

A RIDE THROUGH WESTERN ASIA
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In his memories C.Bigham presents his travel notes across Western Armenia in the Summer of 1895. Here the reader could find remarkable notes regarding the attitude of Turks, Kurds and others toward Armenian atrocities which took place during the reign of Sultan Abdul Hamid II.

The Editorial board presents extracted passages of the book which describe Mr Bigham's journey from Erzurum to the east, until Russian-held territories of Armenia (Chapters VII and VIII, pp.56-75).

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CHAPTER VII
ERZERUM

In 1330 Sir John Mandeville wrote of Erzerum:

Artyroum was formerly a good and prosperous city, but the Turks have greatly wasted it. Thereabouts grows little or no wine or fruit.

Whether Sir John ever visited Erzerum is doubtful, but the description is fairly accurate, and the decay of the city has steadily continued since that time - 120 years before the expulsion of the Christian Emperors from Constantinople - down to the present day. What prosperity the city still possesses is chiefly due to Armenian enterprise, and yet the Armenians have suffered more cruelty in Erzerum than anywhere else.

Lying at the junction of the Trebizond, Sivas, Kars, and Tabreez roads, Erzerum has at all times been a great mart on the caravan routes from Constantinople and the Black Sea to Persia, and from Asia Minor to the Caucasus. The Russians have always understood its importance, and they captured it in the war of 1877. The present fortifications consist of a parapet with high slopes, useless against modern siege guns, and a pestilential ditch which has been responsible for the death of two thousand soldiers in a single season. Yet the city, standing at an altitude of 6,000 feet, and just under the highest peaks of the Agri Dagh range, is naturally healthy. Mandeville alludes to the "many good waters and wells that come from under the earth from the river of Paradise that is called Euphrates, which is a day's journey from the city." The Euphrates, here called Kara Su, runs south near Ildija, where there are hot springs still frequented by the inhabitants for their healing properties.

When we were at Erzerum it was the scene of the most important events in Asia Minor, There had been a massacre shortly before, and two others followed not long after. The feeling of excitement and insecurity had reached a crisis. It is perhaps unnecessary to recall in detail the events which are now a matter of general history, but

for the benefit of those who have forgotten them it may be well to sum them up briefly. In September, 1894, the massacre of Sassun had taken place, and had been followed by others until the end of the year. The Sultan then appointed a Commission to sit at the various places in the Sassun and Mush districts to inquire into the disturbances. The sittings were held from January 24 to June 1, 1895, and were attended by delegates from the European embassies. The Commission itself consisted of three Turkish judges, while the cavalry escort of 400 men which accompanied it was commanded by the notorious Tewfik Pasha. The Commission found that the Armenians had revolted, and that no unnecessarily harsh measures had been taken to suppress the insurrection. As I rode into Erzerum I met the Commission coming out. They were driving in carriages, and what with secretaries, clerks, servants, baggage, etc., there must have been sixty vehicles or more. Tewfik was in full dress, and rode a beautiful horse. All his soldiers were well mounted, and better turned out and equipped than the ordinary Turkish dragoon. But the judges, looked careworn and miserable. The class of Turk to which they belonged does not appreciate revolting details, and it was reported that on their first visit to the Sassun pits they had been overwhelmed with disgust. Mr. Shipley, our delegate, and his French and Russian colleagues had gone on by post to Trebizond and Constantinople, but the Commission were travelling by slow stages, tired no doubt of the arduous task of discriminating between conflicting evidence. And here it should be said that all that was done to convince Europe of the atrocious inhumanity of the crimes committed in the vilayets of Kurdistan was entirely due to the zeal of the European delegates. They worked hard and faithfully to get at the truth in the face of systematic opposition from the official dispensers of justice.

When we reached the khan at Erzerum we heard that several Armenians were still in prison, and despite the efforts of our Consul, Mr. Graves, there seemed little chance of their being liberated. The Vali, Ismail Hakki Pasha, was a rabid Mohammedan, and when I met him a day or two later, he was wearing - Turkish dress, a very unusual thing - for a Governor to do in these days in Asia Minor. I gathered from all I heard that the Russians were considered to hold the key to the position, A short time before, when there had been a riot near the Russian consulate, the Cossack escort had turned out armed only with whips, and had chased the Turkish infantry, who had rifles, out of the street. The local prestige of Russia was increased by this incident, and it was well known that thirty to forty thousand of her troops were massed on the Caucasian frontier.

The English, on the other hand, were far away, and "though great in ships, nothing by land," as the general opinion in Turkey runs. The Kurds, however, in spite of it, had just sent a monster petition to the Queen setting forth the ungenerous treatment they had received and offering their alliance. They laid emphasis on the fact that they had always lived on friendly terms with the Armenians, many of whom were their slaves, until latterly, when they had been forced by peremptory orders from the Palace to ill-treat and murder them. Now they were told that the Sultan was exculpating himself to the Cabinets of Europe by alleging that the massacre had been wantonly committed by the Kurds!

Therefore [ran the petition], not content with leaving us in ignorance and barbarity by withholding the blessings of education, they have compelled us to do evil deeds, and finally have robbed us of our honour.

What amount of truth there was in these statements I should be sorry to say, but there was a general feeling among Turks, Armenians and Europeans that a great deal depended upon the action of the Kurds, and that they might at any time do something unexpected. Nothing but that masterly inactivity with which the Porte has frequently carried the day, could have triumphed over a situation so difficult as that prevailing when in August, 1895, I arrived at Erzerum.

We put up at the khan, where I was soon visited by a Canadian missionary who had lived in the city seventeen years. We had a long and interesting talk, from which I gathered that he was carrying on a hopeless struggle for a cause he loved. In spite of the zeal, the labour, and the money given by wise and energetic men to the work of conversion to Christianity, hardly any real converts are ever made. In Persia it is the same. I remember even meeting a missionary in China, at Kashgar, on the other side of the Pamirs, who had been working there ten years, and had not a single convert to show for his pains. One cannot help thinking that some of the money devoted to missions in Persia and Turkey would do more good if it were turned to the more prosaic ends of making roads, or building bridges, schools, and hospitals. The Mussulman knows that, according to the Koran, he will be eternally damned if he changes his faith. He knows, too, that it means death from the hand of his former co-religionists. So the missionaries work on almost hopeless ground, and often fill up the time by quarrelling among themselves. The American Methodists fight with the English Church, the English Church with the Roman Catholic, not for the Mohammedan so much as for the Armenian, professedly a Christian already. The personal character of the missionaries is beyond praise, but their efforts seem to be made in a wrong direction.

When the missionary, had gone, the Consul's dragoman came round — a pleasant old Armenian, who knew a little English. He told me that it was quite likely I should not be able to go on to Bayazid, as I might "see too much on the way." I was not allowed to visit the prison in Erzerum, probably for the same reason. The Consul asked me to go and stay with him in camp at Ildija on the Friday after my arrival, so I left Murad in charge at the khan, and spent three pleasant days under canvas. His dragoman meanwhile worked the strings of Turkish officialdom to get Murad and myself permission "pour quitter la Turquie," for the passport system here is as severe in theory as that of Russia, although it is less rigorously carried out.

While at Ildija I rode the winner of the Erzerum Derby, a horse with a history worth recounting. Early in the year, Mr. Graves had bought a three-year-old, called Dervish, which he backed to run against any horse in the town. A colonel in a Turkish regiment accepted the bet, and the race was arranged to take place on a flat course of about seven furlong-s outside the town. When the day came the Turk asked for another fortnight, as his horse was not ready. Mr. Graves let him have it; but, when it had gone

by, the colonel again wanted to temporise. Mr. Graves then said that although he was willing to waive the bet, he thought that the race ought to be run without further delay. The day happened to be the Queen's Birthday. All the inhabitants of Erzerum flocked to the racecourse in great excitement, and the Vali had a carriage waiting to take him there if the event should prove propitious to the Turks. On the other side, the Armenian bishops and clergy stayed in the town and prayed on their housetops for the Consul's victory. Mr. Scudamore, the Daily News correspondent, was up on our horse and won easily, the bet was never settled.

Mr. Scudamore, by the way, had been in Erzerum some months. He had hidden in the bottom of a carriage all the way from Trebizond and once in Erzerum had defied the Vali to remove him. When his letters were intercepted by the Turks he established a private post as far as Tiflis, and succeeded in getting his telegrams despatched from there. Although quite young, he has been a war correspondent in the Soudan as well as in the Russo- Turkish war.

One day we were visited by the Armenian Bishop, Monsignor Kuchukian, an agreeable and well educated man, who did not seem to share the dislike of his fellow Armenians to the Turkish nation. He condemned the relentless coercion of the Palace and said that unless something were done to relieve them, the Armenians would soon emigrate in a body to Russia or any country that would receive them, unless Russia annexed Armenia, which event he thought would prove the eventual solution of the problem. The Armenian clergy were living at that time with their lives in their hands, and the dragoman told me that in spite of the protection of his office, he dared not leave the town gate by day nor his house by night, and yet there were as many Armenians as Turks in Erzerum. The predominance of the Turk is again explained by the fact that no Christian subject of the Porte may carry arms, and in addition the Armenians are by birth and education a trading and not a fighting race. In Persia their genius for commerce has full scope, and even in Asia Minor it generally survives oppression. But in Erzerum death, bankruptcy, and confiscation have made great ravages in the Armenian trading community.

Before leaving Erzerum I had an interview with the Vali. We found him in a little kiosk outside the town playing chess with a general. A military band was playing a deafening tune outside. He did not get up when I came in, so I merely touched my fez, instead of scooping my hand up to it. The only thing to do when a Turk is rude, is to meet him on his own ground. As he did not speak a word, I began to talk to the dragoman. This nettled him — and he roused himself from his chess to tell a eunuch to bring some coffee. He then asked me where I had come from, although he must have known quite well, as the Sadr Azam had telegraphed my arrival.

"Stambul," I said.

"And where are you going?"

"Persia."

"What route have you chosen?"

"I do not mind what route I go by."

"That also matters nothing to me," said the Vali loftily. "What route you choose to go by, that one is open to you."

The dragoman then put in that the road by Kars and Erivan was a good one.

"Yes, certainly, but full of Armenian beggars and Kurdish brigands," the Vali answered sarcastically.

"Why should I not go by Mush and Van?" I asked.

Now the road to Mush was the road to Sassun, and in Sassun lay the evidences of the worst massacres, so I was not surprised to hear the Pasha, in spite of his indifference of a moment before, say hastily —

"By that road it is hardly safe for a European to travel. The brigands are dangerous there, though otherwise the country is peaceable. Any other road is easy, but that one impossible !" It was settled at last that I should travel by Bayazid, and he promised an escort. The buyuruldu and the Zaptiehs arrived in due course, and on the 21st of August I said good-bye to my kind host, and started for Bayazid.

CHAPTER VIII ERZERUM TO BAYAZID

As we rode out of Erzerum in the early morning, we passed a cavalry regiment manoeuvring on the plain. The horsemanship of the troopers was singularly ungraceful, and they were riding with such short stirrups that their knees were almost on a level with the cantles of their saddles. A young officer came up and told me that he was teaching them to ride, that they were "ajem" (recruits). As he was on foot, we could not see what his own horsemanship was like, but one could not believe that it was good, when he trained his men to sit so short that they could not possibly use their swords with effect. However when I suggested this he answered lightly. "

"Oh it makes them all the taller, and they reach further! "

I felt inclined to suggest that they might overreach, but just then the colonel came up on a very fine Arab, and took me about a quarter of a mile across the plain to watch another troop being exercised. Both drill and manoeuvring here were inferior, and the riding poor, according to our ideas. But the men were a big strong lot, and if well led would prove formidable to any Cossack or Circassian regiments in the Russian service. But the Turkish troops are seldom properly led, and when there is any fighting to be done, a good deal devolves upon the "chawashes" (sergeants). Still behind earthworks the Turk is almost invincible.

We climbed the heights that lie to the east of Erzerum, and then passed the outer ring of advanced works which now constitute the main defence of the town against any aggressions from the north. The fortifications are out of date, and the detached redoubts which spread all along the frontier to Ararat are sadly deficient in guns and ammunition. Six new guns sent to Trebizond in 1895 by the War Minister were delayed there three months before the road was repaired enough to admit of their being conveyed to the

forts round Erzerum. And it is this lack of roads which has hampered the trade of the city. During six months of the year it is practically snowbound, and the only route kept in anything like order is the military road leading to Kars and the Caucasian frontier. This is due to the Russians, who repair it as much as they can. The other great caravan route from Trebizond by Erzerum to Khoi and Tabreez, which we followed, is barely passable for vehicles even in summer, and in winter even horsemen cannot get along it. The cost of transport is so enormous that miles of corn rot uncut, because the price of carrying it to a market is more than its market value.

At Hassan Kaleh the weather became sensibly colder. It was here that I met a gentleman who supplied me with lunch, and gave me his views on the political situation. Like Abraham, the little Jew doctor at Ersinjan, he said that doctors were the only class in Asia Minor with any education, and this was only because the Government recognised the necessity of their having some knowledge of European medicine in order to keep the troops alive. Speaking of the massacres he said that if left alone, Kurds, Turks, and Armenians were equally ready to lead a quiet and inoffensive life. But the slightest attempt at agitation from without was fatal, whether it came from the Porte, or from outsiders who fancied that by stirring up the feelings of Europe they could change the constitution of the Ottoman Empire. There was no doubt that for some time before the outbursts of 1894 and 1895 such pernicious agitation had continually taken place. The Armenians are a clever and avaricious people, and certain demagogues among them believe that reform in Armenia would suit the policy of England and Russia and perhaps put power into their own hands. They know that nothing is easier than to rouse the suspicions and wrath of their masters at Constantinople, and they deliberately set themselves to attract the attention of Europe by lighting a firebrand. That the lighting of it means rape, murder, and every conceivable misery for their own people these agitators do not consider.

The Kurds, the doctor went on to tell me, are an almost barbarous people, with fine instincts of chivalry and easily influenced by their religion. They look upon plunder as a lawful profession, and nothing will keep them from it except the fear of retaliation. So they were only too ready to obey the Sultan when he commanded them to pillage infidels, and it was only when they found themselves being made the scapegoats of the Government's crimes that they rebelled against the orders laid upon them.

As to the Turks, the doctor said it must be borne in mind that the peasants have no personal enmity to the Armenians. It is the soldiers, worked on by their officers, who exhibit that bitter and relentless fury against another religion which lies dormant in all Mohammedan races. At Yildiz Kiosk they know very well what a force they possess in this bloodthirsty fanaticism, and how easily it can be aroused. It is not surprising that they use such a force when a difficulty comes. Take a typical case according to their lights. They hear that there has been an Armenian agitation: they are anxious to prevent the Great Powers of Europe from annexing any more of the rapidly dwindling Ottoman Empire. An agitation is an excuse for such interference, so the one idea of the Palace

officials is to have the rising put down before the news of it reaches Europe. The Valis are commanded to suppress the rising, and that means a massacre.

The doctor had come to the conclusion that there were only two things to be done to settle the question. Either the Turk must rule his provinces in his own way, or the European must step in and rule them in his way. If the Turk rules, the old system will drag on: oppression here, petty tyranny there, peculation and immorality everywhere, and now and again a massacre. Perhaps there may be a slow improvement in roads, schools, and civilisation generally, but it will be a long time coming. If the European rules, he will rule after his kind, whether he be Russian or English, on some fixed plan for some definite result. Half measures, such as the appointment of Christian governors, or a mixed police force, can only bring about a worse state of things. The Turk will not submit to dictation from the Christian unless he is coerced, and he will never tolerate sharing a right with the despised Armenian. If the disastrous condition of Asia Minor is to be remedied, either England must act or she must let Russia act, and quickly. This was the substance of my informant's conversation. He was a broad-minded man, and his views struck me as interesting and worth consideration. At Keupru Keui the road divides, one branch leading to Russia and the other skirting the mountains; beyond, at Delibaba, we came across a regiment in camp. The Binbashi said, "They have been ill, very ill, but now they are better," and we found out that cholera had been among the troops. He and his officers were most kind and hospitable. He combined the civil office of Kaimakam with his military duties, and several peasants were tried in my presence. The indictment was always the same, failure to pay the imperial taxes, and the excuse the same, bankruptcy.

"Effendim, hich para banga yok dut" (My lord, I have no money). Whereupon, without further parley, the Kaimakam said briskly, "Git balk" (Go and see), and a sergeant marched the criminal off in a friendly way to the village, where no doubt a glass of arrack worked wonders.

The Turkish peasant is as good-natured as he is lazy, and except on compulsion he will hardly ever take the trouble to plough, sow, or reap his field. Consequently a rich and fertile country is rapidly becoming waste, simply from lack of energy.

After leaving Delibaba we passed through a magnificent rocky defile. The cliffs were so close together that fifty men could have held the pass. From here we went through several broken ravines until we came to Taar, where we stayed the night. We had great difficulty in getting new Zaptiehs at Taar, but a small bribe enabled us to start sooner than at one time seemed likely. From there we travelled to an Armenian village, where some men came out of their houses and asked what the English were going to do for them. They complained that the Kurds descended on them twice a year and annexed their cattle and horses, but they admitted that no women or children had been carried off, and not a single man killed. It may have been because it was close to Russia, but this village was certainly prosperous and happy. At Toprak Kaleh, a frontier post, I was provided with two very fine Zaptiehs belonging to the Kurdish Hamidieh

regiment, Bashibazouks, big men dressed in black Circassian uniform, and well mounted. Their Martinis were clean and in good order, not by any means always the case with irregular cavalry. On the way they talked freely, and confessed that they liked the Armenians quite as well as their Turkish officers. They could do the most marvellous tricks at full gallop, throwing up and catching their rifles, checking their horses and turning demivoltes on their own ground.

Our next stopping place was Kara Kilissa, where we were put up in the Kaimakam's office, the khan being full of drunken soldiers. A doctor, six officers, and a police agent came to call soon after our arrival. I gave the police agent my tezkereh, the strange names on which occupied him till the next morning. The others stayed on, drank coffee, and looked curiously at my indiarubber bath, which Murad had filled with water before they came in. After the ordinary compliments the doctor astonished me by saying in French —

"J'apprends que vous avez beaucoup cause sur la route avec vos Kurdes?"

"Oui, j'ai cause un peu avec eux," I answered.

"Et de quelle affaire d'importance avez vous cause?"

"Quelle affaire d'importance peut exister entre moi et les Kurdes?" I asked.

This puzzled him for a minute, but he soon put another question.

"Pour quelle cause etes vous venu en ce pays-ci?"

"Pour m'amuser."

He meditated on this for some time and then asked me if I were much amused?

The others were more civil, if less talkative. They none of them knew a word of Russian, although the object of their presence in the village was to watch the Russians. I saw they were half afraid that I was a spy, but the Vali's seal on my buyuruldu eventually satisfied the police inspector. The officers talked a good deal about the cavalry in the place, and there was something so odd about their repeated refusals to let me see it, that on my way out of the town the next morning I determined to satisfy my curiosity without their leave. So in the morning with the aid of a corporal I rode into the stables, and once there I understood why the officers had been so much against my seeing them. There were a few miserable starved jades in the stalls, and the whole place was filthy. In the barrack rooms the men were sitting unshaved and unwashed on long wooden settles. Their arms and accoutrements were hanging anyhow on the walls, and were rusty and dirty. Going out of the square I saw two of the officers of the night before scowling at me, and when I rejoined Hassan at the end of the street, I found that my Kurdish Zaptiehs had been taken away, and two impenetrable Turks substituted.

That day we crossed the great plain of Alasgird and sighted Mount Ararat. We met many camel caravans coming out of Persia, but there were hardly any cattle about, as the country here is dry and treeless, and except on the river bank there is little vegetation. In the evening we reached Diardin, a Kurdish settlement, and our last station before Bayazid. All the huts in Diardin are built of dried cow-dung, and have no windows. We had no tent, and the night was bitterly cold, so we were obliged to look for

a room. It was a difficult matter to find one, and if the Kaimakam had not come to our help we should have been obliged to sleep out. He provided us with a room like the Jews' dungeon in the Tower, only smaller, dirtier, and less airy. The heating arrangements in these Kurdish huts are original. Half of the room is occupied by a mud ledge three feet by four. Underneath this is a hollow cave in which is piled the dung and charcoal used for fuel. This is lighted and the room soon becomes stiflingly hot. They have a similar system in Persia. We were not sorry to leave Diardin, and continue our way to Bayazid. As we drew closer to the huge peak of Ararat, we met a great many "Kizil Bashis" (Red Heads), as the Turks call the Persians. We also overtook two convicts who had been exiled to Persia. When the Sultan wishes to rid Turkey of an evil-doer, he ships him over the Persian frontier, and the Shah returns the compliment. The Russians wisely refuse to harbour the convicts of either monarch. These two wretches were walking barefoot, tied together with a rope, and driven along by a mounted Zaptieh. I asked him of what crime they had been guilty, and he answered — "Who knows? They are wicked men." We saw Bayazid for nearly four hours before we reached it. It is built on the face of a steep cliff, and is about ten miles from both the Russian and Persian frontiers. I had therefore now practically come to the end of my journey in Asia Minor, and was about to enter a perfectly fresh country inhabited by a very different people.