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Memoirs: Volume 1

Charles Meryon

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The adventurous and unconventional Lady Hester Stanhope (1776–1839) set off to travel to the East in the early nineteenth century. She had acted as hostess for her uncle, British Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, and after his death she received a government pension and decided to leave England. Her personal physician Charles Meryon (1783–1877) wrote this three-volume memoir of their travels, first published in 1846. She had a reputation as an eccentric, but thought of herself as the 'Queen of the desert' and indeed achieved considerable influence in the places she travelled to. Eventually she settled in the Lebanon, where she lived out the remainder of her life. Volume 1 describes their travels in Greece, Egypt, Palestine and Syria, and an account of being shipwrecked near Rhodes. It concludes with the party's arrival in Damascus, where Lady Hester dressed in men's clothing and refused to wear a veil.

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VOLUME 1

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By H. H. Light to the Queen.

SHIPWRECK NEAR THE ISLAND OF RHODES

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TRAVELS
OF
LADY HESTER STANHOPE;

FORMING THE COMPLETION

OF

HER MEMOIRS.

NARRATED BY

HER PHYSICIAN

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON:
HENRY COLBURN, PUBLISHER,
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TO

JOHN SCOTT, ESQ., M.D.

OF THE UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD, AND FELLOW OF THE ROYAL
COLLEGE OF PHYSICIANS OF LONDON,

A GENTLEMAN AT ONCE EMINENT FOR HIS EXTENSIVE
ACQUAINTANCE WITH ORIENTAL LANGUAGES,
AND FOR HIS CLASSICAL KNOWLEDGE,

THESE VOLUMES ARE INSCRIBED,

BY HIS OBLIGED FRIEND,

THE AUTHOR.

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P R E F A C E.

The TRAVELS now presented to the public are intended to complete the MEMOIRS of Lady Hester Stanhope; and the author trusts that the interest excited by his former work — shown by the rapid sale of an extensive first edition, and the demand for a second—will be manifested equally for this. Indeed, he cannot doubt that the reader will be anxious to learn by what steps an unprotected woman progressively gained so marked an ascendancy in a strange land, the language and the usages of which were altogether contrary to her own, whereby the attempt became so much the more difficult. As, then, the MEMOIRS embraced a period of about fifteen years, in which the author endeavoured to trace the causes that led to the “decline and fall” of her ladyship’s somewhat visionary empire in the East, the TRAVELS

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will now take up her history from the time she quitted England, and, by a faithful narrative of her extraordinary adventures, show the rise and growth of her Oriental greatness.

A distinct line may at once be drawn between this and other books of peregrinations in the East. The reader will here find no antiquarian research, no new views of the political relations of sects and parties: but these Travels exhibit what others do not — a heroine who marches at the head of Arab tribes through the Syrian desert; who calls governors of cities to her aid, whilst she excavates the earth in search of hidden treasures; who sends generals with their troops to carry fire and sword into the fearful passes of a mountainous country, to avenge the death of a murdered traveller; and who then goes, defenceless and unprotected, a sojourner amidst the people on whom these chastisements had fallen.

This work embraces a period reaching from the thirty-sixth to the forty-third year of Lady Hester's life. It fills up an interval so far important, as connecting her residence with Mr. Pitt and the occurrences which marked the last fifteen years of her existence; and enables those, who may be disposed to blame or applaud her conduct, to speak at least upon

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certain grounds: and, though her enemies may find eccentricities enough to satisfy their inclination to ridicule her, her friends will dwell with pleasure on such of her actions as must, in the eyes of unbiassed persons, excite praise; whilst the undoubted marks of a superior mind, which, every now and then, show themselves, will bring into evidence the talents and energy which she inherited from her ancestor, the great Lord Chatham.

Some apology may seem necessary for the paucity of incidents in the first six or eight chapters. Twice had the author to lament the loss of what is most precious to a traveller, supposing him to have noted down from day to day the occurrences of his route. Up to the early part of the year 1812 the narrative is compiled from letters, written to friends in England, and from notes fortunately preserved. All that is subsequent to May, 1812, is copied from a journal kept unbroken for four or five years, during an intercourse which afforded the same facilities for observation as he enjoyed in preparing his former work.

On the criticisms which were passed on that work, the “Memoirs of Lady Hester Stanhope,” he feels bound, in justification of himself, to make a few observations. Unacquainted with the motives which

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actuated the writers of them, the public will, perhaps, when these are explained, entertain a different opinion from what, otherwise, it might be led to do.

Mr. Pitt, during his long administration, was surrounded by many coadjutors, who were raised by his patronage and favour to high places in the government. His generous nature led him to tolerate in some of them a line of conduct based on principles and motives less pure than his own. These men, in becoming the channel of advancement to others of an inferior class, created a host of followers, who thought it, and, where they survive, may think it still, a party duty to support the reputation of those persons to whom they owed their advancement. Mr. Pitt's niece and companion, Lady Hester, endowed with a finer discrimination of character than her uncle, and enabled from her position as a bystander to take a just measure of the abilities and motives of those who seemed to be acting with him, could scarcely bear with the stupidity of some, the duplicity of others, and the baseness of almost all. Gifted by nature with a most retentive memory, so as to be able to compare men's actions and assertions from time to time, just in her appreciation of their designs, fearless of their anger and a match for their ridicule, disclaiming all compromise with insin-

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cerity and vice, she aimed with an unerring hand the shafts of her disdain at all those whose vices and perfidy called forth her execration.

What then must have been the rage of these persons, who, finding their patrons unmasked in conversations related with strict fidelity, had no resource left them, but, where the narration was unimpeachable, to malign the narrator! All this is well understood by the higher classes of society in England: they may read the critic's vituperation, but they know why he is enraged, and they leave out his observations in the estimate which they form of the author's claim to their attention: but the mass of the public, who are less in the secret, pity the author, or perhaps even join in the ridicule against him.

Let those, therefore, who are open to conviction, correct their judgment and be undeceived. Let them be persuaded that, although the adherents of a Helio-gabalus, of a versatile, or an insincere minister, a pompous Lord, or an intriguing Duchess, may for a time be successful in their abuse, truth at length will prevail, and the indignation of a noble-minded, upright, and virtuous woman, become matter of history.

Among a host of critics, the Memoirs have been

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pronounced by some of another class as devoid of artistic excellence. The author's total abnegation of self, and his steady adherence to the rule he had laid down of shadowing the background on which he stood, in order to throw greater light on the more prominent figure in front, seems to have availed him nothing! Surely these critics might have had the sense to perceive that the author, if he had been so disposed, could have given to himself a much more flattering costume, and have arrayed himself in a garb of Eastern glitter as imposing as the most vivid fancy could desire. What was to prevent him from describing his familiar visits to the great people of the country, and the intercourse which he enjoyed with many of them — from recounting his pleasant adventures with lords and princes — from enumerating the ambassadorial gaieties of Constantinople, the frivolities of Smyrna, Cairo, and other cities, in which he bore his share—or from colouring incidents calculated to impose on the reader, too far removed from the scene of action to be able to decide what degree of credit was to be given to them? But it was not the author's purpose to divert attention from the heroine of his story; and in all the adventures which the reader may peruse in the following pages, he wishes his

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own share in them to be lost sight of, excepting where his presence is necessary for making the description complete.

One word more remains to be added as to the credit which is to be attached to what Lady Hester Stanhope says of herself and others. The author of this narrative can conscientiously affirm that, after an intimate knowledge of her ladyship's character for upwards of thirty years, he was always impressed with the highest respect for her veracity. Indeed, her courage was of too lofty a nature ever to allow her to condescend to utter a falsehood.

May 1, 1846.

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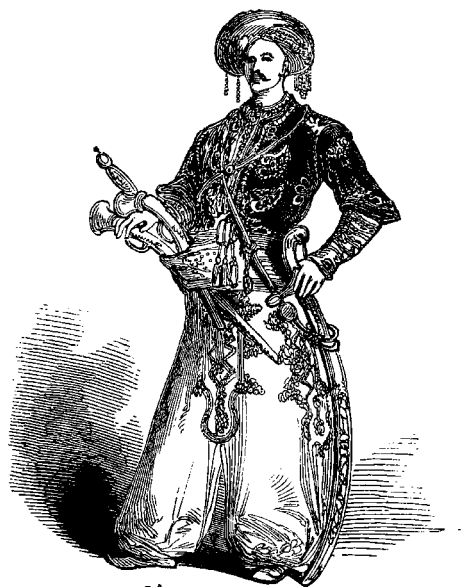
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