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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter XV. Turkish Arabia

CHAPTER XV.

TURKISH ARABIA.

Approach to the Euphrates—The Invisible Banks—Mesopotamia—Fau—Mahomrah—Sheik Jarbah—The Young Sheik—A Boat Excursion—The “Bellum”—An Unwelcome Guest—Bassorah—Running the Quarantine—English Merchants—Captain Carter, the English Sheik—A Warm Welcome to Marghil—A Pet Lion—Musselman and Infidel—Exports from the Euphrates—The Garden of Eden—River Scenes on the Tigris and the Euphrates—The Bedouin’s Tent—An Arabian Horse—Ezra’s Tomb—The Sportsman’s Paradise—We cannot Bag a Lion—Ctesiphon and Seleucia—The Barber and the Mule Driver of the Prophet—The City of the Caliphs in Sight.



OR more than thirty miles from its mouth, the yellow waters of the Euphrates pouring into the Gulf, give notice of our approach to a great river. I am reminded of the *Yangt-si*, in China, whose muddy waters have given its name to the Yellow Sea. But the river we are now approaching is associated with the earliest recorded history of the human race. On its banks was located, ac-

cording to tradition, the Garden of Eden. Here, too, can still be seen, rising one hundred and fifty feet above the sandy plain, an immense mass of masonry, supposed to be the remains of the Tower of Babel—its top fused as if by

lightning, into rock-like masses, where the impious attempt of the first descendants of Noah was arrested by fire from heaven. On the banks of the river are the half explored ruins of Nineveh and Babylon, those mighty cities whose magnificence and extent were the wonder of the ancient world.

The two great rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, rising among the mountains far away in the north, and flowing southward for more than a thousand miles, unite about one hundred miles from the Gulf, in one broad stream called by the Arabs, the *Shat-al-Arab*, or river of the Arabs. The immense fertile plains of alluvial soil embraced between these two rivers, have been known from the earliest times as "Mesopotamia"—once cultivated like a garden, and supporting a very large population.

There is as yet no land in sight, but the Arab pilot says we are within the banks of the river. This sounds rather paradoxical. But presently I am convinced of its truth, as the steamer runs into the invisible bank, and is there stuck hard and fast for five hours, until a rise in the tide floats her off. Again we steam slowly and carefully on, and soon the low coast dotted with palm trees comes in sight. At its mouth the river is more than a mile in width and flows with a rapid muddy current. It is said that the upper end of the Persian Gulf is gradually filling up. But as this process has been going on from the foundation of the world, it is not a very alarming matter to the present generation. The delta of the Euphrates, like those of the Nile and the Mississippi, is the gradual formation of ages, and the soil formed from the deposits of these mighty rivers, is exceedingly fertile. On the right bank at the mouth of the river, is a small village called Fāu. Here we see the low mud walls of a fort, above which from a tall flag-staff the "Crescent and Star" is

flying, and a small Turkish gunboat is moored near the shore. A long wooden building, with side verandahs, is the English telegraph station. The engines stop, and a boat is sent on shore with our bill of health, for the quarantine officers. It returns with a young Englishman of the telegraph corps, who has a week's leave of absence to recruit his health up the river. The town of Bassorah is situated sixty miles from the Gulf on the western bank, to which point there is sufficient depth of water for the largest ships. The river, up as far as Bassorah, is the boundary between Persia and Arabia. The inhabitants on the western side thoroughly hate their masters, the Turks, and with no fear of extradition treaties, cross the river into Persian territory to avoid conscription or punishment for offenses.

Before dark we came to anchor, and the next morning soon after sunrise are off the Persian town of Mahomrah at the mouth of the Kairoon, a large river which has its rise in the interior of Persia. This place and all the territory from Bassorah to the Gulf, is ruled by Sheik Jarbah, in true patriarchal style. His power is absolute over life and property, and so long as he promptly pays over to the Persian Government the required amount of taxes, they do not interfere. In the war of 1856 the Persian fort at Mahomrah was bombarded and captured by the English, and the Persian soldiers, headed by the Sheik, skedaddled into the interior. He is an old man of seventy, but very energetic and enterprising, and the wealthiest man in this part of the country. From where we are anchored we can see the large white buildings of the Sheik's residence, one of which is evidently the harem, as on its broad piazza there is a great fluttering of female figures in bright colored drapery. We are warned not to direct our glasses in that direction, as it would be a breach of etiquette, and give offense to the

old Sheik. There are several Europeans here in the service of the Sheik, or connected with him in mercantile enterprises, who come on board, and with them the old man's son, a fine looking young fellow of about twenty-five, to whom we are introduced. He is richly dressed, rather reserved in manner, and treated with great respect by all about him. He is very fond of hunting, a capital shot, and in feats of horsemanship would rival a Comanche on our plains. In matters of business he is sharp and enterprising—"a chip of the old block."

We have on board a small iron steamer, built for Sheik Jarbah in England, and sent out in pieces. It is one hundred feet long and intended for the navigation of the Kairoon. To discharge this, the "Gunga" will be detained here two days, and as Bassorah is but twenty-five miles further up the river, we decided to take a small boat called a *bellum* and push on to our destination. These boats with a name so suggestive of war, are very long and narrow, and usually painted on the outside in alternate black and white squares that look like ports. Declining an invitation to breakfast on shore, we pack our satchels, leaving our heavy luggage to go up on the steamer, spread our soft Persian rugs in the bottom of the boat, put in a gun and a brace of revolvers, some umbrellas, and a basket well stocked with provisions for our lunch. Before nine o'clock we are off, hoping to make the distance in about six hours. The *bellum* is propelled by two men in the bows with long bamboo poles, assisted by a third man, who sits aft, and steers with a paddle. We keep close to the banks to avoid the swift current in the middle of the stream, and for the first two or three hours find it very pleasant. Groves of date palms line the shore on both sides all the way to Bassorah, and are said to produce the finest dates in the world. Behind this fringe of palms we can see broad, fertile meadows, on

which are grazing large herds of cattle and buffaloes. The river is very high, and in many places overflowing its banks. There are frequent canals leading out from the river for irrigation, and close to the banks are many small weirs, made of date sticks, for trapping fish. The tide is now running up, and we push along at quite a rapid rate. We get an occasional shot from our "Wesley-Richards" at ducks and pelicans. Of inhabitants we see but few, and they are not prepossessing in appearance. Some swarthy, half-naked Arabs crawl out of their mud huts to gaze at us, while children entirely nude, run along the shore, screaming and holding out their hands for *baksheesh*.

Soon after noon we stopped for half an hour to lunch, and give our boatmen a rest. We found a pleasant, grassy bank, unpacked our basket of provisions, put our bottled ale in the river to cool, and were congratulating each other upon our grand picnic, when a new comer, in the shape of a venomous spotted snake, proposed to join our party. The unwelcome visitor was despatched by the boatmen, but we concluded to adjourn to the boat to finish our meal. As the day advanced, the hot sun began to tell upon ourselves as well as our men. The tide had turned and was now running against us, giving increased velocity to the current. At every bend of the river we looked anxiously ahead for some appearance of a town.

Our men could not speak a word except in Arabic or Persian, and were evidently slackening in their exertions. We were scarcely making two miles an hour, and would have jumped ashore and walked, but the ground was so swampy, and intersected by so many canals and ditches, as to render that impracticable. But the application of coin has sometimes a marvelous effect in reviving the flagging energies. We gave to each of our men a rupee as extra *baksheesh*, and by pantomime urged them forward.

It acted like a charm, and before long the tall masts of a Turkish guard ship were discerned above the date trees round a bend of the river. She was anchored near a large fort at the mouth of a creek, a mile up which is situated the town of Bassorah. Near the guard ship were two foreign steamers and several *marhalahs*, or river boats, with large lateen sails. The custom house and the yellow flag of a quarantine station came next in view.

But now a new difficulty arose. Our ship had not received *pratique*, and we had no right to land. If the health officers should see us we would be arrested for violating the quarantine regulations. There is no other country in the world where quarantine laws are so stringent as in Turkey. In this matter even money is useless. This country has suffered so often from the frightful ravages of the plague and cholera, that a most vigorous system is enforced with all ships coming into Turkish ports.

Our destination was not the town of Bassorah, but a place two miles higher up the river, called Marghil, where the docks and warehouses of Lynch & Co., are located. We replaced our India pith hats, which are only worn by Europeans, with the red Turkish fez, and directed our boatmen to keep close to the opposite shore. We took down our sun umbrellas and put out of sight everything that would mark us as strangers. As we passed the guard ship, the officer on deck directed his glass towards our boat, but seeing nothing suspicious allowed us to pass.

Before we reached Marghil, one of our men, overcome by the heat and nine hours' incessant labor, sank down exhausted; but he speedily revived with the application of cold water, to which we added a few drops of brandy.

We reached Marghil before sunset and were warmly welcomed by Captain Carter, the manager of Lynch & Co's business in Bassorah. This is the only firm of

English merchants in Turkish Arabia. It was established forty years ago, and has agencies in Bassorah, and Bagdad, which is about five hundred miles up the river. For many years one of the partners resided at Bagdad, but their headquarters are in London. A few years ago they obtained, after much difficulty, a *firman* from the Turkish government permitting them to establish a line of steamers between Bassorah and Bagdad, under the name of the "Tigris and Euphrates Navigation Company." This line receives a liberal subsidy for carrying the English mail between these two points, and has developed a large and constantly increasing traffic. The shipments by this firm to England were last year over one thousand tons of dates, two thousand five hundred bales of wool, and large quantities of gall-nuts and gums.

At Bagdad, the British government has a diplomatic representative, who is also Consul General, under the name of "Resident." It is a very important position, and it is now worthily filled by Colonel Herbert, a veteran English officer and a most accomplished gentleman, who has seen twenty-five years service in India.

My friend Finnis, who has been so long my *compagnon de voyage*, is a junior member of the firm of Lynch & Co., and now visits for the first time their establishments in the East.

Bassorah is the port of Mesopotamia, and contains about fifteen thousand inhabitants, a mixture of Turks, Arabs, Persians, Armenians, and Jews. Most of the buildings within the walls, which are of great extent, are in ruins. The houses are of sun-dried bricks, and the streets very filthy. The governor is a Turkish officer, appointed by the Pasha of Bagdad. The summer heat is intense and the situation very unhealthy, the adjacent country being frequently flooded by water from the overflow of the



THE TOMB OF EZRA, ON THE TIGRIS.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

river. It is hard to realize that this was once one of the richest and most populous of all the commercial cities of the East. When Babylon was in its glory, long before Bagdad was founded, Bassorah was the *entrepot* of the rich fabrics of India, and the Euphrates the great artery of commerce between Europe and the East. It has suffered terribly from the plague. In 1773, it is said that two hundred thousand of its inhabitants perished. At the last visitation of this fearful pestilence, in 1831, it was almost depopulated. Whole families became extinct, and many valuable estates, including houses and date groves, were left without owners.

Returning from my one short visit to the town, Marghil seemed like a paradise. Here, enclosed within the walls of the *compound*, are the work houses, coal depots, machine shops, and wool presses of the firm. The bales of wool are submitted to hydraulic pressure and reduced to the smallest possible compass before shipment. Outside the walls there has grown up quite a village of native employees, of whom Captain Carter is the Sheik. To them his word is law. He decides their disputes, dispenses medicines to the sick, is quite skillful as a surgeon, and, as he speaks Arabic like a native, and has that manner of command acquired as a sea captain, his influence is unbounded. Of his social accomplishments, his generous hospitality, and the comforts, and even elegance, of his bachelor quarters, I shall ever retain the pleasantest memories.

There are many pets about the premises that are curious and amusing—birds and monkeys of various kinds, and a young lion about half grown, as large as a Newfoundland dog. He had been permitted to run loose, but was now chained up, as he could no longer get along amicably with his former playmate, a large English dog, called "Paul." In fact, Paul's mate, "Virginia," had come to grief in a

little trial of strength about the possession of a bone. He is soon to take a sea voyage for his health, and will have his permanent residence at the "Zoo" in Regent's Park. During the last trip of the steamer up the Euphrates, four lions were shot from the deck of the boat. They were on



SHOOTING LIONS FROM THE BOAT.

a small island, and a sudden rise in the river had cut off their retreat to the main land. The largest weighed three hundred and fifty pounds, and the skin, one of the finest I ever saw, was presented to my friend. The Mesopotamia lion is usually without the dark and shaggy mane of the African species, but some have been found on the Kairoon river with a long, black mane. The people of the country make a distinction between these, the former being Mussulmen and the latter *Kaffirs*, or infidels. By a proper remonstrance, and at the same time pronouncing the profession of faith, the former may be induced to spare one's life, but the unbelieving lion is inexorable.

The time here has passed like a dream. While my friends during the day have been engaged in matters of business, I have lounged on the grass in the garden, where the orange and citron are mingled with the date and mulberry trees, the faithful Mahomet always within call to bring coffee or make a *chibouk*. This life has been the more enjoyable after the confinement and monotony of our long sea voyage. But now we must say good bye to Marghil and its genial host, and go on board the steamer for the last stage of our journey.

The "London" and the "Dijleh" or "Tigris" are two iron sidewheel steamers, built expressly for the river service, with powerful engines to stem the rapid current. They are one hundred and seventy-five feet long, flat bottomed, the plates of the hull being of steel, and draw, when loaded down to the guards, but three and a half feet of water.

Forty miles above Bassorah we reach Kernah, the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates. Our course is to the right, up the Tigris upon which Bagdad is situated. According to tradition, Kernah is the site of the original garden of Eden. But alas for these degenerate days! we look in vain for any relic of paradise, for the "tree of knowledge," or any other tree, among the mud huts of the miserable Arab town. Can these swarthy, half-grown children that swarm on the banks, be descendants from our first parents? If so, the "*descent of man*" is here practically demonstrated. Near Kernah, on the Tigris, there was sunk about ten years ago, a vessel laden with interesting relics excavated by the French Government at Nineveh. They were mostly slabs of marble of great beauty, and the loss to antiquarians is irreparable.

The river is very crooked, and to avoid the force of the current the "London" keeps near the shore. As we swing round the sharp bends, we can almost jump from her deck

on to the bank. The water is very high, and in many places has overflowed the banks and formed broad lagoons over which are hovering flocks of ducks, herons, and other wild fowls. Laborers are strengthening the dykes with mud mixed with coarse grass and reeds to save their crops of wheat and barley from destruction. The fringe of date palms, so attractive a feature of the Euphrates from the Gulf to Kernah, is no longer seen, only broad, fertile, alluvial plains, over which, when uncultivated, there waves a strong, coarse grass that reminds one of our great western prairies. Here are immense herds of cattle, and flocks of coarse-wool sheep, buffaloes, whose black smooth hides and humped shoulders seem to indicate a cross with the hippopotamus, wallowing in the mud and water close to the shore, sometimes with only their heads or nostrils above the surface. Mud villages, where the whole population, men, women, children, and dogs turn out and line the shore to gaze at the passing steamer; black Bedouin tents, always at a little distance from the river's bank, and around them horses grazing; these are some of the characteristic scenes of our first two days.

At one place we landed and visited the encampment of a Bedouin Sheik. The tents of black goat's hair were pitched promiscuously, large and small, one, two, and three poles in length. Carefully picking our way to avoid stumbling over the tent poles, we entered the lodge of the head man, who welcomed us at the entrance, and invited us to be seated on a carpet and regaled us with black coffee, goat's milk, cheese, and other Arab delicacies, followed by the inevitable *chibouk*. The tent looked more comfortable and much better furnished than I expected. The upper end was hung with striped cloth and the ground covered with carpets and mats, while saddle bags, copper utensils, and arms were hung on pegs, or scattered on the

floor near the entrance. Our call was short, and the conversation, entirely by pantomime, could not be very animated. The chief was courteous and polite, frequently bowing and *salaaming*, to which we responded after the same fashion.

As we passed out we stopped to admire a beautiful full-blooded, iron-grey Arab mare, tethered to a long spear stuck in the ground. Her arched neck, fine delicate nostrils, intelligent eyes, and smooth limbs would have turned the heads of many an enthusiastic horse fancier. A Bedouin never parts with such an animal as this, and if she dies the whole tribe goes into mourning.

The second day after leaving Marghil, we passed Ezra's Tomb, a large picturesque building, with an immense green dome in the center. Near it are groves of date and willow trees, and it is a conspicuous object for many miles over the level plain. It is a sacred shrine to the Jews, who come here in great numbers from Bagdad, at certain seasons of the year, to celebrate their feasts.

For three days we pass through a country that is almost destitute of cultivation or inhabitants. Sometimes we see large mounds, once the site of populous towns and cities, but now only the jackals and the wild beasts of the desert prowl among these deserted places. A perfect network of canals and water courses, now choked up with sand, in ancient times rendered this country most fertile and productive.

But game is plenty, and there is an almost constant fusillade of guns and rifles from the deck of the "London." Besides waterfowl, such as pelicans, herons, cranes, and ducks, which are always in sight, we have wild boars, jackals, and antelopes.

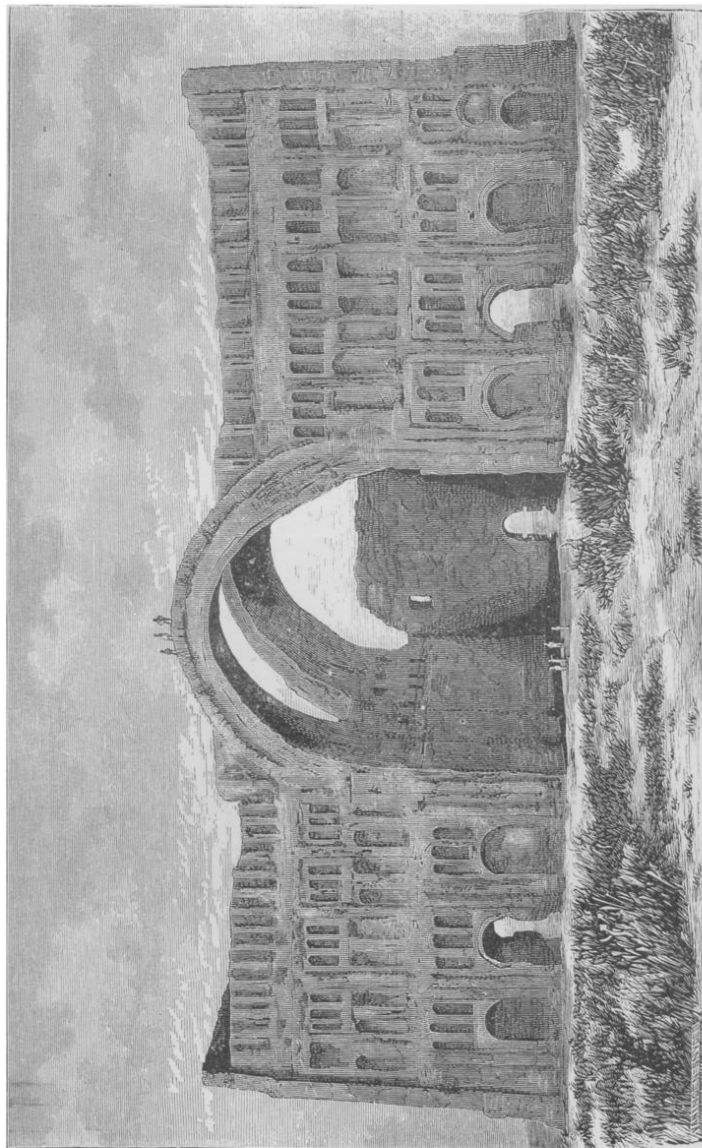
In winter the wild boar is hunted on horseback with spears, a most exciting and dangerous sport. My friend

is a keen sportsman, and with his long range "Henry Martinez" rifle, is a dead shot at a wild boar at five hundred yards. We are especially on the lookout for lions, but see none during our trip. The officers of the steamer, all English, join in the sport. Captain Cowley, elated by his recent experience, says laughingly that he is above all such small game as wild boars and antelopes, and will not stop his boat to bag anything short of a lion.

The day before reaching Bagdad we arrived at Ctesiphon, where there is one of the most remarkable ruins on the Tigris. On the opposite bank a long line of mounds mark the site of Seleucia, which like Ctesiphon was built almost entirely from materials brought from Babylon. All that remains of Ctesiphon, once the proud capital of the Parthian empire, is an immense archway one hundred and six feet high, being the entrance to a vaulted hall about one hundred and fifty feet in depth. The front of the building, of which this arch is the center, is over three hundred feet long and ornamented with four tiers of pilasters and small arches like corridors. What a magnificent palace the whole structure must have been, with an archway over a hundred feet in height for an entrance. Mounds surround the building for many acres, made up of broken bricks, and fragments of pottery and glass.

About half a mile from the arch are two mosques to which, as sacred shrines, the Mahometans make pilgrimages. One is the burial place of the *barber* of the Prophet, the other of his *mule-driver*. Though bearing evidence of great age, for if genuine they must date back nearly thirteen hundred years ago, these tombs seemed almost modern compared with the relic at least five hundred years older, which we had just visited.

At length on the sixth day after leaving Bassorah, just as the sun was rising, the morning air heavy with the odor



THE ARCH OF CTESIPHON.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

of orange blossoms, we entered the long reach of the Tigris, on both sides of which Bagdad is built, and the "City of the Caliphs," with its vaulted domes and lofty minarets, is before us.

