



The Project Gutenberg eBook, A Dweller in Mesopotamia, by Donald Maxwell

This eBook is for the use of anyone anywhere at no cost and with almost no restrictions whatsoever. You may copy it, give it away or re-use it under the terms of the Project Gutenberg License included with this eBook or online at www.gutenberg.org

Title: A Dweller in Mesopotamia

Being the Adventures of an Official Artist in the Garden of Eden

Author: Donald Maxwell

Release Date: March 20, 2006 [eBook #18031]

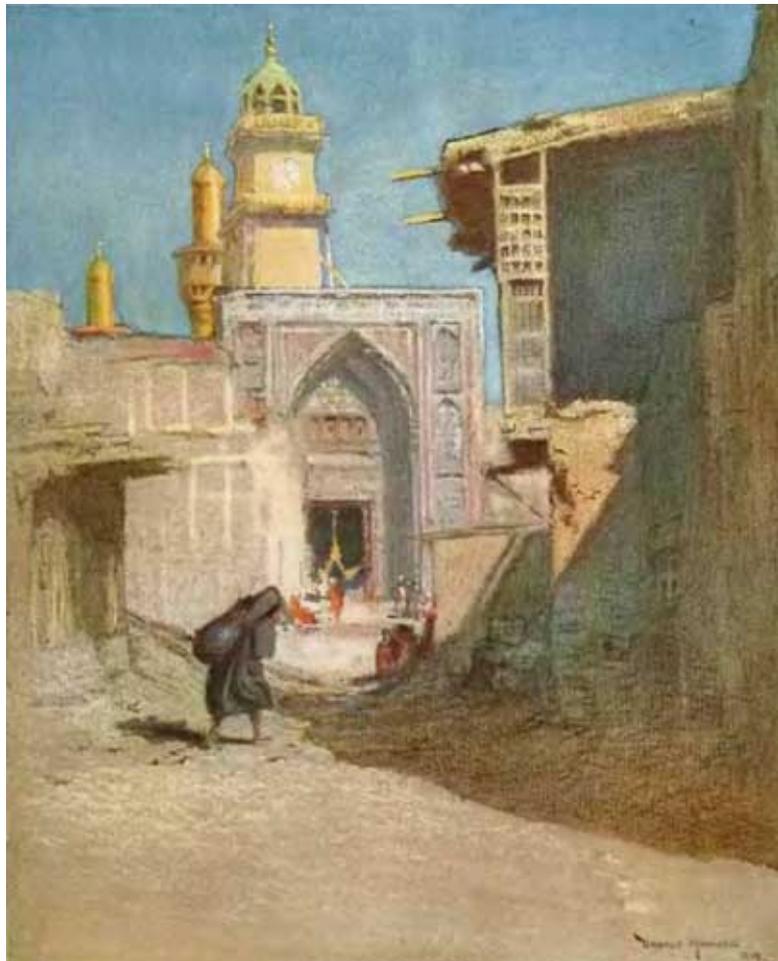
Language: English

Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1

START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK A DWELLER IN MESOPOTAMIA

**E-text prepared by Marilynnda Fraser-Cunliffe, Janet Blenkinsip,
and the Project Gutenberg Online Distributed Proofreaders Europe
(<http://dp.rastko.net/>)
from page images and digital files generously made available by
the University of Georgia Libraries
(<http://fax.libs.uga.edu/>)**

Note: Images of the original pages are available through the University of Georgia Libraries. See <http://fax.libs.uga.edu/DS49x2xM465D/>



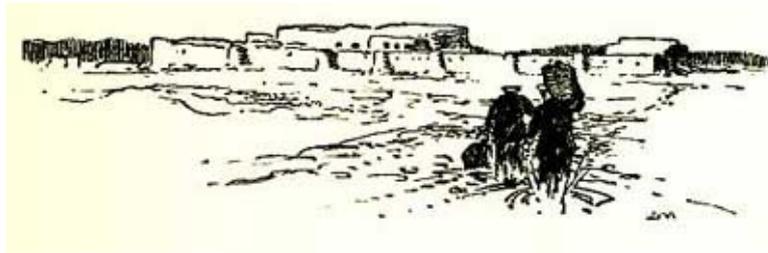
THE GOLDEN TOWERS OF KHADAMAIN

A DWELLER IN MESOPOTAMIA

BEING THE ADVENTURES OF AN OFFICIAL ARTIST IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN

BY DONALD MAXWELL

WITH SKETCHES IN COLOUR, MONOCHROME, AND LINE



LONDON: JOHN LANE, THE BODLEY HEAD, VIGO STREET
NEW YORK: JOHN LANE COMPANY MCMXXI

WILLIAM CLOWES AND SONS, LIMITED, LONDON AND BECCLES,
ENGLAND.

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

THE LAST CRUSADE

**ADVENTURES WITH A
SKETCH BOOK**

**WITH BIBLE AND BRUSH
IN PALESTINE**

[In preparation]

THE BODLEY HEAD

PREFACE

Few adventurous incidents in our lives seem romantic at the time of their happening, and few places we visit are invested with that glamour that haunt them in recollection or anticipation. I remember comparing the colour scheme of a barge in Baghdad with that of one in Rochester. It was a comparison most unfavourable to

Baghdad—a thing the colour of ashes with a thing of red and green and gold. Yet now that I am back in Rochester, the romance lingers around memories of dusty mahailas. It is easy to forget discomfort and insects and feel a certain glamour coming back to things which, at the time, represented the commonplaces of life. There certainly *is* a glamour about Mesopotamia. It is not so much the glamour of the present as of the past.

To have travelled in the land where Sennacherib held sway, to have walked upon the Sacred Way in Babylon, to have stood in the great banquet hall of Belshazzar's palace when the twilight is raising ghosts and when little imagination would be required to see the fingers of a man's hand come forth and write upon the plaster of the wall, to wander in the moonlight into narrow streets in Old Baghdad, with its recollections of the Arabian Nights: these things are to make enduring pictures in the Palace of Memory, that ideal collection where only the good ones are hung and all are on the line.

Although it was for the Imperial War Museum that I went to Mesopotamia, these notes are not about the War, but they are a series of impressions of Mesopotamia in general. The technical side of my work I have omitted, and any account of the campaign in this field I have left to other hands. The sketches here collected might be described as a bye-product of my mission in Mesopotamia; but most of them are the property of the Imperial War Museum, and it is by the courtesy of the Art Committee of that body that I have now been able to reproduce them.

The Beacon,
Borstal,
Rochester.

June 12, 1920.

CONTENTS

I. The Fiery Furnace	<u>1</u>
II. The Venice of the East	<u>15</u>
III. Sinbad the Soldier	<u>27</u>
IV. The Wise Men from the West	<u>37</u>
V. By the Waters of Babylon	<u>49</u>
VI. Arabian Nights in 1919	<u>67</u>
VII. In Old Baghdad	<u>89</u>
VIII. Paradise Lost	<u>97</u>
IX. The Desert of the Flaming Sword	<u>109</u>
X. The Kings of the East	<u>119</u>

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATES IN COLOUR AND MONOCHROME

The Golden Towers of Khadamain	<u>Frontispiece</u>
Abadan, Persia, the Oil Quays	<u>4</u>
H.M.S. <i>MANTIS</i> , one of the Monitors on the Tigris	<u>12</u>
Hospital Hulks at Basra	<u>18</u>
"The Solemn Palms were ranged above, unwoo'd of summer wind"	<u>22</u>
The House of Sinbad the Sailor, Basra	<u>24</u>
A Bend in "the Narrows" of the Tigris	<u>30</u>
A Marsh Arabs' Reed Village	<u>34</u>
Mud Houses on the Tigris	<u>40</u>
A Mahaila of the Inland Water Transport	<u>42</u>
Ezra's Tomb	<u>44</u>
On the Euphrates, Early Morning	<u>52</u>
Babylon, the Excavations at El-Kasr	<u>56</u>
An Old World Craft: a type of boat unchanged since the days of Sinbad	<u>60</u>
Bellams under Sail	<u>62</u>
Babylon the Great is Fallen, is Fallen	<u>64</u>
A Street in Khadamain	<u>70</u>
Moonlight, Baghdad	<u>72</u>
A Nocturne of Baghdad	<u>74</u>
Mahaila and Marsh Arab's Bellam	<u>80</u>
A Moonlight Fantasy: Kut, from the ruins of the Licquorice Factory	<u>94</u>
Dawn at Amara	<u>100</u>
A Backwater in Eden	<u>102</u>
Puffing Billy on the Tigris	<u>106</u>
Sunset on the Tigris	<u>112</u>
Sheik Saad and the Persian Mountains	<u>114</u>
Hit, known to the Arabs as the Mouth of Hell	<u>116</u>
A British Cruiser in the Persian Gulf	<u>122</u>

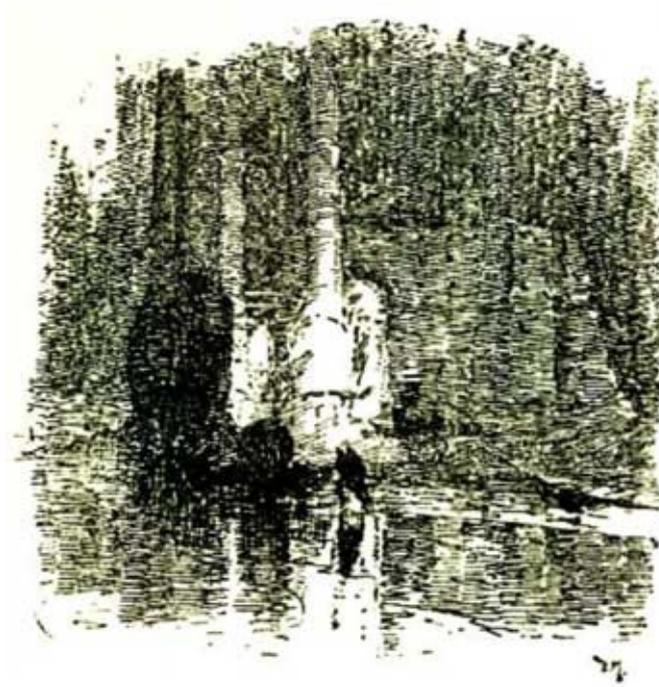
LIST OF LINE SKETCHES

Abadan	2
"Serried ranks of tall iron funnels"	6
Ship loading with Oil	7
"A Mysterious-looking furnace tower"	9
"Crude steam engines evolved by Titans when the world was young"	11
In Ashar Creek	16
Sunset, Old Basra	21
Dhows, Basra	26
Monitor "Moth" at Basra	28
The Sirens of the Narrows	33
Noah's Ark, 1919	36
Upward Bound on the Tigris	38
Hillah	47
Ctesiphon	50
Ancient Irrigation Channel near Hillah	55
Tower of Babel. Fig. 1	57
The Tower of Babel	59
Tower of Babel. Fig. 2	60
Tower of Babel. Fig. 3	61
Goufas on the Tigris	68
"A magic vignette of palms, Eastern buildings, and a large South-Western Railway engine"	77
"Suddenly we came upon a scene of strange beauty and dramatic effect"	79
"By garden porches on the brim, The costly doors flung open wide"	82
"All round the fragrant marge, From fluted vase and brazen urn, In order, Eastern flowers large."	83
"By Baghdad's shrines of fretted gold, High-walled gardens, green and old."	85
Showing the Simplicity of Mesopotamian Domestic Architecture. Tigris	88
Baghdad	90
"Puffing Billy" in Baghdad	91
A Bit of Old Baghdad	93
"Blossoms and fruit at once of golden hue Appeared, with gay	

enamelled colours mixed."	<u>98</u>
"High, eminent, blooming ambrosial fruit Of vegetable gold."	<u>105</u>
The Walls of Hit	<u>110</u>
Hit	<u>120</u>
Samara	<u>121</u>

I

THE FIERY FURNACE



Abadan.



There is an unenviable competition between places situated in the region of Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf as to which can be the hottest. Abadan, the ever-growing oil port, which is in Persia and on the starboard hand as you go up the Shatt-el-Arab, if not actually the winner according to statistics, comes out top in popular estimation. Its proximity to the scorching desert, its choking dustiness and its depressing isolation, are characteristics which it shares with countless other places

among these mud plains. But it can outdo them all with its bleached and slime-stained ground in which nothing can grow, its roaring furnaces and its all-pervading smell of hot oil.

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

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

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



ABADAN, PERSIA, THE OIL QUAYS.

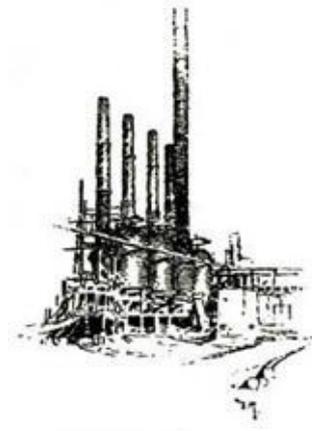
Well, to begin my story.

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

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

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

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



"Serried ranks of tall iron funnels."

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

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

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



Ship loading with oil.

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

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

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

The novice who roams about this place in the dark spends a lot of time falling over pipes. They are stretching all over the place without any method that is apparent. The Chief showed up most of them with his torch, and so I fell about only just enough to get used to the feel of the ground as a preliminary to what was coming later. It had rained heavily two or three days before, consequently there were lake districts, slimy reaches of mixed oil and mud and dried, hard-looking islands that were in reality traps

to the unwary. The top only was firm, and it had the playful property of sliding rapidly on the greasy substratum and thus sitting you down without warning when you thought you had reached dry land.

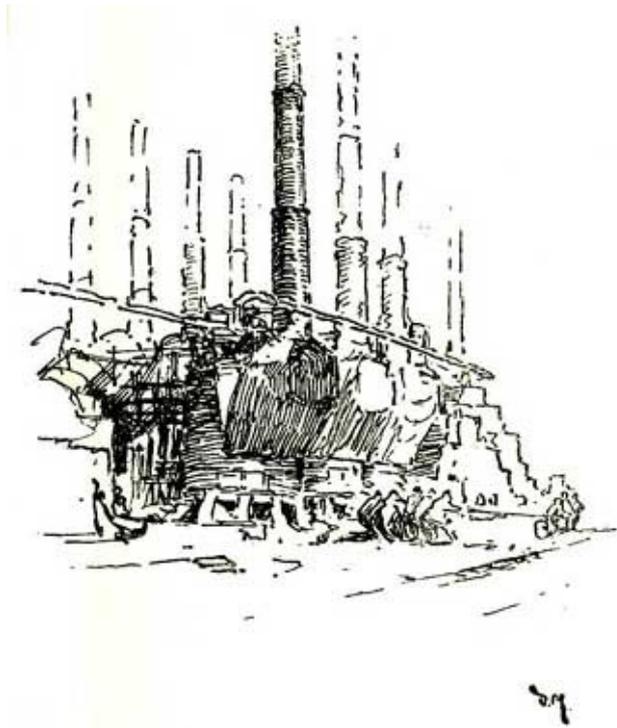


"A mysterious-looking furnace tower."

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

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

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



"Crude steam engines evolved by Titans when the world was young."

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

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

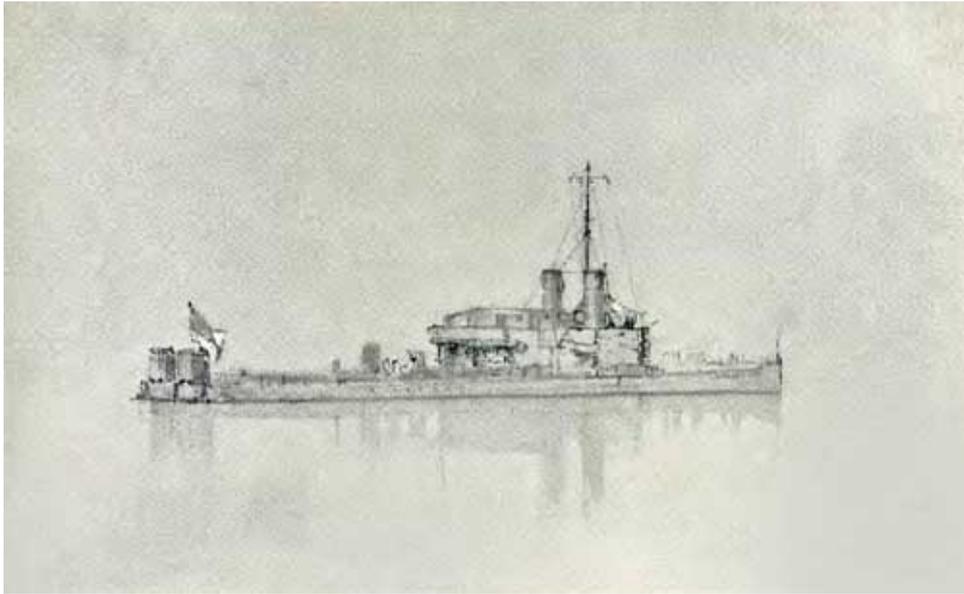
"What race are these men?" I asked the Chief.

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

"And what is that tower?"

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

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



H.M.S. MANTIS, ONE OF THE MONITORS ON THE TIGRIS.

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

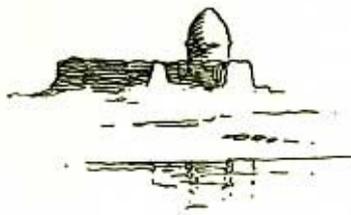
I came again in the morning to look at the works. They did not appear half so mysterious as when seen in the dark. The Tower of London had shrunk into quite a small buttressed building of brick and Nebuchadnezzar's Fiery Furnace dwindled considerably in size. The Medes and Persians, on the other hand, looked wilder and more "operatic" than at night. I think as a matter of fact they were Kurds.

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

Take a very tattered, colourless, and ill-fitting dressing gown, without a girdle and

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

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

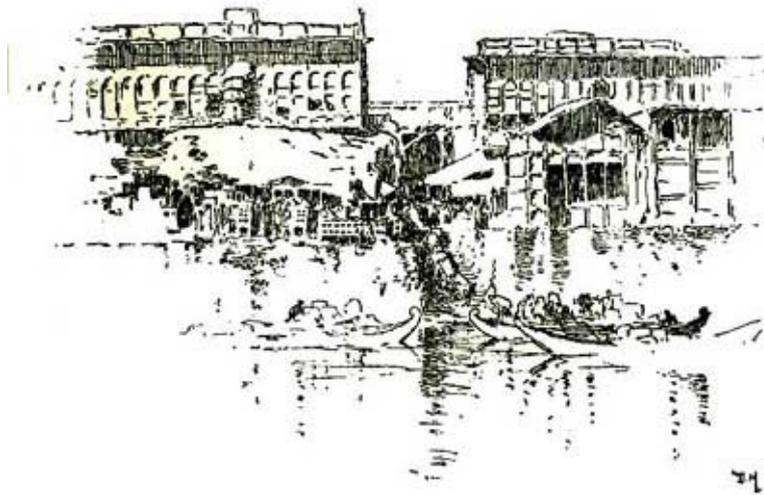


II

THE VENICE OF THE EAST.



In Ashar creek.



THE VENICE OF THE EAST

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