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Adolphus Slade

Excerpt

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TURKEY

AND

THE CRIMEAN WAR.

CHAPTER I.

Origin of the Ottoman Nation—Othman Founder of the Turkish Monarchy—Sultan Amurath I. defeats the Sclavonic League—Bajazet subjugates Asia Minor—He is defeated and taken Captive by Tamerlane—Mahomet I. and his Descendants consolidate the Empire—Syria and Egypt subdued by Selim I.—Amurath IV. captures Bagdad—Eastern Empire of the Turks—Policy of the House of Othman—Reign of Sultan Mahomet IV.—Power of the Sultans—Policy of Sultan Mahmoud—The Janissaries and their Organization—Their Destruction and its Consequences—The Reforms of Sultan Mahomet II.—Fires in Constantinople—Pertef Pasha—Death and Burial of Sultan Mahmoud.

THE Ottoman nation, like other nations which have achieved greatness, rose from a small beginning. A few hundred Turcoman families, living in tents, like the Turcomans and Kurds of the present day, formed its nucleus. Under their chief, Ertogrul, they led a pastoral life, in the dominions of the Sultan of Roum; whose capital, originally Nice until its capture by the Crusaders (A.D. 1097), was Iconium. The kingdom

of Roum was a fragment of the empire, extending from Samarcand to Egypt, consolidated by Alp Arslan, a lineal descendant of Seljuk, which, breaking up on the death of Malek Shah, resolved itself into four states, each ruled by a prince of the Seljukian line.

Othman, the son of Ertogrul, entered early the military service of the Sultan of Roum; he acquired favour and influence there, and on the abdication of his suzerain succeeded to the throne, A.D. 1299. The fallen dynasty retained wealth and spiritual honours, and its representative, the Mollah-Hunkiar, has since enjoyed the right to gird with the sabre of power every sultan of Turkey on his accession. Othman, the son of Ertogrul, was the founder of the Turkish monarchy, and the Turks by birth or adoption have since been styled Ottomans or Osmanleys.

The Ottomans looked upon the dissolving Eastern empire as their inheritance. Vigorously led, brave, and united by a fervent religious belief, they despised alike the arms and sophistry of the Greeks, who betrayed their sense of weakness by sending in nominal marriage a daughter of the imperial house to Sultan Orchan. In the course of three generations they transferred their capital, first to Brussa, next to Adrianople. Their neighbourhood disturbed the repose of the Byzantines, and roused the Bulgarians, Servians, and Albanians to arms; but the tardy valour of the latter was of no more avail than the processions of the former. Amurath I., the founder of the Janissaries, overthrew their army, and broke the Slavonic league formed against him, at the battle of Kossova, A.D. 1390. As the victor surveyed the field of battle on the following day, a Servian

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BAJAZET CAPTURED BY TAMERLANE.

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started up from among a heap of slain and revenged his comrades by a blow of his yataghan, of which the Sultan died, in the seventy-second year of his age and the thirty-first of his reign. The tide of success continued to flow on under his son Bajazet, surnamed Ilderim (lightning). He curbed the aspirations of the emirs of Anatolia, who ill bore the ascendancy of the house of Othman; he subjugated the country from the Hellespont to Mount Hæmus; and he vanquished a confederate army under Sigismund, king of Hungary, at the battle of Nicopolis. The hour then arrived for the salutary trial of adversity; that ordeal which develops the virtues of a race and discloses its tendencies. Every nation which has acquired eminence has been early tempered by that trial. The want of it proved fatal to the empire whose capital had known neither infancy nor adolescence. Born of a master will, "new Rome" sprang at once, untrained, untutored, into adult existence, with the wealth of nations at command to gratify the passions of a corrupt age. Success had made Bajazet arrogant, and his arrogance had aroused the jealousy of Tamerlane, popularly known as Timour the Tartar. Mutual reproaches and defiance led naturally to war. The Tartar and Turkish armies, both of common origin, met on the plain of Angora, each led by its sovereign in person and animated by his rancour. In the battle which ensued, July, 1402, victory remained faithful to her favourite. The Turkish army was routed; Bajazet was taken prisoner, and Asia Minor lay at the feet of the conqueror. The fruit of a century of toil and courage, the work of Othman, Orchan, and Amurath, seemed lost in a day. But the Ottomans

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had not accomplished their allotted task ; the promise of Mohammed of Constantinople for the “ faithful ” had to be fulfilled. Tamerlane, therefore, satisfied with success and revenge, retired to his dominions beyond the Caspian, leaving the Turkish empire to be contended for by the four sons of Bajazet, the eldest of whom, Mahomet, after ten years of civil strife, remained the victor and ascended the throne of his father at Adrianople. Mahomet I. reconsolidated the Ottoman empire ; his son, Amurath II., strengthened its foundations by wise legislation ; and his grandson, Mahomet II., by the aid of a monster cannon, wrought by a Venetian, throwing 600-pound balls, crowned the edifice by the conquest of Constantinople, 29th May, 1453. Mournful day ! when the last Constantine fell nobly in the breach, slain by a vulgar hand ; and the first cathedral, reared before the birth of *Islam*, rung with the praises of Mohammed.

This catastrophe revealed to central Europe the existence of a great and menacing Moslem power, and showed the Italian republics the folly of having allowed their policy to be shaped solely by mercantile considerations. Hungary with Transylvania became the battle-field of the German and Turkish empires ; while the Venetians and Genoese sank from their haughty position under the Greek emperors to the humble condition of suitors for commercial favours at the feet of a slave of the Sultan. Selim I., the third in succession from the conqueror, subduing Syria and Egypt, dethroned together with the Mamlouk dynasty the titular caliph of the Fatimite line, seated in mock state at Cairo, and transferred, A.D. 1516, the relics of

the Prophet and other insignia of the caliphate from his palace to the imperial seraglio. The eleventh in descent, Amurath IV., the last Sultan who took the field in person, wrested Bagdad from the Persians. In possession of the "holy cities," and the famous seats of the caliphate, the house of Othman, invested thereby with the religious and historic associations dear to Islam, became lustrous in the eyes of the Moslem world, and but for its Scythian origin the lofty title of "Commander of the Faithful" * might have been awarded by common consent to its chief.

The tenacious hold of the Eastern Empire by the Turks, encamped amidst disaffected peoples with whom fusion was next to impossible, and menaced by powerful neighbours animated by religious hostility, forms a remarkable passage in history. They had taken that empire literally in pieces. They reconstructed it. They reannexed to it the Mesopotamian provinces ceded, with part of Armenia, to the Persians by the Emperor Jovian, as the price of his retreat from the Tigris with the remnant of Julian the Apostate's army. They added to it the African presidencies, part of the Western Empire, also Dacia, never ruled firmly even by Rome; and, with garrisons in Hungary, they included in their dominion the extreme point of Arabia, far beyond the Roman sway, Aden—the refuge of Cain, according to the Arabs. With their power recognized East and West, they sent, during

* "Commander of the Faithful" was one of the titles of the Caliph, and in virtue of it his name was mentioned in the Khoutbey (Friday noon prayer) in every mosque. That distinction ceased with the fall of the Abbassides. Since then each state has mentioned only its own sovereign in the Khoutbey. Moslems in countries ruled by sovereigns of another faith mention as Commander of the Faithful the Sultan of Roum (Turkey) in their Khoutbey.

the reign of Solyman the Magnificent, in a fleet built expressly at Suez, an army to India against the Portuguese; and their diversion in Hungary and Naples in favour of France, leading Charles V. to raise the sieges of Marseilles and Arles, and retire with his forces behind the Var, readjusted the European balance of power. Haireddin Pasha (Barbarossa), with the ambassador of the eldest son of the Church for his guest, the negotiator of the treaty of alliance defensive and offensive between Francis I. and the Ottoman Porte, carried away captive in his galleys on that occasion many thousand Italians from Brindisi and Otranto.

The House of Othman avoided dynastic complications and evaded that rule of inheritance which gives precedence to the eldest of the race—fecund source of Asiatic civil discord—by usages calculated to prevent collateral extension and facilitate direct succession. The princes of the blood, state prisoners virtually from the hour of their father's death, were given concubines for toys, and the princesses of the blood were married, for little more than form's sake, to pashas who were generally relegated to distant governments, with the charge of maintaining their royal wives' establishments. The issue of these unions, if female, might be reared; but the duty of perpetuating the imperial race devolved upon the Sultan. No son, traditional testimony leading to that conclusion, born to or of any other member of the family, survived to gladden its mother's heart with its prattle; nor did the exception, proving the rule thus far, occur until the reign of the thirtieth Sultan, Mahmoud II. His eldest daughter's son attained the age of five years and then died. His heir, Sultan Abdul

THE OTTOMAN DYNASTY.

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Medjid, was equally tolerant of his brother, who, on his accession, produced a son four years old, whose existence had been a family secret; but the boy was then recognized, and registered at the Porte as a prince of the imperial race. Infanticide, however, was rare, recourse being had to an expedient to which allusion is sufficient; and which, becoming with such high sanction interwoven with the domestic economy of private harems, may be considered one of the causes (precocious marriage aiding) of the disproportionate female mortality among the Moslem population of the capital.

Thus the Ottoman dynasty became, like the Nile among rivers, a solecism: a stately stem without branches, as the other is a noble stream without affluents. The direct succession of the first fourteen Sultans is proof that each of them survived his uncles; whether fairly or unfairly cannot, in regard of all, be affirmed. History only records three Sultans guilty of the death of their brothers, the number of whom in one instance exceeded fifty; and in the absence of evidence we may be allowed to assume that the princes in general died naturally: some of them, perhaps, of *tedium vitæ*. They were sensually pampered, intellectually starved; they had no healthy pursuits, no manly diversions; they had much to fear, nothing to hope for; their society was composed of treacherous eunuchs, fawning pages, dissolute buffoons, and fanatic mollahs. When sickness oppressed them why try to combat it with nauseous drugs and insipid diet? Better lie down and die. Moslem resignation is often the indifference to life generated by mental and physical languor, and sometimes the impatience of it, born of

“the law’s delay,” and “the insolence of office.” The nation approved of an arrangement the advantages of which it shared without the responsibility; all it required was, security for the succession, in case of the Sultan having no son, or one of tender age.

The fortunes of the Ottomans culminated in the reign of Sultan Mahomet IV. That reign witnessed the conquest of Crete; the phenomenon of a series of able, upright grand viziers of one family—the Kiuprogous, whose still respected tomb faces the column erected by the first Constantine in the centre of his forum,—and the siege of Vienna, A.D. 1683. The Turkish army before Vienna clamoured for an assault for the sake of plunder; its commander, Kara Mustapha, temporized for a capitulation for the sake of ransom: the plunder would belong to the troops, the ransom to their general and his friends in the capital. This hesitation gave time for Sobieski and his Poles to arrive to the rescue. The tide then turned, and, sweeping the Ottomans out of Hungary, where their horsetails had floated in the breeze for above a century, it continued to ebb slowly and fitfully, occasionally checked by a transient breeze of prosperity, until it reached low-water mark in the reign of Sultan Mahmoud II.; of which I shall speak more at length, since out of its events grew the Eastern question. In that reign, for the first time, revolt was successful, and peace was accompanied by humiliation. The Greeks, cheered in their struggle and finally aided by Western Europe, gained independence, and the Russians exacted a pecuniary indemnity at the peace of Adrianople; and then, organized by an aspiring rebel, the despised fellahs of Egypt, crossing the Taurus, overthrew the imperial army at Konia,

POWER OF THE SULTAN.

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the cradle of the monarchy. Their further advance, beyond Kutaieh, was deterred by the disembarkation, in February, 1833, of a Russian army on the Asiatic shore of the Bosphorus : direct evidence of the distress of the monarchy, thus reduced to crave aid from its hereditary foe—the foe destined, in its own opinion, to deal by the Turkish as the Turks had dealt by the Lower Empire.

Sultan Mahmoud's reign was a prolonged struggle with his people for power. Theoretically absolute, the power of the Sultan of Turkey had for generations been practically limited by custom ; which in the East has the force of law : often more. *Adet dir* (it is the custom) is the excuse and the apology for abuses and anomalies whose name is legion. The Sultan might, unquestioned, decapitate individuals and confiscate their goods ; but he dared not oppress the community nor levy taxes unauthorized by law. He might fill his harem with strange women, but he dared not peer through the harem lattice of the meanest of his subjects. The seduction of a Turkish lady by Sultan Ibrahim filled the measure of his unpopularity and determined the storm which deposed him. The Tartar race, which sprang into notice under Othman, regarded him as their chief, tacitly elected. They swore fealty for themselves and posterity to the family of the founder of the dynasty ; but reserved the right to choose the worthiest of it to reign. When the line of conquering Sultans, followed joyously by the nation, ended, their effeminate successors found themselves circumscribed by institutions silently grown out of the traditions of their nomade ancestors, of which the *Kourshaltai* was prominent. The Turkish nation, unable to free itself from the obligation of passive obedience

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ordained by the Koran, placed that volume beside the throne, and empowered the Scheick ul Islam, the chief of the Ulema, to interpret its meaning to the Sultan, and remind him of his obligation also to govern according to law. This restraint, aided by the domestic arrangement before spoken of, has caused the comparative stability of the Ottoman family among Moslem dynasties, the cohesion of the heterogeneous elements composing the vast empire under its sway. The Caliphate had been nearer the fountain of Islam, invested moreover with a sacred character; yet each of its branches having run through the cycle of conquest, torpor and decay sank under the withering influence of a despotism which none dared gainsay. The Ottoman monarchy—solecism in the East—possessed a constitution: defective, and in a state of chronic disorder, but still a roughly balanced system.

The tragedy enacted at Constantinople by the Janissaries and Mustafa Bairactar * which terminated with the

* In 1807 the Janissaries deposed Selim III. in favour of Mustafa, the eldest of his two nephews, the sons of Sultan Hamid. On hearing of the fall of his patron, Mustafa Bairactar, the pasha of Rudschuk, raised an army of Albanians and marched on Constantinople to reinstate him. Overawing the city, he traversed it with his force to the outer wall of the seraglio. Chamberlains met him there, and demanded, in the name of Sultan Mustafa, his object. "I know no other Sultan than Selim; let him appear and I will give an answer," said the Bairactar. Sultan Mustafa sent word to him in rejoinder to wait a little and Sultan Selim would appear. In half-an-hour the Bairactar was admitted into the outer court, and there saw the dead body of the unfortunate Selim, victim to his zeal. He at once stormed the inner courts, deposed Sultan Mustafa, and transferred his brother Mahmoud from the recess in which, it is said, the architect of the palace had concealed him, to the throne. Sultan Mahmoud II. made Mustafa Bairactar the grand vizier; but he did not long fill that post. The Janissaries in revenge soon afterwards set fire to his residence, in the flames of which he perished.