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978-1-108-05202-3 - Unexplored Syria: Visits to the Libanus, the Tulúl el Safá, the Anti-Libanus, the Northern Libanus, and the 'Aláh: Volume 1

Richard Francis Burton and Charles Frederick Tyrwhitt Drake

Excerpt

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UNEXPLORED SYRIA.



GENERAL REMARKS.

My eyes were still full of the might and majesty of the Chilian Andes, and of the grace and grandeur of Magellan's Straits—memories which fashionable Vichy and foul Brindisi had strengthened, not effaced—as I landed upon the Syrian shore on Friday, October 1, 1869.¹ The points of resemblance and of difference between the South Pacific coast and Mediterranean Palestine at once struck my glance. Both are disposed nearly upon a meridian; mere strips of flat seaboard, mostly narrow, rarely widening, bounded by two parallel Cordilleras, flanking waterless deserts on the far eastern lee-land: the

¹ My last appointment had been at Santos, São Paulo, the Brazil.

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northernmost are notably the highest blocks of mountain; and the low-lying southern extremities, in Asia as in America, are ever rising by secular up-growth; whilst either shores, Pacific and Mediterranean, are subject to remarkable oscillations of level, chiefly the result of Plutonic agencies. Both coasts are subtended by currents with northerly sets; both lands depend greatly upon snow for their water-supply; both show the extremest contrasts of siccity and humidity, of luxuriance and barrenness; and both abut upon a 'desert,' an extensive tract of extreme aridity. In both, as was said by a lover of Spain, God has still much land in His own holding. Syria and Palestine are, indeed, an Eastern Chili dwarfed and grown old—whose wadys (*Fiumaras*) are measured by yards, not furlongs; whose precipices answer to feet, instead of metres; whose travelling distances are registered in hours, not in days and nights. The former boasts of its Hermon, its Libanus, and its Anti-Libanus; the latter caps them with her Maypú, her Tupungáto, and her Aconcágua—names which, by the bye, drew groans as I pronounced them at the last anniversary dinner of the Alpine Club—while lakes and rivers, plains and valleys, cities and settlements, storms and earthquakes; in fact, all the geo-

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graphical, the physical, and the meteorological, as well as the social features of the two regions, show a remarkable general likeness, but every thing upon a similar scale of proportion.

On the other hand, the difference in all that may most interest the imagination, fire the fancy, and upheave the heart is yet more pronounced than the resemblance. The New World, which had been my latest scene of action, wearies with its want of history, of association, and consequently of romance; it was born to the annals of humanity within the space of four centuries; its aborigines, so to speak, were savages that can interest only in Fenimore Cooper; its legends are raw and grotesque, wholly wanting the poetical charms, tender and delicate, of South-European paganism; whilst art and science were, till the other day, words unknown to it. It is the prose of prose, the veriest reality. Its past is insignificant; its present is the baldest and tamest of the kind; and the whole of its life of lives dwells in the future—a glorious and gorgeous realm, ever dazzling the eyes, and serving chiefly to cast a grayer, sadder tone over the things that are.

The Old world of Palestine, again, is oppressively old, as the New is uncomfortably new: it is over-

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ripe, while its rival is yet raw; it makes the dissatisfied poet cry,

‘The world is weary of the past.’

In these regions we find hardly a mile without a ruin, hardly a ruin that would not be held deeply interesting between Hudson’s Bay and the Tierra del Fuego; and, in places, mile after mile and square mile upon square mile of ruin. It is a luxuriance of ruin; and there is not a large ruin in the country which does not prove upon examination to be the composition of ruins more ancient still. The whole becomes somewhat depressing, even to the most ardent worker; whilst everywhere the certainty that the mere surface of the antiquarian mine has been only scratched, and that years and long years must roll by before the country can be considered explored—before even Jerusalem can be called ‘recovered’—suggests that the task must be undertaken by Societies, not by the individual.

Of history, again, of picturesque legend, of theology and mythology, of art and literature, as of archæology, of palæography, of palæogeography, of numismatology, and a dozen other -ologies and -ographies, there is absolutely no visible end. And if the present of the New World be bald and tame, that of

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the Syrian Old World is, to those who know it well, perhaps a little too fiery and exciting, paling with its fierce tints and angry flush the fair vision which a country has a right to contemplate in the days to be.

The reader will understand this mingled feeling—a feeling never absent except in books—with which this pilgrim cast his first look upon the ‘holy, beautiful Hermon;’ a commonplace hogsback (*χοιράς*), where he had been led to expect a mighty and majestic Mont Blanc; upon the short barren buttress of Carmel by the Sea (*la Vigne du Seigneur*), type of graceful beauty to the Hebrew, and now crowned with a convent not quite useless, and with a French lighthouse decidedly useful, though uncommonly expensive;² upon the insignificant lines, the dull tintage, and the sterile surface of the Libanus—that Lebanon which served the Israelites as a *beau idéal* of glory and majesty; upon the memorial Ladder of Tyre,

² The French company (*L'Administration des Phares*) of Constantinople must administer to advantage, must make money, even at Carmel. Whilst a ship, say of 740 tons, pays 8*l.* for lightage-fees up the English Channel to Liverpool, the same vessel going the usual Mediterranean round of Papayanni & Co.'s steamers expends 30*l.*, or 3*l.* 10*s.* at each port. For Gibraltar light a vessel contributes 2*s.*; at Bayrut she is mulcted 370 piastres, or within a few pence of 3*l.*

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much resembling from afar a snowy patch taken from the Dover cliffs; and upon Bayrut, classic Berytus, a little city of the true harbour-town species, with terraced lines and tenements flat-roofed enough to support a bran-new settlement in Southern Italy. There was, indeed, to me something almost quaint in the contrast between the pictures which the fancy of childhood, aided perhaps by Mr. Bartlett and others of his craft, had traced and had deepened till the print might have been indelible, and the realities which rose somewhat misty and cloud-veiled above the light-blue Mediterranean wave. Like almost all realities, the scene declined answering to the anticipation. The comparison presently suggested the want of a realistic description, showing sights and things as they are; not as they are wished to be, nor as they ought to be — realistic chiefly as to the outer and visible part of such things and their bearings; thus serving to set off the other, and to many the more interesting, phase of the subject, ‘la merveilleuse harmonie,’ as M. E. Renan expresses it, ‘de l’idéal évangélique avec le paysage qui lui sert de cadre.’

I doubt whether this explanation will satisfy the man of artistic tastes, who writes to me, ‘Surely you will not “unweave *all* our rainbows”? Who will be

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the gainer by reading your comparison of the plain of Sharon with the Bedfordshire fields? I, for one, am certain that many take a delight in believing the contrary.' But surely this belief, which thus depends upon 'delight,' may be attacked to advantage, not only because it makes physical size and topical beauty the chiefest charm of the Holy Land, but also because it dwarfs the true importance and grandeur of its effects upon humanity, by setting its events in a frame far too large and fair. A great action appears the greater by being placed upon a small theatre. Pombal was a giant in Portugal; and though we still do right to measure—despite the Dean of Westminster—the power of a country by its size, yet we ever take the highest interest in those bygone days when the smallest of nations, Egypt and Greece, were perhaps the greatest. Why, then, make 'the mighty wall of Lebanon rise in indescribable majesty:' had Dr. Robinson never sighted the Alps, or the White Mountains of his native land? What means the 'eternal snows of the royal Hermon:' did Dr. Tristram ever see his favourite mountain all berry-brown in September and October? Why quote of a poor bell-shaped, onion-topped mound,

'What hill is like to Tabor's hill in beauty and in fame?'

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Had M. Chasseaud never glanced at Patras or Reggio, to quote no others, when he asserts: 'It would be superfluous to say that the immediate neighbourhood of the hills defining the landscape about Beyrout is, without one solitary exception, the finest and the most fertile in the known earth'³

The fact is, we find here, and not elsewhere, a complaint which may be called 'Holy Land on the Brain.' It is no obscure cerebral disorder, like the morbid delusions of the poisoner: it rather delights to announce its presence, to flaunt itself in the face of fact. This perversion of allowable sentiment is the calenture which makes patients babble of hanging gardens and parterres of flowers, when all they beheld was sere and barren. The green sickness mostly attacks the new and unseasoned visitor from Europe and North America, especially from regions where he has rarely seen a sun. It is a 'strange delusion that the man should believe,' Carlyle says, 'the thing to be which *is* not.' As might be expected, it visits the Protestant with greater violence than the Catholic, whose fit assumes a more excited and emotional, a spasmodic and hys-

³ *The Druzes and the Lebanon*, by George Washington Chasseaud. London, Bentley, 1855.

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terical, form, ending, if the patient be a man and a poet, in a long rhapsody about himself, possibly about his childhood and his mother. It spares the Levantine, as yellow Jack does the negro: his brain is too well packed with the wretched intrigues and the petty interests of a most material life to have room for excitement at the 'first glimpse of Emmanuel's Land.' A long attack of the disorder—which is, however, rare—leads from functional to organic lesion. Under such circumstances, the sufferer will, to adduce only one instance, hire a house at Siloam, and, like the peasant of yore, pass his evening hours in howling from the roof at the torpid little town of Jebus, 'Woe, woe to thee, Jerusalem!' The characteristic and essence of the complaint are not only to see matters as they are not, but to force this view upon others; not only to close the eyes of body and mind to reality, but also firmly to hold that they are open, and to resent their being opened by any hand, however gentle. A few limestone blocks stained with iron rust become 'beautiful blush marble,' because they are the remains of a synagogue at Tell Hum—which, by the bye, is *not* Capernaum. Men fall to shaking hands with one another, and exchange congratulations, for the all-

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sufficient reason that the view before them embraces the plain of Esdraelon. The melon-shaped article which roofs the greater Rock in the Noble Sanctuary becomes an 'exquisite dome;' and so forth unto nausea. In art, poetry, and literature generally, 'Holy Land on the Brain' displays itself by an exaggeration of description which distorts the original; by sentimental reminiscence; by trite quotation, more or less apposite; and sometimes by a trifle of pious fraud. Its peculiarity in the Englishman and the Anglo-American is the rapture with which it hails the discovery in some ruinous heap of some obscure Scriptural name, belonging to some site still more obscure. As it especially afflicts writers of travels and guide-books, the sober and sensible tourist in Syria and Palestine must be prepared for not a little disappointment. Finally, it is in some few patients incurable: I have known cases to which earthly happiness and residence in the Holy Land were convertible terms. It endures time and absence, affecting the afflicted one with something of that desiderium, that 'sad and tender passion which a father nurses for the child whom he has loved and lost.'

Another advantage of the realistic treatment in