, among other equally astounding statements, that the proof of gold existing in the place was to be found in the fact that "large pieces of the precious metal" were daily washed down from the hills by the mountain streams.

My faith is too great in the intelligence of my fellow-countrymen, notwithstanding the opinion expressed on that
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subject by Carlyle, to suppose that either this glittering story, or those of precious stones being picked up in the groves of Paphos, or the tales of coal mines waiting for development, were generally believed. But, none the less, it is a fact that at the time of the occupation of Cyprus, every one in England imagined that the island under British rule would have a great future; and swarms of our fellow-countrymen packed up their traps and flew to the new possession. As a matter of fact we had simply recovered the self-same territory that Richard the lion-hearted had wrested from the power of an usurper in retaliation for discourtesy shown to his betrothed wife; and, with all the commercial instinct of an Englishman, had then sold to the Knights Templars, who dissatisfied with their acquisition, passed it on to Guy de Lusignan, neither of whom, by the way, ever completed the payment of the purchase money.

In the Near East, at that time, but one opinion found expression: this occupation of Cyprus was another link in that chain of British footholds in the Mediterranean, which many then believed might eventually extend to Gallipoli, there to resist Russian designs on Constantinople, and the advance of a Muscovite fleet into Western waters. Cyprus, affirmed these little Near Eastern politicians, would become a big place, a stronghold, a great naval station, after the fashion of Malta and Gibraltar. Fortifications would be raised, docks sunk, barracks and public buildings erected. Whilst friends of England applauded the astute diplomacy of our Foreign Office, and the wonderful perspicacity of the Earl of Beaconsfield and Lord Salisbury, every one agreed that there was evidently money to be made in this new British territory; and a multitude of adventuresome spirits in Near Eastern seaports, particularly such as possessed a knowledge of the English language—Maltese, Greeks,
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Armenians, Syrians, Hebrews, along with a few Frenchmen, Germans, and Englishmen—hurried off to the exciting centre of attraction, just as our fellow-countrymen did at home.

I was at Athens when the telegraph brought the news of the result of the Berlin Conference and the cession of Cyprus to England. I had been up in the Othrys mountains some time before, dabbling in an abortive insurrection against the Turks; and, regaining the capital when the movement collapsed, had lingered in the classic city to recuperate and enjoy the antiquities.

Two months' delightful repose at the foot of the Acropolis, in the simple home of a hoary-headed palikari, where the branches of a lemon-tree loaded with juicy, golden fruit shaded the windows of my apartment, had proved sufficient. Notwithstanding the charm of the surroundings I parted with them without an effort. In fact, the message announcing the news came as a godsend; and, with the rest, I buckled my portmanteau and set out for the new British possession, with a commission to send letters to the Glasgow Herald.

I reached Larnaca, the principal roadstead of the island, which has no ports, early one summer morning, on board the Ceres of the Austro-Hungarian Lloyd's line, after a round-about voyage via Constantinople and Smyrna. During a brief run ashore at the latter place to stretch our limbs, we learned that the Greek Consul had delivered 1200 passports for Cyprus in the course of a week. When Dr. Heidenstam, the health officer and mayor, who boarded the vessel at Larnaca to give pratique, inquired how many passengers would disembark, and was told 120, he cast his eyes up to heaven and shrugged his shoulders.

Nothing daunted, this fresh swarm of immigrants eagerly set about getting ashore. Scrambling into the boats plying for hire around the ship, and reaching land, they there encountered a small multitude quite as eager to quit the
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place and gain the steamer, as they had been to leave the steamer and attain the island. These people told a tale of woe. They had parted with nearly all their spare cash, had done no good, and fared badly. In fact, there was nothing to do, no opening of any kind. Moreover, the place had become so overcrowded with strangers of all sorts and conditions that the cost of provisions had trebled, and to find a lodging was almost an impossibility. Happy the man who had the luck to secure a vacant bed at an exorbitant price amongst three or four others that were occupied, in a dismal room with bare, unplastered rubble walls, on a ground floor.

And those who unfolded this doleful tale of disappointment, who had rushed to the island among the first, to better their fortunes, and were among the first to leave it in disgust, earnestly advised the newcomers to take to sea again and get home as fast as they could. Some were wise enough to follow this counsel; some elected to remain and see for themselves. They went away afterwards, lighter in pocket, and chewing the cud of bitter discontent.

In spite of the congested state of the Larnaca population, I and a fellow-countryman succeeded, after diligent search, in securing an empty room in a house boasting only of a ground floor, and looking more like a stable than a human habitation. We had both brought our bedding with us, and having purchased a couple of iron bedsteads and a few other simple articles of furniture, were able to make ourselves as comfortable as the dismal aspect of the dwelling would permit. This accommodation, though rough and wanting in cheerfulness, was not costly, according to English ideas, for all we paid, between us, was one Turkish lira a month; but, just to give an idea of the value of household property in Cyprus, I will mention that this amount was double what the entire premises could have been rented for, per month, previous to the occupation.
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Rents had certainly gone up at a bound, a circumstance partly due to a speculation in which M. Zaraffi, the well-known Greek banker at Constantinople, had engaged, and one that, in the end, proved utterly disastrous. This gentleman having heard at Yildez Kiosk that Cyprus was about to be handed over to England, had promptly despatched an agent to the island with £20,000, and instructions to buy as much freehold property as he could. Many of the impoverished Cypriots were only too pleased to convert their real estate into hard cash, but when the British warships arrived off Larnaca, along with a fleet of transports, they saw which way the cat jumped, as the saying is, and several of the vendors refused to give up possession, with the result that the judicial authorities had a nice little batch of lawsuits to try, as soon as they settled down to work.

In the meantime Zaraffi had received delivery of a good many of his purchases, and amongst them of a corner house on the Strand facing the sea, usually let at an annual rental of £12, but which had been vacant for three years. To secure this property £300 had been paid. After my arrival at Larnaca these premises were let to a muscular and wiry old Welshman, named Williams, from Constantinople, who took them for three years at a rental of £300 for the first, £320 for the second, and £320 for the third year; so that the freehold was paid for with the first year's rent. But Zaraffi's other investments were not all so successful. In the end, when the excitement was over, and it was found that England did not intend to make Cyprus a naval station, and when practically all newcomers except Government servants and one or two merchants had left the place, rents fell to little over what they had been before the British fleet was sighted.

Although I arrived rather late in the field, Larnaca was still humming with activity, and swarming with Europeans,
chiefly our own countrymen, who were all in white,—bodies in white suits, feet in white canvas shoes, heads capped with white helmets or white pulp hats of many different shapes and dimensions. A fleet rode at anchor in the offing, an Anglo-Indian army of 10,000 men was encamped under canvas ashore, Sir Garnet Wolseley was acting as the Queen’s High Commissioner and Commander-in-Chief, and the British flag floated serenely from all the public buildings on the island.

My first attempt at business was made the day after I put foot on land, when at dawn, along with a French baker from Alexandria, I set out on mule-back for the camp at Chiflik Pasha, five miles away. This baker, who seemed intelligent enough in other respects, was beset with the inane idea of persuading the Commissary-General to feed Tommy Atkins on French puffy bread. Acting as interpreter I had a long talk with the gentleman responsible for what enters Tommy's inside; but although he admired and gratefully accepted for his own breakfast the samples of crusty petits pains that my companion presented to him, he explained that they were not the sort of aliment suitable to the British soldier, who required bread of a much heavier and more compact nature; and he held out no hope that my friend would secure the bread contract, which for that matter was in the hands of an English Smyrniot.

A stroll through the camp and a chat with the soldiers revealed the fact that there was ample room for improvement in the quality of Mr. Atkins’s loaf. He complained most bitterly about it, alleging that it was made of indifferent flour, that it was full of sand and only half baked. His beef, he growled, was ill-fed and dirty, and there was no convenience for washing it. As to the potatoes they were all eyes, and quantities were diseased. But, as a set-off against these statements I must place on record that Tommy looked well-
fed and rosy, whilst the impression I took away with me was that he appeared too fat.

On returning to town with my disappointed champion of the dough-trough, I happened to get into conversation with an intelligent Greek named Christofides, who could speak several languages fluently, but was unable to write any of them. This amiable son of Hellas lost no time in pointing out to me that a mint of money could be made out of the Cypriots by writing petitions for them to the Government. A vast number of people, he assured me, had something to say to those in authority, some grievance to bring to their notice, some favour to ask, and did not know how to make themselves understood. Under the Turks they went to a Turkish or Armenian scribe, who drew out petitions for them, to which they affixed their seals, and they proposed proceeding in the same way with their new masters.

After some discussion we arranged a partnership. Christofides was to ferret out the petitioners, I to draw up the petitions in my best English, and the proceeds were to be shared every evening, in equal parts. I remembered the ancient formula: “The humble petition of so and so respectfully sheweth,” etc., and winding up with the words, “and your petitioner will ever pray.” So we set to work at once. Our stock-in-trade did not occasion any very great outlay. A small deal table and common chair were procured, and placed in the open air on the Strand, facing the sea, within a strip of shade afforded by some adjoining buildings. There sat I, sipping sweet coffee, smoking cigarettes, waiting patiently for clients; before me a quire of foolscap, a penny bottle of Stephens’s Blue Black Ink, a penholder fitted with a J pen, some sand to dry the writing in lieu of blotting-paper, and a few English postage stamps to give an additional air of importance to the documents, which I drew up in as bold a fist as I could command.
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Christofides, in the meanwhile, scoured the town in search of customers. His system, if slow, was thorough. Commencing work at six in the morning, he would go from coffee-house to coffee-house, from store to store, courting discourse with all whom he met; and as Cypriots, like other peoples in the Near East, have no lack of spare time and are fond of gossiping, he got through a vast amount of conversation before lunch-time, and found out all that was going on. In this manner he secured clients whom, ever and anon, he brought to me, and whilst he explained their cases I wrote out their petitions. The question of the fee invariably occasioned a lot of haggling. We endeavoured to secure a sovereign for each petition, but this was rarely forthcoming, and rather than allow the client to go away to some rival, willing to work at any price, we sometimes had to be content with a dollar. Still the business paid very well for a time; until, indeed, the Larnaca Cypriots had got over the mania for petitioning the authorities.

The Strand was the great centre of activity: a long, straggling esplanade flanked on one side by the sea, broken here and there by tottering landing-stages propped up with sticks half eaten away by the action of the salt water; on the other by rough stone houses, no more than a story high, with massive Roman-arched entrances and ground-floor windows barred with iron. Here were located the Post-office, the Post-office, the Eastern Telegraph Company, the residence of the District Commissioner, the Municipal Building, the Konak, with its Jail and Court-House, the Custom-House, the places of business of the principal English firms who had rushed off to Cyprus to make fortunes,—Henry S. King and Co., F. O. Harvey and Co., Truefitt from Bond Street, Williams from Constantinople, Janion from Liverpool, and Zealous Zachariah Williamson, a smart, up-to-date Constantinopolitan Jew, the same as had written to
the morning paper about the nuggets of gold being washed down by the mountain torrents.

Here also were the principal Greek and Turkish coffee-houses, the French café, the English bars, and the Club, conducted by a couple of broken-down English gentlemen. One of them disappeared from the scene, discontented, at a very early stage. The other struggled on for a long time, relying in the end on his luck at whist and billiards to assist him in joining the two ends. Eventually he had to make a run from his creditors, and got clean off by arranging with the captain of the steamer trading between Egypt, Syria, and Cyprus to slow down and pick him up at sea after she had left the roadstead.

The largest firm attracted to Cyprus by the occupation was Henry S. King and Co. They arrived with a great flourish of trumpets, representing a number of good manufacturing houses, and consigners of general merchandise. Mr. Killerby, a quiet, shrewd, amiable gentleman who is still giving his services to the firm in Cornhill, directed the fortunes of the branch, and enjoyed a full measure of well-deserved popularity. His right-hand man, for a time, was the late Mr. James Bell, the brother of that same Mr. C. F. Moberly Bell who is now a shining light at Printing House Square. Henry S. King and Co. displayed unbounded enterprise and energy, backed up with capital, in the effort to establish themselves in the island, and were one of the last to leave it. But in the end, convinced that the game was not worth the cost of the candle, even this powerful firm considered it wise to take themselves off, handing their business over to one of their clerks, who struggled on in a small way until he died, supplying the few troops and Government servants in the place with such articles as they required from Europe.

In the very early days of the occupation the importation
of goods from home was as varied as it was enormous; for the average Englishman on his travels pays slight attention to the musty old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans.” Arrived at Rome, or anywhere else for that matter, the Englishman’s habits and customs undergo little change. When he dashed off to Cyprus to make his fortune he was accompanied by tons upon tons of tinned provisions, bacon, and hams; by thousands upon thousands of cases of jam, marmalade, condensed milk, tea, cocoa, coffee, chicory, spirits, wine, and beer; by hundreds of barrels of soda water and other non-intoxicants; by parcels without number of British cutlery, glass, and crockery, hardware, paraffin lamps, iron bedsteads, pipes, tobacco, patent medicines, agricultural implements, and most of the other articles that he is accustomed to have within reach in his own country.

He had not forgotten his round sponge bath, and every morning when he left his bed it was to get out of his pyjamas into his tub. These daily matinal ablutions from tip to toe, in a land where the Christian inhabitants make but small use of water externally, although they take a good deal inwardly, and where soap is regarded in the light of a luxury, caused a singular misconception.

“How dirty these English people must be,” one Cypriot lady who let lodgings was heard to remark to another; “they are always washing themselves!”

Far from living like the Cypriots on goat and pillaf, salt anchovies and olives, tomatoes and stringy cheese, cucumbers and fig-peckers—those beccaficos whereon Byron tells us he delighted to feed—onions and garlic, water melons and purple grapes, mastic and thick black wine, the British immigrant chiefly relied for nutriment on the hundred and one different kinds of preserved foods, from Liebig’s Extract to bully beef, which had accompanied him across the seas. The consumption of these articles at the commencement of