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Bedouins of the Syrian Desert.

(JOHN SARGENT, R.A.)

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THE DESERT AND THE SOWN

BY
GERTRUDE LOWTHIAN BELL

WITH MANY ILLUSTRATIONS AND A MAP



LONDON
WILLIAM HEINEMANN

1907

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قَالَ تَأَبَّطُ شَرًّا
 يَرَى الْوَحْشَةَ الْإِنْسِ الْإِنْسِ وَ يَهْتَدِي * بِحَيْثُ أَهْتَدَتْ أُمُّ النُّجُومِ الشَّوَابِكِ

He deems the Wild the sweetest of friends, and travels on
 where travels above him the Mother of all the clustered stars.

TA'ABATA SHARRAN.

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To A. C. L.
WHO KNOWS THE HEART
OF THE EAST

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PREFACE

THOSE who venture to add a new volume to the vast literature of travel, unless they be men of learning or politicians, must be prepared with an excuse. My excuse is ready, as specious and I hope as plausible as such things should be. I desired to write not so much a book of travel as an account of the people whom I met or who accompanied me on my way, and to show what the world is like in which they live and how it appears to them. And since it was better that they should, as far as possible, tell their own tale, I have strung their words upon the thread of the road, relating as I heard them the stories with which shepherd and man-at-arms beguiled the hours of the march, the talk that passed from lip to lip round the camp-fire, in the black tent of the Arab and the guest-chamber of the Druze, as well as the more cautious utterances of Turkish and Syrian officials. Their statecraft consists of guesses, often shrewd enough, at the results that may spring from the clash of unknown forces, of which the strength and the aim are but dimly apprehended; their wisdom is that of men whose channels of information and standards for comparison are different from ours, and who bring a different set of preconceptions to bear upon the problems laid before them. The Oriental is like a very old child. He is unacquainted with many branches of knowledge which we have come to regard as of elementary necessity; frequently, but not always, his mind is little pre-occupied with the need of acquiring them, and he concerns himself scarcely at all with what we call practical utility. He is not practical in our acceptation of the word, any more than a child is practical, and his utility is not ours. On the other hand, his action is guided by traditions of conduct and morality that go back to the beginnings of civilisation,

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traditions unmodified as yet by any important change in the manner of life to which they apply and out of which they arose. These things apart, he is as we are; human nature does not undergo a complete change east of Suez, nor is it impossible to be on terms of friendship and sympathy with the dwellers in those regions. In some respects it is even easier than in Europe. You will find in the East habits of intercourse less fettered by artificial chains, and a wider tolerance born of greater diversity. Society is divided by caste and sect and tribe into an infinite number of groups, each one of which is following a law of its own, and however fantastic, to our thinking, that law may be, to the Oriental it is an ample and a satisfactory explanation of all peculiarities. A man may go about in public veiled up to the eyes, or clad if he please only in a girdle: he will excite no remark. Why should he? Like every one else he is merely obeying his own law. So too the European may pass up and down the wildest places, encountering little curiosity and of criticism even less. The news he brings will be heard with interest, his opinions will be listened to with attention, but he will not be thought odd or mad, nor even mistaken, because his practices and the ways of his thought are at variance with those of the people among whom he finds himself. “’Ādat-hu:” it is his custom. And for this reason he will be the wiser if he does not seek to ingratiate himself with Orientals by trying to ape their habits, unless he is so skilful that he can pass as one of themselves. Let him treat the law of others respectfully, but he himself will meet with a far greater respect if he adheres strictly to his own. For a woman this rule is of the first importance, since a woman can never disguise herself effectually. That she should be known to come of a great and honoured stock, whose customs are inviolable, is her best claim to consideration.

None of the country through which I went is ground virgin to the traveller, though parts of it have been visited but seldom, and described only in works that are costly and often difficult to obtain. Of such places I have given a brief account, and as many photographs as seemed to be of value. I have also noted in the northern cities of Syria those vestiges

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of antiquity that catch the eye of a casual observer. There is still much exploration to be done in Syria and on the edge of the desert, and there are many difficult problems yet to be solved. The work has been well begun by de Vogüé, Wetzstein, Brunnow, Sachau, Dussaud, Puchstein and his colleagues, the members of the Princeton Expedition and others. To their books I refer those who would learn how immeasurably rich is the land in architectural monuments and in the epigraphic records of a far-reaching history.

My journey did not end at Alexandretta as this account ends. In Asia Minor I was, however, concerned mainly with archæology; the results of what work I did there have been published in a series of papers in the "Revue Archéologique," where, through the kindness of the editor, Monsieur Salomon Reinach, they have found a more suitable place than the pages of such a book as this could have offered them.

I do not know either the people or the language of Asia Minor well enough to come into anything like a close touch with the country, but I am prepared, even on a meagre acquaintance, to lay tokens of esteem at the feet of the Turkish peasant. He is gifted with many virtues, with the virtue of hospitality beyond all others.

I have been at some pains to relate the actual political conditions of unimportant persons. They do not appear so unimportant to one who is in their midst, and for my part I have always been grateful to those who have provided me with a clue to their relations with one another. But I am not concerned to justify or condemn the government of the Turk. I have lived long enough in Syria to realise that his rule is far from being the ideal of administration, and seen enough of the turbulent elements which he keeps more or less in order to know that his post is a difficult one. I do not believe that any government would give universal satisfaction; indeed, there are few which attain that desired end even in more united countries. Being English, I am persuaded that we are the people who could best have taken Syria in hand with the prospect of a success greater than that which might be attained by a moderately reasonable Sultan.

We have long recognised that the task will not fall to us. We have unfortunately done more than this. Throughout the dominions of Turkey we have allowed a very great reputation to weaken and decline ; reluctant to accept the responsibility of official interference, we have yet permitted the irresponsible protests, vehemently expressed, of a sentimentality that I make bold to qualify as ignorant, and our dealings with the Turk have thus presented an air of vacillation which he may be pardoned for considering perfidious and for regarding with animosity. These feelings, combined with the deep-seated dread of a great Asiatic Empire which is also mistress of Egypt and of the sea, have, I think, led the Porte to seize the first opportunity for open resistance to British demands, whether out of simple miscalculation of the spirit that would be aroused, or with the hope of foreign backing, it is immaterial to decide. The result is equally deplorable, and if I have gauged the matter at all correctly, the root of it lies in the disappearance of English influence at Constantinople. The position of authority that we occupied has been taken by another, yet it is and must be of far deeper importance to us than to any other that we should be able to guide when necessary the tortuous politics of Yildiz Kiosk. The greatest of all Mohammedan powers cannot afford to let her relations with the Khalif of Islam be regulated with so little consistency or firmness, and if the Sultan's obstinacy in the Tabah quarrel can prove to us how far the reins have slipped from our hands, it will have served its turn. Seated as we are upon the Mediterranean and having at our command, as I believe, a considerable amount of goodwill within the Turkish empire and the memories of an ancient friendship, it should not be impossible to recapture the place we have lost.

But these are matters outside the scope of the present book, and my *apologia* had best end where every Oriental writer would have begun : "In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate !"

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