

Brereton Frederick Sadleir

**On the Road to Bagdad:
A Story of Townshend's Gallant
Advance on the Tigris**



Frederick Brereton

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On the Road to Bagdad: A Story of Townshend's Gallant Advance on the Tigris

CHAPTER I A Frontier Station

A gun, a small brass piece, an interesting relic of other days, boomed forth the hour of noon from the lowest embrasure of a hill fort overlooking the cantonment of the – Sikhs, and warned all and sundry that it was time for tiffin. The cloud of grey smoke which blew upward from the muzzle, and which was wafted ever so gently by the breeze floating toward the hill-top from the depths of the giant valley below, spread out into a thin white sheet, and, ascending slowly, first wrapped the time-scarred walls of the old fort in its embrace, and then, getting whiter as it ascended, reached the battlements above, and, percolating through the many gun embrasures, floated over the roof of the fortress, till the misty haze hung about the portals of the veranda of the Officers' Mess bungalow.

There were a dozen or more figures, dressed in khaki or in pure white, and stretched in every sort of attitude, and in every variety of chair, beneath that veranda. There were young subalterns, joined but a month or two since, and other subalterns whose hair at the temples was already showing some suspicion of grey while still they failed to get promotion. There was a rather stout old field officer who had seen more years of service in India than many of the subalterns could boast of in their lives. A rubicund, jolly officer he was, upon whom the detestable climate of the many stations in which he had been forced to serve had made not the slightest effect whatever. There was another officer, too, short, slim, and active as a cat, whose hair and moustache were as white as the snows capping the distant mountains. A glance told one intuitively that here, too, was an old soldier, an old Indian soldier, that is, who had spent the better part of a long life out in the "shiny".

"Hallo! What's the time? Anywhere near time for tiffin?" asked one of the "subs", whose cap had fallen over his face, and who now awakened from the reverie into which he had fallen, and suddenly started upward.

"What! So fast asleep that you didn't hear the gun?" cried a brother officer, smacking him heartily on the back. "Man alive! The fort's still shaking."

"And yet," smiled the rubicund Major who had seen so many years' service in India, "and yet, my boys, I'll vouch for the fact that I've slept the hot hours of the morning away on the roof of this fortress a hundred times and more and failed to be awakened by the gun. What is more, that report at twelve o'clock has become a sort of habit with me, so that I've lain here smoking and perspiring in the heat, and though the gun's gone off as usual, and, indeed, as it's never failed to do this last twenty years or more, I've been startled when the mess waiter has come out to announce tiffin. Ha! Listen! That should be proof enough that the gun has gone; the burra Mem-sahib's butler is ringing for the Colonel. Between you and me, my boys, the Colonel isn't half as punctual a man in his own house as he is in the orderly-room, and, what's more, he expects a great deal more of that commodity from us poor fellows than he exhibits himself. But, tut-tut! That's heresy. That's preaching revolution. Don't any of you fellows mention it."

He stretched his arms, and waddled, rather than strode, from the veranda, across the roof of the fortress, and through those wisps of smoke which still curled upward, till he was leaning upon the low wall which protected the edge of the fortress; and there for a while he stood, looking out upon a scene which enchanted him more on every occasion when he went to view it. It was habit, indeed,

with the old Major to take stock of that view every day before tiffin, just as a *bon viveur* takes his *apéritif* before luncheon.

"Braces a fellow up, don't you know," the jovial Major was wont to tell his brother officers. "It's glorious; it's elevating; it's positively exhilarating; and gives a fellow a right down sharp hunger! That's what you boys want to cultivate out in this country. Look at me! Never sick or sorry, and have always taken my meals like a good 'un. That's because I've a cheerful heart, a sound digestion and constitution, and take a delight in my surroundings and in all that's doing. No grouching for me, my boys. Take everything as it comes and don't bother."

Everyone knew the Major, and not one of the Subs but listened to what he said with respect and amusement.

"Decent old fellow," he was always voted.

"And teaches a fine lesson, too," the Colonel had told his officers on more than one occasion. "Grouching's the curse of the British army in some stations. I don't say that British officers are in the habit of grumbling always; far from it. But when there's nothing doing, and a fellow is tied by the leg in some frontier station, and must stay there and groan under a roasting sun, why! if he doesn't keep himself fit and in first-class condition he gets out of sorts, and then there's grumbling."

Let us look over the wall of the fortress, where a number of officers had by now joined the stout Major, and take stock of that view which he had proclaimed to be "exhilarating". True enough, it was one of those marvellous views only to be obtained on the frontier of India. The fort stood perched on a projecting eminence, around which nature, guided by the active hands of many a succeeding garrison of soldiers, had grafted a most enchanting garden. A stream trickled from above and behind the fort, and descending the gentle slopes of the mountain, and broadening as it came, splashed through the very heart of the cantonment gardens, and sent off a broad canal of shimmering water down beside the main street. From that point it splashed over the edge of the precipice just beneath the fortress, and, tinkling musically as it went, splashed its way to the bottom. You could hear it from the roof of the fort. Often enough the sun's rays, glancing through the mists and spray thrown up by the fall, formed a most gorgeous rainbow; while in the height of summer, when the sun, then almost overhead, poured down such furious heat that the roof of the fortress glowed and almost simmered, then that same misty spray would be wafted up by a cooling draught from the valley below, and would fall upon the blistering skins of the officers who gasped beneath the veranda.

Yes, even in those hill forts it can be hot enough, and where the – Sikhs were quartered there were seasons when, not long after the sun had risen, no sane white man dared to venture abroad.

And what a valley it was below! Rugged and winding, narrowing here and there, till from the height above it looked as though a wagon could not be driven along it, and then widening most unexpectedly and suddenly till there came a huge saucer, as it were, in which a whole city could have been safely deposited. Trees clad the side of the mountain as it descended into the valley, trees which, scattered at first, grew later in thick clumps till they became almost a forest, and which, severed by the river which wound its way through the valley, had taken root again on its farther bank, and went straggling up the opposite heights till almost the snow-line was reached. Those heights perhaps provided the summit of grandeur to this magnificent scene. Wooded below, as we have seen, they became rugged and broken and rocky as they ascended, till there was presented a row of broken irregular pinnacles, which cut along the sky-line right opposite the fortress, and which presented day in and day out, even on those days when the sun's rays bore down so relentlessly upon the roof of the fortress, a continuous line of snow, hollowed here and there into deep crevasses and gullies, presenting most gorgeous blue shades in the depths of a hundred dimples, and showing elsewhere a smooth, unbroken surface of light, which altered only when north-eastern gales were blowing.

"A sight for the gods! yes," the jovial Major told his comrades, snuffing at the breeze as if he were a dog, "and who could be down-hearted, or dull, or miserable, or even discontented, with such a view to look upon?"

"More particularly when one knows so well that tiffin's ready, and that the words of wisdom of our dear old friend the Major always precede the announcement of that meal."

It was the white-haired senior officer who had spoken banteringly, and who stood at that moment beside the Major, one hand affectionately on his shoulder, the other on the parapet of the fortress.

"There, Charlie! Didn't I say so! Listen! There's the gong going."

The silvery notes of a gong reached their ears at that very moment, and, turning, all saw a most magnificent personage – to wit, the mess butler – standing at the door of the mess bungalow, sounding the call for luncheon. Then all turned and trooped across the roof of the fortress, across the veranda, and disappeared within the door of the bungalow.

It was perhaps three minutes later when a tall and immaculately dressed officer sauntered on to the roof of the fortress, and having taken stock of the view – as if he too must needs partake of some fillip before venturing upon luncheon – then strode off into the mess bungalow. There he found his brother officers already seated, and, striding down behind them, sat himself down at his accustomed place.

"Hallo! Back again, Joe?" ventured the jovial Major, who occupied the neighbouring chair. "Hardly expected you."

Major Joe Douglas dropped his eyeglass as he helped himself to curry, and turned smilingly upon his brother officer.

"Oh! Really!" he said, in those very quiet tones for which he was noted.

"Never saw such a chap," laughed the jovial Major, as he attacked the food which lay before him. "You come and go like a wizard. In fact, you're here one day, and gone to-morrow, and goodness only knows where you spirit yourself to. My dear old boy, you can't deny the accusation. Mind you, I'm not trying to be inquisitive, very far from it, for I know that inquisitiveness in the case of 'politicals', such as you are, is a deadly sin; but let's call it simple curiosity, harmless curiosity – the curiosity one's allowed to display with regard to one's brother officers. You see, you come and go."

"Yes. Quite so," smiled Major Douglas.

"And sometimes you're here, kicking your heels about, and dawdling for a month and more at a time. Then you disappear, where to, goodness alone knows. If you were going on leave to England the whole station would be aware of it. But you don't. You haven't been home for ten years at least. Then where do you get to?"

Till that moment a babel of sounds had been proceeding from the members of the mess, for a dozen subalterns can create quite a considerable amount of noise between them. Yet, as they ate their meal and bantered with one another, not one had failed to notice the arrival of Major Joseph Douglas. They liked the man. Not that they saw very much of him, nor could he be accused of ever being garrulous. He was just a smart, tall, immaculately dressed officer, who had a great reputation for smartness and soldierly qualities. At first sight his eyeglass rather awed young subalterns, till they grew to know that the Major was like Charlie, his fat brother officer, a most excellent and unaffected fellow. Beyond their liking for him there was, however, a depth of curiosity to which their senior officer had only just given expression. Such a cross-questioning of Major Douglas not one of the subalterns would ever have ventured upon. For somehow it had come to be generally known in the mess that the Major's movements were essentially secret. He was a political officer, they all knew, though what "political" meant in his case few of them had but the faintest idea. Yet one and all were very naturally consumed with a desire to know something of this quiet, reserved, yet exceedingly pleasant brother officer. Thus it happened that even in the midst of their banter they heard the old field officer cross-examine the Major, and promptly became silent.

"Well, now," they heard him say, "I've cornered you, Joe; you're here, next door to me, and can't get away; and remember it's just friendly curiosity. Do, for goodness' sake, tell us something about yourself: where you've been of late, what you've done, and what's the meaning of it."

All eyes were turned promptly upon Major Joseph Douglas. He groped for his fallen eyeglass, and fixed it very deliberately in his eye, then he signalled to one of the mess waiters and just as deliberately helped himself to another share of curried chicken.

"I – Oh – Why, Charlie!" he began. "Have you – er – that is, did you try this curried chicken? I declare it to be the best that I've tasted for a year or so. What's happened? Have you fellows been indulging in a new cook since I last went away, or – Do try some, Charlie, there's a good fellow."

Those who did not know the officers of the – Sikhs, and didn't know either Major Charles Evans or Major Joseph Douglas, might have expected at this moment quite an explosion on the part of Major Evans. The jovial fellow had had the audacity to show curiosity. Taking advantage of his age and of his seniority, he had ventured at the mess table to cross-examine a "political", and now, just as he was listening with bated breath for the answer, he received – merely a "put-off", and heard his brother officer asking him, in that suave, quiet voice he knew so well, whether he would not indulge in a helping of curried chicken. Yet those unacquainted with the officers of the – Sikhs would have found themselves signally in error when expecting an explosion. Those two bright eyes, of which Major Evans boasted, twinkled as he listened to his brother officer. Then the corners of his mouth dimpled, and a moment later he was roaring with laughter.

"Beaten, hopelessly beaten!" he cried jovially; "and I might have expected it. For an oyster, my dear boy, you really are exceptional. Now any other fellow, any other "political", that is to say, would have indulged in some sort of hint to relieve our curiosity, would have pitched some sort of yarn, even though it were not an exactly true one. But you – well, you're hopeless, incorrigible, and most utterly disappointing. Boy! Bring me some iced water, I must cool myself down after such a rebuff, and I'll – Hallo! Hallo! Here's a message."

A native soldier stood saluting at the door of the ante-room, and presented an official envelope to the mess butler.

"The Major Sahib," he said.

"The Major Douglas Sahib," the mess butler corrected him severely. "The Major Douglas Sahib. Quick! Important!"

He placed the envelope on a silver salver, and, holding it there with the tip of his thumb, came swiftly and silently round to the seat occupied by that officer.

"From the Colonel, Sahib," he said as he leant over Joe Douglas's shoulder.

Very slowly and deliberately, as if unconscious of the fact that every eye in the mess was surreptitiously fixed upon him, Joe Douglas tore open the envelope and read the contents of the missive.

"Proceed at once to Bombay. There call for orders at Governor's office. Mesopotamia – urgent," he read, and those who watched him saw not so much as a flicker of an eyelash or the smallest change of expression. He folded the letter up again and very deliberately placed it back in the envelope and very leisurely deposited it in a pocket. Then he finished his curried chicken, called for a cup of coffee, and sat smoking a cigarette and chatting with his brother officers.

"Well?" asked Major Evans, as Joe Douglas rose to leave. "I'm serious, my boy, this time. Everyone knows that things are moving over in Europe and elsewhere, and everyone can guess that you are off again on some expedition. Here's good luck! If I can do anything for you in your absence don't fail to write, for you know that Charlie Evans will stand by you."

Joe Douglas nodded to the dozen subalterns seated about the table, and puffed a cloud of tobacco smoke above their heads.

"Come out for a moment, Charlie," he said. "Good-bye, you fellows, I'm just off on a little trip. Keep things going till I come back again to the mess."

He was on his feet by now, and strode clanking out on to the roof of the fortress, followed by Major Evans. Then the two men walked to the parapet of the fortress and stood side by side looking

out over that gorgeous scene, neither of them venturing to speak for a few minutes. At length Joe Douglas turned to his companion.

"Listen to this, Charlie," he said. "I'm off on something bigger than I've had to tackle before, though I'm to cover much of the ground that I'm used to. It's Mesopotamia again."

"Ah! Mesopotamia – a nasty place, up North of the Persian Gulf – heat – mosquitoes – Arabs," muttered Major Evans.

"Not to mention Turks and Germans and ruffians," said his brother officer quietly; "but I'm used to them all, Charlie, and am not thinking of myself. I'm thinking of Geoff. You know I've been his guardian ever since my old friend, his father, was lost in that Frontier expedition. He's joining the Mahrattas almost at once, and I badly wanted to keep an eye on him. You'll do that for me, eh?"

"Willingly."

"And will take charge of his father's papers?"

"Everything."

"Then good-bye."

The two men gripped hands most cordially and firmly, and then Major Joseph Douglas turned on his heel and strode from the roof of the fortress, just as quietly and unostentatiously as he had strolled into the mess bungalow. This going away at a moment's notice was nothing new to him. An hour was sufficient in which to see that his servant had packed all his belongings. Half an hour later, in fact, saw him riding down the rough track which led from the mountain, and three days later he was in Bombay itself. The journey before him was something a little out of the ordinary. There was war in the air. There was already talk of a giant European conflagration, and of an outbreak of hostilities between Germany and Austria on the one hand, and France and Russia on the other. We all know now that that war quickly drew into its toils other combatants. That Great Britain came into the struggle to uphold her honour, and with the object of retrieving the downfall of Belgium and of wrecking the power of the German Kaiser. Yet this tale has little to do with the main theatre of that gigantic conflict. It deals with a part of the world hardly known in Europe, a part consisting of wide wastes of sand and gravel, and peopled by Arab and Turk and Armenian and Jew, not to mention Persians and peoples of other Asiatic races.

What Major Joseph Douglas did not know of Mesopotamia and of the valleys of the Euphrates and of the Tigris may be said to have been hardly worth knowing. As a "political" he had made perhaps a dozen trips to this out-of-the-way part of the world, and being by nature attracted by the desert, and being vastly interested in the peoples living therein, those trips had become a source of huge enjoyment to him, so that return to his regiment in India had, after a while, become a sort of penance. His heart leapt at the thought of a further trip, yet, when he had read the papers, and when he had had an interview with the Governor at Bombay, even he – even light-hearted, cheerful, confident Joe Douglas – could not fail to see that danger, perhaps death, lay before him in those deserts. Yet he took ship for the Persian Gulf without hesitation, and, having landed at the township of Basra, disappeared entirely.

The desert had swallowed him up, and thereafter, within a short while of his coming to this outlandish post, that Armageddon, that gigantic conflict, which now tears Europe to shreds, and which has already seen so many of her people slaughtered, began along the frontiers of France and Belgium and of Russia, and, proceeding in violence as the months went by, slowly immersed the Balkans in its turmoil. Turkey, too, was dragged into its trail, so that the venturesome Joe Douglas, the "political", sent on a secret mission from India, found himself in the heart of a country in the occupation of Britain's enemies. Indeed, when this gallant officer reached the neighbourhood of historic Bagdad, those elements of the city other than Turkish were in a turmoil. Soldiers were elbowing their way through the bazaars, and the Turks alone, those people the placidity of whom nothing can destroy, seemed to be the only inhabitants of the city who had not escaped from Bedlam. It was in Bagdad, then, that Major Douglas found himself surrounded by enemies, and in danger of instant capture.

CHAPTER II

Geoffrey Keith and Another

What a thing it is to be young and enthusiastic! The very news which, cabled far and wide, set the world almost trembling; which gave information of vast armies hurriedly mobilizing and rushing to meet one another in deadly combat; and which saw families divided, husbands and fathers and brothers torn from those they cared for, found Geoffrey Keith in the very highest of spirits.

Not, let us explain, that this young man did not, and could not, realize the gravity of the position – of the terrible conflict which, at that moment, was bursting forth in Europe. He was not such a dunce that he had not learned of the might of Germany, of the military spirit which, for forty years or more, had swept from end to end of that country, and of the dark Hohenzollern cloud which had hung over the fair lands of Europe for many years past. Nor had the gossip of brother officers in clubs and in messes failed to reach his ears. He knew well enough that the outbreak of war between Germany and Austria, and France and Russia, meant terrible fighting. He knew, better still, that if Great Britain came into the struggle that fighting would become even more strenuous still; for was not that the character of all Britons – slow to take up a quarrel, patient and forbearing, they had yet proved themselves in many a tussle to be stern and stanch fighters. They had shown indeed that pluck, that grit and determination, which long years since has won for our nation a wonderful reputation. Bulldogs we are known as, and bulldogs the British were to prove themselves in the course of this tremendous upheaval.

Yet, war meant excitement! It meant active service! It meant perhaps journeying to another country; seeing strange sights and hearing unfamiliar sounds, and taking part, for all one knew, in deeds which would become historical.

"Bad luck for some people, no doubt," said Geoffrey as he sat in the corner of a railway carriage and panted, for the heat was great. "Just think of it, Philip, my boy! You and I have only recently completed a special course in England and have not yet joined our regiment, and here we are, only just arrived in India, and already under orders for active service. What will they do with us, do you think?"

His companion, a tall, slightly built young fellow of some nineteen years of age – a few months older than Geoffrey in fact – answered him with energy. To be sure, he too was lolling listlessly in the opposite corner of the carriage, and was fanning himself with *The Times* of India. It was desperately hot outside, and now that the train had come to a halt at a wayside junction, what current of air there had been passing through the compartment was stilled entirely, so that the interior was like an oven. Outside the sun poured down upon the broad platform of the junction till one's eyes ached if one looked out through the gloom of the carriage at its bright reflection; and there, crowded upon it, careless and unmindful of the sun, chattering and gesticulating and shrieking at one another as only a native mob can do, were hundreds of natives, waiting for a train to take them in the opposite direction.

"Where shall we go, eh?" answered Philip. "Where will the Mahrattas be ordered to? Well now, Geoff, that's rather a large order. To begin with, you don't suppose, do you, that every regiment – native and British – now in India will be taken out of the country?"

"Why not?" ejaculated Geoff, peering hard at him through the gloom which filled the interior of the carriage.

"Why not! Well, of course, there are reasons. For instance: supposing you were to remove every soldier in the country and leave only civilian white people behind, those agitators – those native agitators, that is – always to be found in such a huge population as we have in India, might stir up trouble, knowing that they had only the police to deal with. That's a reason, and a very good reason, for keeping troops in India; and I have got another. Great Britain has already got an Expeditionary Force fully organized and planned for fighting with our French ally. But she'll be hard put to it to get

that force fully mobilized and equipped. Not until then will our country have time to turn round in other directions. So you can take it from me, my boy, we are likely to stay in our station for some time before we get marching orders."

As a matter of fact the declaration of war between Germany and Great Britain produced a great deal more than excitement in far-off India. There was a great coming and going of trains, a great concentration of certain of the troops – both native and British – in parts of the Empire, and, when a few weeks had gone by, transports set out across the Indian Ocean carrying those two native divisions to France which were to do such signal service. And, in the interval, those troops not yet under orders were being busily prepared for fighting. Indeed, Geoff and his friend Philip had hardly reached their station – within a few miles of that so recently quitted by Major Joe Douglas – when they found themselves hard at work training.

"Of course, you young officers have only just joined us," their Colonel told them a couple of days after their arrival. "But we are fortunate in one thing, you were both of you born in India – in cantonments – and may be said to have been brought up in the Indian army. Then you have done work with the O.T.C. in England, and gone through a special course before leaving that country. But you will have to nail in at your work as hard as possible, for it is more than likely – more than likely," he repeated with emphasis, "that the Mahrattas will be wanted very soon for foreign service."

"Foreign service! Hurrah!" cried Geoff enthusiastically, when he and his chum were alone together. "That's what I've always thought and wished for. But where? France, eh?"

"Hardly likely," came the answer. "Everyone knows that the Meerut and Lahore Divisions are bound for that quarter. Isn't there any other spot where there's likely to be fighting?"

Months later, had their question been answered, it would have caused the one questioned to smile ironically. For indeed this gigantic conflict has spread across the globe, till there are few places in which fighting has not occurred; but Mesopotamia! Who would have thought that the Mahrattas were to undertake service in the neighbourhood of the Persian Gulf. Why, Philip hardly knew of the existence of such a place, though Geoff was well acquainted with the country. Let us explain the circumstances of this young fellow a little more fully before he becomes immersed in the excitement and adventures of a campaign in the valley of the Tigris.

Geoff Keith was the only son, the only child in fact, of Captain Robert Keith, once of the – Sikh Regiment, in which Major Joe Douglas was an officer. Subalterns together, they had grown up side by side, and had become inseparables. Often enough, when Joe Douglas happened to have been with his regiment – which was seldom in later years – these two had spent their leave together, and many a hunting trip had they taken together in the neighbourhood of the Himalayas. But circumstances in the end tended rather to separate these two old friends, for, as we have explained already, Joe Douglas became a "political" – a very well-thought-of and frequently employed "political", we should add – while Robert married, and therefore was seen less often in the mess of his regiment. Yet the old friendship never died away, and when Robert, who in the meanwhile had had the misfortune to lose his wife, went on an expedition to the frontier, and there sustained a wound from which he died, it followed as a natural course that his old friend Joe Douglas was left as guardian of the boy.

No one could say that this gallant officer had not carried out his duties with every sympathy. Indeed, Geoffrey had become like a son to the Major, and during the years that he was in India – for Geoff was sent to a school for English boys in the hills – the two saw a great deal of one another. With an eye to the future, the Major went so far as to give long and painstaking instruction to his charge; so that, when at length, at the age of sixteen only, Geoff accompanied his guardian on one of those expeditions of his into Mesopotamia, he found himself by no means a stranger.

"It will be your own fault, Geoff," said the Major, as they took a river boat up the Tigris towards Bagdad – "it will be your own fault, my lad, if you don't, one of these days, follow in my footsteps as a 'political'. I have taught you Turkish, and the Arabic the natives in and around Bagdad speak, and though I dare say at times you have found it an awful bore, yet you've stuck to your work like a

good 'un. Now you'll see the advantage of that work. You'll be able to understand what people are saying round you, and will be able to make your way amongst the Turks and amongst the Arabs with comparative ease. The few months we are here during this trip will familiarize you with the country and the people, and one of these days this trip will prove of immense advantage to you."

That sojourn in Mesopotamia had indeed been one long delight to Geoff Keith. The open-air life; their residence, often enough with some wild Arab tribe; their tent dwellings; those long rides on horseback which they took across the desert, fascinated him, so that when the time came for the Major to turn his face towards India, Geoff was by far the most disappointed of the couple. In the Persian Gulf they bade farewell to one another, Geoff trans-shipping on to a boat on its way to Suez. From there he went to England, where he spent a couple of years at one of the finest of our public schools. A short course at Aldershot followed; and then, on the eve of this tremendous conflict which had just broken out between the Kaiser and his hosts, and the free nations of Europe, and in which Great Britain had just commenced to take her part, Geoff Keith had taken ship for India once more, where a commission already awaited him in the Indian army.

To look at the young fellow you would not have imagined for a moment that he was in any particular way accomplished. Moderately tall and straight, he was as jolly as a sand-boy, and as careless as a boy of fifteen. Yet there was a deep look about the eyes which, to those who took the trouble to notice it, gave signs of something better, of serious thought in fact, of accomplishments hidden by his joyous manner. To be precise, you would not for a moment have imagined that Geoff could speak Hindustani just as well as he could speak English; that he could gabble Turkish in the markets of Bagdad with such ease and such precision that even a native would not have suspected him – that is, provided he were dressed as a subject of the Sultan. In addition, there was his knowledge of those Arabic tongues, knowledge imparted at first by his guardian, and since then improved and perfected by residence in the country.

"Great accomplishments!" you will say. And yet so easily and so gradually acquired – for youth makes light of such matters – that Geoff was not conscious of his accomplishments. He was, in fact, just the careless, happy-go-lucky fellow we have endeavoured to describe him. Not conceited in the least, but merely a very ordinary specimen of British youthful humanity.

"Mesopotamia!" he shouted, when the news of their proposed expedition reached him. "George! That's splendid!"

"Ripping!" echoed Philip, extracting a cigarette from his pocket and lighting it with a most elaborate show of unconcern, and yet with fingers which trembled as they held a lighted match to the end of it. "Ripping! How awfully lucky for the whole lot of us that you've been to that country! You have, haven't you? But – where on earth is it? I'll confess at once that geography isn't a strong subject with me, and even now I haven't done much more than conquer the bare outline of India. Of course a fellow knows that Mesopotamia is somewhere adjacent to Persia, and Persia, if I remember rightly, isn't so frightfully far away from Turkey and Afghanistan. How far'll we be away from our Russian allies there? And, I say! I suppose it'll be a 'walk-over'!"

Geoff grinned back at his companion.

"Don't you think it!" he told him, his face now serious. "The average fellow seems to have got hold of the idea that the Turk is a lazy, idle, good-for-nothing, easy-going beggar, who'll hold up his hands and go under immediately war is declared on him. Why, I was reading a paragraph in the paper last evening which told us that Turkey was committing suicide by joining forces with Germany, and that Russia and England between them would mop her up and sweep her out of Europe."

Philip looked puzzled. When he said he had no great affection for geography, and had no particularly good bump of locality, he told his chum only the bare truth. To be quite candid, and yet essentially friendly with reference to Geoff's friend, we have to say that not even Geoff could have described this young officer as brilliant. He was just a gay, light-hearted, and, when he liked, an energetic and useful officer. When he liked to apply himself to his profession, or indeed to any

other work of not too exacting a character, Philip could do as well as any other, though, to be sure, he did not shine as a rule. As a soldier, he was no better and no worse than his fellows, only his gayness of heart and his natural dash and courage might easily, under circumstances of exceptional stress, bring him to the fore and make him conspicuous. But, to speak bluntly, Philip was a bit of a dunce, and had lived his short life so far without taking extraordinary notice of his immediate surroundings, and of the world in general.

"Half a mo'!" he said, blowing a cloud of smoke in Geoff's direction. "What's that? Turkey in Europe! But Mesopotamia's Asia, isn't it? Here's a pencil, my boy, and here's a copy of to-day's 'orders'. Just you sketch out on the back of it the outline of Mesopotamia. I'm not such a fool that I can't follow a sketch when it's made for me."

A brother "sub" joined them at that moment, and as Geoff sketched diligently and drew in the outline of the Persian Gulf, of the Afghan frontier, and of Persia, another and yet another subaltern strolled up, till, quite unknown to him, a little group of officers were looking on over his shoulder. Then he suddenly became aware of their presence, and, colouring furiously, for the young fellow was essentially modest, he crumpled the paper up and threw it into a corner.

"No you don't, my boy! No you don't!" said a well-known voice from behind his shoulder. "We are all of us keen on knowing something more about the place we are bound for, and you are the only one amongst us who has ever been there. Take it as an order, Geoff. I'll guarantee that there shall be no larking, and I'm sure that every one of your brother officers wishes you to give us just a short lecture on the country called Mesopotamia."

Under the circumstances it was not to be expected that a junior officer, so junior indeed as Geoff, could refuse the request – the order if you like to call it, though it was given so pleasantly – of one of his seniors. It was the senior captain, in fact, who was leaning over his shoulder, and who patted his arm encouragingly.

"Fire ahead, Geoff," he told him. "It's not showing off! There's no swank about it! I'd like awfully to know all about this Mesopotamia. I'll admit the fact, before you young officers, that I'm just about as ignorant as I can be. Up to now I never imagined that there were any Turks to speak of in the neighbourhood of the Persian Gulf, so why on earth they should send an Expeditionary Force there from India is more than I can guess at. The Colonel says it's so that we shall protect the oil-supply which comes down from Persian territory to somewhere near the Gulf. Know it, Geoff?"

"Yes, sir! And if you really won't think it's swank – "

"Of course not. Now, here's a piece of paper, and get on with it."

To one who had visited the country, and, more than all, to one who had accompanied the studious Major Joseph Douglas, there was no difficulty in drawing a map which showed all the essential points in Mesopotamia. It was not exactly Geoff's fault that he knew a great deal about the country. Thanks to the tuition of his kindly guardian, and the long discussions which that officer had so frequently indulged in, Geoff had contrived to visit Mesopotamia and live there, not as an ordinary tourist might have done, but as an explorer. Brought into the closest contact with the Turk, the Persian, the Armenian, and the Jew, it was only natural that, with his guardian's help, he should have learnt something of the international situation as it concerned Turkey. A visit to Constantinople had shown him the more civilized side of the country, while the outbreak of the war between the Balkan Powers and Turkey, and the dissertations of Major Joe Douglas, had familiarized him more or less with the situation of Turkey in Europe.

"Of course, there is the 'pipe' line," he told his listeners, "and, going by what Major Douglas has always told me, it cannot fail to be of great importance to Britain. You see, numbers of our battleships now use oil fuel almost exclusively."

"Quite so! That's got it!" chimed in the senior officer. "You've hit the nail on the head, Geoff. Go ahead!"

"So an expedition to the head of the Persian Gulf may very well be for the sole purpose of protecting the oil-supply of the British Navy. As to why the Expedition should come from India rather than from England, I can say that anyone – any white man that is – who has been to Mesopotamia will know that it's a beast of a climate. As hot as India in the plains in the hot weather, and often enough, when the cold season comes along, bitterly cold and wet. But for the most part it is hot, and damp, and trying, so that native troops are far more suitable. There's the 'pipe' line," he told his listeners, sketching in a line from the southern border of Persia. "It strikes across the desert to the east of the River Karun, and joins up with the Shatt-el-Arab, close to a place called Mohammera. I ought to explain that the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates join up somewhere in the region of Kurnah and Basra, and then flow on, picking up the River Karun and opening into the Persian Gulf some twenty miles farther down. As to Turks, of course the bulk of them are up country, particularly in the neighbourhood of Bagdad. But there are fortified posts along both rivers and right down to the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab. At Basra there are quite a considerable number of Europeans and Indians, and they tell me that an increasing trade is done from that port. If we land somewhere about there we are sure to be opposed, and if there weren't any Turks there are any number of Arabs, some of whom, at least, are likely to be unfriendly."

"So that there'll be fighting, eh?" asked the senior officer.

"Plenty of it, I imagine," Geoff told him. "Those Arabs are wily beggars to deal with."

"And where's Bagdad?" he was asked. "And how does it lie compared with Constantinople?"

"And what about Persia, and Russia, and Turkestan, and Turkey in Europe?" demanded Philip, anxious to improve the occasion.

Thus pressed, Geoff could not do other than sketch in the various positions, showing Persia to the east, and Russia where she abutted on Turkey in Asia, along the line of the Caucasus Mountains. Then, having shaded in the Black Sea, thus showing the southern shore of Russia and the Crimea, he sketched the Sea of Marmora and the Narrows, where, at the Dardanelles, the British fleet was so soon to be hammering.

A glance at the map will show better than any description the chief features of the situation, and only a few words are needed to explain the intrusion of Turkey into the gigantic war which had so recently arisen. If one looks for the cause of Turkey's joining with Germany and Austria against the Powers of the Entente, one is bound to confess that no adequate reason can be discovered. Turkey had nothing to fear from Great Britain or from her allies; yet, for years Germany had been secretly scheming to expand her sway over Turkey. It may be conceded that, whereas, exclusive of Russia, the whole of Europe was highly industrialized, and the greater part of the "middle East" that was easy to come at was already being busily developed by France or Great Britain, or others of the European nations, there yet remained the whole of Turkey in Asia and of Persia – a gigantic sweep of country – the natural riches of which were, still, not even tapped, and which, thanks to the listless idleness of the Turk, were likely to remain untapped until some European Power, with need for extending her commerce, swept upon the scene and took advantage of such golden opportunities.

Already Russia had brought a portion of Persia under her sway, while Great Britain had secured the other portion. No doubt, too, Russia had her eyes on the northern portion of Turkey in Asia, while Britain was not entirely ignorant of the riches lying undeveloped in Mesopotamia. What had once been, according to legend, the Garden of Eden, and, since the Turk had come upon the scene, had been utterly neglected, and had woefully depreciated till it had become hardly better than a barren desert, was capable of being coaxed back into its old condition. Riches, now hidden, might be won from the country by Western energy and resource, while the country, once firmly occupied by Germany or by any other nation, would open a way to the subjection of Persia and to an approach upon India by way of Afghanistan.

Let us say at once that Turkey had no adequate reason for joining in this vast struggle against Great Britain and her allies; but she was cajoled into that action. Perhaps her leaders were heavily

bribed by the Germans, who themselves had reason enough in all conscience. The coming of Turkey into the conflict would of itself detain large forces both of Russia and of Great Britain; and then again, supposing France and Britain and Russia to have been defeated in Europe, Germany would have a clear field in the "middle East", with a prospect one day of even approaching India, and so of coming nearer to the consummation of that vastly ambitious scheme the Kaiser had set before him, of becoming the Ruler of the World.

But Geoff and his brother officers cared not a rap for such thoughts. That little lesson in geography proved of vast assistance to them all, and the thought of fighting in the near future, of Turks and of Arabs, roused their excitement to the highest. A couple of weeks later they took train down-country, where the bustle about the port, the presence of other troops who were to take part in the expedition, and the sight of the transports they were to board brought their spirits to fever pitch. Two days later they set sail, and within a very short period found themselves steaming to the head of the Persian Gulf. Before the dusk fell that evening they were within sight of land, and had the huge felicity of seeing the gunboat which escorted them exchange shots with the Turkish forts at the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab. It was the opening of their campaign. It was the first shot that many of them had heard discharged in actual warfare.

"Hurrah!" shouted Philip as he watched a shell bursting in the distance. "To-morrow, my boy, we'll be in the thick of it."

CHAPTER III

The Persian Gulf

What a scene of movement it was as the transport bearing the Expeditionary Force from India, destined to operate in Mesopotamia, steamed slowly up the Shatt-el-Arab, its naval escort proceeding ahead and gingerly feeling its way forward. Now and again excited Arabs were to be seen near the bank of the river, some of whom brandished their rifles, and then, as if fearing retaliation, disappeared amongst the palms. Women and children gazed in amazement at the armada which had come so unexpectedly to visit them, while the few Turks present looked on placidly – for your Turk is the most placid of all individuals.

It was some way up the river that a site had been chosen for disembarkation, and, almost before Geoff and his chum Philip could have thought it possible, the troops were disembarking.

"Of course they'll get off some of the cavalry at once," said Geoff, as he watched the horses being slung over the side. "They'll go off on a reconnaissance, and we ought soon to hear whether the enemy are in the neighbourhood."

"That's just what beats me," Philip rejoined, as he sucked at the inevitable cigarette. "Now you'd have thought that a chap like you would be sent with them, Geoff; for what do the officers with our Indian cavalry know of Mesopotamia, of the Turks, of the Arabs, and of all the different sorts of people you've told me of? They ought to be able to speak the native lingo, so as to cross-examine people. No one doubts that they are splendid horse-soldiers, but then, don't you know, there's a limit to a fellow's usefulness. 'Pon my word," he went on, getting quite indignant, "I really can't imagine what the G.O.C. can be doing! I've a jolly good mind to somehow drop him a hint that there's a chap called Geoff Keith along with the expedition. Eh! Oh!"

He gave a start as he turned round, for there was a movement on the deck immediately behind him. Geoff, too, who had been lounging on the rail of the ship, swung his form round to see what was happening. There was a dusky soldier behind them – one of their own Mahrattas – standing, tall and thin and erect and motionless, as is the case with native soldiers.

"The Officer Sahib," he said, as he held out a tiny "chit" (note). "From the Colonel Sahib."

It was perhaps characteristic of Philip that he seized the missive and glanced at the name written upon it.

"What! Not me! It's you, Geoff!" he exclaimed almost indignantly, and certainly with disappointment. "My word! Wonder what it's about. Supposing the Colonel has done just as I suggested a moment ago, and has dropped a hint to the G.O.C. Open it, there's a good fellow, for I'm full of curiosity."

Geoff obliged his friend in such leisurely style that Philip was almost stamping with impatience before the missive was opened, and then stretched out his long neck so as to be able to read the contents of the letter.

"You will please report at my orderly room at once," was written in pencil, while below there was his Commanding Officer's signature.

Philip whistled.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, and then looked sideways somewhat quizzically at his friend. "Ructions, eh? Adjutant reported badly on you! Something wrong with your parade this morning, I shouldn't wonder. Anyway, 'bang goes' all hope of your getting special employment."

To speak the truth, a feeling of dismay oppressed our hero as he glanced at those few words, while his brain got busily to work to discover the reason for the message. So far as he was aware, there had been no dereliction of duty for which he could be reprimanded. Indeed, Geoff's keenness was well known to the Adjutant and to his Commanding Officer. That the special knowledge he had

of Mesopotamia should have anything to do with this sudden and unexpected summons never crossed his mind for a moment, in spite of Philip; for, after all, as we have said, Geoff was an extremely modest fellow, and made light of those unusual attainments which he had developed by a visit to this ancient Garden of Eden. Colouring to the roots of his hair, he coughed loudly to clear his voice, and, pulling down his khaki twill jumper, set off for the orderly room at once. A knock on the open door was followed by a peremptory command to enter, when he found himself face to face with his Commanding Officer.

"Ha! That you, young Keith? Sit down. Now look at that; it's a message from the Head-quarters of this expedition."

Geoff took the paper with fingers which almost trembled, for surely, surely a message from the Commander-in-Chief concerning himself must have reference to something far transcending in importance the question of a trifling dereliction of duty on his part.

"My dear – ," he read, "I am told by one of my Staff Officers that Douglas's young ward is with the force, and that the young officer knows Mesopotamia and the native tongues. Please send him along to me at once."

"At once, you see," said the Colonel, smiling kindly at our hero; "that means a feather in your cap, my lad. But perhaps you'd rather stay with the Mahrattas, eh?" he asked quizzically, now laughing loudly as he saw the puzzled expression which spread across Geoff's features. "There! There! Don't try to be polite," he told him. "I know exactly what you want to say; you're keen on your own regiment, and you'd like to work alongside the brother officers with whom you've been trained. You know well enough that, if there's any fighting to be done, the Mahrattas will be right in the midst of it; and, if they're not, it will be a piece of atrociously bad luck. But there's this other billet. Though you like your own regiment well enough, this order means special service. Now, Geoff, off you go without delay. You'll find the General ashore, and please give my compliments to him, and hand him this 'chit'."

A little more than ten minutes later, with his sword buckled on, his revolver in place, and with his full kit in evidence, Geoff clattered down the gangway and swung along the strand, and halted in front of the native house where the General had taken up his quarters. He was ushered in at once by one of the Staff Officers, and found himself face to face with the brilliant soldier who had sent for him. We admit only the bare truth when we state that it was a trying moment for our hero, for, after all, subalterns – junior subalterns in particular – are very small fry as compared with General Officers, and, unless cram-full of assurance, are apt to feel extremely insignificant, almost humble, in fact, when brought face to face with an officer of lifelong experience. Yet Geoff had been born and brought up with the Indian army. Standing stiffly at attention, he returned the General's gaze with a gaze which was as frank, as unflinching, and almost as politely inquisitive as that which had been turned on him.

"Mr. Keith, sir," one of the Staff Officers told the General. "You sent a note to the Officer Commanding the Mahrattas, asking him to send this young officer to you. You will remember, sir, that he is the son of Major Robert Keith, killed in that Frontier Expedition in which you served, and that Major Douglas has acted as his guardian."

That brought another penetrating glance in Geoff's direction – a glance which seemed to take in every characteristic of the young fellow standing so stiffly at attention: his tall, stout, active figure, his clean-cut person, his undoubtedly refined and gentleman-like face, and the intelligence which gleamed from behind the dark eyes which were turned still politely, yet unflinchingly, upon the General.

The latter cleared his throat, and brushed away the flies which were hovering in myriads about him.

"Of course," he said brusquely, "I remember perfectly. Mr. Keith, I understand that you have been in Mesopotamia with Major Douglas; please let me have some further information. I imagine that you must have gone up country. What more?"

Thus encouraged, Geoff promptly stated how he and his old friend had ventured to Bagdad and beyond, and had spent months in the country, sometimes in a native city or village, sometimes amongst the Armenians or Arabs, and often enough in the heart of some purely Turkish city.

"And you speak Turkish?" came the sharp question.

"Yes, sir."

"Well? Quite fluently, I mean."

"Like a native, I believe, sir," said Geoff modestly.

"Um! And Arabic? and other tongues?"

"Almost as well, sir."

"You can ride, of course?"

"Certainly," said Geoff.

There was a long pause, whilst the General once more inflicted upon Geoff that cold, stern, penetrating, yet kindly glance of his. Evidently he was thinking deeply, and just as evidently he was summing up the character of the young fellow standing at attention before him.

"Remember his father well," he was saying to himself; "he was a nice, clean-cut fellow, like the boy here; and, of course, everyone knows Joe Douglas, one of the best officers, one of the best 'politicals', India has ever possessed. This youngster looks as though he would go through fire and water to carry out his duties. I like his modesty, both of speech and of appearance, and, by Jove! he ought to be a very valuable addition to us.

"Attached to the Head-quarters Staff," he suddenly blurted out, turning to his Staff Officer. "Mr. Keith, I should be glad to avail myself of your services, but please understand that they may very well bring you into circumstances of very considerable danger. Recollect that we are now at war with Turkey, while your previous visit was made at a time when there was peace between us. That may very well have brought about a drastic change in the usually gentle Turk; and to be captured by them might result in serious consequences. I mention this question of unusual danger, seeing that you are such a young officer, and, of course, should you prefer to go back to your regiment, there is nothing to prevent you."

Would he prefer to go back to the Mahrattas? Why, Geoff's two legs were simply twitching and shaking so violently with excitement that he could hardly keep his knees from hammering together. It wasn't fright. The officer facing him knew that well enough. It was merely keenness – keenness for the work to be entrusted to him. It wasn't necessary even for Geoff to give a verbal answer; his decision was written all over his face. Why, he was simply dying for some form of active employment. It was a relief, then, to receive a kindly nod of dismissal from the General, and to retire precipitately from his presence. Outside the native hut a hand was laid firmly on his shoulder, and once more he found himself addressed by the Staff Officer.

"We want you at once," he said. "You'd better go on board and get rid of all this kit as soon as possible."

"Yes, sir."

"And – of course you've got your own saddlery and gear of that sort."

Geoff promptly assured the officer that he was fully equipped, and as a matter of fact had brought his own stout little Arab with him.

"Then bustle, my lad. We've a couple of troops of cavalry ready disembarked, and are anxious to find out what the Turks are doing. You'll go with them, and I needn't tell you that you'll do your utmost to help the officer who goes in command. You'll be under his orders, of course, and I feel sure that you'll be able to render very great assistance. Don't forget to take your water-bottle with you, and some food too; but there, I was forgetting that I'm talking to a young officer who knows the ground and has been in Mesopotamia before. Still, there are no hotels in these days, I imagine, though it is to be hoped that we shall come across friendly inhabitants, ready to feed us if need be, and prepared to give us a welcome."

Geoff went along that strand as if he were possessed of wings, and raced up the gangway.

"Half a mo'! Why in such a hurry? Look here, Geoff, what's all the ruction about? You've been to Head-quarters, haven't you? My word! That means something – either a frightful ruction and summary dismissal, if not a general court-martial, and shooting in the cold, early morning, or – or – what does it mean?" demanded Philip, gripping the unwilling Geoff by the arm and firmly retaining him.

It was no use attempting to shake off his friend, or to plead that he was in a hurry and that there was no time for delay. The utmost that Geoff could do was to bid Philip follow him down to his cabin, where he at once began to throw off certain of his kit and rummage for other items amongst his half-packed baggage. A shout brought his native servant, and another shout was echoed along the ship and soon sent his syce racing towards him.

"You'll get Sultan disembarked at once, with all his blankets and clothing," commanded Geoff. "Just run him up and down a little once you get him ashore, for he'll be stiff after the voyage. Now, my beauty," he went on, addressing his native servant, "just look lively with it, for I'm due back at Head-quarters in a few minutes."

"And what's the game?" demanded Philip insistently, impatiently in fact, already envying his chum immensely. Not that he was jealous of Geoff at all, for, if Philip were himself eager for some form of special service, he knew at least that Geoff had special attainments, special knowledge which fitted him for a post of that description. How Philip bewailed the fact that in his younger days – though to be sure he was still only a youngster – he had made such ill use of his opportunities. For, like his friend, Philip had been born in a cantonment, had lived the better part of his young life in one or other of the hill stations in India, and had grown up in the atmosphere which surrounds the army in British India. Hindustani and native dialects had come naturally to him, had been acquired without effort when he was a mere slip of a lad, but Turkish, that was an altogether different question.

"Well," he demanded eagerly, "you've got a job, have you? A special job, Geoff? Congratulations!"

He smacked his friend heartily on the back when he had heard the whole story, and emitted a shrill whistle of amazement, perhaps even of envy, when Geoff told him that he was to be attached to Head-quarters.

"Well, that's going it!" he exclaimed. "Attached to Head-quarters, eh! And just off on a reconnaissance. Mind you ain't captured, Geoff, for I've a very particular reason, and I'll tell you what it is. What's the good of my being chums with a fellow whose attached to Head-quarters for special service if that chap can't somehow or other squeeze me in one of these days and take me along with him? That would be fine, wouldn't it, Geoff? One of these days you'll probably want to sneak off, dressed as an Arab or something of that sort. How'd I do to come with you, even if only as a humble servant? But then – Oh, hang it! There's the language! But never mind, somehow or other you'll manage to take me with you."

Not for one moment did the eager Philip cease to chatter and cross-examine Geoff, as the latter and his servant plunged into the midst of the half-packed baggage and extracted sundry articles likely to be of use to him. As to agreeing to take Philip with him on some expedition, of course Geoff could not even give so much as a thought to the matter at that moment, though, to be sure, as he told himself, having Philip with him would be tremendous fun, and would add to his enjoyment. However, there was little time for thought, and none for discussion. In the course of half an hour he had selected all the kit he required, and had dispatched his servant ashore with the remainder. Then he dived down to the orderly room to formally report his impending departure, while he received the congratulations of his Commanding Officer and the Adjutant.

"Don't forget, Keith, you're one of the Mahrattas," he was told, "and the regiment looks to you to maintain its high reputation wherever you may go. But you'll do that, Geoff. I knew your father,

and if I know you at all – and I ought to seeing that you've been trained under my eye – you'll follow in his footsteps, and will do well in the post for which you've been selected."

A firm grip of Philip's hand as he stepped upon the gangway, a cheery good-bye, and a nod to others of his brother-officers, and Geoff was ashore, where the first object that his eyes lit upon was Sultan being walked up and down the strand, tossing his handsome head and shaking his mane, caracoling, and looking as if such a thing as a voyage from India were of no consequence. Patting his animal and talking to him for a few moments, Geoff then went on briskly to the native hut selected as Head-quarters, near which the two troops of Indian Horse he had been told were about to move away on a reconnaissance were already drawn up, the men at their horses' heads, standing expectant and immovable, and the officers strolling to and fro, smoking cigarettes and showing as much impatience as any of the soldiers. Striding up to the senior of the officers, Geoff at once reported himself.

"I've been ordered to accompany you, sir," he said.

"Lieutenant Keith, Mahrattas."

"And glad to meet you, Keith," came the hearty answer, whilst his hand was gripped. "I understand you've been in Mesopotamia, and know something of the country and the languages. Ward of my old friend, Joe Douglas, aren't you?"

It made Geoff glow with pride to hear so many eulogistic remarks made concerning the old friend who had cared for him now for so many years, and who indeed had filled the place of his father. That Major Joe Douglas was appreciated wherever he was known in the Indian army – and to be sure this "political" was known in very many stations, and to a host of officers – was a fact that Geoff could not fail to know, for in India all that concerns the army is known by its officers. Yet to hear him spoken of so very highly now by senior officers, to hear him eulogized, and to realize that the welcome extended to himself, Geoff Keith, was due, in part at least, to the old friendships made by his guardian, could not fail to make every impression on our hero. It made him then and there register a silent vow that, come what might, he would do nothing that would not reflect favourably upon the Major.

"He stood by me all these years," he thought, "he taught me all I know, though I fear I am still very young and an ignoramus. But he's tried hard I know to impart all his own special knowledge to me, and he's given me chances that many a young officer would give his ears for. Right! I've got to remember that always; and if I don't carry out this job to the satisfaction of my seniors, well I'll just deserve kicking."

The voice of the officer commanding the Indian Horse awakened him from the short reverie into which he had fallen.

"We'll be off in five minutes," he told Geoff; "we're just waiting for maps of the country to be issued, and for special instructions from Head-quarters. Now, Keith, since you've reported, I presume that you're quite ready to move off with us."

"Quite, sir!" Geoff told him with energy.

"Then what about a mount? Of course you will have brought one, seeing that all Indian officers are mounted, but if by chance your horse has not yet been disembarked, we'll leave one of our men behind and you can make use of his mount for the time being."

Geoff turned at once, and, looking towards the strand where Sultan was being exercised, signalled to his syce to bring him along immediately. A minute later Sultan was prancing and circling close at hand – the admired of all admirers.

"Pon my word, Keith, I admire your choice of horse-flesh," the officer told Geoff with enthusiasm as he walked slowly round the fretful Sultan, noting every handsome point. "No need to ask you whether you can ride or whether you've only recently gone through a school of instruction, for no fellow would dare to put his leg over that beast who hadn't had any amount of experience. Easy to handle, eh?" he asked, bending down, the better to take a look at Sultan's feet and legs. "My

word! but there's pace there, and there's strength in those shoulders, while, if I know a horse at all, this fellow will be a stayer."

If you had wanted to give Geoff Keith some particularly great pleasure, or desired to pay him some extraordinary compliment, you could not have done it better or more easily than by admiring Sultan. Let us explain at once that Sultan had once upon a time belonged to Major Douglas – indeed, he had been bred by the Major, and came of a famous stable. He had, one might almost say, grown up with our hero; though to be sure he was yet only a six-year-old, full of life and youth and strength. Nor had Geoff's temporary absence from India in Mesopotamia, and during those months he had spent in England, been sufficient to allow Sultan to forget his young master. It was with a whinny of pleasure that he had greeted his return to the "Shiney", and though there were many who would not have dared to mount the animal, and, indeed, few whom Sultan would allow to ride him, yet in the hands of Geoff Keith this fiery beast became as gentle as a lamb, as docile and as easily handled as any horse. To be short and explicit, Sultan was a most splendid Arab, one in a thousand, and a steed of which even a General would have been proud, and the possession of which might easily have turned the head of any junior subaltern.

"A nice little horse. Yes, as nice a little horse as ever I set eyes on," declared the officer in command of the two troops of Indian cavalry, as he paced round Sultan, patting him now and again, talking to him, and admiring his handsome points and his general appearance. "A grey was always my fancy, Keith, but they want a heap of handling. Let's see what he looks like with a man on his back. I'll wager that his paces are as good as his looks; trot him along, lad, and open him out a little. Our horses have already had a gallop, and they needed it after their confinement on board ship."

It was with a keen discerning eye that the officer watched Geoff pick up his reins and swing himself into the saddle. It was all done in an instant, though, indeed, the fretful Sultan made it difficult for anyone to mount him. But a word from Geoff quieted him for just a few seconds, and in that brief space of time the lad had gripped his mane, had thrust one foot into the stirrup, and was well home in his saddle.

"Let go!" Geoff told the syce, and there for a moment he sat motionless, Sultan standing as still as any statue – his head thrown back, his muzzle raised, and his eyes gleaming wickedly. Then with a bound he leapt to one side – a leap which would have thrown the average rider – and a second later, shaking his head free, he went off towards the desert like the wind, as if determined to have his freedom.

"Steady! Steady, boy, steady!" said Geoff, holding him firmly with the reins. "You're here to do what I want and not what you want; and, besides, a burst of speed so soon after coming ashore might be bad for you; you're coming back to let those officers take a good look at you."

The mad impulse of the Arab to be off, to be galloping wildly across the loose sand and gravel thereabouts, to be hurtling amongst the palms which covered the country-side, was controlled in an instant, and with such little effort that those officers who watched could not discern it. Geoff brought his mount back towards the troops of horse at a steady trot, a trot in which Sultan showed magnificent action, so much so that riding him gracefully was a matter of difficulty. Then a gentle pressure of the reins again brought him to a standstill, his feet well spread, his head held high, those eyes of his gleaming and shining. Indeed, all could see the spirit of the horse, and none were surprised when, a moment later, as the Officer in Command approached, Sultan rose on his hind legs and thrashed the air, Geoff sitting him and talking to him gently.

"A very handsome piece of goods, Keith," he heard, "'pon my word! I'm as envious as I can be; but in fairness to all of us you ought to take him out a little bit and give him a breather. Gently at first, and then some quick pace, so as to let him get rid of a little of that spirit. Otherwise he'll be kicking other horses in the ranks or disabling one of the officers."

A gentle word from Geoff, the merest relaxation of the reins, and Sultan was off again, but curbed this time ever so gently; off at a trot again, showing that magnificent action with his fore legs,

his quarters gleaming in the sunshine. And, slowly as they went, the pace increased till it became a canter, which Geoff allowed his mount to keep up until they had covered a good mile of desert – until, in fact, he was well out in the open and away from the palms which spread themselves some distance from the bank of the river. Then he pulled up his mount and patted him on the shoulder.

"That's your first breather, old chap!" he said; "now I'll allow you to have a burst of speed till we are near the trees again, just to get rid of the devil in you. After that you'll behave yourself, and go along quietly like the rest of them. Now off!"

"Handles the beast as if born to it," declared the Commanding Officer, as he watched the figures of man and horse racing towards him, while his brother officers crowded about him. "That lad has hands and a seat to be proud of, and the beast he rides is the best bit of horse-flesh I've seen – and that's saying something."

There was no doubt, in fact, that Geoff's arrival on the scene, his unexpected attachment to these horse-soldiers, his unconscious exhibition of horsemanship, and his possession of that fine Arab, had created quite an enviable impression upon the officers who were to be his companions.

"A young chap, such as he was, who could ride so well, who had the pluck to manage such a horse, must be a good fellow," they told themselves; and, thinking that, the information which was now given them – that Geoff was no new-comer to Mesopotamia, but had spent some months there with a famous Indian "political", and even knew the languages – prepossessed them still more in his favour.

"You'll do, my lad," the Commanding Officer whispered in his ear some few minutes later, when Geoff had dismounted, and had handed over Sultan to the syce. "It wants judgment to ride a beast like that, and judgment's the virtue required for the job to which you have been appointed. Now, Keith, our orders have come, and here are the maps; pop this one into your map-case. I shall take the troops up beside the river towards Basra, and if it seems necessary I shall send one troop off to my right to see what's happening farther out in the desert."

There were sharp words of command, and then a whistle blew, at which those stalwart Indian soldiers mounted their horses as one man, and sat there like so many dusky statues; then the whistle sounded again, and the cavalcade moved off, Geoff, at the invitation of the Commanding Officer, riding beside him.

It was as well, perhaps, for our hero that he was all unconscious of the fact that those Indian cavalry officers were not the only witnesses of that exhibition he had given with Sultan, and that other eyes than the curious ones of the natives of those parts followed the troops of horse, and his own upright figure, as they swung away from the site of disembarkation. It might have turned his head, and robbed him of his natural modesty, had he known that numbers of the Head-quarters Staff were outside their hut, looking on at this first movement of the expedition in Mesopotamia; and it would most certainly have caused a flush to rise to his cheeks, and possibly, had he not been a steady, sensible fellow, might have induced a degree of swollen-headedness, had he been able to hear the remarks of some of those senior officers. For, like those with the Indian horse, they, too, had fixed their eyes on Sultan, had seen the masterly way in which he was managed, and had admired the horsemanship of this new-comer amongst junior officers.

"He's a find," declared one of the Staff Officers, "and I'll eat my hat if young Keith doesn't prove a most promising officer!"

But that was a question for the future. To make good resolutions, to register silent vows, is, after all, a very easy matter, and one to which we all of us are prone. Promises are, we know, very much like pie-crust, so easily are they broken, and good intentions and vows, made ever so solemnly and so secretly, are difficult to keep. Would Geoff, with all his youthful enthusiasm, with all his keenness, with his undoubted steadiness of character, do well? Or would he prove only an egregious failure?

"Trot!" The command rang out loudly, and in a moment the troops of horse were swinging away across the now fast-opening desert, their horses' feet kicking up clouds of sandy dust and gravel

debris. Those palms were left behind in a trice it seemed, and within half an hour the landing-place was little more than a memory. It was perhaps two hours later when an officers' patrol, which had been riding well in advance, signalled the troops to halt, and one of their number came back at a gallop.

"A strong force of horsemen away on our left front, sir," he reported. "Turks, I think, but I am by no means certain."

"Halt! Mr. Keith, you will ride forward to the patrol, and if necessary beyond them. Let me have your report at the first possible moment," came the sharp order.

A second later Sultan was bounding forward, and in a little while Geoff had joined the officers' patrol at the point where they had now halted. Yes, there was a force of horsemen away in front, and to all appearances the campaign in Mesopotamia was about to open.

CHAPTER IV

The First Encounter

"There! Over there you can see a mass of horsemen, and I think there are infantry just behind them," said Daglish, one of the officers forming the patrol which had gone out in front of the two troops of Indian Horse sent out to reconnoitre. When Geoff pulled up his Arab, Sultan, he found close beside him the young officer who had just spoken, standing with his reins hooked over one arm, his feet wide apart and sunk almost to the ankles in the soft sand of the desert, and his glasses glued to his eyes, as he surveyed the ground to his left front, adjacent to the River Shatt-el-Arab.

"Hang it!" Geoff heard him say as he too dropped from his saddle and let his reins fall on Sultan's neck – for Sultan had been trained by the knowing and experienced Joe Douglas to stand as still and as steady as a rock without a rider, so long as his reins were left in that position.

"Hang it, Keith! there's a sort of a mist out there, and while just a second ago I could have sworn that there were several hundred horsemen, either Turkish or Arab, there is now nothing but shimmering water and palm-trees and houses, and a devil of a big village."

Daglish, a young, spirited, and handsome cavalry officer, dropped his glasses and let them dangle about his neck, while he turned impatiently towards Geoff.

"See!" he cried, stretching his hand out. "Look for yourself, Keith; there's the village yonder and hundreds of palm-trees round it; but it can't have sprung up in a moment, and can't have taken the place of those horsemen. What's it mean?"

The line the officers' patrol had taken had brought them to a low elevation – for though the estuary of the Tigris and the Euphrates is more or less flat, and the greater part of it but desert country, the ground rises here and there almost imperceptibly into hard gravel patches, and it was on the summit of one of these that the patrol had halted, and from which they had first sighted what was taken to be enemy horsemen, and which now, to the amazement of the officer, had developed into merely a native village. Pulling out his glasses, Geoff first of all surveyed the scene without their aid, and noticed that from the slight elevation to which they had attained he was able to look down upon the course of the river as it ran through a broad belt of green palm-trees. He could see stretches of the water flashing here and there under the brilliant rays of the sun. Elsewhere peeps of it only were obtainable, while in other parts the brilliant reflection from its surface shot through a thousand apertures between the trunks of the palms, the light almost dazzling him as it reached him. It was to a point, perhaps more than a mile away, and just outside the closest belt of palm-trees, that Daglish was pointing, and as Geoff looked in that direction he too saw a native village embowered in palms, its white houses gleaming faintly across the yellow stretches of desert.

"Well?" Daglish asked him impatiently.

Geoff smiled.

"Just a mirage," he told his companion. "They are funny things till you get used to them, and you have to come and live in this country for quite a while often before you get a chance. Before now I've seen a whole Turkish city rise up before me out of the desert, looking wonderfully realistic, with people moving about, and horses, and asses, and dogs in all directions. Then I've gone on a little way, or gone back, and the whole scene has vanished. That's a mirage. Some trick of the sun's rays playing upon the atmosphere spread out over the desert. How it's brought about beats me altogether; but it's real enough when one sees it, and equally elusive when one's moved from one's position. Let's walk our horses across here to the left; we needn't trouble to go downhill at all, for if you have seen the enemy horsemen out there in the open, they will most distinctly have seen you up here on this little bit of an eminence."

Leading their horses, they strode off some distance to their left, sinking ankle-deep into the sand at almost every stride. There were three of them by now, for Harmer, another of the Indian cavalry officers – the one who had come back to make his report – had joined them; and as they went, each one cast glances over his left shoulder, till of a sudden Daglish gave a cry of delight.

"I was beginning to doubt you, Keith," he said with energy; "but now, by James! you are right. That must have been a mirage, though I have never seen one before in all my life. The native village has gone completely; and look at those horsemen!"

They came to an abrupt halt, the three wheeling round at once and raising their glasses.

"Eh! What do you make of 'em?" Daglish said, when a minute had passed during which Geoff focused the distant horsemen carefully and watched them critically. "Turks, eh? Or Arabs?"

"A mixed force," Geoff told him promptly. "Arab horsemen, perhaps two or three hundred strong, and Turkish infantry behind them; there are no guns with them, so I take it that it's simply a reconnoitring force, or maybe it's a garrison, from some point lower down the river, retiring before us."

"Then the sooner we send back to our fellows the better," cried Daglish. "There's open ground before us, and the two troops could operate so as to drive in a blow at those fellows."

Pulling his notebook from his pocket he wrote a few hurried lines, and, having folded the "chit" up, he addressed it to his commanding officer.

"Take it back, Harmer," he ordered. "You can tell them that Keith and I will go on a little and make out those fellows a trifle more clearly."

A minute later the third of the officers was in his saddle and galloping back towards their comrades, whom they had left some distance away, halting at the bottom of this long sloping eminence. Then Geoff and Daglish climbed into their saddles and urged their horses forward, Geoff looking critically at the mount upon which his companion was riding.

"Better go easily, Daglish," he told him, "for that little horse of yours doesn't look as though he was fast, and I can tell you many of those Arab horsemen are superbly mounted. We can go on a little way, of course, and then, if it's the same to you, I'll push on still closer, for there's not a horse yonder that can even look at Sultan."

It was perhaps five minutes later when the two drew rein, for even though Daglish was full of energy and enthusiasm, and indeed was a brilliant cavalry officer, yet he was not devoid entirely of discretion. Though he was itching with eagerness to get to grips with the enemy, and to come to close quarters, he could not fail to realize the weight of the warning which Geoff had given him; nor, having seen that little exhibition which Sultan and his master had given them so close to the place of disembarkation, could he doubt that there were few who could come up to the magnificent Arab Geoff was riding.

"All right!" he told Geoff, a little reluctantly, as he pulled in his horse. "I'll stay here and keep my glasses on them, while you go on a little. Now, don't be reckless; for recollect you are of some value to the expedition, seeing that you speak the lingo."

Shaking his reins, Geoff set Sultan in motion, while Daglish watched him for a while as he cantered towards the enemy; then he threw up his glasses, and, fixing them upon the Arab horsemen, watched their waving lines, the chiefs who sat their horses in front of them, and one man in particular, who cantered slowly along their front – his white cloak thrown back, his dusky arm bare, the weapons he was carrying distinctly visible. It was fascinating to watch that gallant horseman, for a fine sight this Arab made. He pulled in his horse after a while in front of his men, and from the movements of his head it seemed as if he must be haranguing them; then of a sudden he stood in his stirrups and flung the pistol he was carrying high in the air, while an instant later there rolled musically across the desert the sound of shouting – a sound unfamiliar to Daglish's ears.

"Allah!" he heard; "Allah!" That weird, majestic, inspiring call of the Arab. It made the young officer almost twitch; made him admire those horsemen even more, and made him start violently

when a second later he saw through his glasses that self-same chief swing his horse round, shield his eyes with one hand as he stared in Geoff's direction, and then set his horse going at a mad pace which promised to bring him rapidly up to him. Almost at the same instant the Turkish infantry – a mere handful of men – who had been hidden behind the horsemen almost completely, debouched into the open at their left, and at once the sharp rattle of rifle-fire came echoing across the desert. As for Geoff, he heard the sounds and saw that horseman. Little puffs of sand began to rise up all round him, while now and again something buzzed past his head, humming its way on into the distance.

"Near enough," he told himself coolly, pulling Sultan up, while he felt for his glasses; then, dropping his reins, he focused the enemy again, and took very careful stock of them. "Doubt if there are three hundred horsemen there," he thought; "two hundred is more like their number, and a mere handful of Turkish infantry I should say, though having infantry with them points to the fact that they are a garrison retiring up river. And what's that chief mean by riding out like that in front of all his people? Anyway, he's now between the infantry and me, and that will put a stop to those bullets."

If he could, Daglish would have shouted to his companion so far ahead, and for a while he was consumed with the fear that Geoff had failed to notice that single horseman, that magnificently mounted chief, who came galloping across the desert. Then he swung himself into the saddle, and, gripping his reins, sat motionless, watching the figure of his comrade.

Ah! Geoff was beginning to move a little. He had dropped his glasses, and, peering at him through his own, Daglish saw that he had opened the pouch containing his revolver.

"Confound the chap!" he exclaimed. "Does he mean to stay out there and have a single-handed encounter with that beggar? If I'd have thought that possible I'd have sent the idiot back long ago."

Then he dropped his glasses again and sat spellbound, peering across the desert, longing for Geoff's return, and yet hoping, in spite of himself, that the young officer who had so recently joined them would stand his ground, would face this Arab enemy, and would show right at the commencement of this coming campaign that an Englishman was not to be frightened easily.

"Steady does it!" Geoff was saying to himself as he watched the furious approach of the Arab. "By the time he gets up to me his horse will be winded, and he'll be considerably shaken; that will be my chance, and, by George! I'll take it. A captive at this stage would be a tremendous thing for the General; for once an Arab sees that the game is up, and once he realizes that rewards are given for information, he will speak, will speak the truth, indeed. That's one of the curious parts about these Arabs – they've no fondness for the Turks, though many of them will fight for them, seeing that we are heathen and the Turks are of the 'Faithful'; but, on the other hand, they are just as likely to turn against the Sultan and help an invader. Ah! That's just a gentle reminder to let me know that the beggar is armed, and quite eager to kill me."

The horseman galloping furiously towards our hero was now within some sixty yards of him: a picturesque figure, his turban and his flowing robes blowing out in the breeze he made, his Arab horse and the gaudy harness with which it was decorated making quite a remarkable appearance. It was just then, when Geoff was able to clearly distinguish the man's face, that the Arab's right arm was suddenly raised, a puff of white smoke swept away from above the head of his galloping horse, and something sang past Sultan's tail and kicked up a splash of sand beyond him. Then a dull, deep report reached Geoff's ears, and caused Sultan to bound sideways. Speaking to him, and pressing his knees into his flanks, Geoff then set him in motion, and instead of galloping away towards Daglish – who still watched the proceedings with bated breath – he set him flying off at a tangent, a movement which caused the Arab to swing his own horse round and come hurtling after him. Nor was he on the new course more than a few seconds when, pulling another pistol from his belt, he sent a second bullet in Geoff's direction.

"A little too close to be pleasant," thought our hero as he heard the missile hum past his head, and saw the splash of sand it made beyond him. "I'll let Sultan out a little, and increase the distance, so that, if one of his bullets happens to strike us, no great damage will be inflicted. That's doing it!"

That's making him writhe with anger! He's grandly mounted, and I shouldn't wonder if he had the idea that there was nothing he couldn't come up with; but Sultan knows better. Don't we?"

He leaned forward in his saddle and patted his horse's neck, while he glanced backward again at the pursuing Arab. That sudden spurt had taken him some hundred yards in front of his enemy, and even at that distance Geoff could see the chief brandishing his smoking weapon, and could hear as he shouted curses at him. Then slowly, almost imperceptibly, he circled from his course, till in a while he was heading almost direct for the point where Daglish was waiting.

"Give him another two or three shots at the most," thought Geoff, casting many glances over his shoulder. "That Arab fellow may have two or three pistols with him – double-barrelled fellows – and if he's rich and lucky it may be that he's got a revolver. But I'll wager my hat that he ain't, or he'd have used it already."

Ping! There came another shot, very wide of the mark, for the rage into which the Arab chief had worked himself, and the disappointment he was suffering, had unsteadied him – that and his frantic gallop across the desert. By now, too, his horse was blowing hard, and was slackening its pace, a fact which Geoff noted clearly, and made allowance for by holding Sultan in and curbing his paces. It was perhaps a minute later when he swung Sultan round on his haunches and pulled him in abruptly, the sudden halt causing the Arab to decrease the distance between them rapidly and to come rushing towards them.

"Now shall Allah reward me!" the chief bellowed, his eyes gleaming, his teeth set, and his lips parted in a snarl of triumph and anger.

Thrusting his empty pistol back into his belt, he dived for his curved scimitar, which was dangling beside him, and, getting his horse well in hand at the same moment, sped onwards without halting. It was then that Geoff revealed his own weapon, and, taking careful aim, pressed the trigger. An instant later the horse which the chief was riding reared up on its hind legs, whinnying loudly, and there for a moment it stood, pawing the air and snorting; then it collapsed of a sudden, as if the strength which had permitted it to fly so rapidly across the desert had been suddenly torn from it, and, crumpling up, fell back, bearing its rider with it.

"Drop your scimitar," shouted Geoff, covering the fallen chief as he staggered from his saddle and got to his feet. "Now throw your pistols on one side. Good! You'll run in front of me as fast as you can, without looking to either side or behind you; if you fail in this, I have still another bullet to spare for you."

Amazement was written on the face of the chief – amazement which was far greater for the moment than his wrath and his disappointment at being made a prisoner. For wrath does not last for long when a man has met with a fair opponent and has been fairly worsted. Moreover, whatever your Arab may be – fierce revengeful, treacherous, a false friend, if you will have it – he is yet a philosopher, a child of the desert, one who takes things as they come, and makes the best of them.

"By Allah," he grunted, "but this is a strange thing that has happened. A while ago and I thought that you – a white man, one of the race of unbelievers – were surely in my hands, were surely killed or captive; but a while ago, had a man dared to tell me that I, Suliman, should fall before one of the invaders, and this at the very first encounter, I would have slain him; while, had one dared to say that this fine Arab I ride could meet his match anywhere in the desert, I would have had him stripped and beaten. But now, surely this is fate. Allah is great! and if this is his reward, then why should I be wroth with it? My master, I obey."

Quite cheerfully he cast his empty weapons aside and threw his scimitar to a distance; then, with long active strides he set off in the direction that Geoff had indicated, casting not a single glance back at his comrades, content as it were with his fate, and careless of what was before him – a true philosopher indeed, a true child of the desert.

Perhaps ten minutes later they came up with Daglish, finding that young officer amazed, delighted beyond words, hugging himself with enjoyment.

"My word!" he exclaimed as Geoff rode up beside him; "of all the cheek, of all the dare-devils I ever saw. But what the devil do you mean by it?"

He quite exploded as he recollected the fears which had assailed him; indeed, as he sat there, a witness of the moving scene which was taking place before him, he had had many and many a twinge of conscience, and had recollected that Keith was an officer whose loss would reflect on the head of any of his brothers responsible for it. "Why hadn't he told him to halt some hundred yards ahead? Why had he allowed him to go off on such a fool's errand? What the devil was the fellow doing? He'd be killed if he didn't look out, for look at all those splashes of sand about him, and listen to the rifles of those Turkish infantry, and – and – Good Heavens! He was going to wait for that Arab chap! He was going to – Bravo! Bravo, Keith! – took his fire without flinching – and now he is giving him a run for his money. There goes another shot, and can't have missed Keith by more than a trifle. Dash the fellow! He'll get killed yet, and here am I unable to help him."

Imagine the shout of delight the enthusiastic Daglish indulged in when he saw that last manoeuvre of Geoff's, and watched as the Arab's horse reared and then crumpled up beneath him. Why, he had never been so excited in all his life, and now watched with staring eyes as the Arab clambered to his feet and then set off at a fast trot towards the eminence whereon he was standing. But that was a few minutes ago – minutes of huge relief to Daglish, minutes during which he could congratulate himself on a fortunate escape from something approaching a disaster, and upon a tale which would make excellent telling; and then, as a sharp order from Geoff brought the Arab to a standstill, and that young officer halted like a culprit before him, the anger of this other officer – who was senior to Geoff – burst out as he recollected the qualms which had assailed him.

"My word," he bellowed, "what the dickens do you mean by it? Isn't it enough to draw fire from those Turkish infantry, and to stand quite still, like an idiot, to make their shooting more perfect? Isn't it enough to make a fellow swear to see an officer chucking his life away out there in the desert? And, by James, Keith," he cried, as he stretched out a hand and gripped Geoff's, "but it was fine! I wish to goodness I'd been in it; and to think you've got a captive at this early stage. Here, what's your name? Who are you? And where do you come from?"

The Arab, tall, calm, almost austere, handsome and active, stood erect before the two young officers, not a shadow on his face, not a look of animosity about him; he even smiled, and then addressed himself to our hero.

"Doubtless it is one of your chiefs, my master," he said, looking across at Daglish; "doubtless, too, he is both angry and overjoyed at something. Maybe you are his brother, and in that case, seeing that Allah has spared you, and it is I who am a captive, why, I joy with him in his delight and pleasure. My master, if it is ill to be taken by an enemy, it is still an honour and a fine thing to be taken by one who is doubtless of value to his own people – a man respected and looked up to."

"Can't make a word out," exclaimed Daglish, impatiently casting anxious glances over his shoulder and then away towards the enemy. "But, as I said, Keith, you've got a captive, and if you handle him rightly you may make him jolly useful. Now, I'll stay here and keep my eye on those beggars, while you trot this fellow back towards our comrades."

A sharp order from Geoff set the Arab in motion again, and presently, steering a course towards the two troops of horse which could now be seen advancing towards them, they halted a few yards before them – nor is it to be wondered at that a torrent of questions was immediately poured out in Geoff's direction.

"What's this? Who's this fellow? – a fine-looking beggar, a chief I should say. How did you get hold of him? Where's he come from? And what's the latest about this enemy force that Harmer has reported?"

As quickly as possible Geoff told his tale; merely mentioning that he and Daglish had advanced towards the enemy, and that by a fortunate chance they had managed to capture this chief, who had ventured out to meet them.

"I think, if you'll allow me, sir, I may be able to get some important information from him," he told the Officer in Command. "Of course he was very angry, in fact furious, at being captured, but, like a true follower of the Prophet, he is a born philosopher, and is already quite reconciled to his fate. I have told him already that no harm will come to him; and if you will allow me to make promises of good treatment and of reward, I think he'll tell us as much as he knows of the Turks and their movements."

"Then fire ahead! The horses have come along at a smartish pace and will do with a breather. I have already sent off strong advance- and flanking-parties, so that we are not likely to be surprised, particularly as Daghish is still out there in front watching the enemy and can signal back to us. Now, Keith, get on with the cross-examination. I think I may say that you may promise your captive a handsome present of money if he will give us every scrap of information."

Saluting with precision, Geoff dropped out of his saddle, and, leaving Sultan to take care of himself, faced his captive. Then, handling him with that care and tact which residence amongst the Arabs had taught him, and in fact winning his confidence at once – for it was impossible for the Arab chief to have suspicion of this British officer's good intentions – Geoff very quickly gained from him information as to the positions taken up by the Turks and Arabs in the immediate neighbourhood, together with such news as the chief had of forces in other directions.

"But, my master, it is mere rumour – this latter information that I have given you," the chief told him. "I and my men have been posted down beside the river, and know little of what is occurring elsewhere. Doubtless there are Turkish troops here and there, and it may be that in parts there are large forces of them, but between this and Basra they are few. That is true, as Allah hears me!"

As a matter of precaution the chief was handed over to one of the sowars (Indian troopers) as soon as Geoff had repeated to his Commanding Officer what had been stated.

"Then I think we will make short work of those beggars in front of us," said the latter abruptly, as he swung himself into his saddle. "A brush at this stage of the proceedings will liven the men up wonderfully, and will raise the spirits of the Expeditionary Force from India – not that their spirits can be called exactly low, or the men in any way down-hearted."

Setting off at a trot, one of the troops rode to the left of the eminence from which Geoff and his comrades had watched the enemy, while the other took a course to the right and galloped off into the desert. But an officer and a couple of sowars were left on the eminence itself, from which point of vantage they could keep a close watch on the Arab horsemen.

It was perhaps half an hour later that the two troops, separated till then by quite a wide stretch of desert, and hidden entirely from one another and from the enemy by that long, low eminence, converged upon one another and rode out into the open. A careful advance near the bank of the river, where the palms hid them, and the fact that the attention of the Arab horsemen was fixed for the most part on the signallers and their officer left on the eminence, had allowed one troop to get within striking distance of the enemy. Then they suddenly debouched from the trees, and, trotting out into the desert, formed up for a charge; almost at the same moment a cloud of dust far away in the open showed them the position of the second troop, which, riding faster, had got almost beyond the position held by the Arabs. In fact, a rapid movement might enclose the enemy between the two troops, and in any case this menace from two points at once threw them into confusion; shouts were heard from the Arabs, while at once loud reports burst from their ranks, all manner of weapons being discharged at the Indian horsemen. To these was added the sharp, clear-cut snap of modern rifles, with which the Turkish infantry were armed. Then a trumpet blared in the distance, and that cloud of dust suddenly grew bigger, grew bigger and wider, and stretched out till it covered quite a large area. The troop close down by the river, which had just emerged from the trees, cantered out now till six feet of space separated the horsemen.

Then the pennons at the tips of the lances waved, a sharp order snapped down the ranks, and in a trice the lances were lowered. That trumpet blaring in the distance had set every horse in this other

troop curveting and prancing, and now, as a note came from their own trumpeter, the horses were off, the men leaning low down in their saddles, their eyes glued on the enemy, their knees gripping their horses, and their lances pointed well out before them.

What a shout those Indian sowars gave! Their comrades coming from the opposite direction answered with a shrill yell of triumph, and then, like a flash, the two troops were launched against the enemy.

Converging as they came, till there were perhaps only some four or five hundred yards between the flanks of each of the troops, the horsemen plunged into the midst of the Arabs. Here and there they had left a horse rolling on the sand behind them, and there was more than one animal without a rider as they got close to the enemy; but nothing stopped the Indians, neither the shouts nor the bullets of the Arabs. With a crash they were in at them, thrusting right and left, riding them down, riding over them, and then it was over. What was left of those Arab horsemen scattered and fled in every direction, leaving the Indian Horse conquerors.

As for Geoff, his fingers trembled as he pulled Sultan in and dropped from his saddle.

"My word," exclaimed Daglish, offering him his cigarette case with a hand which jerked and wobbled badly, "but that was something! If that's war – the sort of war we're likely to have in Mesopotamia – then the more of it we have the merrier. Come here, Keith! I want to know what yarn you've been pitching to our Commander? You've been fibbing, eh? I asked him as we were trotting along through the palm-trees what report you had given. You said nothing about that flare-up with the Arab chief, about the bullets you were idiot enough to wait for, and about the way you captured him. My boy, there's a lively time coming!"

CHAPTER V

News of the Enemy

When the youthful and enthusiastic, and, let us add, immaculately and smartly dressed Daglish of the Indian Horse declared with such gusto to Geoff Keith that there was a lively time coming, and that that young fellow was likely to hear more of the adventure that had befallen him so soon after his landing in Mesopotamia, he attained to only a portion of the truth, and hinted only in some small degree at what our hero was to put up with. Like a flash the tale of his meeting with the Arab chief went round the camp after the return of the Indian Horse, and not even that exhilarating and most dashing charge could swamp the details.

"Wanted at Head-quarters, sir! Colonel – gave me horders to find you at once. Pressing, sir! Ve-e-ery pressing, sir!" said a British "Tommy", as he discovered Geoff in the act of leaving the horse lines, where Sultan had been picketed.

It was always a habit of Geoff's – as it is of every good horseman who possesses a fine animal, and is fond of it – to make it a custom and rule to see to the comforts of his mount before sitting down to eat and drink. Thus, as Geoff came striding away from beneath the palms where the Indian cavalry had picketed their horses, and where the officers' mounts were made fast to a long picketing-rope close beside them, he came face to face with this British "Tommy"; in fact, the man barred his way to the ship still unloading at the river bank, and arrested his further progress. A big, brawny chap, he was sweltering in the moist heat of Mesopotamia, with the perspiration pouring from his forehead and down both cheeks. His thin khaki-twill jacket was sticking to his manly chest in many parts, and showed a number of moist patches. From under his sun-helmet a pair of shrewd, sharp eyes peered at this young officer – the tale of whose adventures had reached the orderly's ears – while a fierce and somewhat grizzled moustache – for the man was an old soldier, who had seen many days' service in India – projected on either side of the chin-strap which secured the helmet. In the smartest possible manner he came to attention, and, shouldering his rifle, saluted briskly.

"Horders, very speshul, sir," he said, his eyes twinkling; and then to himself, and almost aloud – for this gallant fellow had a way of addressing his remarks to no one in particular, and his thoughts to the open: "Lor'! Bless me 'art! If he ain't no more'n a baby, just a mere shaver; and they tells me he speaks this 'ere lingo like a good 'un. Lingo, do they call it? Just a norrible mess o' words, that's what I says, and yer can't make not one of 'em understand. Why, bless me soul! I sees an old chap with coal-black eyes, an' a beard as white as snow, a-sittin' in a doorway o' one of the things round 'ere they calls 'uts – 'uts, is they? My word! My uncle! – as some of these 'ere orficer men calls it – just 'oles I call 'em. 'Uts! And there was that there man – more like a monkey he looked – and though I shouted at 'im, not a word could he understand, nor me the lingo he flung back at me. I should say –"

Geoff's rather short and abrupt "Well?" brought the good fellow's ruminating to a sudden ending; he coughed loudly to clear his voice, and those sharp eyes of his again twinkled.

"Bless my 'art! I was a-wanderin'," he told himself; and then aloud: "Horders, speshul, sir. Colonel – , sir, said I was to find you at once, and you was to report at Head-quarters immediately. Shall I dismiss, sir?"

"Please," Geoff told him, and stood watching the man and pondering – pondering not so much as to the reason for this order and the nature of the interview before him as to the reason which had produced what he was sure was a twinkling in the eyes of the man who had brought the message.

"Confound the fellow!" he was saying. "I'm sure he had a little joke on of his own, and was almost laughing; and I've seen him before somewhere. Now where?"

In his turn, he too was cut short abruptly, and enjoined to remember his orders, and not to allow himself to indulge in a species of "brown study". For if that gallant soldier had been duly and

correctly dismissed, he was still and always a soldier, a punctilious fellow, who throughout long years had never failed to carry out the orders of a superior, and who, now that he had conveyed such an order to an officer, considered it only his mere duty to see that that young officer acted on the order promptly. He was standing near at hand, his rifle still at his shoulder, his head thrown back, those eyes of his watching Geoff shrewdly.

"Horders, speshul, sir," he muttered in guttural tones, which just managed to reach our hero. "Beg pardon, sir – "

But Geoff had already come to his senses again, and went striding off to the Head-quarters hut, with the orderly following closely. There he found himself confronted just outside the hut, and beneath a tope of palms which threw its grateful shade above some chairs placed there for the Staff of the expedition, by one of the senior Staff Officers.

"Ha, Keith!" he said genially enough. "Sit down, my boy, and have a cigarette. Now tell me all about it. By the way, that has been a very pretty little affair, that rounding up of those Arab horsemen and the charge of the troops we sent out, a very gallant little bit of business, and I shouldn't wonder if it brought credit to the officer in command. But, as I am chiefly concerned with the Intelligence Service, I'll leave that alone for the moment and get you to tell me of the news you obtained from your prisoner. That reminds me. Young Daglish has been telling us a fine tale. Very well done, Keith! Very well done indeed! Though I doubt the wisdom of an officer on special service – as you happen to be just now – making himself the open, unabashed target for Turkish bullets. Take the enemy fire like a soldier when you have to, but don't seek it out; don't look for points or for places where you can expose yourself. In other words, don't be reckless, or, to quote our friend Daglish again, don't 'behave like a careless idiot!' Now then, having said my say, let us get on with our particular business."

Very quickly Geoff gave him all the information he had been able to extract from the captured chief, and then, at a suggestion from the officer, the Arab was sent for, and presently appeared with an escort of sowars about him.

"If I may say so, sir," said Geoff, "I think we shall do far better by showing our trust in this prisoner and dismissing his escort. I do not assert that an Arab is to be trusted. As a general rule, speaking of those in Mesopotamia, he is certainly not; he will join the cause of the highest bidder, or he will leave any sinking ship if only he can discover the danger in which he is standing soon enough. But by making this man realize that we are not a sinking ship, and that his interests are best served by serving us, we shall be able to get from him not only information which he already has, but might even employ him to obtain further facts of importance. For that a liberal reward, to be paid some months hence, should be promised."

For a little while the Staff Officer regarded the chief sternly, and yet with interest. No Englishman could look at such man and fail to find in him much to attract attention. For, as we have said before, this Arab chief was an exceedingly fine specimen of Arab humanity. Tall and straight and austere-looking in his native costume, his features were refined and handsome. There was nothing of the negroid type about him; and indeed this man, dressed in European costume, might have made his appearance in the most exclusive parts of London, and one could guess that his features, his delicately shaped hands, his well-kept nails, his manners, indeed, would have rendered him by no means inferior to his fellows. The chief returned the officer's frank gaze with one just as frank, with one distinctly haughty, with a glance which told of courage, and pride, and also determination.

"Dismiss the escort," commanded the officer sharply, addressing the Indian officer in charge of them; "let them rest in the shade at the back of the Head-quarters hut. Now, Chief," he said, smiling at the captive, "sit down. Keith, ask him to make himself comfortable."

"The officer here wishes you to feel that you are a friend and not a captive," said Geoff at once, taking upon himself the liberty of somewhat enlarging upon his senior's pronouncement. "He invites you to sit down with us, and, as a chief of honour, he knows that by doing so you give your word

that you will not attempt to escape, and that what shall be spoken between us will be the truth, and the truth only."

A beaming smile broke over the face of the chief instantly, and he nodded in friendly fashion to both officers; then, pulling a chair nearer, he sat down with an easy grace which proved beyond fear of refutation that if indeed he were a child of the desert, yet he had some knowledge of Western customs, and unlike his fellows was accustomed to a chair, and appreciated the comfort to be obtained by the use of it.

"My master," he told Geoff, "doubtless His Highness who sits there with us is a great chief in your country, and is one whose words should be honourably listened to. If he says that he desires Suliman as a friend rather than as a captive, and that at a time when he discovers this same Suliman a mere harmless and helpless prisoner, then, indeed, is he a man of great honour and liberality. And what should I say? I, who am a helpless, harmless captive, who am bid to sit as friend before him, and who thereby assents to join your forces. My master, from this day forward I am your man, sworn to your service, sworn to do my utmost for the British. If I depart from this saying, if it should happen that in later days I break my oath, then, indeed, may I be proclaimed to be a faithless scoundrel, one deserving of instant execution. My master, as a friend I sit before you, and I thank you for this great concession."

For more than an hour the three sat there in the shadow of the palms, Geoff acting as interpreter; and slowly, and little by little, as the Intelligence Officer asked questions which would never have occurred to Geoff, information of considerable value was extracted from the chief. Indeed, the latter was undoubtedly greatly delighted at the treatment afforded him – for to be kept a close captive had seemed to him inevitable. And partly by the judicious offer of a handsome reward – a small portion of which was to be paid within a month's time, so soon as he had produced results, and the remainder when the war was finished – together with the promise of certain allowances whilst he was with the British Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia, the chief was led to give a most willing assent to aid his captors further.

"More than that, my master," he said eagerly enough, addressing Geoff while he looked across at the Staff Officer, "I can make even greater promises; for have you not honoured me much by thus making a friend of me rather than a captive? Listen, then! And as Allah hears us, treat this not as a promise, but as a plan to be carried out without doubt and of a certainty. You have treated me handsomely, and have made promises which will give me wealth if I but live to earn it. See, these men about me, these Indian horsemen, these British soldiers, these native troops whom you have brought across the water to fight the Turk and the Sultan and those white men – those unbelievers – who have joined your enemy! You pay those soldiers of yours, doubtless, my master; your British king has gold wherewith to fill their pockets?"

"Certainly, Chief," Geoff told him promptly. "Each man draws his regular pay and allowances. Every one of the soldiers you see here is a free man – free to join the army or not, just as he likes. But, once he has joined, he is paid just as a man who may work as a servant in one of your camps is paid, for the British king forces service upon no man."

"Then listen further, my master. There are in my tribe perhaps a thousand men, all well found with horses, all with great knowledge of this country, and not one of whom would fail to fight if the opportunity came to him. Give them money, pay them the same amount that you pay these Indian soldiers, and find them in certain necessities and in ammunition. Promise this, and trust your slave still further. For then he will ride out to them, and if they be not willing to return with him and join forces with these soldiers, he himself will return – whether they wish it or not – and will render himself up again to you. My master, I am a man of honour, and this thing I will do, as Allah hears me."

The suggestion made by the captured chief was one which, naturally enough, needed much consideration, and, also, the consent of higher authority; yet, so excellent did the plan seem, and so clearly was Geoff able to put it before the Intelligence Officer, that by the following morning it was

adopted, and, a good horse having been handed to the chief, and weapons also, he was allowed to ride out of the camp in search of his followers.

"Of course we may, or we may not, see him back," said the Staff Officer somewhat sceptically. "You tell me, Keith, that Arabs are not to be trusted, and that is a tale I have heard often enough before. Yet I have little doubt that many of them are just as trustworthy as people in our country."

"Just!" Geoff agreed with him promptly, if not warmly, for during his short residence in Mesopotamia, when he had been with Major Joe Douglas, he had met with, and lived with, more than one tribe of Arabs, with whom he had become more than usually friendly. Moreover, he had known them to be absolutely trustworthy; and though, during this coming conflict, some might already have sided with the Turks – who were their nominal rulers – and though, as the campaign went on, it might happen that they would leave that service and join the British – for such is a habit of nomadic Arab tribes – yet that did not prove them to be utterly devoid of trust or of honour.

"If I know a man at all, sir," he said respectfully, "I know this chief, whom I was instrumental in capturing. He has given us his word of honour, and he has called upon Allah to witness the words which he has spoken. That will compel him to carry out his promises whether he wills it or not; and should it happen that his followers arrest him, and do their utmost to prevent his return, yet I feel sure that he will make every effort to come back to us."

As a matter of fact, some three days later, when the embarkation of the British Expeditionary Force was completed, and the troops had settled down in their camps beside the river, the outposts – placed well beyond the encampment – reported a large column of horsemen approaching. The information was brought to Head-quarters, and within five minutes of its arrival that same Intelligence Officer had sent a hurried message to our hero.

"Get on your horse at once, Keith," he told him, "and come along with me. This force approaching may be our friend the chief bringing in his followers or it may be an enemy force come to try conclusions with us. If I happened to be an officer in the Indian Horse I rather think I should hope for the latter, for those boys are dying for more fighting. As it is, I trust that it will be the chief, and that he'll bring with him a lot of useful fellows. Horsemen used to the country and to the tricks of the Turks will be a valuable acquisition, and we shall be able to make the most of them."

Quickly mounting the fretful Sultan, Geoff was ready within a few minutes, and, together with the Intelligence Officer, made rapid progress to the outposts. Then, fixing his glasses to his eyes, he carefully scrutinized the force approaching across the desert. A tall figure in flowing robes, riding at their head, was without doubt the chief who had given them his promise, and, having reported this fact to the Intelligence Officer, the two of them rode out to meet the cavalcade approaching. Then they led them back into the camp, and within an hour the Arabs had settled down as if they had never been anything else but a portion of the British Expeditionary Force destined to advance so far up the River Tigris.

Two days later the camp broke up, and, with a naval flotilla steaming beside them up the river, they marched on Basra, which town they occupied, after meeting with only small resistance. They were now approaching the confluence of the Rivers Tigris and Euphrates, and were, indeed, within striking distance of that portion of the desert which, in days long gone by, was known as the Garden of Eden, where the toil of the inhabitants then living in those parts had converted what may have been a desert in their earlier days into a smiling garden the fame of which has descended through the ages. Yet now it was a desert, a sandy, gravelly stretch of dried-up, waterless, and inhospitable desert, peopled but sparsely, and for the most part only along the actual banks of the river, where the moisture, finding its way into the soil on either side, kept it fertile, and where grew a thick belt of palms, descending past Basra to the open sea. There were marshes, too, for the River Euphrates in particular, which traverses a flat country, has changed its course through the ages on numerous occasions. Some particular course may remain open for a considerable period, and have the appearance of being the main channel, yet always there are overflows, and often enough such a main channel is silted up with the dirt and debris

coming from higher parts of the desert; then the water, bursting over the low banks, and particularly the southern bank, has gouged some other channel for itself, or has widened out into broad stretches of marsh – perhaps only two feet in depth – leaving no semblance of the river channel.

"It's there, amongst the marshes, that the Turks lie hidden," the chief told Geoff that evening. "Of their numbers and of their exact positions I know nothing, yet the rumour has reached me that they are there, and that soon they will attempt to come in behind the British and attack them. It were well, my master, if some of those ships that I see floating upon the water, and in particular some of the smaller ones, were sent into the marshes. There are channels deep enough to take them, and if careful search were made it may be that the Turkish enemy would be discovered."

Geoff was not such a young soldier that he could not at once perceive the importance of the information just conveyed to him. With the knowledge he already had of Mesopotamia, he had been able to inform his friend on the Staff that, above the town of Basra, wide stretches of marsh would be discovered, which at certain seasons of the year were greatly extended by the heavy rains which fell in that part of the world. But if residence in Mesopotamia had given him some idea of the course of the rivers, of the towns and villages dotted here and there, and of the numerous peoples who inhabited that region, he could not, naturally enough, be expected to know where the Turks had disposed their forces on the outbreak of this gigantic war. Some had undoubtedly been posted towards the mouth of the Shatt-el-Arab, for had not the Indian horse already had a lively brush with them? But where were the others? Higher up the river, preparing their defences and waiting for the onward march of the British forces, or sneaking in those marshes to the west of them, which spread themselves along the broken and irregular course of the River Euphrates, from a point perhaps fifty miles away to the spot where the river joined with the main channel of the Tigris? And if they were there, hidden in the swamps, perhaps camping on some piece of ground elevated sufficiently to give them a dry footing, then indeed they would be a menace to the safety of the forces invading the country. They might march down along the edge of the swampy ground, or if provided with native boats, known as bellums, might steal over the shallow waters and cut off the retreat of Geoff and his comrades.

"Chief," he said suddenly, "you know this marsh land, perhaps, and you would help us to discover these enemies?"

"My master, an Arab is a man of the desert, a man who is happiest when far away in the open, or when mounted upon his horse, with leagues of sandy soil before him. We are not given to venturing upon the water, and thus it follows that I am ignorant of these marshes, and could be of little service. But listen, my master! There is one within this town of Basra who could assist you. A man known to me – a native of these parts, of uncertain nationality. He is but a poor fisherman; and if His Highness, whom I have met, cares to arrest him, he has then but to command and the man will carry out his bidding."

"And suppose – for I must tell you, Chief, that we of Great Britain do not force our orders upon helpless and poor people – supposing a reward is offered to this man. What then?" asked Geoff.

"Then, indeed, you may count upon his assistance, his ready assistance," said the chief, "and for all I know he might be willing enough to carry out the work because of his hatred of the Turks. Yes, my master, they are hated in this part of the world. Though they molest the Arabs but little, and indeed fear us greatly, for we are swift to move from spot to spot, and can strike a blow and be gone in an instant, yet to those who live their lives on the bank of the river, where the Turks can reach them easily because of their boats, to these they are often harsh and cruel, taxing them heavily, and treating them as slaves, or little better."

Geoff gave himself a few moments in which to deliberate, and then, asking the chief to accompany him to Head-quarters, he sent in a message to the Intelligence Officer who has already been introduced to our readers. To him he promptly gave full information of the marshes, and of the rumoured Turkish forces lying hidden in them. It was apparent at once that this Staff Officer considered the news of the utmost importance; for, bidding Geoff stay outside the house taken over

by the General, he disappeared inside, and remained there for quite a considerable period. When he came out again, it was clear from the expression on his face that he had come to some decision.

"Those Turks must be found, and routed," he told Geoff. "And of course we shall be glad to take advantage of the services of the native whom the chief has mentioned to you. That means that you must go along too, Keith, for otherwise there will be the language difficulty. Orders will be given to the naval contingent. There are some motor launches with them, and I imagine that one of them should be able to make its way through the marshes. In fact, the expedition will have to be a naval one almost entirely, with you and this native guide accompanying."

Geoff coughed discreetly to attract the Staff Officer's attention, for of a sudden a brilliant thought had struck him. He was thinking of his chum Philip, who had almost "lived in his pocket" these last few days, and who eagerly waited a summons to accompany our hero.

"You are the luckiest beggar I ever came across!" he had told Geoff when he had heartily congratulated him upon his capture of the Arab chief. "Any other fellow would have been shot down by those Turkish bullets, which Daglish says you were idiot enough to stand up and face – but I'll be honest, though, and add that Daglish, though he said at first you were an idiot, said afterwards that he admired your pluck, and wondered whether he'd have been as cool if he'd been in your place. But we're not talking about Daglish, we're talking about you and myself, and don't forget that I come into the discussion. What I want to impress upon you is the decided need you have of assistance. You can't go off on jaunts like that without having another fellow to look after you. Supposing one of those Turkish bullets had hit you after all, what then?"

He stood in front of Geoff and watched him expectantly.

"What then!" repeated Geoff, smiling at the impulsiveness of his chum.

"What then!" cried Philip indignantly. "Why! Well, supposing I'd been there I could have carried you off and could have stood my ground, and captured that chief when he got out to us. But there you are, the thing's over now, and what you've got to do is to look out for trouble in the future. Geoff, you want a fellow alongside of you, a friend, one you can confide in, one ready to assist you at any moment. I'm that friend; and don't you forget it, my boy, or else there'll be ructions."

Geoff did not forget it, for nothing in the world would have pleased him better than to have his old friend along with him. It was nice, and exciting, indeed, to find himself in the company of other officers – such as Daglish and those of the Indian troops who had attacked the Arab horsemen – but, after all, a friend is a friend all the world over; and if Philip had been there, he told himself, Why! He would certainly have enjoyed the whole adventure more thoroughly. And here was a new adventure proposed by this Staff Officer. He, Geoff, was to go off with some of the naval contingent, and was to penetrate into that huge stretch of marshland lying along the course of the Euphrates. Anything might happen! Turks were rumoured to be there, and if they were it was more than likely that there would be a sort of guerrilla fighting. What chances the thing presented! And how jolly to have Philip along with him. He coughed again discreetly, yet in such a way that the Staff Officer glanced at him swiftly and inquisitively.

"Eh?" he asked, smiling. "You – "

"I rather thought, sir," said Geoff diffidently, "that if I could have another officer – an infantry officer, I mean, sir – along with me, it might be some assistance. I – "

"In fact," laughed the Staff Officer, "you have one particular friend, and would be glad to have him ordered to join you with this expedition. Well, I don't know that there is any particular objection," he continued, to Geoff's huge relief and enjoyment. "A smart young officer might be of great assistance, and in any case he'd be very good company. What's the name, Keith?"

Geoff gave it with suspicious promptness, and the Staff Officer jotted it down in his notebook.

"Then you'd better both of you get ready," he told Geoff. "It'll take the navy a little time to make their preparations, but they are not the boys to sit still and think too long, particularly when an expedition is on foot which promises excitement. I imagine they will work most of the night, and by

to-morrow morning early they will be ready to steam off into the marshes. In the meanwhile you had better hunt up this native that the chief has mentioned, and interview him. Offer him a reasonable reward, to be paid after the successful termination of the business."

By nightfall Geoff had fully carried out the instructions given him, and, having visited the naval contingent, learned that a small motor-launch would be fully armed and provisioned, and ready to set off at the first streak of dawn on the following morning. Also, he had interviewed his chum Philip, whose delight and enthusiasm were almost overwhelming. They were up shortly after two o'clock in the morning, and, having eaten a hearty breakfast, and armed themselves with rifles and revolvers, they stole down to the landing-place, where the motor-boat was to wait them.

"Aboard there!" Geoff hailed, for it was still quite dark, and it was impossible to make out even the outline of the boat.

"Ahoy!" a voice came back. "Who's that?"

"Two officers waiting to come aboard. Have you got that native there yet?" asked Geoff, as an oar splashed in the water and the boat was rowed in close to the bank of the river.

"Aboard this hour or more," came the hearty answer. "Easy does it, now, or you'll be capsizing us! There we are, two officers aboard, and all ready!"

"Push her off, Cox; let her go!"

There was a sound of machinery and the clack of valves as the engine was set going; then the tiny motor-boat trembled as the propeller rotated. A moment later she was stealing out across the river, still hidden in the darkness, and, having traversed a long stretch of water, approached the opposite bank, where the marshes empty themselves into the river. The daylight was just coming, and for a while they lay to, so that the native guide could be sure of their position. Then a sharp order was given, the propeller thrashed the water again, and in a little while they were threading their way amidst a mass of reeds and islands of oozing mud, which formed the eastern boundary of the marshes. In less than five minutes they were entirely lost to view, and were launched on an expedition which was to prove as interesting as it was exciting.

CHAPTER VI

An Exploring-party

"And now, supposing we lay to a little and think about some breakfast? Not a bad idea that, eh?" exclaimed a cheery individual, upon whose brawny figure Geoff's eyes had many a time been fixed during the half-hour or more which had elapsed since the motor-boat had stolen so silently and secretly from the main channel of the Shatt-el-Arab into the wastes bordering the River Euphrates, and who seemed to be in command of the expedition.

He was a moderately tall, broad-shouldered, heavily-built, red-faced, and exceedingly – not to say delightfully – healthy-looking specimen of sailor humanity. His thin khaki-twill garments hung loosely about him – for if young subalterns, like Philip and Geoff, must needs have their clothes for active service cut almost as smartly as for residence in London, there were others, older than they – wiser, let us dare to venture – who, with much experience behind them, preferred comfort to elegance, and ease to any degree of smartness. Underneath the helmet which clothed the head of this naval officer was a broad and very rubicund face – as we have already mentioned – a strong, open, and peculiarly prepossessing figure-head, which was seamed and lined, partly by the action of the sun, but more by the almost constant smiles of the owner.

"Just shut down that throttle, Marsden," he called cheerily to the man operating the engine; and then to one of the sailors right for'ard: "You can let go that anchor, Clark. Now, boys, we'll pipe down to a meal and a smoke of tobacco, for there's no violent hurry. Glad to meet you two young officers. I'm Commander Houston, lately of H.M.S. – , the ship the Admiralty authorities in Whitehall insisted on keeping in the Persian Gulf – a nasty sort of a place that Persian Gulf, I can tell you. Aboard-ship life in those parts is worse than any 'hole in Calcutta', and when the hot weather comes, phew! it's a wonder that a white man survives, and to me it's a miracle that I remain so robust and stout, when you'd expect me to get as thin as a lath, and waste away rapidly."

Waste away indeed! No one who cared to look at the jovial Commander Houston would ever imagine that to be possible, to have been probable even at any stage in his career. For the man was heavily built, as we have said, his bones well covered with muscle, and the latter clad with an amount of fat which made his figure rather rounder than was desirable. Geoff smiled back at him, while Philip unbent and let himself go in a moment. They couldn't help themselves, for the Commander made them feel at ease almost immediately. His smiling crew, the oil-stained individual who worked his engine, the Cox who sat right aft with the tiller, every one of them smiled, as if happy to be in his company.

"Looks jolly promising," Philip told his chum *sotto voce*, "It never occurred to me before that in joining this expedition we might have found ourselves under a high and mighty sort of fellow, who would order us about like dirt, just because we're junior subalterns. Ahem! Breakfast? Rather!"

"And to think that we had a meal just before we left our side of the river," said Geoff; "but I'm hungry enough, and ready for anything."

By now the Cox had gone for'ard, where the tall, raw-boned, grey-bearded native – whom Geoff had interviewed on the previous day, and who was said to have an intimate knowledge of the marshes – had now joined them. The Commander himself came aft from the central cabin, in which he had been stationed, and sat himself down near the two young infantry officers, and, opening a locker, pulled out a basket of provisions.

"The man who wants to get on in the world, and carry out a job successfully, must look after his health whatever happens," he smiled at them. "So, having started this expedition successfully, and slipped into the marshes with, I feel sure, no one being the wiser, we can look after the inner man before proceeding farther. Which one of you young officers happens to be known as Geoffrey Keith?"

"Guilty, sir!" Geoff told him, with a laugh. "I am the individual."

"Oh!"

At once our hero felt himself being surveyed with that same sort of polite, yet searching scrutiny which the General and his Staff Officers had directed upon him. Perhaps it is a habit of the Services; more likely it is a habit engendered in men placed in a position of command, who wish, in the space of a few seconds – seeing that often enough there is no longer for the purpose – to sum up those who are to serve with them, those upon whom they may have to call for action, and to assure themselves at the very commencement that they are to be fully relied upon.

"Oh!" he said at last, as he dived into his basket and produced a Thermos bottle, some cups, and a paper parcel. "Young enough, at any rate, Keith, but they tell me not too young to stand fire. Ah! Ah! Tales do spread, don't they? Never saw such people as the army for gossiping! I give you my word that, long before this expedition was mooted, I knew all about a fellow with a thundering fine Arab who had gone out and captured an Arab chief. That's you, eh, Keith?"

It was hopeless for Geoff to attempt to hide his modesty, for the very flush which rose to his cheeks seemed to raise the mirth of this naval officer. He glanced sideways at Geoff as he chuckled loudly, and then handed him a ponderous sandwich and a cup of steaming coffee.

"And the other young officer?" he asked between his own mouthfuls.

"Philip Denman, at your service," laughed the owner of that name, entering into the fun of the moment. "You don't happen to have heard any sort of report about that officer, do you, sir? That is to say, anything against his character, I hope."

"Well, not at present," the Commander laughed back at him, enjoying the joke immensely. "Nothing at present. But you never know! For before we are out of this business there may be lots of opportunities for reports, good and bad and indifferent. But just listen to this: I feel like a schoolboy, for I'm off on a jaunt, after being tied up aboard ship for two months and more. This expedition ought to be like a holiday; and, of course, if we happen to run into the Turks and have a little affair of our own, why, who knows? a poor chap who has been condemned for more than a year past to steam up and down the Persian Gulf may be promoted to something better. Now, Keith, another sandwich. No? Well, well, save it up till later. A pipe then? Oh, you don't smoke pipes! Then turn on your own particular brand of cigarettes while I light my pipe. And now let's have a sort of council of war. I ought to explain that I know precious little about this business. I have been told that these marshes extend for perhaps fifty miles, and even more, due west from the Shatt-el-Arab, and running a little north as they go westward; in fact, following and embracing the course of the River Euphrates. Turks are said to be hiding somewhere about in the marshes, and our job is to find 'em and rout 'em out if we can, and, if not, to bring back information."

He looked at Geoff inquisitively, and the latter nodded with energy.

"Quite so, sir!" he said. "We have brought a native along with us who knows the marshes."

"And a precious-looking old scoundrel he is too," laughed the Commander, turning his eyes towards the bows of the boat, where the native sat on his haunches amongst the sailors, consuming their rations with such energy that there was little doubt that they met entirely with his approval. "A precious-looking old scoundrel too," the Commander repeated; "but no doubt under that dusky skin of his there lies hidden something admirable. It seems to me, Keith, that the first thing for us to do, now that we have looked to the inner man, and have commenced to soothe our nerves with tobacco, is to cross-examine that old scarecrow, and find out something of what he knows about the marshes. I understand that that is your particular job, seeing that you are something of a linguist."

Geoff flushed. It made him quite nervous when people referred to his linguistic accomplishments, and more particularly so when the one who spoke was a merry naval officer who smiled quizzically at him as he asked his question. But a moment later Commander Houston was as serious as he could be, and, stretching out a friendly hand, gripped Geoff's shoulder.

"Only my fun!" he said. "Look here, Keith, there's nothing for you to be ashamed of in the fact that you can talk these Eastern languages. My word! I wish I could! For it would be worth quite a handsome little addition to my daily pay – and that to a Commander in the Royal Navy is something always worth considering. Besides, think of the added interest it gives you in a campaign such as this is! How free it makes you! And what possibility it presents of splendid adventure! Now I wouldn't mind guessing that if you were surrounded by the enemy, and were, as it were, blockaded in one of their towns, you would be quite capable of turning out as a Turk, provided you could get the disguise, and of giving them the slip. How's that, eh?"

Geoff admitted the possibility with a cheery laugh, for no one could be serious when Commander Houston was addressing him.

"I've done it already, sir," he told him, with a grin. "You see, Major Douglas – who's an Indian 'political', and who happens to be my guardian – brought me to Mesopotamia some while ago, and we went right into the heart of the country. The Major knows all sorts of Arabs and other people, and it's part of his job – or was, at any rate, in peace times – to find out everything that was going on; what the Turks were doing, what the Arabs thought of them, and how the various nationalities lived."

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