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THE NAVY IN MESOPOTAMIA



Frontispiece.

THE NAVY IN MESOPOTAMIA

1914 TO 1917

By CONRAD CATO

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TO
CAPTAIN CATHCART R. WASON, R.N., C.M.G.

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED,
IN MEMORY OF THE TWO HAPPY YEARS
DURING WHICH THE AUTHOR WAS PRIVILEGED TO
SERVE UNDER HIS COMMAND

PREFACE

IN writing these historical sketches of naval work in Mesopotamia, I have been guided by the evidence of naval officers who took part in the events narrated, and in some instances I have myself been an eyewitness. In every case I have checked these unofficial accounts by referring to the official despatches, and I hope that in this way I have succeeded in guarding against inaccuracy. It must be understood that my object has been to give some slight indication of the work which has been done by the Navy in the course of the campaign; and though I have necessarily alluded to the military operations, I have made no attempt to give a complete account of any of the engagements so far as the Army was concerned in them. The sketch entitled "The Children of Kanee" was originally written as a yarn, but, inasmuch as it records an incident which actually befell one of H.M. sloops on the Tigris, I have included it among the historical sketches.

As regards the short stories, their main object is to amuse the reader; but if they fail in this, they will at least give a little insight into naval life in Mesopotamia. They are all entirely fictitious, except the one called "The Art of Diplomacy,"

which is founded on fact; and this appears to me sufficient justification in itself for its inclusion in the series. The principal characters introduced are also quite imaginary, but in certain cases I must admit that my imagination has been aided by very pleasant memories of the good fellows I met in Mesopotamia.

CONRAD CATO.

LONDON,
July, 1917.

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PART I.—FACT

THE NAVY IN MESOPOTAMIA

"WILKEY"

(Lieutenant-Commander Frederick J. G. M. Elkes, R.N.R.,
killed in action on December 7, 1914, at the taking of
Kurnah.)

I THINK he was the only incurable optimist I have ever met. When he went sick we all used to throng into his cabin (it was the Captain's deck cabin, to which he was removed for the sake of fresh air), and the sick man used to cheer us up in his own inimitable way. It was like a bracing tonic to see his funny old face and hear him talk broad Lancashire. There was a photograph in his cabin of two bonny little girls with twinkling eyes, and he used to tell me about them; and when I told him that it was easy to see whence they inherited those eyes, his own would give just that identical twinkle. Like all brave men, Wilkey was very simple and very human.

We all called him Wilkey, but whether the name was merely an amplification of his real name, or whether it referred to a well-known popular comedian, is more than I can say. He held two medals for life-saving, as I found out by accident

(for Wilkey never said much about himself); also he was a remarkably good shot with a Service revolver. If there was any kind of sport or fun to be had anywhere, Wilkey was always right on the spot. Above all, he was an incurable optimist. I believe that if he had fallen from a royal-yard he would have thrown a smile to anyone who happened to be in the foretop as he passed, and would have sung out, "Ah'm all right so far."

At Gib. the doctors declared that he had appendicitis, and insisted on sending him to hospital; but three or four weeks later he fetched up at Aden in a P. and O., and found us there tinkering up some engine-room trouble. When at last we reached the bar of the Shatt-al-Arab, and learned that we were to start a campaign in Mesopotamia, Wilkey was in a state of gleeful excitement, especially on hearing that he was to take command of an armed launch. Of course we called it *H.M.S. Wilkey*, but it turned out to be a clumsy little craft, and its engines were constantly refusing duty. Wilkey, nothing daunted, declared that "if the bally old pa-acket wouldn't steam by herself, he would get somebody to tow him into action." He got her into the river somehow or other, but it so happened that there was no action just then, because one of our sloops silenced the guns of the Turkish battery and put all the Turks to flight, so that our troops were landed without a casualty or scrap of any kind. The capture of Busrah followed shortly afterwards, and Wilkey was transferred to the command of another armed launch called the *Shaitan*, and the

original H.M.S. *Wilkey* was put out of commission. He came back to the old ship at the bar for a day or two during the transfer, and before he left again for the river he called me into his cabin, handed me his keys, and asked me to take charge of his possessions. " If anything should ha-appen to me," he said, " joost send them all to the missus." And so I said good-bye to Wilkey.

It was on December 3, 1914, that the sloops and armed launches left Busrah and steamed upstream to a position about ten miles below Kurnah. Next morning early they proceeded as far as the junction of the Shwaib and Shatt-al-Arab, about three miles south of Kurnah, and found the Turks entrenched in a long line from the village of Mazeerah to the left bank of the river. Our troops landed north of the Shwaib, and under cover of the naval artillery and two R.F.A. guns mounted in stern-wheelers they advanced towards the enemy's trenches. It was a slow business, for there was not an inch of cover on that flat open plain, and the Turk was sticking like a leech to his trenches; but at last he found it was getting too hot for him, and by one o'clock in the afternoon he had skipped back out of it. Then came the turn of the armed launches. There were only three of them—*Lewis Pelly*, *Miner*, and *Shaitan*—but when they received the order to go upstream and shell the enemy's positions at Kurnah, the joy of battle entered their souls, and they went forging on until they got within 800 yards of the Turkish guns. Now, the Turk has a little way of pretending that he is not there,

and of letting you come up quite close to him, and of then informing you, without any preliminary, that he is very much there all the time. If his gunnery in those days had been anything to write home about, there would have been no armed launches left; and as it was, they found their position quite uncomfortably warm. The sloops were round a bend of the river and could not see the Turkish guns, so the gallant little trio had to face the music all by themselves. It was not long before the *Miner* got a shell into her engine-room at the water-line, and the water followed it through the hole. Stoker Petty Officer Arthur Jones stopped one piece of shell with his back and another with his head, and Stoker Douglas Lacey, R.N.R., became troubled in his mind about him and about the cascade which was flooding the engine-room deck. But Jones just said: "Never you mind about me. We're here to keep steam in this bloomin' boiler. That's our job. And we just carry on with it as long as the blankety old packet stops afloat. See, mate?" So they carried on. That is why the Captain of the *Miner* was able to take his packet down-river and run her on the mud, so saving her from sinking. That night the engineers from the sloops patched up the hole, and next day the *Miner*,* serene and smiling, said she was ready for some more whenever they liked.

Meanwhile the other two went on plugging away

* Lieutenant Cuthbert E. Heath-Caldwell, R.N., in command.

until the General sent word that he must wait for reinforcements before he could proceed any farther, and then the armed launches were recalled. Wilkey appeared that evening in the *Odin's* mess with a face like a map of Polynesia. It was peppered all over with little bits of shell, which had just penetrated the skin and lodged beneath it. The doctor was for digging them out at once, but Wilkey was for a whisky-and-soda. " My fa-ace," he explained, " was never very mooch to look at. So ah'm not worrying about it." That was on the evening of the 4th, and for the next two days there was a lull in the operations while reinforcements were being brought up from Busrah.

On Monday, December 7, 1914, the programme opened with an overture by the sloops and armed launches, which advanced upstream about a mile, and shelled the enemy's guns at Kurnah and his trenches on the left bank of the river. Under cover of this bombardment our troops began to advance, the plan being to clear the Turks from the left bank, cross the Tigris about three miles above Kurnah, which lies on the right bank, and then attack from north and south simultaneously. By two o'clock in the afternoon the first part of the programme was completed; the trenches were carried and the Turks driven back to their second line. It was at this juncture that the armed launches were sent up to assist the troops, and to cover their left flank from snipers or any hostile force, which might be lurking in the palm groves on the right bank below Kurnah. Now, things that float differ from things that crawl

in that they cannot hide themselves in a hole. While Tommy was making himself fairly comfortable in the abandoned Turkish trenches, Jack afloat on the water was thinking to himself that no gunner could ever hope for a better target than he presented. As for the Turk, he played his old game of Brer Rabbit, laying low, until the three launches came nicely round the bend into a direct line of fire. And then he let drive.

Wilkey was standing on the bridge of the *Shaitan*; beside him at the wheel was Chief Petty Officer Thomas Trenwith, and beside Trenwith stood Mr. George Pysey, who was the skipper of the *Shaitan* in the palmy days of peace before ever the white ensign flew from her mast-head. "Let them ha-ave it properly," Wilkey was saying to his gun's crew below. "Keep on plooging away." He watched the spurts of flame from the Turkish guns flash out with every round, and in his ears was the shrill music of their shells shrieking all round him. But he was not thinking of the Turkish shells. His eyes were glued to his binoculars as he spotted the fall of each one of the *Shaitan's* shells, and directed the gunlayer as to his range and direction. "Eh, but that was a beauty!" he said; "you've got her joost right now. Carry on. Let them ha-ave it . . ." The sentence was unfinished. A shell hit the *Shaitan's* wheel, ricocheted off it, and passed clean through his body. He died with the joy of battle on his lips and in his heart. Chief Petty Officer Trenwith was badly wounded; Mr. Pysey was stunned, and knew no more until he recovered

consciousness enough to be aware of something which lay huddled up on the deck beside him, and dreamily wondered what it was. Meanwhile Petty Officer Walter Vale, who had been below with the gun's crew, had realized at once that he was face to face with one of those moments in a man's life when action must follow thought as thunder follows lightning. In half a dozen strides he was on the bridge, in a fraction of a second he understood that for the moment he was in command of the ship, another fraction told him that the steering gear was hopelessly smashed, and a flash of memory brought back to him an axiom of seamanship which he had learned many years ago: When the steering gear is out of action, you can steer by the engines, if she has twin screws. So he grasped the engine-room telegraph, signalled " Starboard ahead and port astern," swung the ship round, brought her downstream, and fetched her up alongside the Senior Naval Officer's ship. There he stepped on board, saluted the S.N.O., and made his report in the same sort of tone as if he were coxswain of a steam-pinnace reporting to the Officer of the Watch that he had brought off the liberty men from the shore. The cultivation of the emotions is one of the things we neglect in the Service.

Of the further events of that day and the day following a brief summary will suffice to complete the story. By the evening of the 7th our troops had cleared the left bank of the enemy, and next morning they were seeking a favourable spot to cross the Tigris. Meanwhile there was silence in

the village of Kurnah, and the belief gained ground that the Turks had fled up the river during the night, The *Lewis Pelly** proceeded towards the village to reconnoitre, and reached within 400 yards of it before she was greeted with a heavy fire, which made her skip back in haste according to her orders. There followed a mighty bombardment by the sloops. and in the afternoon the *Lewis Pelly* tried her luck again. But the Turk had not got tired of the Brer Rabbit trick, and the ships had to shell the enemy heavily in order to cover her return. In the evening the General announced that the crossing of the Tigris had been effected, and that the troops on the other side were bivouacking for the night, and would attack at daybreak next morning. About midnight a small steam-launch was seen coming down from Kurnah with lights ablazing brilliantly, and doing her best to attract attention. In her were found three Turkish officers, who came under a flag of truce to offer the formal surrender of Kurnah. On December 9, 1914, the Union Jack was hoisted in the village, and Subhi Bey, formerly Vali of Busrah, with 35 officers and 958 men, became prisoners of war.

Wilkey lies in the cemetery at Margill, about five miles up-river from Busrah, and a monument has been erected by his shipmates to him and to Ordinary Seaman Edward Gibson, who died of wounds received in the same engagement. Of Wilkey the official record says: "This Officer behaved with conspicuous gallantry throughout the operations.

* Commanded by Lieutenant John F. B. Carslake, R.N.

He was an able Officer, and is a distinct loss." The unofficial record must add that he was one who, keenly revelling in the joy of life, had no fear of death. He was an incurable optimist, and, if ever he turned his thoughts to the mysteries beyond the grave, I know he must have found there a land full of hope and promise. In Shelley's " Adonais " we may find the epitaph which best befits him:

" He is not dead, he does not sleep;
He has awakened from the dream of life:
'Tis we who, lost in stormy visions, keep
With phantoms an unprofitable strife."

THE CHILDREN OF KANEE

IT happened at the village of Kurnah, which lies at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates. Kurnah is never mentioned nowadays without reference to the fact that local tradition has acclaimed it as the site of the Garden of Eden, and the reputation of the Garden has consequently been dragged through the mud by all the makers of mirth from *Punch* downwards. A more uninspiring spot it would be difficult to conceive. On every side a flat expanse of delta, which becomes a marsh in the flood season, and in the dry season is little more than a desert with a fringe of palm-trees near the river's edge, a scorching sun, plenty of dust, and plenty of mosquitoes. Such is Kurnah, and whether or not it ever was the Garden of Eden, at all events it was once an outpost of the British Empire; for at the beginning of 1915 it was the northernmost limit of the British advance, and was being held by a small garrison of English and Indian troops supported by the guns of H.M.S. *Thora*. Some six miles higher up the Tigris the Turks and their Arab allies were encamped with a fairly considerable force, and were busily entrenching themselves and constructing gun emplacements wherever they could

find a dry stretch of ground. All the surrounding country was in flood, and the work of the artillery, both British and Turkish, was severely handicapped. The British, however, had an important advantage in the possession of a flotilla of sloops and armed launches, whose artillery could be moved up or down the rivers to any spot where it was required. This advantage proved to be a determining factor in the early stages of the Mesopotamian campaign.

Against this naval force the Turks had nothing more formidable to oppose than a river gunboat which carried nine-pounder guns, and had always shown a remarkable agility in skipping up the river whenever the British sloops hove in sight. If the Turks could have found a means of supplementing their very inadequate naval strength, the history of the Mesopotamian campaign would have been very different reading, but the transportation of men-of-war from Constantinople to Baghdad is no easy matter when all the sea-routes are held by the enemy. Constantinople was forced to the conclusion that even in an inland campaign sea-power has an uncomfortable way of asserting itself, and that when rivers and floods wash out all the ordinary rules of military tactics, and drive the belligerents to a form of warfare that can only be described as amphibious, sea-power represents the ace of trumps in the game. The Turks were not slow to realize this, and were embarrassingly persistent in the little attentions they paid to the British sloops. Having no guns to outrange the *Thora's* guns, they tried other devices. The earliest

and most ridiculous entertainment was to creep downstream at night in native canoes and bombard the ship with rifles at close range. This was obviously futile, but it served to amuse the Arabs in the Turkish camp; for the Arabs used to have a theory that if you hit a ship on the funnel you may pierce its most vital organs, and make it an invalid for life. The next effort was the kerosene tin filled with explosives, suspended from a plank and floated down the river—an ingenious device as far as it goes, but rather primitive for twentieth-century warfare. The main defect in it is that there is no guarantee that the plank will float in the right direction, and, as a matter of fact, the strong current invariably carries it to the bank within a very short distance. Two attempts were made, and both failed; but as a result of them a boom defence was constructed across the river, and by way of additional security the *Thora* used to drop downstream every night below the pontoon bridge at Kurnah. There followed a distinct lull in the proceedings, and we had to wait patiently for the next effort.

One evening in March, 1915, there was a “kag” going on in the *Thora*’s wardroom mess, where some half-dozen officers were indulging in that most innocent of short drinks, the “Pow de Souza.” Let me explain that a “Pow de Souza” is a slice of sour lime in a claret glass of soda-water, with a suspicion of gin to flavour it, and a “kag” is a form of discussion peculiar to the Navy, where everybody speaks at once, and no one pays the least

attention to what anyone else is saying. The theorem propounded by the Navigator was that a certain well-known flag-officer belonged to the bulldog breed. He did not lay it down as a theorem, of course, but as an axiom, which is the orthodox way of initiating a "kag." And, of course, he did not trouble himself with definitions, so that no one was quite clear as to the meaning of "bulldog breed" as applied to an Admiral, and the "kag" very nearly fell flat in consequence. But, fortunately, the Paymaster came to the rescue by propounding another theorem all on his own. He boldly stated that the bulldog breed had had its day, and that in twentieth-century warfare brains were worth ten times as much as breed, bulldog or otherwise. It is impossible to say what course the discussion took, because, when five or six people are all talking simultaneously, the resultant sound is about as intelligible as that of a bluebottle in a biscuit tin. During a temporary lull in the turmoil a private of marines, told off as wardroom officer's servant, announced that the soup was down from the galley, and all the disputants disappeared into their cabins to clean themselves. This was the usual procedure in the *Thora*; nobody ever thought of getting ready for dinner until dinner was waiting to be eaten.

At the dinner-table there were certain rules to be observed. "Kags" were allowed, but they were conducted with a decorum and self-restraint almost worthy of the House of Lords, and anything which savoured of "shop" was interdicted. The mess

rather prided itself on its conversational powers, which could cope with such subjects as shoes, and sealing-wax, and cabbages, and Kings. (Ships were usually barred under the classification of "shop.") The Navigator could always speak fluently on any subject under the sun, whether he knew anything about it or not; the First Lieutenant had an extensive knowledge of history, ancient and modern, a catholic taste in English literature, ranging from "Chambers's Encyclopædia" to the latest guidebooks of English counties, and a passionate devotion to the works of Rudyard Kipling, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and the author of "Gals' Gossip." The Sub was also of a literary turn of mind, and dabbled in verse-making; while the Paymaster could quote long passages from the English poets as well as from the Odes of Horace (until he was smothered with a sofa cushion). The Doctor, although he was by nature somewhat taciturn, used to stimulate the conversation with a few well-selected interjections, such as, "Just think!" or "By Gosh!"

The claims of Kurnah as the site of the Garden of Eden were under discussion, and the Book of Genesis had been consulted as to the identity of the four rivers which flowed from the Garden; and when the translation of the Authorized Version was challenged the Revised Version was produced, and everyone had become satisfied that the Garden was at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates. The possibility that either or both of the rivers might have been diverted from the courses which

they followed in the days of Adam had just been mooted, when the Paymaster was heard to be gently muttering to himself. The First Lieutenant instinctively stretched out for a sofa cushion, but it so happened that the Paymaster was not quoting Horace, but Kipling's "Conundrum of the Workshop."

He was saying:

"Now, if we could win to the Eden Tree where the Four
Great Rivers flow,
And the wreath of Eve is red on the turf as she left it
long ago,
And if we could come while the sentries slept and softly
scurry through,
By the favour of God we might know as much as our
father Adam knew."

"Well, that wasn't much," said the Navigator.

"On the contrary," said the Paymaster, "I believe that Adam was quite a sagacious old boy."

"But he knew absolutely nix until he had eaten of the Tree of Knowledge."

"He lived a hundred and thirty years," said the Paymaster impressively.

"Well, *you* must be getting on that way, and you——"

"Now you're condescending to personalities," said the Paymaster.

"Well, what did he know?" asked the Navigator with the air of one who has put a real poser.

"He knew the name of every beast of the field and every fowl of the air."

"How d'you know he did?"

"Because he named them himself."

"But I bet you he didn't remember them all after he'd done it."

The Paymaster was not prepared to make a definite assertion on this point, so he let the Navigator rattle on with a string of statements which would appear absolutely irrelevant and disconnected, unless you happen to know the Navigator. The only thing which checked the flow of his eloquence was the fact that the dead-lights were screwed down in order to darken ship, and in spite of two electric fans the atmosphere in the wardroom was not conducive to protracted efforts in oratory. So the Navigator paused to gasp, and the First Lieutenant struck in with:

"Now then, old Pay, let's have it. What did our father Adam know besides the names of the birds and beasts?"

The Paymaster cleared his throat ominously.

"Once upon a time," he began, "in the days of long ago, when the Earth was inhabited by a race of giants——"

"Is this Teutonic mythology?" asked the Sub-Lieutenant suspiciously.

"No, it is not," said the Paymaster.

"What is it, then?" asked the Navigator.

The Paymaster paused, and his eye kindled with the light of cherished memories.

"I once knew a man," he said, "who had a blazer specially made for him with all the crudest and most startling colours he could think of, and across it he had emblazoned four letters—M.O.B.C."

"What does that stand for?" asked the Navigator.

"That's just what everybody wanted to know. For days he kept them guessing, and they tried every variety of boating club, bicycling club, Badminton club, and bowling club. When they tired of guessing, he told them M.O.B.C. stood for 'My Own Bally Colours.'"

"Excuse me, Pay," said the First Lieutenant, "but can you explain to me what this has to do with the race of giants?"

"Nothing, except that the race of giants belongs to my own bally mythology."

"And now we have it. Go on."

"One of the giants was called Kanee, and he took a long journey to this very land of Mesopotamia."

"Where from?" asked the Navigator.

"Now, look here," interposed the First Lieutenant, "give the Pay a chance. You know that he never gets through a yarn in less than half an hour under the most favourable conditions, and by that time he has invariably forgotten the point."

"If there ever was one," added the Sub.

"Go on, Pay . . . he took a long journey to Mesopotamia."

"And there he found the Eden Tree," said the Paymaster.

"So he knew as much as old Adam," suggested the Navigator.

"What did you say was the name of this worthy gentleman?" asked the First Lieutenant.

"Kanee was his name, and after he had found the Eden Tree he gained a sixth sense. People

now call it common sense, on account of its rarity; but of course they don't know that it is a sixth sense, or that Kanee was the first to possess it. After this he returned to his native land, where he begat many children."

"By Gosh! Just think!" said the Doctor, who always liked to contribute his quota to the conversation. The Paymaster was encouraged to conclude his narrative.

"And the children of Kanee settled in many parts of the world, but mostly in the land to the north of the Tweed, and in Yorkshire and in Kent."

"How about Middlesex?" asked the Sub, who was born there.

"There may be some even in Middlesex. Anyhow, all the children of Kanee inherited this sixth sense, and they alone possess it."

"What a bit of luck!" said the Doctor, suddenly remembering another phrase in his repertoire.

"Well?" said the Navigator. "Is that all?"

"That's all," said the Paymaster.

"What a rotten yarn!"

A distant thunder broke through the still night air—the sound of artillery firing. A signalman presented himself at the wardroom door.

"Turks firing at Snipe Camp, sir."

"Where are they firing from?"

"Can't say exactly where it is, sir."

"Can you see the flashes of the guns?"

"I saw one, sir, on the port bow."

"Towards Birbeck Ridge?"

"Out in that direction, sir,"

"Can you see where the shells are falling?"

"No, sir; I think they must be falling short—somewhere the other side of the trees."

"Have you reported to the Captain?"

"Yes, sir; he's on the bridge now."

The signalman withdrew. His report created a mystery, for between Snipe Camp and Birbeck Ridge there was a wide stretch of flooded land, and so far as was known the Turks had no guns with long enough range to bridge the distance. It was hardly conceivable that they would drag their guns all the way from their camp to Birbeck Ridge to blaze at Snipe Camp, knowing that it was beyond their range. The obvious inference was that they had procured some new guns of larger calibre.

There was a little desultory conversation on the subject, but it was too nearly akin to "shop" to arouse much enthusiasm at that hour of the evening, and the Navigator seized an early opportunity of changing the subject.

"Well, Pay," he said, "you haven't explained the point of that yarn yet."

"It isn't a yarn," said the Paymaster. "It's my own bally mythology."

"Just think!" said the Doctor.

"Perhaps it's allegorical," suggested the Sub.

"Fancy the Sub being able to say a word like that at this hour of the evening," commented the First Lieutenant.

"Quite a good effort," said the Sub complacently.

"Well, just explain the allegory, then," said the Navigator.

"You were talking just now," said the Paymaster, "about the bulldog breed, and I was talking about the man who can think."

"But you aren't going to start it all over again, are you?" asked the First Lieutenant apprehensively. Just at this moment the Captain came into the wardroom.

"Number One," he said, "I'm going up the river to-morrow to have a makey-look-see. I fancy the Turks must have got hold of some new guns, or else they have managed somehow to bring the old ones a good deal nearer than they have ever been before."

"The signalman says their shells are falling a good deal short, sir."

"Yes, but what can their little game be? They wouldn't be such fools as to drag those old guns—of course they may be merely trying to shake us up a bit."

"It would be interesting to see what sort of guns they have brought down there."

"I don't suppose they'll leave them there; but, anyhow, I'm going to make a reconnaissance to-morrow."

"Have the Staff heard of any fresh guns arriving?"

"No, I was talking to them only this morning, and they hadn't heard of anything then. It's rather mysterious. . . . Anybody on for a rubber?"

It was a queer coincidence that someone during the evening asked how an observation mine is worked. The explanation was refreshingly devoid of technical terms.

"There's a road, or a river, or a railway, or something, and you know that the enemy is coming along it sooner or later, so you shove a mine under it. On one side of the road is a tree or something conspicuous. You draw an imaginary line from the tree to the place where your mine is, and continue it to the other side of the road. Then you dig a hole in the ground, and connect your mine to it by electric cable. The tree, the mine, and the hole, are all in the same straight line. When you see the bloke you want to scupper coming along the road, you hide in the hole and wait until he is between you and the tree. Then you press the key, and up he goes. Only you must be quite sure that you are looking at the right tree. . . . Did I deal these? One no-trump."

At an early hour next morning the bugle sounded off General Quarters, and the ship proceeded cautiously up the winding river to the accompaniment of the leadsman's monotonous chant, "By the mark, three," "And a half, three." It was a morning of glorious sunshine in the days of spring, before the land becomes a steaming caldron and the sun a pitiless furnace. Beyond the floods on the starboard beam was a stretch of sand where wild-boars could be seen roaming in search of their day's rations; nearer at hand a jackal was picking his way through the flood and casting furtive glances in the direction of the ship, possibly wondering whether some lucky chance might yield him a feast before the day was out. A signalman on the bridge was sweeping the horizon with his glass. Presently

his attention became riveted upon some object in the distant reaches of the river, and he watched it carefully for a few moments before turning to the Captain who stood beside him.

"She's coming down, sir," he said.

"What is?"

"The Turkish gunboat, sir."

The Captain raised his binoculars. There was no doubt about it; the gunboat was steaming slowly down the river. A wave of excitement swept through the ship. The *Marmaris* coming down to engage us! What a chance! It seemed almost too good to be true. It was the first opportunity since the beginning of the war for a scrap with something which floated. All the guns' crews beamed expectantly, and the order to load with common shell was carried out with an alacrity which, for the East Indies Station, seemed positively undignified. But the Captain was thinking—thinking hard. Why should a gunboat with only nine-pounders come down to engage a sloop with— He signalled to the engine-room to reduce speed. Still the little Turkish gunboat continued her course downstream until she came to a bend in the river, where she stopped and waited, a daring challenger inviting the British Lion to come on if he dared. Was she within range? The question was eagerly canvassed. Not quite; another thousand yards would do it. Suddenly the Captain's voice rang out from the bridge, "Let go anchor!" Soppitt, able seaman, addressed another member of the foremost star-board gun's crew in subdued but voluble tones:

" 'Oly of 'Olies ! what does 'e want to stop 'ere for ? Does 'e think we're a bloomin' *Queen Elizabeth* with a range of umteen miles ? Another thousand yards and we've got the blessed angels—got 'em as snug and comfy as a bloomin' weevil in a bloomin' biscuit. Of all the darnation shows—what does 'e want to stop for ?"

" Will you try a shot at them, Number One ?" came from the bridge through the megaphone.

" Ay, ay, sir."

The First Lieutenant was in the foretop, spying out the land with a pair of binoculars. He leaned over the railing and gave his orders. " Close up, starboard gun's crew. Extreme elevation. Deflection five right. Fire as soon as you're ready." The starboard gun fired, and the First Lieutenant raised his glasses to spot the fall of the shell. Soppitt was quite right: it needed another thousand yards; possibly another five hundred would have made it uncomfortable for the Turk. Would he come down farther and try his luck ? What was the range of his guns ? Was he going to return our fire ? These and a hundred other questions were being eagerly discussed on the fo'c'sle, but the prevailing question was, Why did the Skipper drop the hook just at the moment when he had the chance of sending the Turk to glory ?

" What's the matter with the bloke ?" asked Forest, a corpulent shipwright.

" 'E's afraid of 'urtin' 'em," said Soppitt, waxing sarcastic.

" 'Ow would you like to 'ave one of them nasty

shells come at your 'ead? You wouldn't 'alf like it, you wouldn't. And you didn't ought to want to send 'em at a bloomin' Turk's 'ead. Poor innocent, misguided Turk, what don't know no better!"

The criticisms were getting dangerously pointed, when the appearance of the Sub-Lieutenant coming up the fo'c'sle ladder enjoined silence. As the Sub usually did duty as cable officer, everyone waited expectantly for the order "Up anchor." But the order was not given. The starboard gun tried a few more rounds, and succeeded in eliciting a reply from one of the Turk's nine-pounders. It was some slight consolation to see the Turkish shell fall a good two thousand yards short. Presently a shot from the starboard after-gun appeared to fall fairly close to the enemy, and as a result he was seen to be getting under way. Many eyes were turned to the *Thora's* bridge to see if there were any sign or portent that the order would be given to proceed, but the Captain stood there with an expression on his face as inscrutable as the Sphinx's. Slowly and cautiously—for there was none too much room in the river—the Turkish gunboat turned round, and began to creep back up the river. Her deliberate movements seemed to say in tones of infinite regret: "If you're afraid to fight me, there's no use in my waiting any longer." The indignation of Able Seaman Soppitt grew beyond his own jurisdiction, and, after some futile efforts to find words capable of expressing it, he

relapsed into a sullen silence, liberally punctuated by vigorous expectoration. But still H.M.S. *Thora* lay at anchor, and showed no intention of advancing another inch.

And then something happened. It is hard to explain why it happened. Perhaps the observation-station was badly placed, or perhaps the observer was over-enthusiastic, or perhaps he was looking at the wrong palm-tree. Anyhow, he pressed the key—the key which was intended to send a British ship and a hundred odd officers and men to kingdom-come. A few yards in front of the *Thora* a column of water shot up and towered high above her masts. It was a magnificent sight, reminiscent of the Crystal Palace fireworks on a Brock's Benefit night. The ship's company watched it with respectful appreciation, but they did not cheer, possibly because they had a queer kind of feeling that, according to all the rules of chance and probability they should have been performers in the entertainment instead of mere spectators of it. They gazed in silence, and when the fountain had subsided they gazed at the dead fish floating down the stream. Soppitt was the first to find his voice, but his observations relating to the enemy and their methods of warfare would suffer so much in translation that it is better to imagine them in the original. The most eloquent passage in his speech was devoted to certain German engineers who were known to be operating with the Turks. To them he ascribed the conception of the whole plot, and it is probable that he was right

in his surmise. For the scheme was elaborate and worked out with Teutonic thoroughness, from the firing by night on Birbeck Ridge, to decoy us into a reconnaissance, to the final manœuvres of the *Marmaris* which served to bait the trap. The only fault to be found with it was that it presupposed that no Captain of a British man-o'-war would ever ask himself the question, "Why does a gunboat with nine-pounder guns advance to attack a sloop with four-inch guns?"

A few hours later the Navigator, replete with a substantial lunch, was reclining on the wardroom sofa.

"How did the Skipper know that that blankety mine was there?" he asked.

"I don't suppose he did," said the First Lieutenant.

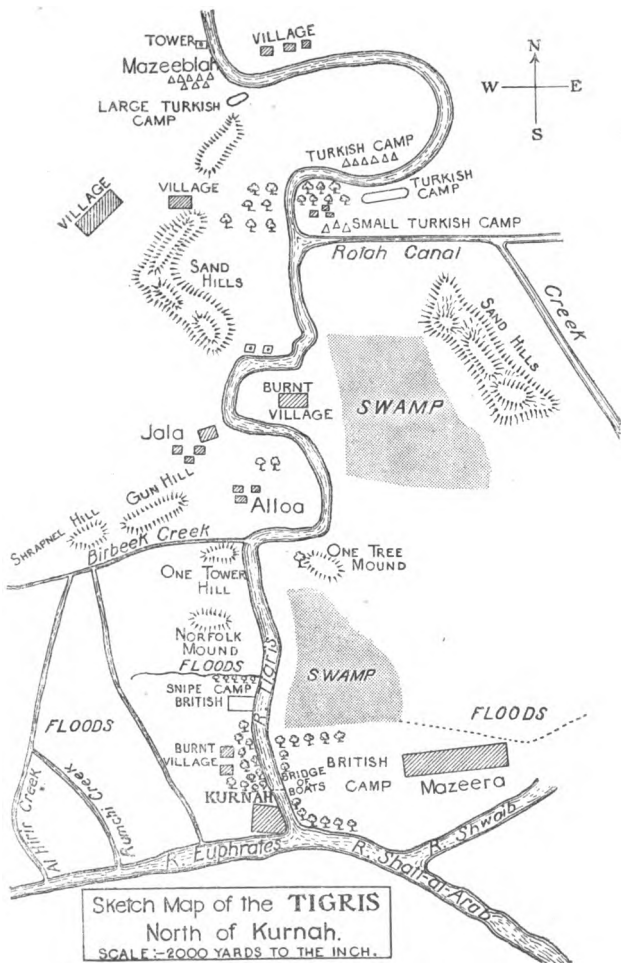
"D'you think it was just a fluke that he stopped?"

"No," said the Paymaster; "there was no fluke about it. The Skipper just happens to be one of the children of Kanee."

But the Navigator has no faith in the Paymaster's mythology. Probably he objects on principle to all private mythologies. Moreover, he inclines to a faith in the bulldog breed.

At the beginning of June, 1915, the *Marmaris*, with many holes in her side, was lying a half-sunken wreck in the Tigris, five miles above Ezra's Tomb. But that is another story. It is only worth mentioning here because, among the books and papers in the possession of her crew, the ship's log was found.

A staff officer sent us the translation of an entry in the month of March, 1915, which read: "Proceeded down-river as far as Rota Creek in order to entice the British sloop *Thora* over the mine-field above Kurnah."



To face p. 31.

AN AMPHIBIOUS ENGAGEMENT

IN the early days of the war, Lord Crewe, speaking in the House of Lords about the campaign in Mesopotamia, described it as an amphibious campaign. And the expression was remarkably apt. When you are waging war in a country which is under water for six months of the year, you gradually acquire the habit of thinking amphibiously. This does not mean, of course, that you become amphibious in your mode of life, or that you learn to waddle like a walrus or make a noise like a hippopotamus. But, being forced to fight in two elements simultaneously, you adjust your notions about fighting accordingly. When a third element—the air—is added to the other two, a further adjustment has to be made, and you learn among other things that supremacy in the air may give eyes to your own artillery and blindness to that of the enemy. This is a simple proposition compared with the problem which arises when there is no dry land on which your artillery can move about, or your infantry advance to attack, or your cavalry maintain a pursuit if the enemy retreats. These problems can only be solved by learning to think amphibiously.

Towards the end of May, 1915, it was decided to

attack the Turkish force above Kurnah, which lies at the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates, with a view to a further advance up the Tigris. This force was estimated to be a little over three thousand strong, and it was entrenched upon various sand-hills and dry patches of ground in the midst of the floods. In these days, when we reckon the strength of armies by the million and casualties by the thousand, no one could be expected to take much interest in so small an affair; and when the London newspapers published the bare news that our forces had advanced from Kurnah to Amarah, the only noteworthy comment of the Press was a petulant outcry by one of the weekly journals, wanting to know, "When is this picnic in Mesopotamia going to cease?" For at that time Mesopotamia was regarded as only a small side-show, bearing no obvious relation to the rest of the war, and it was felt that all the Empire's energies ought to be devoted to the serious work in France and Gallipoli. At that time, too, the name of General Townshend was unfamiliar to the public, and the fact that it was his division which made the big advance from Kurnah to Amarah failed to stir the popular imagination.

The engagement above Kurnah was remarkable for two things—the unique conditions under which it was fought, and the startling success of the British arms. The ground on which the village stands was a few feet above the level of the flood, but all around it, as far as the eye could see, was flooded marshland, dotted here and there to the northward with the small sand-hills in the occupation of the Turks.

These hills had been christened with such names as Norfolk Hill, One Tree Hill, One Tower Hill, Shrapnel Hill, and Gun Hill. So inconspicuous are they in the dry season that a casual observer would imagine that the whole countryside was a dead-level plain; but in the summer of 1915 their barren soil stood out clearly amidst an ocean of green reeds, which grew to a height of five or six feet above the level of the water. The depth of the flood varied considerably, but the average was probably about two feet, and it would have been quite possible for the infantry to wade through it, if the ground had not been intersected by numerous nullahs, or dykes, cut at right angles to the river for irrigation purposes. Most of these were too deep to be fordable, and so it was necessary to devise other means of enabling the infantry to advance.

The Arab has invented a long narrow boat, which is eminently suited to navigate the swift current of the Tigris. He calls it a "bellum," and propels it in deep water with one oar and one paddle, and in shallow water with two punt poles. The bellum played a very conspicuous part in the engagement above Kurnah. For weeks beforehand Tommy had been patiently learning the gentle art of punting, and studying how to avoid that distressing situation where the punter has to make up his mind whether he will say good-bye to his punt or to his pole. The sepoy also had been an assiduous student of the art; it was all part of the process of learning to think amphibiously. Then steel plates arrived from Busrah, and a new weapon of war was called

into being—the armoured bellum. Here was an ideal method for infantry to advance across No Man's Land. Comfortably seated on the thwarts or in the bottom of the bellum under the lee of steel plating, they were to be punted through a forest of green reeds, and could dream that they were spending a summer's day on the upper reaches of the Thames, until suddenly they would wake up with a bump to find that they had emerged from the forest, and had run aground on the sand-hill which was their objective. Then they must dream no longer, for a few yards in front of them the Turks in their trenches would be busy with their rifles, and the job of an attacking infantry is one of those which is all the better for being done quickly.

So the problem of creating an amphibious infantry had been solved. Next came the problem of the artillery, and it is not an easy matter to make a 4.7 gun into an amphibious monster. The best we can do with it is to mount it in a barge, and get a paddle-steamer to tow it upstream to wherever it is needed. It can then tie itself up to the bank and get to work. This sounds all right in theory, but in practice there are one or two serious obstacles. In the first place, a barge is a low-lying craft, and the gunner cannot see his objective over the top of the reeds. In the second place, when the aeroplanes have helped him to find his range, he cannot be sure of keeping it with any exactness, because his barge has a trick of recoiling after every round. The artillery did not take at all kindly to amphibiousness. Then there were the mountain guns, which

scorned anything so commonplace as a barge, and invented a craft all their own. They got the idea from the children in the kindergartens, who fold bits of paper and make all sorts of wonderful things out of them; the most wonderful of all is the double canoe, consisting of two very angular boats joined together along the beam like a pair of Siamese Twins. Take two bellums and place them alongside each other; then fix a wooden platform athwart the pair of them amidships; on this platform mount your gun, and, in order to protect the gunners from a blazing sun, build over them a pergola with frame of wood and roof of matted reeds; and there you have the recipe for the amphibious mountain gun. It is artistic if it is nothing else. In the sternsheets of each bellum stands the gondolier with his punt pole, and by dint of much practice the two gondoliers learn to punt in blissful harmony. The troubles of the mountain gunner, however, are the same as those of his big brother the 4.7. In a forest of reeds, his fire is indirect, and his platform as unstable as a wayward minx.

Fortunately, the tale of the artillery is not yet completed. We have yet to reckon with the naval guns. Three sloops and a small flotilla of armed launches took part in the engagement above Kurnah and to them, at any rate, the presence of water everywhere brought no difficulties or embarrassments. They had bridges and foretops from which their gunnery could be controlled, and in the case of the sloops the guns were at a sufficient height from the water to enable the gunlayers to see what they

were aiming at. Their gun platforms, compared with those of the 4.7's and the mountain guns, were the essence of stability. It is true that their masts and funnels afforded the enemy a splendid mark for range-finding, but, fortunately, the Turkish gunnery at that time was poor; and although the ships were hit occasionally, there were no casualties and no material damage. It was one of the naval guns which at a range of something over 8,000 yards sent a shell right into the embrasure of a Turkish gun, which had commanded the village of Kurnah and the straight reach of river running past it. The gun was silenced, for all its crew were knocked out, and so an unmolested advance up the river was secured as far as Snipe Camp, about two miles above the village. This was the naval programme—to concentrate on each battery singly, and so silence them one after another. Meanwhile the infantry were to advance through the reeds in their armoured bellums, and at the appointed times were to land on the various sand-hills and rush the enemy's trenches. The only thing which went wrong with the programme was that, except on Norfolk Hill, the Turk would not wait to be rushed. The deadly accuracy of the artillery upset his nerves badly, and, if he saw no chance of skipping back out of harm's way, he resorted to the white flag. This was not like the Turk, for usually he hangs on to his trench with the tenacity of a badger in a hole. But the naval guns, after they had silenced all his batteries, got the range of his trenches and adjusted the time fuses to a nicety, so that life was really

not worth living in those trenches. The battle started soon after five in the morning, and by noon some half-dozen of the Turkish positions were in our hands, together with a fair number of prisoners and quite a useful haul of material. This completed the General's programme for the day, and the afternoon was spent in burying the dead beneath a blazing sun, while the shade temperature registered 110° F.

There was one feature in our equipment which deserves special mention, if only on account of its picturesqueness. This was the amphibious field hospital. The Arab has a form of river craft larger than the bellum; it is called the "maheilah," and is fitted with a mast and a sail. In its pristine form it is not unlike a fishing smack, but its two ends curl upwards like a viking's ship, and its prow is adorned with paintings in the style of an illuminated manuscript. Now picture it after its conversion into a field hospital. The mast has been unshipped, and the well has been boarded over to make a continuous deck from prow to stern. Again we must revert to childhood's days, and study the design of Noah's Ark. The frame is of wood and the roof and sides of matted reeds, and on the roof is painted a large Red Cross. Inside are neatly arrayed cots and all the appurtenances of the medical branch, including the hospital orderlies, whose brows are as wet as the village blacksmith's, and whose scanty attire is wetter still, for 110° F. in the shade is not far removed from a Turkish bath. Still, they are prepared for 350 casualties, and it was not their

fault that they only had 23 to deal with. The total cost of the operations (apart from heatstroke cases which come into every day's work in peace as well as war-time) was three men killed and twenty wounded; and so it was really quite natural that the worthy gentleman in his arm-chair in Fleet Street should tell his readers that Mesopotamia was a picnic.

Next day the aeroplanes brought word that the Turks had abandoned the rest of their positions, and were in full retreat up the river in steamers, barges, and maheilahs, and then the whole British force began to move forward in pursuit. Now watch the procession as it files up the Tigris. First two armed launches doing duty as mine-sweepers, with a wire hawser towed between them; then the sloops, which look like giants amidst this motley assembly of river craft; after them more armed launches. Then come the stern-wheelers carrying the infantry, who have now abandoned their armoured bellums. It is a queer-looking craft, this stern-wheeler, something like a two-storied wooden house with an old hay-making machine at the stern, kicking up the water high into the air with as much grunting and groaning as though a spavined horse was setting the wheel in motion. Besides the stern-wheeler there are the Irrawaddy paddlers, and the Indus tugs, and the steel barges of the Supply and Transport Corps; but all these are prosaic compared with the hospital maheilahs and the mountain guns with their double canoes and pergolas of green reeds. Darting in and out among the fleet are the motor-

boats which carry about the staff officers and other important persons. There is something about the whole scene which brings back memories of Henley Regatta, with its house-boats, its river steamers, its motor-launches, and its decorated pleasure craft.

But the enemy is in retreat, and where are the cavalry? Now, it is useless to argue with the cavalry. When they say that they cannot learn to think amphibiously, they mean it, and there is nothing more to be said about it. Their argument is, of course, that the horse is not an amphibious animal, and there is a good deal of truth in it. But the General is never nonplussed by these trifling limitations. If the horse is not amphibious, at all events the Navy is versatile, and when it has finished playing the rôle of artillery it will turn joyfully to the rôle of cavalry without requiring any rehearsals. All the rest of the story of the advance from Kurnah to Amarah is purely naval history; for the Navy now leaves the Army behind—all except the staff officers who find accommodation in the sloops—and goes pounding up the Tigris, past Bahran with its mud forts, past the attempted obstruction near Rotah Canal, past the remains of the Turkish camp at Mazeblah, round the Peardrop Bend, and into the then unknown reaches of the river. The enemy had a long start, but his steamers were heavily laden and were towing barges full of infantry, and his maheilahs stood no chance in a race with steam. Bit by bit the distance between pursuers and pursued grew narrower, and just before sunset the enemy came within range of our

guns. As the sun dipped below the horizon and the sky was suffused in a soft glow, the guns began to bark from the leading armed launch, which had been ordered to proceed to the head of the flotilla and to look out for mines. Soon after, the thunder and flame burst from the Senior Naval Officer's ship, which followed a mile or so behind. In a wilderness of green marshes the silver windings of the Tigris showed up clearly in the evening light, and the pursuing ships forged ahead at a steady pace, ever mindful of the chant which came from the leadsman in the chains. In the distance were the white sails of the fugitive maheilahs, like the wings of frightened swans, and in front of them the desperate little steamers were struggling to tow their barges laden with Turkish infantry. Ahead of them all was the Turkish gunboat *Marmaris*, bound on her last run for safety, and knowing in her sorrowful heart that she could never reach it. When the brief twilight had faded away, and darkness enveloped the whole scene, our guns still went on spitting fire, although their targets were fast becoming invisible. But it was needless, for the fugitives had realized that the game was up. The maheilahs lowered their sails, and those of the steamers which had not been sunk by gunfire drew sullenly to the bank, and waited for their captors to come up. Only a very few of the men tried to escape into the marshes; most of them were too familiar with the habits of the Marsh Arab to make so hazardous an attempt. Among these few were three of the German engineers who had been em-

ployed at Busrah in connection with the Baghdad Railway, and had joined the Turkish Army at the beginning of the campaign. They in the innocence of their hearts thought that they could make their way in an Arab mashoof (canoe) across the marshes, and find a road which would take them to Baghdad. But they knew not the Marsh Arab. Two days later three naked German corpses were found near the river.

The last to abandon hope of flight was the *Marmaris*. She had left all her companions behind and disappeared into the darkness. But we knew what water she drew, and we knew roughly the depth of the river, so we did not worry about her. We also knew that she had some holes through her side, and probably some wounded men aboard her, and that probably her Captain would have only one thought in his mind—how to render his ship beyond repair, so that she could be of no service to her captors. Presently a flickering light shot up from across the marshes, and as it grew it revealed the dark outline of a ship some five miles away round a bend of the river. The *Marmaris* had found salvation in harakiri; her crew had set her on fire, and encamped on the river-bank until such time as H.M. Navy should offer its hospitality to them. Her guns, however, were afterwards found to be in excellent order, and for some strange reason the ammunition in her magazine was not affected by the fire.

The pursuers had forgathered in the gloom of a clump of palm-trees, which had appeared as a

conspicuous landmark in the midst of the marshes. Nestling in the palm-trees, a blue-domed temple marks the spot where the prophet Ezra is said to have died on his way from Palestine to Persia. It was an inconvenient spot to select, because it is a long way from everywhere, and necessitates a tedious journey for the Jewish pilgrims from Baghdad, who, in the days before the war, came every year to visit the tomb. It would seem that Ezra was mindful of the maxim that a prophet must be buried a long way from his own country if he would be honoured by his own people; but even he could not foretell that some day a British man-of-war would come along with an ordinary signalman who knew not Ezra, and insisted on referring to the noble edifice as "Eliza's Tomb." Let the prophet rest in peace. He at any rate is untroubled by the voracious swarms of mosquitoes which haunt his resting-place, or by thoughts of malaria, or of a thermometer which refuses to drop to a respectable position even after nightfall, but keeps a tightly packed medley of naval and military officers gasping for breath beneath their mosquito-nets, and steadily dripping all night long on mats of woven reeds, which have the merit of allowing the drops to soak through, and so leave a fairly dry surface beneath the restless sleepers.

Next day saw the innings of the armed launches, for they alone can now continue the pursuit up the river. One Turkish steamer laden with troops has yet to be accounted for. All the rest of the Turkish force is at Ezra's Tomb under the custody of the

sloops, until such time as the Army can come up and take charge of the prisoners. At daybreak the armed launches get under way, the most commodious of them finding accommodation for the Senior Naval Officer and the General, with a small personal Staff. They go pounding on through the Narrows, past the village of Kulat Salih and into the broader waters above, until the General begins to grow nervous. "We really don't know what we are up against," he reminds the S.N.O.; but the S.N.O. is a born optimist, and all he says is: "I think we will just go round the next bend." By steadily continuing the process of going round the next bend, they find themselves waltzing into the town of Amarah. Ahead of them is the launch *Shaitan*, but she is too intent on retrieving the lost lamb to feel any curiosity about this quaint-looking town; so she goes on plugging away at her best speed right through Amarah into unknown regions beyond, until in due course she overhauls the runaway, and induces it without much argument to return with her downstream. Some hours later she re-enters Amarah in triumph, and hands over another big batch of prisoners.

Meanwhile the rest of the flotilla have come to anchor, and are admiring the picturesque features of the town, including the Arab ladies drawing water from the river in kerosene tins. The S.N.O. is saying affably to the General, "So this is Amarah," but the General is busy thinking. The total British force at the moment, counting in all the crews

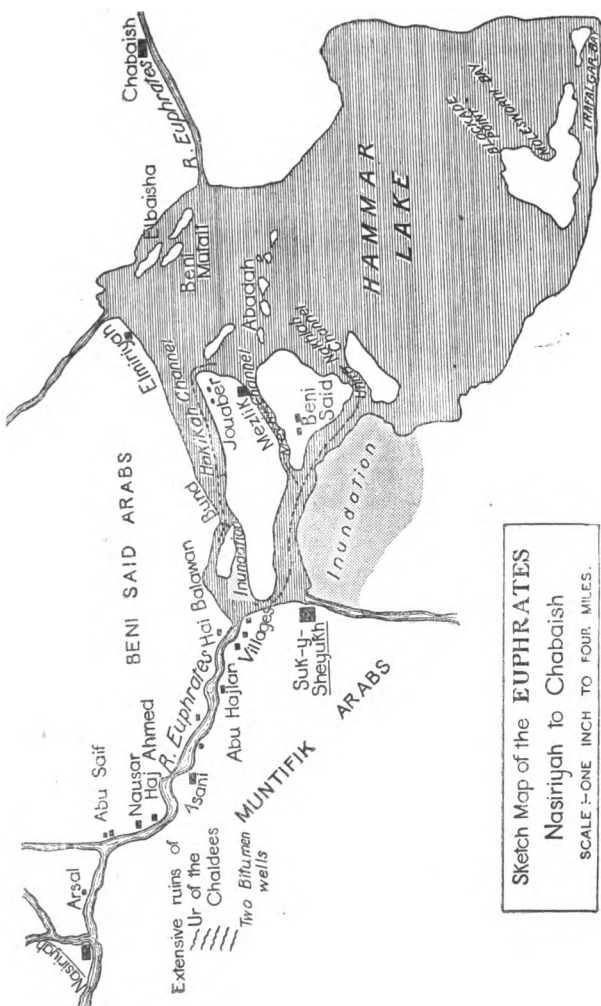
of the launches, the General, his Staff, and a dozen privates, amounts to eighty-eight officers and men. So the General says the time has come to find out what they are up against. A Naval Lieutenant is sent ashore in a skiff with six Tommies, and he makes straight for the Turkish barracks, where he finds quite a lot of soldiers, such as one often does find in barracks. He seeks out the Commanding Officer and asks him how many men he has there. The number was between 400 and 500. "Is that all?" asks the Naval Lieutenant. "Then tell them to pile arms and fall in on the river-bank. They will be stowed in barges and sent down the river at the first opportunity." Now, the Commanding Officer does not know that the total British force at Amarah is only eighty-eight, nor that the British Army is at least twenty-four hours behind the Navy. All he knows is that he has seen a steamer-load of discomfited infantry tearing up the river with an armed launch in chase, and that armed launches have guns. So he deems it wise not to argue the point. His men are told to pile arms and in due course are comfortably stowed away in barges. And that is the story of the taking of Amarah.

The Sub-Lieutenant of the *Thora* was temporarily in command of one of the launches, and was ordered to take a barge-load of prisoners alongside him, and to mount guard over them. His launch had a crew of Lascars, and the only white man besides himself was a private in the Royal Marine Light Infantry, who constituted a small but daunt-

less bodyguard. The Sub also had a revolver and a deck-chair, both of them useful articles in an emergency. The night was divided into watches of one hour each; while the Sub paced the deck, revolver in hand, the private slept peacefully in the deck-chair, and then after an hour the positions were reversed. But, if the truth must be told, they were mighty glad the next day to see the first of the river steamers bringing up the Army. So was the General, and so were all the officers of H.M. Amphibious Cavalry; for those Turks were beginning to think, and among other things were beginning to think that they had been bluffed in a most ungentlemanly way. Moreover, embarrassing problems of commissariat were looming ahead, as must inevitably happen when the cavalry makes a big haul of prisoners some eighty miles beyond their nearest base.

So ended the amphibious engagement, and, turning to the profit and loss account, we must estimate the enemy's casualties in killed and prisoners at between 3,000 and 4,000, and we must add to these a substantial haul of steamers, barges, maheilahs, guns, ammunition, and stores. On the other side we have to place three men killed and twenty wounded. The result of the operations has been an advance of nearly eighty miles into the enemy's country, and the capture of a garrison town. The General, who conceived the whole scheme and carried it out according to time-table, with amazing punctuality, was then unknown to fame. He was

destined to find it later by becoming the victim of the first disaster in the campaign. That was many miles farther up the river, where the land is dry, and the British genius for thinking amphibiously could find no scope.



To face p. 47.

THE TAKING OF NASIRIYAH

THERE are two main essentials for amphibious warfare; one is land, and the other is water. In the engagement above Kurnah which resulted in the capture of Amarah, there was not very much land, but there was plenty of water. In the advance to Nasiriyah* up the Euphrates, which commenced about a month later, there was a moderate supply of land, but of water there was usually too little, and occasionally too much. There was too little to get over the Hammar Lake anything drawing more than five feet, but when we blew up the obstruction across the Hakeekah Channel the water came through like a cataract, and there was a great deal too much of it. The expedition to Nasiriyah taught us that in amphibious warfare the parts played by the Navy and Army respectively must vary according to the proportion of water to land, and according to the general condition of each of them.

The reason that we decided to go to Nasiriyah was that the Turks had used it as a base, from which in their optimistic minds they had once hoped to recapture Busrah. That dream was settled for ever

* Pronounced Naz-i-reeah.

when our forces operating from the fort of Shaiba defeated a considerably larger Turkish force concentrated at Berjitsiyah Wood. The story of the Battle of Shaiba is as thrilling as a battle story can be, and the only thing that restrains me from telling it is the recollection that I am writing about the Navy in Mesopotamia, and the Navy had nothing whatever to do with it. When the Turks retreated from Berjitsiyah, they returned to their base at Nasiriyah; and as this base lies on the flank of our advance up the Tigris, it was decided that their presence there was a dangerous embarrassment. If further reasons are required for the Euphrates expedition, it may be mentioned that Nasiriyah is the centre of influence over the powerful Arab tribes in those parts, and that it has some strategic importance because it stands at the south end of the Shatt-al-Hai, the river which joins the Tigris and the Euphrates, flowing out of the former river at a point just above Kut.* It was also the headquarters of the Turkish civil administration of the western portion of the Busrah villayet.

Having decided to go to Nasiriyah, we had only one other question to settle—how to get there. A crow or an aeroplane would go in a straight line of about 100 miles from Busrah; but things that float could not go by that route because there was not enough water to float in, and things that walk could not go by that route because there was too much water to walk in. So they had to go nearly due north for about fifty miles, and then nearly

* The " pronounced like double o, as in " foot."

due west for about eighty-five miles, while the crew and the aeroplane were taking their leisure along the hypotenuse of the triangle. But the troubles of the things that float and walk did not end here. The first eighty miles of the journey was comfortable enough, for any of the river craft could take them up the Shatt-al-Arab from Busrah to Kurnah, and then up the Euphrates from Kurnah to the village of Chabaish. It was beyond Chabaish that the troubles began. The first of them was the Hammar Lake, a large expanse of shallow water with a tortuous channel running through it. When the expedition started on June 26 the channel was five feet deep; when reinforcements were sent up about the middle of July it was only three feet deep; and when stores and ammunition were required at the end of July for the newly installed garrison, they had to be dragged in bellums over a stodgy mixture of mud and water.

The Hammar Lake at the best of times is not a delectable health-resort. For scenery it has an unlimited expanse of reed-growing marshes, occasionally varied with island villages and a few clusters of date-palms. For climate it has the alternatives of a biting blast in winter and an intense humid heat in the summer. Its human population is small and by no means affluent; its insect population consists of voracious hordes of mosquitoes, which are as numberless as the sands on the seashore, and appear to thrive exceedingly.

Having crossed the Hammar Lake, the expedition entered the Hakeekah Channel, which joins the lake

to the broad waters of the Euphrates. Here they had their first intimation that the enemy was ready and waiting for them. Two motor-launches, built by Thornycrofts for the Turkish Government, and armed with pom-poms, opened fire on the advancing river steamers. The naval flotilla returned the fire, and the motor-launches retired gracefully. The procession of river steamers then entered the channel without further interference, and after about half a mile of it they came to their next difficulty. This was an obstruction (known in local parlance as a "bund") which the Turks had built right across the channel. As a rule the Turks have been singularly unfortunate over their obstructions. They tried one between Busrah and the Persian Gulf, another just below Kurnah, and yet another near the Rotah Creek, a few miles above Kurnah; but in every case we found that by means of careful navigation we could circumvent the obstacles. The Hakeekah bund, however, was quite a different affair. They had plenty of time in which to prepare it, and for once they managed to do the job thoroughly. They filled maheilahs (river sailing craft) with mud, and sank them across the channel, and then they piled more mud on top of them, so that a first-class dam was constructed; and it held back the waters of the Euphrates until they spread far and wide over the land, and were forced to find other passages into the lake. But all things human are transitory, and the Turkish bund is no exception to the rule. It takes time, however, to blow up a bund with dynamite, and it is not a pleasant job

when there is a tropical sun beating down on the workers all day long, when the night temperature seldom falls much below 100° F., and when two impudent little motor-boats, skulking round the corner; persist in irritating the workers by dropping pom-pom shells at frequent intervals. Still, it is only a question of time, and when the firing of the fuse has been followed by a mighty bang, there is a channel through the bund 4 feet deep and about 150 feet wide, and through it the water comes pouring in an avalanche.

How can an unwieldy stern-wheeler plough her way against such a cataract? There is only one possible solution of the problem—to haul her through with a wire hawser. Picture a long line of struggling humanity, streaming with perspiration, backs bowed and sinews at the stretch, as they tug for dear life to get the steamers one by one through the channel. The naval flotilla goes first, and as soon as it reaches calmer waters it proceeds to reconnoitre the enemy's position. Meanwhile the work of hauling the transports through goes on wearily, and at the end of five days all the craft are safely anchored at a spot near Ati's Tower.

The enemy's first position was at the junction of a small tributary, called the Gurmat Safah, with the Euphrates. Here he had guns which commanded the Hakeekah Channel, and was craftily entrenched on either side of it. On July 5, at daybreak our troops advanced to the attack, and the naval flotilla supported them with gunfire. And here is a convenient opportunity to point out

the inward meaning of the axiom that in amphibious warfare the respective rôles of Navy and Army must always vary with the respective conditions of water and land. The naval flotilla consisted of three stern-wheelers, a small armed launch called the *Sumana*, and two horse-boats with a 4·7 inch gun in each. All these craft were palpably makeshifts, commandeered for the purpose of this expedition, because they had a small enough draught to pass through the Hammar Lake. The Senior Naval Officer was in one of these stern-wheelers (the *Shushan*), and he expressed himself quite candidly upon her merits as a fighting ship. He referred to her as the "ancient *Shushan*," but I think it would have sounded better if he had said "venerable," for there is a persistent rumour that she was once the royal yacht of Nebuchadnezzar, King of Babylon. He also described the troubles of the gun's crew of the twelve-pounder which had been temporarily mounted in her. After every round they examined the deck carefully to see how much of it had carried away; and when they found that on the port side the deck could stand the strain no more, they shifted the gun over to the starboard side, and went on gaily firing until a violent recoil very nearly sent the gun, the mounting, and the remainder of the deck, through the bulkhead of the forecabin. This, as the S.N.O. remarked, made good shooting very difficult. The horse-boats with their 4·7 inch guns suffered mainly from their lack of elevation. Indirect fire over the tops of the reeds was the only possible method; and although this was checked

by an officer with a telephone from an advanced observing-station, it could never be as effective as direct fire from a stable platform at a suitable elevation. The Army had howitzers and mountain batteries, but their troubles were much the same as those of the horse-boats. On the other hand, the Turks had a good supply of guns mounted in well-constructed emplacements, so as to command the various reaches of the river. It is not surprising that Major-General Gorringe during the course of the operations sent a message to the Army Commander at Busrah: "I do not appear to have the superiority in artillery, which the calibre and range would reasonably lead me to expect." Perhaps he had in mind the achievement of General Townshend's division above Kurnah, when the artillery of three sloops-of-war and a flotilla of armed launches swamped the enemy's guns, and enabled the Army to gain a decisive victory at a cost of only twenty-three casualties.

In spite, however, of the difficulties with which the gunlayers had to contend, the enemy's first position at Gurmat Safah did not give much trouble. His guns were silenced after about four hours' bombardment; and when his small force of infantry tried to skip back, they were outflanked by the 24th Punjabis, advancing in bellums in the approved amphibious style, and were made prisoners. The result of this first scrap was that the Hakeekah Channel was open to us, subject only to the possibility of mines, for which two of the stern-wheelers proceeded to sweep. In this they received un-

expected assistance, for they were hailed from the bank by a party of Arabs bringing a little present with them in the shape of a Turkish officer. They explained that he had been sent down from Nasiriyah to raise the Arab tribes into a state of active resistance against the invaders; but the tribes did not feel that they wanted to be raised, and they really did not know what to do with the officer, so they handed him over for disposal. He turned out to be an amiable kind of Turk, and he was so much overjoyed at finding himself still alive that he proceeded to guide the mine-sweepers to the most likely places. All the same they found only one mine; presumably the Turks had run short of mines.

On emerging from the Hakeekah Channel we found a river some 200 yards broad, and along its bank were several small villages with gardens and patches of cultivated soil, usually surrounded with mud walls. On the left bank were occasional palm groves and fringes of willow-trees, but the right bank was almost entirely devoid of trees. The banks themselves were nothing more than causeways a few hundred yards wide between river and flood, and beyond them the whole country at this time of year was completely under water. Here was a magnificent terrain for a defending force, for there was no way of getting round them, and no alternative to plain, ungarnished, brutally expensive frontal attack. To make matters worse, the dry land was intersected at frequent intervals by dykes which had been cut at right angles to the river for purposes of irrigation.

The first item in the programme was the occupation of Suk-y-Sheyukh,* which lies a little south of the head of the Hakeekah Channel. This was entrusted to the naval flotilla and the Chief Political Officer, who hoisted the Union Jack in the presence of a representative gathering of local Sheikhs and villagers. The flotilla then led the way up the Euphrates until they reached Asani and located the enemy's main position near a place called Mejinineh, about four miles below Nasiriyah. Three thousand yards lower downstream another bad attempt had been made at an obstruction by sinking two steamers and a Thornycroft launch in the river; but it was a complete waste of good material, for there was very little difficulty in getting through it. On July 7 a reconnaissance told us that we were up against a strong position, and that the enemy was well supplied with guns; so there was nothing to do but to wait for reinforcements and more howitzers to come up from Busrah. At the same time the *Sumana* was sent down for repairs necessitated by a shell which hit her when she was in the Hakeekah Channel, and punctured a steam-pipe. Both she and the transports had plenty of trouble in getting through the Hammar Lake on their way back, and it was now becoming an urgent question whether the operations could be completed before the fall of the river made the line of communications inadequate.

On the night of July 13 we attacked on both banks, the 12th Brigade on the left bank and the

* Pronounced Sook-y-Shook (the Market of the Sheikhs).

30th Brigade on the right bank making frontal attacks, while the 24th Punjabis crept round through the floods to make a turning movement and capture some sand-hills behind the enemy's position. If this turning movement had succeeded, the Turk would not have been able to hold his ground; but, unfortunately, our native troops found a stiffer opposition than they could tackle, and when a tribe of Arabs attacked them in the rear they had no alternative but to get back as best they could. The General came to the conclusion that the reports were true of the Turks having received considerable reinforcements, and that he could do nothing further until more forces were sent up from Busrah, so he asked for more infantry, more artillery, more ambulance, and more aeroplanes. His message even suggested that the operations were assuming the character of trench warfare, which up to that time had been unknown in Mesopotamia in the modern sense of the word. It did not sound like a pleasant prospect at a time of year when the heat is most intense and the mosquitoes at their most virulent stage of activity, and it is not altogether surprising that the temper of the expedition was suffering severely. The Commanding Officer of one of the stern-wheelers wrote to say that "it would need three or four nights from 9 p.m. till 1.30 a.m., and several large glasses of lime-juice and soda, to express my moans and general opinion of the way this show is run." He had been spending many nights towing strings of bellums up to the front trenches to supply our troops with food, and he

had been greeted regularly with a hail of shells and rifle-shot from the enemy. It was a monotonous kind of entertainment, and he was beginning to grow weary of it. He had to carry on, however, for another ten nights before the reinforcements from Busrah had been ferried, punted, dragged, or pushed, through the mud and water of the Hammar Lake, and brought up to the front. Meanwhile gun positions had been moved forward, trenches extended, and various other preparations for attack completed; and all the time the workers were painfully conscious of three things—that the thermometer stood high, that there were plenty of mosquitoes in the world, and that the Turks had some very pretty shots among their snipers.

At daybreak on July 24 the great attack was launched, and on the left bank the 12th Infantry Brigade soon met with success, occupying the enemy's advanced trenches after about two hours' fighting. The real trouble, however, was on the right bank. Here the 30th Infantry Brigade found that a branch channel of the river, known as the Mejinineh Channel, formed a serious obstacle between themselves and the enemy. It was too wide to jump and too deep to ford, so they appealed to the Sappers and Miners for assistance. The Sappers and Miners said that they would be happy to throw a bridge across, if only they could get there with their materials. It was then that some staff officer had a splendid brain-wave, and remembered a rule set forth in an unofficial and unpublished treatise on the art of amphibious warfare.

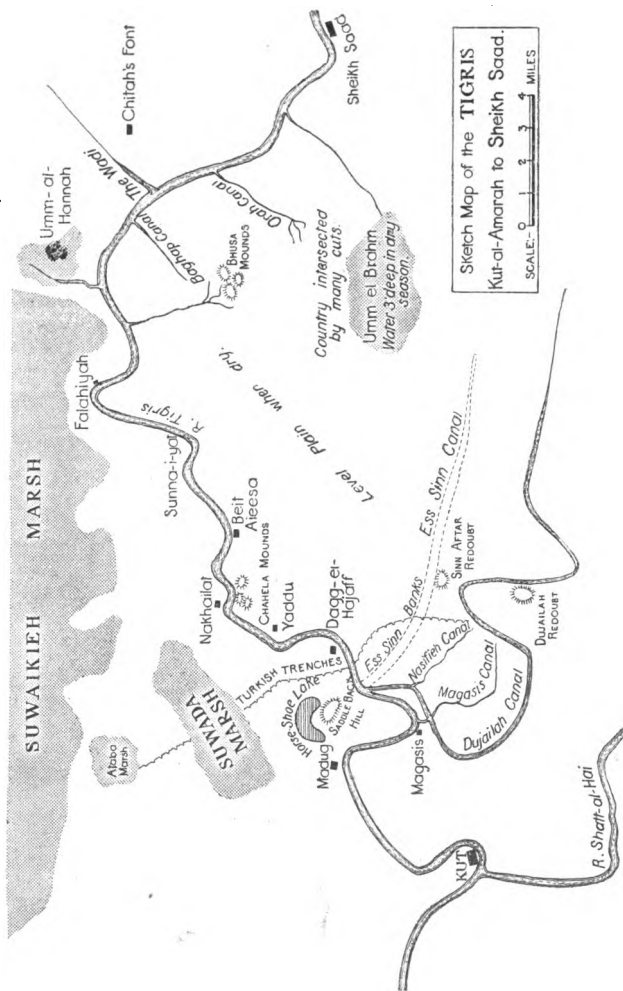
"When in doubt, apply to the Royal Navy." So the Royal Navy's aid was invoked, and the little *Sumana* (commanded by Lieutenant W. V. Harris) was told off to tow a barge with a consignment of sappers, miners, and bridging materials, up to the Mejinineh Channel, while the rest of the naval flotilla did their best to cover the operation by their gunfire. The barge itself was to form part of the bridge, and the *Sumana* was to deliver it safely and in a suitable position in the channel. As soon as the Turks saw what the game was, they let drive at the *Sumana* with everything they could bring to bear on her. The marks of the rifle bullets made her look as though she had the chicken-pox, and the shells—aimed, fortunately, too high to do vital damage—punctured her luckless steam-pipe once more. But she got the barge into the channel and stood by while the Sappers and Miners completed the bridge. Then the 30th Brigade came pounding over it, and, though the Turk still clung like a leech to his trench, he knew in his inmost heart that he could not hold it. By noon the main position was captured, and there remained only a forlorn hope of a position at Sadanawiyah. Whatever might have been its powers of resistance, they were nipped in the bud by the S.N.O., who brought his ship abreast of the foremost trench, laid it alongside the bank, and blazed at the Turks with everything that the little *Shushan* could boast in the way of armament. Then our troops charged the trenches, and the Turks decided that it was not worth their while to stay there. By six o'clock in the evening they

were in full retreat, but the work of the day was not even yet completed as far as the Navy was concerned.

The flotilla immediately proceeded up towards Nasiriyah, and, before they had gone far, what should they meet but their old friend, the Thornycroft motor-launch with the pom-pom! (There were originally two of these, but the Turks sank one when they tried to obstruct the channel.) She did not linger long, but as she departed she kept her pom-pom going busily. Now, it was annoying to think that a little thing like that, after making itself highly objectionable, should get off scot-free. Lieutenant Commander Seymour in the *Shushan* realized this, and he strode up to the twelve-pounder in the bows, and announced that he was going to have three shots if the gun-mounting and the deck would stand it. He laid the gun himself and fired. The first shot was a bit short, the second was a bit over, the third hit her plump and set her on fire. Her crew ran her into the bank and jumped ashore; and that was the end of the Thornycroft motor-boat.

At Nasiriyah the naval flotilla found white flags flying, but when they got abreast of the Turkish barracks some soldiers on the roof opened fire with their rifles. The Navy replied with shells and Maxims, but it was getting too dark to see, so they dropped back and anchored below the town. Next morning a deputation of Arab citizens came off to report that the Turks had evacuated the town, and to invite their kind friends, the British, to occupy it. Major-General Melliss, of the 30th Brigade,

had accompanied the naval flotilla, and a hundred Gurkhas had also managed to find accommodation in the little stern-wheelers. The party landed in state on the morning of July 26, and hoisted the Union Jack at Nasiriyah.



To face p. 61.

THE MAN AND THE AXE

IF simplicity of language be a virtue in a General's despatches, the best part of them will be found in those rare passages towards the end when a hero is recommended for the Victoria Cross. A deed of heroism needs no embellishment of the pen, no mellifluous recital, no pæan of praise; the briefest statement of fact and circumstance is enough to present it to the imagination and proclaim its worth. It was in the simplest of words that Major-General Townshend told the story of the death of Lieutenant-Commander Edgar C. Cookson, R.N., and recommended him for the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross. And the story in itself is a simple one, but as it involves the story of the first capture of Kut-al-Amarah in September, 1915, of which very little has ever appeared in the public Press, I propose to tell it in detail.

It was not until nearly three months after the occurrence of the events I am about to relate, that the attention of the people of England was turned to Mesopotamia by a series of disasters, which culminated in the surrender of Kut by General Townshend's division after a siege lasting 145 days.

During that anxious period a good deal was heard about the strong Turkish positions between marsh and river, which the relieving forces tried in vain to pierce, and such names as Sanna-i-yat, Beit Aieessa, and Ess Sinn became quite familiar to newspaper readers for a short while. But now I want to go back a few pages in the campaign, and show how the same division, blessedly unconscious of the fate in store for it, turned the Turks out of that very stronghold at Ess Sinn, drove them back in full retreat, and marched triumphantly into the town. No more striking illustration could be found of the vicissitudes of war than is afforded by these two periods in the history of the Mesopotamian campaign—the first twelve months up to the autumn of 1915, and the next five months from December, 1915, to April, 1916.

The causes which brought about the transformation are not for discussion here, nor can any comparison be drawn between the two days' engagement, which resulted in the first capture of Kut, and the long series of operations by means of which we tried our utmost to relieve the beleaguered garrison. The conditions were entirely different from alpha to omega. In the first place, in September, 1915, the forces engaged on both sides were comparatively small; in the second place, there was then dry weather and dry ground; in the third place, although the scene of operations was the same, the Turks then relied on only one position—at the Ess Sinn Banks—and made no attempt to hold any positions

to the east of it. Nevertheless, the first capture of Kut-al-Amarah was in itself a performance of sufficient merit to deserve more recognition than the few lines in which the newspapers recorded it.

The main item in the plan of attack was the device of deceiving the enemy as to where the real blow was to be delivered. Our Army was divided into two columns, of which Column A was a formidable force consisting of all three arms, and was placed on the right bank of the river. Column B, which was placed on the left bank, consisted only of infantry and a small supply of artillery. With this disposition of troops the battle opened on September 27, and Column A gave every semblance of a lively attack, while its cavalry stood ready to make a vigorous pursuit if the Turks gave way. But as a matter of fact all this was merely play-acting. At nightfall the Sappers and Miners constructed a pontoon bridge across the river, and during the dark hours the greater part of Column A crossed to the left bank, where the real offensive was to take place, only two battalions being left behind to cover the bridgehead.

The field of operations on the left bank may be described as a channel of land between marsh and river, subdivided by swamps into four narrow passes. On the extreme north the Suwaikieh Marsh, about eight miles from the river at Ess Sinn, extended east and west for many miles, and formed an impassable boundary. In between were three smaller marshes in a straight line running northwards from the river,

which were known as Horseshoe Swamp, Suwaida Marsh, and Ataba Marsh. The Turks made use of these to protect their flanks, and had dug their trenches in between them. Before daybreak on September 28 Column A had not only reached its position of deployment, but had divided itself into three portions—No. 1 to make a frontal attack between Horseshoe and Suwaida, No. 2 to turn the Turkish flank by advancing between Suwaida and Ataba, and No. 3, consisting of cavalry and armoured cars, to go right up between Ataba and the northern boundary, in order to prevent a possible attempt on the part of the enemy to turn our right flank. Meanwhile Column B, at the south end of the line, was to attack the Turkish trenches between Horseshoe and the river. If we could succeed in getting past this line of swamps, we should have no further obstacle to bar our advance upon Kut, which lies on the same side of the river. If, however, we had attempted to press our attack on the right bank, we should no doubt have succeeded in it; but there would still be the river between us and our object, and that it would have proved a serious obstacle the history of the subsequent operations has conclusively shown.

It is rather surprising that the Turks were deceived by our ruse, and it is still more surprising that on September 28 they took so long to realize that we did not intend to make any serious attack on the right bank. It was half-past five in the evening before they managed to get their troops

across the river, and start to bring relief to those which had borne the brunt of the day's fighting. By this time our No. 2 force, having fulfilled its mission, was advancing westwards between Horse-shoe and Suwaida. But on seeing the Turkish reinforcement advancing from the river, our force turned southwards, swooped down on the enemy, and completely routed them. By night we held the greater part of the enemy's trenches and had inflicted heavy casualties, with the result that he decided to retire, and before daybreak was in full retreat along the road to Baghdad.

The part played in the operations by the naval flotilla was necessarily that of a floating artillery. The flotilla consisted of three armed launches—*Shaitan*, *Comet*, and *Sumana*—four horse-boats, and two small motor-boats. The horse-boats had each a 4·7 inch gun, but the launches were too flimsily constructed to carry anything larger than a twelve-pounder. In addition to these craft there was the Royal Naval Air Service, with their seaplanes, who did invaluable work in reconnaissance, in observation of artillery fire, and in carrying important messages. It cannot be said that they enjoyed their job, for the truth of the matter is that most of them were in the throes of malaria. Major Gordon, of the Royal Marines, who was their chief, says very plaintively that in a hot climate he does not like a machine whose slip-stream blows directly through the radiator on to the pilot's face. On one occasion he collided with a bellum as he was

getting off the water, and damaged his chassis, and he explains in his best official language that "this accident was due to the pilot not being in a fit condition to fly, as he had been sick with malaria the day before." But it was simply a case of necessity's compulsion, for we were short of aeroplanes at the time. Three days later he managed to get through the ordeal of a flight of 240 miles without accident. He was splendidly backed up by his men, of whom he says: "Out of twenty ratings, eighteen have been attacked by malaria, some on more than one occasion since leaving East Africa. This illness is hampering the work to a great extent, as the majority of the men are not fit for a long day's work. They all, however, insist on working, and will not say when they feel ill." A dose of Mesopotamia on top of a dose of East Africa without a sugar-plum of leave in between is rather strenuous even for the R.N.A.S., and it is comforting to know that they were all sent home shortly afterwards for a rest and change of climate.

To return to the three armed launches. Their job the first day was to keep up a bombardment of the enemy on the right bank, in pursuance of the scheme of creating the impression that the main attack was to be made there. On the second day they still confined their chief attentions to the right bank, with the idea of keeping down the enemy's fire from that quarter against our brigades operating on the left bank. As soon as an aeroplane brought them word that the operations far inland to the north

had been successful, they moved upstream, and engaged the enemy at close range. Here they found the enemy's shells and rifle-fire made things rather warm for them, and the General sent word that they were not to advance any farther. So they hung on where they were, and secured themselves to the bank. At six o'clock in the evening another message came through from the General. It told them that our attack at the north end of the line on the enemy's left wing had been completely successful, and that the Turks were retreating. The message went on to refer to an obstruction across the river near Kut. Unless this could be removed, it would be impossible for the flotilla to aid the cavalry in pursuing the enemy. The General therefore requested the Senior Naval Officer to proceed upstream, examine the obstruction, and, if possible, destroy it.

Lieutenant-Commander Edgar C. Cookson was acting S.N.O. at the time, in the absence of three officers senior to him, of whom two had taken their ships to Ceylon for health-recruiting purposes, and the third was in hospital. He ordered the flotilla to darken ship, and about seven o'clock the three launches crept upstream, followed by one of the motor-boats. As they approached the obstruction they were detected, and a heavy fire with rifles and machine guns was opened on them from the trenches on both banks of the river. They found that the obstruction consisted of a maheilah in the middle, and two iron lighters, one each side. These

were placed across stream in a line and joined together by wire hawsers. The first idea was that, if the maheilah could be sunk by gunfire, there would be plenty of room for the ships to pass between the two iron lighters. Whether this theory would have proved correct, or whether the sunken maheilah would have been a worse obstruction than the floating maheilah, was never determined, because it is not such an easy thing as it looks to sink a maheilah by gunfire.

It became clear that the only satisfactory way of removing the obstruction was to cut the moorings by which the craft were held together, and send the maheilah floating downstream with the current. The S.N.O. ordered the *Comet*, from which he was directing the operations, to proceed upstream and place herself actually alongside the maheilah.

No mere words can convey an adequate idea of the inferno of rifle-fire which greeted the vessel as she carried out this manœuvre. To the Turks it was of vital importance that the obstruction should remain intact until they had time to get their army away; for their line of retreat for the first few miles lay within easy range of the river, and if the armed launches were able to go upstream at once, they would probably make the difference between an orderly retreat and a rout. Fortunately, all three of the launches were fitted with bullet-proof plating, and so long as a man's duties allowed him to keep under cover he was fairly safe. But it was not always possible to keep under cover. For instance,

there was Leading Signalman Gilbert Wallis, who had to get into an exposed position in order to make his signals visible. He was wounded at a very critical moment, and was unable to stand up; but he managed to prop himself against something and carry on with his signal. It was fortunate that he could do so, for without that signal there would have been worse calamities. Then there was Private A. G. May, R.M.L.I., who was working the *Comet's* six-pounder from behind its gun-shield. He was working it single-handed, and was feeling quite happy at his job until his gun-shield carried away—and then he went on working it without feeling happy. The *Comet's* guns were decidedly unfortunate, for the three-pounder on the port side was always in trouble. The bolts which were meant to hold the mounting to the deck got so loose that they threatened to draw out altogether. Leading Seaman Ernest Sparks, however, continued to fire the gun and to hope for the best, but it was rather like riding a thoroughbred with two broken reins patched up with a bit of cotton.

The *Comet* was brought alongside the *maheilah* to the musical accompaniment of bullets pattering on the steel plating like raindrops on a window-pane. They came in a thick shower from both sides of the river, and those which missed the ship went shrieking overhead like a swarm of harpies. Lieutenant-Commander Cookson peered through the darkness at the wire hawsers which held the *maheilah* in its place, and in a moment his mind was made up.

The Captain of the *Comet* (Lieutenant W. V. Harris) heard him shout for an axe; but was too busy manœuvring the ship to attend to him, and it was too dark to see from the bridge what actually happened. The eyewitnesses were the gun's crew on the fo'c'sle. They saw the S.N.O., axe in hand, leaning over the *Comet's* steel plating in an endeavour to reach the wire hawser. Then they saw him get over the plating and step on to the maheilah itself. Immediately afterwards they saw him fall between the ship and the maheilah, and they hastened to extricate him and bring him back into the ship. There were more bullet holes in him than they cared to count; he died within ten minutes.

The Captain of the *Comet* found that no less than twelve men in the little ship were wounded, and wisely decided that it was impossible to do anything more under such a heavy fire at point-blank range, so he signalled to the other launches his intention of retiring. This was the signal which Leading Signalman Wallis managed to get through, although he was unable to stand up on account of his wound. All the flotilla got back safely, and anchored for the night in the Nakhailah Reach.

Next morning early they went upstream again, and found that the enemy had fled from their trenches abreast of the obstruction, leaving only two men with an old muzzle-loading cannon, which they fired off in the true comic-opera style. By ten o'clock the ships were at Kut; but they had no time to dally there if they were to overtake the

enemy. Unfortunately, the Tigris itself proved an enemy, and they found many obstructions of which the hand of man was quite innocent. The *Sumana* ran aground and broke both her rudders; the *Shaitan* was hit by a shell from one of the Turk's rearguard guns, but, fortunately, the mishap did no more than delay her progress, and she was able later on to come up with the *Comet* again. They sighted two of the enemy's steamers ahead of them, and managed to send a shell into the *Busrah*, causing her to drop two maheilahs full of ammunition which she had been towing, and so find safety in her superior speed. But the *Shaitan* and *Comet* still pressed forward, until they suddenly found another contretemps to deal with. The Turks had detached a small force of infantry and some mountain guns to make a détour inland, rejoining the river some way below our forces, there to harass our line of communications. This force was now on its way back, and, seeing British steamers in front of it, opened fire on them with the mountain guns. So the two armed launches were in the uncomfortable position of having the enemy both ahead and astern of them. At this critical juncture the *Shaitan* ran aground again; she soon got off, however, and Lieutenant Mark Singleton, who was now acting S.N.O., decided that the pursuit must be abandoned, as there was grave risk that the ships might be cut off altogether. So they turned round and made their way back to Kut.

When General Townshend heard the story of

Lieutenant-Commander Cookson's death, he sent a special despatch to General Headquarters detailing the facts. Having described the situation in which the *Comet* was placed, with a heavy fire at point-blank range from both sides of the river pouring into her, the despatch concludes with these simple words: "He found that he could not send a man over the ship's side to cut away the obstruction, because it meant certain death, so he took an axe and went himself."

That is all. No laudatory phrases; no embellishments; just a plain recital of a plain story. But was finer tribute ever penned? As Senior Naval Officer he had been entrusted with an important task, but when he arrived on the scene he found that to order a man to execute it would be to send him to certain death, and so—"he took an axe and went himself." When the children of the centuries to come take up the burden of their marvellous heritage as citizens of the British Empire; when they turn to the pages of history and learn about the strange transformations which the land of Mesopotamia has seen; when they trace the records from the days of Babylon's glory, which endured for two thousand years, through the ages of pomp and magnificence which marked the reign of Haroun-al-Raschid, Caliph of Baghdad, through the years of poverty when, under the thralldom of Constantinople, industries were abandoned, waterways were left to flood the country at their will, and peasants taxed into a state of starvation to fill the

pockets of Valis and Mudirs; when at last they come to the Great War, which brought the British flag into this realm of mighty rivers, and with it the dawn of a new era: then let us hope they may find a breath of inspiration, giving them strength to bear the burden they have inherited, in the simple story of the sailor who "took an axe and went himself."

THE RETREAT FROM CTESIPHON

By one of the ironies of Fate, the big disaster of the Mesopotamian campaign synchronized with the début of the most important accession to the naval forces in the country—the specially constructed gunboats, which were sent out in sections and put together at Abadan. On October 23, 1915, H.M.S. *Firefly*, the first of the new craft, was launched; and ten days later she arrived at Busrah, where she shipped her guns and ammunition, carried out her gun trials, and proceeded the same day up-river, to play her part in the famous push towards Baghdad. Needless to say, she was an object of great interest to soldiers and sailors alike, for she was the very latest thing in Mesopotamian novelties; and while the experts were talking learnedly about her armament, her engines, her draught, her searchlight, her wireless equipment, and all else connected with her fighting efficiency, the ordinary mind was content to admire her domestic fittings—the bunks, the lockers, the telescopic washhand-stands, the flap-tables, the wicker chairs, wicker mess-tables, and all the rest of her furniture and appointments. She had little opportunity, however, of showing herself off, for she was born in stirring times, and

her baptism of champagne was shortly to be followed by her baptism of fire.

Under the command of Lieutenant-Commander C. J. F. Eddis she proceeded to Aziziyeh, where she found the three armed launches *Comet*, *Shaitan*, and *Sumana*, the stern-wheelers *Shushan* and *Massoudieh*, and four horse-boats, each carrying a 4·7 inch gun. This was the whole of the naval flotilla at that time capable of getting up the river. Other gunboats were on the stocks and were nearing completion, but the Great Push could not wait for them. It is not to be supposed, however, that the fortunes of this luckless attempt to rush through to Baghdad could in any way have been affected by an increase of naval strength. A great change had come over the character of the campaign since the summer of 1915, and it could no longer be described as amphibious warfare. The floods had subsided with the fall of the rivers, and the fighting had receded northwards beyond the flood area. The first taking of Kut-al-Amarah at the end of September, 1915, may be said to close the first chapter in the history of the campaign. Thenceforth the operations approximated in character to normal military operations, and the functions of the Navy were reduced to supplementing as well as they could the Army's artillery, patrolling the long line of communications, and standing by to take up the rôle of cavalry in the event of the enemy being put to flight. So far as artillery work is concerned the Navy were at a big disadvantage, in that the masts and funnel of a gunboat offer an ideal mark on which

the enemy's gunners can take their range; and while land artillery can take advantage of irregularities in the ground to conceal itself, the gunboat must always present a conspicuous target. Moreover, the river-banks were high, and for guns with a flat trajectory it was impossible to get under the lee of them, and at the same time command the appropriate range; the only way of firing the projectile over the bank was to keep at a sufficient distance from it, by taking advantage of the river bends, and this, of course, exposed the ships to the full view of the hostile gunners. A further difficulty confronting the Navy was the low level of the river, which is full of shoals and shifting sand-banks, and is very difficult to navigate. This explanation is necessary to a full comprehension of what befell the Navy during the retreat from Ctesiphon.

On November 22, 1915, the naval flotilla was lying at the village of Bustan, about two miles east of Ctesiphon; and as soon as our attack began the flotilla became heavily engaged with the Turkish guns on the right bank of the river, and at the same time was bombarding the Turkish trenches. Their main trouble was the difficulty of locating the enemy's guns, which were very cleverly hidden. The enemy, on the other hand, had been able to prepare for the attack, and had evidently made careful calculations of the exact ranges of various points on the river. Their position was an enviable one, for they were firing all the time at exposed targets while they themselves were well concealed, and could seek protection in trenches or dug-outs

whenever our shells began to fall uncomfortably close to them. None the less the flotilla carried on with the work for four days, although the *Comet* had been badly hit on the first day; fortunately, she was not compelled to withdraw, as it was found possible to repair the damage on the spot.

It is not my purpose to write the story of what was happening on land during these four days, except in so far as the record is necessary to explain the fortunes of the naval flotilla. I have heard General Townshend's attack at Ctesiphon described as a masterpiece; and I have heard it said that he achieved exactly what he predicted—no more and no less. He is reported to have said, when he had arrived at Ctesiphon and had made a reconnaissance of the enemy's position, that by engaging the enemy he could win the battle, at a price, but that his force would be so much depleted that further progress would be impossible. His orders were to engage the enemy, and he carried them out, completely defeating one Turkish division and capturing 1,300 prisoners and several guns. At the end of three days' hard fighting he had driven the enemy back to their second line of trenches; and then came the ominous report that large Turkish reinforcements were arriving. So there was the General, several hundred miles from the base, on a barren plain swept by bitter cold winds, with over 4,000 casualties on his hands, a badly equipped medical service, and a fleet of river transport so inadequate that supplies had broken down, and some of the troops had been without food for three days. The order to retire

came from Headquarters only just in time; in another day or two it would have become impossible for him to extricate his division. On the night of November 25 the field of Ctesiphon was abandoned, and the Army retired to their previous camp at Lajj, about six miles down-river. Next day the retreat continued towards Aziziyeh, and it soon became apparent that there were still further difficulties to be overcome. The problems connected with the navigation of a winding river, with sharp bends at frequent intervals, a strong current, and shifting sand-banks, have already been mentioned; it must now be explained that all the food, ammunition, and stores of the Army were loaded in barges, which were towed in pairs on either side of paddle-wheel steamers. Only those who have had experience of river navigation can appreciate the full significance of this. To manœuvre a paddler, with a couple of heavy barges tied alongside her, round one of those bends was a feat in itself, and this feat had to be repeated at very frequent intervals. It has been said by Napoleon that an army marches on its stomach, and, remembering this maxim, we may find a silent but eloquent expression of the military faith in the efficiency of the Navy and the Merchant Service. For the Army from Ctesiphon marched on in a straight line, trusting to the skippers of the river craft to bring the food and stores round all the tortuous windings of the river, and to come up with them when required.

As it turned out, nearly all the transports got stuck about four miles below Lajj, and a new function for

the Navy in Mesopotamia was revealed—the rescue of stranded Army rations. Throughout the whole of November 26 the naval flotilla was busily engaged in towing transport barges off the mud, and throughout the next day they were occupied in the same way a little lower down the river. One of the tugs had taken a wrong channel near Zoeur, had run aground, and been abandoned by her crew on the approach of some Arab cavalry. So the *Comet* and *Shushan* went in search of the straying tug, found her, and extricated her, meanwhile carrying on a hot argument with the Arab cavalry. The work of rescuing stranded barges went on all that night and during most of the next day; and when all the transports were at last cleared, the *Comet* and the *Shaitan* themselves ran aground about eight miles above Aziziyeh. They remained aground all night, while the enemy's advanced troops carried on a heavy sniping from the right bank, and next day from the left bank as well. But the *Comet* got clear, crossed the river, and kept the sniping parties at a respectable distance, while the *Firefly* and *Shushan* were busy attending to the *Shaitan*. But the poor old packet was past praying for; she had bumped the mud so often in the course of her long career that she had lost heart for her job. She was leaking like a sieve, and there was nothing for it but to salve her guns and stores and abandon her. This was not an easy operation to carry out, with energetic snipers on both banks of the river; so the Senior Naval Officer had to send an appeal to the General for help, and in the afternoon some

cavalry came out from Aziziyeh and eased the situation.

When the rest of the flotilla arrived at Aziziyeh, the S.N.O., feeling that the entertainment of the past few days had been too strenuous for real enjoyment, suggested to the General the advisability of sending the transport barges in advance of the Army, instead of leaving them in the rear to be shepherded home by the Navy. He pointed out to the Staff the difficulties of navigation under the existing conditions, and the fact that the transport had to cover a much longer route than the Army owing to the tortuous course of the river, the distance by road from Lajj to Kut being about 75 miles, and the distance by river 210 miles; and he warned them that, if the barges were not sent ahead, it was probable that many of them would be lost, should the Turks continue the pursuit. He then despatched the *Shushan*, *Massoudieh* and the horse-boats down-river to make all speed to Kut, leaving only the *Firefly*, *Comet*, and *Sumana*, behind with him.

It is impossible at this date to ascertain the reason why it was not found possible to act upon the S.N.O.'s advice, but the fact remains that on November 30 the transport barges left Aziziyeh about the same time as the troops recommenced their march, and anchored that night in the Umm-al-Tubal reach, abreast of our camp. Here occurred the most dramatic incident of the retreat. At daylight on December 1 large enemy forces were seen to the north-west, at a distance of about two

miles; and all round the horizon were still larger forces, which appeared to encircle the British camp on three sides. This was not the awakening vision that the leader of an army would covet, and it came with the greater unexpectedness because this was the first occasion in the campaign that the Turk had been in the position of the pursuer. His extraordinary mobility in retreat was well known to us, but now we learned for the first time that he could be equally mobile in pursuit. There was no leisure, however, to spend in moralizing, for with the first streak of dawn the enemy launched a vigorous attack. The naval flotilla was in action immediately, and, spotting a large body of Turks massed together not more than 3,000 yards away, the *Firefly* and *Comet* proceeded to pour lyddite into them with methodical rapidity. Meanwhile the Army was hastening its retreat, burning all the food and stores which it was found impossible to transport. The air was filled with a blue haze and the penetrating smell of sizzling hams combined with the gentle odours of petrol and burning sacks of flour. How ardently must the beleaguered garrison at Kut, a few weeks later, have wished that all those good things, which were destroyed on that eventful morning, had remained to them! But the great object was to get the army safely away, and in an incredibly short space of time it melted like a cloud on the horizon. There remained the little gunboat and the two armed launches, still plugging away with lyddite shells—Horatius Cocles, Spurius Lartius, and Herminius, barring the way

of the advancing army. They were aided at the outset by the cavalry brigade, which prevented a Turkish column from enveloping our right flank, and by our land artillery, which fought a desultory rearguard action as it retreated.

The three little craft carried on with their job, heedless of whether they were receiving support or not, until a Turkish shell hit the *Firefly* amidships and penetrated her boiler. Lieutenant-Commander Eddis was badly wounded, and one of the stokers was killed; the engines were put out of action completely, and the ship began to drift helplessly downstream. Then the *Comet* took her in tow, but in trying to negotiate a narrow bend in the river both ships stuck on the mud, the *Comet* being firmly wedged against the bank. The *Firefly*, however, managed to get afloat again, and was sent drifting downstream, but it was not long before she grounded on another shoal. Meanwhile the *Sumana* had come up, and was making desperate efforts to drag the *Comet* off the mud; but by this time our troops had all retreated eastwards, and large bodies of Turkish troops had entered our camp. The enemy had also brought up several field guns to short range, and were subjecting all three of the ships to an accurate and heavy fire. Finally the enemy's infantry came running up to the river and completely surrounded the ships, pouring a hail of rifle-shot into them. The S.N.O. decided that it was useless to make any further attempt to save either the *Comet* or the *Firefly*, and, having called up the *Sumana* to come alongside the *Comet*, he climbed

aboard her, and sent a skiff to fetch off the officers and men of the *Firefly*. The S.N.O. was one of those cheery optimists whose optimism is merely stimulated by being in a tight corner. It is recorded of him that, as he was leaving the *Comet* with bullets pattering against the ship's side and singing in his ears, and shells shrieking over his head, he turned to the officers standing beside him, and said, with his inimitable chuckle of glee, "A champagne supper if we get out of this—what?"

So the little *Sumana* took aboard her the two stranded ship's companies, and staggered downstream, so heavily laden that her deck was almost awash. The last she saw of her two lamented sisters was that they were both on fire, with large bodies of Turkish troops surrounding them. But their crews were safe for the time being, their guns and engines had been disabled, and the S.N.O. had got his confidential books tucked under his arm—all except an obsolete signal book, which had to be left in the *Firefly's* safe, because the fire had made the safe too hot to open. I have heard a yarn that in that selfsame safe was a plan of Baghdad drawn up by the General, showing the houses where the British troops were to be billeted when they entered the city. General Townshend was always very thorough, and prepared for every contingency, even when he had very little faith in the possibility of its occurrence. Von der Goltz and Khalil Pasha must have smiled sardonic smiles when that plan of Baghdad was brought to their notice.

In the hurry of our Army's retreat two barges

filled with stores had been left behind, and the *Sumana* had taken charge of them, intending to bring them down to Kut. But now they were surrounded by the Turks, and it was impossible to rescue them. So the little *Sumana* went struggling on, with an abnormal draught which caused her many a bump on the mud, and attended by a constant risk of taking a list and rolling on to her beam ends. It was not long before she came to more evidence of the troubles of a retreating army. One of the transport steamers, towing a lighter on either side of her, had run aground at a difficult bend near Shidhaif. Now, one lighter contained a few stores and some sick and wounded Indian ranks, and the other lighter contained a very large supply of military ammunition for guns of all calibres and for rifles. There was no time to lose, for the Turks were hot on the pursuit and their field guns were within range. The only question to be decided was, Which of the two lighters ought to be salved first? and the S.N.O. made up his mind in a moment—the one which would be of more value to the enemy. It was dragged off the mud, and so was the transport tug, and the pair were sent on their way downstream. This left the problem of the sick and wounded in the other lighter. To take them aboard the *Sumana* was impossible, for it needed little more than an extra feather-weight to make her founder. There happened to be a small steam-launch within hail, and the S.N.O. told her Captain to go alongside the lighter and take off as many of the sick men as he could accommodate,

without jeopardizing the safety of his craft. As it turned out, this solution of the problem was no solution at all, for in some unaccountable way—possibly because the Captain attempted to take too many people aboard, and so made the launch unwieldy—the rescuer got aground in the shallows, and had to be abandoned. The *Sumana* could not possibly attempt to give assistance, for with the load she had to carry she could not even return upstream against the current. Moreover, matters had become urgent, for between her and Kut were many big bends of the river; and if the Turks with their field guns took a straight line across the plain, they would be able to reach one of these, and so cut off the possibility of further retreat.

When darkness fell, the difficulties of navigation increased threefold—in fact, it is nothing short of a miracle that a small overladen craft should have been able to find her way through those tortuous channels of the river at its very lowest season, round hairpin bends, and over treacherous shoals. Sub-Lieutenant C. P. Tudway, who handled her, deserved a better fate than to be among the garrison which surrendered at Kut some five months later. When at last the *Sumana* reached Kut on December 2, she found that she had outpaced the troops after all, and was two or three hours in front of them. They arrived that same evening thoroughly exhausted, and perhaps the most cheering sight which greeted the careworn Staff was the smiling face of the S.N.O. One of them gave vent to his feelings

by exclaiming: "Well now! we never expected to see you again."

So ended the famous retreat from Ctesiphon, and it is no exaggeration to say that the Navy in Mesopotamia never had more difficult duties to perform than during those unfortunate days. The loss of the *Comet* and *Shaitan* was bad enough, but the loss of the *Firefly* was a disaster. She was the first-born of the new brood, and the Navy regarded her with eyes of pride, as every mother regards every first-born child. She had been snatched away from her parent, and become a captive in alien hands, which knew not how to heal her sores nor soothe her afflictions. For more than a year she bore her sorrow patiently, and then came the day of her deliverance, when the tragedies of Ctesiphon and Kut were overlayed by the brilliant record of General Maude's advance and the capture of Baghdad. But that is Another Story.

A FORLORN HOPE

THE month of April, 1916, was full of dramatic incidents in the Mesopotamian campaign, and ended with one of the most dramatic events of the war—the surrender of Kut-al-Amarah. To everyone engaged in the campaign it was a month of long and terrible suspense, and the psychological barometer of the whole British force was going up and down like a piston-rod, as each scrap of news came through from the front. On the 5th of the month we captured the El Hannah position, and it was reported in Busrah that our casualties had been remarkably small, that the Turks had retreated to a lightly held position, some miles to the rear, that we might confidently expect to clear them out of that on the morrow, and that we should then be up against their last and main defence at the Ess Sinn Banks. Next day we heard details of the operations: There were five lines of trenches to be taken before El Hannah became ours; the Turks first retreated to a position at Falahiyah, which we attacked at nightfall and captured; meanwhile on the right bank of the river we had driven the Turks out of their position, and when they counter-attacked we completely outmanœuvred them and

caused them very heavy casualties. All this sounded such excellent news that our spirits soared into the clouds, and we began discussing what would be the most appropriate way to celebrate the relief of Kut. Blowing off sirens and hooters and sending up rockets seemed somehow inadequate for such an occasion, and a searchlight display by the assembled squadron, even if it could be arranged, would be a commonplace method of expressing our emotions.

For the next day or two nobody dared to cast any shadow of a doubt upon the universal confidence that Kut would be relieved; the only latitude allowed to the pessimists was the expression of the view that it would take longer than was generally anticipated. And then there followed a week of ominous silence from the front. The barometer began to fall slowly but steadily, for we knew that, when a big push is in progress, no news must inevitably mean bad news. The Turks were holding us up at Sanna-i-yat, the position which early reports had declared to be only lightly held, but which had evidently been much strengthened by the enemy. A few days later came news that the floods had entered both the Turkish trenches and our own, and that, while we had managed to pump the water out of ours, the Turks had been forced to move back to higher ground, and had lost heavily in doing so. We also heard that we had advanced on the right bank of the river, and that arrangements had been made to supply food to Kut by means of aircraft. This was about the 15th of the month,

and the barometer began to rise again, but not very rapidly. The precise effect which the floods were likely to have upon the operations was at first an uncertain quantity; but when we learned a few days later that our troops were engaged in making a causeway through the floods as an essential preliminary to further advance, we realized that Fate was against us, and that the advent of the flood season had taken place at a most unfortunate moment. And all the time there were small dribblets of intelligence trickling through to us about the desperate straits to which the Kut garrison was reduced. We were all busily engaged upon efforts in mental arithmetic. Given that the aeroplanes at our disposal were so many, that each aeroplane was capable of carrying so many pounds of food per day, and that the garrison of Kut was so many thousand, how much food would be received by each man, and how long could they hold out upon such scanty supplies?

Up to this time not a word had been spoken in H.M. ships about the *Julnar*. Some of our artisan ratings had been sent up-river to Amarah, and most of us knew that they were to fit up steel plates round her steering positions and engines, and make her as secure as was possible against gun and rifle fire; but none of us spoke of it. In the wardroom of one of the sloops an officer remarked that the moon was not rising until past eleven o'clock, and the remark was received by an ominous silence and severe scowls. Ashore, however, the importance of secrecy was not so fully appreciated. The

various messes were openly canvassing the chances of the vessel getting through the blockade, and I have heard that even the Arabs in Busrah bazaar were making it a subject of speculation. The difficulties of keeping the matter secret were obvious. The vessel had been loaded up at Busrah with some 250 tons of food, and had then gone up to Amarah, where she was specially fitted for the great ordeal. However assiduously false reports were spread as to her purpose and aim, the most simple-minded person must have made a shrewd guess as to the real nature of her mission. I happened to go up to Amarah shortly after she had left there for Sheikh Saad, and walking along the bank I met one of the river-transport skippers. He had just brought down some sick and wounded and a few Turkish prisoners, and told me that he had passed the *Julnar* the previous evening. I suppose the expression on my face indicated my surprise at his referring to the subject. "You can't put the cat back in the bag when she's once out of it," he said. "Why, I overheard some of my prisoners exchanging bets on the possibility of her getting through."

The voyage of the *Julnar* was never anything more than a forlorn hope. She was a twin-screw steamer, and faster than most of the river craft, and if any vessel at all could slip through the blockade she was that vessel. In order to gauge her chances we must appreciate the nature of the task in front of her. First of all, she had to face the ordinary difficulties of navigation—a winding river

with hairpin bends and occasional shoals, which even in the flood season were capable of pulling up a heavily laden vessel. Secondly, she had to face these difficulties in the dark, for to make the attempt by daylight was, of course, out of the question. Thirdly, she had to run the gauntlet of the Turkish guns on both banks from Sanna-i-yat to Kut—a distance of over twenty miles by river—to say nothing of a possible fusillade by rifles and machine guns. Fourthly, there was the possibility that the Turks might have sown a minefield, or, what was more probable, have stretched a wire hawser or some such obstruction across the river, in anticipation of the attempt being made. Aero-plane reconnaissances were made, and the airmen reported that they could see no signs of minefields or obstructions; but the waters of the Tigris are muddy, and it was more than possible that objects beneath the surface would escape detection. Turkish prisoners, however, were unanimous in declaring that no obstructions had been prepared. This information, however, if it could be relied on, only served to emphasize the first two difficulties—the negotiation of the sharp bends in the river and the ticklish job of navigating in the dark. The Admiral himself said that he had very little hope of the success of the undertaking, for the odds against it were too great.

I believe that it was first suggested some weeks previously by a member of the Army Commander's Staff, and was referred to the Senior Naval Officer; that it was debated at some length between the Army

Commander, the Staff, and the S.N.O.; and that it was in the first instance abandoned as being beyond the range of practical politics. When, however, the position of the beleaguered garrison became critical, the proposal was again brought up, and was referred to Vice-Admiral Sir Rosslyn Wemyss, the Commander-in-Chief of the East Indies Station, who had arrived at Busrah on April 10, 1916, in the yacht *Imogene*, in the course of his tour round the naval ports of his station. He had at once proceeded up-river, in one of the gun-boats, to the scene of the operations, and the most important question upon which he had to decide was this question of whether or not the attempt should be made to send a ship through to Kut. Without pretending to know what considerations influenced the Admiral's mind, I feel that the problem, although a momentous one, was simple enough in its elements. The beleaguered garrison were nearing the end of their tether; the fate of some 9,000 officers and men was in the balance; the Army had appealed to the Navy for help. So long as there was the smallest grain of a chance, so long as it could be said that with the aid of extraordinarily good luck there was a remote possibility of success, that appeal must not be made in vain. The Admiral sent out private letters to the officers of the Mesopotamian squadron asking for volunteers for the command of the *Julnar*. There was no need to point out to them the dangers of the enterprise, or the slender hopes upon which it had been sanctioned; they all knew that the chances of success

were practically negligible. But most of them sent in their names, and the Admiral's next problem was that of making the selection. His choice fell upon Lieutenant Humphrey O. B. Firman, R.N., and to accompany him he selected Lieutenant-Commander Charles H. Cowley, R.N.V.R., whose intimate knowledge of the river, gained in the service of Messrs. Lynch Brothers, was likely to be most valuable. Mr. Reed, who was given a temporary commission as Engineer Sub-Lieutenant, R.N.R., also volunteered to accompany the expedition. The crew consisted of one engine-room artificer, one leading stoker, three stokers, one leading seaman, and six able seamen. All these were volunteers drawn from the men of the gunboat flotilla. The Admiral says of them: "They were under no misapprehensions as to the dangers they ran, and they knew that I considered it most unlikely that they would reach their destination and fulfil their task; and had it not been that I realized that it was the one and only chance of saving the garrison, I would not have given my consent to such an undertaking."

At eight o'clock on the evening of April 24 the *Julnar* started from Falahiyah on her perilous voyage, and, as though to give her an enthusiastic send-off, our artillery at once opened a terrific bombardment of the enemy's lines. The object of this was, of course, to keep the Turks in their trenches, and so reduce their chances of detecting the blockade-runner; and at first it really looked as if the ruse had been successful, for there was no indication that she had been detected. We began

to make calculations as to her probable progress; but in so doing we were obliged to guess her speed, for there had been no opportunity for testing it after she had been armour-plated and loaded. The moon was due to rise at 1.15 a.m., which gave her just over five hours to cover the twenty odd miles; and taking into account a strong adverse current of about four knots, the allowance was not excessive. After Sanna-i-yat her course would be fairly straight for the first two miles or so, as far as Beit Aieesa; but after that there would be several nasty bends, including a specially difficult one at the end of the Nakhaila reach. Then came the Ess Sinn position, where it was reasonable to suppose that the Turks would be on the look-out, and some four miles farther on was the hairpin bend of Magasis Ferry, which is eight and a half miles from Kut by river, but only four miles as the crow flies. Our only hope lay in the darkness of the night, which was intensified by the high banks of the river; if she had really managed to pass through the front enemy position at Sanna-i-yat without being seen, it was just conceivable that the Turks in the back positions might be caught napping. While we were in the midst of these anxious speculations, a report came from H.M.S. *Mantis* that a red light had been seen at some distance up the river, and we were told that this was the recognized Turkish signal that a vessel was passing up the river. The futility of further speculation became painfully obvious; there was nothing for it but to sit down and wait patiently for the issue, whatever it might be.

The full story of the voyage of the *Julnar* will never be known until the war is over, and our prisoners in Turkey have been released; the only glimpse we can get through the veil which shrouds that heroic endeavour is to be found in the chronicle of one of the beleaguered garrison. We will therefore change the scene to Kut itself, and see what was happening among those who for nearly five months had kept the flag flying in the face of grim starvation. The quotations are from the report written by Lieutenant H. S. D. McNeal, R.F.A.; and though his account of the death of Lieutenant-Commander Cowley is no more than hearsay, there are circumstantial details about it which serve to lend corroboration to it. But first of all I will quote two short extracts, which in themselves afford an awful revelation of the sufferings endured by those brave men:

"Esmeralda, my charger, was killed and eaten on April 18. Poor thing! she died in harness all right."

For a long time before that date the issue of horseflesh as part of the daily rations had become the normal routine; the trouble was that even this form of food had come to an end.

"On April 23 we drew as rations four ounces of bread, one ounce of sugar, and half an ounce of cheese."

How well I remember seeing the arrival at Busrah of some of the exchanged prisoners, those who were too far emaciated to stand the smallest chance of surviving the long journey which would have been

before them had they been carried into captivity. I saw a batch of human skeletons with a thin covering of skin over their bones, and I shuddered and turned my head away. About a year later I returned to the heart of the Empire, and found the walls placarded with appeals to the people to eat less bread, and a Food Controller spending his days in trying to persuade the citizens of England not to waste food. Truly we are an unimaginative race. But let me pass on to the entry in Lieutenant McNeal's report, which relates the occurrences of the eventful night of April 24.

"Great excitement prevailed in Kut when it was heard that the relieving force would attempt to send the steamboat *Julnar* through with rations. It was decided that if the boat got through un-disabled it was to come up to Kut itself and be unloaded, but that if it was hit it was to be beached at the fort. The artillery made special preparations to cover its arrival, and everyone was on edge with expectation. Shortly after midnight heavy rifle-fire was heard down-river, and we knew that the attempt had begun. For fifteen minutes the firing was very rapid; then it died down, and our spirits with it. Another burst of firing came, and our spirits rose accordingly; but this also died away into silence, and we knew that the attempt had failed."

Oh the anguish of it! After five months of hardship and struggle against the pangs of hunger, after five months of alternating hope and despair as each item of news from the relieving force trickled through to the defenders, after five months of grim deter-

mination upheld by the traditions of the Empire to which they belonged—by the memory of Lucknow, where “ever upon the topmost roof the banner of England blew”; of Delhi, of Khartoum, of Ladysmith, and of Mafeking—after five months of unfaltering loyalty to their beloved General and of unflinching faith in his leadership, those sons of Britain and of Britain’s Indian Empire realized that the last hope had gone, and that nothing now remained to them but to surrender. The silence after the second burst of rifle-fire told them that the attempt had failed.

“Afterwards,” says Lieutenant McNeal, “we heard that every member of the crew was killed by rifle-fire.” (Hearsay was at fault in this, for it has been ascertained that only the two officers—Lieutenant Firman and Lieutenant-Commander Cowley—were killed. All the rest were taken prisoner, but among them five were wounded.)

“The Navigator,” continues the journal, “Captain Cowley, had dropped at the wheel with a bullet through his groin, just as he was steering the ship through the most critical place in the whole river, a hairpin bend. While consciousness lasted he hung on, but the boat was swept into the bank and grounded. . . . When the Turkish officers boarded the boat, they found him unconscious, with his hands still gripping the steering-wheel, and, in spite of all the efforts of the Turkish doctors to save him, he died without regaining consciousness.”

Whether or not this account of Lieutenant-Commander Cowley’s death is accurate in its details,

all who knew him will feel confident that he died at his post. His loss was a severe one to the expedition; for apart from his universal popularity, and his knowledge of the natives, among whom that popularity extended, his familiarity with every reach of the river between Busrah and Baghdad made him a very valuable asset in the British forces. Both he and Lieutenant Firman received the posthumous award of the Victoria Cross.

Aeroplanes next day reported that the *Julnar* was in the hands of the Turks at Magasis Ferry.

The rest of the story is soon told. On April 26 the garrison at Kut gave up all hope, and proceeded to destroy the remainder of their store of ammunition, by decapping it and dropping it into the river. Negotiations were opened with Khalil Pasha as to the terms of surrender, and at first there was some expectation that the garrison would be allowed to return to India on parole. When, however, word was passed that, in exchange for this concession, the Turkish Commander demanded that all the guns should be handed over to him intact, the officers and men of the garrison unanimously declared that, rather than surrender the guns to be used against their own comrades by the enemy, they would go as prisoners of war to Turkey. On April 29 General Townshend gave orders that the guns were to be destroyed, and sent round word that all, except the extreme cases in the hospitals, would be made prisoners. The last act of the garrison was to destroy the wireless installation. On that eventful morning we at Busrah were taking

in the farewell words of the men with whom we had worked and fought. In a pathetically brave message General Townshend expressed his thanks to the Army Commander, to General Gorringe, and to the officers and men of the relief force, for the efforts they had made. There followed a long pause; then came the simple word "Good-bye"—and then . . . silence! So ended the most disastrous chapter in the history of the Mesopotamian campaign.

THE DAWN OF A NEW ERA

THE Babylonian Empire endured for over two thousand years—from 2700 B.C., when Ur-bahu combined all the city kingdoms into one empire, until 538 B.C., when Cyrus invaded the land and annexed it as a province of his Persian kingdom. For over two thousand years this country was pre-eminent in the world as the home of art and commerce, famed for its carpets, its cloths, its embroideries, its schools, its libraries, its poets, its astronomers, for all that is comprised in the word "civilization." The walls of Babylon, we are told, were 200 cubits high, 50 cubits thick, and 60 miles in circumference; and when the city had been laid low by the Persian conquest, Alexander the Great promised to rebuild the ruined temples, but after employing 10,000 workmen for two months he was not even able to clear away the rubbish. So the city which once was queen of all the world remains to this day a mass of broken bricks and rubbish. But the prosperity of the land could not vanish in a day; the fertile soil of Mesopotamia, and the great rivers which then irrigated it and provided the natural highways of commerce, still endured; and Babylonia still remained a rich prize, for which Syrians, Parthians, and Romans, in turn competed

And finally it fell into the hands of the Caliphs, the successors of Mohámmed, who founded a new city farther to the north, and called it Baghdad. Here the wealth and pomp and luxury, which had once been Babylon's, were transferred; here Haroun-al-Raschid reigned in the ninth century in a palace with vaulted ceilings, rich mouldings, inlaid mirrors, and massive gilding; here was the home of Sindbad the Sailor, from which he set out upon his wonderful travels, always calling at Busrah to charter his ship and load her with his merchandise. Then came the ravagers from the Ottoman Empire, followed by centuries of strife between Turkey and Persia, fighting for this land of wealth like dogs over a fat bone. But still, in spite of all, the prosperity of the country remained to it, until in 1638 the Sultan of Turkey finally prevailed, and from that time forward Mesopotamia became a Turkish province—and a scene of desolation.

Where is its wealth now? Who can believe that this wilderness of marsh and desert was once a thriving land; that where now we see half-naked nomad tribes living the lives of animals, there once dwelt the foremost agents of the world's civilization? Where are the vaulted ceilings and inlaid mirrors to be found in the evil-smelling, narrow, unaved, dirty, garbage-strewn streets of modern Baghdad? I am told that a few of these relics of the glorious past survive, but they look like the tawdry trappings of a yesternight's feast. Where are the richly laden vessels which once sailed from the port of Busrah to carry their wares to the limits

of the then known world? Where are the poets, the astronomers, the bankers, the merchants, who spread the fame of Babylonia far and wide? All have been swept away by that magic wand—the sceptre of the Turkish Government. It would take too long to tell how this conjuring feat has been accomplished, to describe the methods by which Constantinople essayed to govern Irak. It must suffice to indicate them in a few words. First we have the principle of *divide et impera*, which meant keeping each Arab tribe in a state of perpetual hostility against its neighbour; then we have the Valis of Baghdad and Busrah—the Governors—whose personal income was derived from the taxation of the country, and was supplemented by “saying their prayers at Kerbela” (a euphemism for raiding the Mohammedan shrine at that place); then we have the Mudirs, or local Governors; whose salaries the Government carelessly forgot to pay, so that they had to raise their income by levying fines on the peasantry and tolls upon the river-craft which pass through the pontoon bridges across the rivers (built solely for this purpose, for nobody ever used them as bridges); and then we have the minor officials, such as the quarantine officer at Busrah, who charged a fee for disinfecting you before you went ashore, and another fee of an indeterminate amount for giving you a permit to land. The conservancy of the waterways was absolutely neglected, and this was the worst crime of all, for the whole vitality of the country depends on them. It is true that in 1911 Sir William Willcocks was

engaged by the Turkish Government under a five years' contract to survey the rivers and carry out such irrigation works as were found necessary; but after struggling with the Turkish officials for two and a half years he threw his hand in, and was requested by the Minister of Public Works, as a favour, to state that he resigned on account of ill-health. In the report which he wrote immediately after his return, he contrasts Mesopotamia with Egypt; for he had travelled some years previously up the Nile from Khartoum to the equatorial lakes, and had seen the wonderful work which his own countrymen had done in that inhospitable waste of waters, to introduce new forest trees and new agricultural products, and ameliorate in some degree the conditions of life of the miserable inhabitants. His next voyages were up the Tigris and Euphrates, traversing those deserts and swamps, which to-day represent what was in antiquity the richest and most famous tract in the world, and this is what he says: "How should I have felt if I had belonged to a race in whose hands God had placed for hundreds of years the destinies of this great country, and that my countrymen could give no better account of their stewardship than the exhibition of two mighty rivers flowing between deserts, to waste themselves in the sea for nine months of the year, and desolating everything in their way during the remaining three? No effort that Turkey can make can be too great to roll away the reproach of these parched and weary lands, whose cry ascends to heaven."

Fortunately, Turkey is no longer called upon to

make the effort, for the country has passed into other hands, and the dawn of a new era has come. It broke on March 11, 1917, when the British flag was hoisted at Baghdad. The story of that wonderful advance of the Expeditionary Force from Falahiyah to Baghdad, and from Baghdad to the railhead at Samara, affords a fitting climax to the vicissitudes of the two and a half years' campaign. The part played in it by H.M. Navy was by no means insignificant; in fact, it may fairly be said that the action of the Navy in pressing the pursuit of the enemy resulted in such disastrous consequences to the Turks that it determined the fate of Baghdad.

The naval force had been considerably augmented during 1916, and a large flotilla of gunboats was now on the two rivers. Three of the large twin-funnelled vessels and five of the *Fly* class took part in the operations, and just before the final advance into Baghdad the force was increased by the *Gnat*, a fourth vessel of the *Mantis* class, as well as the recaptured *Firefly*. The actual beginning of the operations, which had such a triumphant conclusion, dates back as far as December 13, 1916, when we opened the ball with a heavy bombardment of the Turkish position at Sanna-i-yat on the left bank of the Tigris, and at the same time made an advance on the right bank as far as the Shatt-al-Hai, which we succeeded in crossing. Next day we extended our advance up both banks of this tributary stream, and so by degrees we crept closer to the Tigris at the point where the Shatt-al-Hai diverges from it. Our object undoubtedly was to clear the right bank of

the Tigris, effect a crossing on the west side of Kut, and so cut the Turkish line of communications with Baghdad. I believe it is one of the elementary axioms of military tactics that the most advantageous point for crossing a river in the face of a hostile force is at the end of a big loop; for if you have possession of the bank, you can bring up your artillery on either side of the loop, enfilade the enemy, and so force him to evacuate the loop and leave you to build your pontoon bridge without being molested. The Turks fought hard to prevent us from occupying the right bank of the Tigris on either side of that loop, which holds the town of Kut, and they were forced to defend with equal vigilance the loop farther west known as the Shumran Bend. The ding-dong struggle went on for weeks, but at last we succeeded in clearing the enemy from the right bank.

Our frontal attack on the Sanna-i-yat position was at first merely a blind to distract the enemy, but later on we made it so much of a reality that the Turks were at a loss to know where the main attack was to be launched. On February 17 a surprise attack on Sanna-i-yat gained us the first two lines of trenches on a front of some 400 yards, but, unfortunately, we were unable to hold them in face of a strong counter-attack. Five days later the Seaforths and one of the Punjabi regiments did splendid work in a repetition of the same attack, and in spite of six successive counter-attacks we managed this time to hold the first two lines of trenches. We then made feints of attempting to

cross the Tigris at Magasis Ferry and opposite to Kut, with the result that the Turkish forces were dispersed over a large area, and his artillery was concentrated at points where we had no real intention of attacking. Finally, on February 23 we effected a crossing at the apex of the Shumran Bend, first by means of ferries, which took over four battalions to cover the bridgehead, and then a pontoon bridge was constructed; the infantry of one division had crossed before nightfall, and another division was ready to follow. Meanwhile we were attacking the third and fourth lines of trenches at Sanna-i-yat, and during the day these also were captured by our troops. This was the beginning of the end for the Turks, and their sole object now was to prevent us from cutting off their line of retreat.

On the morning of February 24 the gunboat flotilla was ordered to move up from Falahiyah, and in the evening they entered Kut. Once more the Union Jack floated over the town, after an interval of nearly ten months; and if only General Townshend's division had been there to share the rejoicing, the memory of those dark days of the campaign in the spring of 1916 would have been blotted out for ever. Next day the pursuit of the retreating enemy began in earnest, and, as usual, the Navy was asked to co-operate with the cavalry. At Imam Mahdi we came across the enemy's rearguard in a prepared position, and a fierce artillery duel opened up between the gunboats and the Turkish howitzers and field batteries. After a few hours some of our own field artillery came up, and later on

our infantry stormed the Turkish trenches. The battle lasted all day, but by nightfall the Turk had either had enough of it, or he thought that his main army had been given sufficient time to make good its retreat; for during the hours of darkness he evacuated the position, and next morning the flotilla continued the pursuit.

I imagine that no army in the world can beat the Turkish Army in mobility. The Turkish soldier can live for days together on the food which he can carry on his back—a hard cake made of compressed dates was his usual diet—and consequently his officers have no need to worry themselves to any great extent about such prosaic problems as those connected with the commissariat and the transport of food-supplies. Their main concern, when the army is in retreat, is to get away the guns and munitions, and throughout the Mesopotamian campaign they have been singularly successful in achieving this object. By way of illustration, it may be mentioned that on February 26 one of our columns tried to accomplish a big stroke by cutting straight across a bend of the river, fully anticipating that they would thus overtake the enemy. They made a forced march of eighteen miles over dry desert, but at the end of it they found that the Turk had been too quick for them, and their only consolation was the capture of a few guns which had been left behind. It is probable that the enemy would have succeeded, in spite of all our efforts, in effecting an orderly retreat had it not been for a daring exploit on the part of the gunboats.

At Nahr Kellak the flotilla came across the rear-guard for a second time, and found them well entrenched. Our cavalry, together with the naval guns, shelled them hotly; but there was no moving them, and it became obvious that the performance at Imam Mahdi was to be repeated. It was then that the Senior Naval Officer decided to try and run the gauntlet of the Turkish guns, and make a bold bid to slip past their rearguard. In arriving at this decision he had several circumstances to take into consideration. The Tigris at the Nahr Kellak Bend is fairly wide; and though there are always shifting sand-banks to be found in every part of the river, he had reason to believe that at this point there was plenty of water. This was an important factor in the situation, because if the foremost ship of the line had been sunk there might have been some danger of the channel becoming blocked, and in this case the rest of the flotilla would have been in an awkward predicament. It must be realized that the enemy's trenches and gun emplacements were situated all round the bend, so that as the ships passed an inferno of shot and shell came at them from three directions. Moreover, the Turks had heavy calibre guns as well as field guns within a few hundred yards of the river, all blazing away at point-blank range; and from the trenches there came a strident accompaniment of machine gun and rifle fire to supplement the roar of the big guns.

Five gunboats took part in this wild dash round the Nahr Kellak Bend, the *Mantis* leading, and as they swept past up the river every gun they had

was in action, from the six-incher down to the Maxim. The range was something less than 500 yards, the kind of range at which the old wooden walls of England used to open an engagement with muzzle-loading guns and red-hot cannon balls. The fury and deadliness of an artillery duel with modern guns at such a range almost baffles the imagination. Every ship was hit several times, but still they held their course; and Fortune smiled on them, for not one of them was disabled. The *Moth*, which was last in the line, came in for the worst punishment; two of her men were killed outright, and of her small complement more than half were wounded, including her three officers. She was hit eight times by shells, and her after-compartment was holed below the water-line, but still she managed to keep on forging ahead. The *Mantis* also had a heavy casualty list; her quartermaster and her pilot were killed in the conning tower, and her Captain (Commander Bernard Buxton, R.N.) received a nasty wound. But in spite of this he took charge of the wheel, just in time to save his ship from running ashore; and though he had never seen that part of the river before, he managed skilfully to steer his ship through the shallows.

So the enemy's rearguard was passed, and before long our flotilla came up with the main Army, and opened fire on them with everything they could bring to bear—heavy guns, secondary armament, pom-poms, Maxims, and rifles. The scene that ensued is indescribable; gun's crews were shot down, and their guns abandoned, to be picked up later by

our advancing troops; munitions and stores were scattered wholesale; rifles were thrown down, and even haversacks and water-bottles; and the greatest wonder of all was that the Turkish soldier was seen to run, for in normal circumstances nothing could ever make him do more than slouch along, either in advance or retreat. To quote the words of Mr. Edmund Candler, the "Eyewitness" in Mesopotamia: "So far the enemy had conducted an orderly retirement. It was the action of the gunboats on February 26 that introduced panic and converted the retreat into a rout."

It was not long before the flotilla found something else than the Turkish Army to engage their attention. This was the Turkish Fleet, and the first vessel to come within range was our little friend the *Sumana*, one of the unfortunate garrison forced to surrender at Kut. She surrendered again now, and was restored to her rightful owners. Several transport steamers also hove to and gave themselves up, and about five o'clock in the evening the large steamer *Busrah* was brought to by a shell from the *Tarantula* and surrendered. She was full of Turkish troops, and was carrying some German machine-guns, of whom some were found killed and the rest wounded. But the prize on which the S.N.O. had most set his heart was the *Firefly*, which the Turks had rechristened *Firicloss*—the first of the brood of Mesopotamian gunboats, which was lost to us during the retreat from Ctesiphon. She was within range, and in company with her was the steamer *Pioneer*. Both were hit several times, but

the *Firicloss* continued gamely to return our fire with her new-pattern British-made gun. At last, soon after six o'clock, she ran into the bank in the Zaljah reach, to the west of Umm-al-Tubal, and within a mile or two of the spot where she had been lost in December, 1915. We overhauled her, and found that the Turks were trying to set fire to her magazine; but we stopped it just in time, and the *Firicloss* became the *Firefly* once more. Her term of tribulation was over, and she returned again to the bosom of her family, heartily welcomed by all her younger sisters. We had to remove her to a safe distance from the *Pioneer*, which was badly afire. Later on the command of the *Firefly* was taken over by Lieutenant-Commander Eddis, who had charge of her at Ctesiphon in November, 1915. He was delighted to find in his cabin that his books and many of his papers remained intact. Our other captures included ten barges, some bridging material and pontoons, and large quantities of rifles, ammunition, and equipment.

Most of the next day we kept the enemy in sight; and together with the cavalry we helped to speed him on his way. On March 1 we reached Aziziyah, which is fifty miles by road from Kut, but about twice as far by river; and here we called a halt, while the Army was reorganizing their line of communications and preparing for a further advance. The Turks had been streaming through the village—no longer an army, but a distracted rabble—casting aside their rifles and accoutrements as though they had no other thought than to get away from the

sound of the British guns. Five days later the pursuit was continued, and at Lajj the enemy's rearguard was found; but a blinding sand-storm rendered artillery work impossible, and it was left to the cavalry to force them to retire. Next day the flotilla arrived at the famous Ctesiphon position, and found it absolutely deserted. It had been strongly entrenched, and there was ample evidence that the Turks had fully intended to make a big effort here; but apparently it had been found impossible to rally them, and the great Ctesiphon stronghold was relegated to the lumber-room of past history.

The final stand in front of Baghdad was made by the Turks on the banks of the Dialah River, which joins the Tigris about eight miles below the famous city; and though the enemy's forces were so much depleted that the line was not held in very great strength, they yet managed to offer serious resistance when our infantry tried to cross the Dialah by ferry. In fact, they subjected our troops to such heavy rifle and machine-gun fire that the first attempt had to be abandoned, and we deemed it wise to adopt other methods. We sent a detachment over to the right bank of the Tigris to enfilade the Turks across the river, and incidentally to deal with enemy forces to the south and south-west of Baghdad. This detachment gradually made its way up the right bank, and on March 10 put the enemy's rearguard to flight, occupying Baghdad railway-station early next morning. Meanwhile the struggle on the banks of the Dialah continued,

and during the early hours of the morning of March 9 the North Lancashires crossed the river, and seventy of them heroically stood their ground for twenty-two hours until next morning, when the East Lancashires and the Wiltshires joined them, and drove the enemy out of the river-side villages back to the Tel Mohammed Ridge, his last position, which was occupied that night. Some motor-lighters carrying infantry across the Dīlāh got stuck in the mud, and had to be rescued by the *Tarantula*.

In the afternoon of March 11 the flotilla arrived at the Citadel in company with Paddler 53, carrying the Army Commander, and for the first time in history the Union Jack was hoisted over the City of the Caliphs. For some hours previously a state of anarchy had prevailed; and, as in the case of Busrah when our naval forces first arrived there in November, 1914, Arabs and Kurds were looting wholesale and setting fire to the houses. Order was soon restored, however, and an inventory was commenced of the booty left in our hands. Guns, machine guns, rifles, ammunition, machinery, railway materials, rolling stock, telegraph equipment, hospital accessories—all the paraphernalia of a big army—were there. But perhaps the most interesting of all was a collection of disabled guns which had been rendered useless by the garrison of Kut on the eve of its capitulation—neglected victims of a melancholy disaster, abandoned to the inroads of rust and decay; their very uselessness bore testimony to the pathos of the tragedy in which

they were involved. But a new era has dawned for Mesopotamia with the hoisting of the British flag over Baghdad Citadel; a future full of hope and promise has been opened up for this mournful land, debased from her proud estate by corruption and misrule. The brightest dawn, however, does not always disperse the clouds of yesterday, nor the golden promise of the future lighten the darkness of the past. There are those among us whose private sorrows still rouse them to a bitter questioning of the why and wherefore of the blunders that have been made, who cannot forget that a heavy toll in the lives of Britain's sons has been levied for the lack of foresight and the errors of judgment, committed by some of those responsible for the conduct of the campaign. Such errors, alas! form the staple of the Empire's history. We Britons spend our lives in making blunders, and give our lives to retrieve them. But though the clouds remain, they are no longer dark and threatening; the dawn has come, and with it the confident assurance that in this new burden of Empire—the task of restoring Mesopotamia to her former prosperity—the generations to come will gain inspiration from the long chronicle of heroic deeds which make up the story of her deliverance. The lives of Britain's sons have not been sacrificed in vain.

PART II.—FICTION

THE ART OF DIPLOMACY

NOT more than a dozen years ago the peace of the world was very nearly disturbed by a circumstance which in itself appeared so inconsequent that the story never reached the public ear. It happened in Westminster, in the offices of a firm of consulting engineers, which were situated immediately underneath the Embassy of a European Power. For the sake of brevity we will call that Power the Republic of Calcivania. On a certain anniversary of a famous event in Calcivanian history the flag of the republic was bravely floating from outside the Embassy's front window. At the window immediately below it sat the head of the firm of consulting engineers. The flag waved backwards and forwards in the breeze, and every now and again flapped noisily against the window-pane, until at last the engineer could stand it no longer. He took two quart bottles of ink, a London Directory, and a Stock Exchange Guide, ranged them at intervals along the window-sill, and, having armed himself with a ball of string, he proceeded to moor the flag of Calcivania in a thoroughly seaman-like manner. And then he went on with his work. When the Calcivanian Ambassador was returning from lunch

he looked up to satisfy his patriotic emotions by a sight of the dear old flag; and next moment he was observed to be leaning heavily against the railings at the side of the pavement, with a fixed stare in his eyes, as though he were trying to recollect what he had had for lunch. It is unnecessary to relate the subsequent events in detail. Suffice it to say that, when matters had reached the verge of an international crisis, the situation was suddenly relieved by a timid knock at the Ambassador's door and the appearance of the office-boy employed by the firm of engineers. The boy confessed his sin with frankness and humility, and plaintively besought forgiveness. He received double wages that week, and Europe was saved from a mighty conflagration.

It is unfortunate that the pages of history cannot record an equally satisfactory conclusion to all the international incidents which have been fraught with big consequences. The one that I am going to relate has certain features about it which demand an apology for its publication, and let me say at once that it would never have seen the light of day if it did not happen to be true. This, and the fact that it throws a valuable sidelight on the history of the war, afford, in my opinion, sufficient justification for its appearance in print. By way of further preface, let me add that in the autumn of 1914 the British sloop H.M.S. *Thora* was lying off the Persian town of Mahommerah, at the junction of the Karun and the Shatt-al-Arab, that the opposite bank of the Shatt-al-Arab was Turkish territory

and that the Turks had been in the habit of claiming that the whole of that river belonged to their domain, although they laid no claim of course to the Karun, which flows entirely through Persian territory. With this explanation, I may safely leave the reader to his perusal of the narrative, which I heard from the lips of the officer mainly concerned, and which, to the best of my ability, I have recorded in his own words, without attempting any embellishment.

We were seated in the wardroom of H.M.S. *Thora*, and the conversation happened to have veered round to the subject of beverages, when the Captain turned to me, and said: "Talking of drinks, I suppose you know what was really the beginning of the war between England and Turkey." I murmured something about the *Goeben* and *Breslau* and German influences at Constantinople, but the Captain obviously felt grieved at the display of so much ignorance, and sought to hide his feelings and his face behind a large glass of lime-juice and soda.

"No," he said, "those were merely contributory causes. The real cause of the war has never been published yet; but there is no reason why it should not be known now, so I will tell you."

Here is the story, in the Captain's own words as nearly as I can remember them, of the events which led up to the declaration of hostilities between England and Turkey:

"In the autumn of 1914 the *Thora* was lying at Mahommerah, and a Turkish gunboat came and anchored close by in the Shatt-al-Arab. To say

that relations were strained between the two countries is to put it mildly. All those little matters you were mentioning just now—well, they didn't make things any easier; and when I saw the gun-boat's Captain coming alongside in his skiff, I realized at once that the position needed careful handling. At the same time I was confident that my diplomatic skill was right on the top line and in good working order. By the way, if you want to wire me at any time, my telegraphic address is 'Tact.' Well, the Turkish Commander was brought into my cabin, and of course I smiled at him benignly and asked him to sit down. He sat on the extreme edge of the chair, and cleared his throat three times before commencing fire. Then he dropped his topee, which he had been twiddling round and round between his knees; and as I stooped hurriedly to pick it up for him, he did the same, and our heads collided violently. It was not a good beginning, and I'm not sure that I didn't make it worse by complimenting him on the thickness of his skull. But always remember this, my boy, that in diplomacy as in all other arts, *Summa ars est celare artem*—the zenith of art is to hide art. When I told him that he had a thick skull, he naturally said to himself: 'Here is a plain sailor who says what he means and means what he says.' So he fired off his first round.

" 'To make your acquaintance, Captain,' he said, 'is to me both a pleasure and an honour. I have made haste to capture the opportunity before it should be too late.'

“ ‘That’s all right, my dear fellow,’ I said. ‘No doubt we shall see a good deal of each other now that we’re such near neighbours. Have a cigarette.’ I held a match for him, and he lit up; but I noticed that he was all of a tremble, so I suggested a drink to steady his nerves. But no, he wouldn’t have a drink; and it flashed through my mind that the Turk is probably rather particular about his drinks. You see, they have some funny little customs; for instance, if a Turkish official makes himself more than usually obnoxious, the fashionable thing to do is to put finely ground glass into his coffee every evening. In course of time he gets a kind of Crystal Palace inside him, and then he dies. Little customs of that kind are apt to make a man rather an epicure about his drinks. He took two or three ladylike puffs at his cigarette, and moved himself so near to the edge of his chair that I began wondering what would be the proper procedure if he collapsed on to the deck. Then he tried a second round:

“ Captain, ‘it makes me desolate that we must so soon say the Good-bye.’

“ ‘Steady the Buffs,’ I said; ‘we’ve only just said How d’you do.’

“ ‘I know, I know,’ he said; ‘it is desolating.’

“ ‘When are you shoving off?’ I asked.

“ ‘I? When am I?’ he asked. ‘You misunderstand me, Captain. I am not, as you call it, shoving my ship. But you are shoving your ship. It is so sad.’

“ This was a regular broadside, and as he sat

there leaning forward towards me, with his hands gripping his knees, he stared so hard at me that he seemed to be trying to look right through me. I felt it was a critical moment, and I said to myself: 'Keep your head, my boy—keep your head.' So I put on one of my blindest smiles, and said:

" 'You're a marvel, you know. You've only been in my cabin five minutes, and you've got me guessing already.'

" The stare gradually relaxed into a grin.

" 'Shall we say, Captain, that at this time of the year the Karun is not a healthy river for British sailors ?'

" 'Yes,' I said, 'you can say that if it gives you any pleasure; but you don't want me to say it, do you ?'

" 'As you will,' he said, and shrugged his shoulders so beautifully that he nearly fell off his chair.

" 'No, I'm afraid I can't make a duet of it,' I said. 'You see, I'm in Persian territory, and I shouldn't like to offend the Persians by saying that their river is unhealthy at any time of the year.'

" 'I think you forget, Captain,' he said, 'that in order to return to the Persian Gulf you must shove your ship on the waters of the Shatt-al-Arab, and so become the honoured guest of my Government.'

" 'That will be a pleasure to look forward to later on,' I said, ignoring the contention that the whole of the Shatt-al-Arab was Turkish water.

“ Well, it took the deuce of a time to come to the point, but he blurted it out at last. He had received orders from Constantinople that he was to intimate to me politely but firmly that the *Thora* must leave Mahommerah without delay. Of course I told him I could do nothing in the matter until I had instructions, and that I should wire for them. He came again next morning to ask if I had had an answer to my telegram, and of course I hadn't. We had no reason to be in a hurry over the business. The following day he called again, but I was still without instructions. He told me he was sorry to say that Constantinople was growing impatient, and he wore quite a worried look. The day after he blew in again, and this time there was an air of determination about him. I don't know what orders he had received, but evidently he had come to present an ultimatum.

“ ‘ Captain,’ he said, ‘ it desolates me to tell you that the sand runs so fast that unless the egg is soon boiled it will be all gone.’

“ ‘ Sit down, my dear fellow,’ I said; ‘ and, talking of eggs, let's have a cocktail.’

“ ‘ Thank you, I do not drink intoxicants,’ he said.

“ ‘ Well have a temperance drink, then,’ I suggested. ‘ Whether our respective Governments part brassrags or not, there's no reason why we shouldn't have a drink together while we can.’

“ He saw the force of this, and after a moment's hesitation he said: ‘ Thank you, Captain; I will have a glass of sherbet.’

"It was an awful moment. I felt a cold shudder pass down my spine, and I know my face was as long as a sea-boot. But I turned it away from him quickly, and, mustering all my presence of mind, I rang the bell. When my Goanese steward appeared, I gave him such a stare as told him as plainly as any spoken words that if he didn't rise to the occasion he would get the sack on the spot.' All I said was, 'Boy, bring me a large glass of sherbet and a large whisky-and-soda,' and I said it as if sherbet was an ordinary everyday drink in a British man-of-war. Imagine my joy when I saw a distinct gleam of intelligence in that boy's eye, the first time I had ever detected such a thing.

"Well, we sat down and chatted about the weather, and the date crop, and things like that, and presently my steward brought in the drinks. My No. 1 size glass is a source of great pride and joy to me; they have nothing like it in the wardroom. The nearest approach to it is the zinc bucket used for drawing bath-water from the river. One glass was filled with a nice cold whisky-and-soda, and the other with a luscious foaming beverage throwing up sprays of effervescence. My guest looked at it with undisguised admiration. He made a good effort to drink it off at one go, but my glasses aren't built for that sort of thing. However he did it in three, and I don't mind betting that Bogey would have taken at least ten.

"Then we sat and talked in the most friendly kind of way, and we had just got on to the subject of the Bahrein pearl fisheries, when he suddenly

sat up in his chair, and a curious expression came over his face, half puzzled, half frightened. I jumped to the conclusion that his conscience had just awaked to the fact that he was not carrying out his orders, so I said rather feebly: 'Well, now about this little business of ours?' To my astonishment, he got up abruptly and gave me such a look—I don't know quite how to describe it, but I imagine it was just the sort of look that Cæsar gave Brutus when he said: 'Et tu, Brute!' Then he snatched up his topee and made a dash for the door. He didn't even turn round to say good-morning, but made a beeline for the gangway, jumped into his skiff, and shouted to his men to shove off. I stood there at the gangway watching him. Every now and then he half rose from his seat and shouted at his men. I don't understand Turkish, but his voice and attitude suggested that he was saying: 'Pull, your blighters, pull!' I went back to my cabin to think it over, and rang the bell for my steward.

" 'Boy,' I said, 'where did you get that sherbet from?'

" 'A little lime-juice, sir, and a little sugar.'

" 'Yes?'

" 'And the white powder'

" 'The white powder?'

" 'Yessir, plenty white powder.'

" 'What white powder?' I thundered.

" 'From de bottle in de sleeping cabin.'

" I sank into a chair and mopped my face with a handkerchief. My Eno's Fruit Salt! He had

used about half the bottle. The game was up; all my diplomatic efforts had been brought to nothing. That night my gallant Turkish friend sent a long telegram to Constantinople, mostly about sherbet. War was declared within forty-eight hours."

UNMIXED BATHING

THE first person to whom the new arrival at Busrah is inevitably introduced is the bellumchi. He is the gondolier who plies for hire a long narrow boat, which the Arab calls a bellum, and to all intents and purposes he combines the functions of cabman, guide, and bureau of information. He would be more successful as a guide and bureau of information if his stock of English were enlarged, but as a rule it is limited to the reassuring formula of "Orright, sir," which he regards as a suitable reply to any question you like to ask him. If you seem dissatisfied, he assumes that you must have forgotten your own language, and obligingly translates it into Hindustani for you—"A-chah sa-ab." Finding that you still persist in asking such silly questions as, "How far is it to B.G.H. No. 3," or can he take you right up the Ashar Creek as far as the Busrah Bazaar, or how far are the Ashar Barracks from the bridge, he tries "Orright, sir," again, and then the conversation languishes.

If you want to go for a shooting expedition—and there are plenty of snipe and wild-duck about in the autumn—you must engage a bellum for the day, and pick out a bellumchi who specializes in

this class of business, and who knows where the best sport is to be had. One of these specialists, Mahomed Ahmed by name, has a fair knowledge of English, and can muster quite long sentences, such as, "Plenty snipe at Gurmat Ali. Ahmed show you. Orright, sir." Ahmed is also a keen sportsman, and keeps a pair of dogs which serve very well as beaters, but as retrievers leave much to be desired.

In the autumn of 1915 a small party of gunboat skippers arrived at Busrah, and, in the absence of anything approaching a civilized hotel, they had to find what accommodation they could. They were waiting for the completion of their respective commands, which had been building at Abadan for some months past. Amongst them was Toby, who had been appointed to the *Smackfly*, and was getting rather tired of being at a loose end. He was frequently in the *Thora's* mess, of which he and all other gunboat skippers were honorary members; and one day I suggested to him that he might devote his superabundant energies to getting up some amateur theatricals for the benefit of the men. He used to be madly keen on theatricals, and in his own peculiar way he was quite a good actor, and was even better as a producer. In the art of make-up I have never seen his equal among amateurs, and when I was shipmates with him some years ago, he was continually upsetting the equilibrium of the older and staidier members of the mess by presenting himself in the wardroom in some quaint disguise, such as a piano-tuner with an unquenchable thirst for beer, or a lawyer's clerk

come to serve a writ on the highly respectable and very indignant Fleet Paymaster. But apparently his enthusiasm had died down, and he showed no interest whatever in the subject of theatricals. His new hobby was the study of Arabic, and when Toby gets hold of a new hobby wild-horses cannot drag him away from it. So I had to leave him in peace to his "Arabic made Easy," and "How to learn Arabic in Half an Hour," and all the rest of his paraphernalia.

One evening when Toby was dining in the mess, the question was put to the vote as to whether or not he was getting too fat; and it was unanimously decided that he was, and that he must go shooting on the morrow for the sake of the exercise. Toby declared at first emphatically that nothing would induce him to go shooting with his brother officers (only he described them in other language); but later on, when he had had a good dinner, he became more complacent, and gave a half-promise that he would accompany the expedition. Presently, however, the hour of six was mentioned as a good time to make a start, and Toby said that if they expected him to turn out at six o'clock in order to tramp through marshes and see a lot of boss-eyed blundering blighters scare away all the birds with their popguns, they would not only be disappointed, but they could also go to blazes, which is a hotter place even than Mesopotamia. They then started arguing with him gently. It was precisely on account of the heat, they urged, that an early start was desirable; it was nice and cool in the morning now, but

about ten o'clock the sun began to get a trifle warm, even in the late autumn; that would be the time to pump up the Primus stove and prepare breakfast; then after breakfast they could laze about for a while, and they might possibly have a swim in the Gurmat Ali River, if they could find a backwater where the current was not too strong. In the afternoon, as soon as it began to get cool again, they could have another go at the snipe. But Toby was obdurate; he did not mind starting at ten, or he would even stretch a point and make it nine, but he refused to go a step beyond this concession. Eventually they decided to humour him, for they knew in their inmost hearts that on previous occasions they had solemnly agreed overnight to make an early start in the morning, but somehow or other it had been half-past nine or ten before they had succeeded in shoving off. The concession to Toby was therefore more apparent than real.

Next morning, however, they were considerably riled at receiving a note from Toby, about breakfast-time, to say that he was sorry that he could not accompany them after all, because another pressing engagement had intervened. The Navigator of the *Thora* was furious at the thought that, if it had not been for their desire to please Toby, they would all have been out of the ship by six o'clock. He had just managed to crawl out of bed and slip into some clothes in time for "divisions," and was so obviously suffering from a fat head that no one took him very seriously. The Captains of the *Scrunchfly* and

Scatterfly devoted their energies, not to reasoning with him, but to inducing him to get on with his breakfast, and to remember to bring his gun (which he often forgot when he went shooting). At last they managed to shove off, and Ahmed with his mate punted them at a good pace up the river to the confluence of the Shatt-al-Arab and Gurmat Ali River, which latter is sometimes known as the New Channel of the Euphrates. A little way up the branch river they called a halt, and the Captain of the *Scatterfly* produced a corkscrew from his pocket, and proceeded to show his skill on a nice cool-looking bottle of beer. It was hardly time for lunch, so after they had fortified themselves with beer they landed and went in search of sport. The birds turned out to be very scarce, or else the sportsmen went in the wrong direction, and, as walking was warm work, it was not long before the need of returning to the bellum with its enticing cargo became apparent. On their way back they were walking through a palm grove, when they suddenly came upon a white-headed Arab striding majestically along the river-bank, followed at a respectful distance by an attendant. Although he was short of stature, there was something so dignified about his appearance that the officers could not help remarking him. He wore his ch-fee* well forward on his head, so that the folds of it partly eclipsed his face; and his abba† was of a texture which showed that he was no ordinary peasant, but a man of some

* A kerchief worn on the head.

† A cloak.

wealth His attendant was plainly clad, but had an intelligent face, and wore an air of importance suggesting that he regarded his office of bodyguard as one of grave responsibility. To the astonishment of the officers, the old gentleman halted and gravely saluted them, touching with the fingers of both hands first his forehead, then his lips, and then his heart. They smiled and acknowledged the salute, without in the least understanding the significance of the gestures. Their surprise was considerably increased when the old Arab addressed them in somewhat faltering English, for it is very rare to find a native with a knowledge of any other language than his own. He had a very deep voice, and uttered his words in a kind of sing-song which was quite pleasing to the ear.

"Salutations, gentlemen. I hope that you have had pleasant amusement."

The Captain of the *Scatterfly* assumed his inimitable smile, and answered for the party:

"Thanks, old sport. Not so bad, but there aren't many birds about to-day."

"There have been English officers before," said the old man, "who have shot well; and so the birds are—how do you say?—shy. But later on, when they have begun to know you, they will not be shy."

This was a cryptic utterance, which was clearly capable of two interpretations, but the officers let it pass.

"You do not know the Arab salutation?" the old man went on. "I will show you I touch my

forehead; it is because I think of you with my mind. I touch my mouth; it is because I speak of you with my lips. I touch my breast; it is because the memory of you is cherished in my heart."

The Navigator of the *Thora* asked him to tell them some more about Arab customs, and the Sheikh was beginning to do so, when he became disconcerted by the behaviour of Ahmed's dogs. The beasts sniffed him very suspiciously, and showed signs of disapprobation, so that the old man grew quite alarmed. A cynic has divided the world into two classes—those who like dogs and those who like men. The classification is obviously incomplete, for it makes no provision for those who like both, nor the benighted few who like neither. One might as well divide the world into the people who wear mackintoshes and the people who carry umbrellas, or into the people who wear collars and the people who wear neckties. It is certain, however, that the dignified old Arab belonged to the category of those who do not like dogs, and the dogs appeared to reciprocate the feeling. Not that their attitude was exactly hostile towards him, but they seemed to regard him as a strange object begirt with mystery. The Captain of the *Scrunchfly* shouted to Ahmed to call off his dogs, and found that he and the Arab's attendant were talking together and were apparently on terms of intimacy. Ahmed whistled to his dogs, and the Captain of the *Scrunchfly* took the opportunity of going up to him to get information.

"Ahmed," he said, "who is that old bloke?"

"Sahib not know him?" said Ahmed in a tone of surprise. "He is the Sheikh of Margill."

Now, there were many reports about the Sheikh of Margill. He was said to be a highly cultured gentleman; he was also said to be addicted to lavish hospitality; and, moreover, he was said to be specially fond of naval officers. I have never met the gentleman myself, and so I cannot speak with authority; but I have a shrewd suspicion that the Sheikh of Margill is very like other Arab Sheikhs. The fact remains, however, that rumour has surrounded him with a halo of romance, and to the naval mind especially he seemed to be a most desirable acquaintance. When the Captain of the *Scrunchfly* went back to his companions and whispered the tidings in their ears, he found that the old Sheikh was squatting on his haunches and discoursing quite fluently upon Arab lore.

"You have heard the women in the villages make a noise like this," he said, and gave quite a good imitation of that shrill chorus which often breaks the stillness of the night in a river-side village. "It is what you call a serenade. When a girl is to be married, all the women of her village meet outside her house every night for seven nights before the wedding, and they make that song to her. After that there is the wedding. You have not been to an Arab wedding? You should go. There is dancing and much music with a drum."

"How many wives does a man have round about here?" asked the Captain of the *Scrunchfly*.

"If he is a poor man he has only one, but if he is rich he has as many as his house will hold," said the Sheikh, and then added modestly: "I have only six wives."

"And do they all live happily together?" asked the Navigator of the *Thora* enviously.

"Oh yes, quite happy. They have just gone to bathe themselves in the little lake. I have a little lake in my palm grove; it is private, of course, so I allow my wives to bathe themselves there."

"No mixed bathing in this country, I suppose?" hazarded the Captain of the *Scatterfly*.

The Arab shook his head solemnly, and turned a searching glance upon the officer to divine the inner meaning of the question. Then he got up suddenly as though a new thought had just occurred to him, and spoke with an eagerness quite strange to the usually phlegmatic native.

"See here, gentlemen: you are all naval officers, and when I was a child my father taught me, as his father had taught him, to hold in honour the great Navy of your country. If it would please you, you shall see my wives. But only from a distance. You will promise me not to go too near. I will show you. It is not far from here. Are you tired?"

The three officers assured him that they were as fresh as daisies; and though the Captain of the *Scatterfly* added as an afterthought that the weather was remarkably dry, and cast longing glances towards the bellum, it did not avail him, for the Sheikh divined his thoughts and hastened to explain the situation.

"The ladies do not stay long in the water. You must go quickly, or you will be too late. I will send Hussein to guide you. He is young like you and can walk as the sh-marl* flies across the desert. I will stay here and wait for your return."

He shouted for Hussein, and then, with an expression of honest anxiety on his face, he added: "But you will promise not to go too near."

The faithful attendant came up, and the Sheikh gave him some instructions in Arabic. What they were the officers of course had no idea, but they supposed that Hussein was to lead them to some point of vantage whence they could obtain a discreet view of the ladies of the harem enjoying their bathe, and that he was receiving strict injunctions not to let them trespass beyond the limits of propriety.

"You must make speed or you will be too late. It would be better to leave your guns here, for it is hot weather to carry guns." And then, as they hurried off in the wake of Hussein, he again repeated his apprehensive injunction: "You will promise not to go too near?"

As soon as they were out of sight, the old Sheikh started to examine the guns which the officers had left behind, and, having selected one to his fancy, he got into the bellum and ordered Ahmed and his mate to punt him through the reeds on the left bank of the stream. If there had been any observers watching the Sheikh of Margill during the next half-hour, they would have said that he knew how

* A hot dry wind which blows from the Arabian desert.

to shoot, and he also knew where the birds were to be found. He explained to Ahmed that the sahibs would be glad to find that they could take home quite a big bag, after all, and Ahmed appeared to be quite satisfied with the new arrangements.

Meanwhile the sahibs themselves were stalking through palm groves at a prodigious pace, circumventing the wide nullahs, jumping the narrow ones, and dripping big drops of perspiration at every stride.

"Queer old boy," gasped the Captain of the *Scatterfly*, at the end of the procession. "You don't often find a bloke who asks you to go and see his wives bathe."

"I wonder," panted the Captain of the *Scrunchfly* just ahead of him, "what kind of rig they wear in the water."

"In the country," choked out the Navigator of the *Thora*, "the women seem to wear only one garment for walking about in, so I suppose they wear less for bathing in."

"Don't you believe it," grunted the Captain of the *Scatterfly*. "They're probably like those girls at the fashionable watering-places—rigged out in most wonderful contraptions, rove at odd corners with all sorts of weird gadgets."

"I say!" gulped the Navigator of the *Thora*, "Where is this bloke taking us? The old boy said it wasn't far."

By dint of a combined effort they found breath enough to make Hussein hear them, and they

called upon him to stop. But Hussein knew no English, so all he did was to shout "Orright sir," over his shoulder, and hurry on at an even greater speed. In a little while he was completely lost to view, and then the officers realized that it had been an unequal contest from the start. They came to a wide nullah which barred their farther progress, and, as they could not tell which way their guide had taken to circumvent it, they collapsed on to the ground and silently panted.

"I suppose the silly ass will discover in time that we are not following him," said the Captain of the *Scrunchfly*.

"I don't care whether he does or not," said the Navigator of the *Thora*. "I'm not going to follow him any more."

So Hussein was left to his own devices, and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, they consisted in making a détour through the palm groves to the bank of the Tigris, where he found a bellum moored at the mouth of a nullah. In this he paddled his way downstream, and so went home, feeling that he had thoroughly earned his day's pay.

About an hour later three very warm officers gave vent to expressions of intense relief on sighting their old friend Ahmed with his bellum. Seated on the bank a few paces off was no less a person than Toby, and as they came up they saw that he was busily engaged on a plate of ham and a bottle of beer, so much so that he seemed quite unconscious

of their arrival until the Captain of the *Scatterfly* announced exclamatorily that he was jiggered. Then Toby smiled his sweetest smile, and said: "You see I managed to get away, after all." Thereat he took another big pull from the bottle, and added: "It was deuced good of you fellows to leave your guns behind for me. I clean forgot to bring mine. But you look warm. What on earth have you been doing?"

"We've been for a walk," said the Captain of the *Scrunchfly* doggedly.

"You look as if you'd been training for the hundred yards. Queer ideas you fellows have! You go out shooting, and then take it into your heads to leave your guns behind. I managed to bag a few birds while you were away. I don't know whose gun it was, but it was a very nice one. Many thanks for the loan of it."

"For heaven's sake, give me a drink," said the Navigator of the *Thora*.

"Have you all been having a swim?" asked Toby. "I remember that was to have been part of the programme."

But not another word was to be got out of any of them until their internal needs were satisfied.

"By the way," said the Captain of the *Scatterfly* after a long pause, "the old Sheikh of Margill was here just now. Have you seen anything of him, Toby?"

"Sheikh of Margill? So that's who it was?" said Toby.

"Why? Have you been talking to him? Where did he go?"

"I've often heard of the Sheikh of Margill," said Toby. "Nice old bloke, isn't he?"

The sentiment was received with a chilling silence, so Toby tried again.

"By the way, is he married?"

"How the deuce should we know?" asked the Captain of the *Scrunchfly* irritably.

"Well, I thought that, as he was a pal of yours, you would at least ask after his missus and the kids."

"Chuck over that ham and the carving-knife," said the Navigator of the *Thora*, whose mind at the moment seemed unable to transcend beyond the most mundane affairs.

"Where did the old boy go?" reiterated the Captain of the *Scatterfly*.

Then Toby, having eaten a very satisfactory lunch, quietly picked up a newspaper which had been lying beside him on the ground. Underneath it were disclosed the abba and ch-fee of an Arab Sheikh, and beside them a neat little japanned tin box, which anyone in the theatrical profession would have recognized at once as a make-up box.

"I think," said Toby, "that he must have gone to bathe with his harem, as he has left his clothes behind."

Of the subsequent proceedings I have no official records. Suffice it to say that, when the four officers returned that evening to the *Thora's* mess, they were all agreed that they had had a splendid day's

sport, and they followed it up with one of those convivial evenings for which the *Thora* was rightly celebrated. There is just that something about Toby that nobody can be really angry with him for long.

THE FORWARD OBSERVING OFFICER

IN the summer of 1921, some time after the conclusion of the Great War, I was motoring with a small party of friends through the Eastern Counties. We were passing through a particularly flat part of the country, with very little to relieve the monotony of the landscape except an occasional clump of trees, and a still more occasional village with red-tiled roofs and square church tower. Although there was nothing about the scene which was really comparable with the desert plains of Mesopotamia, my mind for some unaccountable reason wandered back to that land of blazing sun, enervating heat, and voracious mosquitoes. The faces of old acquaintances passed in a procession before my mental vision, and one in particular halted in the middle of the stage and recalled to my memory some of the episodes with which he had been associated. I had been messmates with him at the naval camp in Ceylon, where we went to rejuvenate ourselves when the ordeal of the Mesopotamian summer was beginning to make its mark on the health of the ships' companies; I had dined in his mess aboard H.M.S. *Flighty* on many occasions, and he had dined in my mess; I had played tennis with him, walked with

him, and yarned with him. And now I had a vivid recollection of him, seated in an arm-chair in our wardroom, telling us his experiences up the river when he was doing duty as Forward Observing Officer to the gunboats. It was in the dark days after the retreat from Ctesiphon, when General Townshend and his division were being besieged in Kut, and many valuable lives were being sacrificed in the long endeavour to relieve him. At that time the British camp was on the wrong side of the Wadi, a small stream flowing into the Tigris from the north, and the Turks were strongly entrenched at El Hannah on the other side of the stream. From January until April of the year 1916 we strove to drive them out of their position by frontal attack, and each effort cost us so dearly that during long intervals we were forced to rest in our trenches, and do no more than snipe at them with our rifles, while our artillery every morning and evening loosed off a few rounds to let them know we had not forgotten them. It was trench warfare on the same pattern as was going on in France at the time, and it pleased nobody; for the conditions under which our troops were living were about as bad as they could be, owing to the lack of river transport, and during January and February they were forced to the conclusion that the pelting rain, biting winds, and omnipresent mud of Mesopotamia in the winter were worse than its heat and mosquitoes in the summer. It was not until April 5, 1916, that we finally managed to capture the El Hannah position, and then we had great hopes that the relief of Kut

was in sight, until we found ourselves held up again by the Turks at Sanna-i-yat. But I am digressing from the subject of the Forward Observing Officer.

I could see his face so plainly, as I sat leaning back in the car, quietly enjoying the exhilaration of the smooth travelling. I could even hear his voice as he was describing what it felt like to stand on the top of a ladder, with Turkish shells whizzing all round him, and I remember his saying: "The material effect was nil, but the moral effect on my nerves was enough to entitle me to a fancy claim for damages." And then I awoke from my reverie with a start. It was lunch-time, and we had pulled up at the door of an hotel in a small provincial town where the good lady of the house, clad in a black sateen dress which seemed rather to exaggerate the ample proportions of her figure, stood at the door and assured us that she had an excellent lunch for hungry motorists. Just inside the door I noticed a poster announcing the advent of a travelling circus, and idly paused to read the large print on it. The biggest letters of all proclaimed a wonderful feat of equilibration by the "Great Scalator"; but, as I had never heard of the gentleman before, I was quite prepared to accept his greatness on trust and seek the more prosaic pleasures of life, such as a good hostelry can afford.

The inn was an old one, and, as I am interested in architecture and archæology and things like that. I started to explore its rooms and passages. This explains how it was that I found myself unexpectedly in the bar. A trim little barmaid was presiding

over an array of beer-pumps, and the sole other occupant of the room was a well-groomed gentleman, who stood with his back to the door through which I had entered. So far as I could make out, he was discussing the subject of psychological phenomena with the trim little barmaid. There was something about the set of his shoulders which seemed familiar to me, and, when he turned his head, the exclamation of surprise I uttered was not on account of the meeting, but of the strange coincidence that my daydream should have prepared me for it. It was the Forward Observing Officer. After an exchange of the usual expressions of gratification at the unexpected pleasure which had befallen us, he said, "What's yours?" and after a few further observations on the same subject I also said, "What's yours?" And so in course of time the Forward Observing Officer grew reminiscent.

"Let me see," he said, "you weren't up at the Wadi camp before we captured the El Hannah position, were you?" I hastened to reassure him on this point. "No," he continued, "I remember now. You were down at Busrah in those days. You know we used to have a morning and evening Hate just to show the old Turk that we were not neglecting him. I had to walk two miles or so across the plain, and stand on top of a ladder to spot the fall of the shells from our gunboats, and report results by telephone. I never felt really comfortable on that ladder. You see, it was the one conspicuous object there, and the Turkish batteries were very partial to it. Sometimes the shells came in such a thick

cloud that it grew quite dark overhead, and I'm one of those people who can never smoke a pipe comfortably in the dark. As a matter of fact, I believe those Turkish batteries were manned by Germans, or at all events their gunners had been trained by Germans, and I'll tell you how I found out.

"I suppose you know that every shell has its own special shriek, and you can tune a shell to make any note you like. All the German shells were marked with their notes—B flat, B natural, C natural, C sharp, and so on—and the German batteries were trained to play regular tunes by firing the shells in the right order. They trained the Turks to do the same, because they were very keen on introducing Kultur to the British, and they thought it was an excellent thing for us to hear good music. Some of the Turkish batteries only played light and frivolous music, things like 'When the Midnight Choo-Choo leaves for Alabam' and 'Ragtime Cowboy Joe.' They were allowed to do this because the Germans were rather anxious just then to pay pretty little compliments to the Americans, and you know America is very proud of the great musicians which she has produced in recent years. But some of the batteries played real classical music, things like the overture to 'Tannhäuser,' and Handel's Largo, and 'Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay.' There was one battery, though, that played funny things like the Hungarian Rhapsodies and Rachmaninoff's Prelude in E minor. I never liked that battery, and whenever they started to play Sinding's 'Rustle of Spring' I always

knew that it was time to pack up. Have you ever tried coming down a ladder in a hurry? Well, of course, the dodge is to put your feet outside the rungs and slide. Avoid a ladder with splinters; they spoil all the pleasure of the thing. At first you are apt to land with a bit of a bump, but with practice you learn to put the break on with your feet when you are near the bottom, and so land quite comfortably and gracefully. That battery was very fond of the 'Rustle of Spring,' and they used to make their infernal shells rustle a bit too close to me to be really pleasant, so I became rather an expert in sliding down a ladder. Life's a queer thing when you come to think of it. You never know what's going to happen next. Who'd have thought that it was worth one's while to learn how to slide down a ladder? The same again please, Belinda."

I had listened with breathless interest to these thrilling experiences, but curiosity now prompted me to ask him what he was doing in a little country town near the East Coast of England. I suggested tentatively that he might be on leave.

"Leave?" he said. "I've left the Service altogether."

"Have you, though?" said I. "Then, what kind of a job have you got now?"

He reached across the counter and lit a cigarette.

"Come and see the circus," he said. "Afternoon performance at three, evening at seven."

Here was an obvious effort to change the subject, and I took the hint. It was many years since I had

seen a circus, and the idea rather appealed to me, so I accepted the suggestion with alacrity. At the same time I must confess my curiosity was fairly aroused by the air of mystery with which he was surrounding the nature of his present occupation, and I could not resist asking him, after a decent interval, why he had chosen to leave the Service.

"Lucre," he said, "filthy lucre—that and nothing more. I discovered that I could make more money outside. It happens that I can do something which very few blokes can do, and so I can command a big price. In the Service there were hundreds of other fellows who could do my job just as well as I could, and consequently there's no money in it."

This was as much as I could get out of him, but I had hopes that when we had spent the afternoon together he would grow more communicative, so I asked him to get me some seats for the circus next to his own, and handed him the necessary. I then joined my friends at lunch (he had refused to make one of the party), and I was glad to find that they were quite keen on the idea of spending the afternoon at the circus.

The tent had been rigged in a field not far from the inn, and we got there punctually at three o'clock; but I was disappointed to find that the seat next to mine was empty, and, though I looked all round the ring, I could see no sign of the Forward Observing Officer. The show was very much the same as I remember it in the days of my childhood, only I am sorry to say that the clown did not strike me as being so irresistibly funny as he used to do

in those bygone days, nor did I experience quite the same thrill when the lady on horseback jumped through the paper-covered hoops. Nevertheless we were all there to enjoy ourselves, and so we applauded each performer with enthusiasm. Finally there came what was evidently the *pièce de résistance*. A terrible-looking old tramp with many days' growth on his chin, and clad in tattered garments surmounted by a disreputable top-hat, lurched into the arena, and commenced his turn by bumping into the clown, who turned a double somersault on the ground, but did not seem in the least to resent the affront. On the contrary, it had the effect of making him quite industrious, for he produced a large square board and proceeded to sprinkle it with powdered resin. He next produced a ladder, and, placing the feet of it on the board, invoked the aid of the tramp in hoisting it. Having got it into position, the clown retired a few paces to gaze at it admiringly while the tramp held it upright. And then, before I had realized what was going to happen, the tramp began to mount the ladder, keeping it balanced by a lateral movement which continually adjusted the position of the feet, and so kept them below the centre of gravity. Up and up he went, slowly advancing from rung to rung, while the audience sat breathless with excitement. Once he lost the balance, but as the ladder swayed forward, and the prospect of an appalling disaster caused a deep groan to run round the tent, he slid down to the ground, with an ease and grace which brought back to my mind what my friend had told

me of his experiences in Mesopotamia. A little more resin was sprinkled on the board and the tramp again began the ascent. This time he was even more cautious than before, and the audience watched his every movement as though they were spellbound. At last he reached the top, and even stood upright on the topmost rung. His next action caused some alarm to the ladies in the audience, for he proceeded to divest himself of his garments. The top-hat went first, and was adroitly caught by the clown; the coat and waistcoat followed, and then the trousers. Finally the beard was discarded, and there—there in all the glory of pink tights—stood the Forward Observing Officer.

A MESOPOTAMIAN PICNIC

THE *Flytrap* is the messenger of the Fleet in Mesopotamia. She was originally built by Thornycrofts for the Turkish Government, but at an early stage in the campaign we succeeded in persuading the Turks by means of cogent arguments that she would be more useful to us than to them. When she had been refitted and her engines thoroughly overhauled, she became one of the fastest packets on the river, and with her six-pounder and a Maxim she was quite formidable enough for her purpose. She takes the mails, and the fruit ration and fresh vegetables from Busrah up-river, and distributes them among the gunboats; and sometimes she carries the Senior Naval Officer between the base and the scene of operations, and, in fact, does odd jobs of general utility. She might, of course, have been called the *Mercury*, or some fancy name like that; but her duties were at first associated with the *Fly* class gunboats, and so it seemed more appropriate to call her by the homely name of the *Flytrap*.

There is nothing very remarkable about the *Flytrap*, except her commanding officer, whose versatile genius has taken him through many walks of life, and, if it had only led him into a more public

career, would have made him a valuable contributor to the gaiety of nations. He started life in the *Britannia* by having a difference of opinion with the mess steward as to the freshness of a dish of cabbages. His method of persuading the steward to smell it was to plunge his nose into it forcibly, and, as the cabbages were hot, the steward's nose suffered. There followed an interview with the Captain, but our versatile friend still consoles himself with the reflection that for the next week everybody could see the steward's nose, but nobody could see where the cane had made its painful impressions. Of his subsequent career and its startling and dramatic developments, there is no space to write in detail here. The Law at one time exercised a fascination for him, but it did not last long; he gave a passing thought to Medicine and to the Stage, but it was no more than a passing thought. The call of the sea was ever in his ears, and he found he could not resist it. All the same, he still feels there is one profession for which he would have been eminently suited, and he has never ceased to hanker after it. "I ought to have been a parson," he will often say in an impressive tone; and when you ask him why he has this fancy for the Church, he will reply: "You have never seen me in a surplice, have you? I look d——d nice."

This introduction to the Captain of the *Flytrap* is necessary, because he is the principal actor in the story of the Mesopotamian picnic. It was told me by the Captain of the *Scrunchfly*, and I accept no responsibility for it. I merely repeat it in his

own language so far as I can remember it. The scene is laid at the Bal-i-hai Redoubt, and I have not yet been able to find any such place on the map. He says it is somewhere between Kurnah and Baghdad, so I will take his word for it. The time is the early summer of 1916, soon after the fall of Kut, when a rather curious reaction had set in among all ranks and ratings in Mesopotamia. The strain of the previous four months had been severe, but when the tragedy was over, and we knew that all efforts to relieve the garrison had proved fruitless, our spirits suddenly went up with a jump. I cannot explain the psychology of it, but I imagine that it is just that of the philosopher who invented the adage about not crying over spilt milk. Anyhow, here is the narrative of the Captain of the *Scrunchfly* as he told it to me. By way of preface, let me explain that the Captain of the *Squashfly* is always called Garibaldi, in reference to the popular superstition about the ingredients of Garibaldi biscuits.

I am not quite sure how it started. I think someone picked up an English newspaper dated some time in the summer of 1915, wherein an intelligent journalist had asked petulantly: "When is this picnic in Mesopotamia going to end?" Someone picked up this old newspaper about the Mesopotamian picnic, and Garibaldi, the Captain of the *Squashfly*, said, "Well, why not have a picnic in Mesopotamia?" and his First Lieutenant said, "Why not?" and the Captain of the *Flytrap* also

said, "Why not?" I think that was how it started. Anyhow, we agreed to combine the resources of the *Scrunchfly*, *Squashfly*, and *Flytrap*, and to walk across the plain to a little hill in the distance which had a nice shady cluster of trees on it, and there, far from the madding crowd, to regale ourselves in our sylvan retreat.

It was the Captain of the *Flytrap* who gave a spice of originality to the thing by asking if we would mind his coming in his surplice. You know, he has an idea that he ought to be a parson because the rig suits his peculiar style of beauty. So he has made himself a surplice out of an old tablecloth, and this was what he wanted to wear, but the suggestion roused Garibaldi's jealousy.

"If you're going to do that," he said, "we may as well call it a fancy-dress picnic at once."

"And why not?" asked his First Lieutenant.

"All right," said Garibaldi; "I shall go as Salome."

"Then, you don't get me there," said the Captain of the *Flytrap*. "As if any self-respecting parson would go to a picnic with Salome!"

They argued it out for half an hour, and at last persuaded Garibaldi to go as King Canute in his seaside bathing costume and a gold-painted cardboard crown. It was the idea of the crown which brought him round; it pleased him no end. A stroke of diplomacy on my part. His First Lieutenant said he was going as a Greek Athlete, with a crown of palm leaves on his head, a monocle in his eye, and a pair of bathing drawers round his

waist. The weather had started to hot up a bit, and these scanty costumes were quite *de rigueur*. I decided to go as a Boy Scout—shorts, shirt, and a boat-hook.

Well, we got a couple of hands to help us carry the gear. We thought two would be enough until we saw the stock of beer which Garibaldi contributed to the feast. Then we wished we had borrowed half a dozen mules from the Transport Corps. Nevertheless we strode on bravely, old Surplice leading the way. I fancy he got a bit mixed as to whether he was Anglican or Roman. He imagined he was leading a procession, and held a tablecloth over his head to look like a banner. He never said a word the whole way, but kept on making a diabolical row which, Canute told me, was supposed to be a Gregorian chant. When we got to the foot of the hill, I remember I had a bit of an argument with the Greek Athlete as to whose turn it was to carry the basket with the crockery in it, and we argued all the way up. The two hands had dropped some way behind, and, as they were carrying the beer, Canute got anxious about them, and went back to see if he could help them by carrying some of it himself. Well, as I told you, I was busy arguing with the Greek Athlete, when I heard voices ahead of me, and, looking up, I saw a bloke in khaki talking to the Surplice. On getting closer I found he was a Turkish officer. He spoke excellent English and seemed rather a cheery soul. I heard him say to the Surplice:

"But you are holding up a flag of truce. What have you come to say?"

And old Surplice went on solemnly chanting:

"Venite, exultemus Domino. Benedicite, omnia opera," and so on.

Finding that he couldn't get any sense out of the Surplice, the Turco turned to me and the Greek Athlete. Our costumes seemed to startle him a bit, but he spoke quite politely.

"Good-morning," he said; "you wish to parley with me?"

"Even so," said the Greek Athlete. "Let us sit here beneath this pleasant shade and tell sad stories of the death of Kings."

The Greek Athlete reads Shakespeare, but he can never get his quotations right. As the Turco seemed rather puzzled, I thought I had better put in a word or two.

"But tell us first, brave warrior," I said, "who are you, and how come you to be sequestered in this lonely spot?"

"This," he said, "is the Bal-i-hai Redoubt."

"Ah!" said the Greek Athlete, fixing his monocle in his eye. "Now, that is very interesting. Never before have I seen a redoubt. Does it have a moat and drawbridge?"

"Tell me," said the Surplice, "does all this proud domain belong to you? And those brave fellows yonder, whose heads I see above the battlements, are they all your faithful retainers?"

"They are my gun's crew," said the Turco. He was a good fellow, but horribly prosaic.

"You have a gun?" said the Greek Athlete. "That is very interesting. And have you an artificial lake with swans swimming over its glassy surface?"

"Look here," I said, "I'm awfully sorry if we're trespassing. You see, we didn't notice any fence or signboard to say that trespassers would be prosecuted by order. We came up here to have a little picnic. Won't you join us?"

"We'll clear up all the bits of paper and empty bottles and things," said the Greek Athlete, "and this noble home of your proud ancestors shall look as fair as ever. I pray you, worthy knight, join us in our revelry."

The Turco didn't seem to know quite what to make of us.

"Pardon me," he said; "our countries are at war."

"War," said the Surplice in his best canonical voice—"ah, war is a terrible thing! And to think that nations went to war with each other all because of a woman. Helen of Troy, you know. But of course you never met her. I am glad—I am very glad. She was no better than she ought to have been."

Just then up came old Canute with the beer, and the sight of that seemed to settle the question for the Turco.

"Well," he said, "I cannot take you prisoners, as you came here under a flag of truce. I suppose this gentleman is in charge of the party;" and he turned towards Canute, whose cardboard crown

made him look rather impressive. Canute's regal bow was quite a good effort.

"That," said the Surplice, "is our old friend King Canute, who tried a course of sea-bathing to cure his chilblains, and wrote that beautiful poem, 'Roll on, thou dark and deep blue Ocean, roll.' He married the fair Robina, the daughter of the lady who burned King Alfred's pancakes, and made him exclaim, 'Ah, Robbie, Robbie, I asked for bread, and you gave me a lump of charcoal!' He had fourteen children in fifteen years in order to avoid paying income-tax."

Well, we spread the tablecloth on the ground, and put all the good things on it; and I asked our guest whether he would start on sardines with hard-boiled eggs and chutney, or lay a foundation with jam sandwiches. We gave him plenty of beer. It seems that he belonged to the Young Turk party, and Young Turks drink beer. And all the time the Greek Athlete and the Surplice burred away like a pair of cooing doves. The Greek Athlete every now and again would put his monocle in his eye, and gaze abstractedly at the Bal-i-hai Redoubt.

"So that is your redoubt," he would say. "Verily a noble structure. Now tell me: is it haunted by a ghost in clanking armour? No? And yet, I suppose, it is very ancient. Did it belong to your father before you, and your grandfather before him?"

The Turco would smile indulgently and shrug his shoulders. Whether or not he thought we were harmless lunatics I cannot say; probably he had

an idea that all Englishmen were more or less mad. Anyhow, he went on placidly stowing away the victuals, and I rather fancy that it was the first good square meal he had had for many months. Now and then he would look from one to the other of us, and he seemed to be specially fascinated by the Greek Athlete's wreath of palm leaves and Canute's golden crown. A contented smile played over his lips all the time, and I think he was really enjoying himself.

"Tell me," said the Surplice: "in your proud domain I suppose you have an extensive and valuable library?"

"Well, no," said the Turco, "not very extensive. In fact, it consists just now of only one book—a book on tropical diseases."

"Now, that is very interesting," said the Greek Athlete. "I love tropical diseases. Which ones do you like best?"

"Lately," said the Turco, "I have been reading about malaria, beriberi, and Asiatic cholera."

"I know! I know!" said the Surplice, waving his hand excitedly—"mumps!" We all looked at him in surprise; even the Surplice surprises us sometimes.

"Mumps," said the Turco very politely, "is hardly a tropical disease."

"But I remember learning that when I was a child," said the Surplice. "When in a redoubt, read mumps."

Then we took the Surplice, gently but firmly, laid him on the ground, and sat on him. The Turco

was getting used to our little ways, and went on placidly eating.

"The Surplice," explained King Canute, "has the reputation of being the worst bridge-player in Mesopotamia."

From beneath the combined weight of King Canute and the Greek Athlete the voice of the irresponsible Surplice broke into a chant, and I just managed to recognize the air of a setting of one of Longfellow's poems.

"I sat playing bridge at midnight, the clock was striking the hour;

My partner made it three No Trumps, I bravely shouted
four.

'How often, oh how often,' said my partner with a sigh,
'I've told you not to push it up when there's no necessity!
How often, oh how often, in the days that are gone by,
I've longed to punch your silly head and black your
blooming eye!"

"It's no use," I said; "you had far better let him get up, especially as he hasn't yet produced that cheese which he promised to bring."

"By Jove, yes! Where's that cheese, Surplice?"

The Surplice struggled to his feet, and, diving into a basket, produced a stone jar, which he held aloft triumphantly.

"Cheese, Gorgonzola, one in number. The climax of the feast."

"Is it anything like your Silver Key cocktail?" asked Garibaldi, turning pale. This was a patent ready-made cocktail which the Surplice used at one time to keep in the *Flytrap*, and we all had painful recollections of it.

"Now, as a matter of fact," said the Surplice, "I know nothing about this cheese, except that I bought it in Bombay some months ago."

"How many months?" asked the Greek Athlete anxiously.

"I have reserved this cheese," the Surplice continued impressively, "for some state occasion, and behold the hour has come."

"Well, suppose you open the blooming thing," I suggested, "instead of playing the Hyde Park orator."

He sat down and laboriously stripped off the layers of tinfoil, until he came to the stone stopper, which was coated round the edge with cement. He was in the act of chipping this off, when he suddenly threw the thing from him and collapsed in a heap. The jar landed on top of a beer bottle, and burst with a kind of sizzling noise. I remember that I was telling the Surplice in forcible language not to act the goat, when I became conscious of a blue haze all round me, which grew so thick that it was impossible to see a yard in front of me. A curious lassitude overcame me, and I sank to the ground. The next thing I remember was that I was lying on my back beneath the trees at some little distance from the scene of the picnic, and I heard one of the *matelots* saying: "Try a drop o' beer; that might pull 'im round." It did, and I raised my head and looked about me.

"Where are the others?" I asked.

"We 'aven't been able to get 'em out yet, sir. It's something cruel over there. We only just

managed to drag you out of it. Another minute and I should 'ave dropped. Lucky we was on the windward side of you! 'Ullo! 'Oo's this coming along?"

It was some of the Army. They explained that they had seen us through their telescopes, and thought they ought to warn us that we had wandered up to a Turkish redoubt. When they saw the air turn blue, they guessed that something had happened, so they had sent for an ambulance party. Those ambulance fellows were splendid; they dashed into the thick of it, and brought the whole lot back on stretchers. They then went up to the redoubt, where they found thirty-two Turks laid out, but by means of artificial respiration they were all brought round. Of course, there was nothing for it but to take them back to the British camp as prisoners, and our fellows occupied the redoubt as soon as the air had cleared a bit.

Two days later there was a paragraph in Reuter's to say that we had stormed and occupied the Bal-i-hai Redoubt, capturing one officer and thirty-two men. Our friend the Turco happened to see it just before he was sent down-river. I strolled round to say good-bye to him (for he was a very decent sort), and I found him absolutely furious.

"Look at this," he said. "Stormed and occupied the Bal-i-hai Redoubt! Is that what you call storming a redoubt? Why, you didn't even know it was a redoubt until I told you. Bah! You talk about Wolff's Agency, but for sheer audacious

mendacity—well, to use your English expression, you take the gingerbread.”

If the Turkish officer said that to the Captain of the *Scrunchfly*, I must honestly say that I am inclined to—— But no: perhaps it is wiser not to say it; he is bigger than I am.

A LOWER DECK EPISODE

THE educational test for the rating of petty officer consists of simple arithmetic and writing from dictation. The First Lieutenant of the *Thora* always used to complain that the men who passed their educational test were the most incompetent members of the ship's company, and that the men who failed were usually the smartest. Such, I believe, is the way of examinations; the really brilliant men are the ones who get ploughed. At least, I know that when I went in for examinations I usually got ploughed, but, of course, I do not mean to infer that the rule is invariable. For instance, there was Able Seaman Soppitt who passed his educational test with flying colours; he was quick at figures, and wrote a very fair hand, and his spelling was above reproach. Soon after he joined the ship he was rated Leading Seaman, but this only caused the First Lieutenant to use some picturesque language in which Soppitt was described as the biggest blithering idiot in the ship. The fact of the matter is that the man's genius did not lie in the direction of seamanship, or of any of those qualities which appeal to the executive officer; it is hard to define exactly the direction in

which it did lie, but the genius was there all right, and the best I can do is to describe it as a genius for original sin. Of course, I may be crediting him with a brilliancy which really belongs to his collaborator, a corpulent shipwright called Fraser. I only know that between the pair of them they showed enough diabolical ingenuity to have raised them to a position of immortal fame in the collected annals of unpunished crime.

It is a matter of small moment to know how I became acquainted with the facts in the incident of the lonely Naval Officers; suffice it to say that I held my peace, and that the Powers that be, if they ever went through the process of putting two and two together, gave no sign that they had arrived at the inevitable result. It is true that I had one piece of evidence which I kept to myself, merely because I attached no importance to it at the moment. Soppitt came to me one afternoon and asked me for the address of the *Times*. I am used to being asked all sorts of strange conundrums, so I gave it to him, and thought no more about it. Quite two months later (for the post to England took about a month each way on the average) I happened to be glancing through the *Times*, when I came across the following advertisement:

“Two lonely Naval Officers would like to receive letters from some bright and cheerful young lady.— Address C. S. or J. F., Box Z 4824, *Times* Office.”

About a week later (the ship was lying at Busrah at the time) the news circulated that the mail-

steamer was just coming round the bend, and, in accordance with my usual custom, I went up on the poop to watch her arrival. When you are several thousand miles from home, and in a climate which is bad enough to cause a beneficent Admiralty to give you extra pay for living in it during the four worst months of the year, the arrival of the English mail once a week is attended with a degree of expectancy worthy of a lovelorn maiden on St. Valentine's Day. It is about the only thing which breaks the wearisome monotony of the daily routine and gives a zest to life. As the mail-steamer makes its way up the Gulf, the wireless stations tick the news from one to the other, and start a buzz of speculation as to when it will arrive at each port of call. Sometimes doleful tidings come through that the P. and O. steamer has been delayed, and that the Persian Gulf steamer has left Bombay without any English mail; and then there is an air of calm resignation on the faces of the exiles as they settle down to endure another week of scorching days and breathless nights.

On this occasion, however, the English mail was up to time, and everybody was looking happy as the mail-steamer swept majestically up the river and passed within a stone's-throw of the *Thora*. "Good-evening," said the mail-steamer, dipping her ensign as she proceeded to her anchorage. "Good-evening," said the *Thora*, dipping her ensign in answer. "Quartermaster!" sang out the First Lieutenant, "call away the steam-cutter to take the postman over to the mail-steamer."

"Ay, ay, sir."

Perhaps there is no better exercise for the virtue of patience than when the mail-steamer arrives. She has no sooner dropped her anchor than she is surrounded by all the small craft in the river, all clamouring at once for attention to their multifarious demands; for they are exiles one and all, and here is the one link with civilization, with that far-away world from which they came. But not one of them can gain admittance to the ship until it pleases the medical officer of the port to run his launch alongside, go on board to make the usual inquiries and inspection, and pronounce his verdict as to whether he can give the ship a clean bill of health. By the time these preliminaries have been carried out, and the mail-bags addressed to the care of the Senior Naval Officer have at last been handed over, the stock of patience both of the mail-steamer's officers and of those awaiting their letters is nearing total exhaustion.

The First Lieutenant was standing at the gangway when the steam-cutter returned.

"An extra big mail," he remarked. "Are these all for *Thora*?"

"Yes, sir," said the Master-at-Arms, who was doing duty as ship's postman; "and this isn't all of it. There's an extraordinary lot of parcels as well as the letters. Anyone would think it was Christmas time."

"Well, carry on with the sorting as quick as you can. I'll send the coxswain back for the parcels."

Twelve large bags were emptied on the deck, and the Master-at-Arms, assisted by the Sergeant of Marines, dripped large beads of perspiration over them as they knelt down to their task. "Look here," said the Master-at-Arms, as soon as he had had time to grasp the situation, "we'd better make separate bundles for them two. It'll save us trouble in the end." And so the work went on, accompanied by a monotonous drone of which the burden ran, "Soppitt, Fraser, Fraser, Soppitt, Soppitt, Soppitt, Soppitt, Fraser, Fraser," *ad infinitum*.

After half an hour the First Lieutenant came out of the wardroom to see what was happening.

"How about the wardroom letters?" he said.

"We haven't come to any wardroom letters yet, sir."

"You're a mighty long time over this job. What's the matter? What are these two piles here?"

"One is Leading Seaman Soppitt, sir, and the other is Shipwright Fraser."

"H'm! They seem to run an extensive correspondence."

Presently the Captain's bell rang for the Quartermaster, and the message he sent was brief and to the point.

"The Captain says 'e wants 'is letters at once."

"We haven't come to the Captain's letters yet."

The First Lieutenant realized that the position had become acute.

"We must have some extra hands on this job," he said, "or we shall be all night over it."

The aid of two petty officers was invoked, and for a solid hour the four sorters stuck manfully to their task; for a solid hour they dripped perspiration to the accompaniment of the same monotonous chant. And so at last the work was completed; letters and parcels were sent off to the various quarters of the ship to which they belonged—all except four large heaps, two of letters and two of parcels, which remained lying on the deck.

"Soppitt and Fraser can come and fetch 'em if they want 'em," said the Master-at-Arms, who was not in the best of tempers. "And I'd advise 'em to bring a couple of coaling barrows and some sacks," added the Sergeant of Marines.

In the cool of the evening (if a shade temperature of 95° can be described as cool) Soppitt and Fraser sat down with an air of grim determination to tackle their correspondence.

"Lumme!" said Soppitt: "'ere's one 'as sent me 'er photo."

"I've 'ad three photos so far," said Fraser complacently.

"'Old 'ard, though," said Soppitt; "she wants me to send 'er mine."

"Most of 'em seem to want that," remarked Fraser.

"What are we going to do about it?" asked Soppitt.

"I don't know what *you're* going to do, but I ain't going to sweat my 'eart out over it."

"'Arf a mo', Fraser; ain't you got some picture postcards of naval officers?"

"I got one of Jellicoe and one of Sturdee, that's all."

"That'll do. You 'ave Sturdee, and I'll 'ave Jellicoe. Dig 'em out, old sport."

The postcards were produced, and Soppitt copied out carefully the name and address of one of his fair correspondents. On the space reserved for messages he wrote: "Herewith my photograph as requested, J. R. J."

"'Ere you are, Fraser," he said; "all you 'ave to do is to write the young lady's name and address with a touching little message alongside of it."

"But there's about 'alf a dozen of 'em in the first fifteen letters."

"That don't matter. You can send a postcard to the others saying as 'ow you're sorry you ain't got any photos left, but if she will apply to Miss So-and-so she can 'ave a sight of one. It'll be like one of these 'ere cirkerlating libraries."

Fraser expressed approval of the plan, and they again devoted themselves to the colossal task in front of them.

"'Ow about this for style?" said Soppitt after a short interval. "Just listen to this: 'I picture you, in my mind's eye, on your great steel-clad boat'—they all call a ship a boat—'your great steel-clad boat, round which the billows are surging, your face turned to the howling gale, your hands firmly grasping the rudder——'"

"She seems to think you steer the old 'ooker

by swimming behind, and 'eaving round the rudder when you want to alter course."

"Perhaps she means the wheel," suggested Soppitt. "Where am I? 'Your hands firmly grasping the rudder, an intrepid son of an intrepid race, nurtured in the traditions of our glorious Nelson.' That sounds all right, don't it?"

"There's a good many of 'em go in for the 'igh-falutin' style," remarked Fraser. "It's by way of being bright and cheerful."

For another spell there was silence, broken only by the sound of ripping open envelopes and the rustle of paper.

"'Ullo!" said Soppitt presently, "'ere's one of 'em broke into poitry."

"I've 'ad four poitry ones," said Fraser.

"Just listen to this: 'Brave guardian of fair England's shores, who knowest not the use of fear, take comfort in your lonely watch, for England's daughters hold you dear.' That's a bit of all right. There's fifteen verses of it."

"'Lonely watch' don't sound right," said Fraser critically; "most of mine 'as a fancy word for watch; they calls it a vigil."

Soppitt tried the emendation, but shook his head sadly. "It don't sound right with 'vigil.' You'll 'ave to make it 'vidge.' 'Take comfort in your lonely vidge.'"

"'Roast mutton and vidge twice,'" quoted Fraser.

Soppitt opened another envelope and laboriously

made his way down the front sheet of a closely written letter.

"Now, that's what I calls thoughtful," he said "She arsts me to send my photo, and then she says that a woman don't take much stock of what a bloke looks like, only she 'as a natooral curiosity about it."

"She guessed you was an ugly-looking devil," suggested Fraser, "and she wanted to tell you as 'ow it wouldn't put 'er off, so long as she knew the worst at once."

"I've got another idea. There's a book I saw sculling about the other day—one of these 'ere advertisement books of the orficers' tailors, with pictures of orficers in uniform. I'll cut out one of those and send it to 'er with my love."

Fraser was deeply immersed in a long epistle which evidently gave him some trouble. He kept on going back to the beginning, to get a fresh start; but before he had gone far he came across a series of perplexing obstacles. At last he appealed to Soppitt for assistance. "I can't make 'ead nor tail of this one. 'Oo was Di-og— No, that ain't right—Diogeens. 'Oo was 'e?"

"Blessed if I know," said Soppitt.

"Well, this is what she says about 'im. 'Dio-geens lived in a tub, but he was not lonely; for he told Alexander the Great to get out of his sunlight——'"

"That ain't a genuyne letter," said Soppitt. "It's a soap advertisement. You'll see it marked

'Advert.' at the end. "'Ave you used Sunlight Soap? Yus, but Diogeen's is the best.'"

"'Arf a mo'," said Fraser; "you're right off the target. Listen to this: 'He had cultivated the art of self-sufficiency, and learned to extract the elixir of life from the serene contemplation of Nature.' I reckon it all means something, only you want a key to it."

"Is there any more of it?"

"'Ere you are; I've found the key: For Diogeens read Naval Officer; for tub read ship.' Now then let's try again."

"But 'ow about all them other words? Ain't they in the key?"

"I can't make no sense of it," said Fraser despairingly.

"What's the finish of it?"

Fraser read out the concluding sentences of the letter with slow precision, tackling the long words by numbers, as they say in the drill-book.

"'The moral of the story is that man, in spite of all his supercilious pretensions, is irrevocably doomed to a position of perpetual dependence upon woman. Wherefore, O sailor man, be wise in time. No longer hold yourself aloof, but, when occasion serves, step forward boldly to meet the representatives of the fairer and stronger sex, and make your choice.' She draws three lines under 'stronger.'"

"I know!" said Soppitt. "She's one of these 'ere Suffragettes arstin' you to receive a depytation. She thinks you're a bloomin' Cabinet Minister."

"P'raps you're right," said Fraser. "But I ain't going to meet any representatives of the fairer and stronger sex in this forsaken country—unless she's thinking of these Arab women, with their faces stowed in their silk 'andkerchiefs, and I reckon there aren't many Suffragettes among that crowd."

The morrow being Saturday the afternoon was devoted by the ship's company to "make and mend"; but Soppitt and Fraser spent it in a state of profuse perspiration unpacking parcels, which spread themselves over mess tables, mess stools, and the deck. There were knitted ties, and knitted scarves, and knitted socks, and knitted cholera-belts, and knitted tam-o'-shanters, all so beautifully warm and comforting that fresh streams of perspiration started to run down their necks with every parcel they opened. What to do with them in the Persian Gulf at the very climax of the hot weather taxed even the ingenuity of Soppitt. It was with rather an apologetic air that he and Fraser offered them round to their shipmates, suggesting that they might come in handy one of these days. (And I have no doubt that they did.) By the time all the parcels had been disposed of, nearly every member of the ship's company had received a favour of some kind or other. The next problem was how to convey a message of thanks to each of the donors. The only possible method was to get each recipient to write a letter on his own account, for neither of the two heroes could face the ordeal

of writing all the letters themselves. By means of a little astute diplomacy, Soppitt managed to induce them to sit down pen in hand and write quite effusive letters, extolling the virtues of a nice warm woollen scarf or a nice thick pair of socks, and he took care that none of them explained that the smudges on the paper were caused by the drip of honest sweat. He and Fraser undertook to address and stamp the envelopes (the postage made quite a big hole in their month's pay), and, when each letter was completed, Soppitt went through it to "censor" out all undesirable particulars, and then appended a postscript in his own handwriting: "I thought you would not mind me handing on your beautiful present to this man, who is an orphan and quite alone in the world."

In the evening the two conspirators, having at last accomplished their Herculean task, were standing on the fo'c'sle trying to get cool. The sun was setting behind the palm-trees which fringe the river, casting its last rays across the endless miles of desert beyond. On the bank a few patient sepoys were squatting and whiling away their leisure hours by dangling the most primitive of fishing lines in the current, an occupation which seemed to befit their sombre taciturn natures. Except for a few motor-launches and other light craft passing up and down the river, all the world appeared to be in a state of suspended animation, and that feeling of peacefulness which sunset brings to the senses had entered the souls of even Fraser and Soppitt.

They had both been silent for a long while, when Soppitt stepped to the side of the ship, knocked out his pipe against a stanchion, and turned towards his companion.

"I wish now that we 'adn't done it," he said.

"Too much like 'ard work," commented Fraser.

"It ain't that," said Soppitt, "but I wish we 'adn't done it."

"Well, there ain't no 'arm in it, as I can see."

"It ain't playing the game," said Soppitt, whose gaze was wandering over the tops of the palm-trees to the distant horizon. "They all done it out of the kindness of their 'earts."

"Well, we ain't agoing to break their 'earts, are we?"

"You remember that advert.?" asked Soppitt after a pause. "You remember we said as 'ow we was lonely? Well, we wasn't—not then. But some'ow it's different now. It's made me feel a kind of lonely."

"Thinkin' of all the young ladies what's arst for your photo?"

"No, I ain't thinkin' of them at all."

He dived into his pocket and drew out a letter.

"This is the only one of them letters that I've kept," he said. "It's different from all the rest. It don't arst me for no photo; it don't enclose no photo; it don't call me the intrepid son of an intrepid race, nor the brave guardian of England's shores."

"Is it poitry or prose?" asked Fraser.

Soppitt would not commit himself to any answer, but drew the letter from its envelope and handed it to his companion.

This is what Fraser read:

"DEAR MR. SAILOR,—I am only nine years old, so I am not really a grown-up young lady. But you say you are lonely, and I don't like to think of you being lonely, because I never am. You see, I have Tim—that is our dog; he is a fox-terrier with a lovely black blob on his forehead—and I can't be lonely when I have Tim to talk to. But if you like I will send you Tim. I know you would love him as much as I do, and then you would not be lonely any more. Do let me send him; only you must tell me where to send him to.—With love, yours affectionately, SYBIL FAIRFIELD."

Fraser folded up the letter and handed it back. His eyes, too, now sought the horizon.

"When I get to Bombay," said Soppitt, "I'm going to buy a collar for Tim and send it to 'er."

"But ain't you going to write to 'er now?"

"Yes, I'm going to write and tell 'er that I ain't really lonely—leastways I wasn't."

"You're right," said Fraser; "I reckon it makes one feel as if there's something one wants, and don't just know what it is."

"I know now what it is," said Soppitt. "I suppose every bloke's the same; but I dunno—maybe they ain't. It's just a kind of feeling that

if I was 'er daddy, or if I 'ad one like 'er all my own,
there'd never be no more loneliness for me."

Thus did Leading Seaman Soppitt stumble by
accident on one of the laws of the universe which
it is not given to every bachelor to discover.

THE ORDEAL OF LOCHINVAR

IT so happened that the *Smackfly* and the *Scatterfly* were the only two gunboats on the Euphrates patrol at the time, and both were lying near a large village called Sup-Turiniyah, tied up to the opposite bank of the river. This was in the late summer of 1916, at the time when the expedition was having a standeasy so far as fighting was concerned, but was still very busy over its transport problems. The railway was nearing completion between Kurnah and Amarah, and the line to Nasiriyah was well advanced. An expert business man had taken charge of the river transport service, another expert was dealing with the congestion of shipping in the port of Busrah, and a new Army Commander was not only himself leading the strenuous life, but was making all his Staff do the same, in spite of the devitalizing effect of the climate. The rivers had fallen, and the Hammar Lake had become impassable for anything bigger than a bellum; so the two gunboats were doomed to spend the next few months above the lake, until such time in the early spring as the water began to rise again. They were quite happy, however, for they found congenial company in the military messes at Nasiriyah and

other places where detachments were stationed; and occasionally they got a chance of doing a little wholesome strafing, when a fractious tribe of Arabs became too bold and started interfering with the food convoys. But on the whole the Arabs are a peaceable folk—when they have to deal with people stronger than themselves—and after a few salutary lessons they came to the conclusion that it was best to leave the Inglesi alone when their gunboats were hovering about.

The one person whom this life of monotonous ease suited thoroughly was Toby, the Captain of the *Smackfly*, for it gave him ample opportunity for pursuing his new hobby—the study of the Arab and his language. He used to make a point of doing his own marketing in the villages, and probably the vendors chuckled with delight whenever they saw him coming; for Toby had no head for figures, and would readily pay any price demanded of him so long as he got the goods. He once told me that he believed very firmly in what he called the Gouin system for learning languages. I do not profess to know what this is, but Toby's method was to borrow the Interpreter from the *Scatterfly* (having none in the complement of his own ship), and to make the unfortunate man stand by while he emitted a series of weird sounds, which he fondly believed to be Arabic. The Interpreter used to wear a patient smile throughout the performance, for he was a born diplomatist; but after a bit he began to get a faint glimmering of the meaning of the sounds. In fact, the result of the Gouin system, as practised by Toby,

was that the Interpreter learned a brand-new language.

As regards the study of the Arab, Toby commenced by making a careful research into the subject of the native dress. In the more civilized centres this was quite a big subject, for some of the town Arabs wear elaborate costumes, and apparently the number as well as the quality of the garments rises proportionately with the social status of their wearer. Thus, a wealthy Arab merchant in Busrah wears quite magnificent robes including a pair of cotton trousers; and his wife is arrayed in a silk dress which would rival any Paris gown, and hides her face behind a silk veil of costly texture, whose only fault is that it leaves too much to the imagination. But in the country districts the garb of the man varies between nothing at all and a long coarse robe, which he calls his "abba"; a kerchief held on his head by a circlet of woven hair, which he calls his "akal"; and a pair of sandals on his feet. The women in the country appear to wear only one garment, a loose-fitting dress of dark material, which is usually seen tucked up to the knee when the lady is drawing water from the river or working in the fields. As a matter of fact, I have it on the authority of an official publication that there are other garments, but that they are hidden from view; and experts tell me that the skirt of the one visible robe should be technically called a divided skirt, because from the knee downwards it is slit at the side, presumably to facilitate the operation of tucking it up when the lady goes paddling in

the river. Of course, there are the distinctions due to rank to be observed in the villages as well as in the towns, and one may spot the village Sheikh by his belt (he calls it "hussan") and his sandals. His wife, too, and his daughters, assimilate their attire to that worn by the highborn ladies of the metropolis, and in the larger villages wear the veil which their humbler sisters can afford to discard.

This information about Arab costume, meagre as it is, must not be taken for gospel; for the greater part of it I have accepted on trust from Toby, and although his former passion for theatricals has made him a student of such matters—well, Toby, after all, is just Toby. You may picture him in his spotless white suit and helmet, taking those funny little strides of his along the river-bank towards some village of reed huts, which occasionally boasts a brick house for the residence of the Sheikh; on one side of him the broad waters of the Euphrates, and on the other a clump of palm-trees or a patch of cultivated ground growing "ladies' fingers" or some other native vegetable; in the distance, both to right and left, nothing but limitless acres of marshland, from which the flood waters are beginning to recede as the autumn approaches. Lazily paddling down the river, an Arab in his mashoof (the native canoe) stares at him with an air of non-chalance, dreamily wondering why the white man should be in such a hurry (for Toby always steps out briskly); or perhaps the fellow is not even using his paddle, except as a rudder, but is reclining at

his ease in the sternsheets, while his wife on the bank is pulling steadily at the end of a tow-rope. Toby in his philosophic moments has sometimes dilated eloquently upon the wonderful training of the Oriental woman as contrasted with that of her Western sister. I may mention that Toby is a married man, and, like most married men, he can grow quite eloquent when he is several thousand miles away from home.

The Captain of the *Scatterfly* is called Lochinvar, and there is a thrilling romance attached to the name. Once upon a time his ship was lying at Queensferry, and near-by there lived a retired Dundee jute-spinner, who was always known to Lochinvar's messmates as the "Highland Chieftain" (presumably because he came from the Lowlands). Now, the Highland Chieftain had a daughter who was fair to behold, and when Lochinvar set eyes on her—— But I am digressing. Lochinvar is really a very remarkable character, though it is difficult to say just exactly what there is remarkable about him. When you come to look into it carefully, his face is not quite a perfect circle; and though his hair has a warm tint, no one would dream of holding up a piece of bread on a toasting fork to it. But he has a smile. I cannot describe that smile, but I have heard people say that the mere sight of it will banish a raging toothache.

The *Smackfly* and the *Scatterfly*, as I said just now, were both lying tied to the bank opposite to the village of Sup-Turiniyah, and they were within a stone's-throw of each other. Lochinvar had finished

his dinner, and was seated in a wicker chair just outside his cabin reading a novel and trying to keep the mosquitoes at bay by puffing vigorously at a large pipe. It was a thrilling novel, all about a squire of dames who rescued the heroine from a band of highwaymen (they had been employed by the villain to assist him in absconding with her). He had just reached the chapter in which the hero is enticed into the lair of this ruffianly gang, when the Quartermaster appeared before him.

"Beg pardon, sir. There's a lady to see you, sir."

"A what!" exclaimed Lochinvar, nearly jumping out of his chair.

"An Arab lady, sir. She's alongside in a mashoof."

Lochinvar swallowed three times, dropped the pipe out of his mouth, and rubbed his eyes. When he had recovered his composure, he asked in level tones: "What does she want?"

"Wants to see you, sir."

"Is the Interpreter aboard?"

"The Interpreter brought her off, sir."

"Hassan brought her off? Tell him to come here. Half a minute. Tell him to bring the lady with him."

The Quartermaster retired, and in the silence that followed the ping of the mosquitoes sounded like the shrill note of a flute. Then came the noise of footsteps along the starboard gangway, and next moment Hassan appeared and stood to attention with that impenetrable smile on his face that never

seemed to wash off. He was followed by a closely veiled lady, who approached timidly to about two paces in front of Lochinvar, and then sank on her knees with head bowed in an attitude of supplication. Lochinvar laid down his book on top of the big gun, at the breech end of which he was sitting, and leaned forward in his chair.

"What's all this about, Hassan?" he asked.

"The lady wants to make a request, sir."

"Who is she? Where did you find her?"

"I went ashore to buy some eggs, sir, and the lady was on the bank when I was coming back. She is the daughter of a Sheikh, but her father is dead. Her mother is dead, too. She has been living with her stepmother, who beats her."

"But what does she want with me?"

Here the lady began to speak volubly and passionately, holding her hands clasped together towards Lochinvar.

"What is she saying, Hassan?"

Hassan's smile broadened perceptibly for a moment, but quickly resumed the normal.

"I do not know, sir. She speaks fast, and it is a dialect."

"Tell her to speak more slowly."

Hassan interpreted, and the lady began to speak very deliberately and very earnestly.

"She says, sir, that the stepmother wants her to marry, and has chosen a husband for her; but he is not a good man; he is not a proper husband for a Sheikh's daughter, and she hates him."

Lochinvar looked thoughtfully at the figure

crouching before him. It would be impossible to describe it as anything more than a conglomeration of clothes with something animate inside them; no outline of the human form was visible, and no glimpse of the face could be caught through the thickness of the veil. She began to look about her, turning her head with a quick, timid movement, first towards the open door of Lochinvar's cabin, where she could see a snow-white coverlet upon the bed, and a neat array of books on a shelf over the bunk; and then round on her right, looking upwards to the awe-inspiring gun, whose muzzle stretched away into the gloom beyond the rays of the lamp hanging above Lochinvar's head. Presently there arose from the village that strange ululation which suggests a railway whistle trying to neigh like a horse. The girl made a sudden start, and, with a dramatic wave of her hand towards the direction of the sound, she spoke in a trembling voice, which ended with a catch of her breath and a violent shudder. Hassan interpreted. "The women of the village, she says, think that she is in her house, and they are serenading her because she is soon to be a bride. It is a native custom."

"What's her name?" asked Lochinvar. Hassan repeated the question.

"It is a strange name," said Hassan when the lady had replied; "I cannot make it out."

Lochinvar looked thoughtful. "Well, what does she want me to do?" he said.

The girl again began to speak volubly, and from her gestures Lochinvar could see that she was very

much in earnest. She stretched her hands towards him with palms raised, and bowed her head between her arms. Then with a sudden movement she raised one arm as if she were trying to ward off a cowardly blow, and her whole attitude was eloquent of abject terror. And then she began to sob until her body shook with violent paroxysms.

"Poor little devil!" murmured Lochinvar. "Her stepmother must be a brute. What is she saying, Hassan?"

"She is asking you to let her stay here, sir. She says that if she goes back now they will kill her."

"But I can't keep her here. I've nowhere to stow her."

"She says that she will be happy if she can sit at the sahib's feet and eat the crumbs that fall from the sahib's table."

"That's all very well, but—confound it all! I can't turn the *Scatterfly* into an asylum for distressed females. How long does she suggest that I should keep her? What is she saying now?"

"She says that the sahib's face is like the rising moon," said Hassan, and added hastily: "In Araby that is a compliment, sir."

"The deuce it is! Well, what's her own face like? Tell her to take off her veil."

Hassan opened the negotiations.

"She says she is shy, sir," he interpreted.

"Well, that's a bit thick," commented Lochinvar; "she wants to come here as my guest, and I'm not even to see her face."

"She says, sir, she is the beauty of Sup-Turiniyah."

"No false modesty about her, anyhow. What are the rest of them like?"

"She says, sir, that Sup-Turiniyah is famous for its beautiful women."

"Well, its fame never reached me; I never heard of the damned place until I tied up here."

The girl now said something very softly, and Hassan had to stoop down to catch it. He shook his head protestingly, and looked quite embarrassed.

"What is she saying, Hassan?"

"She wants to know, sir——" Hassan began, and stopped himself with an apologetic cough.

"Translate it, Hassan. Never mind what it is."

"She wants to know, sir, whether you mix catechu with the henna when you dye your hair."

"The saucy little minx!" exclaimed Lochinvar with a smile.

"In Araby," explained Hassan, "red hair is considered very beautiful."

"So that's her little way of making love to me?"

Again a low gentle voice murmured from beneath the veil, and Hassan stooped to listen.

"Any more conundrums?" asked Lochinvar. "What is she asking now?"

"She wants to know, sir, whether it is very expensive to make your nose look so beautiful?"

"Confound her impudence!" said Lochinvar. "Tell her that little girls shouldn't be inquisitive."

"In Araby, sir, a fresh complexion is much

admired. She is only wishing to tell you that she thinks you very handsome."

"It's deuced good of her, but if she wants me to reciprocate the compliment she must take off that blooming veil."

"She says, sir, that she will take off her veil presently if you will let her stay here."

"I should jolly well think so! Does she think I'm going to keep an Egyptian mummy aboard here? Tell her to take it off at once."

"She says that she will unveil if you will take her to Nasiriyah. She has a house at Nasiriyah; her father was a rich man and owned property there. And she says that, if the sahib will visit her in her house sometimes, she will be very happy there."

"I've got a dainty little motor-car, and I've got a yacht," quoted Lochinvar, and for a while he sat looking thoughtfully at the figure kneeling in front of him. Subconsciously he began softly to sing the popular duet to himself, while his brain was absorbed with the problem which had been presented to him. 'I've got, honey, lots of money; I've got everything I——' He broke off abruptly and looked round with a startled air. Someone quite close to him was humming an accompaniment to his song. It was only just audible, but there was no mistaking the tune, including the little twiddly bit when the lady in the song asks whether the yacht sails upon the ocean.

"Who was that humming?" asked Lochinvar. Hassan's smile was as Sphinx-like as any human smile can be.

"I believe it was the girl," said Lochinvar.
"But how the deuce does she know that tune?"

Hassan said something to her in Arabic, to which she replied in a dull, listless voice.

"She says, sir, that she belongs to a musical family. Her brother plays the drum."

"But that wasn't an Arabic tune she was humming, nothing like any of the weird noises that the natives call music."

"She says she heard some English soldiers singing it."

"Tell her to hum it again." Hassan interpreted the request.

"She says she is shy, sir."

"Confound her shyness! Ask her again what her name is."

Hassan again put the question, and again was answered by the same low mumbling.

"I do not know the name at all," he said, "but it sounds like Legpoolina."

"Queer name," mused Lochinvar; "but I suppose all these girls have outlandish names that nobody can pronounce. Look here, Hassan, I'm fed up with her. Tell her that she must either take off her veil or else clear out of it." And Lochinvar rose from his chair with an air of determination. In an instant the girl was on her feet, and had darted forward into the gloom beyond the light's rays.

"Bless my soul!" said Lochinvar, "I didn't mean to frighten her. Here, all right, what's-your-name; I'm not going to eat you."

But the lady remained in hiding, and after a few moments Lochinvar walked towards her in his most dignified manner. No sooner did he approach her, however, than she dived under the gun and got round to the other side of the mounting. With slower movements Lochinvar also dived under the gun, but by the time he had reached the port side of it Legpoolina had dodged round again to the starboard side. Three times Lochinvar pursued her round the gun, and then he tried the effect of suddenly reversing his direction after an elaborate feint; but Legpoolina was too quick for him, and with a sigh of resignation he sank into his chair once more.

"I'm not going to play any more," he said. "I don't know whether you call it Hide and Seek, or Chase me, Charley, or Round the Mulberry Bush, but I'm fed up with it."

He picked up his book and made a pretence of reading; the silence was only broken by the ping of the mosquitoes. His eyes roaming the pages in front of him caught these words: "In the Stone Ages woman was wooed by physical force; to-day the gentler methods of civilization must be used; but there are times when the modern woman has a secret yearning for a glimpse of neolithic man."

Lochinvar laid down the book on his lap.

"Where's that girl? What's she doing, Hassan?"

But Hassan, feeling that his services were no longer required, had gone aft. Lochinvar leaned forward in his chair and peered round the gun into the darkness beyond. He was startled by a

quiet voice from behind him, which said in a matter-of-fact tone: "I've brought a bottle of whisky, but I have run out of soda. I hope you've got some."

Lochinvar wheeled round in his chair and sat staring with mouth agape. There stood Legpoolina in an attitude of demure humility; her veil had been cast aside, and was hanging down from her shoulders. The face revealed was the face of Toby.

KNIGHTS ERRANT

IN the summer of 1916 the Navy in Mesopotamia was enjoying a stand-easy, more or less. The Army was very busy building railways and roads, and importing steamers for river transport, and generally bestirring itself over the problems connected with a long line of communications between the base and the scene of operations. The Navy's job was to patrol the line, and to talk gently but firmly to any Arabs who tried to play monkey-tricks, the conversation being conducted with anything from a Maxim to a four-inch. The Arabs soon got to know that it was better not to play monkey-tricks, and so the Navy did not often have to display its conversational powers.

One evening there was a gathering of the clans at Amarah. The large twin-funnelled *Straddlebug* was lying about a mile upstream from the town, tied to the right bank at a spot where it is thickly covered by a palm grove. She had gathered around her some half-dozen or so of the smaller gunboats, as a mother hen gathers her chicks. Just ahead of her were the *Squashfly* and the *Swotfly*; tied to her starboard side was the *Scrunchfly*; close astern of her were the *Slayfly*, the *Grabfly*, the *Clawfly*,

and the *Scatterfly*. They had met to rejoice because one of the clan, who is beloved by all of them, had received recognition of his services to his country—the right to wear a piece of metal attached to a piece of ribbon, and to append to his name some well-selected letters of the alphabet. Such things happen to many people in this mighty struggle, but when they happen to the best-loved naval officer in Mesopotamia the occasion obviously demands some special observance. Most of the forenoon the Doctor of the *Straddlebug* had been writing out invitation cards to the officers of the squadron. “The Captain and Officers of H.M.S. *Straddlebug* request the pleasure of your company to dinner this evening.” There followed an allusion to the auspicious news which had just been telegraphed up from Busrah, and an explanation that, owing to the exigencies of the Service, it was regretably impossible for the hero of the evening to leave his duties at Busrah and attend the dinner. Then came the letters R.S.V.P., and a footnote at the bottom explained: “R.S.V.P. means Bring Your Own Sandwiches.” It was a happy idea, for it resulted in a miscellany of contributions to the feast, both solid and liquid. Lochinvar, the Captain of the *Scatterfly*, was very anxious that the occasion should be graced by the presence of the ladies, for there were a large number of hospital nurses at Amarah, and one of the hospitals was quite close to where the *Straddlebug* was lying. But the view of the majority was that it was to be a naval dinner in honour of a naval officer, and that

the presence of ladies, however delightful, would not be appropriate.

The dinner was a complete success from every point of view. Garibaldi, the Captain of the *Squashfly* (so called in reference to the popular schoolboy superstition as to the ingredients of Garibaldi biscuits), contributed that air of irresponsible gaiety which comes of long experience of a flag-officer's dinner-parties; Lochinvar wore his inimitable smile, which grew more and more resplendent as the evening advanced; and the Captain of the *Clawfly* punctuated the conversation with that deep-throated roar of his for which he is justly famous. In an interval of comparative calm someone asked, "Where is Hercules?" Hercules, I should explain, is the First Lieutenant of the *Straddlebug*, and is so called because he once entered for the Amateur Boxing Championship as a heavyweight, and survived the first two rounds. "Hercules is dining with Toby in the *Smackfly*," said the Captain of the *Straddlebug*. "Toby has to go down-river to-morrow at daylight, so he had to get through the pontoon bridge this evening while it was open. I suppose Hercules thought he might be a bit lonely down there all by himself."

"But, hang it all!" said the Captain of the *Scrunchfly*, "why couldn't he leave his old packet and walk up here to dinner? It isn't much more than half a mile along the bank."

"I'm sure I don't know why he didn't, except that Toby has his little idiosyncrasies."

Someone suggested that he was probably poking

round the Amarah bazaar trying to discover a new smell, for Toby at that time was hotly pursuing his new hobby—the study of the Arab. After that the subject of Toby was allowed to drop.

Then the Captain of the *Straddlebug*, as president of the table, proposed the toast of the evening, and somebody interjected, "And may his shadow never grow less"; but after a moment's reflection the president amended the sentiment to, "May his shadow never grow less nor greater," and I feel confident that the amendment would have been heartily approved by the subject of the toast himself. After dinner the Junior Lieutenant of the *Thora* was made to recite. At that time he was in temporary command of the *Slayfly* while her Captain was in hospital with a touch of fever. He gave them the account of the costermonger who was accused of stealing an old gentleman's watch, winding up with the impassioned speech made by the prisoner in his own defence, a classic worthy to rank with Cicero's "Pro Milone." He had just reached that dramatic moment where the prisoner says, "And—by Your Worship in particular," when the whole company was startled by a piercing shriek from the river-bank. It was the cry of a woman in an agony of terror, a blood-curdling yell which caused even the rosy countenance of Lochinvar to turn pale. At the same moment, with such promptness that it might have been the result of a preconcerted signal, the *Swotfly* turned on her searchlight.

A white flood of light streamed through the palm grove on the river-bank, and immediately attracted

a swarm of stag-beetles, which dashed themselves against the glass and fell to the deck. There is something strangely dramatic about the glare of a searchlight, something suggestive of the devices of the stage at a Drury Lane melodrama. In the intensity of light every object stands out conspicuously as though seen through a stereoscope, but beyond the limits of the beam there is a blackness like that of the nethermost pit. The officers in the *Straddlebug* had eyes for only one object revealed by the searchlight's glare. Hastening along the crest of the bank was a tall, powerfully built Arab. He seemed to glide along with a movement which was almost snake-like, his *ch-fee** and *abba†* streaming out behind him. But it was not on the man that every spectator fixed his horrified gaze, but on the burden that he carried in his arms. The girl was evidently in a dead faint, for her head lay drooping across his shoulder, and one arm was hanging limp and swinging like a pendulum with every stride he took. Her face was as white as the cap on her head, or at least it appeared so in the rays of the searchlight, which had the effect of making even her grey uniform look almost white.

As soon as the alarm was raised, the Arab realized that by keeping along the river-bank he could never escape the pursuing glare, and that his one chance of safety was to be found in the thickness of the palm grove inshore; so he swerved suddenly to his right and threaded his way with a sinuous, gliding move-

* A kerchief worn on the head.

† A cloak.

ment through the palm-trees. Less than fifty yards from the river, and running parallel to it, was a deep nullah (dyke), and the nearest crossing was at least two hundred yards farther upstream. There was another crossing downstream, but before the Arab could reach it he would be in a populous area and was bound to be intercepted.

"That's all right," said Garibaldi; "he can't get across that nullah except by jumping it, and he'll have to drop the girl to do that."

But Garibaldi spoke too soon. The Arab was seen to increase his stride, and, gathering speed as he approached the obstacle, he took a mighty leap which landed him safely on the other side. Next moment he was lost to view behind a thick undergrowth through which the searchlight could not penetrate.

Then the chase began. It was led by the Captain of the *Scatterfly*, who rushed across the gangway, plunged headlong into the palm grove, tripped over a root, picked himself up, ran wildly on, took a flying leap at the nullah, missed his footing, and fetched up in the water with a mighty splash. The Captain of the *Clawfly* was hard on Lochinvar's heels, and when he saw the bedraggled officer crawling up the muddy bank on the other side of the nullah his deep-throated roar could be heard echoing through the grove. Followed by the more prudent members of the hunt, he ran along the side of the nullah until he came to the place where a felled palm-tree had been thrown across it, and then ran back along the other side. But Garibaldi,

of the *Squashfly*, was not to be numbered among the prudent. Realizing that time was the essence of the contract, he followed Lochinvar's example, and landed with a squelching noise into two feet of slimy mud, which rose like a fountain all round him and almost eclipsed him.

The most prudent of all was the Captain of the *Straddlebug*, who "fell in" a landing-party with a Maxim gun, in case the pursuit should lead them into a stronghold of armed Arabs. He was accompanied by the Captain of the *Slayfly*, who had darted back to his ship to get his revolver, and the pair of them at the head of the Maxim party brought up the rear of the chase. Of the further adventures of these two and their party of gallant *matelots* I have no exact record; but it seems that carrying a Maxim gun across a narrow plank in the dark, with a deep nullah underneath, is one of those things at which the average *matelot* does not shine. The only authenticated incident which I have been able to gather from the confused account of this party's proceedings is that of a *sotto-voce* observation made by a leading seaman, to the effect that he was not a sanguinary tight-rope dancer.

I pass on to the events which befell the two heroes who had faced the terrors of the leap in the dark. On they stumbled through the night, until they came to the entrance to one of the camps. Here a sentry was on duty, and when the two strange figures came within the rays of his lantern he hastily searched his mind for instructions as to the proper procedure. In their present condition it was

impossible to say what they were, but if they were excavated they might turn out to be commissioned officers. In order to be on the safe side he stood to attention.

"Which way did he go?" gasped Lochinvar.

"Beg pardon, sir?" said the sentry.

"He must have passed this way. Where did he go?"

"Was you referrin' to them two naval officers, sir?"

"Naval officers! What the blank are you talking about? That Arab carrying off one of the hospital nurses."

The sentry merely gaped.

"We're wasting time," said Garibaldi; "he must have struck across the desert."

"But how could he? We should have seen him," objected Lochinvar. "He couldn't possibly cross an open space like that without being seen."

"He might be hiding in the shadow of a nullah," suggested Garibaldi; and they dived again into the palm grove.

"What did he mean about two naval officers?" Garibaldi asked after they had proceeded a hundred yards or so. "I thought all the others were behind us."

"The fellow's a blithering idiot," said Lochinvar testily. "I wish the deuce we had a lantern! If the devil's hiding—hullo! what's that?"

Two figures were seen darting through the palm-trees a short distance to the right of them. They turned out to be the Captains of the *Scrunchfly*

and the *Clawfly*; and when the latter was near enough to recognize Lochinvar through the alluvial deposit encasing him, his deep-throated roar made the palm-trees shake again. Presently the Captains of the *Swotfly* and *Grabfly* came up, and the six of them proceeded to form line abreast with intervals of about thirty yards, and to make a thorough search of the palm grove. Garibaldi was farthest inshore, and after a while he again came across the sentry at the camp gate.

"Did you say you saw two naval officers just now?" he asked.

"Two, sir? There's more than that about to-night."

"But just before you saw me?"

"That's right, sir, there was two officers—a tall one and a short one."

"Which way did they go?"

"I couldn't rightly say, sir; but I think they must have turned up towards the river, like as if they was going to the officer's club. They was carrying something under their arms."

"What sort of thing?"

"I couldn't rightly say, sir; they was too far off. Just looked like a couple of bundles what might be anything."

"Thank you," said Garibaldi, and he turned on his heel and resumed the search.

As I said before, I have no precise record of the adventures of the Captains of the *Straddlebug* and the *Slayfly*. I only know that after an hour and a half the Maxim was safely returned to the ship,

and that two perspiring officers dragged their weary limbs across the gangway. They were shortly followed by the rest of the search-party, who straggled in one by one, all very much depressed by their failure. The first person to meet the eye of the Captain of the *Straddlebug* was his First Lieutenant, who was sitting unconcernedly at the top of the deserted dinner-table.

"Hello, Hercules! You've missed some excitement this evening," he said; and then, as he rounded the corner of the big gun, he saw that Hercules had a guest.

"Hullo, Toby! I didn't expect to see you this evening. What will you have? I see you've tried the port."

"You keep a jolly good brand of port in the *Straddlebug*," remarked Toby. "Where do you find it?"

But something had caught the eye of the Captain of the *Straddlebug*, from which even a compliment to his port wine failed to distract his attention. He gazed at it in silence, and then he gazed on Toby, and from Toby his gaze shifted to Hercules. At the far end of the table were two neatly arranged piles, one consisting of the abba, ch-fee, and akal,* of an Arab Sheikh, and the other of the cap and grey uniform of a hospital nurse. The silence was intense while seven overheated officers, five of them coated with dust and two with slimy mud, stared in wonder at the two significant piles. No ordinary historian

* A circlet of woven hair which keeps the ch-fee in place on the head.

is competent to describe their feelings, and no ordinary language is adequate to record what they said when they had recovered their powers of speech. But it must be placed to the credit of the Captain of the *Clawfly* that the sounds of his mirth were wafted across the river, and next morning the inhabitants of Amarah were asking each other if they had heard the earthquake during the night. All honour, too, to the Captain of the *Straddlebug*, who remarked that they had all been put through the only real test, for no man can justly claim to have a sense of humour unless he can see a joke against himself.

THE END

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