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Arthur John Evans

Excerpt

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ILLYRIAN LETTERS.

LETTER I.

REFUGEE AND INSURGENT BOSNIA.

Impossibility of peaceful settlement in insurgent provinces. Extent of Bosnian insurrection. Reign of terror in country districts. A quarter of a million refugees. Inadequacy of official relief. Corruption of 'patriots.' Miss Irby and Miss Johnston's work.

LETTER
I.

Knin (on the Dalmatian-Bosnian Frontier), February 8, 1877.



HERE seems to be a general impression in England that though the Conference has ended in smoke, matters are much smoother now than they were a few months ago. Russia, we are told, will only bluster and threaten a bit; Serbia is already negotiating terms; and as to Bosnia and Bulgaria—after all, what is the lot of the Christian inhabitants of Turkey when weighed against the peace of Europe? The oil of diplomacy has been poured upon the troubled waters, and somehow *ça s'arrangera*. The refugees will return; the insurgents will see the propriety of laying down their arms the instant that Russia fails them; and as to the condition of the rayah, well, we must trust to the good sense of the Turks to 'ameliorate' it themselves.

Extraordinary misconceptions in England as to situation.

Now I do not profess to be in the confidence either

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LETTER 1.	<p>of Russia or the Principalities, but so far as the Bosnian refugees and the Bosnian insurgents are concerned, and I may add the Bosnian Mahometans, I have set myself to examine personally the true state of affairs, and in the course of a somewhat difficult journey have seen and heard enough to open the eyes of those who indulge in these comfortable speculations. I will even venture to assert that so far as concerns those very countries where the present troubles originated, the prospect of a settlement was never more remote than it is at present.</p>
<i>The Bosnian refugees will not return.</i>	<p>The refugees, driven forth from Bosnia by deeds of savagery (which, though unreported by English newspapers, almost surpass the horrors of Bulgaria), are dying by tens and hundreds, starved and frozen in the inhospitable gorges of the Dinaric Alps ; but they will not return.</p>
<i>The insurgents will not lay down their arms.</i>	<p>The Bosnian insurgents hold already in their possession mountain strongholds, embracing over 1,000 square miles, are fairly armed, and, as I believe, capable not only of holding their own without foreign assistance, but ultimately, perhaps, unless thwarted by foreign intervention, of forming a new free State—a little Bosnian Montenegro—in the north-western angle of the province.</p>
<i>The new Constitution still-born in Bosnia.</i>	<p>Finally, as to Turkish promises and paper constitutions, the fall of Midhat will have already prepared your readers for the intelligence that the Turkish Government has not dared to promulgate the new Constitution in Bosnia in the native language, and that, so far at least as Western Bosnia is concerned, the Government of Stamboul has practically ceased to exist. The country not in the hands of the insurgents is terrorized over by the dominant caste of native Mahometan fanatics, the begs and agas, and their (in Bosnia still half-feudal) train of murderous Bashi-Bazouks, who have cast off the last</p>

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THE REIGN OF TERROR.

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semblance of obedience to the Central Government. In the country about Travnik and Banjaluka, the worst horrors of Bulgaria are repeating themselves at this very moment. I have before me the following details from a source on which you may absolutely rely. The outburst of fanaticism at present desolating that already desolated part of Bosnia, had its origin among the dregs of the Mahometan population of Travnik, the ex-capital of this country. One gang of these ruffians numbering about a hundred made its way to Banjaluka, and since the end of last month robber bands of these fanatics have been making inroads into the Christian villages whose inhabitants had not fled the country. As to the number of persons actually murdered, it is impossible at present to obtain exact details. In a single village, however—Zupa, by Banjaluka—there were six such assassinations; many have been cruelly beaten, and other outrages have been committed of which I cannot write. The worst is, that in the depths of winter a large and peaceful population have been scared from their homes, and are either hiding in the forests or have crossed the frontier. The Agram papers raise the number of this fresh exodus of refugees to 5,000, but this is probably an exaggeration, and I have been careful to accept nothing on the authority of Croatian or Dalmatian journals. The fact which I wish to impress upon my readers is that, so far from the refugees returning to their burnt homes, their numbers are rather augmenting; and even while I write this, news reaches me of fresh arrivals of refugees at this place from Glamoš; these, however, on their own showing, were driven forth by no particular act of barbarity, but simply by hunger and misery.

The total number of the refugees amounts at present to

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I.
*Reign of
Terror in
Bosnian
country
districts.*

*Fresh
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ayah
fugitives.*

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I.*A quarter
of a million
refugees.*

about a quarter of a million, some of whom are at present in Serbia, some in Montenegro, and the rest in the Austro-Hungarian provinces of Dalmatia, Croatia, and Slavonia. Of those here in Dalmatia the last official account gives the following number:—In the district of Bencovatz, 1,779; of Sebenico, 13; of Knin, 10,490; Curzola, 4; Ragusa, 17,094; Cattaro, 2,200; Sinj, 2,300; Macarsca, 300. The real numbers, however, will be found considerably to exceed these figures. The Austrian authorities have refused to register many who live too near the Bosnian frontier; others, but a very small minority, have means of their own; and others again have been supported by friends across the border. The two English ladies—Miss A. P. Irby and Miss Johnston, who, in pursuance of their great work of relief, have stationed themselves here at Knin, as the head-quarters of human misery—have the best reasons for believing that, so far as this district is concerned, 12,000 would be nearer the mark; while if the fugitives in the mountains on the other side of the border be reckoned, the numbers in this neighbourhood would be raised to nearer 17,000.

*Inadequacy
of Aus-
trian
relief.*

The Austrian Government professes to give ten kreutzers daily, or rather less than twopence, to every adult, and half that amount to children; but, as I have already intimated, many in the more remote and mountainous districts receive nothing at all; and even where it is given, I am sorry to be obliged to add that even this pittance is cut down by the villany and corruption of the official underlings who distribute it, so that many adults have received no more than three kreutzers a day. If we remember the past history of Knin, the centre of a wild Morlach population—robbers driven seawards from the interior, pirates driven inland from the sea, repressed

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CORRUPTION OF KNIN 'COMITATO.'

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and corrupted later by Turkish, Venetian, and Austrian despotism—it is the less to be wondered at that though the population of this place have many amiable characteristics—as what Dalmatian has not?—truth and honesty are not to be reckoned among their conspicuous virtues. The history of the *Comitato*, formed here professedly to aid the oppressed rayahs beyond, and the refugees on this side of, the border, is a history of peculation and intrigue. The 'patriots' are quite as corrupt as the officials, and sums collected in Serbia and elsewhere to aid the refugees have been perverted to very different purposes by men in whom the old predatory instincts of the Morlach and the super-subtlety of the Venetian are perpetually triumphing over all nobler impulses. I could point to men here who have grown rich on the misfortunes of those they professed to aid. I may have to allude to still blacker charges; and, indeed, it adds not a little to the difficulty of one's position here, that one is forced to refuse the Dalmatian kiss of peace from thieves and even would-be murderers.

Private charity and official relief having in this district fallen into such hands, the state of the refugees has been most deplorable. Small-pox and famine-typhus have wrought terrible ravages among the weaker portion of these unfortunates; and though the disease has now somewhat abated since October last, over 2,000 have died in this district alone. The arrival of the two English ladies has been, indeed, a godsend to the Bosnians in this part. In Slavonia and Croatia they have been working over a year, and besides distributing enormous supplies of food and clothing, they have founded eighteen¹ day schools, where the destitute

LETTER
I.*Corruption
of Knin
'Comitato.'**Miss Irby
and Miss
Johnston's
work.*¹ Now (January 1878) twenty-two.

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I.*Miss Irby
and Miss
Johnston's
work.*

children have been both fed and taught. Since their arrival here their energy has been unflagging ; they have performed long and weary journeys in the rough carts of this country to seek out those who stood most in need of help ; and besides distributing Indian corn and blankets and clothing in the most judicious and methodical manner, they have had the satisfaction of setting on foot a new school for refugee children at Plavno, about two and a half hours' drive from here. They are also carrying out an admirable plan—much appreciated by the Bosnians—of providing the women with flax to make their own clothes. By the local committee their proceedings are viewed with characteristic jealousy, but by the simple Bosnians they are held in a kind of veneration, and natives have come from afar to see the two English queens—'Kralitzas,' as they call them. Great, however, as their exertions have been, the need here is scarcely to be measured in words, and there are districts among the mountains where no one has yet penetrated, and where the distress is still more awful.

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LETTER II.

THE FUGITIVES IN THE CAVERNS.

My expedition to the Bosnian mountains. Uzélatz and his merry tales. Metropolitans and popes in Bosnia. A new St. George! How the shepherd was shorn. Old Lazar. Illyrian winter-scenes. A dance of death. The fugitives in the caverns. Representative Government carried underground.

LETTER
II.

Bosnian Border, February 9.



N order to explore some of the more inaccessible haunts of misery, as well as to obtain a personal acquaintance with the position and prospects of the Bosnian insurgents, I set forth on an expedition among the wild and snow-capped highlands of the Dinaric Alps that lie beyond what is still known as the Turkish frontier.

Start on expedition.

I left Knin under very good auspices, in company with a native gentleman who has been doing his best to help the two English ladies in their difficult work of relief. Uzélatz, of whom I speak, was born of Bosnian parents, though on Dalmatian soil, and, though a man of culture and independent means, took the command of the insurgents of this part of Bosnia during the first year of the revolt. During his year of leadership he gained several important successes against the Turks, and there can be little doubt that, had he remained in command, the insurgents would at present be in possession of a larger area of country. He was, however, wounded, and forced by reasons of health, as well as by the intrigues of

Uzélatz.

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II.
Uzdlatz.

the Comitato, to give up his command, which was taken up in turn by a brave but illiterate Bosnian, the Vojvode Golub, and finally by the Serbian Colonel Despotović, who at present commands. Like the other few honest men in Knin, Uzélatz has been forced by the transactions of the Comitato to hold himself aloof from it ; but he has not ceased to do all in his power for the unfortunate Bosnians, and his intimate acquaintance with the country and exhaustive information on all the present phases of Bosnian history, qualify him to speak on these subjects with some authority. It is much to his credit that, sympathising as he does with the present movement, his feelings are absolutely untinged with religious fanaticism. During the year of his command he did all in his power to conciliate the native Slavonic Mahometans of Bosnia, and with some partial success—nay, he carries his religious indifference so far that he has more than once exclaimed in my hearing, ‘Oh, if the Christians of Bosnia would only turn Mahometans, that would be better than these miserable feuds.’

*His tolerant attitude towards Mahometans.**Corruption of Orthodox hierarchy.*

As to priests—even of the Pravoslav or Orthodox profession—the ex-insurgent leader had a most wholesome and cordial aversion to them : indeed, one of the chief grievances of the rayah is the state to which the Turks have succeeded in reducing the Pravoslav Church in the province. The Metropolitan at Serajevo and the Eparchs buy their offices from that faithful servant and nominee of the Divan, the ‘Greek’ Patriarch at Stamboul, and the single idea of the new ‘Spiritual Pasha,’ on his arrival amongst his flock, being how to make the speculation pay, the state to which the inferior clergy are reduced may faintly be imagined. The more ignorant the village popes are, the less capable are they of

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withstanding the exactions of their superior ; so their spiritual overseer resigns them to their pristine state of ignorance, and is rather pleased than otherwise when he finds a priest who cannot read the liturgy ! ‘ None of your new-fangled heretical learning for me,’ remarks the fat Metropolitan as he pockets the fees, which the wretched village priest has had in his turn to screw out of his congregation. But the Fanariote hierarchy, I am happy to say, has rather over-reached itself here, as it did in Bulgaria ; the yoke of the foreign Turcophile bishops has tended very strongly to knit together the village popes and their flocks in a common opposition, and has only brought out the more that democratic spirit always so strong in the lower grades of the Orthodox Church, and itself a still surviving influence of the old Greek republics, just as Roman Catholic centralisation perpetuates the organization of the fourth century Empire.

Uzélatz whiled away our journey by telling me many merry tales about village popes and the Fanariote bishops, one or two quite worthy of Boccaccio. A late Metropolitan, who rejoiced in the curiously appropriate name of Dionysos, for he was of a Bacchanalian turn, used to find it profitable to take with him on his visitations a goodly assortment of ‘ icons,’ which he disposed of to the faithful at prices varying from a ducat apiece, the episcopal benediction being thrown into the bargain. As, however, Dionysos added gambling to his numerous accomplishments, and as indeed he did succeed on one occasion in ‘ rooking’ one of his brother bishops of a considerable sum, we need not be surprised if the venerable Metropolitan, in addition to the holy images, sometimes added to his luggage a pack of cards. Now it so chanced that, having on one occasion driven a more

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II.*The
spiritual
Pashas of
Bosnia.**A Baccha-
nalian
bishop.*

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LETTER

II.

*A pious
fraud.*

than usually profitable trade in icons, the bishop was asked by a pious rayah whether he had yet an image of St. George for sale. The Metropolitan looked into his bag, there was not so much as an icon to be seen; he fumbled among his vestments—anathema! he must have sold them out; but here his eye rested on a familiar piece of pasteboard—it was a happy thought! . . . Do my readers know the Venetian cards in use in these regions?—probably not. . . . ‘Yes,’ replied the bishop, ‘I have yet an image of the holy St. George, but indeed it is an image of such great price that it were sacrilege to part with it.’ ‘Your grace,’ said the man, ‘I will give ten grosch for such an image.’ ‘Ten grosch for such an icon!’ quoth the holy man, ‘I would not part with it for less than half a ducat.’ The poor man reluctantly handed the coin to the Metropolitan and went away rejoicing, with *the king of spades* in his wallet! They say that after the success of this first experiment the bishop made the pleasing discovery that if a queen of hearts were passed for Our Lady, or knaves were christened angels, heaven might yet smile upon the pious fraud. Of the whole story I will say, *Se non è vero è ben trovato!*

*An avaricious
‘pope.’*

Uzélatz told me that when he was an insurgent leader he was resting one day in a small Bosnian hut, divided into two rooms by a small partition, and two priests, who did not know that he was there, were drinking in the further compartment. Suddenly a Bosnian woman came in in a great hurry: ‘Your Reverence, my father is dying, and needs your comfort; pray make haste or it will be too late!’ ‘Oh! I can’t be bothered!’ said the pope addressed. ‘I’ll come,’ said the other, ‘if you’ll give me a ducat.’ ‘We are very poor, your Reve-