

The Oldest City in the World

By WILLIAM G. FITZ-GERALD

MOST travelers, I think, will award to Damascus in Syria the palm of being one of the most "untouched" of oriental cities, a lovely ancient snow-white garden, surrounded by forests of pomegranates and other orchards such as caused the Arabs, a thousand years ago, to speak of it as a "pearl encircled by emeralds."

Time has stood still in Damascus for a thousand years and life goes on in the country outside its walls precisely as it did when the ancient Bible historian spoke of the city in the Book of Genesis. For there, plowing is done with a crooked bough drawn by a ragged camel; or by the Arab farmer's wife in double harness with a donkey.

There, too, and likewise within the walls, one sees the long lines of indolent eastern women drawing water from the well, just as Rachel did; or women sitting before the doors of their houses grinding corn in the old Bible way, with upper and nether stones.

In the evening when the muezzins wail the call to prayer from the terraces of lofty minarets, one strolls through the crowded bazars, just as St. Paul did, and then down the "street called straight" so familiar to us from the Acts of the Apostles.

Then, too, the coffee-houses present wondrous pictures of eastern life. Many of them are encircled by swift-running crystal streams, that come down from the mountains of Lebanon, whence Solomon procured cedar-wood for his mighty temple; and in these cafe gardens sit the rich Damascenes, cross-legged, smoking narghiles and playing chess, or talking of long-expected caravans from Smyrna and Aleppo, from Beirut, and even the far Euphrates country, where archeologists have placed the site of the Garden of Eden.

And how interesting are those same caravans!—thousands upon thousands of long-necked, slow-pacing camels laden

with golddust and spices, frankincense and silk, ivory, ostrich feathers and precious gums from every part of the Orient, as well as tea and dates, olives and oranges.

No one can walk through the streets of Damascus without being bewildered by color and form and sound, nor if he have any imagination at all, can he fail to be impressed by the proud history of the city. Did not David himself conquer it, and is not its history inextricably woven with that of Israel? We find it in the histories of Alexander the Great, and Darius the Persian. Roman Pompey received ambassadors in Damascus; and the miraculous conversion of St. Paul took place on the road to this lovely city.

But I cannot dwell upon its splendor all through the ages. Bysantines and Persians owned it in turn, and when the star of Mohammed arose in Arabia, "Esh-Sham," as the Arabs call Damascus, rose to its highest pitch of splendor. Damascene Moslems, by the way, have ever been famed for their fanatical fervor, and away back in the sixties they rose and slaughtered no fewer than 14,000 Christians.

As the delighted visitor saunters through the crowded streets, he is amazed at the variety of costumes and the diversity of nationalities represented. He will see Hindus from the Persian Gulf; swarthy and fierce Afghans; Armenians; the queer tribesmen from the banks of the Tigris; timid Syrians, of course, as well as the strange Druses (neither Christian nor Moslem, but a little of both) and, above all, the fleeced and turbaned Bedouins of the desert, whose riches, like those of Abraham, are computed in flocks and herds, and who live not in houses, but in black tents—the "Tents of Kedar" of the Song of Solomon—woven by their women-folk out of camel's hair.