

POETICAL HUMBEGGERY.

From Our Special Correspondent

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When I think how I have been swindled by books of Oriental travel, I want a tourist for breakfast. For years and years I have dreamed of the wonders of the Turkish bath: for years and years I have promised myself that I would yet enjoy one. Many and many a time, in fancy, I have lain in the marble bath, and breathed the slumbrous fragrance of eastern spices that filled the air; then passed through a weird and complicated system of pulling and hauling, and drenching and scrubbing, by a gang of naked savages who loomed vast and vaguely through the steaming mists, like demons; then rested for a while on a divan fit for a King; then passed through another complex ordeal, and one more fearful than the first; and finally, swathed in soft fabrics, was conveyed to a princely saloon and laid upon a bed of eider down, where eunuchs, gorgeous of costume, fanned me while I drowsed and dreamed, or contentedly gazed at the rich hangings of the apartment, the soft carpets, the sumptuous furniture, the pictures; and drank delicious coffee, smoked the soothing narghali, and dropped, at the last, into tranquil repose, lulled by sensuous odors from unseen sensors, by the gentle influence of the narghali's Persian tobacco, and by the music of fountains that counterfeited the pattering of Summer rain.

That was the picture, just as I got it from incendiary books of travel. It was a poor, miserable fraud. The reality is no more like it than the Five Points are like the Garden of Eden. They received me in a great court, paved with marble slabs: around it were broad galleries, one above another, carpeted with seedy matting, railed with unpainted balustrades, and furnished with huge, rickety chairs, enshroued with rusty old mattresses indented with impressions left by the forms of nine successive generations of men who had reposed upon them. The place was vast, naked, dreary—its court a barn, its galleries stalls for human horses. The cadaverous, half-nude varlets that served in the establishment had nothing of poetry in their appearance, nothing of romance, nothing of Oriental splendor. They shed no entrancing odors—just the contrary. Their hungry eyes and their hawk forms continually suggested one glaring, un sentimental fact—they wanted a "square meal."

I went up into one of the racks and undressed. An unclean starveling wrapped a gaudy table-cloth about my loins, and hung a white rag over my shoulders. If I had had a tub then, it would have come natural to me to take in washing. I was then conducted down stairs into the wet, slippery court, and the first things that attracted my attention were my heels. My fall excited no comment. They expected it, no doubt. It belonged in the list of softening, sensuous influences peculiar to this home of eastern luxury. It was softening enough, certainly, but its application was not happy. They now gave me a pair of wooden clogs—benches in miniature, with leather straps over them to confine my feet (which they would have done, only I do not wear No. 13s). These things dangled uncomfortably by the straps when I lifted up my feet, and came down in awkward and unexpected places when I put them on the floor again, and sometimes turned sideways and wrenched my ankles out of joint. However, it was all Oriental luxury, and I did what I could to enjoy it.

They put me in another part of the barn and laid me on a stuffy sort of pallet, which was not made of cloth of gold or Persian shawls, but was merely the unpretending sort of thing I have seen in the negro quarters of Arkansas. There was nothing whatever in this dim marble prison but five more of these biers. It was a very solemn place. I expected that the spiced odors of Araby were going to steal over my senses now, but they didn't. A copper-colored skeleton, with a rag around him, brought me a glass decanter of water, with a lighted tobacco pipe in the top of it, and a pliant stem a yard long, with a brass mouth-piece to it. It was the famous "narghali" of the East—the thing the Grand Turk smokes in the pictures. This began to look like luxury. I took one blast at it, and it was sufficient. The smoke all went down my throat. It came back in convulsive snorts through my nose. It had a vile taste, and the taste of a thousand infidel tongues that remained on that brass mouth-piece was viler still. I was getting discouraged. Whenever hereafter I see the cross-legged Grand Turk smoking his narghali, in pretended bliss, on the outside of a paper of Connecticut tobacco, I shall know him for the shameless humbug he is.

This prison was filled with hot air. When I had got warmed up sufficiently to prepare me for a still warmer temperature, they took me where it was—into a marble room, wet, slippery, and steamy, and laid me out on a raised platform in the center. It was very warm. Presently my man sat me down by a tank of hot water, drenched me well, gloved his hand with a coarse mitten, and began to polish me all over with it. I began to smell disagreeably. The more he polished, the worse I smelt. It was alarming. I said to him: "I perceive that I am pretty far gone. It is plain that I ought to be buried without any unnecessary delay. Perhaps you had better go after my friends at once, because the weather is warm, and I cannot 'keep' long." He went on scrubbing, and paid no attention. I soon saw that he was reducing my size. He bore hard on his mitten, and from under it rolled little cylinders, like macaroni. It could not be dirt, for it was too white. He pared me down in this way for a long time. Finally I said: "It is a tedious process; it will take hours to trim me to the size you want me. I will wait; go and borrow a jack-plane." He paid no attention at all.

After a while he brought a basin, some soap, and something that seemed to be the tail of a horse. He made up a prodigious quantity of soap-suds, deluged me with them from head to foot without warning me to shut my eyes, and then swabbed me viciously with the horse-tail. Then he left me there, a statue of snowy lather, and went away. When I got tired of waiting, I went and hunted him up. He was propped against the wall, in another room, asleep. I woke him. He was not disconcerted. He took me back and flooded me with exhausting hot water, then turbaned my head, swathed me with dry table-cloths, and conducted me to a latticed chicken-coop in one of the galleries, and pointed to one of those Arkansas beds. I mounted it, and vaguely expected the odors of Araby again. They did not come. The blank, unornamented coop had nothing about it of that Oriental voluptuousness one reads of so much. It was more suggestive of the county hospital than anything else. The skinny servitor brought a narghali, and I got him to take it out again without wasting any time about it. Then he brought the world-renowned Turkish coffee that poets have sung so rapturously for many generations, and I sipped upon it as the last hope that was left of my old dreams of Eastern luxury. It was another swindle. Of all the unchristian beverages that ever passed my lips, Turkish coffee is the worst. The cup is small, it is smeared with grounds; the coffee is black, thick, unsavory of smell, and execrable in taste. The bottom of the cup has a muddy sediment in it half an inch deep. This goes down your throat, and portions of it lodge by the way and produce a tickling aggravation that keeps you barking and coughing for an hour.

Here endeth my experience of the celebrated Turkish bath, and here also endeth my dream of the bliss the mortal revels in who passes through it. It is a malignant swindle. The man who enjoys it is qualified to enjoy anything that is repulsive to sight or sense, and he that can invest it with the charm of poetry is able to do the same with anything else in the world that is tedious, and wretched, and dismal, and nasty.

As for the Dancing Dervishes, they are a delusion and a folly. They are a pack of miserable lunatics in long robes, who spin round, and round, and round, with closed eyes and arms elevated and extended, and look as ridiculous as it is possible for any creature to look. They keep time to a caterwauling of barbarous instruments and more barbarous human voices, and travelers call the stupid performance and its infamous accompaniments "impressive." So would be a carnival of idiots and tom-cats.

The Dervishes are so holy that you must take your boots off when you enter their menagerie—their mosque, if you like it better. There are 300 visitors, 600 bare feet, and no two of them emit a similar fragrance. Here you have 600 different smells to start with. There are 30 Dervishes; they spin around a large, close room nine times, and exhale a different odor every time, and a meager one. So there you have 870 separate and distinct smells, and any one of them worse than a burning rag factory. Truly it is very impressive. The Dancing Dervishes are the dreariest, silliest humbugs in all the Orient. They know it as well as anybody. Yet every ass that comes here from a distant land rushes there to see them, just as I did, and then rushes to the photographer's and buys their pictures—which I did not do. I wish I were Sultan for one day. I would hang all the Dervishes for 40 minutes, and if they did not believe themselves after that I would be severe with them.

The books of travel have shamefully deceived me all these years, but they can never do it more. The narghali, the dervishes, the aromatic coffee, the Turkish bath—these are the things I have accepted and believed in, with simple, unquestioning faith, from boyhood; and, behold, they are the poorest, sickest, wretchedest humbugs the world can furnish. Wonders, forsooth! What is Turkish coffee to the coffee at home? What is a narghali to a meerschaum? What is a Turkish bath in Constantinople to a Russian one in New York? What are the dancing dervishes to the negro minstrels?—and Heaven help us, what is Oriental splendor to the Black Crook of New York, and its wondrous where Constantinople has one!

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