

# AMURATH TO AMURATH

## CHAPTER I

### ALEPPO TO TELL AHMAR

*Feb. 3—Feb. 21*

A SMALL crowd had gathered round one of the booths in the saddlery bazaar, and sounds of controversy echoed down the vaulted ways. I love to follow the tortuous arts of Oriental commerce, and moreover at the end of the dark gallery the February sun was shining upon the steep mound of the citadel; therefore I turned into the saddlers' street, for I had no other business that afternoon than to find the road back into Asia, back into the familiar enchantment of the East. The group of men round the booth swayed and parted, and out of it shouldered the tall figure of Fattûh.

"May God be exalted!" said he, stopping short as he caught sight of me. "It is well that your Excellency should witness the dealings of the saddlers of Aleppo. Without shame are they. Thirty years and more have I lived in Aleppo, and until this day no man has asked me to give two piastres for a hank of string." He cast a withering glance, charged with concentrated animosity, upon the long-robed figure that stood, string in hand, upon the counter.

"Allah!" said I warily, for I did not wish to parade my ignorance of the market value of string. "Two piastres?"

"It is good string," said the saddler ingratiatingly, holding out what looked like a tangled bundle of black wool.

"Eh wah!" intervened a friend. "'Abdullah sells nought but the best string."

I took a seat upon a corner of the counter and Fattûh

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came slowly back, shaking his head mournfully, as one who recognizes but cannot amend the shortcomings of mankind. The whole company closed in behind him, anxious to witness the upshot of the important transaction upon which we were engaged. On the outskirts stood one of my muleteers like a man plunged in grief; even the donkey beside him—a recent purchase, though acquired at what cost of eloquence only Fattûh can know—drooped its ears. It was plain that we were to be mulcted of a farthing over that hank of string.

Fattûh drew a cotton bag out of his capacious trousers.

“Take the mother of eight,” said he, extracting a small coin.

“He gives you the mother of eight,” whispered one of the company encouragingly to the saddler.

“By God and the Prophet, it cost me more! Wallah, it did, oh my uncle!” expostulated the saddler, enforcing his argument with imaginary bonds of kinship.

Fattûh threw up his eyes to the vault as though he would search heaven for a sign to confound this impious statement; with averted head he gazed hopelessly down the long alley. But the vault was dumb, and in all the bazaar there was no promise of Divine vengeance. A man touched his elbow.

“Oh father,” he said, “give him the mother of ten.”

The lines of resolution deepened in Fattûh’s face. “Sir, we would finish!” he cried, and fumbled once more in the cotton bag. The suspense was over; satisfaction beamed from the countenances of the bystanders.

“Take it, oh father, take it!” said they, nudging the saddler into recognition of his unexampled opportunity.

The hank of string was handed over to Ḥâjj ‘Amr, who packed it gloomily into the donkey’s saddle bags, already crammed to overflowing with the miscellaneous objects essential to any well-ordered caravan on a long journey. Fattûh and Ḥâjj ‘Amr had been shopping since dawn, and it was now close upon sunset.

I climbed down from the counter. “With your leave,” said I, saluting the saddler.

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“Go in peace,” he returned amicably. “And if you want more string Fattûh knows where to get it. He always deals with me.”

The crowd melted back to its avocations, if it had any, and the excitement caused by our commercial dealings died away.

“Oh Fattûh,” said I, as we strolled down the bazaar with the donkey. “There is great labour in buying all we need.”

Fattûh mopped his brow with a red handkerchief. “And the outlay!” he sighed. “But we got that string cheap.” And with this he settled his tarbush more jauntily, kicked the donkey, and “Yallah, father!” said he.

If there be a better gate to Asia than Aleppo, I do not know it. A virile population, a splendid architecture, the quickening sense of a fine Arab tradition have combined to give the town an individuality sharply cut, and more than any other Syrian city she seems instinct with an inherent vitality. The princes who drew the line of massive masonry about her flanks and led her armies against the emperors of the West, the merchants who gathered the wealth of inner Asia into her bazaars and bartered it against the riches of the Levant Company have handed down the spirit of enterprise to the latest of her sons. They drive her caravans south to Baghdâd, and east to Vân, and north to Konia, and in the remotest cities of the Turkish empire I have seldom failed to find a native of Aleppo eager to provide me with a local delicacy and to gossip over local politics. “Here is one who heard we were from Aleppo,” says Fattûh with an affected indifference. “His brother lives in the next street to mine, and he has brought your Excellency some apples. But they are not like the apples of Aleppo.” Then we exchange a greeting warm with fellow-citizenship and the apples are flavoured with good-will, even if they cannot be expected to vie with the fruit of our own countryside.

It was at Aleppo that I made acquaintance with the Turkey which had come into being on July 24, 1908. Even among those whose sympathies were deeply engaged on behalf of the new order, there were not many Europeans who, in

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January 1909, had any clue to public opinion outside Constantinople and Salonica. The events of the six stirring months that had just elapsed had yet to be heard and apprehended, and no sooner had I landed in Beyrout than I began to shed European formulas and to look for the Asiatic value of the great catchwords of revolution. In Aleppo, sitting at the feet of many masters, who ranged down all the social grades from the high official to the humblest labourer for hire, I learnt something of the hopes and fears, the satisfaction, the bewilderment, and the indifference of Asia. The populace had shared in the outburst of enthusiasm which had greeted the granting of the constitution—a moment of unbridled expectation when, in the brief transport of universal benevolence, it seemed as if the age-long problems of the Turkish empire had been solved with a stroke of the pen; they had journeyed back from that Utopia to find that human nature remained much as it had been before. The public mind was unhinged; men were obsessed with a sense of change, perplexed because change was slow to come, and alarmed lest it should spring upon them unawares. The relaxation of the rule of fear had worked in certain directions with immediate effect, but not invariably to the increase of security. True, there was a definite gain of personal liberty. The spies had disappeared from official quarters, and with them the exiles, who had been condemned by 'Abdu'l Ḥamīd, on known or unknown pretexts, to languish helplessly in the provincial capitals. Everywhere a daily press had sprung into existence and foreign books and papers passed unhindered through the post. The childish and exasperating restrictions with which the Sultan had fettered his Christian subjects had fallen away. The Armenians were no longer tied to the spot whereon they dwelt; they could, and did, travel where they pleased. The *nâmûsîyeh*, the identification certificate, had received the annual government stamp without delay, and without need of bribes. In every company, Christian and Moslem, tongues were unloosed in outspoken criticism of official dealings, but it was extremely rare to find in these freely vented opinions anything of a

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constructive nature. The government was still, to the bulk of the population, a higher power, disconnected from those upon whom it exercised its will. You might complain of its lack of understanding just as you cursed the hailstorm that destroyed your crops, but you were in no way answerable for it, nor would you attempt to control or advise it, any more than you would offer advice to the hail cloud. Many a time have I searched for some trace of the Anglo-Saxon acceptance of a common responsibility in the problems that beset the State, a sense the germs of which exist in the Turkish village community and in the tribal system of the Arab and the Kurd; it never went beyond an embryonic application to small local matters, and the answers I received resembled, *mutatis mutandis*, that of Fattûh when I questioned him as to the part he had played in the recent general election. "Your Excellency knows that I am a carriage-driver, what have I to do with government? But I can tell you that the new government is no better than the old. Look now at Aleppo; have we a juster law? wallah, no!"

In some respects they had indeed a yet more laggard justice than in "the days of tyranny"—so we spoke of the years that were past—or perhaps it would be truer to say a yet more laggard administration. The dislocation of the old order was a fact considerably more salient than the substitution for it of another system. The officials shared to the full the general sense of impermanence that is inevitable to revolution, however soberly it may be conducted; they were uncertain of the limits of their own authority, and as far as possible each one would shuffle out of definite action lest it might prove that he had overstepped the mark. In the old days a person of influence would occasionally rectify by processes superlegal a miscarriage of the law; the miscarriages continued, but intervention was curtailed by doubts and misgivings. The spies had been in part replaced by the agents of the Committee, who wielded a varying but practically irresponsible power. How far the supremacy of the local committees extended it was difficult to judge, nor would a conclusion based upon evidence from one province

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have been applicable to another; but my impression is that nowhere were they of much account, and that the further the district was removed from the coast, that is, from contact with the European centres of the new movement, the less influential did they become. Possibly in the remoter provinces the local committee was itself reactionary, as I have heard it affirmed, or at best an object of ridicule, but in Syria, at any rate, the committees existed in more than the name. Their inner organization was at that time secret, as was the organization of the parent society. They had taken form at the moment when the constitution was proclaimed, and had undergone a subsequent reconstruction at the hands of delegates from Salonica, who were sent to instruct them in their duties. I came across one case where these delegates, having been unwisely selected, left the committee less well qualified to cope with local conditions than they found it, but usually they discharged their functions with discretion. The committees opened clubs of Union and Progress, the members of which numbered in the bigger towns several hundreds. The club of Aleppo was a flourishing institution lodged in a large bare room in the centre of the town. It offered no luxuries to the members, military and civilian, who gathered round its tables of an evening, but it supplied them with a good stock of newspapers, which they read gravely under the shadow of a life-sized portrait of Midhat Pasha, the hero and the victim of the first constitution. The night of my visit the newly formed sub-committee for commerce was holding its first deliberations on a subject which is of the utmost importance to the prosperity of Aleppo: the railway connection with the port of Alexandretta. To this discussion I was admitted, but the proceedings after I had taken my seat at the board were of an emotional rather than of a practical character, and I left with cries of "Yasha Inghilterra!" ("Long live England!") in my ears. I carried away with me the impression that whatever might be the future scope of its activities, the committee could not fail, in these early days, to be of some educational value. It brought men together to debate on matters that touched the

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common good and invited them to bear a part in their promotion. The controlling authority of the executive body was of much more questionable advantage. Its members, whose names were kept profoundly secret, were supposed to keep watch over the conduct of affairs and to forward reports to the central committee: I say *supposed*, because I have no means of knowing whether they actually carried out what they stated to be their duties. They justified their position by declaring that it was a temporary expedient which would lapse as soon as the leaders of the new movement were assured of official loyalty to the constitution, and arbitrary as their functions may appear it would have been impossible to assert that Asiatic Turkey was fit to run without leading-strings. But I do not believe that the enterprise of the committees was sufficient to hamper a strong governor; and so far as my observation went, the welfare of each province depended, and must depend for many a year to come, upon the rectitude and the determination of the man who is placed in authority over it.

Underlying all Turkish politics are the closely interwoven problems of race and religion, which had been stirred to fresh activity by exuberant promises. Fraternity and equality are dangerous words to scatter broadcast across an empire composed of many nationalities and controlled by a dominant race. Under conditions such as these equality in its most rigid sense can scarcely be said to exist, while fraternity is complicated by the fact that the ruling race professes Islâm, whereas many of the subordinate elements are Christian. The Christian population of Aleppo was bitterly disheartened at having failed to return one of their own creed out of the six deputies who represent the vilayet. I met, in the house of a common friend, a distinguished member of the Christian community who threw a great deal of light on this subject. He began by observing that even in the vilayet of Beyrout, though so large a proportion of the inhabitants are Christian, the appointment of a non-Moslem governor would be impossible; so much, he said, for the boast of equality. This is, of course, undeniable,

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though in the central government, where they are not brought into direct contact with a Moslem population, Christians are admitted to the highest office. He complained that when the Christians of Aleppo had urged that they should be permitted to return a representative to the Chamber, the Moslems had given them no assistance. "They replied," interposed our host, "that it was all one, since Christians and Moslems are merged in Ottoman." I turned to my original interlocutor and inquired whether the various communions had agreed upon a common candidate.

"No," he answered with some heat. "They brought forward as many candidates as there are sects. Thus it is in our unhappy country; even the Christians are not brothers, and one church will not trust the other."

I said that this regrettable want of confidence was not confined to Turkey, and asked whether, if they could have commanded a united vote, they would have carried their candidate. He admitted with reluctance that he thought it would have been possible, and this view was confirmed by an independent witness who said that a Christian candidate, carefully chosen and well supported, would have received in addition the Jewish vote, since that community was too small to return a separate representative.

As for administrative reform, it hangs upon the urgent problem of finance. From men who are overworked and underpaid neither efficiency nor honesty can be expected, but to increase their number or their salary is an expensive business, and money is not to be had. How small are the local resources may be judged from the fact that Aleppo, a town of at least 120,000 inhabitants, possesses a municipal income of from £3,000 to £4,000 a year. Judges who enjoy an annual salary of from £60 to £90 are not likely to prove incorruptible, and it is difficult to see how a mounted policeman can support existence on less than £12 a year, though one of my zaptiehs assured me that the pay was sufficient if it had been regular. In the vilayet of Aleppo and the mutesarriplik of Deir all the zaptiehs who accompanied me had received the arrears due to them as well as

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their weekly wage, but this fortunate condition did not extend to other parts of the empire.

The plain man of Aleppo did not trouble his head with fiscal problems; he judged the new government by immediate results and found it wanting. I rode one sunny afternoon with the boy, Fattûḥ's brother-in-law, who was to accompany us on our journey, to the spring of 'Ain Tell, a mile or two north of the town. Jûsef—his name, as Fattûḥ was careful to point out, is French: "I thought your Excellency knew French," he said severely, in answer to my tactless inquiry—Jûsef conducted me across wet meadows, where in spring the citizens of Aleppo take the air, and past a small mound, no doubt artificial, a relic perhaps of the constructions of Seif ed Dauleh, whose palace once occupied these fields. Close to the spring stands a mill with a pair of stone lions carved on the slab above the door, the heraldic supporters of some prince of Aleppo. They had been dug out of the mound together with a fine basalt door, like those which are found among the fourth and fifth century ruins in the neighbouring hills; the miller dusted it with his sleeve and observed that it was an *antîca*. A party of dyers, who were engaged in spreading their striped cotton cloths upon the sward, did me the honours of their drying-ground—merry fellows they were, the typical sturdy Christians of Aleppo, who hold their own with their Moslem brothers and reckon little of distinctions of creed.

"Christian and Moslem," said one, "see how we labour! If the constitution were worth anything, the poor would not work for such small rewards."

"At any rate," said I, "you got your *nâmûsîyeh* cheaper this year."

"Eh true!" he replied, "but who can tell how long that will last?"

"Please God, it will endure," said I.

"Please God," he answered. "But we should have been better satisfied to see the soldiers govern. A strong hand we need here in Aleppo, that the poor may enjoy the fruits of their toil."

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“Eh wah!” said another, “and a government that we know.”

Between them they had summed up popular opinion, which is ever blind to the difficulties of reform and impatient because progress is necessarily slow footed.

We passed on our return the tekíyeh of Abu Bekr, a beautiful Mamlûk shrine with cypresses in its courtyard, which lift their black spires proudly over that treeless land. The brother of the hereditary sheikh showed me the mosque; it contains an exquisite mihrâb of laced stone work, and windows that are protected by carved wooden shutters and filled with old coloured glass. Near the mosque is the square hall of a bath, now fallen into disrepair. Four pendentives convert the square into an octagon, and eight more hold the circle of the dome—as fine a piece of massive construction as you would wish to see. The sheikh and his family occupied some small adjoining rooms, and the young wife of my guide made me welcome with smiles and lemon sherbet. From the deep embrasure of her window I looked out upon Aleppo citadel and congratulated her upon her secluded house set in the thickness of ancient walls.

“Yes,” she replied, eagerly detailing the benefits of providence, “and we have a carpet for winter time, and there is no mother-in-law.”

Aleppo is the Greek Berœa, but the town must have played a part in the earlier civilizations of North Syria. It lies midway between two Hittite capitals, Carchemish on the Euphrates, and Cadesh on the Orontes, in the heart of a fertile country strewn with mounds and with modern mud-built villages. The chief town of this district was Chalcis, the modern Kinnesrîn, a day’s journey to the south of Aleppo, but with the development of the great Seleucid trade-route between Seleucia on the Tigris and Antioch on the Orontes, which Strabo describes as passing through Hierapolis, Aleppo, being on the direct line to Antioch, must have gained in importance, and it was perhaps for this reason that the little Syrian village saw the Seleucid foundations of Berœa. The Arabic name, Ḥaleb, retains a reminis-