

TWO SISTERS IN LEBANON AND SYRIA

Margaret Clarke

59

Emily Anne Beaufort, the youngest daughter of Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort, was born in 1826 and died in 1887. After

her father's death, she and her sister set off on a long tour of the lands of the eastern Mediterranean, and Emily's account of their travels appeared in *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines, including Some Stay in the Lebanon, at Palmyra, and in Western Turkey*¹. A review of it by Viscount Strangford reportedly led to their meeting and subsequent marriage, on which she became Viscountess Strangford.

"The world must be very rich in beauty, if there exist half a dozen places on its surface much more beautiful than Beyrout; but I, for one cannot believe that there are." So thought Emily Beaufort when she arrived there with her sister and their maid in April, 1859. They had first stepped ashore at Latakia, on the eighth morning after leaving Smyrna on the steamship *Euphrate* and were looking forward to a lengthy stay.

Their journey so far had certainly not been without incident. They had sailed up the Nile as far as Wadi Halfa in Nubia, delighted with their dahabiah which they christened *Wandering Maiden*, British ensign flying at the stern. Then disaster struck when they were at Edfou, on the return journey to Cairo. They had gone ashore to see the temple by moonlight, when fire broke out on board and destroyed the *Wandering Maiden*. Whilst it was awkward to lose almost all their wardrobe, they regretted much more the loss of journals, books, sketching materials and paints. However, when she came to write about her travels, the mishap did not prevent Miss Beaufort from recommending eastern travel to other ladies at home: "I earnestly trust that many may be incited to similar enterprise, by showing them with what ease and security ladies may travel even alone in those countries which have been frequently supposed to be open only to strong and energetic men".

Although they found Beirut enchanting, they had no wish to settle there in the heat of sum-

mer. So, they engaged a dragoman ("Habeeb Soma, the best of those at Beyrout") and set off to find a house for the summer in the mountains above the city. They discovered that some houses were already occupied by silk worms (with attendant fleas), and would not be available until later in the year. Eventually, they came across a spacious newly-built house, the property of three brothers who were merchants, and they promptly took it for three months from 23rd July. During their travels in Egypt they had heard of the beautiful situation of the village, Beit Miry, where they were to stay; and they soon settled very comfortably into the most pleasant existence possible.

They had no reason to suspect at the time that the situation of their house was to place them between warring factions before very long. The village was built along a semi-circular ridge, about two thousand feet above Beirut with the Druse inhabitants mostly occupying the western end and the Maronite Christians the eastern end. Their house was on the western horn of the mountain, with Druse houses above on a rocky outcrop, and the house of the Maronite bishop half an hour's journey down the steep track below them. It was not, of course, complete without an improvised flagstaff on which they could hoist the British flag which had graced their dahabiah on the Nile. Emily confesses that they were not strictly entitled to a privilege reserved for Consuls. Entitled or not, however, the Beaufort sisters did raise the "grand red jack", which seems to have occasioned much admiring comment, and certainly did not diminish their standing in the village. In fact, they had arrived in great style to the sounds of gunfire from the barracks below, and from "every ship in the bay". The welcome was not for them, however; it was a royal salute to greet the arrival of the Grand Duke Constantine of Russia.

¹ *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines including some stay in the Lebanon at Palmyra, and in Western Turkey*. London: Longman, Green, 1861, 2 vols.

TWO SISTERS IN LEBANON AND SYRIA

60

The idyll was not to last. One day there was an altercation when two mules collided on the mountain track leading up to the village. The Druse villager driving one of them (they had been guests at his wedding a few weeks before) berated and beat the driver of

the other, a young Christian boy whose father then waylaid the Druse muleteer and repaid him in kind. A very minor squabble. The repercussions, however, were more serious. Other villages took up the quarrel, and before long their house in that little bit of Eden, neatly situated between the warring Druse and Maronite factions, had bullets fly-

ing overhead and around it as the situation deteriorated. It so happened that two gentlemen, who were friends of Emily's family, had also recently taken a house in the village, and had been invited over to read the Sunday service with them. In that uncomfortable and volatile situation the sisters hoped that their friends would not risk coming; but come they did. Emily records: "I do not think that any of us will easily forget that hour of prayer, and with what unusual meaning the petition arose 'from battle and murder, and from sudden death -- Good Lord deliver us'". Local Christian women took refuge under their flag; and although houses in the village were sacked and burned, theirs was untouched. Indeed a Druse leader appeared after the skirmish was over to assure them that their persons and property would be safe wherever their flag was unfurled. He revealed that the Druse had endeavoured to put off the engagement because of the presence of the English ladies; and his statement seemed to be confirmed later by other reports that reached them. The unfortunate Druse muleteer was one of those killed in the fighting.

There was considerable alarm down in Beirut where the sounds of firing had been heard. Wild rumours began to circulate when people, fleeing from the mountain villages, arrived with what Emily called exaggerated accounts of the fighting. The various Consuls sent up horses and mules to bring down their nationals from the villages; but no one came from the British Consulate because the Consul was away. Help, however, arrived in the person of their friend, Captain Mansell, commanding HMS *Tartarus*, which had arrived in Beirut. He found transport animals for them, sending them up with an escort of janissaries to bring the ladies down. There was relief to find that they were safe, since it was confidently rumoured in the town that one of them had certainly been killed. They did not know then that these sporadic exchanges of fire would culminate in the massacres of Christians in Lebanon and Damascus in the summer of 1860. One of their first expeditions after arriving in Lebanon had been to see the fine palace of the Emir Beshir² at Bteddeen with its fountains and mosaics ("superior to, and more varied and elegant than the best things of the kind in Venice"). Later on, when Emily came to write her account, she reflected that theirs had perhaps been the last European eyes to see that site before some of the worst atrocities



1 Map of Palestine

were committed there in June, 1860. In recalling these deeds, however, she asked her readers to remember "the acts not so very long since of many an army of drilled and disciplined soldiery belonging to the most Christian countries of Europe - civilized Europe".

Travel in the mountains called for stamina and often for strong nerves. The best of the mountain roads were staircases constructed by the Emir Beshir, but these were often no more than jumbles of slippery rocks where the worst stretches appeared in the most perilous places at the edge of deep ravines. These caused Emily to note that "a lady's seat has a strong feeling of one-sidedness about it when both her feet are hanging over a precipice, and only one shoulder seems over terra-firma". They discovered, as many Victorian women travellers found, that the camping life was most agreeable, in spite of very long days in the saddle, scorpion bites, unreliable guides and the vagaries of the weather. They did not exactly travel light : "I cannot say too much of the comfort in Eastern travelling, both in Egypt and in Syria, of the *Portable Tin Baths* made for trunks; they hold as much, or nearly so, as one person ought to want -they are safely secured by lock and key, and they travel admirably on mule-back when enclosed in a basketwork cover.....The dragoman provides iron bedsteads and thin wool mattresses, which are tolerably comfortable; an invalid, however, will find the caoutchouc air beds luxuriously good, -they

fold up, pillow and all into a very small space, and are always dry and free from vermin" ³.

Like so many travellers, they planned to visit the famed cedars. They sailed on HMS *Tartarus* to Tripoli, and then went up into the mountains and encamped near the village of Eh'den, famous for its vines, its walnut groves, and its summer flowers. They had intended to move on within a day or two to make the ascent to the cedars; but they found the spot so tranquil and beautiful that they could not bring themselves to leave for almost a month. The company of the young Emir, "Sheikh Yussoof", was most congenial too, for he was very well informed about affairs in Europe. He was also a generous host, on one occasion entertaining them to a twelve-course dinner, accompanied by "many varieties of excellent Lebanon wine". They rose to the occasion with a return feast that matched what they had enjoyed; for "our Arab cook actually managed to give them [the Emir and the French Consul at Tripoli, M. Blanche] the same number of courses *à la Française* as the Emir had given us *à l'Arabe*: but our dinner ended with real English plum pudding besides, and excellent peach ice-cream, made by one of the dragomans, and champagne" ⁴. (Travellers from Victorian Britain had great faith in the desirability of plum pudding, which found its way to many parts of the globe.)

Their next camp was near a chapel in the famous cedar grove, and there, on the eve of September 14th, they witnessed an interesting ceremony. It was the day, according to long-established tradition, when the Emperor Constantine in the fourth

2 Beshir became Emir of the mountain regions in 1786. He was a power in the land for more than fifty years, except for two brief periods in exile.

3 *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines*, II, pp. 482-3.

4 *Ibid.*, I, p. 267.

century had a vision of a flaming cross in the sky bearing the legend, *In hoc signo vinces*. He became a Christian, and proclaimed Christianity throughout his dominions. On this day, Emily reports, a beacon is lit on every mountain top in Syria, "beginning with the Cedar

mountain, besides bonfires in every village, handing on the good tidings, as it were, from one to the other throughout the land; it is a fine idea, and on a calm night, it is still finer in reality; the flames of each fire, as they rose and fell in the night breeze shining against the deep azure sky, were exceedingly pretty, and every here and there a long train of fire was laid up the side of the mountain, like a fiery snake, which, catching the wind, now on this side, now on that, seemed really to have caught also the wriggling, gliding motion of a living serpent" ⁵.

After leaving the cedars, the two sisters moved on from Lebanon into other parts of Syria. Travelling by night to avoid the daytime heat, they went on to Baalbek. Emily did not feel it necessary to describe the ruins in detail, assuming that everyone at home would be already familiar with the appearance and history of the site from the accounts and paintings of the travellers who had preceded her. The same could not be said, of course, of Palmyra. The journey from Damascus across the desert to Zenobia's old city was considered to be particularly hazardous. Few European men made it, and even fewer European women.

One of them was Jane Digby, the former Lady Ellenborough, who was conducted there by Sheikh Medjuel in 1853, and later married him. His tribe of the Anazeh guarded jealously the right to conduct travellers across the desert to Tadmor, as it was always known to the local people. The greatest danger they faced was probably the dreaded *ghazou*, or raid made by other tribes in search of camels, horses, and other valuables, in which travellers were often stripped of all they possessed. So travellers put themselves into the hands of Sheikh Medjuel for safe conduct to their destination. In her biography of Jane Digby el Mezrab, as she was known after her marriage, Mary Lovell reckons that before Jane's trip in 1853, no European woman had been to Palmyra since the notorious Lady Hester Stanhope about forty years earlier ⁶.

It seems that Emily and her sister did not originally envisage a visit to Palmyra when they arrived in Damascus. The dangerous nature of the journey, the difficulty of arranging it, and the expense involved made them decide reluctantly that it would be impossible. But there was much to see and admire in Damascus. The English missionary, Mr. Robson, and his wife introduced them to Jewish, Christian and Muslim families, where they were entertained in the fine houses so much admired by European visitors. She describes the courtyard of a typical house: "paved with coloured marbles, and with one or more fountains shaded with pomegranates, lemon, orange, and oleander trees; wherever you look, all is marble, both white and coloured. This court has its raised leewan, splendidly ornamented on the walls and ceiling,

5 *Ibid.*, I, p. 279.

6 Mary S. Lovell, *A Scandalous Life. The Biography of Jane Digby el Mezrab*. London: Richard Cowen Books, 1995.

7 *Egyptian Sepulchres and Syrian Shrines*.

8 Abd el Khader, Emir at Mascara in Algeria, who rallied the tribes and opposed the french occupation during the 1830's. After being forced to surrender in 1847, he was eventually allowed to live in exile, first at Brusa and later in Damascus.

9 *Ibid.*, I, p. 321.

and its divan covered with rich brocades; here you are generally received and presented with lemonade, sweetmeats, and coffee; but in most rich houses one of the rooms round this court is also a reception-room, of which the walls are entirely covered with marble mosaic

and gilding, a fountain at one end, a divan at the other, coloured matting and handsome Persian carpets on the floor, and near the ceiling a row of win-

meet us, and we were greatly struck by his appearance: he has a tall, majestic figure, fair skin, grey hair -that once was black- a long white beard, a forehead and keen piercing eye which could nowhere be passed unmarked. I never saw more intellect marked in the one, nor a more truly eagle expression in the other,..." Not many months after their visit he and his Algerian followers were rescuing Christians from the city, sheltering them, and refusing to hand them over to the mob ⁹.

Then something occurred to make them think once more of a visit to Palmyra : "one



2

Panorama of Tadmor

dows, latticed with pierced marble or carved wood in patterns of fairy intricacy and lightness; the ceilings are always of wood most delicately carved, painted and gilt. A closed door in this court leads by a little passage into a third court much the same, only handsomer than the others, where the ladies reside, and beyond which they do not come in Mooslim houses" ⁷.

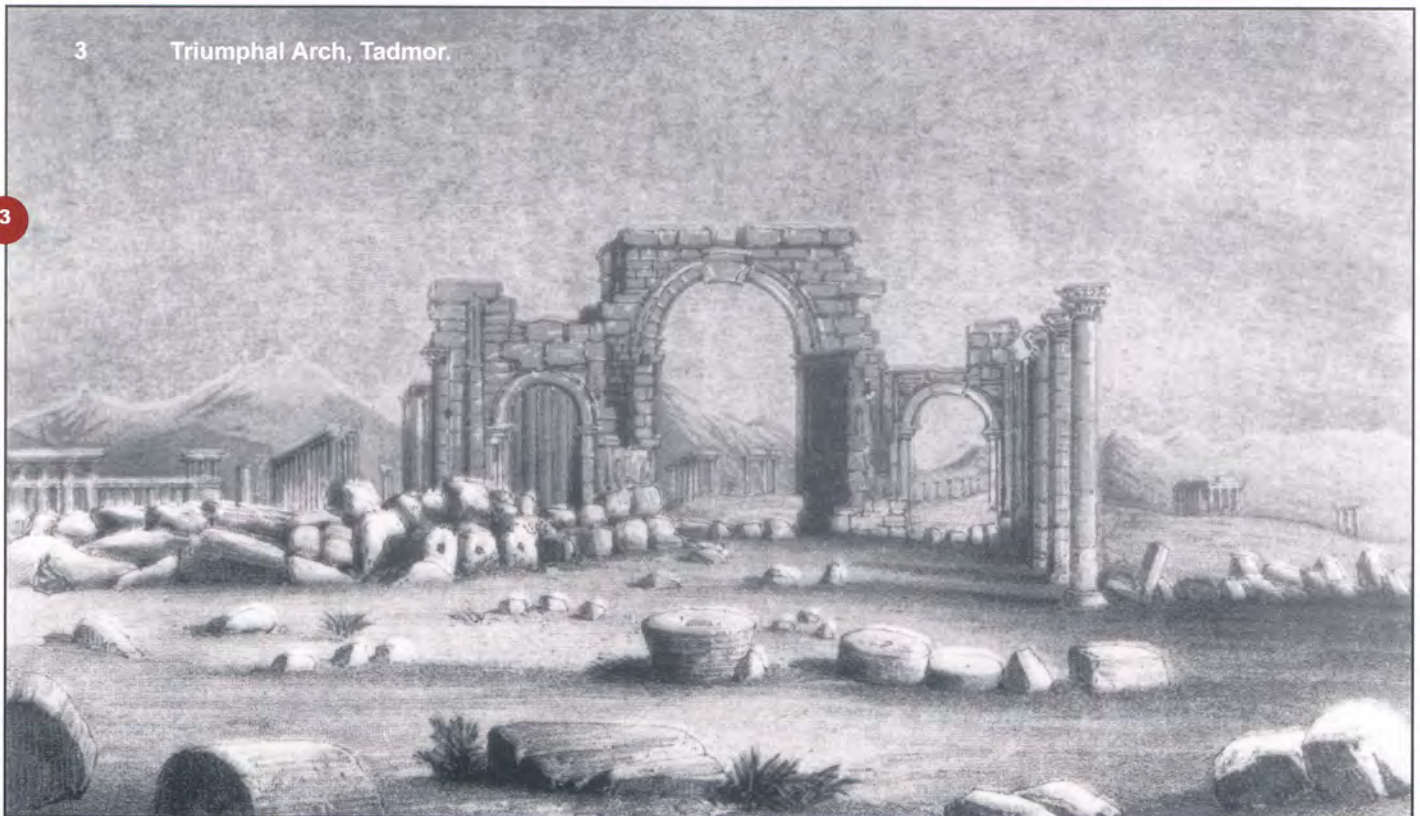
The English Consul, Mr. Brant, and his wife, who were old friends of the Beauforts, were fortunate enough to live in such a "beautiful house of the old Damascus style, in the Mooslim quarter," and through him they were privileged to secure an introduction to Abd el Khader, the Algerian leader ⁸ then resident in Damascus, and much respected and admired by all sections of the community. She recalls that he "came forward to

day, Mr. Robson, the excellent missionary and his wife showed us a portfolio of drawings, conveying so grand an idea of the magnificence and glorious beauty of the ruins, that we were seized with the most intense desire to see them for ourselves". As it happened, the painter Carl Haag was staying in the same hotel as the Beaufort sisters. When they told him what they had seen, he looked over the portfolio himself, and famously declared, according to Emily: "If I am a ruined man all my life, or if I walk there in Bedoueen sandals, I *must* go to Palmyra!"

There was much negotiating to be done with Sheikh Medjuel who agreed to take their party, "at the price of 15l. a head", engaging to choose good dromedaries for them, for which they paid 2l. extra. Excitement ran high at the prospect

of going as guests of the Sheikh, meeting the Bedouin, and living on camel's milk and meat. The desert usually merited a capital letter in Emily's account. Medjuel also agreed to allow them -and this was most unusual- to stay for five days, instead of the usual twenty-four hours, at Tadmor. They seem to have been a merry company as they traversed the wastes of the Syrian Desert to arrive safely at their destination. Their escort entertained them with wild songs; and they "improvised verses about the riders, which elicited great applause and some amusement; they were chiefly personal descriptions, which we did not, of course, understand, but sometimes we caught allusions to incidents that had happened in the day, or to things we had said to them in our very meagre Arabic. Mr. Haag, who

Haag; and he was not to be disappointed. *Triumphal Arch in Palmyra*, was one of the paintings that resulted from the trip. Emily herself was accomplished with pencil and brush, and produced her own version, *Triumphal Arch, Tadmor*; and a rather more ambitious *Panorama of Tadmor* which opens out to form a frontispiece in the first volume of her book. Her readers in England would certainly have found her painting *Sheikh Miguel of the Anazeh Tribe* interesting, since the former Lady Ellenborough had often occasioned scandal, and there was considerable curiosity about her recent alliance with such an exotic figure as the Sheikh. Emily's account was admirably discreet. She makes no mention of the fact that Jane was one of their party to Palmyra. Mary Lovell, however, in her biography of Jane, reveals that she did indeed accompany them, and was grateful to Emily, who admired and liked both Jane and her husband, for her discretion.



dressed like a Bedouen, and was always full of jokes, was a favourite with them, and the chief songs were about him, with good-natured fun about his continually dropping asleep, etc" ¹⁰.

One of the considerations that led Sheikh Medjuel to take them to Palmyra was that its splendours might be more widely known through the paintings of a well-known artist like Carl

While Emily and her sister observed the inhabitants of Tadmor, they themselves were persons of considerable interest to the rather wild denizens of the ruins. They had already in Egypt provoked some speculation - the "hareem belonging to nobody"- and now, at Tadmor, interest turned to a desire for acquisition : "The morning after our arrival, in our first walk out to the ruins, a crowd

of townspeople mobbed us in the Great Arch; and several more eagerly begged to know how much our relations would expect for us. In spite of the assurance that Frank women were never thus sold, they continued to bid for us; and after my shaking my head at some of

their offers, one man enthusiastically rose to the sum of 10,000 piastres; but, like the fox in the fable, when told decidedly that he could not have me at any price, he turned away and said, 'I would have offered another thousand if her eyes had been black!' " ¹¹.

The great adventure was over all too quickly. Their subsequent travels took them out of Syria and down to Jerusalem; but it was from Latakia that they said goodbye to the Near East exactly a year and a week after first landing there. Emily's painting *Our Last Encampment in Syria* records the setting for their final days. Her parting words : "Farewell, dear and beautiful Syria" suggest that she had grown to love the country which had provided such rich experiences.



4

Portarait of Sheikh Miguel.

10 *Ibid.*, I, p. 346.

11 *Ibid.*, I, p. 370.