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On a Camel Through Arabia

By FRED SIMPICH

I write this from the heart of Arabia—the Home of Islam—the cradle of primitive man. I am not sure primitive men were addicted to "cradles" but the phrase sounds good. Anyway, the human race got started on a small scale in this vicinity, back in the days of the prominent men who are headlined in the Bible. I'm sure, too, that if the world had been as large when the Prophets collaborated on their symposium, that small fry like Lot and Meshack would have been given less space. But they were pioneers on this earth, in a way, and as charter-members of the first human settlement founded by Adam and Eve 236 miles south of Bagdad, naturally came in for honorable mention.

But it's Arabia today that I am exploring—a vast desert wilderness almost unknown to western civilization. One or two adventuresome Germans, a few inquisitive Britons, an ethnological Frenchman and a pair of map-making Russian army officers have penetrated the desert wilds southwest of Bagdad. So far as I know, no Americans have passed this way. Paris and Monte Carlo offer new sensations to most Yankees who are tired of lugging their money around; and the few studious and scientific persons who have ventured into Arabia from America have found their reward in a bee line for Babylon, or some similar deserted mining camp of the first settlers in these parts.

It's the desert that has clutched me. The winged bulls hewn from blocks of stone, the cuneiform or "written stones," the rough glass vases 7000 years old, which spectated antiquarians feverishly dig for in the buried cities of the plains, are useful in a way. They help fill shelves in vast museums where one grows dizzy on Sunday afternoons. But already most people know about the Tower of Babel, the hanging gardens which didn't really "hang," and they know too, that Belshazzar drank awfully and set a frightful example for the youth of Mesopotamia. It's to the people who live here today that I turn; in the camps of these Bedouins, among these fierce children of the silent desert, I unravel a tale which ruses and written stones cannot tell.

As I sit in my tent of camel hair cloth and write this, I hear the desert folk talk, and they call each other Ibrahim (Abraham) and Musa (Moses) and Yusuf (Joseph). They live now as your ancestors and mine

lived, ages ago, in this same great plain, between the Tigris and Euphrates. "Mesopotamia," it is called, which means "Between the Rivers." From here the tribes went out, to the North and West, and some across 6000 miles of steppes to China, to people the earth. And those who moved away got ahead. These left to hold the fort are keeping house now just as they did so long ago. They are killing a sheep outside, even now, to make a sacrifice in support of a vow—just like the man in the Bible did, when told a sheep would do as well as his son.

Come with me, on a camel, from Bagdad to the Holy City of Kerbela, and learn of these desert folk—know caravan life as I have seen it, feel its charms, its mystery, its primitive joy. Perceive that here, and here only, men live, love, fight and die now as it was in the beginning. Ride with the Persian pilgrims, and see how free and untrammelled life is on the endless deserts of the East. Here men regret naught that happened yesterday, and worry not about tomorrow. "Inshallah," they say; "God Willing" it's translated, but it merely means "What's the Use?" Last night I showed them Halley's Comet. "Yes," said the Sheik, "I saw it a moment ago; but it's God's business—why should I bother?" Another said it might mean a bad omen for the Sultan, or for the Beni Lam—a tribe to the south who make war on all Persians, and on the Jebel Shammars of the Euphrates country.

December 23, 1909, broke hazily over the gilded domes and porcelain tiled minarets of ancient Bagdad. Devout Musselmans were praying on the roofs of their flat-topped houses as our caravan made ready for the desert trail. We were early astir, for it is a long march to the Holy City of Kerbela, and the first wells are far from Bagdad. We secured two camels of the better type, one for myself and one for Salmon Hussein, the dignified Moslem guide. On eight donkeys we packed our tents, camp kit and goat-skins of muddy Tigris river water. This Oriental idea of carrying water in a sack strikes the modern Yankee mind a stiff blow. But wooden and tin vessels are unknown; stone jugs would break when an animal tumbles and falls—and then, there is no evaporation from the tight goat skin. Yusuf, the cook, Hamid the camel driver, and a sour-faced Arab muleteer made up my party. The authorities had promised an escort of six "Zaptiehs," or mounted gendarmes; but as they had not shown up when starting time came, we fled away without them. For, like Chicago policemen, Zaptiehs are often mere matters of adornment. Besides, the guide carried a rifle and my own Winchester was slung over the high, rocking wooden saddle of my trotting camel. On the desert, as among nations armament makes for peace.

Filing slowly through the crowded, picturesque bazaars of Bagdad, which are aswarm with eager traders at early daybreak, we passed through the old ruined gate, bulldozed ages ago by the gallant Haroun Raschid, and thus onto the broad limitless desert; for Bagdad, be it known, lies in the heart of the wilderness and is saved from a dusty death only by the swift running Tigris, which courses 600 miles across the great Arabian wast.

Over us a fierce, destroying sun burned hard and strong, even in December; in front, and to right and left, a heat-scorched horizon shimmered and danced.

Into the Land of Dead Things. Before me lay the land of camel's bones, of sun and sand, the home of dead things. A tireless waste it is, a flat, empty and desolate land—a country that was, but is not. The words of the Prophet who said that Babylon should pass away are come true. For this very waste, ages ago, was the fertile and populous kingdom of the powerful monarch, Nebuchadnezzar. Now here and there a sand blown mound marks where a temple or a palace stood. Even Belasco, the wizard of scenery-making, must pause here; not even a palm or a crumbling pyramid raises its head to make the picture look like a conventional desert.

The silence of a thousand years hung in the air.

Not a bird, an insect, a tree or a shrub—just a sea of sand and silence.

The camel's padded feet were noiseless; so acute was the stillness that once, when an animal stumbled and the water in the goat skin splashed, I was startled by the report. A Jewish synagogue on Monday morning is a noisy place compared with the Arabian desert.

For the first few hours I sang and whistled—though the Arabs call whistling "Devilish Speech." The eternal silence got on my nerves. Then the jerking motion of the camel, novel at first, grew painful. My back ached. For a change I asked the guide to let me ride in front, and keep the trail. This was easy—bones marked the way. We were on the Pilgrim road—the path followed for thousands of years by people from Persia—the Mohammedan Pilgrims who go each year to the Holy City of Kerbela, carrying thither the bones of their dead for burial near the sacred mosques. There was no clear

path, for the wind blows sand into track as soon as made. But somehow bones don't get covered; and all along we saw them, scattered skeletons of camels and donkeys, remains of the herds who had gone before.

Thus we pressed on, anxious to make the wells in time for camp, and end the day's march.

Finally they appeared. Salmon saw them first. He points, two or three miles ahead, and protruding, it seemed from the very ground, I made out the arched banners of a scrubby date palm. Drawing nearer, I saw that a few low trees were clustered about a well in a shallow depression in the desert. Unconsciously we hastened a trifle and were soon descending into the basin. The guide struck my camel on the neck, crying "Ek-Ek-Ek," and down the clumsy, tired beast kneeled. What joy to stretch my blistered legs, and ease my broken back.

Camel thorn grew about the muddy wells, and from this Yusuf soon kindled a fire. The tent up, and hot tea made, already the lonesome spot seemed less cheerless. I ate dried dates, some rice and condensed milk, and turned in. Outside lay the camels, chewing noisily their cud. The pack mules had their small measure of grain, the Musselmans were busy at their own meal a few feet away. My food was safe from them, of course, for it was not unclean, belonging to a Nazarena (Christian)?

The Pilgrims Join Us.

Perhaps I had slept an hour, when the uproar began. Salmon shouted and the muleteer swore; the cook whined. But it was not robbers after all—simply half a hundred Persian pilgrims, going our way. They had left Bagdad three hours after we had, and had overtaken us at the wells. The horde swarmed noisily around the wells, shouting and beating their animals. Some women, who travelled with them, added their shrill cries to the tumult of the night. These women ride all day in cage-like boxes, open at the top, one on each side of a big Afghan mule, or a camel. At night they sing or dance, to amuse the foot-sore pilgrims. This caravan was on its way to Kerbela, and was made up of ten or fifteen pious Persians and their outfits. A part of this outfit consisted of several coffins, in which rattled the bones of a venerated ancestor.

The Death Caravans.

Think of walking four months, over mountain and desert, leading a mule carrying your grandfather's bones! Think of having this mule slip and fall, while fording a river, leaving your ancestor's boxed-up bones to drift away on the roaring river. Then imagine chasing those sacred bones, you yourself stumbling and tripping as you raced along the river bank, trying to keep in sight of the rattling bones, playfully tossing on the waves! I saw this happen. And when the poor pious Persian finally caught the elusive remains of his honored ancestor, he had to spend two hours hunting his lost donkey; and whilst absent on this errand jackals got at his grand-father's bones, and mused them up. This was at Bakuba, forty miles north of Bagdad, where the Pilgrims cross the Diala on their way to Kerbela.

Mohammedans in Persia, when they feel ready to die, move to the Holy City of Kerbela, that they may be buried in or near the sacred mosques. Those who are too poor to stand the trip, or die suddenly in Persia, become a charge on their descendants. When a grand son feels financially able, he digs up his grand-father and starts for Kerbela, there to re-enter the body. Turkish laws and quarantine officials say such dead ancestors must have been dead two years; there are also some other restrictions on travelling from Persia into Turkey, accompanied by the skeleton of one's grand-father. But sometimes the Persian pilgrims overlook these. Thousands of such corpses have been brought through Bagdad in a single year. Epidemics have been traced to them, and in many cases they are smuggled through, sometimes shortly after death. The German writer, Karl May, says he always gave these "Todes Karawanen" a wide berth, especially in hot weather.

So the second time I went to sleep, I dreamed that one oblong box opened, and that an elderly Persian, deceased some 150 years, glided over and sat on my knees, and blew a deathly plague breath at me, and laughed so all his dusty old bones rattled—and rattled—and rattled, till I woke up to find my camel's long face thrust into my tent; it was his breath I felt, and his short halter chain which had rattled.

I cursed the camel's religion till the driver came and pulled him away. Then I slept till morning.

Things that Happened on the March.

Roast gazelle makes a good breakfast. One of the Persians gave me a few ribs. True it had been cooked in Bagdad the morning before, but the desert folks are not fastidious as to food. I have seen them make coffee from water dipped from brackish pools, near which camels had stood all night. I had some of the coffee myself; it tasted like any other

Arab's coffee—a little muddy, but good.

By sunrise we were off, due south-west.

I was stiff and sore; the camel's slouching, back-wrenching walk seemed more painful than ever. How I envied the women, with rings in their noses and ears, riding in the cages on the mules. They had soft, easy straw mats to sit on. I had to perch, high up in the air, on the back of a camel that rocked all day with a deep sea-going motion.

Beside me walked the camel driver. The speed and endurance of Arabs, on foot, is amazing. They can go further in three days than an average American riding horse.

Towards noon a baby died—a two year old child that belonged to one of the Persian women. They dug a shallow hole in the sand and buried it there. I wondered why they ever brought it along. Older persons who die on these marches are carried on, if possible, to Kerbela.

At the wells, where we camped, one of the muleteers was stung by a scorpion. His leg swelled badly, and he limped. Among Arabs, the women are doctors, and one of the women with the caravan sought to treat the man who had been stung. He was superstitious, however, and said the women would bewitch him. She made a stew out of a small white hawk killed in the trees about the wells—boiled it whole, feathers and all—and the man reluctantly ate some. Pills or tabloids the desert folks sneer at—they say any medicine to have merit should come in bulk.

Some desert folks say when a man dies of thirst, his soul goes forth in the form of a green owl, which flies around in the air a thousand years, screaming for water.

Towards night we came upon the ruins of some old canals—remnants of the great irrigation system which once flourished here and made Mesopotamia the greatest grain producing country of the then known world. Two hours later we camped again, near a group of wells of fairly good water. Desert folks are suspicious of well water in which they find no insect life—they fear enemies may have poisoned the water. The day's march had been long, and there was little singing. The pilgrims slept early.

The Holy City at Last.

A Mohammedan who has been to Mecca or Kerbela is called a "Haji," and is allowed to paint his beard a grey red. One such was in our band and he came early to call me. They were all very serious, and seemed anxious to start. At dawn I found myself back on the hurricane deck of my rolling camel, riding with the pilgrims. He of the red beard rode beside me.

"Why do you, a Nazarena, go to the Holy City?" he asked.

"To behold and admire," I answered with due gravity.

He was appeased. He did not know that I wanted to see all those flowing whiskers painted red; to seek "antiques" among the pilgrims; to barter for a choice rug; to get a photo of his sacred mosque, and inspect the burying ground of all those imported ancestors. Twenty dollars is paid as a fee for interring an ancestor in a certain choice spot. It is said that when the interested relatives have returned to their homes, the venerated ancestor is thrown out and the coveted spot resold to the next pious pilgrim.

We were now well into the heart of ancient Babylonia.

The desert was more and more marked by the lines of what were once great canals. Camel thorn appeared in greater quantities. This is a hard, prickly shrub, good food for camels and also used as fuel by the Bedouins.

Once, passing through a low, flat on which the camel thorn grew thickly, we started three desert gazelles. These graceful creatures, with long, straight horns, were off like the wind. Salmon's Martini cracked once, twice, three times, but the gazelle kept on their way. The Persians chaffed my guide, and pointed out their own superior method of catching the gazelle. They use a falcon. First they train the falcon, by using a sheep to whose head a piece of raw meat has been tied. The falcon, blindfolded and without food for two days, is taken onto the field and placed on the sheep's head and allowed to have a bite of the raw meat; then he is carried away a few yards, and allowed to fly back for another bite. This is kept up till the falcon is taught to fly a hundred yards or more, and light on the sheep. Then the bird is ready for the real chase, after gazelle. It is taken out by the hunter, who carries it, blindfolded, riding on his wrist. When a gazelle is started the bird's eyes are uncovered and it is released. Its keen eyes immediately discern the fleeing gazelle, and off goes the falcon like an arrow. Lightly on the gazelle's head, where it holds on with its sharp talons, the wretched antelope is thoroughly demoralized by the unusual event, and the flapping of the hawk's wings about its eyes, and falls a ready victim to the hunter's lance.

Towards noon the Persians became very silent.

The Holy City was not far away. Even the women spoke in subdued voices, and left off abusing the camel drivers.

Suddenly, like a crashing college

yell, the whole caravan broke into their chant, keeping step with it as they marched. And there, before us, lifting itself from under the horizon in that strange refractory way peculiar in the heated desert air, we saw the Holy City, its golden domes burning in the quivering light.

Nearer we came, and more and more saw that we were indeed approaching a great gathering place of men. In an hour we were fairly among the horde—thousands on thousands of pilgrims, camped in their brown desert tents about the walls of Kerbela.

We sought a clear space and camped—lost among them. As night advanced the din became unpeppable. Trumpets blared, the beating of countless tom-toms rattled through the camp, and shapely Arab women glided through the twists and poses of that much abused dance which only true daughters of the Orient ever master. Here and there they danced about the fires, bare-foot and brown of skin. Up through the hazy smoke floated the wierd notes of the Bedouin flutes.

In the background stood the tall, crab-like camels, chewing, chewing, chewing, what? I don't know. Further still behind them towered the domed mosques of the Holy City, which I shall explore tomorrow.

Above burned the same arc-lamp stars that guided the wise men of the east on their walk to Palestine, centuries ago.

And I sat at my tent flap and looked out at an Arab woman dancing.

What wouldn't Gertrude Hoffman, Allen or Tanguay give, I thought, to learn a step like that.

TROUBLE REPORTED ON RESERVATION

Prospectors Warned Off While Trying to Locate Mineral Ground.

Washington, March 7.—Unofficial reports here indicate trouble on the Spokane Indian reservation over prospectors being warned off. Apparently they have sought to locate mineral there, relying on the approaching opening of the reservation.

The date for opening, together with the date for opening the Coeur d'Alene and the Flathead reservations, today was set over from April to May 2. In the meantime the Indian agent is in control with full authority to keep off prospectors.

Delay in classification and appraisal of the lands caused the postponement of the opening. These are the reservations for which the drawings were conducted last autumn.

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