PEEPS AT MANY LANDS
ANCIENT ASSYRIA

JAMES BAIKIE

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Peeps at Many Lands:

Ancient Assyria

by

James Baikie

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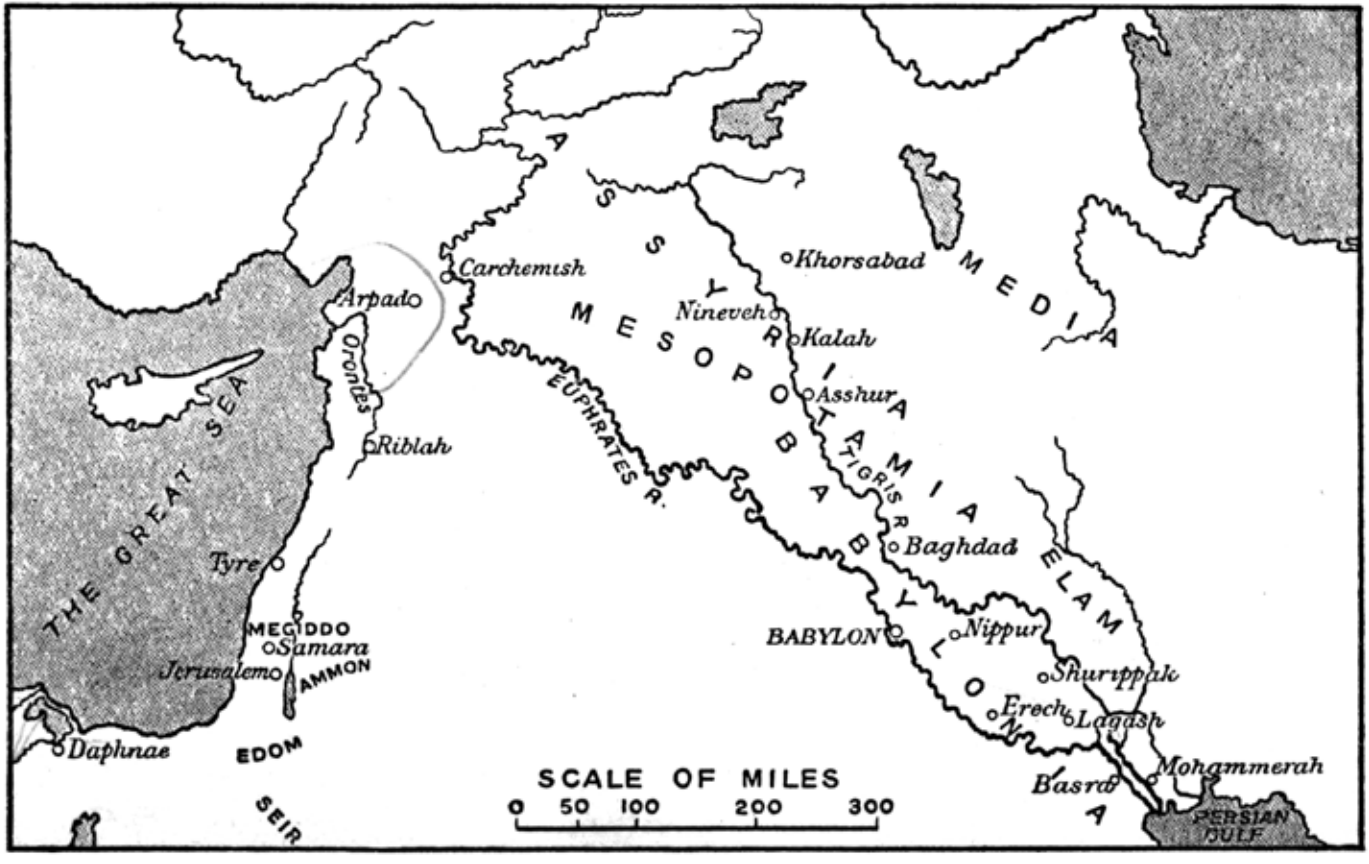
Contents

1. THE CRADLE OF MANKIND 1
2. BURIED TREASURE 12
3. AN ASSYRIAN CITY 2,800 YEARS AGO 28
4. THE KING GOES HUNTING 40
5. THE WARS OF A ROBBER-NATION 51
6. A KING'S LIBRARY OF TWENTY-FIVE CENTURIES AGO 65
7. HERO STORIES OF THE ANCIENT EAST. 75
8. HERO STORIES OF THE ANCIENT EAST — *continued* *88*
9. THE GODS AND THEIR TEMPLES 98
10. LEGENDS OF THE GODS 105



SKETCH-MAP OF ANCIENT ASSYRIA.

CHAPTER I

THE CRADLE OF MANKIND

AT the beginning of all things, when the world was new and men were finding out bit by bit what they could do and how to do it, there were two countries that were more important than any others. They were both the valleys of great rivers, and it was the rivers that made them what they were. The one country was Egypt — that wonderful land where the Nile comes rolling down from the Great Lake Basin of equatorial Africa and flows for hundreds of miles between temples and pyramids erected by the greatest builders the world has ever seen. About Egypt, two of these little books have already told you.[1]

The other country was known by several different names. There were really two kingdoms in it — Babylonia and Assyria; but the name that was given to the whole country by all the other nations of the world, though it sounded different in the various languages, always meant the same thing. If it was a Greek who spoke, he said "Mesopotamia"; if it was an Egyptian, he said "Naharina"; if it was a Hebrew, he said "Naharaim": but they all meant "Between the Two Rivers," or "The Land

1 Peeps at Many Lands: "Ancient Egypt," by J. Baikie; "Egypt," by R. Talbot Kelly.

of the Two Rivers," for the great feature of the country was that it lay between two big rivers, the Tigris and the Euphrates, which come down from the mountains of Asia Minor and flow southeast into the Persian Gulf.

If you will look at your map, you will see that almost from the northeastern corner of the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf there runs in a slanting direction a comparatively flat strip of country. It is rather hilly, or at least high upland country, at its upper end near the Mediterranean, but it grows flatter and flatter the further you go east, till, near the Persian Gulf, it is as flat almost as a table. On the one side of this land rise the great mountain ranges that form the outer wall of Kurdistan and Persia, huge forbidding hills, with only a few wild and narrow passes leading up into their solitary fastnesses; on the other side, the great desert rolls away towards Damascus and Arabia, wave after wave, mile upon mile, of barren sand and shingle. But the land between, wretched and poverty-stricken as it looks now, was once the Garden of the World — the place where men first learned to be men and not brutes, and where the two great rivers, as they rolled on towards the sea, reflected the walls and towers and temples of many of the oldest and greatest cities that the world has ever known. Egypt is the only other land that can claim to have a story which goes back as far as that of the country about which we are thinking.

Far away up in the mountains of Asia Minor there lies a little mere or lake called Gioljik, and here the more northerly of the two rivers of the land, the Tigris, takes its rise. It flows almost straight for the sea, running so

swiftly all along its course that the people of the country call it "Dijla" ("The Arrow"), and cutting for itself a deep trench below the level of the plain. The other river, the Euphrates, rises among the hills still further north and east than the Tigris, and heads at first straight for the Mediterranean, as though it meant to cut through the narrow neck of land which keeps it from the middle sea. Changing its mind, however, it sweeps round in a great bend to a course roughly parallel with that of its sister stream, though a considerable distance south of it, and flows on towards the Persian Gulf much more deliberately and sluggishly than its northern neighbour.

The upper part of the land between the rivers is more or less hilly and bare; but gradually the slopes become less steep, and the land becomes a level plain, which, indeed, has been made by the mud and silt brought down by the two rivers. At a place called Kurna, in the plain, the two rivers unite, and the single stream, now called the Shatt-el-Arab, rolls slowly to the sea, past the dirty and unhealthy ports of Mohammerah and Basra. Many hundreds of years ago the plain did not extend nearly so far, for the sea came further inland. Mohammerah, which is now 47 miles inland, actually stood on the shore in the time of Alexander the Great; and we know that another place which is now 125 miles from the Gulf used to be a seaport. But that was more than 5,000 years ago, and every day since then the great rivers have been bringing down soil from the mountains and laying it down in the plain, and so pushing the sea further back.

Now it was on this flat plain, between the uplands of

the two rivers and the sea, that the cradle of mankind was first rocked, and that the infant human race first opened its eyes and began to see what a wonderful place this world might be. Later, the uplands lying further up the rivers became important also, and, indeed, I shall have more to tell you about them than about the plain; but it was the plain that first became important. That was so long ago that you can scarcely imagine how long. In all likelihood that first settlement of men which the Bible describes as the Garden of Eden lay somewhere in the plain between the rivers — indeed, the Bible says that one of the rivers that watered it was the Euphrates. And it was here that men first began to build cities and towers and temples. One of their towers has become forever famous because the Book of Genesis tells of it as the Tower of Babel; and when we hear that name we know pretty well where we are, for Babel and Babylon are the same name — the one is "The Gate of God," and the other "The Gate of the Gods" — and the Tower of Babel was, no doubt, the great temple-tower that the first builders of Babylon reared to the glory of their god.

Nowadays you would not think that there ever had been much of the garden about this country. It is wild and bare and desolate. Higher up the rivers especially, there are stretches which are gay and bright with greenery and wildflowers for a little while in early spring, but they quickly get parched and dry when summer comes; and the lower parts are all dotted over with swamps filled with the water which the rivers leave behind them after the annual floods — swamps where fever, and ague,

and malaria breed continually. The only things that break the monotony of the great bare plains are a few unsightly heaps, very like the rubbish heaps that are piled up around our coal-pits and shale-pits; and altogether you can scarcely imagine a more doleful or uninteresting-looking country.

But all this was once very different. At every spot where there is now a mound, there once stood a great town, with its walls and palaces and temples, its busy market-places and its crowded streets; and the land between the towns was one of the richest soils in the world. A great Greek writer, called Herodotus, travelled all through these countries several hundred years before Christ, and has left the story of his journey. Among other things he says that he won't tell all that he saw, because people would never believe it, for never was there known such fruitfulness as that of Babylonia. But he says that the seed often yielded three hundred fold, and that the blades of corn were often three and even four fingers broad. To look upon the land now, you would think that Herodotus was only hoaxing you with traveller's tales; but we know that many other things he tells us are quite true, and so it is natural to suppose that he is telling the truth in this also. He describes, for instance, the funny old round leathern boats that the people used on the rivers; and not only can we see the same boats represented on their sculptures, but the folks actually use boats exactly like them on the rivers to this day. Besides, many other ancient writers confirm what Herodotus says about the fruitfulness of the country.

The reason of the difference between then and now is that in the old days the kings and governors used to take great pains to see that the floods of the rivers were regulated and used to water the land by means of canals. A king used to be as proud of the canals he had dug as of the conquests he had made. And so, when the floods came down, the sluices of the canals were opened, and the flood-water was distributed through all the land, and used to water the dry parts instead of spreading itself uselessly over the low-lying ground. If the canal system had been kept up and looked after, the land to-day would be as rich as ever. But whenever the Turks got possession of the country, they neglected this, as they neglect everything useful, and all the wonderful canals of the old kings have long since gone to wreck and ruin. You can still see the beds where they ran, with the banks on either side stretching across the plain. Indeed, the best roads to-day follow the beds of the old canals. But now the water is allowed to go to waste, or worse, to make the land into a sour swamp, and the whole country almost is desolate. Still, if wise and good governors were to get it into their hands once more, and were to remake the canals and keep them in proper working order, there is no doubt that this wonderful old land would be as good as ever again before long; and perhaps that may come to pass in our time too.

Now about the very earliest history of this country, the time when men were just beginning to become civilized, and were still using tools and weapons of stone, we cannot tell so much as we can tell about the same time in Egypt.

For the land in Mesopotamia does not preserve the relics of the past so well as the dry sandy soil of Egypt does. Still, we can go back a very long way indeed. And we can see that what happened was something like this: A cluster of people would gather together for convenience and for safety, and gradually they would form a little town. Bit by bit the town would grow bigger. Strong walls would be reared to protect it, all built of brick, for there was no good building stone in a country made of mud, like Babylonia, as there was in Egypt. And then would come a temple to the god who was supposed to watch over the town, and beside the temple rose a tall tower, built, just as a child builds a castle with wooden bricks, in stages, growing smaller and smaller as they went higher. And then the big man of the town, who was both king and priest, would require a big house to live in; and so by-and-by there grew up a palace beside the temple and its tower; and you had a city-state complete. Round its walls lay the fields which the citizens farmed, going out to their work in the morning when the gates were opened, and coming home again at sunset before the gates were shut; and beyond the ploughed fields lay a wider circle of pasture-land where the flocks of the townsfolk were driven out to pasture, and were watched over by shepherds and herdsmen. It was a little kingdom, quite compact and complete within itself.

But if you went up to the top of the temple-tower, and looked across the plain, you would see, far away on the horizon, the top of another tower, like the one you were standing on, gleaming in the sunlight. There was

another city-state at the foot of that tower too; and by-and-by, as the two towns grew bigger and the circles of fields and pasture widened, the borders of the two states would meet, and then there was trouble. The herdsmen and shepherds quarrelled and fought, and somebody was killed. And then the citizens of the town that had lost a man took down their spears and helmets and big shields and went on the warpath against the other town. There was a battle, and the victorious side took possession of as much of the land of its enemy as it could hold. Or perhaps one town conquered its neighbour altogether, and then went on conquering the other towns round about until it had made quite a little kingdom for itself. When that happened, its priest-king gave himself no end of airs. He called himself "King of the Four Quarters of the World," and thought there was nobody like himself — till somebody stronger still came and tumbled him down and set up another little kingdom.

So things went on for hundreds of years. The whole country was dotted with these little city-states, and its history is nothing but their squabbles and struggles. But all the same, men were advancing all the time, becoming wiser and more skilful, and better able to govern themselves. And when everything was ready, the right man came to knit things together. His name was Hammurabi, and he reigned in Babylon much about the time when Abraham the Hebrew came from this land into Palestine, say somewhere about 2,000 years before Christ. He really drew the whole country together into an empire, and made wise laws, and saw to it himself

that they were carried out, as a good king should; and altogether he did a wonderful work for the country. But after the great man's death, as often happens, things did not go so well. And then a great raid of wild tribes from the highlands of Asia Minor swept over the land, and broke all settled government in pieces, and things were very miserable and confused for a long time.

But meanwhile, and for a considerable time, some of the folks from the plain had been moving upstream into the more hilly country; and there in the bracing air of the uplands, and with plenty of fighting to do, both against men and wild beasts, they were growing into a strong, bold race, fiercer and more warlike than the people they had left behind in the plain. They took with them their native god, whose name was Ashur; they built a city for him, which they called Asshur; and in course of time they came to be known as the Assyrians, and their land as Assyria. And when Babylonia came, for awhile, to grief, as we have seen, they began to come to the front and to claim a right to be the lords over all the ancient East. And from the time when they set out to conquer the world, the history of the East for hundreds of years is just the history of how the Assyrians and the Babylonians fought — sometimes with one another, sometimes with the smaller nations around, sometimes with distant Egypt — for the mastery of the old world.

They were cruel and greedy almost beyond belief, and some of the things which they did were even more dreadful than the things we have been hearing of in the Great War. But both Assyrians and Babylonians were

very wonderful people. They built great cities all over the land — two of them so great that the very names of them, Nineveh and Babylon, have always stood for all that is greatest in the way of a city in the world. They piled up huge temples to the gods, they executed wonderful works of art; they gathered great libraries of books, about which I must tell you later; they learned to trace the motions of the stars, and so laid the foundation of our modern sciences of astronomy and navigation. And then God's judgment came upon them for all their cruelty and their pride. First Babylon, with the help of the Medes, wiped Assyria off the map; and then the Medes and the Persians turned on Babylon and made an end of it.

Then came hundreds of years of darkness, when the Persians held rule over all that Assyria and Babylon had once possessed, and when Persian and Greek fought fiercely for the mastery. And all that time the memory of the greatness of these old countries was slowly dying out of the world, and the dust of ages was covering the ruins of their great cities, until at last they had disappeared altogether from man's sight and knowledge, and no man could tell where "Nineveh, that great city," had stood. Babylon still lived on, a poor ghost of former greatness, for a time; but even Babylon at last was hidden under rubbish heaps and lost to human knowledge; and as for all the other great cities, the place that knew them once knew them no more. Four hundred years before Christ, the great Greek soldier and writer, Xenophon, led his Ten Thousand Greeks past the ruins of some of the greatest cities the world had ever known, and all that

he could learn, with the names all wrong even then, was that such and such a city, great and impregnable, had once stood there; but the gods had made its inhabitants senseless, and so it fell.

Then even that little glimmer of light went out, and there was darkness absolute. And the land went back more and more to wilderness, and the desert sands went on drifting, drifting, and piling higher and higher over the relics of vanished splendours. Sometimes a traveller told a story, that nobody more than half believed, about great mounds in Mesopotamia that were supposed to cover ancient Nineveh and ancient Babylon, or even brought back with him a brick or two with strange writing upon it that no man could read. But that was all, until in the middle of last century the buried cities of this ancient world began suddenly to rise out of their graves, and the whole world stood astonished at the glory that was revealed. How it all happened I must tell you in the next chapter.

CHAPTER II

BURIED TREASURE

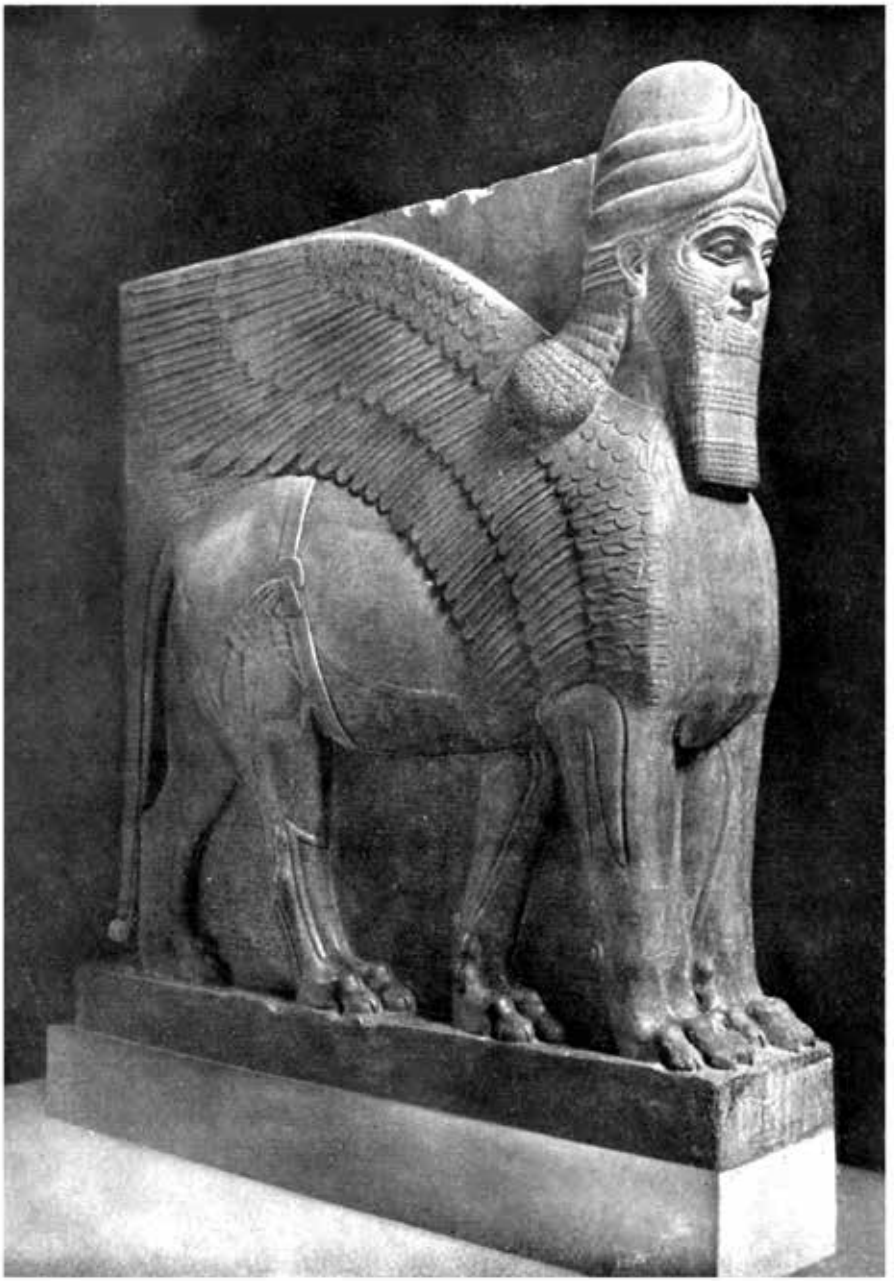
WE have all been fond, at one time or another, of reading stories of the search for buried treasure, and have felt the strain of excitement as the spade of the adventurer jarred upon the lid of the iron-bound chest full of gold and jewels. But I question if ever any searcher after Captain Kidd's or Teach's hoard had a more thrilling time or more wonderful fortune than fell to the lot of the men who first dug their trenches into the great mounds that covered some of the buried cities of Assyria. It was to a Frenchman that the honour fell of being first in the field. In 1842, M. Paul Emil Botta was sent out to Mosul as French consul, and almost immediately began to make excavations in a great mound called Qoyunjik, not far from Mosul. For a good while he had no luck worth talking about, and he was almost ready to give up in despair, when a wandering Arab who had stopped to watch Botta's diggers at work — and no doubt to wonder how Allah should ever have made such fools as these Frank infidels — told him that in a mound called Khorsabad, about five hours' journey from Mosul, there

were plenty of the sculptured stones and lettered bricks for which he was looking.

Botta scarcely believed the man, but after a time he decided to give the new mound a trial, and his workmen had scarcely settled down to dig when they began to uncover parts of a wall that had been sculptured with figures and inscriptions. The consul came at once himself as soon as he heard of their success, and then, day after day and week after week, as the workmen dug further and further into the mound, the walls and galleries of a great palace began to come to light. Of course it was only the lower part that was left; but all along the walls stretched wonderful sculptures, representing scenes of war and triumph, scenes of hunting and of feasting, while the doors of the rooms were guarded by strange and mighty creatures carved in stone, with the heads of men, the wings of angels, and the bodies of lions or bulls. When Botta sent home the drawings of his great discoveries — and still more when the actual sculptures themselves arrived in Paris — the excitement and admiration of the French knew no bounds. Fresh helpers were sent out to enable the consul to complete his work; and bit by bit the whole palace was revealed, and a part of the town which crouched beneath its walls.

It turned out that the palace and the town had been built, about 700 years before Christ, by a great Assyrian king and conqueror named Sargon, the man who captured Samaria and destroyed the kingdom of Israel. He had planned a magnificent house for himself to rest and take his pleasure in after all his wars were over, and

PLATE 2



W. A. Mansell & Co.

WINGED MAN-HEADED LION (pp. 16–17)
From the sculpture in the British Museum

it was quite easy to trace what the different rooms had been like — where the great reception-halls had been, and where the bedrooms, the kitchens, and the cellars of the great palace — and to follow the line of the huge walls that made the palace into a strong fortress, the citadel of the town which lay around. But strong though the palace was, it did not prove strong enough to protect the man who built it. The great soldier-king had only enjoyed his splendid new home for a little while when he was murdered in his own palace by conspirators; and after that the magnificent buildings were gradually deserted, as though the curse of the king's blood lay upon them, and Dur-Sharrukin, "Sargon's Burgh," fell into ruins, and lay unknown for centuries till the spades of Botta's workmen brought it to light again.

Meanwhile, a young Englishman, Austen Henry Layard, was waiting at Constantinople, where he was attaché to the British Embassy, for his opportunity to engage in similar work. He had already travelled through the country, and had marked down one of the big mounds, called Nimrud, as the one he would like to excavate. Moreover, he had met Botta, and the two men had taken to one another at once. When Botta began to make his great finds at Khorsabad, he used to send his reports and sketches to Layard before they were published, and you can imagine how eager the young Englishman at Constantinople grew, as he turned over the wonderful pages, and how he longed for the time when he too would be able to have his share in these great discoveries.

At last his chance came. His chief, Sir Stratford Canning, knowing of his anxiety, offered to contribute £60 towards the cost of digging, and with this sum and a few pounds of his own to help it out, Layard set out from Constantinople to excavate the buried cities of Assyria. He was so eager to get to the scene of his work that he galloped night and day across the country without taking rest, save to change horses at the post-stations, till at last, twelve days after setting out, he reached Mosul, and was almost on the spot where he meant to work. He had to be very careful, however, for, though Botta was friendly, other Europeans were not, and the Turkish pasha, who was pretty bad even for a Turkish pasha, would have been only too glad of an excuse to get rid of him. So he made a great show of going to hunt, and displayed boar spears and guns, while secretly buying the few tools that were needed for his work, and at last, on November 8, 1845, he drifted down the Tigris on a raft with three companions, and landed beside the great mound of Nimrud.

Next day he started digging with a staff of six Arab workmen. Layard set them to work at two likely spots on the mound, and they had scarcely begun to dig before it was evident that they were going to be successful. Slab after slab of sculptured alabaster which had once lined the walls of an Assyrian king's palace came to light, and before he lay down to sleep that night, Layard had discovered two palaces — a very fair beginning for one day's work with six men. Of course it was only a beginning. The walls had to be followed up and traced so that the

plan of the various rooms and passages could be made out. The workmen were unskilled and not very great workers, and the Turkish officials at Mosul, stirred up by some of the Europeans who were jealous of Layard's work, put every hindrance in his way. The very idea that he was digging only for sculptured stones seemed ridiculous to them. They were sure that he was seeking for buried gold. One day his friend Awad came to him very mysteriously, and showed him a few morsels of gold leaf which he had found sticking to some of the sculptures. "O Bey," he said, "Wallah! Your books are right, and the Franks know that which is hid from the true believer. Here is the gold, sure enough, and, please God, we shall find it all in a few days. Only don't say anything about it to those Arabs, for they are asses, and cannot hold their tongues. The matter will come to the ears of the Pasha." He was greatly surprised when Layard told him he was welcome to keep all the gold he found, and his opinion of the wisdom of the Franks greatly diminished.

Bit by bit, however, in spite of all difficulties, the lines of the walls of the ancient palace chambers were laid bare. It was like bringing to life again a long dead and buried world. Here were sculptures of the king making an offering, or pouring out a libation over wild bulls or lions killed in the chase, his attendants holding a gorgeous umbrella over his head, or waving fly whisks to drive away those nuisances. Beside the great man, perhaps, there stood a guardian spirit, with human form, but with eagle head, and great wings outspread. On another part

of the wall you might see the king going forth to battle in his war chariot, his bow bent with a strong arm, and the arrow drawn to the very head, while before him his enemies were fleeing and falling. Or it would be the siege of a town, with archers shooting on all sides against the towers of the town wall, and a battering ram hammering away, and bringing down the walls in ruins, while the king, standing behind, shot arrow after arrow among the miserable defenders.

In spite of the bad weather and continual rain, which made life at the mound very uncomfortable, everything was going well, and Layard's heart was being gladdened day after day by fresh discoveries, when suddenly word came from the pasha at Mosul that the diggings must be stopped at once. It had been found, he said, that the diggers were disturbing the graves of good Moslems, and it could not be tolerated that unbelievers should profane the rest of the faithful. Of course, Layard knew that this was all nonsense, and was only an excuse. Indeed, when he questioned the officer who was appointed to look after things at the mound, this worthy told him quite frankly that he and his men had been ordered by the pasha to manufacture Moslem graves on the mound in order to get up an excuse. They had done it by bringing gravestones from distant villages, quite regardless of the fact that thus they were disturbing the rest of the true believers. "We have destroyed more real tombs of the true believers," he said, "in making sham ones, than you could have defiled between the Zab and Selamiyah. We

have killed our horses and ourselves in carrying those accursed stones."

After a while, however, the opposition began to die down. The old pasha proved too great a rascal for even the Turkish Government to put up with, and his successor was much easier to deal with. Some of the officials at Mosul still tried to make trouble, but the work went gradually on, and the ancient palaces came bit by bit to light. And at last, one day came a crowning wonder of which I must let Layard tell you in his own words. "I was returning to the mound," he says, "when I saw two Arabs urging their mares to the top of their speed. On approaching me they stopped. 'Hasten, O Bey,' exclaimed one of them. 'Hasten to the diggers, for they have found Nimrod himself. Wallah! It is wonderful, but it is true. We have seen him with our eyes. There is no god but God.'" Hurrying back to the mound, he learned to his delight the cause of the excitement. "The workmen had uncovered the upper part of a figure, the remainder of which was still buried in the earth. I saw at once that the head must belong to a winged lion or bull, similar to those of Khorsabad and Persepolis. It was in admirable preservation. I was not surprised that the Arabs had been amazed and terrified at this apparition. It required no stretch of imagination to conjure up the most strange fancies. This gigantic head, blanched with age, thus rising from the bowels of the earth, might well have belonged to one of those fearful beings which are pictured in the traditions of the country, as appearing to mortals, slowly ascending from the regions below."