

CHAPTER III.

THE CHRONIC CONDITION OF ARMENIA AND KURDISTAN.

MANY statements in regard to the state of affairs in Eastern Turkey are criticised as being too sweeping and general, and the inference is drawn that they are exaggerations, not based on exact knowledge of the facts. This chapter will, therefore, contain nothing but definite incidents and figures, names and places also being added regardless of consequences. This information is furnished by a trustworthy authority on the ground, and has already been published in *The Independent*, of New York, January 17, 1895, from which I quote verbatim. It shows the usual course of things in times of so-called peace between Kurds and their Christian slaves, and indicates to what sort of a life these Armenian, Jacobite, and Nestorian Christians are condemned when no massacre is in hand. From my own residence and travels in Armenia, I know that the incidents related would apply to hundreds of villages with simply a change of name.

"A Partial List of Exactions made upon the Village of Mansurieh of Bohtan (Kaimakamlik of Jezireh) by the government, and by Mustapha Pasha, a Kurdish Kocher, or nomad chief, in 1893:

Condition of Armenia and Kurdistan. 55

SUMMARY.

1. Government Exaction	Excess of official demand	3,000 ps. ¹	
	Amount of double tax	4,000	
	Produce taken by gendarmes	2,000	9,000 ps.
2. Exaction by M. Pasha.	Excess of tithe revenue	1,500	
	Damage to crops	2,000	3,500
Total excess taken from village for 1893			12,500
Total of legitimate taxes on village for the year ...			14,000

The village complained to the government of Mustapha Pasha's exactions, but no redress was given by the government, nor anything done to Mustapha Pasha, who, when he learned of their having made complaint, sent droves of sheep to devour the crops that remained, viz., five pieces of ground sown and bearing cotton, millet, flaxseed, etc., valued at 2000 piasters."

"Partial List of Exaction by Aghas of Shernakh (one day north of Jezireh), from Hassana of Bohtan, during years 1891-'93. Hassana has sixty houses:

1893.	
Use of 30 men to carry flour for Mohammed Agha, 2 days	150 ps.
For Mohammed Agha, cash 10 liras	1,000
" " " 15 pieces of cloth	150
" Taher Agha, cash 14 liras	1,400
" " " taken from village priest, cash 75 ps., saddle 75 ps., watch 200 ps.	350
" Sahdoon Agha, cash 2 liras	200
" Mohammed	120
Carried forward	3,370 ps.

¹ A piastre is a Turkish coin of about five cents, or two pence-half penny. In this region the pay of a day laborer is from two to five piastres.

Brought forward.....	3,370 ps.
For Khorshed	57
" Mohammed Agha, harvest, 500 men at 3 ps..	1,500
" " " repair of his roads, 65 men,	
3 days.....	487
" " " repair of his roads, 50 men,	
3 days.....	375
" " " preparation of boiled wheat	
for winter, 450 men and	
14 animals.....	1,160
" " " building house in Dader,	
150 men.....	375
" " " 2000 ceiling sticks, 10	
posts.....	554
" " " 4 large trees for rafters, at	
50 ps.....	200
Total for 1893	8,078 ps.

The above were noted in a book at the time of the occurrence by a village priest, as being seen by him personally, and do not give the great part of the exactions of the Shernakh Kurds, which he did not see.

One item additional to above: all the cotton of Mohammed Agha of Shernakh is, by the villagers, beaten, spun, twisted, woven, and returned as cloth (involving many days' labor and two days' journey), and any weight lost in the making up the amount must be made good.

This oppression is increasing from year to year. The above priest noted for years 1880-'82, taken by Aghas—cash, 4141 ps.; 90 animals used, 450 ps.; 314 men used, 785 ps. Total for three years, 5376, as over against 10,973 ps. for three years, 1891-'93."

"Testimony given in writing, by a Christian of the District of Berwer, in reference to the oppression of Christians in that district by the Kurds, of which he himself was an eye-witness, the examples given being confined to three small villages and of recent occur-

rence. He gives the names of places and of the parties concerned, both Kurds and Christians. We summarize them.

Murders.—Eight men mentioned by name, others generalized.

Robbery.—Cash, 9 liras; again 10 liras; again 15 liras; smaller sums being taken continually.

Mohammed Beg, of Berwer, and his relatives responsible in greater part for the above; also for robbing of two houses in Ina D'Noony.

For generations these Christians have sown the fields of these Kurds, harvested them, done their threshing, irrigated their fields, cut and brought in the grass as fodder for the sheep for use during the winter, together with much other labor, and all without recompense, they finding themselves.

(These things are accompanied, of course, with cursings and beatings.)"

"A number of Christian villages lying farther back in the mountains are even more severely oppressed. The people are literally bought and sold as slaves. In other districts the buying and selling of Christians by Kurds is common."

"Village of Shakh (five hours from Jezireh); like Mansurieh deserted for months by reason of extortion by tax collectors. Many of the people lived during the winter in caves in the mountains."

"The writer was in Nahrwan when the Kaimakam of Jezireh came, several weeks after a murder, to examine into it. The examination was rendered so oppressive to the Christians that the people were glad to declare that nothing had happened, in order to

escape any further inquisition. Even the old mother of the murdered man was frightened until she declared that she did not know of any such occurrence, and had no complaints to make against anybody."

"Kannybalaver—Kaimakamlik of Amadia. During the years 1893-'94 this village was raided several times by the Gugier and Sendier Kurds of the Kaimakamlik of Jezireh. They took one hundred head of animals, field tools, household utensils, beds, wool and yarn, gall-nuts—all of their fall gathering,—and dry goods which had been brought in to sell. At their last visit everything movable was carried off, and the people deserted the village. A leading man of the village, Gegoo by name, was seized by the Kurds, carried for several miles, and was then murdered in cold blood. There were about one hundred Kurds in the band led by Ahrno, brother of Hassu of Ukrul and Kerruvanu. The chief men of their village are Sherriffu and Hassu, who would be responsible for such a raid."

"In the city of Mosul, where there is a Vali, Christians are robbed and killed openly. Three cases are given. Last year a young man, of the Protestant community, of high standing in the city as a merchant, was standing before his door when two young Kurds of notorious character came along, and one of them, without the slightest provocation, at the time or previously, from mere wantonness, stabbed him, and would have killed him had he not been restrained. The family of the man, though one of the most influential families among the Christians of the city, did not dare to make accusation against him, knowing that the only result would be more bloodshed."

"An old missionary who has been familiar with the region from Bohtan to Amadia for years, says these oppressions are increasing, and unless something is done speedily, all the Christian villages of these various districts will soon fall into the hands of the Kurds just as they have in Zabur."

"These instances of oppression given are but a few of the many which might be given. Indeed it is not these greater occurrences, as the big raids and murders, which are the most serious to the Christian. It is the daily constant exactions and oppressions which are crushing the life out of them."

A whole chapter might well be devoted to the oppression by government officials in assessing and collecting taxes. This evil is general, affecting all Turkey. A brief summary of these abuses as generally practised will be given. In view of the poverty-stricken condition of the land, even the legitimate taxes are an exceedingly heavy burden on Moslem and Christian alike, but the burden is greatly increased by the methods here classified:

SUMMARY OF ABUSES.

"I. *Unjust and corrupt assessments.*

1. Villagers are compelled to give assessors presents of money to prevent them from over estimating the taxable persons and property.

2. Assessors, to secure additional bribes, signify their willingness to make an underestimate. This, in turn, affords opportunity for blackmail, which is used by succeeding officials."

"II. *Injustice and severity in collecting.*

1. The collectors, like the assessors, have ways of extorting presents and bribes from the people.

2. The collectors, as a rule, go to the villages on Sunday, as on that day they find the people in the village. They frequently interrupt the Christian services, and show disrespect to their churches or places of prayer.

3. The collection of the taxes is accompanied with unnecessary abuse and reviling, sometimes even with wanton destruction of property.

4. Disregard of impoverished condition of people. Even after several failures of crops in succession, when famine was so severe that the people were many of them being fed by foreign charity, the taxes were collected in full and with severity.

Their food supply, beds, household utensils, and farming implements were seized by the collectors in lieu of taxes. Many were compelled to borrow money at enormous rates of interest, mortgaging their fields and future crops. Unscrupulous officials and other Kurds, in whose interests such opportunities are created, thus became possessed of Christian villages, the people of which henceforth becoming practically slaves to them.

5. These collectors make false returns of taxes received. The official in the city is secured by a bribe, and the matter is kept quiet until a succeeding set of officials come into office. They send their officers to the villages to present claims for back taxes. The villagers in vain contend that they have paid them. They have no receipts. They do not

Through the influence of the British Ambassador at Constantinople Mrs. Bishop was allowed to state the situation to the Grand Vizier in person, and on arriving in England she presented a detailed statement of facts to the Foreign Office and also to a Parliamentary Committee.

That the recent outrages in Sassoun are conspicuous by their extent rather than character, the following incident, which came within the author's own knowledge, on the ground at the time, will show. In June, 1893, four young Armenians and their wives, living only two miles from the city of Van, where the Governor and a large military force reside, were picking herbs on the hillside. They carefully kept together and intended to return before night. They were observed by a band of passing Kurds, who, in broad daylight, fell upon the defenceless party, butchered the young men, and, as to the brides, it is needless to relate further. The villagers going out the next day found the four bodies, not simply dead, but slashed and disfigured almost beyond recognition. They resolved to make a desperate effort to let their wrongs at least be known.

Hastily yoking up four rude ox carts, they placed on each the naked remains of one of the victims, with his distracted widow sitting by the side, shorn of her hair in token of dishonor. This gruesome procession soon reached the outskirts of the city, where it was met by soldiers sent to turn it back. The unarmed villagers offer no resistance, but declare their readiness to perish if not heard. The soldiers shrink from extreme measures that might cause

trouble among the thirty thousand Armenians of Van, who are now rapidly gathering about the scene. The Turkish bayonets retreat before the bared breasts of the villagers. With ever increasing numbers, but without tumult, the procession passed before the doors of the British and Russian Vice-Consulates, of the Persian Consul-General, the Chief of Police and other high officials, till it paused before the great palace of the Governor.

At this point Bahri Pasha, who is still Governor, stuck his head out of the second-story window and said: "I see it. Too bad! Take them away and bury them. I will do what is necessary." Within two days some Kurds were brought in, among whom were several who were positively identified by the women; but, upon their denying the crime, they were immediately released and escaped. The utter hopelessness of securing any justice was so apparent, and experience had so often demonstrated the danger of arousing the Kurds to greater atrocity by further efforts to punish them, that the case was dropped and soon forgotten in the callousness produced by other cases of frequent occurrence. The system of mail inspection is so effective (all letters of subjects must be handed in open at the post-office) and the danger of reporting is so great that I doubt that any account of this incident has ever been given to the civilized world. This case was doubtless reported by the former British Vice-Consul, unless he was busy hunting, and, as usual, was buried in the archives of the Foreign Office for "state reasons."

A foreign physician, never a missionary, and now

out of the country, told me that during a large practice of a year and a half in Armenia, while using every effort to save life, only one case was remembered of regret by the doctor for a fatal ending,—so sad is the lot of those who survive. This instance will explain the strange statement. A call came to see a young man sent home from prison in a dying condition. He could not speak, and had to be nourished for days by artificial feeding, because his stomach could not retain food. Constant and skilful care for a month brought him back to life, from the condition to which his vile, dark, unventilated cell and scanty food had brought him. As soon as the police learned of his unexpected recovery, he was seized and re-imprisoned, though an only son, with a widowed mother and sister dependent upon him. When last heard of, he was still "awaiting trial." Such confinement is a favorite method of intimidation and blackmail in the case of the innocent, and, in the case of the guilty, amounts to punishment without the cost and labor involved in proving the guilt and securing sentence by legal process.

From my own house in Van goods of considerable value were stolen in November, 1893. Though I had good clues to the guilty parties and would have been glad to recover my property, I felt constrained to use every precaution *not* to let the affair come to the ears of the police, lest they should use it as a pretext for searching the houses of many innocent Armenians, in the hope of finding a letter, book, or weapon of some kind, which might serve as an excuse for imprisonment. This course exposed me to

further attacks of thieves and necessitated a night watchman.

WHY ARE THESE FACTS NOT KNOWN?

The ignorance and incredulity of the public is a most significant commentary on the situation. But the explanation is simple. In the nature of the case, in reports of outrages where the victims or their friends are still within the clutches of the Turks, all names of individuals and often the exact locality must be concealed. Such anonymous accounts naturally arouse little interest, and, of course, cannot be verified. The former British Consul-General at Erzerum, Mr. Clifford Lloyd, showed me at that place many such reports sent to him by members of Parliament for verification. He was unable to verify them, but said that the reports gave a correct impression of the condition of the country. At that very time, October, 1890, Mr. Lloyd called attention, in an official dispatch, published in the "*Blue Books*," to:

"1. The insecurity of the lives and properties of the Armenians. 2. The insecurity of their persons, and the absence of all liberty of thought and action. 3. The unequal status held by the Christian as compared with the Mussulman in the eyes of the government."

On this subject there are five channels of varying market value. First. Consular reports, meagre and often inaccessible. The United States has no consuls in Armenia, and consequently no "official" knowledge of its condition. European consuls are expected to report nothing that they are not abso-

lutely sure of, and are given to understand, both by their own governments and by that of Turkey, that they must not make themselves obnoxious in seeking information. They are, at best, passive until their aid is sought, and then alarm the suppliants by refusing to touch the case unless allowed to use names. Second. Missionaries, whose mouths are sealed. They would be the best informed and most trustworthy witnesses. But they feel it their first duty to safeguard the great benevolent and educational interests committed to them by not exciting the suspicion and hostility of the government. Their position is a delicate one, conditional on their neutrality, like that of officers of the Red Cross Society in war. Third. Occasional travellers, whose first impressions are also often their last and whose hasty jottings are likely to be very interesting and may be very misleading. Not so in the case of Mrs. Isabella Bird Bishop, whom I had the pleasure of meeting there, and who embodied the result of her careful investigations in an article entitled, "The Shadow of the Kurd" in *The Contemporary Review*.¹ Fourth. Much evidence from Armenian sources, which is often unjustly discredited as being the exaggeration, if not fabrication, of "revolutionists who seek a political end." Fifth. Turkish official reports, often obtained by corrupt or violent means, or invented to suit the circumstances. Though the financial credit of the Ottoman Government was long ago exhausted, there are some well meaning people who still place confidence in Turkish explanations and promises.

¹ *The Contemporary Review*, May and June, 1891.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

The scope of this book does not permit a discussion of even the Armenian phase of the Eastern question, beyond a bare reference to its possible three-fold solution. There is, first, Russian annexation, a step for which the sufferers themselves are praying, and which Russia is prepared to execute at a moment's notice. If this were the only alternative from present conditions, it should be universally welcomed. Russia is crude, stupid, and, in certain aspects, brutal, but she is not decrepit, debauched, and doting like official Turkey. The diseases of the "Sick Man" are incurable and increasing, while the bully of the North is young, of good blood, and with an energy suggestive of a force of nature. Russia shaves half the head of seceders from the Orthodox Church and transports them. Turkey, with more tact, quietly "disposes" of converts from Islam, many of whom would step forth if the prospect were less than death. The Jewish question, from the Russian standpoint, is largely a social and industrial one, like the Chinese question in the United States. When the writer passed from Turkish Armenia into the Caucasus, it was from a desert to a garden; from danger to perfect security; from want and sorrow to plenty and cheer.

Until lately, thousands of Turkish Armenians have been in the habit of crossing the Russian border in spring, earning good wages during the summer, and returning to spend the winter with their families. This has opened their eyes to the contrast between the two lands and turned their hearts to Russia.

The second solution is Armenian autonomy, like that of Bulgaria, the fond dream of those who ignore the geographical difficulties, the character, and distribution of the population, and the temper of Russia and other powers by whom it would have to be established and maintained.

The only other method is radical and vigorous administrative reforms, which the European powers should initiate, and report to Turkey, instead of *vice versa*, as arranged in Article LXI. of the Berlin Treaty. These "Christian nations" have for sixteen years violated most sacred treaty obligations, and England a special guarantee for such reforms. While attended with difficulties, this is the most desirable solution, and is favored by the great mass of Armenians throughout Turkey, by the Anglo-Armenian Association,¹ founded by Prof. James Bryce, M.P., and by the Phil-Armenic Society in this country.² The real spirit and aim of the Armenian race, as a whole, is unfortunately obscured, in the mind of the public, by utterances and acts of a few irresponsible Armenian hot-heads, who have imbibed nihilistic views in Europe, and are trying, in a very bungling way, to apply them.

¹ *The Case for the Armenians.* London: Anglo-Armenian Association.

² *An Appeal to the Christians of America by the Christians of Armenia.* New York: Phil-Armenic Society.