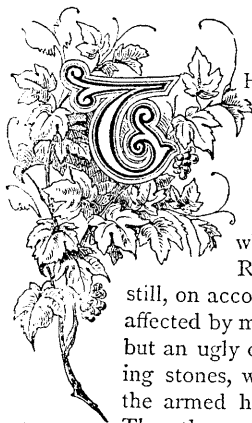


CHAPTERS FROM TRAVEL.

BY CAPTAIN RICHARD F. BURTON.

No. I.—DAMASCUS.



THE first sight of Damascus was once famous in travel, but then men rode on horseback, and turned, a little beyond Dummar, sharply to the left of the present line. They took what was evidently the old Roman road, and which is still, on account of its being a short cut, affected by muleteers. Now, it is nothing but an ugly climb up sheet-rock and rolling stones, with bars and holes dug by the armed hoofs of many a generation. They then passed through El Zâarub, the spout—the primitive way, sunk some ten feet deep in *calcaire*, till it resembles an uncovered tunnel, and is polished like glass by the traffic and transit of ages. At its mouth you suddenly turn a corner, and see Damascus lying in panorama, a few hundred feet below you. "A pearl set in emeralds," is the citizen's description of what El Islam calls, and miscalls, the "Smile of the Prophet" (Mohammed). Like Stambul, it is beautiful from afar, as it is foul and sore within, morally and physically. The eye at once distinguishes a long head, the northern suburb, "El Salihiyah;" a central nucleus, crescent-shaped, and fronting the bed of the Barada; and a long tail, or southern suburb, "El Maydân." These three centres of whitewashed dwelling, and sky-line fretted with dome and minaret, are surrounded and backed by a mass of evergreen orchard, whose outlines are sharply defined by irrigation, whilst beyond the scatter of outlying villages glare the sunburnt yellow clay and the parched rock of the Desert, whose light blue hillocks define the eastern horizon.

The prosaic approach by the French road shows little beyond ruins and graveyards. Damascus outside is a mass of graveyards, the "Great" and "Little Camps" of Constantinople, only without their cypresses; whilst within it is all graveyards and ruins, mixed with crowded and steaming bazars. This world of graves reminds one of Job's forlorn man dwelling "in desolate cities and in houses which no man inhabiteth, which are ready to become heaps." The Barada in olden times had its stone embankment; the walls are now in ruins. On our right is a ruined bridge, once leading to a large coffee-house, both also in ruins. As we advance we see upon the right of the old river-valley the Barmecide Cemetery, all desolate; and beyond it rises the fine Takiyyah (not hospital) of Sultan Selim, half ruined, with its bridge quite ruined. But, though it was prophesied that Da-

mascus should be a "ruinous heap," her position forbids annihilation. The second of Biblical cities, dating after Hebron, she has been destroyed again and again; her houses have been levelled with the ground, and the Tartar has played hockey with the heads of her sons. Still she sits upon the eastern fold of the Anti-Libanus, over her golden-rolling river, boldly overlooking the Desert in face. Damascus, not Rome, deserves, if any does, to be entitled the Eternal City.

I passed twenty-three months (October 1, 1869, to August 20, 1871), on and off, at this most picturesque and unpleasant of residences. It is now in the transitional state, neither of Asia nor of Europe. To one who has long lived in the outer East, a return to such an ambiguous state of things is utterly disenchanting. Hasan, digging or delving in long beard and long clothes, looks more like an overgrown baby than the romantic being which your fancies paint him. Fatima, with a coloured kerchief (not a nosebag) over her face, possibly spotted for greater hideousness, with Marseilles gloves, and French *bottines* of yellow satin trimmed with fringe and bugles, protruding from the white calico which might be her winding-sheet, is an absurdity. She reminds me of sundry "kings" on the West African shore, whose toilette consists of a bright bandana and a chimney-pot hat, of the largest dimensions, coloured the liveliest sky-blue.

The first steps to be taken at Damascus were to pay and receive visits; to find a house; to hire servants; to buy horses, and in fact to settle ourselves. It proved no easy matter. Certain persons had amused themselves with spreading a report that my pilgrimage to Meccah had aroused Moslem fanaticism, and perhaps might cost me my life. They as well as I knew far better. So I was not surprised at the kind and even friendly reception given to me by Emir Abd el Kadir, of Algerian fame, and by the Dean of the great Cathedral El Amawî, the late Shaykh Abdullah el Halabi. And I remember with satisfaction that, to the hour of my quitting Damascus, the Moslems never showed for me any but the most cordial feeling.

House-hunting was a more serious matter. The hotel gives you lumbago, or ague and fever; the lodging is a thing unknown, and the usual establishment, with its single entrance and its heavily-barred windows, placed high up and looking upon a central court, gives a tolerable idea of a gaol. You may see this form, which the Arabs used for defence, still lingering in the Old Bell (Holborn Hill), and in olden Galway they are numerous, being derived through Spain and Portugal from Morocco.

Rents at Damascus have been prodigiously raised during the last few years; eighty napoleons are asked for an empty and tumble-down place which in 1850 might have commanded twenty-five; moreover, the tenant pays in advance, and if he improves or is satisfied with the house, the landlord will assuredly raise his terms. After a score of failures, I found a cottage at the head of the Salihiyyah suburb; it was about a mile from the town, surrounded by gardens, flanked on one side by a mosque, on the other by a "hammâm" or bath, commanding a splendid view of the city proper, and free from the multitudinous inconveniences, including the four hours' visit, of intramural residence.

To stock the house was a yet harder task than to hire it. Good men will not change civilised Bayrut for dangerous Damascus, where in five years, out of the English colony rarely exceeding ten souls, there have been nine deaths. And if you persuade them by high salaries they turn sulky, or they fall sick. Thus, within twenty months we had three cooks, and I ended by living on bread and grapes. We had four head grooms, and left a fifth, who, being found stealing the barley, was dismissed by his employer shortly after our departure.

It is no easy thing for a stranger to buy good and sound horses at Damascus, although during the hot season it is girt by equestrian Bedawin. In the matter of driving a bargain, the "Shami" might hail from Yorkshire, and the European soon learns to imitate them. The wild men ask impossible prices from a Frankish purchaser, and even then there is a certain reluctance to sell, especially the mare. If the latter be thoroughbred she can hardly be bought under £240, a sum in these regions equal to £1,000 in England. Donkeys, which were never ridden at Damascus till the days of Ibrahim Pasha, the Egyptian—who, by-the-by, delivered the place from its own old barbarous fanaticism—have risen in the market, till a good white animal commands thirty to forty napoleons. We won a mare in a lottery, and, as she suffered from incurable stiffness of limb, we exchanged her for a donkey, whose owner presently inquired with astonishment if it had given no one a bad fall. The mare died, and the donkey, after an all but fatal illness, was cured. Of the next two horses, Salim and Harfush, the former was sprained in the back-sinews, and the latter, made vicious by bad riding, was so handy with forefoot, hoof, and tooth, that no one liked to approach those weapons. After this we became more wary, and bought and hired decent animals, but always at exorbitant prices.

After getting settled, my first care was to be up and moving, in order to become acquainted with the sphere of my duties. In 1869 the Euphrates Valley Railway had once more raised its head. This weakly babe, born as far back as 1842, and

ever since that time half fed and ricketty, will not reach man's estate before the end of the present century, unless the actual state of things be radically changed. The fact is, we have shown Turkey and Russia that we want the railway for purely English purposes; two Parliamentary committees of late years have assured them of the fact, and they are acting as those usually do from whom something is wanted. Yet the most superficial observer will see at a glance the necessity of an "Andrew Route"—a subsidiary to the Lesseps Canal; a second line of more direct communication with India, and eventually a feeder of the main trunk which will run from Scutari to Karachi.

So my first tour was down-coast, in order to see what would make the best Mediterranean terminus. I was prepossessed against the Alexandretta line, which runs over waste ground to Aleppo, passes through a wilderness after leaving it, and finally strikes the Euphrates at a place where the stream is navigable only during half the year.

Reaching Tyre, which I visited a second time, I inspected the old north-eastern road, the classical line of traffic and transit, as far as the Nabatiyyah village, distant 16 direct geographical miles. The Lebanon is here easily crossed, the heights being much lower on the south than on the north, and the surface of the country is composed of basins parted by rocky ridges. From Nabatiyyah the route falls gradually into the Buk'â, the central portion of the Cœlesyrian Valley proper, and it makes Ba'albak after 20 more miles, being a total of 66. Thence 108 miles lead to Palmyra, the half-way house between Damascus and the Euphrates river, and thus 174 direct geographical miles separate "Tadmor in the wilderness" from Tyre on the Mediterranean.

I afterwards heard of another good line, which had been carefully surveyed by Colonel Romer, an American engineer. The seaboard terminus was Tripoli of Syria (Tarabulus el Sham). The first great station to the north-east would be Hums (91 miles), and the second Palmyra, 77 miles to the south-south-east. Thus the grand total from Tripoli to Palmyra would be 168 direct geographical miles.

Now both of these lines traverse the richest lands in Syria and Palestine. As in South America, not to say in all thinly-populated countries, the waysides would soon be crowded with settlements; and thus this section may fairly be expected to pay, or at any rate to relieve a portion of the heavy burden which the Desert will impose. From Palmyra the route strikes the Euphrates at a point where it is navigable throughout the year, and, finally, it leads us back from the distant Cape of Good Hope, and from the devious and dangerous Red Sea, to the very first of overland routes, the earliest connection between India and Europe, established long before the days of David and Solomon.