THE ASIATICS

A NOVEL BY

Frederic Prokosch

With an Introduction by

CARL VAN DOREN

NEW YORK

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INTRODUCTION

Nowhere in American literature is there another book quite like *The Asiatics* by Frederic Prokosch. Though it is what must be called a novel, it does not have the kind of plot usually found in novels, or the kind of problem sometimes found there. It merely tells the imagined story of a young American who finds himself in Beirut and makes his zigzag way across Asia to the southern border of China. Perhaps no American has ever been over this precise route, and Mr. Prokosch had not been over it in flesh-and-blood. It was his mind, eager and sensitive, which made the journey through that ancient continent, as historians explore the remote past and writers of fiction study the characters they have created.

Imaginary journeys or voyages are as old as literature. Homer had himself not visited all the seas and islands to which he took his hero in the *Odyssey*. Nobody had, except Odysseus who was a mythical man traveling to mythical places. Marco Polo had actually crossed Asia, and his book was a history of what he had seen as well as of some things he had only heard about. But he was read as much for his marvels as for his facts, and his readers did not know how to distinguish between them. Swift, reporting the travels of downright Gulliver so circumstantially, so statistically, was inventing every incident and person, with satirical side-shots at the human race for its follies and vices which turned up among the pygmies and giants.
and pedants and wiser-than-human horses Gulliver encountered at the ends of the earth. Mark Twain, yarning about his adventures in the Holy Land, on the Mississippi, in the Far West, round the world, cheerfully enlarged the episodes to increase the humor of his tall tales.

Many travelers to all quarters of the globe, bringing back their accounts of what they saw, have in the past hundred years or so done away with the age-old wonders of geography and made distant regions familiar. The earth can never again seem so vast as it seemed up to ten years ago, when Post and Gatty flew round it in eight days. If men could fly over all of Asia in no more time than those two needed, then Asia was no longer the dark mystery it had been thought. An active young fellow might hitch-hike from Damascus to Hong Kong.

That is what the narrator in *The Asiatics* does. With his native English, and some French and German, he has no serious difficulty in making himself understood wherever he goes. With little money, he manages to live on the country, like any hitch-hiker. He recurrently runs into other travelers, who furnish whatever plot the story has. The reputation of America and Europe has gone ahead of him. As he has heard of Asia, so Asiatics have heard of America. They tell him things about it as fantastic as any he has ever heard or read of Asia. Though he is far from home, he is somehow not as far as he expected to be. He cannot help perceiving that the races of men, so long so scattered, are being woven together in spite of their mutual misunderstandings and animosities. It gets harder and harder every year to find a spot of the earth where a man can be an utter stranger.

And yet this is not what the traveler in *The Asiatics* has set out to discover. He is looking, somewhat vaguely, for happiness, which he has not known in America and which
he thinks may exist among Asiatics. Perhaps, he thinks, he is in temperament part Asiatic and in Asia may attain an Asiatic peace of mind. He does not, for he is full of American energies and hopes that sustain him through his long hunt and leave him still hopeful, as well as happy, when he reaches China.

It is impossible to reduce to clear and simple words the reasons why this traveler undertakes this journey or the conclusion he arrives at. The ideas of the book are partly lost in the story, with its rich sequence of adventures, its varied landscapes, its multitude of remarkable men, women, and children met on the road. It is a book of extraordinary beauty, written in a style of silk and silver.

Such books are likely to be merely pretty. But **The Asiatics** does not overlook anything a poetical hitch-hiker might come upon in Asia. It takes filth and disease and ignorance and lust and cruelty and fraud in its easy stride. A hitch-hiker with little money, in Asia as anywhere else, sees the fringes of life if not the under side. If this one is for a time the guest of a half-Europeanized prince, so is he for a time held on a meaningless charge in a loathsome prison. He cannot pick his Asia. He must take it as it comes. But he never seems disposed to make lovely things lovelier than they are, or ugly things uglier, for the sake of some bias already in his mind. He seems to be concerned purely with the things themselves.

**The Asiatics** is original in its conception, beautiful in its execution. It belongs with the most notable modern American books.

**Carl Van Doren**
FAR DOWN the street I saw the night watchman slowly approaching with his lantern. He was singing to himself in a soft grief-stricken voice. When he saw me he grew silent, his wrinkled-apple face grew intent and solemn. He passed me quietly. And then when he reached the corner he began singing again, chanting, I should have gathered from his tone, about the coming of disasters, the grief of old men, the end of love.

The air was full of mosquitoes, everything was wet and warm after the autumn rain. Night had covered the ugliness of the city—the signboards, the telegraph poles, the shabby Ford cars, and above all the many daylight noises. All I could hear was the whining of the mosquitoes, and a block away, where the lights were brighter, the lower whining of a radio in a café. There were some girls standing on an outdoor staircase on the other side of the street. I could see their dark skin glimmering in the soft lamp-light. But they were quiet, they weren’t saying a word. Now and then one of them would turn her head slowly, but that was all.

Outside the café a little old man was standing, gazing at the ray of light that fell through the decorated pane. He knew immediately that I was watching him. Loneliness had sharpened his instincts. So he walked up to me and looked into my face. His own face was in shadow, but I could see his eyes peering through the heat and the dark-
ness like little lanterns, glassy and persevering, full of ex-
perience. "You are a stranger to Beirut?" he said in a
broken French. "Isn't that so?"

I nodded.

"Beirut is not a good city," he went on. "I've been here
four days. It is a hard and ugly city. I see nothing good in
Beirut."

I nodded again.

"Take care, young man, of your money. They will rob
you like magpies."

"I don't have very much money," said I with caution.

"Ah, but some!" he replied quickly. "More than many
of us!"

So he followed me into the café and we sat down at a
table together. We asked the boy to bring us some coffee.
There was a great noise in the room, the radio blaring
and three great Senegambians roaring with laughter and
lewdness. Upstairs I could hear some more men laughing
and the quick tripping footsteps of the women.

"So you don't like Beirut?" said I.

The old man shook his head earnestly. "No."

"What cities do you like, then?"

"I like Cairo."

"Yes, but that's in Egypt. I mean here in Syria, in this
part of the world."

"Cairo isn't so very far away."

"Have you traveled much?"

He nodded absently. He was sipping his coffee with
a slow sobbing noise, and his eyes grew soft and reflec-
tive.

"Have you been in Istanbul?"

He nodded. "But Istanbul is a dying city."

"You have been in Damascus, of course?"

He nodded again. "Damascus is a good city. Ancient
and beautiful.” He paused. “But I tell you, young man, every beautiful city in the world is growing uglier year by year. You from Europe have done it. You’ve been ruining beautiful ancient Asia. You ought to be ashamed of your wickedness.” He was speaking with a great personal anxiety, as if he too were intimately involved in all this.

“But you look like a European yourself,” said I.

“Yes,” he said, eyes mild with reproach. “I am a Greek by blood. My name is Papadopoulos. But I was born in Damascus and I am an Asian at heart.”

Soon we left the café and walked down toward the water. The waves were lapping gently against the warm white pebbles. Overhead shone a foggy moon, and along the shore a rippling edge of foam.

“I have had three sons like you,” said Papadopoulos. “Of your age, that is. Strongly built like you. I am an old man, you see, and at last I’m alone in the world.”

I looked out toward the sailboats in the harbor, a litter of Arab sailing-craft, their wet sails loosened and crumpled. “Old,” he went on, “but not too old. I visited a brothel last night. I slept there with the girls all night long.” His voice was growing a little bit boastful.

“Have you ever been in a Syrian brothel?” he asked in a thick voice.

“No,” I replied.

“Some of them are very fine,” he said. There was no one in sight, but in spite of that his voice had faded into a cloying little whisper. “You walk along the corridor. Some doors are open, some doors are closed. If the door is open you look in. A girl will be there, sitting or standing or lying, waiting for you. If she pleases you then you enter and make love.”

“Why did you come to Beirut, M. Papadopoulos?”

He wasn’t listening. “They have kind hearts, those girls.
They laugh easily and they are willing to forgive a good deal. Most of the brothels are new.”

“Why is that?” said I involuntarily. I didn’t enjoy hearing wrinkled old Papadopoulos talking like this. But still, it seemed to make him happy, so I didn’t interrupt.

“Since the French came, you see.”

“But why since the French came?”

“Oh, Moslems do not like brothels. They believe that brothels are immoral. They think Beirut a wicked Western city.”

“I didn’t know that the Moslems were so virtuous.”

“Oh,” said Papadopoulos with a sly laugh, “they aren’t! It is only that their tastes are a little bit different!”

The moon was growing clearer. A slant of moonlight fell suddenly, like a happy little sigh, upon a tuft of moss at my side. The shore grew close and confiding and the pebbles shone like silver.

“My sons have not been kind,” said the old man. “They are brave, strong and handsome. Yes. But who made them so? From whose loins did they spring? I don’t understand them at all.” He sighed with self-pity. He was watching me carefully, and I noticed that his hands were trembling a little. “They are rich, all three of them. But they no longer love me. When they see me they don’t appear to be in the least happy about it. So I no longer go to them. They refuse to give me money, or even food. Yes. And from whose loins did they spring? To whom do they owe their strength and virility? Ah, they have made me very unhappy.”

Presently I rose and said good night to the old man. I left him sitting beside the shore, thinking a foolish old man’s thoughts, feeling cold and isolated.
I left Beirut the next morning. I rode through the town on a truck that was going to Damascus, and watched the young Syrians in their cheap American suits, students, some of them, others conceited idlers, gossiping in the streets. We passed two or three young men who had come down from the hills, wearing turban and cloak. They looked handsome and graceful and preoccupied. But not the city youths; these looked empty and conceited; they mocked the gentler ones in the old costumes, the old bearded men and the strong graceful men from the hills. Bullies and misers, so they seemed.

Beyond the red roofs we could see the Lebanon hills rising straight up, a wisp of snow on the top. We rode through the refugee quarter as we left the city. Houses built of tins and boxes, hideous things, hotbeds of epidemic beyond a doubt, places where breeding went on at a terrific rate, all the more since the poverty-stricken and the diseased have little else to do. Some of the children, beautiful little Armenians, were digging at roots, nibbling at little bits of this and that which they extracted from the earth. But the strange thing was how the older people had already grown reconciled, how their faces had grown smug again, how their eyes shone with a sleek look and they seemed glad of their misery.

Then the road climbed steeply up into the fierce country to the southeast. Great rocks and gorges, cedars and pines, desolate stretches without life. We passed once or twice through bare little villages that were sitting among the cactus plants in the desert. As soon as we entered them we could feel the air of sullenness, of secrecy and resentment. And also the scent of urine that hangs over the cities and villages of Asia like a veil. Then out into the bare odorless country again.

Up on the hills beyond, the French driver told me, were