

TO THE SUMMIT OF MOUNT ARARAT.

BY EDGAR J. BANKS.

“YOU can not ascend Ararat, Effendi. No man has ever been to the top of the mountain, and no man ever can. Ararat is the mother of the world, and Allah forbid that any man see her face. Men come from England and from France, and they go into the mountain for three days or for four days or for a week, and then say they have climbed to the summit, but they speak not the truth, for when they reach a certain place in the mountain, Allah casts a deep sleep upon them and bears them back to the base. Seek not to go up Ararat, Effendi, lest you too become a man of lies.”

The aged Kurd, who would dissuade me from climbing Ararat, was sincere. He was expressing the belief of most of the Kurds and Armenians and Turks and Persians who live in the little villages about the base and on the sloping sides of the great mountain. And yet in the wonderfully clear air the summit of Ararat, all white with snow, was distinctly visible; it seemed an easy climb of but an hour or two.

The belief that the summit of Ararat is unattainable dates back at least several centuries, perhaps even to a great antiquity. Sir John Mandeville, the tale of whose wonderful travels was written about 1332, refers to it. He says:

“And there beside is another hill that men clep Ararat, but the Jews clepe it Taneez, where Noah’s ship rested, and yet is upon that mountain. And men may see it afar in clear weather. And that mountain is well a seven mile high. And some men say that they have seen and touched the ship, and put their fingers in the parts where the fiend went out, when that Noah said *Benedicte*. But they that say such words, say their will. For a man may not go up the mountain, for great plenty of snow is always on that mountain, neither summer nor winter. So that no man may go up there, no man never did, since the time of Noah, save a monk that, by the

grace of God, brought one of the planks down, that yet is in the minster at the foot of the mountain.

“But upon that mountain to go up, this monk had great desire. And so upon a day, he went up. And when he was upward the three parts of the mountain he was so weary that he might no further, and so he rested him, and fell asleep. And when he awoke he found himself lying at the foot of the mountain. And then he prayed devoutly to God that he would vouchsafe to suffer him to go up. And so he did. And sith that time never none. Wherefore men should not believe such words.”

In 1330 Friar Odoric, who actually traveled in the region, refers in his journal to the same tradition. He says:

“In the foresaid country there is the very same mountain whereupon the ark of Noah rested: unto the which I would willingly have ascended, if my company would have stayed for me. Howbeit, the people of that country report that no man could ever ascend the said mountain, because (they say) it pleaseth not the highest God.”

Ararat is of special interest, not only because of its unusual beauty and height, but because of the story that Noah's ark rested there. However to connect the story with this particular peak is somewhat difficult. In ancient Assyrian times the name Ararat referred to the entire mountain range, rather than to an individual peak. St. Jerome, an early Christian writer, speaks of Ararat as the plain of the Araxes, which lies at the northern base of the mountain. It seems, therefore, that only in comparatively modern times has the name been attached to the highest peak of the range. The Armenians, to whom the mountain is specially sacred, call it Massis. The Kurds and Turks call it Egri Dagh, or the Crooked Mountain, because of its double summit. The Russians know it by its European name.

Ararat lies just where three great empires meet,—Russia, Turkey and Persia. The surrounding region, therefore, is generally infested with robbers and brigands, and is specially unsafe. The mountain may be said to consist of three peaks, forming an equilateral triangle, the sides of which are about seven miles in length. The western and the tallest of the three peaks is Ararat proper, or Big Ararat, as the natives call it, rising to the height of 17,260 feet. Seven miles to the east is Little Ararat, a great conical peak 12,840 feet high. Were it not overshadowed by Big Ararat, it would be a mighty mountain in itself. There drifts of snow remain all summer long in the hollows, and there too is a small Arabic cemetery of

considerable antiquity. The third peak, Takelti, lies a few miles to the north of the other two, and from a distance resembles the first of three steps by which in ancient times some mighty god may have ascended to heaven. Connecting Big and Little Ararat is a sharp ridge, Muchtepe, which at its lowest point is about 8800 feet high.

To climb Big Ararat, in spite of the belief that the gods forbid it, has been the aim of many a traveler; few have succeeded. Tradition says that before the Christian era twelve wise men long stood on the summit watching for the star of Bethlehem to appear,



THE THREE PEAKS OF ARARAT SEEN FROM THE NORTH.

and when it did appear three of them followed it to the Christ child. Though but a tradition, the story suggests that possibly in those early days men may have climbed the mountain to its summit. The tradition to which Sir John Mandeville refers, is still repeated by the natives, for they still tell how Hagop or St. Jacob frequently tried to reach the summit, but was always brought back to the base during the night. Finally when he succeeded, he brought back a plank from the ark, and some of the pitch with which the ark was smeared. The plank was shown in the monastery at Aghurri until 1840, and the pitch was sought for its wonderful medicinal

properties. The pictures of Ararat of two centuries ago plainly show the ark standing on the summit of the mountain between its two peaks.

The first ascent of Ararat, of which there is a record, was made by the Frenchman Dr. Parrot, in 1829. He succeeded in reaching the summit only in his third attempt, and though he wrote a book, describing the ascent in detail, his story was long doubted. In 1834, Spassky Aftonomoff, a Russian astronomer, climbed to the summit to prove his theory that from that height the stars were



THE TWO GUIDES ON THE HIGHEST PEAK OF ARARAT.

visible at noon. In 1845 the Russian general Chodzko, with a party of surveyors, camped on the summit for three days. In 1876 Mr. James Bryce, lately British ambassador to the United States, reached the top. Other ascents have since been made, but of the many who try to climb the mountain, few succeed.

On August 7, 1912, with my companion, Dr. Gibson of Chicago, I arrived at Erivan, a Russian town about forty miles to the north of Ararat; even from that distance the great mountain with its cap of snow seemed but a few hours away. We had come to climb

to its summit. Ice axes were made by the local blacksmiths; shoes were provided with sharp, long nails, and the necessary provisions were purchased. Then we discovered that Ararat was under military control, and that special permission from the government must be had before we could climb it. To obtain the permission we sent telegrams which received no answers, and at length in despair we started for the mountain. Our first stop was at Etchmiadzin, the seat of the head of the Gregorian church. The little place has always been associated with the mountain, for though at a distance it seems to stand at its very base, and carefully preserved in a chamber of the church, in the rear of the altar, is a piece of dark wood, three inches long and an inch in width, carved with the figures of Christ and of the Virgin Mary. The priests claim that it is a part of the ark. Further up the valley, at Nachtchevan, is the reputed tomb of Noah.

Alikizil is the little Armenian village close to the northern foot hills of Ararat. There we secured an ox team to carry us and our goods to Sadar Bulak, the military station near the ridge between the two peaks. The road was merely a trail, and so rough that progress was slow. Great stones, hurled in ancient times from the craters of Ararat, frequently blocked our way. Our first night on the mountain was spent in a little Kurdish village near the entrance to the great chasm which reaches into the very heart of the mountain. Aghurri is a modern town near the site of an earlier town of the same name. There it is said that Noah settled after he left the ark. There he cultivated the vine, and there he made the wine of which he drank. Seventy years ago his very vine used to be pointed out. There too used to grow the willow trees which sprang from the planks of the ark. But these interesting things may be seen no more, for on June 20, 1840, an earthquake shook the mountain to its foundation; a part of the mountain fell upon the village and completely buried it. Not one of its two hundred houses escaped, and not a soul, save two men who happened to be away from their homes for the day, survived. Huge rocks, thousands of tons in weight, were hurled for miles down the slope, and the once fertile fields and vinyards are now so thickly strewn with them that they are fit only for the grazing of sheep. The shrine of Saint Jacob, far in the gorge, together with the plank from the ark, perished; only the sacred spring remained, for that no earthquake may ever destroy. Its waters still slowly trickle down from the rocks, drop by drop, into the tank beneath. When there is drought in the valley below and the wheat is parched, the Christians and Mohammedans

together, for it is sacred to them both, climb to the spring to obtain water for their priests, and as the priests pray over it, rain comes to dispel the drought. When swarms of locust devour the grain, again the peasants take water from the spring to sprinkle over the fields, and the *tuti* bird, like a large gray crow, is attracted by the sacred water, even from a great distance, and devours the locusts. Though the water drips but slowly from the rocks, there is always an abundance of it, for however much of it is taken away, the tank is always full; at least the peasants say so.

From Aghurri up the mountain to Sadar Bulak is but ten



ARARAT FROM THE BARRACKS OF SADAR BULAK.

miles, but for us it was a full day's journey. There between the two high peaks was the military post with about thirty soldiers, and about the post were a hundred or more tents of those who would escape the excessive heat of the Araxes valley. Still higher up the mountain sides, wherever grass would grow and foothold could be had, the shepherds were grazing their flocks of sheep and goats. It is from Sadar Bulak that the ascent of the mountain may best be made. We called upon the commander of the post for permission to climb the mountain; he promptly informed us that it was not in his power to give it. However we persuaded him to telegraph to

his superior, and during the two days we were waiting for the reply, he entertained us royally. The reply was favorable, and though we were already about eight thousand feet up the mountain, the real ascent began on August 18th.

The guide, whom the commander recommended, was Ahmed Beg Shemsiddin, a powerful Kurd of forty. For his services we paid ten rubles a day. He claimed to have made a dozen ascents of the mountain. Seven strong men at two rubles a day were employed to pack the provisions and blankets. Each man carried a load of about twenty pounds; one carried a bundle of sticks for fuel. At



THE HOME OF THE KURDISH GUIDE AT SADAR BULAK.

seven o'clock we set out on horseback to slowly ascend the ridge between the two peaks, but after three hours the horses were returned, for they could go no farther. Tales are told of the fierceness of the Kurdish shepherds of Ararat, but these lonely mountaineers received us kindly and brought us milk to drink. From the summit of big Ararat a brook of cold snow water came bounding down over the rocks. Along its side we saw the fresh tracks of a bear. The wolf and the fox also inhabit the mountain, and large harmless snakes lurk among the rocks, but we saw nothing of them. The occasional call of a mountain bird excited our packmen, and

had they possessed guns, they might have abandoned us for the chase. In the warm moist places between the stones were mountain flowers in abundance; some were of a beautiful blue or white, but the best of all were the great clusters of forget-me-nots. Great stones of black diorite, jagged and rough as if they were freshly blasted from a quarry, frequently blocked our way.

The first night we camped about eleven thousand feet high by the side of a stream of melted snow. To protect us from the cold



A HARD CLIMB NEAR THE SUMMIT OF ARARAT.

wind which swept down from the snowy heights above we heaped stones about the beds. The Kurds, doubled up in their great black capes shivered the night away, or sang to keep up their spirits. In the morning the stream of water was nearly dry, for during the night the snow did not melt, and what little there was, was solidly frozen over. At sunrise we were again on our way. Up over great heaps of stones we climbed, sometimes with great difficulty, or now and then a snow field made the ascent easier, but the Kurds, with

their simple, raw-hide, fur-covered shoes, always clung to the rocks. At the height of twelve thousand feet the air became rarer; the heart beat faster, and it was difficult to breathe. Frequently we stopped to rest. At night fall we found a camping place on a projecting rock, by the side of a great snow field, about fourteen thousand feet in height. The Kurds called the place Kis Kalesi, or Maiden's Castle, but it is doubtful if any maid ever climbed so far up the side of Ararat. Here we heard the streams of water trickling far down beneath the rocks, and melted snow was our drink.



A SNOW PLANE REACHING THE SUMMIT. THE PHOTOGRAPH SHOWS THE SLOPE.

The night air was bitterly cold. Clouds were about and below us, and the stars above alone were visible.

At daylight we were awake eager for the final climb to the summit, three thousand feet above. Once the rumble of thunder seemed to warn us to go no higher, and the clouds became so thick that we could see but a few yards ahead. My companion, already fatigued, decided to go no farther, and the men remained with him. Hesitatingly the guide wrapped up his head, and we two alone started on. Finally as the clouds broke away, one of the men joined us, and we were three. Higher up the mountain the rocks were

steeper and more difficult to climb; in places they were almost perpendicular. Once I tried to cut my way along a snow field which reached to the summit, but it was too steep for safety. Finally a thousand feet from the summit we reached the last barrier of great diorite rocks; beyond, the slope was not so steep, but loose stones of reddish porphyry, mixed with ashes, made climbing even more difficult. When half way up the ash field we observed the strong odor of sulphur, yet no fissures in the mountain side could be seen. The guide asserted that it was there that one always fell asleep while climbing the mountain, and he complained of a severe headache.



THE AUTHOR ON THE SUMMIT.

The bottle contains the names of earlier climbers.

It is sometimes asserted that smoke is seen issuing from near the summit of Ararat, but the craters, all of which have long been extinct, are low down on the slope, and the odor came from the sulphur which was mixed with the ashes on the surface. However every native believes that at some future date Ararat will again belch forth fire as it did in ancient times. Five and a half hours of climbing brought us to the summit of the rocky ridge which ran along by the side of a snow field, and exhausted, we stepped out upon a comparatively level plain. As we stood there the wind drove the clouds away for an instant, and in the bright sunlight, not more than

a quarter of a mile away, and a hundred feet above us was the sparkling, snow-covered peak of Ararat. Excitedly we hurried up the slope: our climb was at an end. At a little distance away was another peak, but at a slightly lower level. In the hollow between the two summits it is said that the ark rested.

At the edge of the snow-capped summit there project from the snow two wooden poles which once supported a large wooden box. It was placed there by some Russian officials several years ago to contain a book, that all who climbed the mountain might record their names, but the strong wind had broken the poles and hurled down



THE SUMMIT OF ARARAT IS GENERALLY OBSCURED BY CLOUDS.

the box, and we found it half buried in snow and ice. Once a Russian flag waved above the box, but the flag, now in shreds, was also frozen into the ice. Near the box is a pile of stones; search among them revealed a bottle and a tin box containing the names of those who had reached the summit. Of the few names which I saw, all were written in Russian; one man, more ambitious than the others, had left there a bronze plate engraved with his name and a date.

The Summit of Ararat is frequently very cloudy, even when it is perfectly clear in the valley below. During the daytime the hot air from the valley rushes upward, and reaching the snow fields near

the summit is cooled. Thus the clouds are formed. It has been said that Ararat is always concealed by clouds from about ten o'clock in the morning till sun-set, but of the two weeks I spent within sight of its summit, more than half of the time there were no clouds to be seen. Unfortunately, when we were on the summit, it was one of the times when Ararat preferred to veil her face. Consequently the air was bitterly cold; the wind swept over the snow in a gale, and only now and then, for just an instant, did the sun penetrate the clouds so that I could make use of the camera which I had brought to the summit with great effort.



ON THE SUMMIT OF ARARAT.

The view from the highest mountains is seldom the best; frequently it is the least interesting. So it is with Ararat. The mountain rises so abruptly from the plain to such a great height that everything below is almost too far away to be seen distinctly. Even little Ararat, which is a mighty mountain, seemed to be flattened out, and the lower peaks were but little knolls on the level plain. The edges of the horizon seemed to be tipped up, as if the earth were shaped like a huge dish, and we were standing on a knob in its center. Forty miles to the north is Ali Goez, 13,400 feet in

height. To the east is Kara Dagh, 11,000 feet high, but the clouds hid them from our view. It is said that the Caspian in the east, and the Black Sea in the west, are visible, but we could see nothing of them.

An hour upon the summit chilled us through. The descent to the camping place took less than half the time of the ascent, for in places we merely stood upon the loose stones and ashes, and they carried us down, but the climb over the large rocks was even harder than the ascent. Finally when we stumbled into camp, and dropped from exhaustion, my companion had brandy ready to revive us, and the Kurds were preparing coffee over a tiny fire. The next day, the fourth, we were at the post of Sadar Bulak.

Two days later, in the little town of Igdirdir to the east of the mountain, while sipping the delicious Russian tea in the public garden, an aged Armenian approached.

"Whence did you come?" he asked.

"From America."

"Why did you come?" he continued with the customary directness of the Oriental.

"To climb Mount Ararat."

"God forbid; that may never be."

"But, Effendim, I have already climbed the mountain."

"May God keep your tongue from such falsehood."

"But, Effendim, it is no falsehood. I climbed to the very summit, to that white peak you see yonder, above the clouds."

"God forbid that my old ears hear such words."

Then I took from my pocket a formidable looking paper which the commander of the post of Sadar Bulak had given me. The old man carefully looked at the seal at the bottom and then in Russian he slowly spelled out these words:

"A Certificate. August 8 (Aug. 21), 1912.

"Post of Sadar Bulak.

"This certificate is given to the American subject, Edgar J. Banks, who has come to the post of Sadar Bulak, and from there, with the guide Ahmed Beg Shemsiddin, has mounted to the summit of Big Ararat. In evidence of this fact, namely the mounting of Big Ararat, I attach hereto the official seal.

"Commander of the Post of Sadar Bulak,

"(Signed) Captain Shatiloff."

Silently the old man handed the paper back, arose, and shaking his head as if bewildered, went on his way.