CHAPTER EIGHT

THE TIGRIS FRONT

Wilson, having performed prodigies of valour and earned the D.S.O., returned from Nasiriyya at the beginning of September. Within a few days the piles of arrears in the office had been worked off, and on the evening of the 19th I left with Sir Percy Cox for the front in the steam launch *Muhammara*, which was to be our office, mess and dormitory for the next eleven weeks. Besides ourselves and our personal servants, Gulam Riza and Sadiq, both Bushiris, our party consisted of: Colonel Sir Mark Sykes*, M.P., who had come out from home by way of Egypt for political consultations, and his British batman; a Goanese cook, Caetan; and finally the crew of four, the Arab skipper, a stoker, and two gondoliers in charge of a balam in tow.

During the night we narrowly escaped being sunk by a large native craft of the type called *mahayla* that came bearing down upon us in full sail and without lights. Mahaylas, the freighters of the Shatt al-Arab and Tigris and a valuable addition to our means of transport, varied in length from thirty to eighty feet with a beam about one third of the length, and in cargo capacity from ten to seventy-five tons. They carried a lateen sail, were often poled in shallow water, and were generally towed up-stream with a rope tied to the top of the mast as well as to the bows.

At dawn we reached Qurna at the old junction of the Euphrates and the Tigris—‘old’ because since the middle of the eighteenth century the actual confluence had been at Garmat Ali—and tied up just long enough to coal and to confer with the A.P.O., Captain A. J. H. Grey. Of Qurna, the traditional site of the Garden of Eden where the tree of knowledge of good and evil, enclosed in iron railings, could still be inspected by the credulous, I need not say more than recall the famous observation of the private soldier of the Norfolks that once he got away from the place there would be no need of any blinking angel with a flaming sword to keep him from coming back again.

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1 [Distinguished Service Order—a British military decoration for special service in action.]
We were now in Marsh-Arab country. As we steamed northwards the palm-groves gradually dropped away to give place to fields of ripening Indian corn. Our skipper at the wheel expressed grave disapproval as a stark-naked figure in the most primitive canoe imaginable paddled rapidly past, and other naked men and boys came into sight on the banks. Male attire, when worn at all, appeared to consist of a single thin cloak (bishit) suspended from the head, with a string round the bare waist into which the cloak could be hitched at the wearer’s discretion, though most of them did not seem to worry about that even when standing talking to women; no loin-cloth, drawers, or similar superfluity. The outer garments of the women, as they sat in front of their own huts, looked simple enough, probably a black turban with perhaps the ends brought down to muffle the throat, and a long shirt, also black or dark blue, hanging loosely to the ankles. It was alleged that when the Turkish steam-launch Marmaris was sunk during the advance women too had rushed naked into the water to take a hand in the looting; but in my experience they always kept themselves decently covered even when wading through waist-high water. In the maize fields near the river there were shaded platforms about a hundred yards apart occupied by little naked boys throwing missiles.