

A Dweller in Mesopotamia eBook

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Contents

A Dweller in Mesopotamia eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	4
Page 1.....	5
Page 2.....	7
Page 3.....	8
Page 4.....	9
Page 5.....	11
Page 6.....	13
Page 7.....	14
Page 8.....	16
Page 9.....	18
Page 10.....	20
Page 11.....	21
Page 12.....	23
Page 13.....	25
Page 14.....	26
Page 15.....	27
Page 16.....	29
Page 17.....	31
Page 18.....	33
Page 19.....	34
Page 20.....	36
Page 21.....	38
Page 22.....	39

Page 23.....	41
Page 24.....	43
Page 25.....	45
Page 26.....	47
Page 27.....	49
Page 28.....	51
Page 29.....	52
Page 30.....	54
Page 31.....	55
Page 32.....	57
Page 33.....	59
Page 34.....	60
Page 35.....	61
Page 36.....	63
Page 37.....	65
Page 38.....	67
Page 39.....	69
Page 40.....	71
Page 41.....	72
Page 42.....	74

Table of Contents

Section	Table of Contents	Page
Start of eBook		1
THE FIERY FURNACE		1
II		5
THE VENICE OF THE EAST		5
III		9
SINBAD THE SOLDIER		9
IV		12
THE WISE MEN FROM THE WEST		12
V		16
BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON		16
VI		22
ARABIAN NIGHTS IN 1919		22
VII		29
IN OLD BAGHDAD		29
VIII		32
PARADISE LOST		32
IX		36
THE DESERT OF THE FLAMING SWORD		36
X		39
THE KINGS OF THE EAST		39
FOOTNOTES:		41
THE END		41
ADVENTURES WITH A SKETCH BOOK		41
THE LAST CRUSADE		42

Page 1

THE FIERY FURNACE

There is an unenviable competition between places situated in the region of Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf as to which can be the hottest. Abadan, the ever-growing oil port, which is in Persia and on the starboard hand as you go up the Shatt-el-Arab, if not actually the winner according to statistics, comes out top in popular estimation. Its proximity to the scorching desert, its choking dustiness and its depressing isolation, are characteristics which it shares with countless other places among these mud plains. But it can outdo them all with its bleached and slime-stained ground in which nothing can grow, its roaring furnaces and its all-pervading smell of hot oil.

Across the broad waters of the Shatt-el-Arab there stretches a lonely strip of country bounded by a wall of palm-tops. Like all the land here it is cultivated as long as it borders the river and thickly planted with date groves. Then lies a nondescript belt that just divides the desert from the sown, and then, a mile or so inland, scorched and unprofitable wilderness.

Into this monotonous spiked sky-line the sun was wont to cut his fiery way without much variety of effect every evening, and night rushed down, bringing respite from this heat; for it is happily one of the compensations of life in these parts that the nights are cool, however hot the day.

About 150 miles from this busy spot lie the oilfields of the Anglo-Persian Oil Company. Two adventurous iron pipes start courageously with crude oil and conduct it by or through or over every obstacle from these wells to Abadan. In the early days of the war great and successful efforts were made to protect this line of supply, which was of vital importance to the British Navy. The Turks lost Fao, the fort that commanded the entrance to the Shatt-el-Arab, within a few days of the opening of hostilities. They had imagined it such a formidable obstacle to our approach that they were thrown suddenly on their beam ends when we took it. Consequently they could not keep us out of Abadan, but fell back on Beit Naama vainly attempting to block the river by sinking ships. One of the hulks, however, swung round and left a channel through which a passage was simple. I once sketched some of these old ships as they lay throughout the period of hostilities. Since then they have been partially blown up. A divers' boat was at work when I made my drawing and the first charge was fired about three minutes after I had finished, removing the funnel and one mast of the principal derelict.

[Illustration: *Abadan, Persia, the oil quays*]

Well, to begin my story.

It was evening. The sun was setting in the orthodox manner described above. Abadan was looking very much as usual. The smoke was smoking, the pumps were pumping, the works were working, and all the oilers along the quay, like all well-behaved oilers, were oiling.

Page 2

As if to protest against the frankly commercial atmosphere of everything and everybody at Abadan, a dhow that might have belonged to Sinbad the Sailor himself was making slow headway before the failing breeze under a huge spread of bellying canvas—an apparition from another age, relieved boldly against the dark hull of a tank steamer.

The flood tide had spent itself and the river seemed unusually still as twilight deepened and the many lights of the works wriggled in long reflection in the water. A spell of enchantment seemed to lie over everything, and the faint purring hum from the distant oil blast furnaces pervaded the still air. Old Sinbad came to anchor and night set in.

This is all very peaceful and picturesque to write about now, but at the time I was in a motor boat that had left Mahommerah to take me for a run and it had broken down and seemed unlikely to start again in spite of all the coxswain's efforts. Consequently we were drifting about on the stream and likely to be swept down by the ebb tide. We were unfortunately on the far side of the river from Abadan, and consequently our plight would not be observed from the works. The situation was not a pleasant one because we stood a very good chance of being run down by some incoming steamer.

[Illustration: "Serried ranks of tall iron funnels."]

When it was clear that we should drift down below the region of the oil quays I thought we would see what our lungs could do. Timing our shouts together, the coxswain and I, we sent up a tremendous hail to the lowest of the piers. Again and again we startled the night, until at last we heard an answering hallo.

In a few minutes a motor-boat bore down upon us. It was the British Navy in the shape of an engineer lieutenant commander. He took us in tow, carried me off to his bungalow, arranged about the boat being berthed and looked after till the morning, and proved a most cheery soul full of good looks and given to hospitality. When I explained my job he roared with laughter.

"Just the right time to arrive," he said. "Subject one, Abadan at night complete with tanks; subject two, works, oil, one in number—sketched in triplicate—why, my Lords Commissioners will be awfully bucked. They've put a couple of millions into this show, you know. Say 'when,' it can't hurt you, special Abadan brand."

[Illustration: Ship loading with oil.]

I said "when." I kept on saying "when," and then as a measure of self-protection suggested sketching the works while I could distinguish tanks from palm trees. So we went out and had a preliminary look round, reserving the "Grand Tour of the Inferno," as my host named our projected expedition, until after dinner.

Page 3

I will not attempt to explain the processes of oil refining. I am merely concerned in narrating what it looks like. I know little beyond the fact that the crude oil arrives by pipe from the oilfields by means of several pumping stations and that it is cooked or distilled over furnaces and converted into different grade oils from petrol to heavy fuel oil. As a spectacle, however, I found a journey through this weird region most fascinating and mysterious. At night it appears as a vast plain gleaming with lights and studded with dark objects, half seen and suggesting primitive machinery of uncouth proportions. Huge lengths of pipes creep from the shadows on one hand into the far-off regions of blackness on the other.

Armed with an electric torch, which the Chief carried, and a large sketch-book which I regretted taking almost as soon as we started, we set out on our quest of Dantesque scenery. At first our road ran along the quays by the river side. A camouflaged Admiralty oiler was loading fuel oil by means of three pipes that looked like the tentacles of an octopus clutching on to the side of the ship. Near this quay was a gate, and we entered the wire fence that surrounds the works and the area of the tanks and struck out over a dark waste.

The novice who roams about this place in the dark spends a lot of time falling over pipes. They are stretching all over the place without any method that is apparent. The Chief showed up most of them with his torch, and so I fell about only just enough to get used to the feel of the ground as a preliminary to what was coming later. It had rained heavily two or three days before, consequently there were lake districts, slimy reaches of mixed oil and mud and dried, hard-looking islands that were in reality traps to the unwary. The top only was firm, and it had the playful property of sliding rapidly on the greasy substratum and thus sitting you down without warning when you thought you had reached dry land.

[Illustration: "A mysterious-looking furnace tower."]

Had I known more about Abadan before I started I would have taken a course of lessons in tight-rope walking, for that seems to be a great asset in getting along. The Chief was quite a Blondin. He could walk or run any length of pipe and never swerve. Much practice had made him an adept. There were places where the only alternative to walking in mud and water was this balancing feat along the pipe lines.

When I had fallen several times and covered myself with a mixture that looked like grey condensed milk mixed with butter and felt like a poultice, I got my second wind. I was still recognizable as a human being. All fear of making myself in a worse mess had vanished, and thus, freed from nervousness, I began to get quite daring. The Chief saw in me the making of a first-class pipe walker, and prophesied that I should be able to attain the speed of three miles an hour. I still fell off, however, enough not to get a swelled head on the subject.

Page 4

After what to me seemed miles, and which as a matter of fact must have been about five hundred yards, we emerged from the lake region and were able to find a track along the ground. It skirted a railway line and led toward some buildings and machinery. A dull glow began to illuminate the scene and show up our path.

[Illustration: "Crude steam engines evolved by Titans when the world was young."]

A building loomed up against the sky. It was dimly lit by firelight and suggested to me a glimpse of the Tower of London with the corner turrets knocked off. In front of this were some vast boilers with uncouth chimneys stretching out of sight into the dark sky. The whole thing, weird and eerie, was reflected in pools of water, through which black figures toiled and splashed, pushing some loaded trollies. Then we came out into a lighted area at the foot of a mysterious-looking furnace tower, where strangely clad men, not unlike tattered and disreputable monks, were hauling at a great black object, some boiler or piece of machinery.

The workmen on closer view showed that they were dressed in sacking or some such rough material in a sort of tunic. They wore long curly hair and curious hats that looked like Assyrian helmets.

"What race are these men?" I asked the Chief.

"They are the Medes and Persians," he replied.

"And what is that tower?"

"Oh, that—," he paused for a few seconds, "that's Nebuchadnezzar's Fiery Furnace heated seven times hotter."

He was evidently determined to do me well from the point of view of local colour and picturesque Biblical association. I think, however, he missed a chance when later on we saw mysterious writing in Arabic characters upon the wall of an engine house. He should at least have read it out as *Mene, Mene, TEKEL, UPHARSIN*.

[Illustration: H.M.S. *MANTIS*, one of the monitors on the Tigris]

Abadan is on an island and the pipe line crosses the water from the mainland. We could see it stretching away across the flat land into the darkness where the sky-line of the palm belt by the waterside was just visible. It is strange to reflect that all this scene of careless activity is dependent on those two pipes, each about 14 inches in diameter, connecting it with a point 150 miles away.

I came again in the morning to look at the works. They did not appear half so mysterious as when seen in the dark. The Tower of London had shrunk into quite a small buttressed building of brick and Nebuchadnezzar's Fiery Furnace dwindled

considerably in size. The Medes and Persians, on the other hand, looked wilder and more “operatic” than at night. I think as a matter of fact they were Kurds.

It is a very simple style of get-up to imitate. For purposes of private theatricals I will tell you how to do it, in case you should find the stage direction, “*Alarums and excursions. Enter the Medes and Persians.*”

Page 5

Take a very tattered, colourless, and ill-fitting dressing gown, without a girdle and flopping about untidily. Wear long black curly hair to shoulder. Put plenty of grease on. Then knock handle off a round-bottomed saucepan, very sooty, and place on your head. Dirty your face and you might walk about Abadan without attracting notice.

I daresay if I knew something technical about the refining of oil I should not find these works so fascinating. There is always a glamour about a thing only half understood. Probably the retorts and boilers and all the apparatus here are of the very latest pattern, yet so strangely unlike modern machinery do they seem that I find myself wondering if I have gone back into some previous age and unearthed strange things of prehistoric antiquity. These solemn-looking turbaned Indians might be tending the first uncouth monsters of engineering—the antediluvians of machinery. These serried ranks of tall iron funnels, these rude furnaces fed by crawling snakes of piping, these roaring domes of fire might be crude steam engines evolved by Titans when the world was young.

[Illustration]

II

The Venice of the east.

[Illustration: In Ashar creek.]

[Illustration]

THE VENICE OF THE EAST

Before the war, when Mesopotamia was a more distant land than it is to-day, Basra was often referred to as the Venice of the East. Few travellers were in a position to test the accuracy of the comparison, and so it aroused little comment. No Venetians had returned from Basra burning with indignation and filled with a desire to get even with the writer who first thought of the parallel, probably because no Venetian had ever been there.

A few simple souls, who had delighted in the mediaeval splendours of Venice, dreamed of a Venice still more romantic—a Venice with all her glories of art tinged with the glamour and witchery of the Arabian Nights, a Venice whose blue waterways reflected stately palms and golden minarets. Other souls, like myself, less simple and sufficiently salted to know that these Turnerian dreams are generally the magical accidents of changing light and seldom the result of any intrinsic interest in the places themselves—even they had a grievance when they saw the real Basra. Was this the Venice of the East, this squalid place beside soup-coloured waters? Was this the city that reveals the

past splendours of Haroun Alraschid as Venice reveals the golden age of Titian and the Doges?

The first general impression of Basra is that of an unending series of quays along a river not unlike the Thames at Tilbury. The British India boats and other transports lying in the stream or berthed at the wharves might be at Gravesend and the grey-painted County Council “penny steamboats” at their moorings in the river look very much as they looked in the reach below Charing Cross Bridge.

Page 6

Another thing which makes the contrast between Venice and Basra rather a painful one is the complete and noticeable absence of anything of the slightest architectural interest in this Eastern (alleged) counterpart of the Bride of the Adriatic. Whereas in Venice the antiquarian can revel in examples of many centuries of diverse domestic architecture from ducal palace to humble fisherman's dwelling on an obscure "back street" canal, in Basra there abounds a great deal of rickety rubbish that never had any interest in itself and which depends for its effect on the flattering gilding of the sun and the intangible glamour of Eastern twilight. In fact Basra might be described from an architectural point of view as a great heap of insanitary and ill-built rubbish which can look collectively extraordinarily picturesque. I have seen bits on Ashar Creek (as for instance the wooden old-tin-and-straw-mat-covered buildings shown in the centre of the sketch in the heading to this chapter) look most romantic and beautiful. Yet they will not bear any close inspection, without revealing themselves as monuments of slovenliness and dirt.

[Illustration: *Hospital hulks at Basra*]

In spite, however, of these drawbacks and disappointments, to those who would find Venetian character by the waters of Mesopotamia, there are two features in Basra that do undoubtedly bring Venice to mind—the boats and the canals. The bellam is a long, flat-bottomed boat not unlike a punt but narrowing at each end to a point, the stem and stern-post alike ending in a high curved piece suggestive of a gondola. These craft are propelled by two men standing one at each end like gondoliers and punting the boat along by poles. If the water is too deep to bottom it they sit and propel the boat with paddles.

The canals of Basra are multitudinous. They are artificially dug and are really more canals than creeks, although they are always called creeks. Ashar Creek is the most important of these waterways. It is generally packed with craft from big mahailas, the type of vessel shown in the sketch facing page 16, to the ubiquitous bellam. Old Basra lies up here. As I approached it one evening, with the sun going down, it looked most gorgeous. Palms and gardens on the right and the buildings of the town on the left, and boats approaching, dream-like in the sunset glow. I have sketched the effect roughly in the line drawing on page 21.

Some of the regions up these creeks are extremely beautiful. For once there was nothing disappointing even in comparison—although comparisons, as we have seen, are odious—with Venetian waterways. For once we have something that can surpass in beauty anything that Venice can show. Basra can boast no architecture, but Nature, coming to her assistance, can produce, between sunshine and water, vistas of orange-laden trees overtopped with palms and all reflected in the still canal. I have known seven kinds of fruit to overhang the banks of one creek at the same time.

Page 7

[Illustration: Sunset, Old Basra.]

I hired a bellam manned by two fearsome-looking pirates and explored unending waterways in and around Basra. The main thoroughfares run at right angles to the river, but there are numerous narrow branches communicating from one to the other, in some places forming a network of little channels. Some of these were beautiful beyond description. The tide is felt in all these waters, and sometimes, during a spring tide, the effect of some of these date palm plantations, with the ground just covered, is strange. Hundreds of palms seem to be growing up out of a lake, and the glades reflected in the still water is dream-like and enchanting, recalling Tennyson's nocturne—

“Until another night in night
I enter'd, from the clearer light,
Imbower'd vaults of pillar'd palm.”

The pirates were quite jolly fellows who pointed out various things to me as being worthy of interest. By this time the natives have got up, in a most superficial way, the things which they think will interest the Englishman. Every group of palm trees more than twenty in number is pointed out as the Garden of Eden, every bump of ground more than six feet high is the mount on which the Ark rested, and every building more than fifty years old is the one undoubted and authentic residence of Sinbad the Sailor. An old house in Mesopotamia in which Sinbad the Sailor had *not* lived would be equivalent to one of England's ancient country mansions in which Queen Elizabeth had never slept. The fact that Sinbad the Sailor is a literary creation doesn't discourage the Arabs in the least.

During this voyage of mine by bellam through the multitudinous creeks of Basra a remarkable thing happened. Under the circumstances it was a providential happening. *I ran into Brown.*

[Illustration: “.... *The solemn palms were ranged above, UNWOO'D of Summer wind*”—*Recollections of the Arabian Nights*]

Now I do not expect the readers of some previous notes of my sketching escapades^[1] to believe this. It is almost too wonderful that a chronicler of travels in desperate need of some comic relief to save his book from dulness would be so lucky as to pick up such excellent copy as Brown, without previous intrigue. Nevertheless I do solemnly state that I had not the slightest idea where Brown was doing his bit in the war. I had last heard of him in France in the Naval Division. That we should both have travelled half across the world to meet with a crash in a backwater at Basra was one of the strangest freaks of fortune I have come across.

My two pirates were poling along quite merrily when we took a right angle turn in fine style. It is evident that the low foliage had hidden the side channel into which we shot,

and they had not seen what became evident too late, a motor-boat at right angles across the creek, apparently stuck fast.

Page 8

I had just time to observe two naval officers and the native coxswain struggling with poles to turn the boat round, or free it from its unserviceable position with regard to the bank when the prow of my bellam took a flying leap over the motor-boat, precipitating my two boatmen into the water, and sending me by means of a somersault into the launch. Somewhat stunned I lay gazing up at a piece of blue sky in which I could discern the green leaves of palm trees.

When in the midst of this blue dome above I beheld Brown perched on the top of a palm tree exhibiting with a look of blank astonishment on his face, waving an arm as if in a kind of bewildered greeting, I gave up the struggle for existence and became resigned to my fate. Without doubt Brown, whom I had last heard of in France, had been killed and was now doing his best to welcome me into a happier and better world.

It would be quite like Brown to try and outdo the ordinarily accepted symbolism of bearing a palm branch by attempting to wave a whole palm tree, for this he seemed most undoubtedly to be doing, embracing its trunk and swaying from side to side.

Subsequently, when things had sorted themselves out in my mind, and when I found I was still in the land of the living I realized that he was attempting to descend to earth. He was no less astonished than I.

After baling out the bellam and restoring order in the launch we found that the casualties were nil, and proceeded to compare notes. Brown, it appeared, had joined the Naval Division, been to Antwerp, Gallipoli and France, and then been transferred for gunnery duties to the rivers of Mesopotamia, and was now Lieut. R.N.V.R. in the *Dalhousie* stationed at Basra. His occupation, when I came across him in this unexpected way, was that of a leader of an expedition in a motor-boat with two R.N. victims to find a new route to somewhere or other which could not possibly be approached by water.

His enthusiasm had been so infectious that he had persuaded these gallant and guileless officers to go with him, and was, at the moment of my arrival, attempting to get a better geographical idea of the surrounding country by climbing a palm tree and shouting directions to the unfortunate occupants of the boat below, who were hopelessly stuck. The sudden impact of the bellam, uncomfortable as it was for all concerned, succeeded where they had failed, in getting them off the mud.

[Illustration: *The house of Sinbad the Sailor, Basra*]

An old-world touch is given to the waters of Basra by the high-sterned dhows anchored in the river. Above Ashar Creek the scenery of the banks with its wharves and big steamers is not particularly characteristic of the East. Some of it might be by the Thames at Tilbury Docks. But by Khora Creek and in the lower reaches of the river at Basra, these old-world ships, with their quaint lines and steep, naked masts, are more in

keeping with our recollections of Sinbad the Sailor, or perhaps of the days of the Merchant Venturers of our own Elizabethan days.

Page 9

It is to be supposed that the type of ship that has survived in the East to the present day, like the mahaila and the goufa, is very much unchanged like everything else, and tells us faithfully what sort of ships there were in these waters some two thousand years ago or more. If this surmise be a correct one, then we can trace the poop tower of the *Great Harry* and the square windows and super-imposed galleries of the *Victory's* stern to this common ancestor. I wish I had been able to get an elevation of the details of one of these more ornate sterns. It would be interesting to compare the work with that in the ships of the Middle Ages and see if there is a definite development of type from East to West via the Mediterranean.

We passed down Ashar Creek just after sunset, and the house of Sinbad, with its picturesque surroundings, thoroughly looked the part. The tower of the mosque stood out against a lemon-coloured sky, and wandering wisps of purple smoke curled up from countless hearths.

Some giant mahailas, nearly obliterated the crooked little galleries that overlook the creek, and a few boats glided silently down towards the open river. Lights began to appear and stars studded the darkening sky. Faint sounds of chanting music floated across the water and all the world was still.

[Illustration: Dhows Basra.]

III

SINBAD THE SOLDIER

[Illustration: Monitor "Moth" at Basra.]

[Illustration]

SINBAD THE SOLDIER

After a few days among the waterways of Mesopotamia one can get hardened against surprises. The most amazing and outrageous types of craft soon meet the eye as commonplaces of river life. Things that would make a Thames waterman sign the pledge proceed up and down without arousing any comment. Noah's ark, with its full complement, could ply for hire between Basra and Baghdad, and the lion's roaring would be accepted as the necessary accompaniment of a somewhat old type of machinery resuscitated for the war.

I have seen boats jostling each other cheek by jowl that might have been taking part in a pageant entitled "Ships in All the Ages." There were Thornycroft motor-boats and Sennacharib goufas, mahailas and Thames steamboats, an oil-fuel gunboat and a stern

paddler that could have come out of a woodcut of the first steamboat on the Clyde—and all these in the same reach. I travelled in this last extraordinary vessel for a short time. She was in charge of a sergeant of the Inland Water Transport, with an Indian pilot and miscellaneous crew, and my adventurous cruise called to mind both the travels of Ulysses and the Hunting of the Snark.

Page 10

The sergeant could not speak Hindustani and the pilot could not speak a word of English. Mistakes of the most frantic nature were common, especially when we were being whirled round and round by the stream at a difficult corner. In the midst of controversy unrelieved by any glimmer of understanding on the part of anybody present we would slide gracefully into a state of rest on a mudbank or bump violently against the shore. Luckily, it seemed as easy to get off the mudbank as to get on it, and we finally got into positions we wanted to for making sketches of various points. The pantomimic violence of the sergeant, together with diagrams in my sketch-book, were ultimately successful.

[Illustration: A BEND IN "THE NARROWS" OF THE TIGRIS]

Nearly all the Tigris steamers proceeding up river have loaded lighters on each side of them. These act as fenders at the corners and take the bump whenever the bank is encountered. The progress is slow and there is often a good deal of waiting, for in the region between Ezra's tomb (above Kurna) and Amara there is not room for two steamers thus encumbered to pass with safety. These waters are known as the Narrows. Signal stations are placed at various intervals, and a signal is made to clear the way, generally for the down-river boat, the up-river craft, which, with the stream against them, will not have to turn round in stopping, tying up to the bank. This manoeuvre is done in a few minutes. The steamer that is to stop runs alongside the bank and natives with stakes jump out and drive them into the marsh ground. She moors to these until the other vessel has passed downwards.

The sketch facing page 30 was done from a steamer bound up-river, which had tied up under these conditions. The paddler coming down has a lighter on each side of her as the one sketched on page 38. She will come down toward the leading marks shown on the right-hand side of the picture, and then slide along the bank, using the lighter on the port side as a fender. Then she will leave the bank and shoot across to the other side of the river, taking the next turn with her starboard lighter.

This drawing will serve to show the general nature of most Mesopotamian river scenery, dead flat, with nothing or little to relieve the monotony, a great expanse of muddy waters and featureless dust, with just a suggestion in one direction of a low line of blue—very faint. It tells of the far-away Persian mountains and of snow.

The great feature of the Narrows, however, and one which all our dwellers in Mesopotamia will remember vividly as long as they live, is the egg-sellers from the Marsh Arab villages on the banks. Although a steamer proceeding up-river may be kicking up a great fuss in the water and apparently thumping along at a great rate, it is, in reality, making only about four knots on the land. Consequently, when it sidles into the bank, with one of its lighters touching the marsh, the natives who are selling things can keep up, and a running—literally running—fire of bargaining is maintained between the ship's company and the Arabs.

Page 11

They are all women who do the selling—weird figures in black carrying baskets of eggs and occasionally chicken. Gesticulating, shouting, shrieking, they rush along beside the up-going steamer and keep even with it. In the middle of a bargain the steamer may edge away until a great gulf is fixed between the bargainers. Sometimes it will slide along the other bank and a fresh company of yelling Amazons will try and open up negotiations for eggs while the frenzied and now almost demented sellers left behind rend their clothes and shout imprecations at their rivals. Another turn of the current, however, and the vessel again nears the shore of the original runners and the deal is finished.

[Illustration: The Sirens of the Narrows.]

One girl kept up for miles and at last sold her basket of eggs. She got a very good price for them, but apparently she wanted her basket back again. The buyer insisted that the basket was included, and the seller shrieked frantically that it was not. She kept up with us for some miles, making imploring gestures, kneeling down with her arms outstretched as though she was begging for her life, and yelling at the top of her voice, tears streaming down her cheeks. The basket would be worth twopence or less and she had made many shillings on the deal. Finally, a soldier good-naturedly threw it to her and it fell in the water about three feet from the shore. She hurled herself upon it waist deep in the water and seized it, then waved her arms and leaped about in a dance of ecstatic triumph that would have made her fortune at the Hippodrome.

Another feature of the Narrows is the reed villages. This, of course, does not exclusively belong to this region, but it is here, when tied up to the bank, that the best opportunity of a close view is taken.

That houses can be built in practically no time and out of almost anything has been abundantly claimed at home by numerous enterprising firms by ocular demonstration at the Building Trades and Ideal Home Exhibitions. Cement guns and climbing scaffolding, we are assured, will raise crops of mansions at a prodigious pace, and the housing problem is all but solved. If we have not noticed many new houses it is not for want of inventors. Yet the best of these efforts is elaborately cumbersome compared with housing schemes on these flat lands bordering the Tigris and Euphrates. Not only has the Marsh Arab evolved a style of dwelling that can be built in a night, but he can boast of a device still more alluring in its naivety and utility—the *Portable Village*!

[Illustration: A MARSH ARAB REED VILLAGE]

I once made a sketch of a Marsh Arabs' village at evening (reproduced facing p. 34), and on returning thither on the following morning to verify certain details, I found it had gone! I succeeded in tracking it down again by the afternoon, about ten miles from its former situation, and found the mayor (or whatever the Marsh-Mesopotamian equivalent may be) inspecting the finishing touches being made to the borough. Of course it is

frightfully muddling, all this moving about of villages, to the stranger who is not keeping a sharp look-out and marking well such impromptu geographical activity.

Page 12

Along the shores of the rivers of Mesopotamia and in the innumerable lagoons and backwaters that abound can be found large areas of tall reeds, ranging from quite slight rushes to canes twenty feet high. It is with such material the Marsh Arab builds. The long rods he bends into arches like croquet hoops. On this skeleton, not unlike the ribs of a boat turned upside down, he stretches large mats woven out of rushes. At the ends he builds up a straight wall of reed straw bound up in flat sheaves. An opening is left for an entrance, a mat, sometimes of coloured material, doing duty for a door.

So much for the principal and removable part of the village. However, the town planner will add to this by improvising mud enclosures for animals, and an occasional wall and "tower." The mud is mixed with cut grass and reeds, quickly drying into a hard substance, and sufficiently permanent for anything that such a temporary village requires.

In the bright sunlight of the Mesopotamian plains, and probably also on account of their prominence at a distance over the flat land, some of these mud buildings look quite imposing. I remember once approaching a city with ramparts, towers, and formidable walls which, on close inspection, turned out to be a small mud enclosure of the most decrepit kind.

Great changes have been made in the rule of the waterways of Mesopotamia. Sinbad the Sailor has given place to Sinbad the Soldier, the Inland Water Transport.

We have learnt, as we were advised to do in regard to the things of Mesopotamia, to think amphibiously.

[Illustration: Noah's Ark, 1919.]

IV

THE WISE MEN FROM THE WEST

[Illustration: Upward bound on the Tigris.]

[Illustration]

THE WISE MEN FROM THE WEST

The story of Mesopotamia is a story of irrigation. "It is not improbable," writes Sir William Willcocks, the great irrigationist, "that the wisdom of ancient Chaldea had its foundations in the necessity of a deep mastery of hydraulics and meteorology, to enable the ancient settlers to turn what was partially a desert and partially a swamp into fields of world-famed fertility." The civilizations of Babylon and Assyria owed their very life to

the science of watering the land, and even in the later times of Haroun Alraschid their great systems had been well maintained. It is said of Maimun, the son and successor of this monarch, that he exclaimed, as he saw Egypt spread out before him, "Cursed be Pharaoh who said in his pride, 'Am I not Pharaoh, King of Egypt?' If he had seen Chaldea he would have said it with humility."

Page 13

Allowing for a certain amount of patriotic exaggeration, the exclamation at least shows at what a high degree of excellence the irrigation system of Mesopotamia was maintained in the 10th century A.D. Yet Mesopotamia is to-day a desert except for the regions in the immediate vicinity of the rivers. You can go westwards from Baghdad to the Euphrates, and every mile or so you will have to cross earthworks, not unlike irregular railway embankments, showing a vast system of irrigation channels both great and small. But there is not a drop of water near and not a tree and no sign of any life. How came the change and how can such a network of channels have ceased to work entirely?

The reason is to be found in some past neglect of the ancient dams that kept the water on a high level, so that it could flow by means of artificial canals at a greater height (and consequently at a slower rate) than the rivers themselves. The Tigris and Euphrates are rivers fed by the melting snow in the mountains of Armenia. The hotter the season and the more necessary a plentiful supply of water, the greater is the amount brought down. The rivers, however, when they reach the flat alluvial plain between the region round about Baghdad and the Persian Gulf, when left to themselves are always bringing down a deposit and choking themselves up and then breaking out in a new direction, causing swamps and turning much of the land into useless marsh. Consequent also upon this silting-up process the banks of the rivers are higher than the surrounding country, and there is a gentle drop in the level of the land as it recedes from the river.

[Illustration: MUD HOUSES ON THE TIGRIS]

The object of the ancient irrigationists was to tap the rivers at the higher part of this plain, and then, by means of great canals, lead the water where they wanted it. Large reservoirs and lakes for storing surplus water were made, and thus the uneven delivery of water by the rivers was checked and a more regular and manageable supply maintained.

The greatest of these ancient channels was the Nahrwan. A regulator, the ruins which are still traceable in the bed of the Tigris, turned sufficient water into this high-level river at Dura. It stretched southwards for about 250 miles along the left bank of the Tigris. It was the neglect of this canal that led to a fearful catastrophe which must have been responsible for the death of millions; a catastrophe which turned some 20,000 square miles of fruitful land, teeming with populous cities, into a dismal swamp.

The intake from the Tigris of this and other canals evidently silted up, and thus enormous volumes of water, usually carried off by them in times of flood, helped to swell this river till, bursting its banks, it inundated the whole country. The result remains to-day—a vast tract of swampy land, barren and almost useless, except to a few wandering tribes of Arabs.

Page 14

And now the land which sent its Wise Men to the West is looking towards the West again for aid. If its ancient prosperity is to be restored, if Chaldea is again to be a granary to the world, it is to the West that it must turn. Science and machinery shall again make the waste places to be inhabited and the desert blossom as the rose. Thus shall the wise men return to them—the Wise Men of the West. In every important agricultural centre are to be found irrigation officers—the first-fruits of British occupation.

There was only one subject of conversation in Mesopotamia in the winter of 1918-1919, and that was the chances of getting back home. There was very little to do at Basra except watch steamers load up with the more fortunate candidates for demobilization and give them a send-off. Brown had no difficulty in getting three weeks' leave to accompany me in some of my expeditions to gather up such fragments as remained of naval subjects on the rivers. We determined on a voyage of discovery up the Euphrates in search of the famous "fly-boats" which had figured so vividly in the early days of naval river fighting, and which now were more or less peacefully employed. I had to make many sketches of them for further use, and succeeded in finding a whole "bag" at Dhibban.

[Illustration: A MAHAILA OF THE INLAND WATER TRANSPORT]

We embarked in an ancient-looking stern paddler named *Shushan*. As we had to camp out in a somewhat rough-and-ready way, with not a little discomfort owing to a spell of very cold weather, Brown insisted on referring to her as *Shushan the Palace*.

She had a tall funnel, like the tug in Turner's *Fighting Temeraire*, and kicked up a tremendous wash with her paddle, the whole effect being faintly reminiscent of a hay-making machine. She pushed her way along, slightly "down by the head," as if she had suddenly thought of something and was putting on a spurt to make up for lost time. I cannot lay hands on a sketch of her, but the one reproduced at the head of this chapter will give some idea of her character. Take away one funnel and place it amid-ships, reduce her tonnage a little, and you have the *Shushan* to the life.

This gallant little curiosity is no late conscripted product of the war. She is one of the pukka ships of the Navy in Mesopotamia—one of the Old Contemptibles. Armed with a three-pounder which caused such havoc to her decks when fired that it is reported the ship had to be turned round after each round. Two shots in succession in the same direction would have wrecked the vessel.

A host of amusing stories of her exploits were told us by her C.O., who was an R.N.V.R. Lieutenant. Some practical joker produced a cylinder alleged to be in cuneiform writing. A translation of the inscription proved beyond doubt that the *Shushan* was used by Nebuchadnezzar as a royal yacht, and is the last surviving link with the Babylonian navy.

Page 15

When the Turks had fled from Kurna and we were chasing them up the river with an amazing medley of craft, like a nightmare of Henley regatta suddenly mobilized, the *Shushan* was in the forefront of the battle. Led by the sloops *Espiegle*, *Clio*, and *Odin*, the Stunt Armada came to Ezra's Tomb at twilight. The river was high and the land in between the great bends was a maze of rushes and lagoons. Hospital hulks like Noah's arks, little steamers, and loaded mahailas jostled each other in their endeavours to get up against the strong stream. The hulks and the barges were dropped at the bend shown in the sketch, facing page 46, and the *Odin* anchored. We had captured already some Turkish barges, and prisoners had to be collected.

The rest pushed on. Across the bend, some two or three miles away, the Turkish gunboat *Marmaris* was putting on every ounce of fuel she had, and a mass of mahailas and tugs were doing their best to escape the Nemesis that awaited them. Then the sloops opened fire, and a desultory cannonade was kept up as it grew darker and darker. At last it was too dark to get any sort of aim, and firing ceased. The *Marmaris* had been set alight by her crew, but we captured the whole of the enemy's flotilla.

[Illustration: EZRA'S TOMB]

Ezra's Tomb is a splendid spot to look at. Mosquitoes at times makes it far from pleasant to live in. The blue-tiled dome surrounded by palms, one of which is bending down in a manner strange to such a straight-growing tree, is an oasis in a vast wilderness of nothing in particular.

The Euphrates from a scenic point of view might be described as more wooded than the Tigris. There are some delightful glimpses of waterside verdure and rush-covered shores. To the archaeologist and the historian Mugheir is intensely interesting, for the great mound discloses the site of the ancient Ur—Ur of the Chaldees—from which Abraham set out towards Canaan.

Up till now, upon a map of the world in Abraham's time, the good little *Shushan* would still be at sea. She would be approaching the coast at the mouth of the river Euphrates, the Tigris flowing-out some fifty miles further east. Dockyards and busy workshops would proclaim the vicinity of this capital, the greatest of all the cities of Chaldea.

Since these prosperous days the sea has receded about 150 miles, and left Ur a nondescript heap to be disputed over by professors.

At length, when we had said good-bye to the *Shushan* and taken to a motor-boat, we arrived at Hillah, bent on finding the house of the irrigation officer. We landed on the wrong side of the river and rashly let the boat go back. Brown maintains now that this was my idea, but as a matter of fact it was one of his attempts at a picturesque approach—for my benefit. Brown has a vivid imagination, and sees so clearly in his mind how a place *ought* to be that he really believes it is so. In this case he pictured us

approaching Hillah and looking down upon miles and miles of fruitful gardens intersected with little waterways—a sort of landscape-garden Venice. This view could only be obtained from a high cliff, and as there was no cliff in lower Mesopotamia, except in Brown's imagination, it was natural that he would be disappointed.

Page 16

A sudden white fog, moreover, took away any chance of a view of any kind, and we were soon hopelessly lost. Some soldiers we met on the way told us to keep straight on and then turn to the left by some palm trees. As we soon encountered some palm trees every few yards we wondered whether they intended to be humorous. I don't think they did, however. The optimism of you-can't-possibly-miss-it type is too general. The man who says "turn down by some trees" knows the place well, and can see certain trees in his mind's eye. He will turn when he sees the right trees, but you will probably get lost.

Needless to say, everything went wrong with our scheme of approaching the irrigation works from a picturesque angle. The dense fog thickened and shrouded the neighbourhood of the river in impenetrable mystery. We kept turning down by palm trees as directed, but to no purpose. We struck the river bank again after much wandering and kept to it, hoping the mist would clear. A man in a goufa appeared from nowhere and floated away out of sight into nowhere like a ghostly visitant from another world. The sun began to show through the fog and blue sky appeared overhead. Soon the steaming vapours dispersed, showing a view of buildings among palm trees and a bridge of boats.

[Illustration: Hillah.]

Here again we were held up while countless mahailas passed through, but we succeeded in getting over at last and eventually found the house of the Wise Men, the headquarters of the irrigation officers.

Had we been ambassadors on a diplomatic visit to Hillah, we could not have been more hospitably entertained or given greater facilities for getting about in a most fascinating region of the world for any one who felt the glamour of history in this once highly civilized country.

Great buildings like Ctesiphon near Baghdad or traces of the vast irrigation works of the past are full of interest, but for romance and mystery there is no piece of the world more fraught with meaning than this site of the city of Nebuchadnezzar, nearly 200 square miles in extent, and now, but for the comparatively small tract of irrigated land, a desert.

"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of devils."

[Illustration]

V

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

[Illustration: Ctesiphon.]

[Illustration]

BY THE WATERS OF BABYLON

The irrigation officers at Hillah were ideal hosts, not only from the commonly accepted standpoint, but from that of an artist. They let me roam about and sketch what *I* wanted, not what *they* wanted. They gave me every means of transport, and such suggestions as they made as to possible subjects were excellent and offered with such tact that there was no difficulty in abstaining from sketching or going on with something else.

Page 17

How often does the unfortunate painter suffer from the well-meaning host, who with an admiration for his calling, which is both extremely flattering and tremendously inconvenient, tries to do him well—especially if he dabbles a little in water-colour painting himself. An organized attack on all the real or supposed picturesque bits in the neighbourhood is planned and the members of his family outdo each other in praiseworthy endeavours to help on the great cause of Art. The campaign is prefaced by a violent discussion at G.H.Q. as to the best landscape within easy reach, and Millie, who has had lessons in pastelles, prevails over Mollie, who merely does pen painting. The wretched painter is then hauled triumphantly into a car surrounded by the artistic, who regard him with almost heathen veneration and feel thrilled by the fact that they, too, observe that the sky is blue and the trees are green. Arriving at the chosen scene and viewing it from the spot “from which they always take it,” the unfortunate artist is stood or seated down, book in hand, complete with paintbox and water, and expected to begin. *He* does not have any voice in the choosing of the view. It is high noon. The sun is right in front of him and everything is so hard that even Turner could make nothing of it. The worshippers at the shrine of art stand round in awed anticipation, waiting for the masterpiece.

It is useless for him to protest that the conditions are impossible. “After such kindness that would be a dismal thing to do.” So he contrives to make some sort of a drawing which dims the lustre of his reputation in their eyes for many years to come.

[Illustration: ON THE EUPHRATES, EARLY MORNING]

The major took us in his car to various points along the river and explained the means employed in irrigation. On the Euphrates there are two methods used for local irrigation apart from the system of canals flowing from the river. One is the water-wheel, a curious contrivance built out on stone piers. It consists of a huge paddle-wheel with buckets like those of a dredger, that fills a trough that runs down into the fields.

The other is a water-raising device that is worked by bullocks. A large leather skin is hauled up from the river by a rope over a wheel. This rope is harnessed to a bullock which walks backwards and forwards hauling up the water-skin and letting it down again. When the full skin reaches the top it hits against a bar and pours itself out into a trough. These two systems, as can be easily imagined, are good only for the land in the immediate vicinity of the river bank, as the supply of water is necessarily not large. Above all the frequency of the water-wheels with their stone piers causes so much obstruction that navigation for any large boats is impossible. In one place there are seven wheels abreast.

At last we arrived at an old bridge crossing one of the ancient canals, which branched off from the river in a westerly direction. I have sketched it on page 57. It is extremely interesting as an example of the resuscitation of the old waterways of Babylonia. The banks of this channel here take almost a mountainous character for so flat a country.

This piling up of mounds has been caused by clearing the silt from the entrance to the intake of the canal.

Page 18

From the vantage point of this high ground we could see a goodly prospect, and on the one side the river, here called the Hindeyeh canal, with its green shore and on the other a belt of date palms and beyond the illimitable desert. Some five or six miles away there appeared a mound surmounted by a tower, a curious object alone in the great expanse of flat land.

"What is that thing," I asked, "that looks like a ruined castle on the Rhine?"

"The Tower of Babel," replied the major, "or rather that is its popular name. It is Birs Nimrud on the map." Brown wanted to start straight away and "discover" it, but we persuaded him to assent to lunch first. The major was too busy for such an escapade, but he suggested lending us a Ford car which would do anything with the desert and which we could not break, so we returned to Hillah.

After lunch we set out on our expedition, Brown very silent and full, no doubt, of romantic projects, and arrived back again at the bridge where I made my sketch. It appears that the route was not direct as far as the car was concerned, owing to the crossing of some water channels, but that on foot we should be able to do it. I knew Brown was concocting something, and he soon let out what it was. His scheme was to send the car round to meet us at the Tower of Babel and we would walk. I think he rather liked the idea of saying "Tower of Babel" to the driver instead of "home." I consented, rather against my better judgment, for I fear Brown's enthusiasm for dramatic settings. His pathetic belief that my next picture for the R.A. would be entitled "The Tower of Silence," and that I should achieve a masterpiece in depicting the blood-red ruin at sunset across the desert was somewhat disarming. He forgot in his enthusiasm that if the sun *did* set when we were in the required position we should be benighted on the plain without food or shelter, and not at all in the mood for painting pictures.

[Illustration: Ancient irrigation channel near Hillah.]

Practical difficulties still existed, inasmuch as we were for a long time unable to explain to the native driver that he was to meet us at Birs Nimrud, and feared, if we were not very explicit, he would return to Hillah and we might never be heard of again. Brown's pantomimic attempts at direction were obscure even to me, and I am sure the driver thought he had gone out of his mind. They consisted in his stooping down with his hand on the ground, then rising slowly, turning round and round, his hand describing a spiral curve, till it shot up straight over his head. Then he pointed to the car. There was evidently some implied connection between the spiral curve and the car. How long this would have gone on I do not know had I not tried the words "Birs Nimrud." The driver understood this and I think we made it clear that whatever happened he was to be at Birs Nimrud and wait for us. So we started off on foot.

Page 19

[Illustration: BABYLON: THE EXCAVATIONS AT EL KASR]

[Illustration: Tower of Babel (Fig. 1).]

When we were well under way, I asked Brown, who is a freemason, if he was endeavouring to reach the understanding of the native by means of some mystic Eastern ritual unknown to me. He was quite scornful of my want of intelligence and explained that his movements were intended to describe the tower that had been built from earth to reach up into heaven. It was perfectly clear, he maintained, that if he first indicated the Tower of Babel and then the Ford car, the driver would see, had he been reasonably intelligent, that he was to take the car to the tower.

The journey over the plain towards the mound and tower was not so eventful as we had expected it to be. Beyond jumping many small watercourses or negotiating muddy patches left by the recent rain, we found no difficulty in keeping a straight course. A herd of camels trotted away as we approached and we started up a fox. Otherwise we came across no sign of life. As we advanced mile upon mile the mysterious tower seemed to get further away, an illusion possible in flat countries. I have often observed a similar phenomenon in Holland. Perhaps in this case mirage had something to do with it.

A mosque or tomb became visible and then, almost suddenly, we seemed to get to close quarters with everything. A ridge rose up from the flat land and from this point of vantage, known as the tomb of Abraham, we could look across a level zone a few hundred yards wide to the long, irregular hummock about a hundred feet high, although in this setting it looked a great deal more. The east side of this small range is scored with miniature wadies washed out by rain, and the crowning ruin appeared (as in sketch, Fig. 1), casting a long shadow down the slope of the hill.

Leaving the high ground we skirted the foot of the mound, going southwards and seeing it from the point of view indicated in Fig. 2, and then as at Fig. 3. A group of Arabs bargaining about coins and attempting to sell curios to two British officers, who had dismounted from their horses, made a tremendous hubbub and, as Brown noted, gave the right local colour as to the confusion of tongues.

I am ill-equipped with books of reference out here, but in one of Murray's handbooks I have unearthed the following note—all I can find about this place:—

[Illustration: The Tower of Babel.]

[Illustration: Tower of Babel (Fig. 2).]

“BIRS NIMRUD, about 21½ hours from Hillah, is a vast ruin crowned apparently by the ruins of a tower rising to a height of 153½ ft. above the plain, and having a

circumference of rather more than 2000 feet. The Birs, which was situated within the city of Borsippa, has been wrongly identified with the Tower of Babel. It is the temple of Nebo, called the 'Temple of the seven spheres of Heaven and Earth,' and was a sort of pyramid built in seven stages, the stairs being ornamented with the planetary colours, and on the seventh was an ark or tabernacle. The Birs was destroyed by Xerxes and restored by Antiochus Soter. The Tower of Babel was possibly the Esagila of the inscriptions, or the E-Temenanki—a tower not yet identified. Not far from Birs Nimrud are the ruins of Hashemieh, the first residence of the Abbaside Khalifs."

Page 20

Brown would have none of this. Anything is anathema to Brown which destroys topographical romance. He is a fierce enemy to “higher criticism,” which does away with the whale in the book of Jonah or the snow-clad summit of Mount Ararat as the resting-place of the ark. It is quite exciting, he maintains, to picture the ark stuck on the perilous ice-peaks of a glacier, with Noah and his family endeavouring to get the elephants and giraffes safely down a ravine like the Mer de Glace to the more temperate regions of the plains below. How much better than thinking of it stuck fast on some wretched mound by the Euphrates, 30 feet high.

[Illustration: AN OLD WORLD CRAFT, A TYPE OF BOAT UNCHANGED SINCE THE DAYS OF SINBAD]

[Illustration: Tower of Babel (Fig. 3).]

Here was a find, too good to be lost, a high tower on a mound visible from afar and unrivalled by any equally picturesque claimant. It looked the part splendidly, so the Tower of Babel it should be as far as Brown was concerned.

As a matter of fact, Brown “let himself go” with historical speculations and discovered not only that this was the Tower of Babel, but that it was the site of Nebuchadnezzar’s fiery furnace, with evident signs, from a fragment of calcined brick, which he bore away in triumph, that it had been heated seven times hotter on some occasion.

We climbed about the ruin, unearthed several coins, which seemed quite plentiful in one place where the rain had washed down the side of a small mound, and found obvious signs of some great conflagration. Brown says that, as no one has got any better explanation of this fire than he has, he will stick to his furnace theory.

The native driver turned up all right with the car and took us back to Hillah. From there we crossed the river by the bridge of boats and at a distance of about five miles came upon the scene of the great excavations, which, although the city is said to have extended over an area of some 200 square miles, is generally known as the site of Babylon. It was in 1899, that the German archaeologist, Dr. Koldewey, began excavations on a large scale and with systematic care.

Although Babylon was a site occupied by some city in prehistoric times, as stone and flint implements denote, the earliest *houses* of which there are any traces belong to about 2000 B.C. It was Nebuchadnezzar, however (605—562 B.C.), who rebuilt the city and made it very splendid, and it is to this period of his reign that the greater part of the ruins of the great city belong. The mound Babil is thought to be the palace of Nebuchadnezzar II. An inscription reads: “On the brick wall towards the north my heart inspired me to build a palace for the protecting of Babylon. I built there a palace, like the palace of Babylon, of brick and bitumen.”

[Illustration: BELLAMS UNDER SAIL]

Page 21

The principal excavations are in the Kasr, at one time a vast block of buildings where are still the traces of a great and broad street used as a processional road to the temple of E-Sagila, which lies to the south about 700 yards away. Some of the stones of this road are in their original places, and there are pieces of brick pavement, each bearing cuneiform characters. If you take up a brick and look at it casually, you might think that it had "Jones & Co." or the "Sittingbourne Brick Co." stamped upon it and it does not look at all old. It is rather startling to be told that the letters read:—

"I am Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon; I paved the Babel Way with blocks of *shadu* stone for the procession of the great lord Marduk. O Marduk, Lord, grant long life."

These mounds of the Kasr have suffered by successive generations of brick getters. Half Hillah is said to be built out of bricks from the ruins of Babylon, and bricks are still taken for any building operations that occur within easy access of these well-nigh inexhaustible supplies. In one place, the Temple of Nin-Makh, the Great Mistress, there are to be found an immense number of little clay images, thought to be votive offerings made by women to the great Mother Goddess.

In the Mound of Amram, according to Major R. Campbell Thompson, are traces of the E-Temenanki referred to in Murray's handbook as not yet identified. [My Murray's handbook is 15 years old.] He writes, in a most useful little book published in Baghdad, 1918, "History and Antiquities of Mesopotamia":—"A hundred yards north of the north slope of Amram is the ancient *zigurrat* or temple-tower of the famous E-Temenanki: 'the foundation stone of Heaven and Earth' (the Tower of Babylon). The enclosing wall forms almost a square, and part has been excavated, but all the buildings have suffered from brick-robbers. The remains of the actual Tower are towards the south-west corner.

"Many ancient restorations were carried out here. Professor Koldewey found inscriptions of Esarhaddon and Sardanapalus and thereafter inscriptions of Babylonian Kings. Herodotus calls the group of buildings 'the brazen-doored sanctuary of Zeus Below,' and he describes the *zigurrat* as a temple-tower in eight stages. The cuneiform records of Nabopolassar relate how the god Marduk commanded him 'to lay the foundation of the Tower of Babylon ... firm on the bosom of the underworld while its top should stretch heavenwards.'"

The first impression of the Kasr is that of a shelled town or mined flour mill, where nothing remains but the lower walls of buildings. From a painter's point of view, the scene of this great city, about which he has pictured so much, is somewhat disappointing. There is such an absence of anything suggestive of palaces and streets. Frankly, the ruins of the cement works at Frindsbury are, pictorially, far more suggestive. I have always said that the hanging gardens of Borstal knocked spots off the hanging gardens of Babylon, and now I know it. So much for a first impression.

Page 22

After awhile, however, wandering amongst these hummocks and pits, with here and there a suggestion of a gateway or pavement, the glamour of it all begins to return.

[Illustration: BABYLON THE GREAT IS FALLEN, IS FALLEN]

It is not to the eye that the appeal of poetry is made, but to the imagination.

There is a figure of a stone lion trampling on a man, but this was unearthed and set up by a French engineer, and is not explanatory of any scheme of sculptural work. It is merely a monument. There is also a brick pillar, the bricks being uncommonly like London stock bricks, which might be part of a fallen chimney in a ruined factory. These are the only architectural signs at first visible.

On descending to the passages and ways made by the base walls of buildings, lions and monsters moulded in the brickwork appear, but they are only to be seen at close quarters, and in one part of this vast wilderness of brick, and do not affect in any way the general character of the place—a place of loneliness and of utter desolation. The whole area is like a small range of hills, down the slopes of which are steep descents to clefts sometimes filled with reeds and rushes and stagnant pools of water. The site of the world-renowned hanging gardens is now marked by a series of nondescript lumps. The great temple of Marduk is a dusty heap of brick rubbish, and the Palace of Nebuchadnezzar appears as a mean slag heap looking down upon a land desolate and empty.

This is Babylon, the glory of kingdoms, the beauty of the Chaldees.

“It shall never be inhabited, neither shall it be dwelt in from generation to generation; neither shall the Arabian pitch tent there; neither shall the shepherds make their fold there.

“But wild beasts of the desert shall lie there; and their houses shall be full of doleful creatures; and owls shall dwell there and satyrs shall dance there.

“And the wild beasts of the islands shall cry in their desolate houses, and dragons in their pleasant palaces.”

[Illustration]

VI

ARABIAN NIGHTS IN 1919

[Illustration: GOUFAS ON THE TIGRIS]

[Illustration]

ARABIAN NIGHTS IN 1919

Somewhere in Mesopotamia, in the desert country that lies between the Euphrates at Felujeh and the Tigris, and in the neighbourhood of a walled-in group of buildings known as Khan Nuqtah, in the month of February of this year, and on a singularly miserable and rainy afternoon, there might have been seen a dark object moving very slowly across the uninteresting field of vision. At a distance it would not have been very easy to make out the nature of the thing, and a newcomer to the scene, with no local knowledge of circumstantial evidence to guide him, would have hesitated between a buffalo or a hippopotamus and finally given a vote in favour of it being some slime-crawling saurian that we come across in pictures of antediluvian natural history.

Page 23

A closer view, however, would have made clear to him that it was no animal, but some species of tank, coated and covered with mud, accompanied by three similarly encased attendants, probably human beings, staggering and skidding about in its immediate vicinity. From time to time, one of these three would mount on the head or fore-part of this object, with the effect of causing it to slide and plunge forward for a few yards to stick again and again, snorting and panting and unable apparently to make any further progress.

A detective, equipped with a certain amount of motor knowledge, might have been able to discern that the mud-encrusted monster was a Ford car. A tailor, whose technical training would help him to penetrate the disguise of thick slime, might have been able to recognize by the cut of their clothes that the first of the three figures was an R.A.F. driver and the other two were naval officers. As a matter of fact one of these forlorn representatives of our boasted sea-power was Brown, and the other one, although I think he would have hesitated to swear to his identity at the time, was the unfortunate writer of these chronicles.

There was no doubt about it; we were done.

“At the present rate of progress we shall reach Baghdad in about ten days,” said the driver, “and it’s getting worse.”

[Illustration: A STREET IN KHADAMAIN]

A few more hours’ rain and no power on earth would move the car an inch. We knew from experience that nothing could be done for four or five days, so we faced the situation philosophically, shouldered a bag each and staggered in the sliding mud in the direction of the Khan. We started off with no illusions as to our fate if we encountered rain, and were therefore quite prepared for this. There was nothing for it but to camp out somehow until the sun had been given a chance. The fact that we had been able to reach this point with the Khan and railway close at hand was a piece of luck for which we were thankful.

Brown was by far the best exponent of this art of walking in mud while carrying weight. The driver was quite good at it, having had considerable practice on similar occasions. I was uncompromisingly bad. I sat down three or four times to the driver’s once. Brown did not sit down at all, but he did some amazing movements in skidding, reminding one in a somewhat vague way of the tramp cyclist of the music-hall stage.

I have often thought since these days of mud in Mesopotamia that a vast fortune might be made by some one who could find a commercial use for a substance, as slippery as oil, as indelible in staining properties as walnut juice, and as adhesive as fish glue. Large quantities of Mesopotamian mud could be shipped to London and made up into tubes. Then all that would be necessary would be three distinctive labels. One could

describe it as a wonderful lubricant and cheap substitute for machine oil. Another could proclaim to the world a new washable distemper. A third could laud it as a marvellous paste or cement that would adhere to anything whatsoever.

Page 24

"There is one comfort," Brown gasped in an interval between two very energetic spells of sliding, "if we can't move the Ford, nobody else can!"

In the circumstances of the moment I cannot say that I felt much "comfort" in contemplating the car's condition. In fact I didn't care in the least whether I saw the thing again or not. All I cared about was reaching the Khan and putting down my bag. We found tracks where some scrubby plants were growing, where the surface was passable, but as we neared the entrance to the Khan, where carts and horsemen had made a veritable quagmire, we stuck, all three, without apparently any prospect of getting on at all unless we abandoned our baggage. However, some Arabs came to our assistance and relieved us of our burdens, so that we gained our objective.

Beginning our toilet by scraping each other down with a ruler, so that we could see which was which, we soon evolved into something like our normal selves. We had a few clothes to change into, but neither Brown nor I had a complete set of everything. The result was that Brown looked like a naval officer that had taken up cement making and I appeared to be a cement worker, finished off, as the eye followed me downwards, with very smart trousers and regulation naval boots.

[Illustration: MOONLIGHT, BAGHDAD]

The Khan was a poor enough shelter as far as accommodation went, but we managed to make up a good fire and get tolerably dry. Some tea, made by the ever resourceful driver, raised our spirits considerably, and we talked over plans for the immediate future. Enquiries revealed the fact that we were in great luck about trains, which appeared at intervals of several days, as one was due in a few hours that would reach Baghdad the same night. The driver had found others held up with their cars, so we left him to stand by till better weather made movement possible and decided to put in a few days at Baghdad instead of waiting here.

At about 7 o'clock, a train of miscellaneous construction steamed in from the direction of Dhibban, bound for Baghdad. This bit of line runs from Baghdad to the Euphrates and is important because it links up the two great waterways and is always available when motor transport is impossible on account of the state of the roads.

We clambered into a covered van, specially reserved—a sort of Mesopotamian Pullman car. It contained a great litter of odd baggage and two Hindu officers who were very luxuriously fitted up with beds and a table. Divesting ourselves of our wet trench-coats, for it was still raining, we made some sort of a seat of our bags and were tolerably comfortable. Brown, who, now that he was dry and warm and well fed, was in the highest spirits, prophesied that our arrival in the enchanted city of the Arabian Nights was well timed, for it was Friday night, when all the mosques would be lighted up.

"A million tapers flaring bright
From twisted silvers look'd to shame
The hollow-vaulted dark, and stream'd
Upon the mooned domes aloof
In inmost Bagdat, till there seem'd
Hundreds of crescents on the roof
Of night new-risen." [2]

Page 25

So sang Brown, with a map spread out, proving to me that we must alight at Baghdad South to get the best effect as we gazed entranced at the night glory of Bagdat's shrines of fretted gold and walked on to find romance and mystery by many a shadow-chequer'd lawn.

"So much better," he argued, "to approach it gradually like this instead of arriving in a matter-of-fact way by train." It was still raining hard, and I had grave doubts about the splendour we were enjoying so much in anticipation, but I did not throw all cold water on his scheme, especially as much of it was planned for my benefit. Art would be the richer, although we, its humble devotees, might be the wetter.

I forget now, very clearly what did happen when we arrived at Baghdad South, because we had stopped some time, shunting about, and did not know that we were there. When at last we discovered that we were at the station the train was just moving off. Brown shouted to me to jump out and take our bags. I did so as best I could, but found myself up to my ankles in liquid mud, not a good position at any time for catching heavy baggage at a height, but singularly awkward in view of the fact that Brown in the dark could not see where I was and hurled the bags just out of reach, but sufficiently near to me to cover me with a kind of soup.

[Illustration: A NOCTURNE OF BAGHDAD]

My next recollection is that of Brown, dark against the sky, describing a parabolic curve and alighting further up the line. The train had gone, and a sloppy gurgling noise mingled with muffled exclamations growing more distinct indicated that Brown was endeavouring to walk in my direction. These were the only sounds that interrupted the steady noise of pouring rain. There was nothing in sight. Not only was it that we could not see the splendour of Baghdad; we could not see each other.

After an interval of groping about and finding bearings, we began to get accustomed to the gloom and discerned some sheds or buildings up the line. Thinking this was the station we plodded on as steadily as possible through the mud. Dimly, through the rain, we could make out some palms and what appeared to be a domed building and a minaret. Then we reached a large wooden shed out of the shadow of which loomed an engine. It evidently had steam up, so we stopped and gave it a hail.

I think I shall never forget the surprise of the next few minutes. As if in answer to our hail, a door opened in the dark mass of the shed and revealed a workshop brilliantly lighted. Out of this stepped an Arab with a lamp in his hand, and gave us an answering shout We stepped into the light. I don't know which was most surprised, the native at seeing such curious figures staggering under large bags through the mud, or we, at beholding in the beam of light from the shed a magic vignette of palms, Eastern buildings and a large South Western Railway engine.

Brown was delighted.

Page 26

"The slave of the lamp," he cried, "calling up spirits from the vasty mud. I don't believe this engine is real, but it will do to get us into Baghdad."

And it *did*. We found a soldier driver and a stoker, got leave from headquarters to use the engine to run into Baghdad West, hurled our bags on to the coal in the tender and were transported unscathed by further mud to the quay by the waters of the Tigris. It was too dark to see much. A multitude of steamboats and mahailas lined the shore. The river was in flood and looked black and forbidding, and it was impossible to see across to the other side. The only light was supplied by a few electric lamps at intervals along the road. It still rained dismally and we made for a canteen close at hand. Here we felt quite at home, for there were several other arrivals as muddy as we were and even worse. Considering this was only a restaurant attached to a rest camp, we fared very well. Our baggage we left there and set out on foot to try and reach Navy House, which was the other side of the river. There were two boat-bridges we were told, and the upper one would lead us into the right quarter. The old Navy House, near to G.H.Q., was now used by some one else, and the British Navy, shrunk to very small proportions as far as Baghdad was concerned, "carried on" in a back street.

[Illustration: "A magic vignette of palms, Eastern buildings and a large South Western Railway engine."]

Our first check was at the bridge. Owing to the river being in flood, it was open, that is, the middle section had been floated out, for fear that the hawsers would not stand the strain and the only road across was the Maude Bridge lower down.

Brown was delighted. The rain had stopped and he anticipated adventure. The idea of getting across the river in a *goufa* flashed across his mind, but a glance at the foaming, tearing water was sufficient deterrent even to an optimist like Brown. It might be done in daylight, but at night it would be suicide.

We decided to make our way through the narrow streets that led by the side of the river until we struck the main road that approached the bridge of boats half a mile or so down. In theory this sounded very feasible, but in practice, owing to the tortuous nature of the ways and to the fact that it was very dark, we soon got lost. Twice, when we thought we were progressing well, we came upon the same place again. Then we struck the river, more or less by accident, and took fresh bearings of the general direction we were to pursue.

We plunged into a covered way, arched overhead like a cloister. This had the advantage of being dry and our speed increased considerably. From time to time a dim light gave a glimmer to show us the way.

[Illustration: "Suddenly we came upon a scene of strange beauty and dramatic effect."]

It was late and there were few people about. The figures that flitted by were silent and mysterious. A window here and there was lighted up, but for the most part the houses were dark and without sign of life. We found no “splendours of the golden prime of good Haroun Alraschid,” but for all that the narrow streets looked romantic and weird. The sky had cleared and the moonlight had given a glamour of phantasy to the vistas of the street.

Page 27

Suddenly we came upon a scene of strange beauty and dramatic effect. A turn in this narrow and cloister-like way brought us to an arched opening, with some steps leading to the water. It was a sheltered inlet from the surging and swirling stream of the Tigris, a kind of pocket built round by crazy old balconied buildings. This was filled with goufas, the weird round boat of the upper river, and the animated scene of people either embarking or disembarking made a strange people. We saw this scene for a few moments only, as we made our way through the crowd at this point. I have since wondered where all these goufas were going. They could not have intended to cross the river under present conditions. I think the rapidly rising river must have upset all calculations as to mooring boats at this point and their owners were making sure that they were secure. The noise and apparent excitement was probably nothing but the usual Eastern custom of making a great fuss about nothing.

[Illustration: MAHAILAS AND MARSH ARAB'S BELLAM]

At last, after much marching and counter-marching, we struck the main thoroughfare leading to the Maude bridge, which we crossed. The thick, seething waters foamed and struggled against the pontoons and swept down between them like roaring devils. We were very glad to get over, for it looked as though a little more force would have carried the whole thing away. Once clear of the bridge we found ourselves in New Street, the thoroughfare made since the British occupation, and incidentally we ran into a cheery naval officer who picked us up and deposited us again at Navy House, whither he was bound. Had we not received this timely aid I think we should have gone on looking for Navy House all night. A more amazing situation for it could not have been found, if you searched the world over.

Wedged in, cheek by jowl, with buildings that might have figured in the tall streets of old London, it lay nowhere near the water, down a very narrow and crooked lane, where mules and men, camels and beggars jostled each other on their lawful occasions.

When we had settled down there and had fine weather for several days, Brown, loath to waste the romance of old Baghdad during glorious moonlight nights, insisted on some mysterious expeditions which were for the purpose of adventure, but ostensibly arranged to give me an opportunity of sketching. He produced an Arab, arrayed in strange garments, to carry a light and generally act as a guide. We called him the slave of the lamp. I am quite certain that he thought Brown was mad, but this belief on the whole was rather an advantage, as he treated him with all the more respect because of his affliction, which he regarded as a special visitation of Allah.

[Illustration: "By garden porches on the brim,
The costly doors flung open wide."]

[Illustration: “All round about the fragrant marge,
From fluted vase and brazen urn,
In order, Eastern flowers large.”]

Page 28

I was surprised that he seemed to take great delight in my sketching, and several times, when I was making notes of some quaint latticed windows overhanging the narrow road, so that they nearly met, he became quite excited, chuckling and laughing to himself, as if in the enjoyment of some tremendous joke.

I discovered afterwards that Brown's native servant had been pulling the leg of our worthy slave, by telling him that these nightly expeditions were for the purpose of carrying off some ravishingly beautiful lady from one of the harems. No doubt he thought my sketching merely a blind. Measurements with a pencil were obviously part of some incantation.

While on the subject of sketching, especially quick note-taking under difficult conditions, I want a word with my fellow-craftsmen should they chance to take up this book. The difficulties of drawing by twilight, lamplight, and the still greater difficulty of drawing in colour under blazing sunlight, cannot easily be exaggerated. How many times has a sketch done in a failing light looked strong in tone, only to go to pieces when seen under normal conditions? How often the sunlight on your paper flatters your colours, so that you think you are improvising in a most joyous way, and when you get home you find nothing but dinginess and mud!

[Illustration: "By Baghdad's shrines of fretted gold,
High-walled gardens, green and old."]

Probably you have thought it out and found some solution as I did, but in case these difficulties are still formidable I will tell you of *one* way to reduce them to impotence. I take with me, on all occasions where there is to be great uncertainty of light, some coloured chalks. About six colours, picked to suit the kind of work attacked; either chalk pencils or hard pastilles will give you certain colour values in whatever light you find yourself, and even if you can hardly see what you are drawing these *must*, to some extent, standardize your values, so that your rough work can be washed over and brought up to any pitch of detail subsequently, without danger of the main tones of your sketch being wrong. The speed with which a sketch can be carried forward in this way, and the "quality" obtained by the rapid fusion of the chalk with the colour wash, are both pleasant surprises when experimenting in this medium.

Night after night we sallied forth and roamed about the narrow ways and tortuous turnings of old Baghdad. The bazaars are mostly covered in with arched masonry, and the effect is that of a long side aisle in a very untidy and greatly secularized cathedral. From time to time glimpses of the dark-blue, star-filled sky showed through openings overhead, and sometimes a quaintly framed view of a dome or minaret.

Page 29

On one occasion we embarked in a goufa, and floated down the rapidly flowing river, keeping close to the left bank and taking advantage of every eddy and corner of slack water made by projecting buildings, lest we should be swept down too far and lose control of our curious and difficult craft. The level of the water was far above the usual height and came up to the very thresholds of these riverside houses. We floated on, sometimes under the walls of dark gardens, sometimes getting glimpses of interiors—interiors which in this glamour of night romance suggested something of the splendour of Baghdad's old glory:—

“By garden porches on the brim,
The costly doors flung open wide,
Gold glittering through lamplight dim.”

We landed by the Maude bridge and explored further afield, finding “high-walled gardens” where we beheld

“All round about the fragrant marge,
From fluted vase and brazen urn,
In order, Eastern flowers large.”

By day, Baghdad is not so impressive. Too much squalor is apparent. Yet there are quaint street scenes.

Ancient windows, overhanging the street in one quarter, reminded me strongly of pictures of old London. The feature that I could not help noticing, not only in Baghdad but in all Mesopotamia, was the absence of local colour. It is true that the sun gives a blazing and confused suggestion of colour to objects by contrast with bluish shadows, especially in the evening, but there is often very little colour in things themselves. The East is supposed to be full of blazing colour and the North gray and drab. Yet compare a barge in Rotterdam or Rochester with one in Baghdad. The former is picked out in green and gold and glows with rich, red sails, while the latter, for all its sunshine, is the colour of ashes—not a vestige often of paint or gilding. Some mahailas I found with traces of rich colouring, blue and yellow (see sketch facing page 34), but this was exceptional. Perhaps the scarcity of paint during years of war may have had something to do with this noticeable absence of colouring in regard to both houses and boats. In spite of this slovenliness in detail there is colour and light in all recollections of Baghdad's dusty streets.

Somehow the discomfort and squalor is soon forgotten and the romance and picturesqueness of these far-off streets remains as a very pleasant memory amidst the winter fogs and coldness of our northern lands.

[Illustration: Showing the simplicity of Mesopotamian domestic architecture. Tigris.]

VII

IN OLD BAGHDAD

[Illustration: BAGHDAD]

[Illustration: "Puffing Billy in Bagdad."]

IN OLD BAGHDAD

Page 30

I suppose there is no city to be found anywhere in the world that would quite reach the standard of dazzling splendour of the Baghdad that we conjure up in our imagination when we think of the City of the Arabian Nights in the romantic days, so dear to our childhood, of Haroun-al-Raschid. We expect so much when we come to the real Baghdad, and we find so little—so little, that is, of the glamour of the East. Few “costly doors flung open wide,” but a great deal of dirt. Few dark eyes of ravishingly beautiful women peering coyly through lattice windows, but a great deal of sordid squalor. Few marvellous entertainments where we can behold the wonderful witchery of Persian dancing girls, but a theatre, the principal house of amusement in Baghdad—and lo, a man selling onions to the habitués of the stalls!

Of all the deadly dull shows I have ever seen I think the one I saw at Baghdad furnished about the dullest. There were two principal dancing girls—stars of the theatrical world of Mesopotamia—and a few others forming a kind of chorus. The orchestra, on the stage, consisted of a guitar, a sort of dulcimer, and a drum. The musicians made a most appalling noise and rocked to and fro, as if in the greatest enjoyment of the thrilling harmonies they were creating. The stars came on one at a time, the odd one out meanwhile augmenting the chorus, and sang a few verses of a song to a tune that can only be described as a Gregorian chant with squiggly bits thrown in. Of course I was unable to understand the words, but can bear witness to the fact that the tune did not vary the whole evening, and every gesture and attitude of the singer was exactly the same again and again as she went through the performance, and the dance which concluded each six or eight verses was also exactly the same every time. After this had been going on for about an hour the other girl came to the footlights. It was natural to expect a change; but no, she went through it all as if she had most carefully understudied the part. Neither of these girls was pretty or in the least attractive to look at. All I could assume, as the audience seemed quite satisfied, was that the words must have been extraordinarily brilliant or that the Baghdad public was very easily entertained.

[Illustration: A bit of Old Baghdad.]

The journey from Basra to Baghdad takes nearly a week in a “fast” steamer. It can be done, however, express, by taking the train from Basra to Amara, leaving Basra about five in the evening and arriving at Amara in the morning. Then the journey is continued by boat to Kut, and thence from Kut in the evening by train, arriving in Baghdad in the early morning—the whole distance within two days. The railway does not run the whole way. The journey from Amara to Kut sounds a mere link across the river, as the full name of Kut is Kut-el-Amara, and most people naturally suppose Amara is part of Kut. This is another Amara, however. The Amara from

Page 31

which we embark for Kut, a day's journey in a fast boat, is a large camp, and quite a town for Mesopotamia, captured from the Turks, early in the war, by sheer bluff. The Turkish commandant surrendered to a naval launch under the impression that about half the sea-power of the British Empire lay in the offing. As a matter of fact no other help of any kind arrived until the next day, and all the surrendered forces were kept on good behaviour by a Lieutenant and a marine—I think with one revolver between them.

Kut looks quite an imposing place from across the river. The sketch at the top of this article shows it when the water of the Tigris was particularly high. It is drawn from the site of the famous liquorice factory, which is now represented by a few mud heaps and one rusted piece of machinery. The long arcade with brick pillars runs along the margin of the river, suggestive of some ancient Babylonian city from this distance, and is but a sorry enough place in reality.

[Illustration: A MOONLIGHT FANTASY: KUT FROM THE RUINS OF THE LICQUORICE FACTORY]

Very little of the Baghdad as we know it to-day is old. By tradition it was founded in 762 A.D., and became the renowned capital of the Arab empire. It is said that the city grew till it covered some 25 square miles, reaching its high-water mark of splendour and magnificence under the Sultan Haroun-al-Raschid. The fame of its schools and learning was world-wide, and Baghdad became to the East what Rome became in the West.

For some five centuries this pre-eminence continued, until the Turkish nomadic tribes from Central Asia came on to the stage. They conquered Persia, Mesopotamia, and Syria.

The Turks extended their conquests to Egypt, and Baghdad, now on the decline, kept her head above water for another century. But Chingiz Khan, the Mongol, appeared on the scene, and his son and successor, Ogotay, overran the Caucasus, Hungary, and Poland. Baghdad was sacked by Hulagu in 1258, and the irrigation works of Mesopotamia were destroyed.

In spite of her decline and fall Baghdad is still a holy place to all faithful Mohammedans. It is the Mecca of the Shiah Mussulmans. Kerbela and Nejef are the great places of burial for the faithful, and among the common sights of the plains of Mesopotamia are endless caravans of corpses from the Persian hills or from the distant north.

The British occupation of Baghdad has been responsible for one broad street through the city, possible for ordinary traffic, but most of the bazaars are long covered-in ways, arched like cloisters and very picturesque at night. There are some wonderful blues on



domes and minarets, but it is not until you see the golden towers of Khadamaian that you get any glimpse of the splendour of the golden prime of good Haroun-al-Raschid. Khadamaian is a great place of pilgrimage, and so zealously guarded is the place that it is said no Christian would ever be allowed to come out of the great mosque alive. A golden chain hangs across the entrance. This can be seen in frontispiece sketch of this book. All good Mussulmans kiss this chain as they enter the sacred precincts.

Page 32

From many delightful points of view the gleaming towers of this place, seen through the palms and reflected in the flooded lagoons at the margin of the river, do indeed give us something of the colour and romance that we had expected to see and yet so rarely find in the sun-baked lands of Mesopotamia.

[Illustration]

VIII

PARADISE LOST

[Illustration: "Blossoms and fruit at once of golden hue Appeared, with gay enamelled colours mixed." —*Paradise Lost*, IV.]

[Illustration]

PARADISE LOST

The statement often made that Mesopotamia is a vast desert through which run two great rivers, bare but for the palm trees on their banks and flat as a pancake, is true as far as it goes. It is possible, however, to picture a land entirely different from Mesopotamia and still stick to this description. I have met countless men out there who have told me that they had built up in their minds a wrong conception of the country and a wrong idea of its character simply by letting their imagination get to work on insufficient data.

To begin with, the word "desert" generally suggests sand. People who have been to Egypt or seen the Sahara naturally picture a sandy waste with its accompanying oases, palms and camels. Mesopotamia, however, is a land of clay, of mud, uncompromising mud. The Thames and Medway saltings at high tide, stretching away to infinity in every direction—this is the picture that I carry in my mind of the riverside country between Basra and Amara. No blue, limpid waters by Baghdad's shrines of fretted gold, but pea-soup or *café au lait*. Even the churned foam from a paddle wheel is *café au lait* with what a blue-jacket contemptuously referred to as "a little more of the *au lait*!" At a distance it can be blue, gloriously blue, by reflection from the sky, but it will not bear close examination.

The railway skirts the river here, running from Ezra Tomb to Amara having started from Basra. Amara must not be confused with Kut-el-Amara. The names are a source of great confusion to newcomers. When I was told that the railway did not go any further than Amara, I lightheartedly pictured myself making my way across the river in a goufa or bellam and scorned the suggestion that I might have to wait some time for a steamer

to Kut. I thought Kut was on one side of the river and Amara on the other. It is, however, a twenty-four hours' journey in a fast boat.

It is perfectly true that the country is “as flat as a pancake” in original formation, but the traces of ancient irrigation systems, to say nothing of buried cities—Babylon is quite mountainous for Mesopotamia—make it a very bumpy plain in places.

[Illustration: DAWN AT AMARA]

Page 33

Now that the British are in occupation of the land instead of the Turk, the natural assumption of every patriotic Briton is that the desert will immediately blossom as the rose and the waste places become inhabited. But the difficulties, which are many—finance being, perhaps, the least of them—arise on all sides, when a study of the subject goes a little deeper than the generalizations popularly made about irrigation and its revival in a land which was once, before all things, dependent for its prosperity upon this science.

Of the two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, the banks of the Euphrates are the more wooded and picturesque and the Tigris is the busier. The backwaters, creeks and side channels of both are exceedingly beautiful, and here one can get a glimpse of the fertility that must have belonged to Mesopotamia when it was a network of streams and when the forests abounded within its borders. Centuries of neglect and the blight of the unspeakable Turk have dealt hardly with this country. It is indeed a Paradise Lost and it will be many a long day before it is Paradise Regained.

A beginning, however, has been made. Our army of occupation includes “irrigation officers,” and gradually the work of watering the country is extending. Hardly any tree but the palm is found, yet this is only for want of planting. The soil is good, and with an abundance of water, everything, from a field of corn to a forest, is possible.

I made some study of the irrigation work in progress, and picked up a little rudimentary information concerning this problem of the watering of the land, although I lay no claim to technical knowledge on the subject. The chief difficulty does not seem to be that of making the desert blossom as the rose, but that of causing the waste places to be inhabited. What the Babylonians with slave labour could do, modern machinery and science can quite easily achieve; but the difficulty of finding sufficient people to live in this resuscitated Eden will be great. Mesopotamia is not a white man’s country. India would appear to be the direction in which to look for colonists, but it is an unfortunate fact that the Arab does not like the Indian and the Indian does not like the Arab. Sooner or later there would be trouble.

[Illustration: A BACKWATER IN EDEN]

In the creeks the water is much clearer than in the river, as it deposits the silt when it flows more placidly than in the turmoil of the main stream. Oranges, bananas, lemons, mulberries abound, and vines trailing from palm to palm in some of the backwaters. In one narrow arm near Basra, a sort of communication trench between two canals, I saw orange bushes overhanging the water, and, growing with them, some plant with great white bells. I have sketched the effect on page 98, and incidentally show a bellam in which an old Arab is pushing his way through the overhanging shrubs. On page 105 is a goufa, a type of round

Page 34

wicker boat in vogue two thousand six hundred years ago and still in use. Talk about standardization: here is a craft standardized before the days of Sennacherib! Assyrian sculptures in the British Museum show this boat in use exactly as it is to-day, and although we have no records, it probably was in use for ages previously. Noah, possibly, had one as dinghy to the Ark. The goufa is made like a basket and then coated with bitumen. This type of boat gives a touch of fantasy to the scenery of the Tigris and Euphrates, especially when filled with watermelons and paddled by a man whose appearance suggests Abraham attempting the role of Sinbad the Sailor for “the pictures.”

Of all the things I saw in my travels in Mesopotamia, I think a goufa was about the most satisfactory. It is a delightful shape and a fascinating colour—a sort of milky blue-grey—somewhere between the colour of an elephant and an old lead vase. It satisfies that craving for mystery which we are led to expect when we travel to the East. When we first see a goufa we do not know quite what it is. It may be something to do with magic.

Another curiosity of the Upper Tigris is the raft of light wood and air-inflated skins which comes down from the north to Samara and Baghdad. On this section of the river there are many shallows, sometimes caused by traces of old rubble weirs. Consequently any kind of craft which drew more than a few inches would be always in trouble. These rafts, made of light saplings lashed together, are rendered buoyant by being packed underneath with goat-skins inflated with air. Thus they require only a very slight depth of water to float them, and they are sufficiently tough to stand bumping and scraping over shoals and shallows.

The men who manoeuvre these strange craft have some sort of tent or shelter to protect them from the sun, and they row with huge paddles. This rowing is sufficient to keep some sort of steering way on the raft, enough to enable it to get from one bank of the river to the other as it floats down.

Wood is scarce in the Baghdad region, and the material of these rafts is sold together with the cargo on its arrival at its destination. The crew proceed back by road to Diarbekr or some up-river town to bring down another raft.

The glamour of the East is felt mostly in the West. In an atmosphere of fog and wet streets, sun-baked plains with endless caravans and belts of date-palms by Tigris' shore seem the most delightful of prospects. Memory and imagination, those two artists of never-failing skill, leave out of the picture all dust and squalor—and insects! Yet to those who are sojourning by the Waters of Babylon or resting in sight of the golden towers of Khadamain romance and mystery would seem to dwell in a glimpse of Waterloo Bridge, with ghostly barges gliding silently by a thousand lamps, or in the grey cliffs of houses that make looming vistas down a London street.

Page 35

[Illustration: "High, eminent, blooming ambrosial fruit Of vegetable gold;"—*Paradise Lost*, IV.]

Of all places in the world, Baghdad, the city of Haroun-al-Raschid, is the one around which cling the romantic ideas of the enchanted East. For this reason "Chu Chin Chow" will probably be still running in ten years' time. It is a play which has become almost a symbol of Eastern romance. In Mesopotamia I observed that it was a standard of comparison. "Like 'Chu Chin Chow'" or "quite the Oscar Asche touch" were expressions frequently heard among our men who were describing something picturesque they had seen.

Now I may as well confess before I go any further, that I have not seen "Chu Chin Chow." I have never been able to get in. During the war, leave in London was an opportunist affair, with no notice in advance to allow for advance booking, and so I never succeeded in my quest of the glamour of the East—on the stage. But war, which brought with it so many disadvantages brought also many opportunities. Although I was unable to get into His Majesty's Theatre, I succeeded in getting into Baghdad.

I found streets through which beggars and British officers, camels and Ford cars jostled each other, often in vain attempts to get on. You can imagine the state of things on a busy morning. By day there is so much more rubbish and dirt to take the romance away from the picturesque, but at night, especially by moonlight, the quaint streets of old Baghdad do give an element of mystery and adventure that the Arabian Nights and the stage lead us to expect.

[Illustration: PUFFING BILLY ON THE TIGRIS]

I came upon a wonderful group of buildings by the banks of the Tigris. It appears to have been a disused mosque. The minarets are shorn of their tops, and look like huge candlesticks. A dark passage, vaulted like the aisle of a cathedral, led down to covered bazaars.

Again, at Basra, the House of Sinbad in Ashar Creek has quite the effect of a wonderfully staged production. The huge, high-prowed mahailas, the crazy wooden galleries skirting the river, the quaint, squat minaret appearing over the flat roofs, and the dim light of lamps reflected in the still water made a picture at twilight that it would be difficult to beat for mystery and romance. A man in black with a fire of brushwood in the bow of a mahaila added a touch of magic to the scene.

I don't know in the least what he was doing with this pillar of fire, but it was extraordinarily effective, and it made you feel you were getting your money's worth out of the show.

Or, again, for mystery and romance, here is another scene on the Tigris between Amara and Kut.

The evening is still. No breeze stirs the sliding surface of the river. On every side immeasurable plains stretch from horizon to horizon, "dim tracts and vast, robed in the lustrous gloom of leaden-coloured even," save where the misty blue ridge of the Persian mountains links heaven to earth, gleaming with a ghostly chain of snow beneath a rose-flushed sky. A few marsh Arabs' reed huts and a distant fire are the only signs that the world is inhabited. A faint rhythmical beating is growing more distinct, the herald of the slow progress of an up-coming steamer.

Page 36

Before night is fallen she has passed—a strange object with high funnel and clattering stern paddle, an apparition it would seem from our Western world of a hundred years ago, moving slowly across the crowded stage of modern war's necessities. I observed her number was S 31, but I believe she is known by her intimate friends as "Puffing Billy."

[Illustration]

IX

THE DESERT OF THE FLAMING SWORD

[Illustration: THE WALLS OF HIT]

[Illustration]

THE DESERT OF THE FLAMING SWORD

Since I have returned to England I constantly run up against people who ask me, sometimes jokingly and sometimes almost seriously, if I have brought back any sketches of the Garden of Eden, and a conversation invariably follows as to the authenticity or otherwise of the traditional site. Is it true that Mesopotamia was the cradle of the human race, and, if so, are the descriptions in the book of Genesis concerning the world known to Adam and Noah, however figuratively they may be taken, in keeping with the natural conditions of such a land? However much Paradise may have been lost, can the traveller see in Mesopotamia any signs of beauty and richness of verdure out of which the artist and the poet could visualize a garden of the Lord?

The answer, as they say in Parliament, where no one could be expected to give a downright and straightforward "yes" or "no," is in the affirmative. The scenes of these early dramas are characteristically Mesopotamian. The well-ordered garden "planted" with the tree of life "in the midst," and a river to water it, the ark of Noah pitched "within and without with pitch" as the ancient goufa is still pitched, the Tower of Babel, built with brick instead of stone and with slime (*i.e.* bitumen) for mortar—all these things belong to the flat, sun-baked lands of this alluvial plain. At Kurna, Arab tradition has placed Eve's Tree. It is a sorry looking, scraggy thing. It does not seem good for food, nor is it pleasant for the eyes and a tree to be desired. Another traditional Garden of Eden is at Amara, and the Eden of the Sumerian version of the story is thought by Sir William Willcocks to have been on the Euphrates between Anah and Hit.

[Illustration: SUNSET ON THE TIGRIS]

The “planting” of the garden and certain details brought out in the short description of its features suggest very strongly the things that would occur to the mind of a writer living in an irrigated country. Milton’s gorgeous backgrounds are almost entirely northern. He has striven to give it an eastern touch here and there, but such stage management consists chiefly in bringing in a few palms from the greenhouse. His description “of a steep wilderness, whose hairy sides with thicket overgrown, grotesque and wild,” and “of that steep savage hill,” are entirely northern

Page 37

in feeling. The same northern wildness pervades the garden. Note the “flowers worthy of Paradise, which not nice Art in beds and curious knots, but Nature boon poured forth profuse on hill and dale and plain.” In irrigation lands like Mesopotamia it is the combination of great heat and abundant water that makes for luxuriant growth. Milton conceives the most romantic and wild scenery on hill and dale and savage defile, suddenly brought into order for the use of man. The Bible story speaks only of features to be found in a land like Babylonia. Sir William Willcocks thinks that the word translated “mist” would probably be better rendered “inundation,” and that the writer is speaking of a country where inundation rather than rainfall was the support of life to the vegetable world. Genesis ii. 5 and 6 would then read:

“For the Lord God had not caused it to rain upon the earth, and there was not a man to till the ground.

“But there went up an inundation from the earth, and watered the whole face of the ground.”

The description of the planting of the garden is very suggestive of a tract of bare land to which irrigation has been brought. “And *out of the ground* made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight.” The garden, too, is watered, not by rainfall, but by a river which parts into different heads, as do the Tigris and Euphrates when they spread out upon the flat alluvial land below Baghdad.

Compare the “scenery” in St. John’s Revelation with that of the writer of Genesis when the kings of the earth and the great men sought to hide from the wrath of God. They “hid themselves in the dens and in the rocks of the mountains; And said to the mountains and rocks, Fall on us and hide us.”

Adam and Eve could hide themselves only “amongst the trees” of the garden.

[Illustration: SHEIK SAAD AND THE PERSIAN MOUNTAINS]

The story of Noah and the flood has a very close parallel in a record of Berosus, the Babylonian priest Xisuthros had a dream in which the deity announced to him that on a certain day all men should perish in a deluge of water, and ordered him to take all the sacred writings and bury them at Sippar, the City of the Sun, then to build a ship, provide it with ample stores of food and drink and enter it with his family and his dearest friends, also animals, both birds and quadrupeds of every kind. Xisuthros did as he had been bidden. When the flood began to abate, on the third day after the rain had ceased to fall, he sent out some birds to see whether they would find any land, but the birds, having found neither food nor place to rest upon, returned to the ship. A few days later Xisuthros once more sent the birds out; but they again came back to him, this time with

muddy feet. On being sent out again a third time they did not return at all. Xisuthros then knew that the land was uncovered, made an opening in the roof of the ship, and saw that

Page 38

it was stranded on the top of a mountain. He came out of the ship with his wife, daughter, and pilot, built an altar, and sacrificed to the gods, after which he disappeared together with them. When his companions came out to seek him they did not see him, but a voice from Heaven informed them that he had been translated among the gods to live for ever, as a reward for his piety and righteousness. The voice went on to command the survivors to return to Babylonia, unearth the sacred writings, and make them known to men. They obeyed, and, moreover, built many cities and restored Babylon.[3]

An eminent authority on the history of Mesopotamia told me that he considered the deluge to have been a purely local catastrophe in the flat land of Babylonia. The Arabs use the same word alternately for mountain or desert. If such a use has come down from long ago the extraordinary statements in Genesis vii. 20: "Fifteen cubits upward did the waters prevail; and the mountains were covered," may be easily reconciled. It has always seemed to me that mountains which were covered by 24 feet of water must have looked very insignificant even in the flat land of Chaldea. If, however, the word "desert" will serve equally well for the word "mountain" we have an account of a flood that could easily destroy the "world" of Mesopotamia. The annual flood from which the nomadic inhabitants were used to escaping (as they do now by moving up to the higher ground) became a wide-spread inundation till the highest "desert" was covered and the population drowned.

The Biblical account of the Ark suggests to any dweller in Mesopotamia that it was a gigantic mahaila. The pitching inside and out is still practised in putting together some of the Euphrates boats, and the method of making a goufa, covering it on both sides with bitumen, has a strong family likeness to the method of boat-building used in those primitive times.

The Jew, however, was always a typical landlubber, and one would expect a specification for the building of a ship would lack nautical details. Not so, however, the Assyrian tablet relating to the Ark. It was, we are told, a true ship. It was decked in. It was well caulked in all its seams. It was handed over to a pilot. It was navigated in proper style. "I steered about the sea. The corpses drifted about like logs. I opened a port-hole.... I steered over countries which were now a terrible sea." The pilot made the land at Nizir and let her go aground.

Near Ezra's Tomb on the Tigris I saw a boat very much like Noah's ark of the toy shop, and made a scribbled sketch of it, which is reproduced on page 36.

[Illustration: HIT, KNOWN TO THE ARABS AS "THE MOUTH OF HELL"]



Beside the fertile tract of country above Hit on the Euphrates—a land which has been identified as the Sumerian Garden of Eden—stretches a wild and desolate region, a place of bitumen and smoke of incrustated salt and sulphur, of rock and fiery heat—known to the Arabs as the Mouth of Hell. It guards the garden from approach by the nature of its inhospitable ground, and so I have called it, this burning wilderness, the Desert of the Flaming Sword, The town of Hit, evil smelling and grim, stands sentinel between the fertile river-bank and the ever-smoking plain.

Page 39

We reached this region in a car from Felujeh, travelling through Dhibban, where we crossed the Euphrates by a bridge of boats and on to Rhamadie. Thence the track is a rough one through desert country, undulating in places and becoming rougher. Some ridges of barren hill cut off the view from time to time as we approach Hit, and we surmount one of these, obtaining a goodly prospect of the river, to plunge down again into a wilderness glittering with crystals. At first sight we might be entering the valley of diamonds of the Arabian Nights, but, alas, a close inspection shows the glittering objects to be merely pieces of rock, a sort of white marble. Then we come to mounds of curious pale earth and ground yellow with sulphur, and then, far descried beneath its black coils of smoke, the walls of Hit.

The car was boiling by this time, and owing to some breakage we had to stop, as we drew close to the town. We left the driver, however, to tinker about with the old Ford, and plunged into the wilds, Brown being particularly anxious to see what all the smoke was about.

The sun heat was still intense, and it was difficult to tell the real size of anything owing to the mirage. A sort of temple seemed to detach itself from the ground, and it was apparently floating about in an ever-changing lake. Little black men were stoking a furnace, and a river of some black substance, well banked up with earth, was flowing at our feet. I think I have seldom seen so weird a sight.

The ground is full of bitumen, and to make lime the Arabs stack up alternate stones and blocks of bitumen, setting fire to the pile. The effect of these kilns with their great columns of heavy, black smoke, writhing and coiling up into the still sky, was indescribable.

The shadow of coming night crept across the desert, turning the gold and purple of the ground to the colour of ashes. The high walls of the town still caught the sunset and glowed dull red against the darkening sky. A fringe of palms, beyond, showed where the river flowed, the river that watered the garden where the land was green and good. But the grim ramparts of Hit stretched like a line of fire between, forbidding and impassable. Higher and higher the shadows climbed till the tall minaret stood out alone, a sentinel and a flaming sword. A hundred sooty figures toiled and grovelled in the ground.

In the sweat of their faces shall they eat bread.

X

THE KINGS OF THE EAST

[Illustration: Hit.]

[Illustration: SAMARA]

THE KINGS OF THE EAST

Page 40

The future of Mesopotamia with its enormous productive potentialities is a subject fraught with great interest to all those who have studied her past. Will this country again become one of the granaries of the world, and will it ever be, like Egypt, an important asset of our Empire? At first, when the war had freed the country from the Turkish yoke, it was assumed that it would rise into unheard-of prosperity under the fatherly care of British protection. Schemes of irrigation, long planned and to some small extent begun, even under the Turkish regime, were to re-stock Eden and benefit the whole world. The Baghdad railway would bring the wares of the East quickly to our doors, and it had even been anticipated that Nineveh would become as much a resort for European tourists as Rome.

All this, however, was foretold in the time when a new world was expected as soon as hostilities ceased. Another tune has been called now, and we find countless advocates of the policy to get out of Mesopotamia altogether and let well alone. Capitalization, like charity, we are told must begin at home, and thirty millions, estimated by the Inspector of Irrigation in Egypt, as necessary to turn Mesopotamia into a prosperous country with an annual revenue in fifty years time of ten millions a year, should be used for house building in England and not for empire building in Chaldea. On the other hand, wise men have told us that the Mesopotamian oilfields near Mosul are to be of great importance, like the Persian wells that have their pipe-line outfall at Abadan, and that a firm and fatherly hand is necessary to keep the country in a state of trade development. Should our sphere of influence be withdrawn from Mesopotamia things will revert back to chaos. Already trouble with the various tribes is brewing.

Not the least of the problems in controlling the marauding activities of some of the nomadic tribes is the difficulty of meting out adequate punishment to peace-breakers. The fact that all the stock-in-trade of a township amounts to a few pots and pans and house material of cane matting and mud makes it impossible to impress them by destroying their houses. In a few days everything would be rebuilt as before. It could often happen that the punitive expedition arrived to find the town moved to some district not mentioned in the orders for the day.

[Illustration: A BRITISH CRUISER IN THE PERSIAN GULF]

Mesopotamia under the Turks was in some ways worse off than others of his badly governed possessions. The officials who were sent from Constantinople into various provinces regarded the job as a poor one, as far as the amenities of life were concerned, and one to be endured while making as big a pile as possible from the ground-down natives. I should imagine that one of these officials would be about as popular with the landowners as a publican was among the Jews.

Page 41

An ancient prophecy foretells that the great river Euphrates shall be dried up that the way of the kings of the East shall be prepared. The time has come, if the war was indeed Armageddon. German engineers in 1914 had made a highway and effectively “dried up” the waters of the river for the passage of the armies. They themselves expected to be kings of the East although coming from the West, and some, it is interesting to note, explain the Prussians as of Oriental origin. At the same time the claims both of oil and empire kept us busy in the Persian Gulf. It looked as if we were to share this new kingdom or sphere of influence with Germany, until the war came and sorted things out.

There are some who see in vast irrigation schemes a “drying up” of the Euphrates that shall bring colonists from the Far East so that the denizens of China or Japan shall begin, like the Saxons in Kent, to get a footing in the country and become, in very substance, the Yellow Peril.

He is a rash man who would prophesy concerning the future of Mesopotamia as far as our empire is concerned. Perhaps before these pages are in print something decisive will have occurred. We read daily in our newspapers of rumours of war with restless tribes around Mosul, and of raids and skirmishes.

The land of Shinar, where Abraham dwelt, with its silent traces of the great civilizations which it fostered, Babylonian and Assyrian, Persian, Greek and Arabian, is once more, by the chances of war, an open book, and time alone will show what is to be written therein.

[Illustration]

FOOTNOTES:

[1] “Adventures with a Sketch Book.”

[2] Tennyson: “Recollections of the Arabian Nights.”

[3] From Ragozin’s *Chaldea*.

THE END

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