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978-1-108-07745-3 - Travels and Researches in Chaldaea and Susiana: With an Account of Excavations at Warka, the 'Erech' of Nimrod, and Shúsh, 'Shushan the Palace' of Esther, in 1849-52

William Kennett Loftus

Excerpt

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CHALDÆA AND SUSIANA.

CHAPTER I.

London to Bághdád—Turkish and Persian Troubles—Colonel Williams and the Frontier Commissioners—Constantinople—Mesopotamia—A Flowery Wilderness—The City of Hárúnu-'r-Réshíd—Pestilence—Nedjib and Abdí Pashas.

FOR many centuries the extensive frontier between Turkey and Persia has been in an unsettled state, continually changing its limits as the strength or influence of either Government for the time prevailed. The affable Persian naturally regards the haughty Osmánli in the light of an intruder upon those rich plains which owned obedience to the might of the Kayanians and Sassanians in the days of Dáráb and Shápúr. Religious difference, moreover, adds to the political animosity of the two great Mohammedan powers. The phlegmatic Turk quietly smokes his chibúk, swears by the beard of Omar, and thanks the omnipotent Allah for all the blessings he enjoys ; on the other hand, the ardent follower of the martyred 'Alí curses the orthodox believer, and takes every opportunity to insult his patron saints. It may be easily conceived that such political and religious disagreements are frequently productive of a state of anarchy and bloodshed, when the subjects of the two nations come into

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THE TURKO-PERSIAN FRONTIER.

close contact. To add to the difficulties attending any proposed reconciliation, the frontier is inhabited by various predatory races, who regard both Turk and Persian with equal hatred, and who are only too happy to exercise their plundering propensities by incursions into either territory. The internal divisions and jealousies which exist among these warlike tribes fortunately prevent them from combining, as in the days of the Parthians, and proving formidable competitors for the possession of Oriental dominion.

In 1839-40, the outbreak of serious hostilities between the Turkish and Persian Governments, arising from the causes above mentioned, was imminent, and likely, in the course of time, to endanger the tranquillity of the whole world. The Cabinets of England and Russia, influenced doubtless by the proximity of their own frontiers in India and Georgia to the regions in question, and therefore interested in the maintenance of peace, offered their friendly mediation for the purpose of restraining the belligerent attitude of their Mohammedan neighbours. The proposal was accepted, and commissioners from the four powers assembled at Erzerúm, who, after sitting four years, eventually concluded a treaty, one article of which determined that representatives should be sent to survey and define a precise line of boundary which might not admit of future dispute. A joint commission was consequently appointed to carry out this article. The British Government selected Colonel Williams, R.A.,* to this service, his previous experience during the protracted conferences at Erzerúm having eminently qualified him for the task now assigned him. Colonel Tcherikoff, the Russian commissioner, although not a party to the treaty,

* Throughout this volume, "the Hero of Kars" is alluded to under the rank he held at the time as Commissioner for the delimitation of the frontier.

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JOURNEY.

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was equally well chosen to represent the Czar. With these officers were associated Dervîsh Pasha, and Mîrza Jáfér Khán, the commissioners for Turkey and Persia respectively. Both had been educated in Europe. The former enjoyed the reputation of being the most learned *savant* among his countrymen, an excellent linguist and chemist. The latter soon endeared himself to the members of the various parties by his obliging manners and many acts of kindness and attention.

In January 1849, I was attached by Lord Palmerston as geologist to the staff of Colonel Williams, and directed to lose no time in joining my chief. On reaching Constantinople, and presenting myself, according to instructions, to Lord Stratford de Redcliffe (then Sir Stratford Canning), I learned that Colonel Williams and his party had set out from thence on Christmas-day, and that letters had been received, dated Síwás, giving a deplorable account of the state of the weather and roads. The snow had fallen to such an unprecedented depth, that the greatest difficulty beset their journey, and at several places it was found necessary, after many days' detention, to cut roads for the passage of the mules. Under these circumstances, the ambassador detained me at Constantinople for a few weeks, in the hope that the return of spring would open the communications with the interior, and admit of my travelling with more rapidity.

On the 7th of March I left the shores of the Bosphorus. After the usual disagreeable voyage in a Black Sea steamer, and a cold protracted ride across the Taurus, upon which the snow still lay uncomfortably deep, I at length reached Diarbekir, whence, proceeding down the swollen Tigris on a "kélek," or raft of skins, I arrived at Mosul on the 5th April, and there joined the British commission.

It is no part of my intention to detain my readers

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with any description of "Nineveh, that great city." This has been already done by another and more able pen than mine. Let it suffice to state, that we beheld those astonishing "heaps built by men's hands," and admired the perseverance and determination of our countryman, Layard, who, from these shapeless mounds, exhumed the wondrous series of Assyrian sculptures which now forms such an important feature in our national collection of antiquities. We visited the four great mounds of Koyunjuk, Khorsabád, Káramles, and Nimrúd, marking the angles of the parallelogram which is supposed to enclose Nineveh. The time spent in our visit consumed exactly three days, and it is probably to a similar circuit of its extent that the passage refers—"Now Nineveh was an exceeding great city of three days' journey." *

Bághdád was appointed for the rendezvous of the commissioners; and, as the British party was in advance of the others, we floated down the Tigris on rafts, visiting at our leisure all those points of interest so admirably described by Rich in his "Narrative of a Residence in Koordistan," and subsequently by other travellers.† All being new to us, we fully enjoyed the opportunity, granted to so few. We rambled over the desolate mound of Kál'a Shergat, the ancient capital of Assyria; we landed at Tekrít, celebrated as the birth-place of the romantic Saladin, the Arab hero of the Crusades; and we stood on the plain of Dúra, recalling to mind the golden image erected by Nebuchadnezzar, and the unflinching faith of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego.

* Jonah iii. 3. This expression may, however, refer to the thinly inhabited district between the river Záb on the south, and the Khábúr on the north, which, there is equal reason to believe, constituted the Nineveh of Jonah's mission. The journey between these two rivers occupies exactly three days.

† Mr Layard gives a short description of the numerous ancient sites between Mosul and Bághdád in his "Nineveh and Babylon," p. 464, *et seq.*

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SCENERY ON THE TIGRIS.

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It was midspring. Instead of the arid sands, which the word "desert" implies to the uninitiated in Mesopotamian travel, broad plains of the richest verdure, enlivened with flowers of every hue, met our delighted gaze on either side of the noble river. Coleopterous insects swarmed upon the banks, culling the sweets of the fleeting vegetation. The cry of the velvet-breasted francolin, and the sand-grouse* rushing overhead like an irresistible wind, enticed the most ardent of our party to land, and indulge the love of their favourite sport. The result was not unsuccessful, and little trouble was experienced in providing for our commissariat. Now and then a herd of wild boars was discovered among the jungle, or observed crossing the river: it was seldom that they escaped unsaluted by a volley of bullets, with more or less effect. A bend of the stream sometimes brought us suddenly upon a large Bedouin encampment, whence, on observing the raft, a score or so of swarthy Arab dames, with piercing black eyes and never-failing rows of the whitest teeth, launched forth on inflated sheep skins, and paddled out to meet the "kéleks." They bore on their heads bowls of milk or delicious lebben,† which they disposed of in return for a few small coins. Although the general aspect of the country is monotonous, there is always something to amuse the traveller. Never did a merrier party than ours float down the Tigris upon a fragile raft.

As Bághdád is approached, the pendent branches of the graceful date-tree, and the refreshing green of the pomegranate, with its bright red flowers, become more and more frequent until, many miles above the city, the river flows through one continuous grove. At length the mosques and minarets appear; the goal so long

* The *Francolinus vulgaris* and *Pterocles arenarius* of naturalists.

† Sour clotted milk—the usual Arab beverage.

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wished-for is within sight at last. He must be wholly void of poetry and sentiment in whom the first glimpse



Bághdád and the Tigris.

of those shining domes does not excite at least some spark of emotion. Who is there that does not recall that city where the lively imagination of his youthful days was wont to revel amid palaces shining in splendour, groups of blind beggars, and the glories of the khálífat? Who is there that does not exclaim, "Is this the Bághdád of Hárúnu-'r-Réshíd and the 'Arabian Nights'?" Alas! how fallen! The blind beggars, it is true, still cluster in the bazaars, and are met at every corner of the streets—the misery and filth remain—but where are the palaces and the justice of the Prince of the Faithful? Few relics of its quondam magnificence survive to remind us of the past. A single minaret, a couple of gateways, the wall of a college, and the conical tomb of the beautiful Zobeid, are nearly all that exist of Bághdád as it was in the days of its greatness. To the just khálíf has succeeded a race of Turkish pashas having no interest but their own aggrandizement—no thought but how they can most

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effectually cheat the revenue, enrich themselves, and pass their time in gross debauchery. Exaction and vice are the order of the day. Now and then honourable exceptions occur to this general rule, but these, alas ! are few and far between. But of this more anon.

At the date of our arrival (May 5) the whole population of Bághdád was in a state of the utmost alarm and apprehension. In consequence of the rapid melting of the snows on the Kúrdish mountains, and the enormous influx of water from the Euphrates through the Seglawíyya canal, the spring-rise of the Tigris had attained the unprecedented height of $22\frac{1}{2}$ feet. This was about five feet above its ordinary level during the highest season, even exceeding the great rise in 1831, when the river broke down the walls and destroyed no less than 7000 dwellings during a single night, at a time when the plague was committing the most fearful ravages among the inhabitants.

Nedjib Pasha had, a few days previously to our arrival, summoned the population *en masse* to provide against the general danger by raising a strong high mound completely round the walls. Mats of reeds were placed outside to bind the earth compactly together. The water was thus restrained from devastating the interior of the city—not so effectually, however, but that it filtered through the fine alluvial soil, and stood in the serdábs, or cellars, several feet in depth. It had reached within two feet of the top of the bank ! On the river side the houses alone, many of which were very old and frail, prevented the ingress of the flood. It was a critical juncture. Men were stationed night and day to watch the barriers. If the dam or any of the foundations had failed, Bághdád must have been bodily washed away. Fortunately the pressure was withstood, and the inundation gradually subsided. The country on all sides for miles was under water, so that there was no possibility

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of proceeding beyond the dyke, except in the boats which were established as ferries to keep up communication across the inundation. The city was for the time an island in a vast inland sea, and it was a full month before the inhabitants could ride beyond the walls.

As the summer advanced, the malaria arising from the evaporation of the stagnant water, produced such an amount of fever that 12,000 died from a population of about 70,000. The mortality at one time in the city reached 120 per day—and no wonder, when a person on being first attacked was made to swallow a large quantity of the juice of unripe grapes! The streets presented a shocking spectacle of misery and suffering. The sick lay in every direction—at the doors of houses, in the bazaars, and open spaces; while those recently smitten or just recovering were to be seen staggering along by the wall sides or supported with sticks. The gates of the city were beset with biers—some carried on men's shoulders to the adjacent cemeteries, others on the backs of mules to the sacred shrines of Meshed 'Alí and Kerbella.

Although our quarters were fixed in a small summer-house and garden at Gherára, an hour's distance from the city, the party was not exempt from the prevailing epidemic. All in turn suffered from fever, and at times there was scarcely a servant, out of our large suite, able to attend upon the sick.

In consequence of the delay arising from the Turkish commissioner's non-arrival at the appointed time, and from certain intricate questions which required a reference to the home Governments, the idea was abandoned of proceeding to the frontier until the summer should be past. In fact, it would have been impossible at that season to bear the fearful heat at the head of the Persian Gulf. Even at Bághdád, during the day, in summer, the thermometer

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STATE OF THE PASHALIC.

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in the shade often rises to 117° Fahr.; and frequently, when the wind blows from the south, the oppression on the senses is so great as to be almost unendurable.* The atmosphere is, however, dry, consequently the lassitude produced is not to be compared with that experienced in a moist climate, like that on the sea-coast of India, or of the Gulf. The heat of the day is relieved in some measure by the agreeable temperature of the night.

Our time was spent in making preparations for the approaching campaign, purchasing horses and mules, hiring servants, and obtaining information likely to be useful in the course of our future wanderings. Much of our leisure was passed in the agreeable society of the English residents at Bághdád; and our sojourn there must ever be a subject of pleasing reminiscence to the members of the commission. Nothing could exceed the attention and hospitality lavished upon us by the consul-general, Colonel (now Sir Henry) Rawlinson, Captain Felix Jones, and that small party of Englishmen whose lot it was to make the city of the khálifs their temporary home.

Bághdád has been so frequently described, that it forms no part of my intention to dwell upon it. Other and less-visited spots invite our notice.

The state of the pashalic was anything but satisfactory at this period. The cruel exactions and oppressive conduct of Nedjib Pasha, who had for many years farmed the revenues, were at length producing their inevitable fruits. Revolt and disaffection reigned everywhere among his subjects. The Bení Lám Arabs, along the lower course of the Tigris, broke out into open rebellion, in consequence of the pasha having placed that tribe under their sworn foes, the Montefik, and thrown into

* We now had positive evidence of the statement made to us in the mountains concerning Bághdád, that birds were so distressed by the heat, as to sit on the date-trees with their mouths open, panting for fresh air!

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prison the two sons of their sheikh, Methkúr—his hostages at Bághdád—because he was several years in arrear of his customary tribute. They seized all native vessels laden with merchandise passing up and down the Tigris. All communication was interrupted between Bághdád and Busrah. Caravans were detained, and the hair of the camels shorn, it being the proper season for this process. But the Arabs, at least, had some sense of justice—the cargoes of the boats and the camels' hair were carefully laid aside, to be honourably restored to their owners as soon as matters might be satisfactorily arranged ; and British property was respected.

The Khuzeyl Arabs, inhabiting the marsh lands on the west of the Euphrates, had torn down the dams which restrained the “great river” within its proper limits, and, by flooding their lands, placed themselves, for the time being, utterly beyond the power of the Turkish Government.

The wild Mádán tribes, in lower Mesopotamia, were on the point of following the example of their neighbours on either side. The Bedouin Arab, taking advantage of the general confusion, made formidable incursions into the pashalic, and plundered all parties indiscriminately, thus retaining his character as the descendant of Ishmael, and fulfilling the prediction, that “his hand will be against every man, and every man's hand against him.”* The prospects of the Turks in their southern province were dark in the extreme. Strong representations were, however, made to the Porte, and resulted in the dismissal of Nedjib Pasha, the instalment of the Seraskier Abdí Pasha in his room, and the abolition of the system of farming the revenue by the substitution of a regular and liberal salary to the new governor. The change was hailed with delight throughout the whole province, and by slow

* Genesis xvi. 12.