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Giovanni Battista Belzoni

Excerpt

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# RESEARCHES AND OPERATIONS

IN

EGYPT, NUBIA, &amp;c.

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## FIRST JOURNEY.

WE sailed from Malta on the 19th of May, 1815, and arrived at Alexandria on the 9th of June following; Mrs. Belzoni, myself, and James Curtin, a lad, whom I brought with me from Ireland, formed our party. The principal cause of my going to Egypt was the project of constructing hydraulic machines, to irrigate the fields, by a system much easier and more economical than what is in use in that country. On entering the harbour of Alexandria, the pilot informed us, that the plague was in the town. To a European, who had never been in that country, this was alarming intelligence. As I wished to have some information concerning the state of the disease, we did not land till the next day, when two European gentlemen came alongside in a boat, and informed us, that it was rapidly diminishing. We accordingly landed, but with much caution, as, in our way to the French Occale, where we were to perform quarantine, we had to pass through the town. Fortunately, St. John's day, which is the 24th of June, was not far off; and on that day the plague is supposed to cease. Some superstitious persons attribute this to the power of the saint himself; but it is too well known, that extreme heat checks the plague in the same manner as the cold season;

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and I observed myself, that when the heat of summer was not so great as usual, the plague lasted longer ; while, on the other hand, when the cold season lasted longer, the plague came later.

The necessity of putting ourselves into a voluntary prison ; the caution we were obliged to take, not to touch any person, or suffer any one to touch us ; the strict order to be observed in receiving any thing that came from out of doors ; and the continual perfumes with which we were regaled, to prevent the plague, as they say, were extremely strange to a novice in the customs of the country. We were confined to our apartment, and for three or four days no one came near us. We were really sick, but I took the caution not to let it be known ; for the plague is so dreadful a scourge, and operates so powerfully on human fears and human prejudices, that, during its prevalence, if a man be ill, he must be ill of the plague, and if he die, he must have died of the plague : no inquiry is made, no examination takes place. Accordingly, had the people of the Occale come to the knowledge of our being indisposed, and particularly that we vomited, they would have concluded, though it was merely the effect of a new climate, that we had caught the pestilence in passing through the town ; and the whole Occale would have been struck with terror, thinking the enemy was within the gate.

The Occale is an enclosure of several houses, so disposed as to form a square. There is no entrance to the area of the square but by the great gate, leading to a common staircase, above which a gallery takes you to every house. In plague time, the people of these habitations must communicate with each other without touching : no provision can enter without being passed through water, nor must bread be touched whilst warm. The disease is so easily caught, that a piece of thread blown by the wind is quite sufficient to infect the whole country. Had it been known that we were ill,

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no one would have come near us, except the Arabs, who go in case of sickness indiscriminately to every one ; and are thus likely to spread the plague, by giving it to those who had it not. Many die the victims of neglect, merely because every disease is taken for the plague : others are victims of a different kind, of the atrocious, interested views of their relatives, who, profiting by their death, may take what advantage they please, even by poison, as no investigation takes place in any instance. "He died of the plague," is the general cry, whatever may be the disease ; and as several hundreds perish daily, they are all carried away without distinction.

After the 24th June, called the great St. John, the plague nearly ceased ; and as my principal view was to reach Cairo, we hired a boat, in company with Mr. Turner, an English gentleman, who was going up the Nile. We sailed on the 1st of July, but, owing to contrary winds, were brought back the same evening. The next day we re-embarked, and were then obliged to land at Aboukir, in consequence of high winds. We visited the place, where many a brave fellow had fallen a sacrifice to the war, and to the glory of his country. Human bones were scattered here and there.

Continuing our voyage the same day, we entered the mouth of the Nile, and landed at Rosetta ; four days more brought us to Boolak, within a mile of Cairo. Though our eyes began to be accustomed to the sight of the Arabs in Alexandria, the bustling scene here was still more striking. The majestic appearance of Turkish soldiers in various costumes, without regularity or discipline, Arabs of many tribes, boats, canjeas, camels, horses, and asses, all in motion, presented a striking picture. I landed, and went immediately to Cairo ; and as the holy fathers of the convent of Terrasanta could not receive women within their walls, we were accommodated in an old house in Boolak, belonging to Mr. Baghos, to whom I was recommended. He was the principal

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interpreter of Mahomed Ali, and director of all foreign affairs : a man of great acuteness of understanding, and so well disposed towards strangers, particularly Europeans, that it was soon arranged, that on such a day I was to be presented to his highness the Bashaw, to make my proposal. The house we inhabited was so old and out of repair, that I expected every moment it would fall on our heads ; all the windows were shut up with broken wooden rails ; the staircase was in so wretched a condition, that scarcely a step was left entire ; the door was fastened simply by a pole placed against it, having neither lock nor any thing else to secure the entrance. There were many rooms in it, but the ceiling in all of them was in a most threatening state. The whole furniture consisted of a single mat in one of the best rooms, which we considered as our drawing-room. We had mattresses and linen with us, otherwise we must have adopted the Arab method of sleeping : as no chairs are to be had in this country, we sat on the ground ; a box and a trunk served as a table : fortunately, we had a few plates, as well as knives and forks, which we had provided to use in the boat ; and James, our Irish lad, bought us a set of culinary utensils, of pottery. Such were our accommodations.

Though my principal object was not antiquities at that time, I could not restrain myself from going to see the wonder of the world, the Pyramids. I took an opportunity of going with Mr. Turner, who obtained an escort of soldiers from the Bashaw, to accompany us. We went there to sleep, that we might ascend the first pyramid early enough in the morning to see the rising of the sun ; and, accordingly, we were on the top of it long before the dawn of day. The scene here is majestic and grand, far beyond description : a mist over the plains of Egypt formed a veil, which ascended and vanished gradually as the sun rose, and unveiled to the view that beautiful land, once the

site of Memphis. The distant view of the smaller pyramids on the south marked the extension of that vast capital; while the solemn, endless spectacle of the desert on the west inspired us with reverence for the all-powerful Creator. The fertile lands on the north, with the serpentine course of the Nile, descending towards the sea; the rich appearance of Cairo, and its numerous minarets, at the foot of the Mokatam mountain on the east; the beautiful plain which extends from the pyramids to that city; the Nile, which flows magnificently through the centre of the sacred valley, and the thick groves of palm trees under our eyes; all together formed a scene, of which very imperfect ideas can be given by the most elaborate description. We descended to admire at some distance the astonishing pile that stood before us, composed of such an accumulation of enormous blocks of stones, that I was at a loss to conjecture how they could be brought thither; and presently we entered the pyramid: but I must reserve for some other time the more minute account of this wonderful work. We went round the second pyramid, examined several of these mausoleums, and returned to Cairo with the satisfaction of having seen a wonder, which I had long desired, but never supposed I should have the happiness to behold.

A few days after we made a party of Europeans, to go as far as Sacara by water, and after visiting the pyramids of that place, the party returned to Cairo, except Mr. Turner and myself, who went to see the pyramids of Dajior. These are considerably smaller than the large ones, I believe in the proportion of about one to six. One of them is of a different form, as it has a curve in the angles, which brings it to a perpendicular near the ground. This, and those at Sacara, which appear like hanging galleries, differ from the generality in point of shape; but the two of Dajior are in better preservation than any of the rest. I observed also near Sacara and Betracina,

which I believe to be the central part of Memphis, the remains of other pyramids, which, by their dilapidated state, induced me to suppose, that they are of an earlier date than any of the rest. At this time I had no opportunity of visiting the pits of the embalmed mummies of birds: but a Fella brought us one of the earthen vases that contained a bird, which I believed to be a hawk by the shape of the bones. The vase was so perfect, that we laughed at the Arab for his attempting to impose on us. Seeing that he could not sell his piece of antiquity, and that he was laughed at besides, he broke the vase before us, to show what connoisseurs we were of antiques. We overshot the mark this time; for the caution that had been given us, never to credit what an Arab says, made us disbelieve the truth. On our returning towards the Nile, we passed by the broken pyramid of sun-baked bricks; and it appeared to me, on examining it afterwards, that it did not decay gradually, like the other pyramids, but by large masses of the bricks separating at a time from the rest.

On our arrival at the Nile it was quite night, and we had to pass several villages to come to a place where we could embark for old Cairo. Our road was through a cluster of palm trees, which by moonlight had a most solemn effect. Some of the Arabs were dancing to the usual tunes on the tambourines; and, forgetting perhaps the slavish condition in which they are held by the Turks, were happy for a while. We took a small boat, and arrived in old Cairo before day. Two days after I was to be presented to the Bashaw on the subject of my hydraulic project; and accordingly I went to the house of Mr. Baghos, where I first became acquainted with the late Mr. Burckhardt. This acquaintance was a fortunate circumstance for me, as the various and important information I acquired from him proved to be of the greatest service to me in that country, and I shall ever remember it with the deepest gratitude. Going to the

citadel with Mr. Baghos, we had to pass through several of the principal streets, which are always crowded with people, and for this reason a stranger supposes the capital to be very populous; but except these streets and the bazars, the rest of the town is quite deserted, and a great number of falling houses and much rubbish are to be seen every where. We were mounted on our asses, the most convenient and only mode of travelling for Franks in that city. We met a soldier on horseback, who, when he came near, gave me such a blow with his stirrup upon my right leg, that I thought he had cut it in two. The stirrups of the Turks, which are like shovels, cut very sharp; and one of the corners, catching the calf of my leg, tore off a piece of flesh in a triangular form, two inches broad, and pretty deep. After this he swore two or three oaths at me, and went on as if nothing had happened. The blood ran out copiously; and, instead of seeing the Bashaw, I was taken to the convent of Terra-santa, as the nearest Christian place I could go to. It is to be remarked, that, at this time, there was a great discontent among the soldiers against the Bashaw, for having given orders, that they should learn the European military evolutions; and, as I was in a Frank's dress, I suppose the fellow paid me for what he had learned of European fighting. From the convent I was taken home to my house in Boolak, where I remained under cure for thirty days, before I could stand on my legs.

During my confinement in this house, I had an opportunity of observing at some distance the manners of the Arabs, who passed under our window. Our house stood in a good situation, where we could observe all the landing from the boats that came from Alexandria and Rosetta. All the goods which went or came passed our residence; and the caravans of the Moors from Mecca halted for several days in this place. It was a strange sight for us, to observe these people in their tents, living in separate families, while their chief occupation was sitting on the ground, smoking, singing, and



saying prayers, which I observed lasted sometimes three or four hours, besides the ceremonial prayers, repeated standing and kneeling. I did not make any minute observations, for, as I have said, my first occupation was with a different view; nor did I expect at that period, that I should ever have any thing to do with these people, as a traveller.

When I recovered, I was presented to Mahomet Ali Bashaw, who received me very civilly. Seeing that I walked lamely, and being told the cause, he said, such accidents could not be avoided where there were troops. I made an arrangement with him, and undertook to erect a machine, which would raise as much water with one ox, as the machines of the country with four. He was much pleased with my proposal, as it would save the labour and expense of many thousands of oxen in the country; a matter of importance, since these animals are scarcely of any other use than working; for, though they are in pretty good condition, they are seldom killed for food, the Turks eating mutton, and the Arabs buffalo's flesh, when they can afford it. The Bashaw was just returned from Arabia, where he had conquered some of the Wahaby tribes, and delivered the holy cities of Mecca and Medina from the Infidels. He himself conducted the war till lately, when his son Ibrahim Bashaw conquered some of the great chiefs, who were taken prisoners and sent to Constantinople, where they were executed. Notwithstanding this, I am of opinion, that Mecca will be to the Turks, what Jerusalem is to the Christians; for, unless a strong army be kept there, the croisades of Mahomet Ali will have no better effect, than that of our Godfrey of Bouillon.

During the time that I was engaged in preparing my hydraulic machine, one morning I went on the road towards Cairo, and, to my surprise, found a perfect silence, instead of the continual confusion of noise and bustle of every description. The boatmen were getting their boats ready, as if to set off immediately. No camels appeared



to carry water to Cairo; no ass-drivers were seen; no shops open; and no person in the streets. I could not conceive what was the reason of this singularity, nor could I inquire of any one, as no person was in the way; but, being Friday, I concluded it might be some particular holiday with the Mahommedans. I went on, and still I met no one. The distance from Boolak to Cairo is about a mile, through an open country; and midway is a bridge, near which I found a group of soldiers. I continued my walk without noticing them; one of them, however, levelled a gun at me, and all the rest laughed at the idea of frightening a Frank.

I passed on till I entered Cairo. When I reached the Franks' quarter, both gates were shut; but through the small door I observed a Frank, engaged like myself in the act of peeping, and who proved to be Mr. Bocty, the Swedish consul-general, who was surprised to see me. I could not imagine what all this meant. At first I concluded, that a violent plague had broken out, and that every one kept his house: but the Mahommedans do not seclude themselves on such occasions; so I was at a loss what inference to draw. Mr. Bocty anxiously inquired of me how I happened to be there, whence I came, and what I had seen on the road; and he was not a little surprised, when I told him, that I came from Boolak, and did not see any thing particular on the way. I had not been at the door long, before we heard a great noise in some of the streets, and a volley of musketry discharged. I was then hurried into the Franks' quarter, and the gates were closely shut. I was soon informed, that a revolution had broken out among the soldiers against the Bashaw, and that some of the troops were in pursuit of him to the citadel, whither he had retired for safety. Strange as it may appear, it proved, that by our not communicating with any body in Boolak, we knew nothing of what passed in the morning at Cairo; and it so happened, that at the very place where the

revolution had begun, which was the seraglio, in the Esbakie, no one was visible when I passed ; for after the Bashaw had retired into the citadel, all the soldiers ran after him ; and as to the rest of the people, no one came out of their houses. All the Franks in their quarter were alarmed, and prepared for defence in case the gates should be attacked. I went to the house of Mr. Baghos, in the same quarter, as I had business with him ; and he was not a little surprised to see me, knowing where I lived.

I was much concerned for Mrs. Belzoni, whom I had left at home with only James and an Arab ; and though Mr. Baghos endeavoured to persuade me to stop with him all night, I insisted on returning almost immediately. I went off unperceived by any one in the house ; but at the gates of the quarter I found great difficulty in having the door opened ; and no sooner was I out, than it was instantly closed after me. I took the same road that I came, and had not gone far, when I met a body of armed soldiers running towards the centre of the town. Advancing further, I heard several muskets discharged in a street near, and many others at some distance ; indeed, there was a continual firing kept up. On my approaching the Esbakie, I saw several soldiers running towards the seraglio, and others hastening towards me. When they came up, one seized the bridle of my donkey, while another took me by the collar, and the rest were busied in rifling my pockets. I had but a few dollars in my possession ; and my pocket-book contained only letters and passports, of which I know not how they have disposed : but what principally drew their attention was a white topaz brooch, which I had in the frill of my shirt, and which they took for a brilliant. I kept in good humour with them ; and when I perceived their attention to the topaz, I began to move in order to depart. I do not know whether I had reason to fear they would call after me, suspecting that I marked them so as to