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Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

1855

But whosoever chooseth the life to come and directeth his endeavour towards the same, being also a true believer, the endeavour of these shall be acceptable unto God.—*Al Koran.*

THE winter came with its succession of storms of some days' duration, leaving two or three feet of snow on the ground. On January the 7th, my friend Dr. Sim, with Robert Dick, a Scotch farmer's wandering son, came and accompanied me to the summit of the Mount of Olives. It was interesting on looking eastward to notice that just below Bethany the snow ceased, and did not appear again until far over the Jordan, the range twenty miles distant, where it formed a horizontal line, above which all the mountains of Moab and Nebo, as far as eye could reach, were white. On returning to my house Sim playfully pretended to snowball the landlady's two boys, who nestled like chickens under their mother's skirts, quite cowed by the unwelcome winter. With snow gone, on the highest roof of Sim's house, I finished the clouds and sky of my picture, defying the bitter cold and wind of this exposed studio. On my return in the evening I found that the elder of the boys was ill in bed, and the old Bethlehem cook as she deposited the dinner on the table, uttered pious ejaculations about him, I knew that she herself was the mother of an idle and selfish

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son, she asked me about my mother, repeating, "Poor mother, poor mother! why do you leave her?" As the week went by, the parents' anxiety increased, and on my return home, entering the sick-room I found two good Prussian sisters come to nurse, and the doctor with the missionary were just taking leave, offering commonplace consolations to the mother, which led me to see that the case was really alarming. I referred to Dr. Sim's wish to see the patient, and hoped that he might be brought on the morrow; the woman clutched at my words. The evening was a sad one. I had my pen work to do, but ere retiring I went again to see the boy, and cheered the anxious mother as well as I could, asking that I might be told if in the night I could do anything. I slept with far-away thoughts, when suddenly my senses were aroused by a turmoil of confusion and a battering at the door. In distracted tones I heard the mother's words, "Oh, Mr. Hunt, Mr. Hunt, he is dead—he is dead—he is dead," and behind all was the voice of the Bethlehem woman uttering her death screech. Hurriedly I jumped up, and in the darkness snatched on my clothes. When I opened the door the poor woman was being led back to the chamber by her husband and the nurses. She took me to the bedside and showed her dead son, appealing to me with a mother's pride to say that he was beautiful. I sat up till dawn making a portrait of the boy for the comfort of the family.

With the sky of "The Scapegoat" completed I had now to finish the skeleton camel sketched in at Oosdoom, from one found near Jerusalem. My first hope was to complete the picture in time to send it to London for the Royal Academy, but owing to the delay in finding the third suitable goat, this had become impossible and the work was still incomplete at Easter when many English visitors arrived. Some brought introductions to me, and meeting congenial company was a pleasant relief to the vexations of my daily work.

While the city was more cheerful than usual, Lord

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Napier and Ettrick, with Lady Napier and her young sons, arrived, and Frederic Lockwood, whom I had known at Cairo, came over to meet his sister. I delayed their visit to my studio in order that the "Azazel" should be nearer completion, and when I had the pleasure of showing them my work, their discriminating and cultivated judgment was of pleasant service to me, after I had been for so long removed from the opportunity of artistic opinion.

An ancient quarry which penetrated under the city had been recently discovered. The Mahomedans were very jealous about it, and forbade entrance, but Cayley, the eccentric traveller, Brindley Nixon, and other young Englishmen were anxious to see it, and Sim and I undertook to conduct them. Graham lent us his tower on Olivet for the night. In the afternoon we left the city by separate gates, and waited at a distance until the last belated wayfarers had re-entered the walls, and the guards had shut the heavy doors upon themselves. The country around was by that time quite abandoned, and we made the necessary circuit to the Damascus gate, cautiously creeping close up to the foundations, beyond sight of the city ramparts, in order to reach the opening to the cave. It was not difficult to remove a stone or two put there to seal up the entrance, and one by one we crept in. After about eight feet of level rock there was a drop of the same extent; inside we lit our candles and waited for the whole party to descend. We proceeded, touching the quarried rock with our left hands; following along we came to chambers where the quality of the stone had tempted the ancient masons to extend their operations. In parts water dripped from the roof into pools, where the splashed surface of the rock was glazed and rounded; the blocks lying about had all been worked into measure and form, as the Bible describes the stones of the Temple to have been. Some of these had been discarded and left on the ground, presumably because of a discovered flaw. While most of us were examining a

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large door nearly finished, which was fresh as if of recent work, we were dismayed at hearing the loud explosion of some firearm in our rear, the noise of which reverberated alarmingly through all the hollows of the cavern. It turned out that a pistol had been fired with extreme thoughtlessness by one of our company, "merely for fun." How far it could be heard by the inmates of houses above our heads we never knew, but although we could believe that they would be more afraid than ourselves, we became anxious lest our place of exit should be obstructed.

When the quarry had been first entered, on its discovery by a shepherd, the skeleton of some unfortunate explorer had been found, who had evidently sought the means of escape in vain. After our exit we went to Graham's tower, where we had supper and found sleeping accommodation.

Sir Moses Montefiore came early in the spring on a charitable mission. While he was encamped outside the Jaffa Gate I wrote to him concerning the misinterpretation of my innocent object as a painter by the Jews and their Rabbis, and I begged that he would explain my purpose, and induce the Rabbis to remove the interdict which prevented the more orderly minded Jews from coming to me. Mr. Sebag Montefiore saw me on the subject, and promised attention to the question. Mr. Frederic D. Mocatta arriving rather later, I urged the point with him also; his knowledge of art and artists enabled him to understand my difficulties the better, so now I had improved prospect for "The Temple" picture, when I could be free again to work on it.

It had been a vexation to me during its progress to have no opportunity of seeing the distant slope of the northern Olivet from the platform of Moriah, which came into the background of the picture. Since the days when Godfrey de Bouillon, with his crusaders, were chased from Jerusalem, no Christian, except in disguise or by stratagem,

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at a risk of very probable death, had ever entered its precincts. Montefiore had indeed quite recently been admitted, and his entrance was not so shocking to the sons of Ishmael as to his own brethren. The Rabbis had pronounced against the part which their benevolent visitor had taken in availing himself of the opportunity, because, it not being now known which was the spot covered by the Holy of Holies, he, not being the High Priest, might have offended in treading on the proscribed ground. I had envied him and his followers, for I still felt the possibility of getting in myself was as far off as ever.

Early in April, however, the Duke of Brabant, the heir-apparent of Belgium, arrived in Jerusalem, and it was whispered that the very enlightened and francophile Pasha of the day was making great efforts to gratify the Duke's interest in the place. The Prince had been provided with a firman to enter the Mosque area, yet it was probable, as with many previous travellers coming from Constantinople, that His Highness would be told it would be fatal to the lives of all who attempted to act on the Sultan's favour; but gossip had not much to indulge in, and soon it was said that the Duke would be privileged to enter the Harem. I called on the Consul, and pleaded that if it were so, the English residents ought also to pass the sacred gates. He told me that this was generally felt, and that he was watching to secure the opportunity. On the Saturday of the Greek Easter, he sent me word to hold myself in readiness that afternoon. Earlier in the day I had witnessed the ceremony of the Miracle of the Sacred Fire in the Church of the Sepulchre.

This year no Russian pilgrims were present, yet the building was crowded with strangers, male and female, from Greece, Armenia, Egypt, and Abyssinia; in fact, in this respect the occasion was like the ancient feast of Pentecost, bringing strangers from all parts, and such resemblance was undoubtedly in mind when the original

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form of this ceremony was instituted, for it is on record that an artificial dove descended through the opening of the dome, carrying the fire with it into the sepulchral shrine. Curzon in his *Monasteries of the Levant* describes his experiences in 1834, when three hundred people were killed in the disorderly crush. Kinglake was there the next year, who treats of it in his most graphic manner, and Dean Stanley was a witness of the scene in 1854, a year before my own visit.

At 4 P.M. I presented myself at the appointed place for entrance to the Mosque, and found the secretary nearly alone. The company increased by ones and twos, and the Pasha had just counted twenty-one when our Consul arrived with a train of some thirty English subjects, clergy with their wives, and other ladies connected with mission work. Very obvious was the bewilderment of the Pasha, but his politeness was equal to the need. When he left the apartment time after time, and returned with no show of having advanced matters, I was inclined to suspect that he had as poor an estimate as I had of the interest which the majority of the crowd were likely to take in the features of the Mosque, and that he would therefore consider that the risk should not be incurred, and that it might be wise to delay action until advancing darkness should render our entrance into the sacred place impossible.

During this time it transpired that the Pasha was intent upon the success of a summons issued to all the dervishes of the Mosque to assemble in a chamber of the Hareem to discuss a point of great moment, which had to be considered by the highest authorities. Thinking it was the question of admitting the Belgian prince which had to be debated, they thronged into the building to utter their loudest protests. Delays arose in making certain that all the dervishes were assembled, and then the doors were locked, and a company of soldiers posted outside for an hour to turn the council-chamber into a prison.

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After this precaution, the Duke of Brabant and his suite advanced, and we were bidden to follow ; passing a few courts belonging to the house, we emerged from a dark passage into the great area which includes the site of the ancient Temple.

It was a moment in life to make one's heart stir as the door was turned on its hinges, and the way into this long-dreamed-of, much-longed-for, yet ever-forbidden sanctum was at last declared to be open to us.

On my first arrival in Jerusalem, wandering alone, I had entered the gates by mistake, but before I had realised my position I was set upon by one, then by two blacks, and threatened by an approaching crowd of wild and dark Indians and Africans, from whom I escaped by a hasty retreat. Now the place was empty, and I gazed with boundless delight on the beautiful combination of marble architecture, mellowed by the sun of ages, of mossy-like cypresses, and Persian slabs of jewel hues ; but at once I was told that no one must linger. At the foot of the steps we were ordered to take off our boots ; wearing Turkish shoes, I had no difficulty, but many were unprepared ; and it was one of the grim mockeries of fate that at such a moment ladies and gentlemen should intensify the hideousness of modern costume by hobbling about in lacerated stockings, carrying Wellington boots and fashionable shoes in their hands. Unfortunately the Royal Duke gave no sign of caring for the wonders about him ; he sometimes glanced to right or left as the guide referred to different objects, but never once did he pause from his swift march around the Mosque As Sakreh or through Al Aksa to dwell on any object, nor did he turn aside to examine anything out of the direct line of the prescribed route ; an Arab in Westminster Abbey would not have been more supremely superior. When Sim and I ran off to look at the interior of the Beautiful Gate, we were quickly summoned back by a messenger, with a caution that it would be imprudent to go alone, in the face of possible danger from dervishes who had evaded

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imprisonment. We pleaded that we were armed, and would take the chance, but the Pasha still objected, and we had to abandon our hope. I left with my curiosity only increased. On emerging from the gate to *Via Dolorosa* we saw a body of Moslems in the street, who glared with hatred such as only religious rancour can inspire, but they allowed us to disperse in peace.

If all the Christian visitors to the Mosque that day had felt the respect for Mahomedans which the sight of their reverent conservation had awakened in me, and if the sons of Hagar assembled at its doors had then been able to read the feelings inscribed on our hearts, their attitude towards us would scarcely have been other than brotherly pride in such hospitality as all followers of the prophet of Mecca are enjoined to exercise. From the day that Abraham met Melchisedek, this spot has been the theatre of events which have struck deepest roots in the life of humanity. It has been the sanctuary where God's word had been proclaimed to Jew, Christian, and Moslem. Had the Jews still possessed it, there would have been signs of bloody sacrifice. Had any sect of Christians possessed it, the place would have been desecrated either by tinselled dolls and tawdry pictures, as in the Church of the Sepulchre, or else by the ugliness, emptiness, and class vulgarity of the Anglican and Prussian worship, as found in the city of Jerusalem. In the case of the Moslem there was not an unsightly nor a shocking object in the whole area, it was guarded, fearfully and lovingly, and it seemed a temple so purified from the pollution of perversity that involuntarily the text, "Here will I take my rest for ever," rang in my ears. The past, so many pasts, stood about, even the very immediate present was a mystery and a wonder; it was an epoch at least in a life, and an hour even in the world's history, the moving of the index to a turning-point. The Osmanli sands were running fast, and the hour-glass would soon be turned; but I felt that the sons of Hagar had been appointed for a great purpose, to

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keep the place sacred until the sons of Sarah should be sufficiently purified by long-suffering to take it again into their charge.

But I had not attained my object. I had not been able to make even the slightest scribble of the landscape for my picture. I had, however, gained the distinct knowledge that the only point from which it could be obtained was the roof of the "Mosque of the Rock," which would be about the right height above the plateau of the Court of the Israelites. That I should ever be able to mount upon this, unless it might be in the guise of a workman, seemed quite out of hope, and only Moslems were employed in the reparation of the roof.

Photographs and exhaustive discussions have now made familiar to the world the startling unlikeness of the outside and the inside of the Mosque As Sakreh. Remarking upon the evidence pointing to its having once been a Christian church, which its interior suggested to me, a resident in Jerusalem said, "I see you are a convert to Mr. Fergusson's theory." I had not then heard of the architectural critic's conclusions, drawn from examination of drawings made under extraordinary circumstances by Catherwood and Bonomi.

In May all the pleasant English company went away together, for the Consul had the opportunity of visiting Gerash, which was not always open to travellers, and the chance was eagerly seized by those who made that place a fresh stage on their journey. The temptation was great for me to join them, but the time for my work was too precious to spare, and a discovery I had made did much to decide the question for me. The gun which I had carried on my saddle, and which had often served me in good stead, was cracked in the stock. The opening could scarcely be seen, and was not yet in danger of causing disruption, but when it was fired the strain dipped the barrel enough to make it hit low. A much more serious and troubling discovery was, that the revolver, on the efficacy of which my life had more than

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once depended, had reverted to its old fault of getting fixed in the lock. I put it by for a few days in order to take it myself to the ill-fated Frederic, but circumstances had hindered me from getting to his shop before it was closed for the evening. When supper was over I therefore called my landlord and said, "I want you to go to Frederic and deliver my pistol; explain to him yourself that it is loaded and cannot be fired off because of the defect for which I first sent it to him. He returned it repaired, but with the spring so weak that it only occasionally exploded. He must now put it into proper working condition at any cost, for a pistol that cannot be trusted is worse than useless. Explain that I know he is clever, and quite capable of curing the fault."

My landlord was a philosopher who at all times strove to enforce consideration for the weaknesses of others. "Vell, vell, yas! ve most 'ave patience. Frederic, poor fellow! he unhappy. I go to Frederic, I say, vy for you not marry, plenty nice gals 'ere now, you are von ov us, you av goot busness, vy not take vife. Vot"—and here he shrugged his shoulders commiseratingly—" 'e say, 'I stay 'ere only to die like my vrent die, an' den wot my vife do?' He tocht in 'ed, pooh fellow!" "I know, I know, Max, but mind you give him my message, and take care that no one touches the pistol but yourself, till you deliver it into his hands with the caution that it is loaded," said I.

The next morning Max, who was as conscientious as he was proud of his proficiency in English, assured me he had acquitted himself of his commission scrupulously. He said Frederic had listened attentively, and pleaded that before the spring was too slack, now too tight; there ought to be a new strong one, but he had not liked to put me to the expense of this before, now he would spare no pains. He was too busy for a day or two to attend to it, however, and would not take it in hand until he could finish it properly.

"Ah," said Max, "he quite mad, poor fellow! 'e 'ang