



The Future in Arabia

An Address by H. G. VAN VLACK, M. D.

NOTE: Dr. Van Vlack has just been commissioned First Lieutenant in the Medical Reserve Corps of the United States Army.

Let me tell you how we celebrated the Fourth of July two years ago. The day was humid and the mercury hugged 112 and 115 degrees all day. No, it did not rain except for the perspiration that fell from us and from the trees in the morning. For there in the Persian Gulf one does not see rain from March to November. We Americans—eight counting the babies—decided to celebrate by having a picnic in the desert in the evening. At sundown we reached the chosen spot, a knoll, so as to catch any breeze hot or cool that might be caught out of doors. Near us was the shabby date-garden with an occasional scarlet pomegranate blossom to be seen among the trunks of the trees. Higher up were the young dates commencing to show their color of yellow or red below the dusty fronds forming the tops of the date trees. In the garden and about it were the huts of grass and date branches. From these came the odors of cooking and other odors not so pleasant. On the desert we saw countless bleaching bones of camels, donkeys, cows, and sheep, lying where they had been dragged from the city dead or to die. Then somehow we were glad that God had made the sun hot to dry up the offal that was uncared for, except that it was removed from under the former owner's nose. We were glad for the wild dogs that acted as scavengers. We were not glad for the mosquitoes that swarmed from every hole and damp place in the irrigated gardens, and which brought the fever under their tongues. We were not glad for the flies that competed with us, and often successfully, in the struggle for the food from our cloth. We were not glad that the children from the huts were illiterate, dirty, and ignorant of all moral and sanitary laws.

That night we thought of our homes in America and all that she had meant to us and to all the people in her charge. Someway we wanted to bring her influence more and more over into that neglected gulf and valley.

But the message that I was asked to bring you was on "Conditions in the East." The East of which I want to tell you is in the Arab country of the Persian Gulf and Mesopotamia, of Moslems, yes, and polygamists, 2,000 years behind the times in the march of civilization. A people backward and unprogressive, but backward because they have been under the sway and domination of the unthinkable Turk. All progress, ambition, and almost their very souls have been crushed out of them. Still they are very democratic in their ideals. To-day the British Expeditionary Force "D" has occupied a large part of Mesopotamia. In the places where the Arab is in full control their government is tribal and paternal of the most primitive type.

What of the country? Is it worth developing? Do you know that the most valuable pearl fisheries of the world are those of the Persian Gulf? That the Mesopotamian valley is as rich if not richer than our Mississippi-Missouri valley? Mesopotamia was the site of the Garden of Eden, of Babylon, of Baghdad the Magnificent. To-day this valley of the Tigres and Euphrates rivers, called Mesopotamia, is almost unscratched. With irrigation it would again become "The Garden Spot of the Earth," and literally feed the world with its dates and grains. In it are nine known oil fields, only one of which has been tapped. From this area comes most and the finest of our dates. From Baghdad before the war there was shipped annually more than a million dollars' worth of wool and hides to the U. S. A. The mountains of Turkey, Persia, and Arabia have never been prospected, but from what little we do know we believe that they contain great wealth in minerals and precious stones.

Now this is their need. They need to be taught to rule and to help to develop their resources. The children need to be taught what real patriotism means, to be good Arabs, not American or English half-castes. They need to be taught values of moral living, sanitation, and the rights of neighbors. This means schools, boy scouts, playgrounds, civic pride, etc. They need to be guided in forming a government and in running it when it is once formed.

Does this affect us and how? Turkey is bound to lose control over these people if *we Allies* win this war and are true to our best traditions. They want a democracy and we are bound to give it to them in the best form that we can. I have tried to show you what a valuable country this is in its natural resources of men, soil, and minerals. England, which is occupying this country, will be pretty well exhausted in men and money by the time this war is over. So I will not be at all surprised if we in America are asked to take a hand in the development of the resources of Mesopotamia.

↓ You say this is visionary—a dream? Let me tell you what I see in the future. I see the Shat-el-Arab, the River of the Arabs formed by the junction of the Tigres and Euphrates Rivers, teeming with laden merchant vessels instead of men-of-war at Busrah. River fighting vessels and transports I see changed into cargo boats to carry the commerce of the two rivers. Instead of cannon and munitions of war moving to the northward, I see produce of America and Europe taking their place. On the military railroads now there, no longer do I see machine guns and rifles, but I see American tractors, plows, seeders, binders and threshers. For, to-day the Arab still uses the crooked stick to plow with, he cuts his grain with a sickle and treads it out with horse, mule, donkey, or cow, exactly as it was done 2,000 years ago. I see the army of occupation turned into an army of development. I see irrigation dams and canals built, grain fields and gardens covering the now barren desert lands and battlefields. Thus will the sword be turned into a plowshare and the spear into a pruning hook.

Our American vanguard is already there. There are American schools, hospitals and licorice plants there and at work. But most of all, the people trust America and believe we are true and disinterested without intending any grab at their country; that we stand to succor the oppressed and give all a square deal. Horace Greeley in his day said: "Young man, go West." I say, "Young America keep your eye on the East. It calls for manhood and leadership just as truly as the West did in Greeley's day."