

WITH PEN AND BRUSH IN EASTERN LANDS
WHEN I WAS YOUNG

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

- 'TWIXT GREEK AND TURK, 1881
THE FAR EASTERN QUESTION, 1896
THE MIDDLE EASTERN QUESTION, 1903
INDIAN UNREST, 1910
CECIL SPRING RICE: IN MEMORIAM, 1919
THE EGYPTIAN PROBLEM, 1921
INDIA OLD AND NEW, 1922
THE OCCIDENT AND THE ORIENT, 1924
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Frontispiece

A MAIN STREET IN PEKING DESTROYED BY THE BOXERS

WITH PEN AND BRUSH
IN EASTERN LANDS
WHEN I WAS YOUNG

BY

SIR VALENTINE CHIROL

ILLUSTRATED WITH SKETCHES BY THE AUTHOR



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INTRODUCTORY

AN eminent person whose name has escaped me laid it down as a golden rule that one should never explain. I prefer to be quite frank with my readers. If I have been tempted to write another volume which skirts and occasionally overlaps some of the ground I covered in my *Fifty Years in a Changing World*, it is largely because I have been persuaded – perhaps overpersuaded – by many friendly critics who said they wanted to hear more about my personal experiences and impressions during my early years of Eastern travel. When I objected that I might not be able to avoid repeating myself sometimes – a failing to which old age is only too prone – I was bluntly told that nobody would remember in 1929 what I had written in 1926. My hesitations only ceased when my publishers agreed to have the book illustrated with some of the sketches I had brought back with me from remote corners of the world to which few artists – or even modest amateurs such as myself – had had my opportunities of penetrating. For water-colour painting has long been my favourite hobby, and, as a malicious Frenchman observed, *on est souvent porté à se targuer surtout des petits talents qui ne sont pas de son métier.*

But as soon as I had undertaken to gather together the frayed

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threads of recollections spread over a long series of years, I began to envy, save for his physical anguish, the drowning man to whom is, it is said, vouchsafed in his last moment of agony a brief but perfect vision of the whole of his past life. I am not aware that anyone who has recovered after being drawn out of the water, even when life seemed to be extinct, has ever borne witness to such an experience. But I am writing about the East, and Mohammedans at any rate hold a somewhat similar belief as a solemn article of faith. For them at the moment of death the soul of the True Believer, passing to the Seat of Judgment, crosses a bridge 'as fine as a hair and as sharp as the edge of a sword,' and whilst he is crossing it the whole of his life flashes past him in the presence of the Recording Angel who decides his fate in the next world. A Persian friend once indeed likened the supreme ordeal with which he too would be one day confronted to the awful unfolding of a pitilessly truthful cinematograph. He was altogether one of the most interesting products I have known of Western education grafted on to a fine Oriental intellect. I had met him when I went for the first time to Persia in 1884. He had just returned from studying in Europe – a very rare thing in those days – and what was still more rare, he had studied hard and with conspicuous success. For he had come out at the top of the list from the *École des Ponts et Chaussées*, the nursery of French civil engineers, and he had gone home with high expectations. For where could a young engineer find greater scope than in a country where there were no roads at all and most of the bridges were falling into ruins? He received a robe of honour from the reigning Shah, Nasr-ed-Din, who, however, had no desire to waste on roads and

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bridges the contents of a treasury which barely satisfied the requirements of his personal pleasures and well-stocked *anderoun*. So my friend had had to be content with the high-sounding title of Engineer of the Realms, which he earned by tidying up the ramshackle city of Teheran and building new stucco palaces for the King of Kings and pavilions for his royal ladies. He had brought back with him the Parisian's *esprit gouaillieur*, and as I was one of the few who could appreciate it in his very different homeland, he often let himself go with me, and entertained me greatly with his shrewd and cynical comments on high life in the Persian capital. I lost sight of him for many years, but met him again in 1904 when he accompanied the Shah Muzaffered-Din on a state visit to London. He had waxed in the meantime rather portly and very prosperous and, though his French was as perfect as ever, his manner had acquired a rather ponderous solemnity as he described to me the way in which *mon auguste maître* and his suite were passing the time in London. It was their visit to the cinema, then in its infancy, that seemed to have made the deepest impression upon him because, as he assured me with a pious gravity which I should never have suspected from my earlier acquaintance with him, '*J'y ai constaté une des belles vérités de notre Sainte Religion,*' and then proceeded to compare it with the experience that awaited him and all True Believers on the sharp and narrow bridge on which *tout bon Musulman fait ou perd son salut*. I answered in the same tone that I felt sure that *de toute façon Votre Excellence saura y faire convenablement son salut*. Then only his old sceptical smile flitted once more across his face, and as I rose to retire and he shook hands with me, saying how glad he had been

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to see me again, he added, with a slight shrug of his shoulders: '*Voyez-vous, mon ami, j'appartiens en fin de compte à l'Orient où la religion est encore bien portée!*' Whether he would have now said that religion is still as fashionable all over the East is another question that would lead me too far afield.

There is anyhow no process available to me by which my memory can be refreshed like that of the drowning man or the dying Mohammedan, and having on the other hand the undeniable advantage of being still alive – though in my seventy-eighth year – I must be content to draw as best I can on recollections which time has not yet seriously dimmed.

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