THE

MODERN EGYPTIANS.

INTRODUCTION.

THE COUNTRY AND CLIMATE—METROPOLIS—HOUSES—POPULATION.

It is generally observed, that many of the most remarkable peculiarities in the manners, customs, and character of a nation, are attributable to the physical peculiarities of the country. Such causes, in an especial manner, affect the moral and social state of the modern Egyptians, and therefore here require some preliminary notice: but it will not as yet be necessary to explain their particular influences: these will be evinced in many subsequent parts of the present work.

The Nile, in its course through the narrow and winding valley of Upper Egypt, which is confined on each side by mountainous and sandy deserts, as well as through the plain of Lower Egypt, is everywhere bordered, excepting in a very few places, by cultivated fields of its own formation. These cultivated tracts are not perfectly level, being somewhat lower towards the deserts than in the neighbourhood of the river. They are interspersed with palm-groves and villages, and intersected by numerous canals. The copious summer rains which prevail in Abyssinia and the neighbouring countries

begin to show their effects in Egypt, by the rising of the Nile, about the period of the summer solstice. By the autumnal equinox, the river attains its greatest height, which is always sufficient to fill the canals by which the fields are irrigated, and, generally, to inundate large portions of the cultivable land: it then gradually falls until the period when it again begins to rise. Being impregnated, particularly during its rise, with rich soil washed down from the mountainous countries whence it flows, a copious deposit is annually spread, either by the natural inundation or by artificial irrigation, over the fields which border it; while its bed, from the same cause, rises in an equal degree. The Egyptians depend entirely upon their river for the fertilization of the soil; rain being a very rare phenomenon in their country, excepting in the neighbourhood of the Mediterranean; and as the seasons are perfectly regular, the peasant may make his arrangements with the utmost precision respecting the labour he will have to perform. Sometimes his labour is light; but when it consists in raising water for irrigation, it is excessively severe.

The climate of Egypt, during the greater part of the year, is remarkably salubrious. The exhalations from the soil after the period of the inundation render the latter part of the autumn less healthy than the summer and winter; and cause ophthalmia and dysentery, and some other diseases, to be more prevalent then than at other seasons; and during a period of somewhat more or less than fifty days (called *el-khum'a'see'n*), commencing in April, and lasting throughout May, hot southerly winds occasionally prevail for about three days together. These winds, though they seldom cause the thermometer of Fahrenheit to rise above 95° in Lower

Egypt, or, in Upper Egypt, 105°*, are dreadfully oppressive, even to the natives. When the plague visits Egypt, it is generally in the spring; and this disease is most severe in the period of the khum'a'see'n. Egypt is also subject, particularly during the spring and summer, to the hot wind called the *semoo'm*, which is still more oppressive than the khum'a'see'n winds, but of much shorter duration; seldom lasting longer than a quarter of an hour, or twenty minutes. It generally proceeds from the south-east, or south-south-east, and carries with it clouds of dust and sand. The general height of the thermometer in the depth of winter in Lower Egypt, in the afternoon and in the shade, is from 50° to 60°: in the hottest season it is from 90° to 100°; and about ten degrees higher in the southern parts of Upper Egypt. But though the summer heat is so great, it is seldom very oppressive; being generally accompanied by a refreshing northerly breeze, and the air being extremely dry. There is, however, one great source of discomfort arising from this dryness, namely, an excessive quantity of dust; and there are other plagues which very much detract from the comfort which the natives of Egypt, and visiters to their country, otherwise derive from its genial climate. In spring, summer, and autumn, flies are so abundant as to be extremely annoying during the daytime, and musquitoes are troublesome at night (unless a curtain be made use of to keep them away), and sometimes even in the day; and every house that contains much wood-work (as most of the better houses do) swarms with bugs during the warm weather. Lice are

* This is the temperature in the shade. At Thebes, I have observed the thermometer to rise above 110° during a khum'a'see'n wind, in the shade.

not always to be avoided in any season, but they are easily got rid of; and in the cooler weather, fleas are excessively numerous.

The climate of Upper Egypt is more healthy, though hotter, than that of Lower Egypt. The plague seldom ascends far above Cairo, the metropolis. It is most common in the marshy parts of the country, near the Mediterranean. During the last ten years, the country having been better drained, and quarantine regulations adopted to prevent or guard against the introduction of this disease from other countries, very few plague-cases have occurred, excepting in the parts above-mentioned, and in those parts the pestilence has not been severe*. Ophthalmia is also more common in Lower Egypt than in the southern parts. It generally arises from checked perspiration; but is aggravated by the dust and many other causes. When remedies are promptly employed, this disease is seldom alarming in its progress; but vast numbers of the natives of Egypt, not knowing how to treat it, or obstinately resigning themselves to fate, are deprived of the sight of one or both of their eyes.

When questioned respecting the salubrity of Egypt, I have often been asked whether many aged persons are seen among the inhabitants: few, certainly, attain a great age in this country; but how few do, in our own land, without more than once suffering from an illness

* This remark was written before the terrible plague of the present year (1835), which was certainly introduced from Turkey, and extended throughout the whole of Egypt, though its ravages were not great in the southern parts. It has destroyed not less than eighty thousand persons in Cairo: that is, one-third of the population; and far more, I believe, than two hundred thousand in all Egypt.

that would prove fatal without medical aid, which is obtained by a very small number in Egypt! The heat of the summer months is sufficiently oppressive to occasion considerable lassitude, while, at the same time, it excites the Egyptian to intemperance in sensual enjoyments; and the exuberant fertility of the soil engenders indolence; little nourishment sufficing for the natives, and the sufficiency being procurable without much exertion.

The modern Egyptian metropolis, to the inhabitants of which most of the contents of the following pages relate, is now called *Musr;* but was formerly named *El-Cka'hireh;* whence Europeans have formed the name of *Cairo*. It is situated at the entrance of the valley of Upper Egypt, midway between the Nile and the eastern mountain range of Moockut'tum. Between it and the river there intervenes a tract of land, for the most part cultivated, which, in the northern parts (where the port of Boo'la'ck is situated), is more than a mile in width, and, at the southern part, less than half a mile wide. The metropolis occupies a space equal to about three square miles; and its population is about two hundred and forty thousand. It is surrounded by a wall, the gates of which are shut at night, and is commanded by a large citadel, situated at an angle of the town, near a point of the mountain. The streets are unpaved; and most of them are narrow and irregular: they might more properly be called lanes.

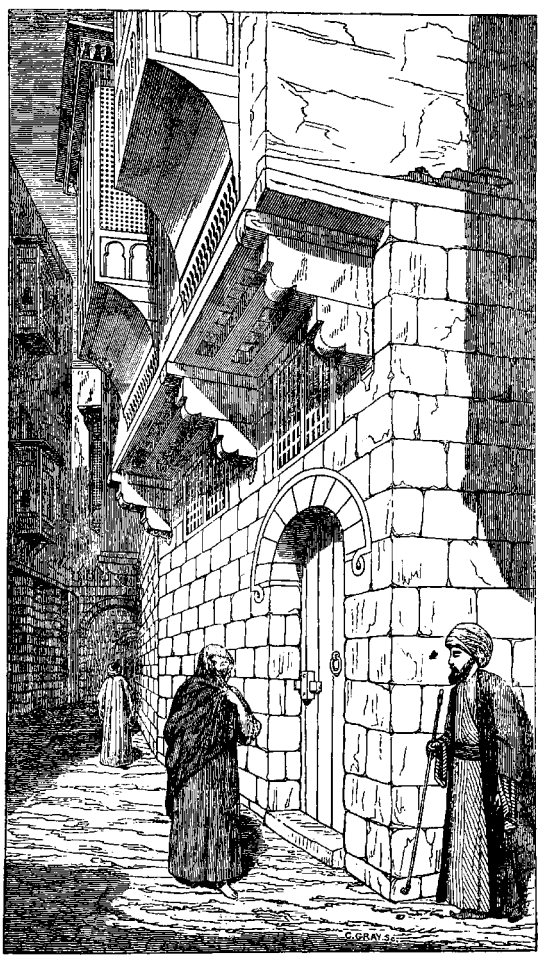
By a stranger who merely passed through the streets, Cairo would be regarded as a very close and crowded city; but that this is not the case, is evident to a person who overlooks the town from the top of a lofty house, or from the minaret of a mosque. The great thorough-

fare-streets have generally a row of shops along each side*. Above the shops are apartments which do not communicate with them, and which are seldom occupied by the persons who rent the shops. To the right and left of the great thoroughfares are by-streets and quarters. Most of the by-streets are thoroughfares, and have a large wooden gate at each end, closed at night, and kept by a porter within, who opens to any persons requiring to be admitted. The quarters mostly consist of several narrow lanes, having but one general entrance, with a gate, which is also closed at night; but several have a by-street passing through them.

Of the private houses of the metropolis, it is particularly necessary that I should give a description. The accompanying engraving will serve to give a general notion of their exterior. The foundation-walls, to the height of the first floor, are cased, externally and often internally, with the soft calcareous stone of the neighbouring mountain. The surface of the stone, when newly cut, is of a light yellowish hue; but its colour soon darkens. The alternate courses of the front are sometimes coloured red and white, particularly in large houses; as is the case with most mosques†. The superstructure, the front of which generally projects about two feet, and is supported by corbels or piers, is of brick; and often plastered. The bricks are burnt, and of a dull red colour. The mortar is generally composed of

* A view of shops in a street of Cairo will be found in this work.

† This mode of decorating the houses has lately become more general, in consequence of an order of the government, whereby the inhabitants were required thus to honour the arrival of Ibrahee'm Ba'sha from Syria.



Private Houses in Cairo.—The street in this view is wider than usual. The projecting windows on opposite sides of a street often nearly meet each other; almost entirely excluding the sun, and thus producing an agreeable coolness in the summer months.

mud, in the proportion of one-half, with a fourth part of lime, and the remaining part of the ashes of straw and rubbish. Hence the unplastered walls of brick are of a dirty colour; as if the bricks were unburnt. The roof is flat, and covered with a coat of plaster.

The most usual architectural style of the entrance of a private house in Cairo, is shown by the sketch here inserted. The door is often ornamented in the manner here represented: the compartment in which is the inscription, and the other similarly-shaped compartments, are painted red, bordered with white; the rest of the surface of the door is painted green. The inscription, "He (*i. e.* God) is the Creator, the Everlasting" (the object of which will be explained when I treat of the superstitions of the Egyptians), is seen on many doors; but is far from being general: it is usually painted in black or white characters. Few doors but those of large houses are painted. They generally have an iron knocker, and a wooden lock; and there is usually a mounting-stone by the side.

The ground-floor apartments next the street have small wooden grated windows, placed sufficiently high to render it impossible for a person passing by in the street, even on horseback, to see through them. The windows of the upper apartments generally project a foot and a half, or more, and are mostly formed of turned wooden lattice-work, which is so close that it shuts out much of the light and sun, and screens the inmates of the house from the view of persons without, while at the same time it admits the air. They are generally of unpainted wood; but some few are partially painted red and green, and some are entirely painted. A window of this kind is called a *ro'shan*, or, more commonly, a

Door of a Private House.