
Opening Extract from...

Tales from the Queen of the Desert

Written by Gertrude Bell

Published by Hesperus Press Ltd

TALES FROM THE QUEEN OF THE DESERT

GERTRUDE BELL

Published by Hesperus Press Limited
28 Mortimer Street, London W1W 7RD
www.hesperuspress.com

Persian Pictures first published in the UK in 1894
Syria: The Desert and the Sown first published in the UK in 1907
This selection first published by Hesperus Press Limited, 2015

Typeset by Roland Codd
Printed in Great Britain by CPI Group (UK) Ltd

ISBN: 978-1-84391-547-8

1

To those bred under an elaborate social order few such moments of exhilaration can come as that which stands at the threshold of wild travel. The gates of the enclosed garden are thrown open, the chain at the entrance of the sanctuary is lowered; with a wary glance to right and left you step forth, and, behold! the immeasurable world. The world of adventure and of enterprise, dark with hurrying storms, glittering in raw sunlight, an unanswered question and an unanswerable doubt hidden in the fold of every hill. Into it you must go alone, separated from the troops of friends that walk the rose alleys, stripped of the purple and fine linen that impede the fighting arm, roofless, defenceless, without possessions. The voice of the wind shall be heard instead of the persuasive voices of counsellors, the touch of the rain and the prick of the frost shall be spurs sharper than praise or blame, and necessity shall speak with an authority unknown to that borrowed wisdom which men obey or discard at will. So you leave the sheltered close, and, like the man in the fairy story, you feel the bands break that were riveted about your heart as you enter the path that stretches across the rounded shoulder of the earth.

It was a stormy morning, the 5th of February. The west wind swept up from the Mediterranean, hurried across the plain where the Canaanites waged war with the stubborn hill dwellers

of Judaea, and leapt the barrier of mountains to which the kings of Assyria and of Egypt had laid vain siege. It shouted the news of rain to Jerusalem and raced onwards down the barren eastern slopes, cleared the deep bed of Jordan with a bound, and vanished across the hills of Moab into the desert. And all the hounds of the storm followed behind, a yelping pack, coursing eastward and rejoicing as they went. No one with life in his body could stay in on such a day, but for me there was little question of choice. In the grey winter dawn the mules had gone forward carrying all my worldly goods – two tents, a canteen, and a month's provision of such slender luxuries as the austerest traveller can ill spare, two small mule trunks, filled mainly with photographic materials, a few books and a goodly sheaf of maps. The mules and the three muleteers I had brought with me from Beyrout, and liked well enough to take on into the further journey. The men were all from the Lebanon. A father and son, Christians both, came from a village above Beyrout: the father an old and toothless individual who mumbled, as he rode astride the mule trunks, blessings and pious ejaculations mingled with protestations of devotion to his most clement employer, but saw no need to make other contribution to the welfare of the party – Ibrahīm was the name of this ancient; the son, Habīb, a young man of twenty-two or twenty-three, dark, upright and broad-shouldered, with a profile that a Greek might have envied and a bold glance under black brows. The third was a Druze, a big shambling man, incurably lazy, a rogue in his modest way, though he could always disarm my just indignation in the matter of stolen sugar or missing piastres with an appealing, lustrous eye that looked forth unblinking like the eye of a dog. He was greedy and rather stupid, defects that must be difficult to avoid on a diet of dry bread, rice and rancid butter; but when I took him

into the midst of his blood enemies he slouched about his work and tramped after his mule and his donkey with the same air of passive detachment that he showed in the streets of Beyrout. His name was Muhammad. The last member of the caravan was the cook. Mikhāil, a native of Jerusalem and a Christian whose religion did not sit heavy on his soul. He had travelled with Mr. Mark Sykes, and received from him the following character: 'He doesn't know much about cooking, unless he has learnt since he was with me, but he never seems to care twopence whether he lives or whether he is killed.' When I repeated these words to Mikhāil he relapsed into fits of suppressed laughter, and I engaged him on the spot. It was an insufficient reason, and as good as many another. He served me well according to his lights; but he was a touchy, fiery little man, always ready to meet a possible offence halfway, with an imagination to the limits of which I never attained during three months' acquaintance, and unfortunately he had learned other things besides cooking during the years that had elapsed since he and Mr. Sykes had been shipwrecked together on Lake Van. It was typical of him that he never troubled to tell me the story of that adventure, though once when I alluded to it he nodded his head and remarked: 'We were as near death as a beggar to poverty, but your Excellency knows a man can die but once,' whereas he bombarded my ears with tales of tourists who had declared they could not and would not travel in Syria unsustained by his culinary arts. The arak bottle was his fatal drawback; and after trying all prophylactic methods, from blandishment to the hunting-crop, I parted with him abruptly on the Cilician coast, not without regrets other than a natural longing for his tough ragouts and cold pancakes.

I had a great desire to ride alone down the desolate road to Jericho, as I had done before when my face was turned

towards the desert, but Mikhāil was of opinion that it would be inconsistent with my dignity, and I knew that even his chattering companionship could not rob that road of solitude. At nine we were in the saddle, riding soberly round the walls of Jerusalem, down into the valley of Gethsemane, past the garden of the Agony and up on to the Mount of Olives. Here I paused to recapture the impression, which no familiarity can blunt, of the walled city on the hill, grey in a grey and stony landscape under the heavy sky, but illumined by the hope and the unquenchable longing of generations of pilgrims. Human aspiration, the blind reaching out of the fettered spirit towards a goal where all desire shall be satisfied and the soul find peace, these things surround the city like a halo, half glorious, half pitiful, shining with tears and blurred by many a disillusion. The west wind turned my horse and set him galloping over the brow of the hill and down the road that winds through the Wilderness of Judaea.

At the foot of the first descent there is a spring, 'Ain esh Shems, the Arabs call it, the Fountain of the Sun, but the Christian pilgrims have named it the Apostles' Well. In the winter you will seldom pass there without seeing some Russian peasants resting on their laborious way up from Jordan. Ten thousand of them pour yearly into the Holy Land, old men and women, for the most part, who have pinched and saved all their life long to lay together the £30 or so which carry them to Jerusalem. From the furthest ends of the Russian empire they come on foot to the Black Sea, where they take ship as deck passengers on board a dirty little Russian boat. I have travelled with 300 of them from Smyrna to Jaffa, myself the only passenger lodged in a cabin. It was mid-winter, stormy and cold for those who sleep on deck, even if they be clothed in sheepskin coats and wadded top-boots. My shipmates had brought their own provisions with

them for economy's sake – a hunch of bread, a few olives, a raw onion, of such was their daily meal. Morning and evening they gathered in prayer before an icon hanging on the cook's galley, and the sound of their litanies went to Heaven mingled with the throb of the screw and the splash of the spray. The pilgrims reach Jerusalem before Christmas and stay till after Easter that they may light their tapers at the sacred fire that breaks out from the Sepulchre on the morning of the Resurrection. They wander on foot through all the holy places, lodging in big hostels built for them by the Russian Government. Many die from exposure and fatigue and the unaccustomed climate; but to die in Palestine is the best of favours that the Divine hand can bestow, for their bones rest softly in the Promised Land and their souls fly straight to Paradise. You will meet these most unsophisticated travellers on every high road, trudging patiently under the hot sun or through the winter rains, clothed always in the furs of their own country, and bearing in their hands a staff cut from the reed beds of Jordan. They add a sharp note of pathos to a landscape that touches so many of the themes of mournful poetry. I heard in Jerusalem a story which is a better illustration of their temper than pages of description. It was of a man who had been a house-breaker and had been caught in the act and sent to Siberia, where he did many years of penal servitude. But when his time was up he came home to his old mother with a changed heart, and they two set out together for the Holy Land that he might make expiation for his sins. Now at the season when the pilgrims are in Jerusalem, the riff-raff of Syria congregates there to cheat their simplicity and pester them for alms, and one of these vagabonds came and begged of the Russian penitent at a time when he had nothing to give. The Syrian, enraged at his refusal, struck the other to the earth and injured him so severely that he was in

hospital for three months. When he recovered his consul came to him and said, 'We have got the man who nearly killed you; before you leave you must give evidence against him.' But the pilgrim answered, 'No, let him go. I too am a criminal.'

Beyond the fountain the road was empty, and though I knew it well I was struck again by the incredible desolation of it. No life, no flowers, the bare stalks of last year's thistles, the bare hills and the stony road. And yet the Wilderness of Judaea has been nurse to the fiery spirit of man. Out of it strode grim prophets, menacing with doom a world of which they had neither part nor understanding; the valleys are full of the caves that held them, nay, some are peopled to this day by a race of starved and gaunt ascetics, clinging to a tradition of piety that common sense has found it hard to discredit. Before noon we reached the khan halfway to Jericho, the place where legend has it that the Good Samaritan met the man fallen by the roadside, and I went in to lunch beyond reach of the boisterous wind. Three Germans of the commercial traveller class were writing on picture-post-cards in the room of the inn, and bargaining with the khānji for imitation Bedouin knives. I sat and listened to their vulgar futile talk – it was the last I was to hear of European tongues for several weeks, but I found no cause to regret the civilisation I was leaving. The road dips east of the khān, and crosses a dry water-course which has been the scene of many tragedies. Under the banks the Bedouin used to lie in wait to rob and murder the pilgrims as they passed. Fifteen years ago the Jericho road was as lawless a track as is the country now that lies beyond Jordan: security has travelled a few miles eastward during the past decade. At length we came to the top of the last hill and saw the Jordan valley and the Dead Sea, backed by the misty steeps of Moab, the frontier of the desert. Jericho lay at our feet, an

unromantic village of ramshackle hotels and huts wherein live the only Arabs the tourist ever comes to know, a base-born stock, half bred with negro slaves. I left my horse with the muleteers whom we had caught up on the slope – 'Please God you prosper!' 'Praise be to God! If your Excellency is well we are content' – and ran down the hill into the village. But Jericho was not enough for that first splendid day of the road. I desired eagerly to leave the tourists behind, and the hotels and the picture-postcards. Two hours more and we should reach Jordan bank, and at the head of the wooden bridge that leads from Occident to Orient we might camp in a sheltered place under mud hillocks and among thickets of reed and tamarisk. A halt to buy corn for the horses and the mules and we were off again across the narrow belt of cultivated land that lies round Jericho, and out on to the Ghōr, the Jordan valley.

The Jericho road is bare enough, but the valley of Jordan has an aspect of inhumanity that is almost evil. If the prophets of the Old Testament had fulminated their anathemas against it as they did against Babylon or Tyre, no better proof of their prescience would exist; but they were silent, and the imagination must travel back to flaming visions of Gomorrah and of Sodom, dim legends of iniquity that haunted our own childhood as they haunted the childhood of the Semitic races. A heavy stifling atmosphere weighed upon this lowest level of the earth's surface; the wind was racing across the hilltops above us in the regions where men breathed the natural air, but the valley was stagnant and lifeless like a deep sea bottom. We brushed through low thickets of prickly sidr trees, the Spina Christi of which the branches are said to have been twisted into the Crown of Thorns. They are of two kinds these sidr bushes, the Arabs call them zakūm and dōm. From the zakūm they extract a medicinal oil, the dōm bears a

small fruit like a crab apple that ripens to a reddish brown not uninviting in appearance. It is a very Dead Sea Fruit, pleasant to look upon and leaving on the lips a taste of sandy bitterness. The sidrs dwindled and vanished, and before us lay a sheet of hard mud on which no green thing grows. It is of a yellow colour, blotched with a venomous grey-white salt: almost unconsciously the eye appreciates its enmity to life. As we rode here a swirl of heavy rain swooped down upon us from the upper world. The muleteers looked grave, and even Mikhāil's face began to lengthen, for in front of us were the Slime Pits of Genesis, and no horse or mule can pass over them except they be dry. The rain lasted a very few minutes, but it was enough. The hard mud of the plain had assumed the consistency of butter, the horses' feet were shod in it up to the fetlocks, and my dog Kurt whined as he dragged his paws out of the yellow glue. So we came to the Slime Pits, the strangest feature of all that uncanny land. A quarter of a mile to the west of Jordan – the belt is much narrower to the east of the stream – the smooth plain resolves itself suddenly into a series of steep mud banks intersected by narrow gullies. The banks are not high, thirty or forty feet at the most, but the crests of them are so sharp and the sides so precipitous that the traveller must find his way across and round them with the utmost care. The shower had made these slopes as slippery as glass, even on foot it was almost impossible to keep upright. My horse fell as I was leading him; fortunately it was on a little ridge between mound and mound, and by the most astonishing gymnastics he managed to recover himself. I breathed a short thanksgiving when I saw my caravan emerge from the Slime Pits: we might, if the rain had lasted, have been imprisoned there for several hours, since if a horseman falls to the bottom of one of the sticky hollows he must wait there till it dries.