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THE COUNTRIES OF THE WORLD.

CHAPTER I.

THE TURKISH EMPIRE: ITS GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS.



WE are now passing from Asia, and can either step into Africa, or by crossing the narrow Dardanelles enter Europe. But in either case we should be in the country of an Asiatic people. In short, we cannot better begin our last volume than by a sketch of the remarkable empire which, arising in Asia, in time spread into Africa, and for three centuries at least has transferred its centre of gravity to Europe, there to attain great magnificence, only to decline and grow decrepit, until its boundaries are getting so rapidly circumscribed that its most important territories promise before long to be again in Asia. For some time past we have been traversing a region strewn with the wreck of kingdoms. In the midst of lonely deserts, where the tent of the nomad is almost the only sign of life, we come upon the sculptured stones of palaces, and the inscribed tablets which boast of the exploits of conquerors. The very names of the empires and monarchs who have made Central Asia the arena for their ruthless rule would fill pages with words, which could scarcely be intelligible to readers whose lives have not been spent among Asiatic manuscripts or encaustic inscriptions. We are again stumbling among the ruins which ambition has for centuries wrought. All Turkey in Asia is covered with memorials of the past. Babylon—"that great city"—Nineveh, Asia Minor, Palestine—all are comprehended under this portion of the Sultan's dominions. Africa is not less interesting, for here is Egypt, the home of so many associations, and Arabia, that arid land in which sprang into life, and was nurtured, the faith which proved such an aid to the conquerors who adopted it. Finally the ruined nationalities on which the Ottoman Empire in Europe is founded are numerous, and of a bewildering ethnological complexity. They have been crushed, and they have risen again, only to be seemingly effaced once more, until, as the bonds which bind the Caliphate together get loosened, they spring up afresh, aided by force without and fraud within, until the "Eastern Question" becomes one of the mention of which diplomatists become pale, and the readers of newspapers grow a-wearied.