



OGIER GHISELIN DE BUSBECC

THE
TURKISH LETTERS
OF
OGIER GHISELIN
DE BUSBECC

Imperial Ambassador at Constantinople

1554-1562

TRANSLATED FROM THE LATIN
OF THE ELZEVIR EDITION
OF 1633

BY

EDWARD SEYMOUR FORSTER

With a Foreword by Karl A. Roider



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TO
H. A. O.
IN MEMORY OF A
TOUR IN THE NEAR EAST

THE PAPER IN THIS BOOK MEETS THE GUIDELINES
FOR PERMANENCE AND DURABILITY
OF THE COMMITTEE ON PRODUCTION GUIDELINES
FOR BOOK LONGEVITY
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long journeys and labour of every kind. The horse-cloths which I mentioned are put on in summer just as in winter, but they vary them according to the weather. They consider that to keep them covered both conduces to sleekness of coat and is a necessary protection against the cold, since they are sensitive to chill, and, in particular, suffer from exposure to bad weather.

As I have already remarked, I take pleasure in watching my horses towards sunset when they are picketed each in its proper place in the court, and when I call them by name—'Arab' or 'Caraman' or whatever they are called—they reply by whinnying and look towards me. For I make a practice of going down to them from time to time and distributing melon skins amongst them with my own hands; hence the notice which they take of me. Indeed, I seek by whatever means I can to forget the annoyances which beset me.

I have six female camels, which I have bought to carry baggage; but my real object is to take them back for my royal masters, in the hope that they may be induced by the consideration of their usefulness to breed this kind of animal. There are two things from which, in my opinion, the Turks derive the greatest advantage and profit, rice among cereals and camels among beasts of burden; both are admirably adapted to the distant campaigns which they wage. Rice keeps well and provides a wholesome food, a little of which suffices to feed a large number. Camels can carry very heavy burdens, endure hunger and thirst, and require very little attention. One driver is enough to look after six camels; and no animal is more amenable to discipline. The camel does not require combing or scraping, but, like one's clothes, can be kept clean

by brushing. They lie, or, to be more accurate, kneel on the bare ground and allow themselves to be loaded. If the burden is heavier than they can reasonably carry, they protest by grunting and refuse to get up. They are apt, however, to rupture themselves if their load is too heavy, especially if the road be muddy or slippery. It is a pleasure to see how they kneel in a circle with their heads close together, eating and drinking with the utmost goodwill out of the same manger or basin, content with the scantiest fare. If necessary, owing to lack of fodder, they chew up brambles and thorns, and the more these make their mouths bleed the more they are pleased. Some of these camels are supplied from Scythia, but the majority come from Sinai and Assyria, where they are fed in great herds, and are so plentiful and cheap that a well-bred mare is sometimes exchanged for a hundred camels. It is not, however, the cheapness of the camel which perhaps should call for our wonder so much as the dearthness of the mare and the price asked for it; for mares of this kind are so highly esteemed that one who possesses even one of them regards himself as a man of wealth. The test of their excellence consists in their being ridden at a breakneck speed down a steep mountain-side without stumbling.

The Sultan, when he sets out on a campaign, takes as many as 40,000 camels with him, and almost as many baggage-mules, most of whom, if his destination is Persia, are loaded with cereals of every kind, especially rice. Mules and camels are also employed to carry tents and arms and warlike machines and implements of every kind. The territories called Persia which are ruled by the Sophi, as we call him (the

Turkish name being Kizilbash), are much less fertile than our country ; and, further, it is the custom of the inhabitants, when their land is invaded, to lay waste and burn everything, and so force the enemy to retire through lack of food. The latter, therefore, are faced with serious peril, unless they bring an abundance of food with them. They are careful, however, to avoid touching the supplies which they carry with them as long as they are marching against their foes, but reserve them, as far as possible, for their return journey, when the moment for retirement comes and they are forced to retrace their steps through regions which the enemy has laid waste, or which the immense multitude of men and baggage animals has, as it were, scraped bare, like a swarm of locusts. It is only then that the Sultan's store of provisions is opened, and just enough food to sustain life is weighed out each day to the Janissaries and the other troops in attendance upon him. The other soldiers are badly off, if they have not provided food for their own use ; most of them, having often experienced such difficulties during their campaigns—and this is particularly true of the cavalry—take a horse on a leading-rein loaded with many of the necessities of life. These include a small piece of canvas to use as a tent, which may protect them from the sun or a shower of rain, also some clothing and bedding and a private store of provisions, consisting of a leather sack or two of the finest flour, a small jar of butter, and some spices and salt ; on these they support life when they are reduced to the extremes of hunger. They take a few spoonfuls of flour and place them in water, adding a little butter, and then flavour the mixture with salt

and spices. This, when it is put on the fire, boils and swells up so as to fill a large bowl. They eat of it once or twice a day, according to the quantity, without any bread, unless they have with them some toasted bread or biscuit. They thus contrive to live on short rations for a month or even longer, if necessary. Some soldiers take with them a little sack full of beef dried and reduced to a powder, which they employ in the same manner as the flour, and which is of great benefit as a more solid form of nourishment. Sometimes, too, they have recourse to horseflesh ; for in a great army a large number of horses necessarily dies, and any that die in good condition furnish a welcome meal to men who are starving. I may add that men whose horses have died, when the Sultan moves his camp, stand in a long row on the road by which he is to pass with their harness or saddles on their heads, as a sign that they have lost their horses, and implore his help to purchase others. The Sultan then assists them with whatever gift he thinks fit.

All this will show you with what patience, sobriety, and economy the Turks struggle against the difficulties which beset them, and wait for better times. How different are our soldiers, who on campaign despise ordinary food and expect dainty dishes (such as thrushes and beccaficos) and elaborate meals. If these are not supplied, they mutiny and cause their own ruin ; and even if they are supplied, they ruin themselves just the same. For each man is his own worst enemy and has no more deadly foe than his own intemperance, which kills him if the enemy is slow to do so. I tremble when I think of what the future must bring when I compare the Turkish system with

our own ; one army must prevail and the other be destroyed, for certainly both cannot remain unscathed. On their side are the resources of a mighty empire, strength unimpaired, experience and practice in fighting, a veteran soldiery, habituation to victory, endurance of toil, unity, order, discipline, frugality, and watchfulness. On our side is public poverty, private luxury, impaired strength, broken spirit, lack of endurance and training ; the soldiers are insubordinate, the officers avaricious ; there is contempt for discipline ; licence, recklessness, drunkenness, and debauchery are rife ; and, worst of all, the enemy is accustomed to victory, and we to defeat. Can we doubt what the result will be ? Persia alone interposes in our favour ; for the enemy, as he hastens to attack, must keep an eye on this menace in his rear. But Persia is only delaying our fate ; it cannot save us. When the Turks have settled with Persia, they will fly at our throats supported by the might of the whole East ; how unprepared we are I dare not say !

But to return to the point from which I digressed. I mentioned that baggage animals are employed on campaign to carry the arms and tents, which mainly belong to the Janissaries. The Turks take the utmost care to keep their soldiers in good health and protect them from the inclemency of the weather ; against the foe they must protect themselves, but their health is a matter for which the State must provide. Hence one sees the Turk better clothed than armed. He is particularly afraid of the cold, against which, even in the summer, he guards himself by wearing three garments, of which the innermost—call it shirt or what you will—is woven of coarse thread and provides

much warmth. As a further protection against cold and rain tents are always carried, in which each man is given just enough space to lie down, so that one tent holds twenty-five or thirty Janissaries. The material for the garments to which I have referred is provided at the public expense. To prevent any disputes or suspicion of favour, it is distributed in the following manner. The soldiers are summoned by companies in the darkness to a place chosen for the purpose—the balloting station or whatever name you like to give it—where are laid out ready as many portions of cloth as there are soldiers in the company ; they enter and take whatever chance offers them in the darkness, and they can only ascribe it to chance whether they get a good or a bad piece of cloth. For the same reason their pay is not counted out to them but weighed, so that no one can complain that he has received light or chipped coins. Also their pay is given them not on the day on which it falls due but on the day previous.

The armour which is carried is chiefly for the use of the household cavalry, for the Janissaries are lightly armed and do not usually fight at close quarters, but use muskets. When the enemy is at hand and a battle is expected, the armour is brought out, but it consists mostly of old pieces picked up in various battlefields, the spoil of former victories. These are distributed to the household cavalry, who are otherwise protected by only a light shield. You can imagine how badly the armour, thus hurriedly given out, fits its wearers. One man's breastplate is too small, another's helmet is too large, another's coat of mail is too heavy for him to bear. There is something wrong everywhere ; but

they bear it with equanimity and think that only a coward finds fault with his arms, and vow to distinguish themselves in the fight, whatever their equipment may be ; such is the confidence inspired by repeated victories and constant experience of warfare. Hence also they do not hesitate to re-enlist a veteran infantryman in the cavalry, though he has never fought on horseback, since they are convinced that one who has warlike experience and long service will acquit himself well in any kind of fighting. . . .

I will now return to the topic with which I dealt before, namely, the indulgence which the Turks show towards every kind of animal. The dog is regarded by them as a foul and unclean animal, and they therefore exclude it from their houses ; its place there is taken by the cat, which they regard as a much more moral animal and apparently endowed with some degree of modesty and propriety. In support of this attitude towards the cat they quote the example of Mahomet their lawgiver, who was so devoted to his cat that, when it had fallen asleep on his sleeve while he was reading and the hour of prayer called him to his religious duties, he preferred to cut away his sleeve rather than disturb the cat's slumbers. Although they have this feeling about dogs, which are public property and have no masters and act as watchers over quarters and districts rather than any particular houses, and live on the refuse which is thrown out into the streets, yet, if there is a bitch with puppies in the neighbourhood, they go to her and make a heap of bones and scraps of porridge and bread, and regard such action as entirely pious. When I accuse them of giving to a brute beast what I am inclined to think

they would not bestow on a rational being of their own kind and certainly not on a Christian, their reply is that reason has been given to man by God, a noble instrument for every purpose, but that man abuses this gift, and so any misfortune which befalls him is due to his own fault and, therefore, he deserves less pity ; on the other hand, God has bestowed upon the brutes nothing except certain natural impulses and appetites, which they cannot but follow, and, therefore, they are deserving of human help and pity. For this reason they are enraged if any animal is put to death by torture and any pleasure is taken in mutilating it. I can illustrate this by what happened lately to a Venetian goldsmith. He used to take delight in capturing birds, and had caught amongst the rest a creature the size of a cuckoo and of much the same colour, but with so huge and wide a throat, though its beak was small, that, when it was forced open, it gaped so wide that it could contain a large human fist. The man, who was something of a joker, struck by the strangeness of this, fastened the bird with wings outstretched over the entrance to his house, with its jaws held open with a piece of wood, so as to make it gape. The Turks, who passed that way in large numbers, stopped and looked up at it ; but when they saw that the bird was moving and alive, they were stirred to compassion, and exclaimed that it was a crime thus to torture a harmless bird. They summoned the goldsmith from his house and seized him by the scruff of the neck and haled him before the judge who tries capital charges, and he was on the point of receiving a good thrashing when a messenger arrived from the Venetian Bailly (*n*), the official who

administers justice to the inhabitants of Venetian nationality, and demanded that he should be handed over to him. The judge was kind hearted and well disposed, but the request was only granted with difficulty amid the protests of the other Turks. Thus the man was saved (*n*). He often used to visit me, and I was much amused when he told me the whole story and described how frightened he was. He also brought the bird for me to see; I have already described its appearance, and it is said to fly at night and to suck cows' udders. I imagine that it is identical with the goat-sucker of the ancients. Such is the attitude of the Turks towards every kind of animal, and particularly towards birds.

Near our quarters is a tall plane tree, remarkable for its widespread branches and the density of its foliage. Under it bird-catchers sometimes take their stand with a large number of little birds, and many people come and ransom the captives for a few coppers and then release them one by one from their hands. They generally fly up into the plane tree, where they cleanse themselves from the grime and dirt of their prison and spread their wings, chirruping the while. Then the Turks who have ransomed them say to one another: 'Listen to him congratulating himself and thanking me.'

'What,' you exclaim, 'are the Turks such Pythagoreans that in their eyes every animal is sacred and they never feed upon them?' By no means; nay rather, they refrain from no flesh that is set before them whether boiled or roast. They declare that the sheep is born for the butcher's stall; but they do not tolerate that any one should take pleasure in its agony

and torture. The smaller birds, of whose notes the country and fields are full, some Turks can never be induced to kill or even keep shut up in cages, thinking it too great an interference with their liberty. But on this point there is a divergence of opinion. Some Turks certainly keep nightingales with sweet voices, and let them out on hire in the spring. I have seen men carrying about goldfinches trained to fly quite a long distance in search of a coin which was displayed to them from a window above. If the person who was holding the coin did not allow it to be wrenched from him, they would perch on his hand and accompany him from room to room, struggling all the time to seize the coin. As soon as they obtained it, remembering the way by which they had come, they would fly back to their master in the street, who recalled them by ringing a bell, and, on handing over the coin, received as a reward a few grains of hempseed. But enough of this subject, lest you should think that I am imitating Pliny or Aelian and want to write a Natural History.

I will now pass to another topic and tell you about the high standard of morality which obtains among the Turkish women. The Turks set greater store than any other nation on the chastity of their wives. Hence they keep them shut up at home, and so hide them that they hardly see the light of day. If they are obliged to go out, they send them forth so covered and wrapped up that they seem to passers-by to be mere ghosts and spectres. They themselves can look upon mankind through their linen or silken veils, but no part of their persons is exposed to man's gaze. The Turks are convinced that no woman who possesses

the slightest attractions of beauty or youth can be seen by a man without exciting his desires and consequently being contaminated by his thoughts. Hence all women are kept in seclusion. Their brothers, it is true, are allowed to see them, but not their husbands' brothers. Men of the wealthier classes and higher ranks make it a condition, when they marry, that their wives shall never set foot outside their houses, and that no man or woman shall on any pretext whatever be admitted to visit them. This prohibition includes even their nearest relatives, except their fathers and mothers, who are allowed to visit their daughters at the Turkish Easter. If the wife is the daughter of a man of very high rank or has brought an unusually large dowry, the husband undertakes on his part not to keep any concubines but to be faithful to one wife. Otherwise, no law forbids a Turk to take as many concubines as he likes in addition to his lawful wife; and there is no distinction between the children of wives and those of concubines, but both are held to possess the same rights. Concubines may be either purchased or acquired in war, and when they are tired of them there is nothing to prevent them sending them to the slave-market and selling them. They obtain their freedom, however, if they bear children. Advantage was taken of this privilege by Roxolana, Soleiman's wife, when she had borne him a son while she was still a slave. Having thus obtained her freedom and become her own mistress, she refused to have anything more to do with Soleiman, who was deeply in love with her, unless he made her his lawful wife, thus violating the custom of the Ottoman Sultans. The dowry is the only thing which distinguishes a

lawful wife from a concubine; for no slave has a dowry. A marriage-portion confers upon a woman the right to be mistress of her husband's household and gives her authority over all the other women. The husband, however, has the right to choose with whom he shall pass the night; he intimates his wishes to his wife, who sends him the slave whom he has selected. The latter perhaps obeys with more alacrity than the other gives the order. One night a week is reserved for the wife, namely, Friday, which is their feast day, and she has a right to complain if her husband defrauds her of it. Of the other nights he may dispose as he pleases.

Divorces are granted amongst the Turks on many pretexts, which husbands can easily contrive. A divorced wife has her dowry restored to her, unless the separation has been due to some reproach against her. Wives have more difficulty in divorcing their husbands. Amongst the reasons for which it is granted are the failure on the part of the husband to supply his wife with the necessities of life and unnatural behaviour on his part. The wife then appears before the judge and testifies that she can no longer live with her husband; when the judge inquires the reason, without giving any answer she takes off her shoe and turns it upside down. This indicates to the judge the treatment which she has received from her husband.

Men of position who possess large harems put them under the charge of eunuchs. . . . They also have baths in their houses for the use of themselves and their womenfolk; the poorer classes use the public baths. They hate uncleanness of the body as though it were a crime, and regard it as worse than impurity of the

soul ; hence their frequent ablutions. Since the majority of the women make use of the women's public baths, great numbers both of free women and of slaves congregate there, amongst whom are many girls of extraordinary beauty brought together by various chances from every quarter of the world. . . .

Roostern, when, after an interval of some days, I had been transacting some public business with him, began to treat me in a friendly way, which was rare with him, and eventually brought himself to ask me why I did not have myself initiated into their religion and become a partaker in the worship of the true God. He added that, if I were to do so, I might expect great honours and rewards from Soleiman. I answered that it was my fixed determination to abide in the religion in which I was born and which my master professed. 'So be it,' said Roostern, 'but what will become of your soul?' 'For my soul too,' I said, 'I have good hope.' Then, after reflecting for a moment, he said, 'Yes, you are right ; I cannot help thinking that those who have lived holy and innocent lives on this earth will share eternal bliss, whatever religion they may have practised.' This heresy is held by some Turks, and indeed Roostern is considered as not too orthodox in all respects. The Turks consider it quite in accord with their religion and duty to make a single offer of communion in their rites and cult to a Christian who enjoys their good opinion, hoping thus, if possible, to save one who is destined for everlasting destruction ; and they regard such an offer as the greatest act of kindness that they can show.

I must now repeat another conversation which I had with Roostern, which will show you what a wide

difference of religion exists between the Turks and Persians (*n*). He asked me once whether war was still going on between the Kings of Spain and France. When I replied in the affirmative, he said, 'What right have they to wage war against one another, when they are bound by religious ties?' 'The same right,' I replied, 'as you have to go to war with the Persians ; there are cities, provinces, and kingdoms, about which they are at quarrel, and have recourse to arms.' 'The cases are not parallel,' replied Roostern, 'I assure you that we abhor the Persians and regard them as more unholy than we regard you Christians.'

[Busbecq next gives an account of the campaigns of Ali Pasha in Hungary.]

In Croatia, too, and the neighbouring districts various raids have taken place from both sides of the frontier, and both parties have paid the penalty for excessive indolence and carelessness, and for excessive daring. I will quote an example, which gave me matter for rejoicing and will, I am sure, be pleasant hearing to you. . . . News had been brought from that part of the world to Roostern that a certain Turk, whom he praised very highly and declared to be a kinsman of his own, had suddenly put in an appearance with an armed force as a highly inconvenient guest at a wedding which some Christians were celebrating. They imagined themselves quite safe, for they lived in a remote district and had no idea that there were Turks anywhere near. The raiders caused a general confusion, killed a number of men, and carried off several persons, including the unhappy bridegroom and his intended bride. Roostern was delighted at the news and inflicted upon every one a boastful account