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Charles Meryon

Excerpt

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TRAVELS
OF
LADY HESTER STANHOPE.

Τὴν Ἀσίην δὴ πλείστον διαφέρειν φημι τῆς Ευρώπῆς ἕς τὰς φύσεις τῶν ζύμπαντων, τῶν τε ἐκ τῆς γῆς φνομένων καὶ τῶν ἀνθρώπων· πολλὸν γὰρ καλλιόνα καὶ μείζονα πάντα γίγνεται ἐν τῇ Ἀσίῃ. Ἡτέ χῶρη τῆς χῶρῆς ἡμερωτέρῃ καὶ τὰ ἡθεα τῶν ἀνθρώπων ἡπιωτέρα καὶ ἐνεργότερα. [Hippocr. 72 ¶, cap. 5. Περὶ ἀερῶν, ὕδατῶν καὶ τοπῶν.]

CHAPTER I.

Damascus—Ramazán—Visit to the Jews—House of the Hayms, brothers of him of Acre—Visit to the Pasha—Compliment of Hadj Mohammed to Lady Hester—Curiosity of the women to see her Ladyship—Their dress—Inefficacy of personal restraints upon women—Fanaticism of the inhabitants of Damascus—Lepers—Amusements of Ramazán—Patients attended by the Author—Sulymán Bey—His malady—His cure—Rural fête—Sister of Ahmed Bey—Chief families in Damascus—Visits to the sick—The Merge, or place of amusement—Women at prayer.

Damascus is a city of the highest antiquity, and is repeatedly spoken of in the Holy Scriptures. In the

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time of the Syro-Macedonian dynasties, and of the Romans, it was the capital of Cœle-Syria. Under the Saracen Caliphs, it was the residence of the Omniades, beginning forty years after the death of the Prophet; and it is still the second, if not the principal city of Syria, and the capital of a pashalik.

Its name, among the natives, is El Sham, and Demeshk el Sham, demeshk being the word from which we derive Damascus, the signification of which I do not know, and el Sham (to the left) being the name of the province, as Yemen (the right hand) is the name of another facing it. Ali bey, p. 265, makes its population to amount to 400,000 souls, which is probably too much by half; and we have a right to doubt his accuracy, since the shortness of his stay (only seven days) must have rendered it impossible for him to obtain accurate estimates. He reckons 20,000 Catholics, 5,000 Greek schismatics, and 1,000 Jews. Damascus has many noble mosques and fine public edifices. Of the mosques we entered none; yet a person could, as he sat in the Melon coffee-house, look into the court of the principal one, of which Abulfeda seems to speak, p. 172, saying that it was built by Walyd, son of Abd el Malek, and was called Beny Omyah: although it has not externally any appearances of Saracen architecture. Ali bey, in his character of a Mahometan, entered it, and he describes the mosque as having “three naves

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of forty-four columns, each nave being four hundred feet long : and in the middle of the central nave four enormous pillars, supporting a large stone cupola." He adds that, the mosque stands in a large court, surrounded with arcades, supported by square pillars, over which are galleries, and that in the mosque is the sepulchre of John the Baptist, whose head, as well as that of Hoseyn ebn Ali, was exposed here. In the suburbs there is a mosque of dervises remarkable for numerous cupolas. It is said to have as many as a dozen schools in it, supported by large revenues, arising from endowments and contributions. I regret not to have taken drawings of the ironwork of the windows of the ancient mosques, which, from the taste and delicacy of their forms, were well worth the trouble.

Of the khans, that which is called Khan Harûn is the most remarkable. It is built in layers of black and white stone, like a chess-board ; and within are commodious magazines for the merchants.

The patriarch of the Greek Church, a prelate superior in rank, although not in power and influence to the archbishop of Constantinople, resided here. His title is patriarch of Antioch. He had under him forty-two archbishops and bishops.

Damascus owes half of its pleasantness to the fountains which abound in every part of the city, and in almost every house. These fountains are supplied by running streams, which traverse the city,

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and which are branches of a small river, called the Barada.¹

Although the house assigned to Lady Hester Stanhope was a good one, she had probably determined to find it bad, in order to shift to a better quarter of the city ; for it is customary, in Turkish cities, to lodge Europeans, of what rank soever they may be, among the Christians ; as their habits of life and their religious observances are more easily followed there than among the Turks, who, in their own quarter, would suffer with impatience any violation of their own notions of decency or religion, which Europeans, without intending it, are constantly committing. So it is, that the Mahometans look on the Christian quarter in the most contemptuous light, never going thither but when called to it by urgent business.

Lady Hester knew all this ; and was determined, by a strong measure, at once to give herself a title to consequence beyond any other European who had before visited Damascus. Accordingly, the dragoman

¹ Abulfeda's description of it runs thus :—"The river, which flows to Damascus, takes its rise beneath a Christian church, called El Faygeh, and becomes at once a rivulet, which is increased in its course by many other small springs. It then unites with a stream, called the Barada, and forms one river, which, at its entrance into the plain of Damascus, divides itself into six or seven branches running to the different quarters of the town." At this division there is a cascade, and an inscription on the rock in Cufic characters, which Mr. Burckhardt told me he had copied.

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was despatched to state how impossible it was for her to remain in the house assigned to her. It was attempted to overrule her objections, but in vain; and, towards the close of the day, the pasha gave orders that the dragoman should be conducted from house to house with permission to choose, until one was found suitable. Lady Hester instructed M. Bertrand as to what she should like, but raised objections to every one that was proposed, until one, in which a Capugi Bashi, coming on some business from the Porte, had resided, met with her approbation.

The fatigue of moving being over, the Christian whose house Lady Hester had quitted was to be satisfied, and his expectations were raised to an inconceivable pitch, grounded upon her supposed riches and greatness. Some idea may be formed from one article of his bill, which was no more than a tumbler of lemonade, "Sherbet for the queen on her arrival, 15 piasters." His visionary prospects, however, were soon annihilated, and he was desired to content himself with a fair price for two nights spent in his house, being told that he should recollect how little claim, according to the practice of Turkish grandees, he had to any thing at all.

The house to which we were now removed was situate in the best quarter of Damascus, not far from the palace, and near the bazars. It opened through a narrow passage into an oblong marble paved court. In the middle of the court was a large

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basin, shaded by two very lofty lemon trees, into which two brazen serpents poured a constant supply of fresh water. At one end of the court was a saloon with a tessellated marble pavement; at the other an alcove or recess for a divan or sofa, with a small apartment on each side. A double staircase led up to a considerable height on the outside of the left wall of the court; at one end, to two rooms, which Lady Hester occupied for sleeping and dressing-rooms, and at the other to a large saloon, which was destined to receive visitors. There were consequently but six rooms in all, yet was this considered a spacious house; for the Orientals sleep in the same room where they sit, their beds being removed in the day-time to large recesses formed in the walls for that purpose, and hidden by a curtain.

Curiosity, it may be supposed, was much excited by Lady Hester's arrival. There are two monasteries at Damascus, one of monks of the order of St. Francis, the other of Capuchins. The society of these monks is generally sought after by Europeans; and, in the expectation of the distinguished reception they fancied they should receive, the superior of each monastery came to offer his services to her ladyship: but she would not see them. They were told that, as the quarter of the town she lived in was entirely Turkish, and as the sight of priests in this neighbourhood would be looked upon as an infringement of the rules observed by them, of seldom or never coming thither, they were requested

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not to repeat their visit: but she received with civility Mr. Chaboceau, a French doctor, seventy years of age, very deaf; for his privileges were more extended, as all quarters of the city are alike open to medical practitioners. This gentleman has or had a son living in England, at Uxbridge.

These measures, purposely made public among the servants, and repeated by the master of the house to his friends in the city, were construed into demonstrations of her esteem for the Turks, and contributed not a little to her popularity.

In the mean time, after resting herself a day or two, she prepared to ride out. No sooner were the horses brought to the door, than a crowd of women and children assembled; the gravity of the male part of the Turkish population seldom yielding so far to curiosity, as to allow them to join in a mob. When she came out, as she stood upon the horse-block, (of which there generally is one at the entrance of most houses) a smile on the people around served at once to prepossess them in her favour. She was accompanied by no one, but her young interpreter, Giorgio, and Mohammed, her Janissary, thus throwing herself entirely on the discretion of the inhabitants. Her first excursion naturally gave us some uneasiness; but it was without foundation. A grave, yet pleasing look, an unembarrassed, yet commanding, demeanour met the ideas of the Turks, whose manners are of this cast. We were, however, somewhat diverted by the

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different reports which were spread respecting her among them. It was generally supposed, from her fair complexion, that she painted white: and it was confidently affirmed, as her appearance was so little European, that, although by birth an Englishwoman, she was of Ottoman descent, and had Mahometan blood in her veins.

The Turkish feast of Ramazán was now celebrating, during which Mahometans are accustomed to fast from sunrise to sunset for the space of a whole moon. Little business, excepting what is unavoidable, is transacted all this time. The day is beguiled as much as possible in sleep, by which the cravings of appetite and the desire for drink are considerably deadened. The first half of the night is devoted to feasting and visits.

Lady Hester was anxious to be presented to the pasha as soon as possible, and an early evening was fixed on. Previous to it, she signified to the Jews, brothers of him of Acre, her intention to visit them. They filled at the court of Damascus, as has been said, the post of seráfs, which word signifies bankers or money-changers, but embraces a more comprehensive meaning. The wealth of this family was enormous, and the house they lived in was not inferior to any one in the city: its exterior, however, was mean in appearance, and gave no idea of the magnificence within. All the houses in Damascus are built of clay, beat up with chopped straw, and made into a

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composition,¹ which, when dried in the sun, becomes very tenacious. Houses so built have, externally, a mean appearance ; and as the Jews throughout Turkey are odious to the natives, they are compelled, from policy, to give to the quarter in which they reside a dirtiness of appearance that shall not rouse the over-sensitive jealousy of their masters. Accordingly, on entering the Jews' quarter at Damascus, the organs of smell and sight are much incommoded, and any thing but architectural beauty or cleanliness is found in it. Haym's street-door opened, and we went down two or three steps into a stone entry about fifteen or twenty feet square, to the left of which was a dirty alcove, with a carpet on the floor, and cushions against the wall, and opposite to it a small filthy room. A staircase led from this court to two rooms above, of the same description. Any stranger, but particularly a Turk, enters thus far, and, whether he comes for the business of a moment or for a few days, it is here the master of the house sees him, and it is here that his meals are brought to him.

Opposite to the front door was another which opened by a crooked entry into the first grand court of the house, so that nobody from the strangers' court could see into this, even if the door was ajar. Here began to be displayed the wealth of the proprietor. The

¹ These walls were known to the ancients, and called *parietes formacei*. The same composition is still used at and near Lyons in France, and called *pisé* : as also in Cornwall.

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court was spacious, and in the centre was a large basin, into which water spouted and gave coolness to the surrounding apartments, which were numerous. A large one on the left was covered with a rich Persian carpet, and the cushions of the sofas, which ran round the three sides, were of Damascus satins. On the right was a smaller one, more magnificent, but on the same plan. We entered only those two in the first court.

A passage led into a second court, the pavement of which was inlaid with marble mosaic, and in the centre was a basin with a fountain. Round it were numerous apartments; and these were destined for the harym; nor should I have enjoyed the privilege of seeing them (as no men enter here) had I not accompanied her ladyship, who, as a female, was necessarily conducted to them. Nothing could equal the magnificence of these rooms, two of which, at the extremity, were peculiarly beautiful, and between them was an alcove, which is inseparable from the houses of the Levantines, and which is no other than a saloon with three sides to it, the fourth side, fronting the court, being entirely open to the air, with an arch thrown over it. All these apartments had the walls painted and gilded in arabesque, and none of the ceilings were plain, but painted in stars, in lozenges, or in some diagram or device.

Neither in the first nor the second court was there an upper story, excepting over one room, where all the