

1842—1849.

THE THIRD VISIT TO EGYPT.

LANE had seemingly exhausted modern Egypt. He had described the country, drawn a minute picture of the people's life, and translated their favourite romances. But there remained before him a still greater work, one indeed not bounded to any one country but concerning the whole Mohammadan world, and yet, like his other works, having its roots in Egypt. It was no longer a popular book that he was engaged upon: it appealed only to the narrow circles of the learned. But it is the work by which his name will ever be remembered, and by which England may claim the palm of Oriental scholarship, even above Germany, the home of Eastern study in Europe.

It was impossible for Lane to acquire his intimate knowledge of Arabic without perceiving the lamentable deficiencies of the materials for its study then existing in European languages. Especially weak were the dictionaries: for Grammar could boast the magnificent works of De Sacy and Lumsden; whereas in the dictionaries of Golius and Freytag, if there were signs of learning and industry, there was also a dearth of material and a want of scholarship to interpret it, still more a lack of knowledge of Eastern minds, which resulted in statements calculated as much to mislead as to instruct the student. So long as the young Orientalists of Europe were reared upon the meagre food thus afforded to them, the standard of scholarship would be low and the number of students limited. Lane was well aware that it was not necessary to submit to this state of things from a want of the means of reforming it. On the contrary he knew that in Cairo there existed the richest materials the Arabic lexicographer could desire; and he determined himself to work the quarry and to produce a thesaurus of the language, drawn from original sources, which should once and for all supersede the imperfect productions of Golius and Freytag and bring the labours and learning of the Arab lexicographers within the reach of European students.

The field into which Lane was about to throw all his energy was a peculiar one. The materials for composing such a work as he contemplated were singularly perfect. For the exceptional history of the Mohammadan Arabs had produced a nation of grammarians and lexicologists. The rapid spread of the tide of Muslim conquest had threatened the corruption and even the extinction of the language of the *Ḳur-án*; other tongues were beginning to intermix with the pure Arab idiom; and it was foreseen that, were the process suffered to continue undisturbed, the sacred book of the Muslims would soon become unintelligible to the great body of the Faithful.

“Such being the case, it became a matter of the highest importance to the Arabs to preserve the knowledge of that speech which had thus become obsolescent, and to draw a distinct line between the classical and post-classical language. For the former language was that of the *Ḳur-án* and of the traditions of *Mohammad*, the sources of their religious, moral, civil, criminal, and political code, and they possessed in that language, preserved by oral tradition,—for the art of writing in Arabia had been almost exclusively confined to the Christians and Jews,—a large collection of poetry consisting of odes and shorter pieces, which they esteemed almost as much for its intrinsic merits as for its value in illustrating their law. Hence the vast collection of lexicons and lexicological works composed by Arabs and by Muslims naturalized among the Arabs; which compositions, but for the rapid corruption of the language, would never have been undertaken.