

**THE CRETAN
REFUGEES AND THEIR
AMERICAN HELPERS**

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A STATEMENT

ADDRESSED TO THE CONTRIBUTORS FOR THE RELIEF OF
CRETAN REFUGEES.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN: Last winter, a cry of distress reached your ears from the outposts of Christendom; and in the spring I went, as your almoner, to relieve the sufferers.

In order that you may better understand the case, and the effect of the distribution of your gifts, have the patience to hear a few words respecting the causes which led to the present deplorable condition of the Island of Crete, or Candia, and about the moral as well as material interests which are involved in the result of the struggle of its inhabitants for freedom. You will see that it is not a mere question whether a few thousand Christians shall or shall not die of hunger and cold, rather than submit to Mohammedans; because, although the Cretans seem to be struggling merely for their own existence and freedom, they are in reality fighting for the progress of Chris-

tianity and of civilization in the East. They are debating with arms one phase of the "Eastern Question."

Crete is the largest and most important of the "Isles of Greece." It is to them what Cuba is to the other West India islands. It is not so long as the State of Massachusetts, and has only about half as many square miles of surface. But all Attica, you know, was only a tenth as large as Massachusetts, yet played a larger part in ancient history than the latter has as yet done in modern.

Crete lies in the south-eastern part of the Mediterranean, and forms the natural southern frontier and bulwark of Greece proper. From east to west, a chain of rugged mountains rises precipitately from the plains to a great height. I saw the snow lying on the peaks of Mount Ida in July last, while grapes, and figs, and luscious fruits were ripening in the few places left unscathed by fire and the axe.

Its climate is so mild, its skies so soft, its waters so sweet, its soil so rich, its productions so abundant, and all its natural conditions so favorable to human life and enjoyment, that the ancients called it "The Blessed."

It had once a hundred walled cities; it contained more than a million inhabitants, still was not full. Its checkered history furnishes a striking proof of the fact, that the happiness and interests of the peoples are apt to be utterly disregarded by absolute and irresponsible governments, of whatever kind.

In the palmy days of ancient Greece it was a republic; and its inhabitants have been, and still are, strongly democratic in their tendencies: but, in the tumultuous times which followed the downfall of the Grecian republics, its

exposed situation, between Europe, Asia, and Africa, laid it open to invaders; and the piratical Sicilians, the filibustering Romans, and the marauding Saracens, each in turn seized it, plundered it, and misruled it.

In the partition of the great Roman power, Crete fell to the Eastern Empire, and enjoyed a little season of peace and prosperity; but it was soon wrested from the feeble grasp of Byzantium by a horde of barbarians, who overran and ruined it.

In the tenth century the Greeks liberated the island from the barbarians, and restored it to the Byzantine Empire. But that corrupt and effeminate power had now become decrepit and bankrupt, and was pawning her jewels, and selling her provinces, inhabitants and all, like estates stocked with cattle; while young Venice was swaggering about the world, with a stout arm and a full purse, seizing upon corner lots, and buying up mortgaged lands. So the old empire conveyed Crete, for a consideration, to the Marquis of Montferrat, who sold it to the young republic; and the purchase money went doubtless to keep up a little longer the tawdry trappings of royalty. How like a project of to-day!—poor old Byzantium selling the fairest isle of the East to a young republic in order to raise a little cash; and poor old Spain ready to sell the fairest isle of the West to a young Venice, who, if not rich in cash, is rich in promises to pay!

The population had been reduced one half during the troubled ages of changing dominion, and was only 600,000: but the island was justly esteemed by Venice as among the most important of her great possessions. She showed this not only by flaunting the banner of Candia in the

Piazza San Marco, — where you may still see its staff standing, — but by enormous expense for restoring the old fortifications and building new ones.

Those of Candia, the capital, were probably the most extensive then known in the world, and seemed to make the place impregnable. The Venetians endeavored to perpetuate their sway over the island by denationalizing the people, effacing their local institutions, and establishing a nobility [*"degli possidenti"*]; but the Cretans obstinately resisted all such efforts, and maintained most of the municipal and parochial institutions, which they had guarded through so many ages, and from so many invaders. They were, however, good allies in war, and aided the Venetians not only to repel the Genoese and other filibusters, then marauding about the Mediterranean, but helped them as they had helped other gallant defenders of the cross in their wars with the infidels.

Venice bore the brunt in the fight to repel the onward march of Mohammedanism into Europe, and some of its bloodiest and most protracted campaigns were fought in Crete, with Cretans for allies.

But Venice in her declining days was no match for Turkey, then fiery, fanatical, and in the full career of conquest. Driven slowly back by overwhelming armies, the Venetians made a last desperate stand in the vast fortress of Candia, or Megalo Kastro, and there endured one of the most fierce and protracted sieges upon record. For twenty-four years they resisted with steady courage the fierce assaults of fanatical, but then virile, barbarians, slaying tens of thousands and hurling back the rest. But ever on the morrow a new pack came howling onward;

so that, in the twenty-fifth year, the Venetians, after having been beleaguered, bombarded, undermined, and blown up, after seeing their walls crumbling, their ditches filled up, their magazines exhausted, and their ranks unrecruited, sailed mournfully away in their shattered fleet, and left the Greek population to their sad fate. Proverbs are sometimes historical records; and to this day Venetians, when they wish to express what we mean by "war to the knife and knife to the hilt," say it was a war of Candia — *guerra di Candia*.

Many of the rich inhabitants followed the Venetians. Others, clutching their arms, took to the mountains; and there they maintained a semi-independence, paying their tribute, but refusing to live on the plains, or allow the Turks to live in the mountains. But the mass of the people were forced to bow before the storm, instinctively preserving, however, their family relations, their language, and their religion; and the harder the storm of oppression raged, the more closely they clung to these essential elements of nationality. They continued to be Greeks in all the essentials of character; and the violence of the Turks, instead of effacing the traits of nationality, only stamped them deeper; so that, although a pall was spread over the island, and Crete was lost to sight, yet under the pall was life; and a silent struggle began, in which the conqueror was vanquished, and Greek nationality proved more vigorous and persistent than Turkish. If the Greeks suffered the demoralization attendant upon slavery, their enemies suffered the greater demoralization ever attendant upon the exercise of tyranny.

The invaders seized upon a large part of the fertile lands;

but they were obliged to leave the rest to the inhabitants, not that they might live and thrive, but that they might earn money and pay tribute. The Turks were obliged to make all land titles sacred, else their own would have been worthless ; so that the Greek peasant became secure in his land, however exposed to personal insult, humiliation, and violence.

The Greeks had a religion which, though disfigured by superstition, still preserved the essential features of Christianity, and elevated and strengthened them, while the Turks had a religion which degraded and enfeebled them. The Greeks strengthened the ties of family — of kith and kin ; the Turks weakened all theirs. The Greeks sanctified the marriage relation by monogamy ; the Turks polluted it by polygamy. The Greeks were reticent and chaste ; the Turks, loose and licentious. The Greek women were prolific ; the Turkish, sterile. The Greeks were industrious and thrifty ; the Turks, lazy and wasteful. If the Turk seized property by violence, he demoralized himself and his race, but could not take from the Greeks the faculty of acquiring more. The very violence of oppression defeated its own end, and engendered hatred and fear, which intensified the antagonism arising out of difference of race, language, and religion. This antagonism prevented any material amalgamation, and helped here, as elsewhere, to perpetuate with more remarkable purity the old Greek blood, which has never been so adulterated as to have lost its native characteristics.

Falmerier, and others, who suppose that it has, must have overlooked the effects of the great law that when two alien races mingle, the purer overcomes or absorbs

the other. In virtue of this law the Slavonian invaders of Greece, in the sixth century, the 200,000 Albanian invaders of the sixteenth century, and the later Turkish invaders, have been vanquished by their victims. The truth of this is shown in the physical appearance and mental characteristics of the mountaineers of Crete, as well as those of other rugged districts of Greece.

This silent struggle for national existence, this death-grapple between races, is now going on between Greeks and Turks in various parts of old Greece, insular and continental; in soft Samos, in flowery Rhodes, in blood-stained Scio, in rugged Epirus, in fertile Thessaly; in rich Macedonia; and the end is sure to be—extermination of the Turks, or their expulsion from Europe.

Diplomacy may prop rotten thrones, may suppress democratic tendencies, may uphold the Crescent, may retard the march of Christianity and of civilization for a while, but, thank God! not forever; and the sultan, notwithstanding his new alliances, must soon go over the Hellespont as ignominiously as did Xerxes.

In this manner the Cretans, clinging to the soil like the grass, showed more tenacity of national life, than their enemy, who towered above it like the trees. Thus stood the parties during the dark ages when Crete was lost to sight of the European world; so that when the trumpet of national resurrection sounded in 1821, and the Greeks of the continent commenced that seven years' war which ended in the enfranchisement of part of their race, and the independence of part of old Greece, the Cretans also rose vigorously upon their oppressors, drove them from the interior of the island, and shut them up in the old Venetian fortress upon