

THE TRAVELLER.

THE NESTORIANS, OR THE LOST TRIBES.

BY ASAHEL GRANT, M.D.

CHAP. IV.

Battle-ground of Alexander.—Akra and its Scenery.—Reception by a Koordish Chief.—Journey to Amadiéh.

OCTOBER 8, 1839.—My slumbers were disturbed by slight showers of rain which fell in the night. This proved a fortunate circumstance, as I was thus awakened just in time to hear the neighing of my horse; and secure him, as he was moving off under very suspicious circumstances, his halter having been loosened probably by robbers, who fled on the outcry and pursuit which was made.

At dawn of day we mounted, and soon entered upon an extensive and very level plain, watered by the Gomeia and Hazir, or Chaser rivers, which we soon after forded a few miles above their junction. Geographers are agreed that the latter is the Bumadus, upon which the famous and decisive battle was fought between the legions of Darius and Alexander; and the extent and situation of this plain, with its relative distance from Arbela, whither the Macedonian army pursued the vanquished monarch of Persia, and which gave name to the battle, seem to denote this as the probable theatre of that memorable scene of blood and carnage. Such was the opinion of my friend, Colonel Sheil, who skirted its northern bounds in his late tour in Koordistan; and the opinion receives support from the use, by the ancient Syrian writers, of the significant name Beth Garmæ, or Beit Germe, "the Place of Bones," for a district which must have been situated nearly in this position; doubtless from the bleaching skeletons of the three hundred thousand slaughtered Persians who were left on the field. What a fitting monument to the memory of the world's great conqueror, "Place of Bones!"

Beth Garmæ appears to have once contained a large population of Nestorian Christians, as it is mentioned by Amrus and Elias of Damascus, in connexion with Adiabene and other contiguous places, as one of seven metropolitan bishoprics whose prelates elected and ordained the patriarch. The Nestorians are now reduced to a few scattered villages on the northern border of the district, and this fertile plain is still desolated by the ravages of war. Within the last six years, the Koords of Ravendos and of Amadiéh have successively swept over it, and the present year the finishing stroke in its desolation has been given by the Turkish army under the pashas of Mosul and Bagdad.

The ill-fated inhabitants sought shelter in the adjacent mountains during each successive storm; and, when I passed, a miserable remnant of them had just returned to repair their dilapidated dwellings, and prepare for approaching winter. In answer to our inquiries for food, some of them said they had not bread to eat themselves, and begged us to supply their necessities. In other villages, a scanty remnant of their harvest had been gathered in; and the straw, which is cut up fine by thrashing instruments having great iron teeth, was piled in heaps, and covered over with earth, like the small conical coal-pits in America, to preserve it from the storms. Near the border of the plain, some of the largest cotton I have seen in the East was still standing, testifying to the exuberant fertility of the soil; but it is sown so densely that it cannot attain the size of the cotton in our southern states.

About three, P.M., we approached the romantic little town of Akra, imbosomed in gardens and fruit orchards, which, for beauty, variety, and fertility, are unrivalled even in the East. For a mile before reaching the town, our path was imbowered in arbours of pomegranates, blending their golden and crimson hues, contrasted with the rich green olive and the more luscious but humble fig, and interspersed with the peach, apricot, plum, and cherry; while the unpretending blackberry lined our avenue, and held out its fruit for me to gather while seated upon my saddle. It was the first fruit of the kind I had seen since leaving the shores of my native land, and it was welcomed as a friend of my early days, bringing with it tender recollections of "home, sweet home!"

This delightful rural scenery is strikingly contrasted with the bold and bare rocks of the main range of the Koordish mountains, that rise abruptly from the foot of the town, which is overlooked by the now ruined castle, perched upon one of the nearest and most precipitous cliffs, once their "rock of defence." The castle had just been demolished by the Turks, who carried the rebellious chief a prisoner to Bagdad, and placed another Koord of the same ancient family over the district of Amadiéh. To visit this Chief, and secure his protection, while in his territory, was the occasion of my visit to Akra, which required about two days' ride farther than the direct route from Mosul to Amadiéh, by the way of Elkosh or Dehook. But I had no reason to regret the extension of my journey.

The pasha welcomed me with all the politeness of the most polished Oriental, or, I should rather say, Persian, for he had nothing of the stiff hauteur of the Turk. He rose from his carpet as I entered the tent, and gave me a seat by his side. But scarcely had the first compliments been exchanged, when he held out his hand for me to feel his pulse, saying that he had long been ill, and he regarded my visit as a special favour from God; at the same time tendering me a pressing invitation to remain with him some days. As he spoke Turkish and Persian fluently, as well as his native Koordish, I found no difficulty for the want of a medium of communication; and we conversed freely upon a variety of topics. But, when at length he spoke of the fallen fortunes of his family, which claims descent from the Abbasside caliphs of Bagdad, and till recently, as he affirmed, had held independent sway over no less than twelve hundred villages in these mountains, I could not but regard the topic as one of great delicacy, especially as what we should say might be carried by the birds of the air to the now dominant authorities, where nothing but evil could be the result. I therefore evaded a direct reply, and changed the conversation by deserved encomiums upon the charms of the scenery by which we were surrounded; for this chief was spending the early part of autumn in his tents, amid the enchanting gardens I have mentioned, while two beautiful rivulets murmured through the vales on either side. Just then, a fine little son of the Chief, scarcely eight years of age, came in with a smiling face, bearing in his hand a large pomegranate, which he had used as a mark, and perforated by a ball from his rifle. A suitable present was immediately ordered for the young marksman by the Chief, who appeared much delighted with this proof of his son's proficiency in the most essential element of a Koord's education.

To handle skilfully the instruments of death, and bound fearlessly over the roughest ground on their fiery steeds, are the highest accomplishments with these bold mountaineers. Some knowledge of letters is also acquired by the men of rank, and there are instances of females learning to read the Koran. Indeed, the Koords often manifest an inquisitiveness for general information that indicates a disposition for improvement truly encouraging; and they may yet prove a most hopeful class for missionary enterprise. By their Turkish neighbours, they are often called by an appellation which signifies "half Mohammedan," as if it was believed that they are less attached to their religion than the Turks.

Before I took leave of the Chief, he gave to the cavass from Mosul a receipt for my safe delivery into his hands, with just the same formality as though I had been a bale of goods; and he would be held equally accountable for my safety while in the bounds of his jurisdiction; as he is immediately responsible to the pasha of Mosul. He then ordered a young Koord in attendance to be ready to accompany me on my departure.

I remained two nights in Akra, and, by invitation, spent the second evening with the local Turkish Governor from Mosul, who had indulged so freely in brandy, to counteract the deleterious effects of the bad water, as he alleged, that he was fast verging upon delirium tremens. To calm his perturbed spirits, he had called together about twenty of the chief citizens, while a skilful musician had taken the place of David before Saul, to dispel the evil spirit by the soft, soothing strains of the harp. It was an instrument of seventy-two strings, (or wires,) of which sixty-four were remaining, and the music was altogether harmonious and agreeable.

Akra was once the seat of one of the numerous schools of the Nestorians; but the only remains of this sect in the district are to be found scattered through some twenty or more villages, some of which I afterward visited. Those in the town have become Chaldeans, (i.e. papists,) and they and the Jacobite Syrians have each a church excavated from the rocks of the mountain. They scarcely number thirty households in the town, and one of their priests told me that he was quite dependent on his own exertions for subsistence. The whole population may amount to two thousand souls. In the district, the Chaldeans are more numerous than the Nestorians. Just over the mountains, in Zebarrî, are a few Nestorian villages, subject to the Koords. On the other side of the river Zab, which is about ten or twelve miles to the east, there are some Chaldean and Nestorian Christians, subject to the bey of Ravendos. But it is impossible to gain accurate statistical information in such a country, without remaining some time with the people.

Oct. 10.—Before entering the difficult mountains I was about to traverse, I sold my last horse; and, mounted on a hardy mule which I had hired, I set off at sunrise, and for ten or twelve miles pursued a westerly course along the foot of the main range of mountains. I then entered a pass to the north, which brought me to the river Hazir, which I followed to near its source, a few miles west of the fortress of Amadiéh, where I arrived on the third day from Akra. The road through Zebarrî is more direct, but it is also more difficult, and the Koords were not in the most peaceable mood.

On the first day from Akra I passed three or four Nestorian villages, the largest of which had a population of nearly one thousand souls; also a village inhabited by Jews speaking the Nestorian language; and at night we lodged in a Koordish hamlet, where the people had a blood-feud with another village through which we passed, and which lay in sight. Three men had been killed from one of them, and only two from the other, and now the former were trying to make up the balance by deliberately murdering their neighbours: and thus the quarrel would finally be settled. Our road was rough, and our fare coarse, but we had occasion for gratitude that we were kept in safety.

Amadiéh is pleasantly situated in an extensive opening or undulating plain between the mountains. The district is fertile in grain and fruit. The wheat is good and abundant, and the grapes are among the finest I have seen. The raisins made from them are an article of export, and are celebrated as the best brought into Persia. The climate is deemed insalubrious, and successive wars have made sad havoc among the unfortunate population, who greatly need a good and stable government.

The town, or, more properly, the fortress of Amadiéh, is situated on the level summit of a very precipitous mountain, or mass of rock, which rises, as I judged, nearly a thousand feet above the plain, and, being entirely insulated and distant from the surrounding mountains, it is regarded as quite impregnable. I ascended by a circuitous and difficult footpath, and entered the town at two o'clock, P.M., October 12th, after answering the challenge of the heavy armed soldiers who kept the gate. The town is garrisoned by Turkish soldiers, whose commanding officer is made immediately responsible to the pasha of Mosul. The Koordish chief of the province of Amadiéh has no access to the fortress. This is an important precautionary measure on the part of the Turks, who, by demolishing the castle at Akra, and placing a foreign garrison in this more important fortress in the centre of the district, have completely put it out of the power of the Koords to throw off the Turkish yoke, unless under some special turn of fortune.

This will prove a great advantage to our prospective labours among the Mountain Nestorians— for, so long as there is a responsible control exercised over the Koords by the Turkish government, the way to the independent Nestorian Christians beyond is entirely open; and hence I cannot but regard the changes that have taken place here as peculiarly favourable to the prospect of extending our labours into that interesting field.

The town I found almost depopulated by war consequent on the invasion of the Ravendos Koords; and of 1000 houses, only two hundred and fifty are inhabited.