

TRAVELS AND ADVENTURES

ON THE

SHORES OF THE CASPIAN SEA.

CHAPTER I.

SKETCH OF THE AUTHOR'S PREVIOUS TRAVELS, AND HIS ARRIVAL AT ASTRABAD. — HIS PARTY DESCRIBED. — MUSTAPHA KHAN THE GOVERNOR. — VISIT OF AN ASTRABAD PEDANT. — THE DEAD BODY OF A NOBLE CAPTURED BY THE TOORKOMANS. — ITS VALUE TO THE CAPTORS. — ALARM OF FIRE. — CITY OF ASTRABAD DESCRIBED. — ITS REPUTED ORIGIN. — APPEARANCE. — STREETS. — BAZARS. — PALACE. — FACE OF THE COUNTRY AROUND.

IN the year 1821, being desirous of visiting Persia on my way from India to England, I availed myself of my acquaintance with the late Dr. Andrew Jukes, to accompany him on a mission with which he was charged, from the government of Bombay to the court of Tehran; but that gentleman having unfortunately died at Ispahan, upon his way, I proceeded to Tehran, carrying with me the dispatches intended for the Persian court, which were delivered into the hands of Henry Willock, Esq., chargé d'affaires to His Britannic Majesty.

Having resolved to visit the remote province of Khorasān, and, if possible, to penetrate into the countries to the north east of it, I left Tehran in December 1821, accompanied by Meerza Abd-ool-Rezāk, a Persian of good family, considerable liberality of sentiment, and respectable mental endowments; attended also by my faithful

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negro John, and four Persian servants. The Meerza was, in truth, my companion, and I hoped to gain much information from his intelligence, his quickness of observation, and his knowledge of the people and their language.

Our party, after encountering various detentions and some hazards, reached Mushed, the capital of Khorasān, early in February 1822, where we remained six weeks, in hopes of being able to cross the desert to visit Bockhara and Samercand, which cities were the grand object of our wishes. But the disturbed condition of the country, which had totally put a stop to all intercourse by caravans, the only practicable mode of travelling in these quarters, rendered further progress in that direction impossible. We were, therefore, forced reluctantly to turn our steps homeward; but we resolved that it should be by a new track, and accordingly proceeded by Koordistan, a district of Khorasān, bordering on the great desert, through the once populous and fertile plains of Gourgaun, to Astrabad, at the south east corner of the Caspian sea: thence we proposed to shape our course through the provinces of Mazunderān and Gheelān, which border its southern shores, to Azerbaijan, and its capital Tabreez, the seat of government of Abbas Meerza, Prince Royal of Persia.

In the travels through Khorasān already published, the course of our party has been given, with a description of the countries through which we passed, until reaching Astrabad, we entered a region differing entirely in its nature from all we had heretofore seen: and which, after passing through the turbulent and rebellious province of Khorasān, might have been deemed comparatively secure.

On the 6th April 1822, we entered Astrabad, and remained there until the 15th of the same month; during a great part of which time the weather was damp and rainy; the clouds hung low on the hills, throwing a heavy gloom over all the landscape, and prevented us equally from making many of the observations we required, and from taking long excursions out of doors.

On the second day of our stay I visited Mustapha Khān, the governor of the town, who, however, did not appear disposed to pay

MUSTAPHA KHAN, THE GOVERNOR.

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much attention to his guests ; for it was not until long after I had taken up my quarters in the lodging which he himself had provided, that he thought of making any enquiry after my health or wants ; and although repeatedly told that I did not require soorsaut, as the entertainment supplied for guests, or servants of government, by the villages, on the part of the king is called, and which should be, but seldom is allowed for to them, in their annual account of taxes, he shuffled about it, in a manner which sufficiently proved that he would gladly have had the credit, without the expence of being hospitable.

After a considerable time, his brother, attended by several of the chief persons of the town, came to pay me a visit, and to see the curiosities I was reported to possess ; but the conduct and conversation of these good people only served to confirm the correctness of that character, which I had commonly heard attributed to the people of Astrabad, of churlish manners, ignorance, and bigotry. The greater part of them never having quitted their native town, had seen nothing even of the Persian world ; but wrapped in admiration of their own orthodoxy and wisdom, affect to treat strangers in general, and particularly those whose creed or opinions differ in any degree from theirs, with profound contempt.

It was, I believe, with a view to perplex and confound me, that the governor or his brother one day sent one of their chief worthies to visit me ; his name was Seyed Ahmed, a young scholar of high repute in his own city for talents and learning ; deeply read, it was said, in all the sciences that are taught in the East ; and though only twenty years of age, during which period he had never left Astrabad, quite equal, as his admiring townsmen believed, to dispute the palm of acquirements, and knowledge, with the most learned men of the age. His coming was announced to me with studied solemnity, by some of his humble admirers ; his approach was made known by a bustle and fracas ; and he entered my room with an air of pompous abstraction, that, with the foregoing preparation, formed an amusing climax : it was evident from every motion of his countenance, as well as from his first expressions, that he came in all his panoply of

learning, bursting with a mass of freshly crammed, but ill digested reading, to put us all to shame and confusion.

He commenced operations by attacking some observations which Meerza Abd-ool-Rezāk had made ; and uttered, in support of his opinions, a most sonorous rhapsody, of which I could follow but little. The meerza, suppressing a smile, asked his antagonist, whether the effusion which he had just heard was to be found in books, or was an effort of his own genius ; to which the young man conceitedly replied, that books, to be sure, had their value, though they often spoke obscurely ; that opinions not to be found in writing might be not the less correct ; and that he, for his part, had learnt to think and speak for himself. But the look of derision which the meerza could not suppress seemed to alarm the young professor, and he thought fit to change the subject.

He now put a series of questions to me regarding astronomy ; and upon my venturing to hint some doubts as to the correctness of the Persian notions upon such subjects, he stopped me short, assuring me in a tone of condescension, that all these matters had been demonstrated beyond contradiction, and might easily be made plain to any man of sense ; “ I will undertake to prove,” added he, “ every thing that is advanced, to your own satisfaction, if indeed “ you have capacity to understand it.” I bowed to conceal a laugh at this speech, and begged him to proceed, which he did, by repeating to me very gravely, and in a tone which proved how vast he thought his own knowledge, the ordinary principles of Eastern astronomy ; — that the universe is composed of the four elements, fire, air, earth, and water ; that the masses of these are concentric, and surround each other ; the earth being the innermost, the water next covering the earth, then the air, and beyond that the fire. I stopped him here, and entreated that he would explain to me how these things, particularly the last, was to be proved ; but our learned friend’s forte was neither definition nor demonstration ; such he begged again to assure me was the order of nature, but he could get no further. The meerza and I stuck to our point, and would only admit demonstrated facts ; so that weary of being constantly brought back

to the point whence he set out, he gave the matter up, with an affected smile at our obstinacy and ignorance ; observing at the same time to his companion, while he indicated me with a motion of his head, “ that person has some turn for astronomy, but he is too self-opinionated to learn ; he would be a clever fellow if he would but “ listen to instruction !” He considered my sextant attentively and long, asked many idle questions regarding it, and ended by observing in profound Arabic, that it was really a neat pretty thing of the kind. Soon after this he took his leave, preserving in his countenance and carriage the same lofty contempt with which he entered, and quitted us, probably, not less discomposed than we on our part were entertained with this specimen of Astrabad science.

We had other visitors, however, during our stay, of a more pleasing description, and from one person who had frequently visited the cities of Khyvah and Bockhara, I obtained some interesting information respecting these places. We understood, too, that reports were prevalent of a coalition having been formed between the Tuckeh Toorkomans and the Uzbecks, for invading Khorasān ; and that several thousands of these united marauders were already on foot for that purpose : various rumours were also in circulation of Chappows, or plundering expeditions in the vicinity of Shahrood, and it was stated that a caravan from Marunderān, carrying, among other valuable commodities, the dead body of some great person from that quarter, had fallen into their hands. On hearing this I laughed, and observed that the body would hardly repay the captors for their trouble. “ Ah, you mistake,” cried the relater, “ it would be worth to them “ at least 20,000 tomauns, or about 11,000*l.* sterling ; for the son, or “ the brother, or the next of kin, whoever he might be, could never “ permit the body of his relative to be buried in a land inhabited “ by infidel soonies, and would be forced to ransom it at any rate “ the captors might demand. Not long ago,” continued he, “ a “ similar accident occurred, and the relative of the deceased being “ unable or unwilling to go to the full extent of the ransom required, “ purchased back an arm only, for which he paid 1,000 Khorasānee “ tomauns, about 1,400*l.* sterling, and which was duly carried to

“ Mushed to be interred there as representative for the whole
“ person.”

This anecdote, though somewhat ludicrous at first sight, affords a striking proof of the power of the religious prejudices of this people; it is to be wished that their religion were more effectual to promote good deeds and charitable feelings towards their fellow creatures, and that they were more apt to extend to their relatives while alive, the pious offices which superstition and pride combine to wring from them to the dead.

On the evening before we quitted Astrabad we had a serious alarm. The chimney of our cook-room, which had been partly constructed with reeds covered with clay, took fire by the blaze of some wood burning in the fire-place, and communicating with the wooden frame of the roof, threatened to consume the whole building. To add to the dilemma, there was no visible way to the top of the house, nor had we any vessels or other means of conveying water to the parts on fire. The natives who came into the court upon hearing the bustle, either looked in stupid apathy, or ran about in confusion, without attempting any thing effectual; and had there been a breath of wind nothing could have saved the house; perhaps a great part of the town might have been destroyed. For some time we remained, as may be conceived, in a very painful state of anxiety, when at length one of the Prince's attendants, who was lodged in another part of the house, showed us a place from whence we could find access to the roof; by this way my negro servant, John, accompanied by Seyed Allee, one of my Persian attendants, mounted immediately, tore down the tiling, and so judiciously applied the small quantity of water that could be furnished by means of the cooking pots and other vessels, that the fire was presently extinguished.

It may not be uninteresting in this place to say a few words of this city, which has been believed to owe its origin to Yezid-ibn-Mehlub, an Arab chief of great celebrity.*—While this prince was

* This great general, who flourished in the end of the first and beginning of the second century of the Hegira, commanded the armies of Solymaun, Seventh Caliph of the Omniades, in Khorasān, which he reduced to obedience. He conquered the city and

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halting during his progress through the country at a village named *Isterick* or *Asterick*, which then occupied a portion of the scite now covered by the city of Astrabad, a treasure of forty earthen vessels full of gold and silver, and bound together by a chain, was dug up from the earth within its walls ; and was by him directed to be laid out in building a city which inherited the name of its obscure predecessor.

The circuit of the present city is about three miles and a half ; and it is surrounded with a wall of mud, once lofty, thick, and formidable, strengthened by numerous towers, and defended by a wide and deep ditch ; but the wall has mouldered down to a mere mound of earth, upon which has lately been raised a parapet, of height sufficient to screen a man, and little more than a foot thick, loop-holed for musketry, and serving to connect such of the towers as yet remain, or have been rudely repaired ; the ditch is nearly filled up with rubbish, and in most places has been converted into rice fields. It is needless to add, that the whole would prove quite indefensible against troops of the least resolution.

In former times the city was still more extensive, and the wall embraced within its circuit a strong fort called Kallah Khundān ; but Nadr Shah, jealous probably of its strength, and of the disposition of the inhabitants to rebel, ordered the fort to be demolished, and the town to be contracted to its present limits. Like most cities in Persia, the greater part is in ruins, and there are not now more than from two to three thousand houses within its walls.

The appearance of Astrabad differs from that of cities in the southern and more elevated provinces of Persia, as much as that of the respective surrounding countries from each other. Not only

territory of Jorjaun, then an independent state under the rule of a prince designated Meerzabaun ; and advanced into Teberistān and Deylem, divisions of the ancient Hyrcania ; at which period tradition supposes him to have laid the foundations of Astrabad. The life and exploits of Yezzed-ibn-Mehlub may be found at length recorded in D'Herbelot's *Bibliothèque Orientale*, and Price's *History of Mahomedanism*, vol. i. p. 462. et seq. : — the latter author follows the Tareek-e-Tebree, and Kholaussut-ul-Akbaur, and designates him "Yezzed the Son of Mohilleb." He was killed in battle, A. Heg. 102.

does the forest or the thicket approach on every side to the very ditch, but the extensive gardens and numerous trees which are mingled in all quarters with the buildings of the place, produce a very agreeable and varied effect, in opposition to the monotonous and sterile aspect of the grey mud-walls and roofs of the southern towns and villages. The houses, too, are picturesque and pleasing, both in shape and colour: they are constructed chiefly of wood, and frequently furnished with verandahs resting upon wooden pillars. The style of their architecture is light and open, more in the Indian than the Persian taste; the roofs raised to a pitch are covered sometimes with red tiles, sometimes with thatch, and extend far beyond the walls. Many houses are fitted up with lofty bawdgheers, literally "wind-catchers," square towers having openings on each side that act like windsails, conducting the wind into the rooms of a house, and which are used in many eastern towns, as Bushire and Bussora. They are built in the shape of towers, roofed with tiles, and produce an enlivening effect, equivalent to that of spires, in the landscape. There are besides numerous detached buildings of irregular forms, that contrast happily with the dead and lofty walls by which others are surrounded.

One important improvement in this town particularly attracted our notice: all the streets are well paved with stone; a regular drain runs along the centre of the principal ones, while a slighter hollow is seen in the smaller lanes and alleys, towards which the sides have a gradual inclination. This carries off the water, which in most other Persian cities stagnates in pools, or ploughs up and destroys the streets in its course. The inhabitants owe this essential addition to their comfort to Shah Abbas, who probably, at the same time that he made the great causeway through Mazunderān, ordered all the bazars and public streets to be paved, that they might be rendered passable in all weathers, which, it may be remarked, they could hardly ever be in so moist and rainy a climate, without such a precaution. The people are so sensible of the great utility of this measure, that they not only keep up the pavement of the public

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streets, but have causewayed all the small lanes leading to their private houses; an attention to neatness which gives to Astrabad an air of comfort and cleanliness to which we had long been strangers.

The bazars or public markets are tolerably extensive, but poorly filled, as the shops contain little more than the articles required for the mere consumption of the place. Astrabad, indeed, though a port town of the Caspian Sea, can boast of but little trade. These bazars are covered from the weather, not as at Ispahan, Sheeraz, Tehrān, &c. by a series of arches and domes, but by a roofing like that of the houses, formed of wood, and covered with tiles or thatch.

There are no buildings, either public or private, deserving of particular notice at Astrabad. The palace of the Prince is a miserable establishment, consisting of several dewankhanehs, which is the Persian name for the public sitting-rooms of great men, with private apartments, and one or two courts, all in a state of decay. Some of them were undergoing repairs to fit them for the reception of the governor, Prince Budd-e-a-Zemaun Meerza, a boy of ten or eleven years of age, and grandson of the king, who was at this time expected. In the court we saw several pieces of cannon of various calibres, three or four of which were mounted on new carriages, ill and coarsely made; the rest, including a mortar, lay dismounted, and in a very neglected state.

The revenue derived from this little province does not exceed 12,000 tomauns, or about 7000*l.* sterling, no part of which, in all probability, ever reaches the royal treasury; but Astrabad is famous for its toffunchees, or matchlock-men, so called from toffung, a gun or matchlock, a considerable body of whom is generally in attendance upon, or within call of the king. This province is also the native country of the Kadgers, a Turkish tribe of which the king is the head; and is consequently considered by his majesty as that portion of his dominions on which he can best rely in times of danger or internal revolt.

During the time of our stay in Astrabad, I traversed the town in every direction, and made several excursions in its vicinity. In

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the course of these rambles I was not less surprised at the extent, than gratified by the comparative cleanliness of the streets, and the freshness and beauty of the foliage that abounded in every part of this singular town. Among many fine old sycamores there rose some tall straggling cypress trees, that looked like dark spires above the roofs and thick verdure. The tops of the garden-walls and other inclosures, built of unbaked bricks or mud, and coped with reeds and clay, were gay with a thick covering of blue and yellow lillies, gilliflowers, and other brilliant plants; and the gardens themselves, full of fruit trees, particularly cherries and apples, were covered with a continued sheet of blossoms. I wandered through several of these gardens with great pleasure; that planted by the late governor, Mehedee Koolee Khan, though formal in its taste, and in the shapes of its trees, was particularly pleasing from its clear and abundant supply of water, its shade, and rich foliage.

When we passed the gates, and found ourselves fairly in the country, the eye was gratified by a more extensive though a less cultivated prospect. Climbing a hill which overlooked the town on the south-west, the whole seemed stretched at our feet, as in a map. To the east lay the Elburz range of mountains; their lower regions, and the deep valleys which intersected them, thickly clothed in dark green wood; their summits were chiefly hid in mist, or, when seen, presented bare rocks thickly spotted with snow: to the north and north-east extended the rich plains of Gourgaun, diversified with villages and forests, with verdure and cultivation, and terminating in the Toorkoman desert. On the north-west lay forest and cultivated land, bounded at a considerable distance by the Caspian Sea, which we now saw for the first time, and which was doubly interesting, as all that resembles the ocean must be to those who have long been excluded from its view. There are associations which connect themselves in an Englishman's thoughts with the "world of waters," which could not fail to be powerfully called forth by the sight of this great Asiatic lake.—Home, friends, and country, rushed almost painfully upon my recollection for a moment, but the presence of nearer objects dispelled the illusion, and I felt that we were still in Persia.