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John Lloyd Stephens

Excerpt

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INCIDENTS OF TRAVEL
IN
EGYPT, ARABIA PETRÆA,
THE HOLY LAND, ETC.

CHAPTER I.

Alexandria.—Pompey's Pillar.—The Catacombs.—The Warwick Vase.—The Pacha's Canal.—Boats of the Nile.

ON the afternoon of the —— December 1835, after a passage of five days from Malta, I was perched up in the rigging of an English schooner, spyglass in hand, and earnestly looking for the "Land of Egypt." The captain had never been there before; but we had been running several hours along the low coast of Barbary, and the chart and compass told us that we could not be far from the fallen city of Alexander. Night came on, however, without our seeing it. The ancient Pharos, the Lantern of Ptolemy, the eighth wonder of the world, no longer throws its light far over the bosom of the sea to guide the weary mariner. Morning came, and we found ourselves directly opposite the city, the shipping

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in the outward harbour, and the fleet of the pacha riding at anchor under the walls of the seraglio, carrying me back in imagination to the days of the Macedonian conqueror, of Cleopatra and the Ptolemies. Slowly we worked our way up the difficult and dangerous channel, unaided by a pilot, for none appeared to take us in charge. It is a fact worthy of note, that one of the monuments of Egypt's proudest days, the celebrated Pompey's Pillar, is even now, after a lapse of more than two thousand years, one of the landmarks which guide the sailor to her fallen capital. Just as we had passed the last reef, pilots came out to meet us, their swarthy faces, their turbans, their large dresses streaming in the wind, and their little boat with its huge latteen sail, giving a strange wildness to their appearance, the effect of which was not a little heightened by their noise and confusion in attempting to come alongside. Failing in their first endeavour, our captain gave them no assistance; and when they came upon us again he refused to admit them on board. The last arrival at Malta had brought unfavourable accounts of the plague, and he was unwilling to run any risk until he should have an opportunity of advising with his consignee. My servant was the only person on board who could speak Arabic; and telling the wild, fly-away looking Arabs to fasten on astern, we towed our pilots in, and at about eight o'clock came to anchor in the harbour.

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ALEXANDRIA.

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In half an hour I was ashore, and the moment I touched it, just as I had found at Constantinople, all the illusion of the distant view was gone.

Indeed, it would be difficult for any man who lives at all among the things of this world to dream of the departed glory of Egypt when first entering the fallen city of Alexander ; the present and the things of the present are uppermost ; and between ambling donkeys, loaded camels, dirty, half-naked, sore-eyed Arabs, swarms of flies, yelping dogs, and apprehensions of the plague, one thinks more of his own movements than of the pyramids. I groped my way through a long range of bazaars to the Frank quarter, and here, totally forgetting what I had come for, and that there were such things as obelisks, pyramids, and ruined temples, the genius of my native land broke out, and, with an eye that had had some experience in such matters at home, I contemplated the “improvements:” a whole street of shops, kept by Europeans and filled with European goods, ranges of fine buildings, fine country-houses, and gardens growing upon barren sands, showed that strangers from a once barbarous land were repaying the debt which the world owes to the mother of arts, and raising her from the ruin into which she had been plunged by years of misrule and anarchy.

My first visit was to Mr. Gliddon, the American consul, whose reception of me was such that

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I felt already as one not alone in a strange land. While with him an English gentleman came in—a merchant in Alexandria—who was going that night to Cairo. Mr. Gliddon introduced us; and telling him that I too was bound for Cairo, Mr. T. immediately proposed that I should accompany him, saying he had a boat and everything ready, and that I might save myself the trouble of making any preparations, and would have nothing to do but come on board with my luggage at sunset. Though rather a short notice, I did not hesitate to accept his offer. Besides the relief from trouble in fitting out, the plague was in every one's mouth, and I was not sorry to have so early an opportunity of escaping from a city where, above all others, "pestilence walketh in darkness, and destruction wasteth at noonday."

Having but a short time before me, I immediately mounted a donkey—an Egyptian donkey—being an animal entirely unknown to us, or even in Europe, and, accompanied by my servant, with a sore-eyed Arab boy to drive us, I started off upon a full gallop to make a hasty survey of the ruins of Alexandria. The Frank quarter is the extreme part of the city, and a very short ride brought us into another world. It was not until now, riding in the suburbs upon burning sands and under a burning sun, that I felt myself really in the land of Egypt. It was not, in fact, till standing at the base of Pompey's Pillar, that I felt

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POMPEY'S PILLAR.

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myself among the ruins of one of the greatest cities of the world. Reaching it through long rows of Arab huts, where poverty, and misery, and famine, and nakedness stared me in the face, one glance at its majestic height told me that this was indeed the work of other men and other times. Standing on a gentle elevation, it rises a single shaft of ninety feet, and ten feet in diameter, surmounted by a Corinthian capital ten feet high, and, independent of its own monumental beauty, it is an interesting object as marking the centre of the ancient city. It stands far outside the present walls, and from its base you may look over a barren waste of sand, running from the shores of the Mediterranean to the Lake Mareotis, the boundaries of Alexandria as it was of old.

All this intermediate space of sandy hills alternating with hollows, was once covered with houses, palaces, and perhaps with monuments, equal in beauty to that at whose base I stood. Riding over that waste, the stranger sees broken columns, crumbling walls, and fragments of granite and marble, thrusting themselves above their sandy graves, as if struggling for resurrection; on one side he beholds a yawning chasm, in which forty or fifty naked Arabs are toiling to disentomb a column long buried in the sand; on another an excavated house, with all its walls and apartments almost as entire as when the ancient Egyptian left it. He is riding over a mighty sepulchre, the

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sepulchre of a ruined city, and at every step some telltale monument is staring at him from the grave.

Riding slowly among the ruins, I passed the celebrated wells built in the time of Alexander, at the very foundation of the city, at which generation after generation have continued to slake their thirst, and ended my ride at Cleopatra's Needle, a beautiful obelisk sixty feet high, full of mysterious hieroglyphics that mock the learning of the wise of our day. Time has dealt lightly with it; on one side the characters stand bold and clear as when it came from the hands of the sculptor, although, on the other, the dread sirocco, blowing upon it from the desert more than two thousand years, has effaced the sculptor's marks, and worn away the almost impenetrable granite. By its side, half buried in the sand, lies a fallen brother, of the same size and about the same age, said to have been taken down by the English many years ago for the purpose of being carried to England; but the pacha prevented it, and since that time it has lain in fallen majesty, stretching across a deep chasm formed by excavations around it.

At six o'clock I was riding with my new friend, spurring my donkey to its utmost to get out of the city before the gate should close; and my reader will acquit me of all intention of writing a book when I tell him that, a little after dark of

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THE CATACOMBS.

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the same day on which I arrived at Alexandria, I was on my way to Cairo. Accident, however, very unexpectedly brought me again to Alexandria; and on my second visit, while waiting for an opportunity to return to Europe, I several times went over the same ground, more at my leisure, and visited the other objects of interest which my haste had before prevented me from seeing.

Among these were the Catacombs, situated about two miles from the city, on the edge of the Libyan Desert, and near the shore of the sea. These great repositories of the dead are so little known, that we had some difficulty in finding them, although we inquired of everybody whom we met. Seeing an Arab brushing some horses near an opening in the side of the rock, we went to him to inquire, and found we were at the door of the Catacombs. The real entrance is now unknown, but was probably from above. The present is a rude forced breach, and the first chamber into which we entered, a chamber built with pious regard to the repose of the dead, we found occupied as a stable for the horses of one of the pacha's regiments. My donkey-boy had taken the precaution to bring with him candles, and a line to tie at the entrance, after the manner of Fair Rosamond's clew, to save us from being lost in the labyrinth of passages; but the latter was unnecessary, as the Arabs employed about the horses

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had explored them so thoroughly for purposes of plunder that they were sufficiently sure guides. Taking two of them into pay, we followed with our lighted torches through two chambers, which, to me, who had then seen the tombs in Thebes, Petra, and Jerusalem, contained nothing remarkable, and came to what has been called the state chamber, a circular room about thirty feet in diameter, with three recesses, one at each side of the door and one opposite, a vaulted roof, and altogether admirably fine in its proportions. In each of the recesses were niches for the bodies of the dead, and in one of them skulls and mouldering bones were still lying on the ground. Following my guides, I passed through several chambers half filled with sand ; but having by this time lost much of my ardour for wandering among tombs, and finding the pursuit unprofitable and unsatisfactory, I returned to the state chamber and left the Catacombs.

They are supposed to extend many miles under the surface, but how far will probably never be known. The excavations that have as yet been made are very trifling ; and unless the enlightened pacha should need the state-chamber for his horses, the sands of the desert may again creep upon them, and shut them for ever from our eyes.

Near the door of the entrance, directly on the edge of the shore, are chambers cut in the rocks,

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CLEOPATRA'S BATHS.

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which open to the sea, called by the imposing name of Cleopatra's Baths. It is rather an exposed situation, and, besides the view from the sea, there are several places where "peeping Tom" might have hidden himself. It is a rude place, too; and when I was there, the luxurious queen could hardly have got to her chambers without at least wetting her royal feet; in fact, not to be imposed upon by names, a lady of the present day can have a more desirable bath for a quarter of a dollar than ever the Queen of the East had in her life.

The present city of Alexandria, even after the dreadful ravages made by the plague last year, is still supposed to contain more than 50,000 inhabitants, and is decidedly growing. It stands outside the delta in the Libyan Desert, and, as Volney remarks, "It is only by the canal which conducts the waters of the Nile into the reservoirs in the time of inundation that Alexandria can be considered as connected with Egypt." Founded by the great Alexander, to secure his conquests in the East, being the only safe harbour along the coast of Syria or Africa, and possessing peculiar commercial advantages, it soon grew into a giant city. Fifteen miles in circumference, containing a population of 300,000 citizens and as many slaves, one magnificent street 2,000 feet broad, ran the whole length of the city, from the Gate of the Sea to the Canopic Gate, commanding a view, at

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each end, of the shipping, either in the Mediterranean or in the Mareotic Lake, and another of equal length intersected it at right angles ; a spacious circus without the Canopie Gate for chariot-races, and on the east a splendid gymnasium, more than six hundred feet in length, with theatres, baths, and all that could make it a desirable residence for a luxurious people. When it fell into the hands of the Saracens, according to the report of the Saracen general to the Calif Omar, “it was impossible to enumerate the variety of its riches and beauty ;” and it is said to “have contained four thousand palaces, four thousand baths, four hundred theatres or public edifices, twelve thousand shops, and forty thousand tributary Jews.” From that time, like everything else which falls into the hands of the Mussulman, it has been going to ruin, and the discovery of the passage to India by the Cape of Good Hope gave the death-blow to its commercial greatness. At present it stands a phenomenon in the history of a Turkish dominion. It appears once more to be raising its head from the dust. It remains to be seen whether this rise is the legitimate and permanent effect of a wise and politic government, combined with natural advantages, or whether the pacha is not forcing it to an unnatural elevation, at the expense, if not upon the ruins, of the rest of Egypt. It is almost presumptuous, on the threshold of my entrance into Egypt, to speculate