

Neglected Arabia

Missionary News and Letters

Published Quarterly by

THE ARABIAN MISSION

Five Years Too Soon

CHAS. FARQUHAR SHAW, E.E.B.

When we arrived in Arabia nearly two and a half years ago, we were questioned from all sides as to why we had come to such a country. We gave our reasons for attempting to establish a business in Busrah, and did our best to satisfy the curiosity of the inquiring ones. Now that we have decided to leave Busrah, we are again being plied with the interrogatives "how," "why," "when," and "where."

Before giving any reasons let me briefly run over the history of the Busrah Scheme: About five years ago the Students' Christian Association of the University of Michigan came to the realization that they were doing next to nothing for foreign missions. Having talked over the situation with a number of friends, the secretaries of the Association decided that something must be done to interest the student body. A committee was formed, meetings were held, entertainments were given, prominent speakers were brought to Ann Arbor—all in the interests of foreign missions.

After a careful consideration of the whole missionary problem, it was decided to do something for Arabia. Several conferences were held with the members of the Arabian Mission Board, and Busrah was selected as a suitable place to commence a medical work. The Committee chose Dr. Van Vlack as their first medical missionary and arranged to pay his expenses and salary on the field.

It was also decided to carry on an educational and industrial work in connection with the scheme, and that is why the firm of Shaw and Haynes set up an engineering business in Busrah. Mr. Haynes, Mrs. Shaw and myself came out at our own risk and expense and attempted to start a business that would support us on the field so that we could ultimately give all or most of our time to educational work.

From a business point of view, this was rather a risky undertaking. We had no clear ideas about the country, very little information concerning the business prospects and labor conditions in Busrah, and only a slim capital behind us. Many will blame us for setting out on such an enterprise without sufficient technical knowledge regarding the possibilities of the country. At any rate, we have found out that almost

any kind of business in Arabia is attended with serious risks, and a firm without a large capital behind it cannot hope to run a profitable business. Perhaps we showed a lack of discretion. If we had taken time to investigate, we might have made different plans that would have assured our success. However, nothing can be gained by crying over spilt milk, and as a matter of fact, it would have been an expensive undertaking to commence any investigations as to the business possibilities of Arabia. No man can give a reliable opinion unless he has seen the country for himself and has actually tried to make the Arab work!

After nearly two and a half years' experience in Busrah, I am of the opinion that we started business here five years too soon. Some of the better class Arabs are only just beginning to think about improvements for their country and the Turks seem to be doing their level best to drive all such new fangled ideas out of the Arabs' heads.



BEGINNING WORK ON MISSION HOSPITAL AT KUWEIT.
MR. SHAW SUPERINTENDING

However, there are other factors that tend to retard the development of the Persian Gulf region. In the first place, its geographical position is one of its greatest drawbacks. True enough, the nearest Indian port—Karachi—is only about six days' journey by boat from Busrah, but India produces very few articles that are required for the development of Arabia. Almost all of the machinery imported into Busrah comes from Europe by way of the Suez Canal, and is subject to high freight charges. This difficulty will be partly overcome when the Baghdad railroad is built, but in all probability it will be several years before the road is completed.

Another serious hindrance to the progress of Busrah is the fact that the rest of the world is so surprisingly ignorant of conditions existing in Arabia. Even in India people don't seem to have the remotest idea as to what is suitable and what is not suitable for this

country. In Europe the ignorance regarding things Arabian is more marked, and the Americans are absolutely hopeless. On several occasions American firms have asked us to try to sell such things as electric heaters, steam rollers, etc. Some firms have asked us to sell agricultural implements, but they want us to advance the whole of the price of the article before it is shipped from New York. They don't seem to be able to comprehend the fact that we have to try to create a demand for their goods. They are unwilling to assume any risk themselves, and are not inclined to spend money in order to investigate the field.

I suppose that the worst obstacle in the path of Arabian progress is the Arab. In many respects he is a fine fellow, but he has bad faults. In the first place he is ignorant. In the second place he is lazy. In the third place he is self-satisfied. I fail to see how one could find a worse combination than this. The Arab in general is a poor workman. He can't turn out good work and doesn't want to. If you show him how to do a thing he will tell you that he knows a better way. If you tell him that he has made a mistake, he is always ready with the lie that you told him to do it that way. If you turn your back on him, he is sitting down taking a rest.

The man who takes up a contract with Arab workmen, has a hard proposition before him. He can be sure that every man on the job is working against him and is doing his best to drag out the work. Under these conditions, it is hard to realize any profits. Yet it is possible to teach the Arab if one has a little patience. I was told that an Arab would never learn to use a shovel, but after two days of showing, scolding, praising, and pleading, I had several men who could use a shovel quite as well as any Italian workman.

Some sage has remarked that "he who knows not, but thinks that he knows is a fool—shun him." If everybody practiced this kind of philosophy upon the Arab, there would not be much hope for him. I firmly believe that he can be taught, and until he is taught, the country will continue to stagnate.

As far as I can see, the development of Arabia depends upon three things—opening of railroads to and through the country, the enlightenment of the rest of the world concerning Arabia, and the enlightenment of Arabia concerning the rest of the world. These things can't be done in a day. They require time and money.

Busrah has wonderful prospects before it, and in another five years it should begin to develop. But at the present date we find it impossible to get enough business to pay for the high cost of living in the city, and on that account we find it necessary to return to America.

Taking all things into consideration, I am glad that we came to Busrah. Our experience and investigations have been bought at a high price, but they will be of considerable value to the men in Ann Arbor who are doing their best to help the cause in Arabia. Our leaving Busrah does not mean that the interest in the Michigan Scheme will die out. On the contrary, the Committee in Ann Arbor has doubled its efforts, and is filled with determination to carry on the work to a success. It is my earnest hope and prayer that the Michigan Scheme will receive God's richest blessing.

Reedville-on-the-Euphrates

REV. G. J. PENNINGS

The traveler on the river steamer from Busrah to Baghdad is surprised at the scarcity of population between Kurna and Amara. The palm trees soon cease, and on the low level plain on either side of the Tigris he sees only an occasional small village. One naturally expects the same condition to exist on the Tigris's sister river. So that one is again surprised to find that on the contrary, the region is quite populous. Here the gardens of thriving date palms extend as far as Madina, a distance of about fifteen miles, and are literally filled with numerous villages. In fact, in some places the whole garden appeared to be one vast village. No one knows the exact number of inhabitants, but it must run into the thousands.

Soon after Madina the country becomes one vast swamp on both sides of the river. The Tigris confines itself relatively well within its low banks, except in times of high water, but not so the Euphrates. Through many branches it pours its waters over the land converting large stretches of territory into one broad marsh, so that it is much wider at Nasaria than at Kurna, about a hundred miles further down stream.

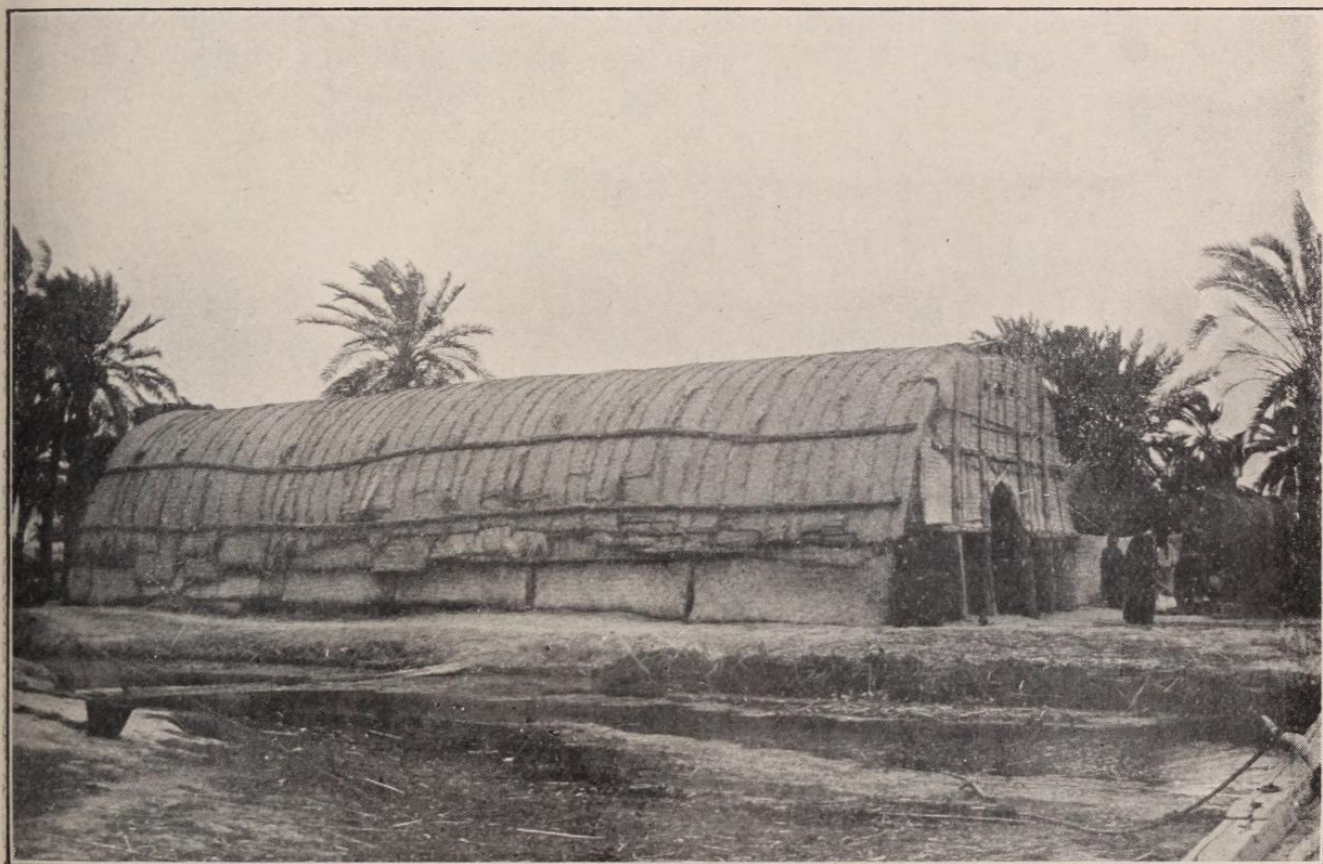
Few inhabitants are to be expected in these interminable swamps, and for some miles above Madina there are but few. It was, therefore, with no little amazement that we came upon the large town of Kabayish. Varying in width from three to four hundred yards, it extends along the north bank of the Euphrates a distance of three, if not four, miles. A grove of palm trees extends the whole length of the village. We were the more surprised because it is surrounded on all sides by swamps and the River; while the opposite side of the River is one vast swamp. It seemed most remarkable that a strip of high ground should extend for such a distance along the north bank of the River only, though it seemed less remarkable that people should choose such a favorable site for a dwelling-place in the midst of such swamps.

We were traveling in company with some government inspectors, also bound for Nasaria. Our party landed to stay over night with Sheikh Salim Khaioun, who entertained us most hospitably.

Kabayish is in very deed a cane city. Practically every building from the large guest house to the smallest hut is constructed of the reeds with which the marshes are covered. The guest house, which is also the city hall of the place, deserves special mention. It is composed entirely of cane. It is fully 85 feet long, and 20 feet wide and 15 feet high beneath the center of the arches. These arches are composed of bundles of cane, about three feet in diameter at the bases, tapering gradually to about a foot in thickness where they meet overhead. In all there are some 18 of these graceful arches. Smaller bundles of cane are laid crosswise and to these the covering mats, also made of the marsh reed, are secured. The floor is also covered with cane mats. We asked how much it had cost to put up the building. The answer was, "Nothing. We get the cane for nothing from the swamps." In communities like these time is not reckoned as having any value.

After asking various individuals a few times how many people there were in the city, and getting answers like, "Many," and "God knows," the Sheikh told me there were as many as 20,000. A city of 20,000 people within comparatively few miles of Busrah and yet almost unknown and hardly mentioned on maps!

Upon asking the meaning of the name Kabayish, we incidentally came upon the secret of the long ridge of higher ground on which the village is built. We were told it comes from a word "kabash" meaning to "build up with cane and mud." Thus the whole place is artificial and we were told the place is at least eighty years old. In fact, Kabayish in a humble way reminds one of Venice. The elevated ground is intersected by innumerable creeks of varying width, which cut the town up into groups of a few houses each. These creeks, evi-



THE GUEST HOUSE AT KABAYISH

dently, were formed by the removal of the earth to form the adjoining patch of higher ground. Because of these creeks it is impossible to walk any distance in a straight course. The means of conveyance is the "mashuf," a canoe-shaped boat constructed of light planks and made water-tight by a covering layer of pitch. These boats skim over the water very lightly, but they are so unsteady that it has been well said that the traveler ought to wink with both eyes at the same time lest the boat lose its balance. Long use has made the men and especially the women expert in handling it.

The Sheikh was most generous in our entertainment. At night he made us quite a feast. Besides a huge platter of rice, the size of a wagon wheel, there were some seventy smaller dishes, filled with

various preparations of rice, meats, gravies and sweets. Nor was he less cordial in the morning, when he accompanied us as far as our boat went.

Though Shias, the people were far less fanatic than people of that sect usually are. They ate and drank freely with us, making no more distinction than if they had been Sunnis.

During the course of the evening we had quite a long argument with the Sheikh on religious matters. He was quite an intelligent man. I was surprised to hear him take the advanced position that the Jesus we worship and the Isa of the Koran are not the same, because the New Testament does not contain their alleged prophesy about Muhammad. One remark he made is worthy of record, for it illustrates the attitude of mind ignorant Muhammadans very frequently take with reference to our civilization. He said, "You people are far advanced in inventions and manufactures, things of which we are ignorant, but when it comes to religion, then we know a little something."

Arab Babies

MRS. H. G. VAN VLACK

There is great rejoicing in an Arab home when a little son is born into it. Every one in the immediate family feels as if he or she had



THE MISSION BABIES

(Left to right) GRACE, ALFRED, NORMAN, GERTRUDE AND MATTHEW

just bestowed some great boon upon humanity. The relatives, even the nearest, treat the mother with far more respect and consideration if she has a son than if she has a daughter. The mother knows that she has a firmer hold on her husband's affections and a more dignified