

CONTRIBUTED ARTICLES.

A DIARY OF THE WAR.

BY ANON.

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A DAY or so before Xmas 1916, six of my staff and I had orders at last to proceed by hospital ship up the Gulf to Mesopotamia and to embark at 8 a.m. the day after Christmas. Now Xmas is always such a busy time. From 10 to 12 p.m. on Xmas Eve we crept round the wards, carrying Chinese lanterns and singing Xmas carols. How the lads loved it each Xmas Eve! I have heard them remark, "It is like a bit of home," or "I thought they were angels."

On Xmas Day, the usual visiting and entertaining went on. The officers dressed up and amused the men, and in the evening, we sisters gave them a two hours' entertainment done by ourselves. I remember the "Bombay Times" gave us about 300 words on our show and we felt like professionals.

We did not finish until past 10 o'clock that night and we had all our packing to do as we had to leave at 8 a.m. next morning, so most of us were up half the night!

At half-past six, a.m., I flew over to take a last look at the patients and hospital and had a great lump in my throat. I hated leaving them.

On my return to the sisters' quarters, I found the Sergeant-Major had called out the orderlies and detachments not on duty, and there they stood in two lines, making an avenue for me to my door. I said "Good-bye" to them, and a few Parsee clerks who worked in our Administrative block garlanded me, as is their custom, and presented me with two bouquets. I felt like Royalty, but at the same time, rather a fool all bedecked.

The ambulance came and we and our packages were motored off to Apollo Bunder by 8 a.m. to the steps leading down to where the tender was waiting to take us to our ship lying out in midstream. Our Colonel whom we all loved and officers of the unit and friends had collected here to see us off. I thought we had a great send-off in London and Malta, but this was even greater.

December 26th, 1916.—It was a perfect calm day now that the ship was moving out of Bombay, but soon when all sight of land had gone, it began to roll, and I disappeared as usual for some time.

We always loved to put our heads out of the porthole to see the dawn, and one day or so later, in the Arabian Sea, was very wonderful,—lots of low-lying, fluffy clouds touched with gold. I wish I could reproduce the scene on paper. At night we seemed to sail through nothing but phosphorus; it was simply wonderful, and I believe if the ship's lights had gone out, we could almost have seen to read.

We had not seen land now for three days, but magnificent mountains began to appear on the Arabian and Persian coasts. It became much colder and I was glad of my old tartan plaid.

Later, the fire bell ringing, startled the whole boat into activity. The crew seemed to enjoy this practice, and I am sure it is the only time many of them got up on deck.

Now we passed the narrows, and after the Bombay heat, we felt this cold wind so much that we were glad of our coats which we had not required for over a year. The ship's officers, too, looked wintry for they changed to-day into their winter blue.

December 31st, 1916.—After a rough night we got to Shatt-el-Arab light-ship. How lonely it looked tossing there with nothing in sight! The small boat was sent to pick up the Arabian pilot as we were now at the bar about 70 miles from Basrah. Here we remained for about two hours awaiting the tide, with nothing but mud-coloured, silt-laden waters in sight, brought down by the Shatt-el-Arab from the Euphrates and Tigris. Some hospital ships cannot cross the bar, and patients coming downstream, have to be transhipped here. It sounds a perilous business! How strange it was to feel the ship scraping along the mud. Some ships stick for hours and have to await the tide. We were lucky for we struck the one navigable channel.

We anchored for the night off Abadan on the Persian side where the Anglo-Persian oil tanks are, and what a horrid smell there was.

Earlier in the evening we had passed Fao, the first point captured by the British in November 1914. Both sides of the river were one mass of date groves with lovely "nulahas" every here and there, and away beyond, nothing but desert. We had another lovely sunset that evening with these palms silhouetted against the sky.

Eight miles beyond Sahil our vessel had just room to pass between two steamers sunk right across our course, a legacy left by "Johnny Turk," but Allah was good and their plans were frustrated. It is a very awkward obstruction and the ocean-going steamers have just room to pass dead slow.

January 1st, 1917.—So, on the New Year, we arrived at Basrah and turned over a new and very interesting page of our lives' history. The Matron-in-Chief of Mesopotamia came on board and took me over to her office where we had a long talk. We had met in Malta and India; it was delightful to meet her again, and we were to be close friends for over three years and travel home together in 1920.

We passed through a large hospital of huts (1,070 beds), which became my own in two years' time. Along the hard mud front, one could see our men in blue strolling up and down and many picturesque Arabs running about.

As we had to proceed up river by paddle-boat, and it was not ready for a day or so, we were housed in the sisters' quarters of this hospital on the banks of the Tigris.

Next day, we had a walk through the palm plantations of Ashar to an Army and Navy stores, just a rough shanty with a few things in it; but we were able to buy a few warm "undies," for January in Mesopotamia is bitterly cold.

We went through the native bazaar, full of rough, busy, picturesque Arabs, but our military police made way for us. On our way back to our quarters, at a native village made of palms, we bought some eggs to supplement our rations for our journey up river. Often we walked backwards in order to view the sunset.

January 4th, 1917.—We thirteen sisters left Basrah at 2 p.m. in a motor launch which took us upstream to berth 3, where our flat-bottomed paddle steamer was awaiting us, and being piled up with all kinds of things for the trip up river. What a busy spot! You must have seen pictures in the illustrated magazines showing the endless stores being shipped up river. On each side of our paddle steamer was a huge flat-bottomed barge, two-deckers, covered in by an iron-corrugated roof. On one side were horses and on the other provisions and fodder.

We all had our camp beds out on deck and slept there curtained off from the Indian and British troops by some sail-cloth. It was a great picnic, and I would not have missed it for worlds!

We did not make way till 6 p.m., and travelled by moonlight without lights. It must be a great river for careful navigation, for it is like a snake with many "devils' elbows," and the mud, silting down, causes such mud-banks so that the course is constantly being altered.

We passed what is supposed to be the Garden of Eden.

January 5th, 1917.—It was such a cold grey morning with showers and thunder and lightning. We passed Eszras Tomb of turquoise blue among the palms. Slowly, we crept round corners. Our width, counting the two barges on either side, was 120 feet, and sometimes we scraped along one bank and bumped hard, so as to get round a sharp corner. It was all rather marvellous. We passed many little villages made of reeds and mud, and whenever we bumped, the Arab men, women and children flocked out and ran along the side, selling live chickens, fish and eggs, and such bargaining went on. We used to get a dozen eggs for 2 or 3 annas (pence) but now they would not give them up for under a rupee (16 pence). Ah! the rags they wore and the filth of them, nevertheless they looked so picturesque.

Our bully beef and bread and butter were excellent, although we did not know when we were eating cheese or butter! Luckily it was cold and we were all so hungry. Bovril soup, bully beef with pickles, and tinned fruit was our dinner last night, and jolly good too! As we were thirteen, the skipper would not let us all sit at one table so he provided a small table, for one, and this the last comer got. It generally fell to my youngest sister whom I had in Malta and also in Bombay,—a splendid little nurse.

We stood almost all day, there was so much of interest to see. Now, however, it became less interesting, all perfectly flat desert, and the sails of the

lovely boats looked as if they were running on the ground, the river twined and turned so. The river was muddy-coloured, the banks were ditto, and so was the country all round. Occasionally we saw a tree!

I quaked thinking of my new work ahead and hoped all would go well. Our Matron-in-Chief was just a little ahead of us, and we would be glad to see her when we arrived in Amarah.

How thankful we were of our great woolly jackets which were dealt out to us at Basrah, for our fingers and ten toes were dead with cold.

Snipers were busy along the banks, and now a little railway, for goods only, appeared on the right bank which ran into Amarah. Aeroplanes were busy overhead this morning and there was always something going on. Some Arab tribes were yelling along the banks, still carrying their live ducks and eggs, wherever the river was narrow and we were likely to bump. I am sure by the look of them and the old pictures handed down, that they have not altered one bit since the days of the Old Testament.

The Tommies got much amusement out of the trip, haggling and buying from the tribes.

How bitterly cold it was at night, but we had hot bottles, three brown blankets, and most of our clothes on, and a macintosh sheet over all, and only thirteen noses appeared above board. We had another thunder-storm and huge hard hailstones fell as big as two peas rolled into one.

We anchored in the middle of the Tigris all night as we could not get up the narrows in the dark, and the moon was clouded. The jackals made night hideous with their yells, but on the whole, we slept well, except for the awful coughing of the Indian troops, we might have been in an acute tuberculosis ward. Some had nightmare and screamed out and we heard the armed guard silence them. There was only one layer of tarpaulin to divide us.

January 6th, 1917.—We started off again at 6 a.m., on such a bitter morning—it might be blowing through snow, and still we are winding and winding up the river Tigris. It was wonderful, but nothing to be seen but desert on either side and occasionally we passed native villages of palm leaves and then these lovely mahaler boats glided by. The whole land looked mud-coloured and so was our tea for breakfast! The bread pudding for lunch was made in the wash basin and the bread and rations lay under our beds. We were all just dying with laughter as we sat huddled together with rugs round us, but at 2 p.m. we arrived at Amarah, which is such a picturesque town with its many palm trees and stately minarets in the distance.

Our Matron-in-Chief met us in a motor launch and we were hurried off to our different hospitals before the pontoon-bridge closed. Our hospital was at a lovely part of the Tigris, with a large block for sick officers, while the men were in huts and tents alongside. The nursing staff had quarters in three or four Arab dwellings communicating with each other.

(To be continued.)