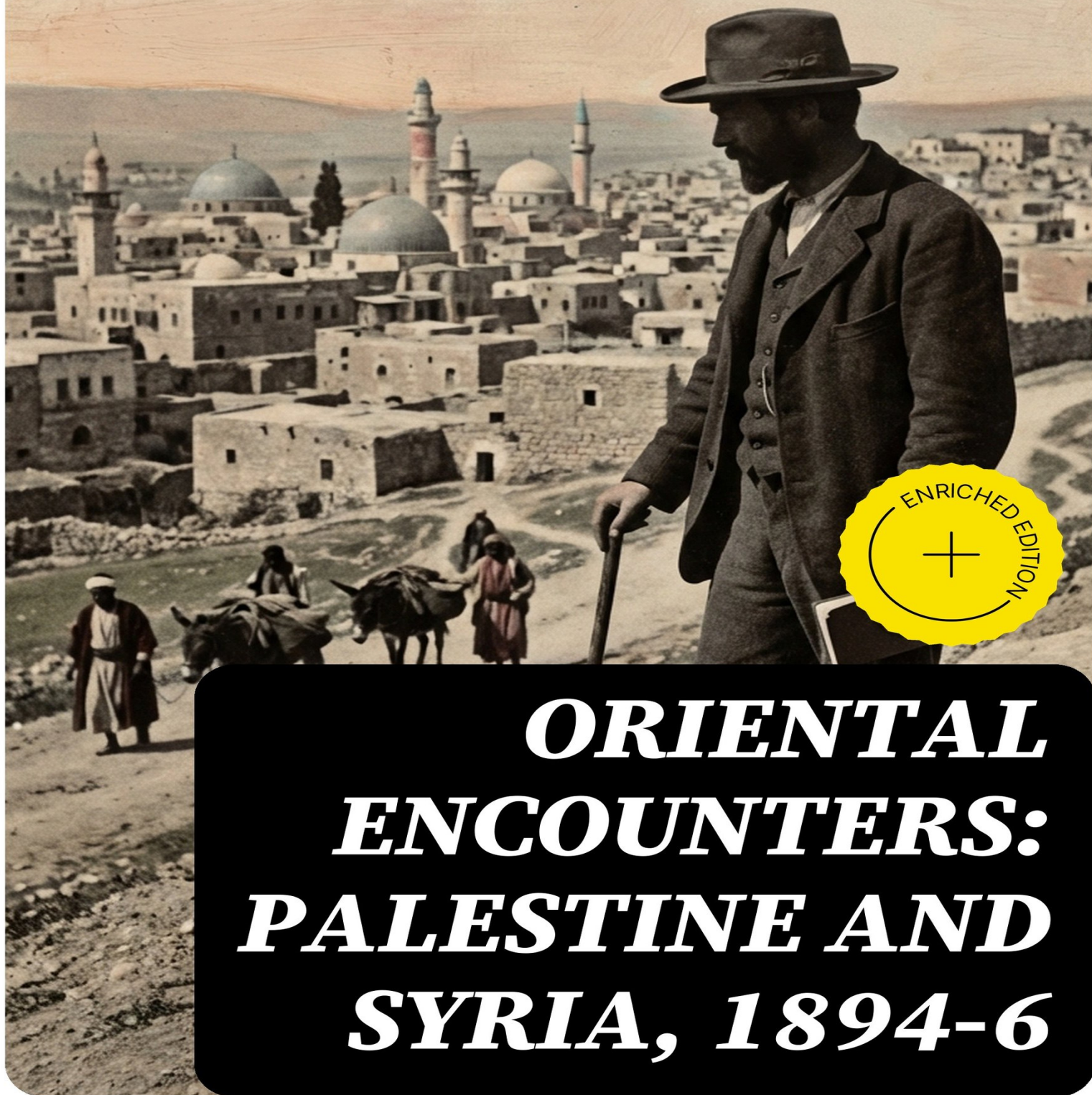


***MARMADUKE
WILLIAM
PICKTHALL***



***ORIENTAL
ENCOUNTERS:
PALESTINE AND
SYRIA, 1894-6***

Marmaduke William Pickthall

Oriental Encounters: Palestine and Syria, 1894-6

Enriched edition.

Introduction, Studies and Commentaries by Quinn Theodore

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Introduction

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Between curiosity and misunderstanding lies the fragile art of encounter that animates Marmaduke William Pickthall's record of journeying through the late Ottoman Levant. *Oriental Encounters: Palestine and Syria, 1894-6* is a travel narrative shaped from the author's movements across Palestine and Syria during those years, presenting scenes observed on roads, in towns, and among households. First published in the early twentieth century, it stands at the intersection of memoir and reportage, attentive to people and places rather than to itinerary alone. The book's temporal frame, anchored before the sweeping upheavals of the twentieth century, offers a distinctive window onto daily life under Ottoman rule.

Pickthall writes in a first-person voice that is candid and observant, favoring episodic sketches that linger on conversations, gestures, and the small negotiations of travel. His pages move between quick, humorous vignettes and longer, reflective passages, balancing momentum with close attention to detail. Landscapes are evoked through texture and movement rather than catalogues, while character is revealed through social situations—meals offered, bargains struck, courtesies observed. The narrative's structure invites the reader to accompany a young traveler as he learns how to ask, listen, and wait, experiencing the region not as spectacle but as a web of obligations, expectations, and mutual watchfulness.

At the heart of the book is the problem of perception: how a visitor sees others, how others see the visitor, and how both acts shape behavior. Language, etiquette, and trust recur as motifs, with miscommunication and tact forming a pair as consequential as any map or compass. Pickthall watches the workings of hospitality and honor while recognizing the limits of his own perspective. He tests assumptions and revises them, though never escaping the fact of his outsider status. What results is not a definitive portrait of Palestine and Syria, but a meditation on the terms under which portraits are made.

The sketches present a mosaic of late nineteenth-century Levantine life: market streets and caravan routes, agricultural rhythms and coastal traffic, religiously diverse communities and the administrative routines that knit them together. Rather than a statistical survey, the book offers textured glimpses of social practice—forms of greeting and bargaining, expectations around protection and payment, the tempo of travel by animal and foot. The Ottoman context is present as a living background, felt in officials' offices, road checkpoints, and village councils, but the narrative remains grounded in ordinary interactions. Through cumulative detail, readers sense both continuity and change in a region of longstanding connections.

As a document of its era, the work necessarily carries the attitudes and vocabularies of late imperial travel writing, yet it also displays notable sympathy and curiosity. Pickthall's willingness to dwell with ambiguity, to record confusion as well as delight, complicates the conventional opposition between romantic picture and cold report. His observational

method emphasizes encounter over judgment, while his irony is usually turned on his own mistakes. Readers alert to the debates around Orientalism will find a text that repays critical attention: it exemplifies a tradition, reveals its limits, and, at moments, resists it through patience and respect for local knowledge.

For contemporary readers, the book matters for both historical and ethical reasons. Historically, it preserves eyewitness impressions of Palestine and Syria in the years before the twentieth century reshaped political borders and social imaginaries, adding ground-level texture to discussions otherwise conducted through archives and abstractions. Ethically, it models—and tests—the possibilities of cross-cultural understanding under unequal conditions, reminding us that listening is a practice learned in situ, not a principle applied from afar. In a world saturated by rapid travel and instant commentary, these measured encounters demonstrate the value of slowness, reciprocity, and the humility to accept partial knowledge.

Approached as narrative, *Oriental Encounters* offers suspense of a modest kind: not the drama of conquest, but the quieter question of what recognition will be possible between strangers. Approached as testimony, it is an artifact of a particular writer, time, and place, requiring both sympathy and scrutiny. Read with care, it rewards on both counts, revealing the craft by which observations become stories and stories become understandings. Pickthall's pages do not dissolve difference; instead, they trace how difference is negotiated and sometimes bridged. That

delicate work, begun on footpaths and in courtyards over a century ago, remains urgently relevant today.

Synopsis

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Marmaduke William Pickthall's *Oriental Encounters: Palestine and Syria, 1894-6* recounts the author's youthful travels through the late Ottoman Levant. Written as a sequence of vivid episodes, it follows a loosely chronological path from coastal entry points into inland cities and rural districts. The narrator's perspective evolves from curiosity to informed engagement, as he seeks to understand people and places encountered on the road. Rather than presenting a grand thesis, the work collects scenes of daily life, social etiquette, and negotiation, building a mosaic-like portrait of a region often summarized from a distance in European discourse.

Early chapters dwell on first impressions and practicalities: transport arrangements, the role of guides and interpreters, the protocols of hospitality, and the improvisations required by unpredictable conditions. Markets, coffeehouses, and roadside inns serve as classrooms where the traveler begins to grasp local rhythms of speech and conduct. Bargaining, gift-giving, and ceremony are shown as forms of communication that reduce distance between outsider and host. Missteps occur, yet they become instructive, guiding the narrator toward a more attentive posture and preparing him for more complex encounters beyond the ports and caravan routes.

The narrative then turns to urban life, tracing movements through prominent towns of Palestine and Syria under

Ottoman administration. Attention falls on the order and energy of bazaars, the bureaucratic routines of officials, and the influence of learned and religious figures. Through anecdote, the book illustrates how courtesy, reputation, and mediation often substitute for formal procedure, while still upholding a recognizable notion of justice. The narrator notices the performative aspects of authority and the reciprocal expectations that bind officeholders and subjects. These city episodes establish a counterpoint between institutional structures and the informal networks that sustain them.

From cities the account moves outward to villages and pastoral communities, where cultivation and herding organize time and allegiance. The traveler observes how kinship, hospitality, and negotiated protection shape movement across the countryside. Guides and local intermediaries arbitrate passage and ensure safety, drawing on customs that predate and intersect with imperial rule. Landscapes themselves—mountain tracks, upland fields, and open steppe—become actors in the story, setting limits and offering opportunities. In these chapters, the book emphasizes practical wisdom: how people read the terrain, forecast weather, and settle disputes without recourse to distant authorities.

Intercommunal life appears in layered, everyday scenes rather than abstract debate. The narrator notes coexistence and friction among Muslims, Christians, and Jews in shared spaces of trade and worship, refraining from simplified moral verdicts. Foreign missions and consular presences occasionally enter the frame, adding a further dimension to

local dynamics. The book records the accommodations that enable business and ritual to proceed, as well as moments when misunderstanding disrupts the balance. By attending to social cues, forms of deference, and the mutual testing of intentions, the narrative shows how trust is established and sometimes strained.

As the journey lengthens, hardships of travel—fatigue, weather shifts, scarce resources, and miscommunication—become part of the learning curve. The author's increasing competence in language and custom allows more candid conversation and a wider circle of acquaintances. Small crises illuminate larger patterns: how communities protect guests, punish transgressions, and repair honor. With each episode, the narrator refines his judgments, replacing inherited preconceptions with observations grounded in practice. The cumulative effect is not confession or conversion narrative, but a reorientation of attention toward the ordinary mechanisms that make shared life possible.

The book closes by gathering its episodic insights into a coherent impression of the late nineteenth-century Levant before subsequent upheavals reshaped the region. Without striving for exhaustive coverage or dramatic revelation, it contributes a durable record of manners, institutions, and landscapes as encountered by an attentive visitor. Its enduring resonance lies in the patience of its method: meaning accrues through face-to-face encounters, careful listening, and an acceptance of complexity. For readers, the work offers a historically situated and human-scale perspective on Palestine and Syria, valuable both as travel literature and as a snapshot of a world in transition.

Historical Context

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In 1894–1896, when Marmaduke William Pickthall traveled through Palestine and Syria, the region formed part of the Ottoman Empire under Sultan Abdülhamid II. Administrative divisions included the Vilayet of Beirut and the Vilayet of Damascus, while Jerusalem was a separate mutasarrifate reporting directly to Istanbul. Coastal ports such as Jaffa, Haifa, and Beirut connected the provinces to Mediterranean shipping lanes served by European lines. Telegraph links, quarantine stations, and consulates mediated movement and communication. The Holy Land also attracted organized tourist parties and pilgrims, increasingly shepherded by firms like Thomas Cook, creating a cosmopolitan traffic that intersected with everyday life in towns, villages, and caravan routes.

The late Hamidian state emphasized centralization and public order, visible in gendarmerie patrols (zaptiye), district governors (kaymakams), and provincial councils balancing Ottoman law with local influence. Justice was dispensed through sharia courts for personal status and nizamiye courts for criminal and commercial matters, alongside consular jurisdictions afforded by the Capitulations to foreign nationals. Mission schools and hospitals—Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox—were prominent in cities, while waqf endowments supported mosques and charitable works. Daily administration mixed Ottoman Turkish paperwork with Arabic as the lingua franca. The resulting institutional

mosaic shaped how travelers obtained permits, negotiated escorts, and understood local authority.

Rapid infrastructural change framed journeys. The Jaffa-Jerusalem railway opened in 1892, transforming access to the Holy City from the coast, and the Beirut-Damascus line began operating in 1895, replacing portions of the old caravan trail across Mount Lebanon and the Beqaa. Carriage roads linked district centers, while steamers landed passengers at often perilous roadsteads like Jaffa. European postal agencies coexisted with Ottoman mail. These routes enabled merchants, pilgrims, and officials to move with new speed, yet travel still required bargaining, seasonal timing, and reliance on muleteers and dragomans. Economic shifts accompanied the networks, from citrus exports near Jaffa to silk cultivation in Mount Lebanon.

Society in Ottoman Syria and Palestine was religiously and ethnically diverse. Sunni Muslims formed majorities in many districts; Christian communities included Greek Orthodox, Melkite, Maronite, Latin Catholic, and Armenian congregations; Jewish communities comprised long-established Sephardi families and growing Ashkenazi colonies. Druze communities were influential, particularly in Mount Lebanon and the Hauran. After the 1860 sectarian war, Mount Lebanon became an autonomous mutasarrifate under a non-local Christian governor, supervised by the Powers, a settlement still shaping politics in the 1890s. Protective patronage by foreign states fostered schools and charitable institutions, but also multiplied competing jurisdictions and loyalties in cities such as Beirut, Damascus, and Jerusalem.

Regional dynamics were conditioned by the Eastern Question. Britain's occupation of Egypt since 1882 secured the Suez Canal and expanded British consular and commercial presence along the Levantine coast. French influence was entrenched through Catholic missions, Saint Joseph University (founded 1875), and investments in railways and public works. The Syrian Protestant College (later the American University of Beirut), founded in 1866, signaled U.S. missionary and educational engagement. Russian patronage of Orthodox communities and Austrian and German commercial ties rounded out the diplomatic map. Such rivalries were visible to travelers in flag-marked schools, post offices, and steamship agents, and shaped the conduct of Ottoman officials.

The years 1894–1896 were turbulent across the empire. The Hamidian massacres targeted Armenian subjects in Anatolia and affected cities with Armenian populations, including disturbances in Aleppo in 1896, heightening international scrutiny of the Ottoman government. In Palestine, the First Aliyah (1882–1903) continued, with agricultural colonies such as Rishon LeZion, Zikhron Ya'akov, and Rosh Pinna supported in part by Baron Edmond de Rothschild. The Dreyfus Affair, beginning in France in 1894, intensified debates in Europe that would soon energize political Zionism, even as Jewish life in Ottoman towns like Jerusalem and Safed remained embedded in local economies and institutions.

Travelers in the interior navigated tribal territories, village customs, and urban guilds. Bedouin groups in the steppe regions participated in taxation and policing

arrangements with officials, while rural peasants (fellahin) balanced state demands with communal solidarities. Hospitality codes, bargaining practices, and the expectation of gratuities (baksheesh) structured many encounters. Religious endowments (waqf) maintained shrines and schools, and the Status Quo governed access to Christian holy places in Jerusalem, often policed by the gendarmerie. These conventions, together with escorts, permits, and intermediaries such as dragomans, shaped the tone and texture of contact between Ottoman subjects and European visitors.

Oriental Encounters, written as sketches of 1894–1896 journeys and published in 1918, reflects this milieu. Pickthall was a young English traveler who learned Arabic and observed provincial administration, pilgrimage traffic, and village life at close range. His portraits emphasize individuals—guides, officials, and townspeople—rather than abstractions, and note elements often elided in guidebooks of the period. The book's sympathy for Muslim and Arab perspectives foreshadows his later public defense of the Ottoman cause during the First World War and his conversion to Islam in 1917, situating the work as both testimony to, and critique of, its imperial moment.

ORIENTAL ENCOUNTERS: PALESTINE AND SYRIA, 1894-6

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RASHÎD THE FAIR

The brown plain, swimming in a haze of heat, stretched far away into the distance, where a chain of mountains trenched upon the cloudless sky. Six months of drought had withered all the herbage. Only thistles, blue and yellow, and some thorny bushes had survived; but after the torrential winter rains the whole expanse would blossom like the rose. I traversed the plain afterwards in spring, when cornfields waved for miles around its three mud villages, wild flowers in mad profusion covered its waste places, and scarlet tulips flamed amid its wheat.

Now all was desert[1q]. After riding for four days in such a landscape, it was sweet to think upon the journey's end, the city of perennial waters, shady gardens, and the song of birds. I was picturing the scene of our arrival—the shade and the repose, the long, cool drinks, the friendly hum of the bazaars—and wondering what letters I should find awaiting me, all to the tune of 'Onward, Christian soldiers'—for the clip-clap of a horse's hoofs invariably beats out in my brain some tune, the most incongruous, against my will—when a sudden outcry roused me. It came from my companion, a hired muleteer, and sounded angry. The fellow had been riding on ahead. I now saw that he had overtaken other travellers—two men astride of one donkey—and had entered into conversation with them. One of the two, the

hindmost, was a Turkish soldier. Except the little group they made together, and a vulture, a mere speck above them in the blue, no other living creature was in sight. Something had happened, for the soldier seemed amused, while my poor man was making gestures of despairing protest. He repeated the loud cry which had disturbed my reverie, then turned his mule and hurried back to meet me.

'My knife!' he bellowed 'My knife!—that grand steel blade which was my honour!—so finely tempered and inlaid!—an heirloom in the family! That miscreant, may Allah cut his life!—I mean the soldier—stole it. He asked to look at it a minute, seeming to admire. I gave it, like the innocent I am. He stuck it in his belt, and asked to see the passport which permitted me to carry weapons. Who ever heard of such a thing in this wild region? He will not give it back, though I entreated. I am your Honour's servant, speak for me and make him give it back! It is an heirloom!' That grey-haired man was crying like a baby.

Now, I was very young, and his implicit trust in my authority enthralled me. I valued his dependence on my manhood more than gold and precious stones. Summoning all the courage I possessed, I clapped spurs to my horse and galloped after the marauder.

'Give back that knife!' I roared. 'O soldier! it is thou to whom I speak.'

The soldier turned a studiously guileless face—a handsome face, with fair moustache and a week's beard. He had a roguish eye.

'What knife? I do not understand,' he said indulgently.

'The knife thou stolest from the muleteer here present.'

'Oh, that!' replied the soldier, with a deprecating laugh: 'That is a thing unworthy of your Honour's notice. The rogue in question is a well-known malefactor. He and I are old acquaintance.'

'By the beard of the Prophet, by the August Coran, I never saw his devil's face until this minute!' bawled the muleteer, who had come up behind me.

'Give back the knife,' I ordered for the second time.

'By Allah, never!' was the cool reply.

'Give it back, I say!'

'No, it cannot be—not even to oblige your Honour, for whose pleasure, Allah knows, I would do almost anything,' murmured the soldier, with a charming smile. 'Demand it not. Be pleased to understand that if it were your Honour's knife I would return it instantly. But that man, as I tell thee, is a wretch. It grieves me to behold a person of consideration in such an unbecoming temper upon his account—a dog, no more.'

'If he is a dog, he is my dog for the present; so give back the knife!'

'Alas, beloved, that is quite impossible.'

With a wave of the hand dismissing the whole subject the soldier turned away. He plucked a cigarette out of his girdle and prepared to light it. His companion on the donkey had not turned his head nor shown the slightest interest in the discussion. This had lasted long enough. I knew that in another minute I should have to laugh. If anything remained for me to do it must be done immediately. Whipping my revolver from the holster, I held it close against the rascal's head, yelling: 'Give back the knife this minute, or I kill thee!'

The man went limp. The knife came back as quick as lightning. I gave it to the muleteer, who blubbered praise to Allah and made off with it. Equally relieved, I was about to follow when the utterly forlorn appearance of the soldier moved me to open the revolver, showing that it was not loaded. Then my adversary was transfigured. His back straightened, his mouth closed, his eyes regained their old intelligence. He stared at me a moment, half incredulous, and then he laughed. Ah, how that soldier laughed[2q]! The owner of the donkey turned and shared his glee. They literally hugged each other, roaring with delight, while the donkey underneath them both jogged dutifully on.

Before a caravanserai in a small valley green with fruit-trees, beside a slender stream whose banks were fringed with oleander, I was sitting waiting for some luncheon when the donkey and its riders came again in sight. The soldier tumbled off on spying me and ran into the inn like one possessed. A minute later he brought out the food which I had ordered and set the table for me in the shade of trees.

'I would not let another serve thee,' he informed me, 'for the love of that vile joke that thou didst put upon me. It was not loaded. After all my fright!... It is a nice revolver. Let me look at it.'

'Aye, look thy fill, thou shalt not touch it,' was my answer; at which he laughed anew, pronouncing me the merriest of Adam's race.

'But tell me, what wouldst thou have done had I refused? It was not loaded. What wouldst thou have done?'

His hand was resting at that moment on a stool. I rapped his knuckles gently with the butt of the revolver to let him

know its weight.

'Wallahi!' he cried out in admiration. 'I believe thou wouldst have smashed my head with it. All for the sake of a poor man of no account, whom thou employest for a week, and after that wilt see no more. Efendim, take me as thy servant always!' Of a sudden he spoke very earnestly. 'Pay the money to release me from the army. It is a largeish sum—five Turkish pounds. And Allah knows I will repay it to thee by my service. For the love of righteousness accept me, for my soul is thine.'

I ridiculed the notion. He persisted. When the muleteer and I set forth again, he rode beside us, mounted on another donkey this time—'borrowed,' as he put it—which showed he was a person of resource. 'By Allah, I can shoe a horse and cook a fowl; I can mend garments with a thread and shoot a bird upon the wing,' he told me. 'I would take care of the stable and the house. I would do everything your Honour wanted. My nickname is Rashîd the Fair^[1]; my garrison is Karameyn, just two days' journey from the city. Come in a day or two and buy me out. No matter for the wages. Only try me!'

At the khan, a pretty rough one, where we spent the night, he waited on me deftly and enforced respect, making me really wish for such a servant. On the morrow, after an hour's riding, our ways parted.

'In sh'Allah, I shall see thee before many days,' he murmured. 'My nickname is Rashîd the Fair, forget not. I shall tell our captain thou art coming with the money.'

I said that I might think about it possibly.

'Come,' he entreated. 'Thou wouldst never shame a man who puts his trust in thee. I say that I shall tell our captain thou art coming. Ah, shame me not before the Commandant and all my comrades! Thou thinkest me a thief, a lawbreaker, because I took that fellow's knife?' he asked, with an indulgent smile. 'Let me tell thee, O my lord, that I was in my right and duty as a soldier of the Sultan in this province. It is that muleteer who, truly speaking, breaks the law by carrying the knife without a permit. And thou, hast thou a passport for that fine revolver? At the place where we had luncheon yesterday were other soldiers. By merely calling on them to support me I could have had his knife and thy revolver with ease and honesty in strict accordance with the law. Why did I not do so? Because I love thee! Say thou wilt come to Karameyn and buy me out.'

I watched him jogging on his donkey towards a gulley of the hills along which lay the bridle-path to Karameyn. On all the evidence he was a rogue, and yet my intimate conviction was that he was honest. All the Europeans in the land would lift up hands of horror and exclaim: 'Beware!' on hearing such a story. Yet, as I rode across the parched brown land towards the city of green trees and rushing waters, I knew that I should go to Karameyn.



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A MOUNTAIN GARRISON

The long day's ride was uneventful, but not so the night. I spent it in a village of the mountains at a very curious hostelry, kept by a fat native Christian, named Elias, who laid claim, upon the signboard, to furnish food and lodging 'alafranga'—that is, in the modern European manner. There was one large guest-room, and an adjoining bedroom of the same dimensions, for some thirty travellers. I had to find a stable for my horse elsewhere. A dining-table was provided, and we sat on chairs around it; but the food was no wise European, and the cooking was degraded Greek. A knife, fork, and spoon were laid for every guest but several cast these on the floor and used their fingers. In the long bedroom were a dozen beds on bedsteads. By offering a trifle extra I secured one to myself. In others there were two, three, even four together. An elderly Armenian gentleman who had a wife with him, stood guard with pistols over her all night. He was so foolish as to threaten loudly anyone who dared approach her. After he had done so several times a man arose from the bed next to mine and strolling to him seized him by the throat.

'O man,' he chided. 'Art thou mad or what, thus to arouse our passions by thy talk of women? Be silent, or we honest men here present will wring thy neck and take thy woman from thee. Dost thou understand?' He shook that jealous