

TO MECCA

BY ALL-RAIL LINE

THERE is one railway in the world that will always pay dividends, and that is the new Hedjaz Railway in Asia Minor. The commerce of that eastern land is not yet developed to occidental proportions, but the terminus of the road is Mecca, the city sought by every one of the millions who call upon the name of Mahomet. And another fact about the railway that will assure its patronage by the faithful Moslem is that Medina is on its line. Medina, par excellence, the city of the prophet.

In former days the Moslem who would make his pilgrimage to the tomb of the Prophet at Mecca must needs go on foot or on camel back a long journey over desert and waste places. Of course, to make the trip under such circumstances was the more meritorious to the self-abnegating disciple of Mahomet. But the tomb at Mecca was beyond the reach of many hundreds of thousands who had neither the time, the strength, nor the money to expend in the arduous pilgrimage. The Hedjaz Railway will bring Mecca much nearer to these.

Nothing, perhaps, has happened in our time which appeals more strangely to the imagination than the arrival of the Hedjaz Railway at Medina; certainly nothing which more readily would have been scouted ten years ago as a chimerical dream. But the Turk has achieved the impossible and laid his 600 miles of iron track through a country only less rough than its inhabitants, in about the shortest time on record for anything like the same mileage.

The station at Medina was opened with all possible Moslem ceremony. It has been built, of course, outside the walls, and the visitors will now look from it over the Holy City, much as the only avowed Christian not in Moslem service who is certainly known to have seen its minarets looked over it nearly 90 years ago. This was Captain George Forster Sadlier, who was sent in 1819 by the Honorable East India Company on a confidential mission to the famous Ibrahim Pasha, son of Mehemet Ali. The Egyptians had at last worn down the Wahabi resistance, captured the Emir of Nejd and his capital, and overrun Arabia down to the Gulf, and Sadlier was commissioned to concert measures with their general for the extinction of Gulf piracy. But when he landed he heard that Ibrahim had already withdrawn to the west, and he was forced to follow in his track from point to point right across Arabia till at last he ran him to earth at Medina itself. Sadlier was not allowed within the city, but was sent to Bir Ali to keep company with two or three Italians and Frenchmen in the Egyptian service; and he could get nothing out of the Pasha except some trumpery presents. But when he came down to the Red Sea he had crossed Arabia from east to west—a feat which no other European not professing Islam is known to have achieved in modern times—and his eyes had seen Medina.

It is said that Greeks have been employed on more than one occasion to adorn and repair the Prophet's tomb; but these, like Ibrahim's doctors and aides, were certainly in Moslem service, and, likely enough, professing Moslems for the time being. In the latter category also fall the prisoners from the Crusading wars who were settled in and near Medina and are thought to have left a distinct strain in its population to this day. All the rest of the very few Europeans who have ever penetrated within its walls were renegades or pretending followers of Islam. One of these was even its Governor for a few months under Ibrahim. He was a Scot of Leith, Thomas Keith by name, some time in the 72nd Highlanders, but taken prisoner in General Frazer's disaster near Rosetta and made, perhaps not altogether perforce, a Moslem and a Mameluke. He rose to be an Agha, followed Ibrahim to Arabia, and died fighting in the first advance on Nejd. He had been cannily administering the Holy City only two years before Sadlier arrived, and had he lived a little longer, there might have been an interesting meeting between the ex-full private and the rather rigid sahib who held his majesty's commission.

The Europeans who have left any record of their attainment to Medina do not need the fingers of both hands to count them. The first was the Bolognese adventurer, Ludovico Varthema, who forswore the Church, enlisted as a Mameluke, and came down from Damascus with the Pilgrimage in 1503; the next, Johann Wild, an Austrian captive, in 1604; the next a

stout Englishman of Exeter, Joseph Pitts, also a victim of the Barbary corsairs, who followed his master as a slave on the Pilgrimage of 1678. Pitts found an asylum at Smyrna on his way back and escaped to England again, where he sat down and wrote a "True and Faithful Account" of the Holy Cities and of what the pilgrims did therein, which was considered highly edifying by the devout of Exeter and elsewhere and ran through several editions. But the one which came under Gibbon's all-searching eye was not held of much account. More than a century passed thereafter before any other European is known to have reached Medina; but early in the 19th century two men of science, who had embraced Islam, or at least assumed Moslem guise for the time, passed that way—Ulrich Jasper Seetzen, a Russian official in 1810, and the famous Switzer, John Louis Burckhardt, four years later. The first went on to a violent death in Yemen, and has left no description of Medina; the second contracted there the disease which was to kill him before his time soon after he had returned to Cairo, and could not go about the city as he had gone about Mecca; but nevertheless he has given us the best description of it, except, perhaps, that of his follower Burton. He found the famous tomb-mosque, a paltry tinselled place, and the city altogether rather mean and small compared with Mecca, though grown since Niebuhr had reported it to be in deep decline 50 years before. What the Swede Wallin saw there, when he came down from Northern Nejd in 1845, he never related in any detail, but Richard Burton made amends nine years later, and his account of Medina is the most solid result of the famous adventure of Sheikh Abdallah, the Afghan. There alone Burton saw more and could tell more than Burckhardt, but, curious and bold as he was, he was unable to peer within the curtain of the Prophet's Tomb, and so lost the credit of being the first, and so far the only, European who could vouch from eye-witness for the internal character of perhaps the most interesting mausoleum in the world. The short list ends with the name of J. F. Keane, who went up to Medina by the coast road from Mecca in 1878, and is, if we

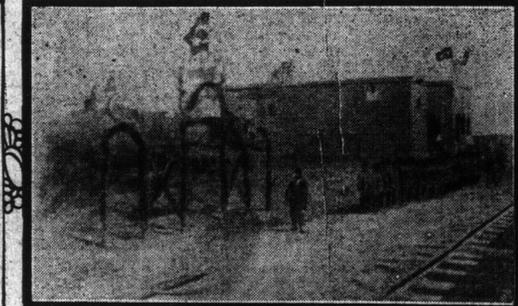
mistake not, still living. A few others there have been, Western converts to Islam in their latter years, but they have not told their tales, and more than one Europeanized Moslem, who has written down his experiences. But from first to last no openly-avowed Christian, the subject of a Christian Power, has passed the holy gates.

The list is much shorter than that of the European pilgrims to Mecca, and it is curious that neither list includes any one since Varthema who has followed the Pilgrimage down the whole of the great haj road from Damascus. Doughty turned off at El'Ala, Burton came up from Yambo. Thus the last completed section of the Hedjaz Railway runs

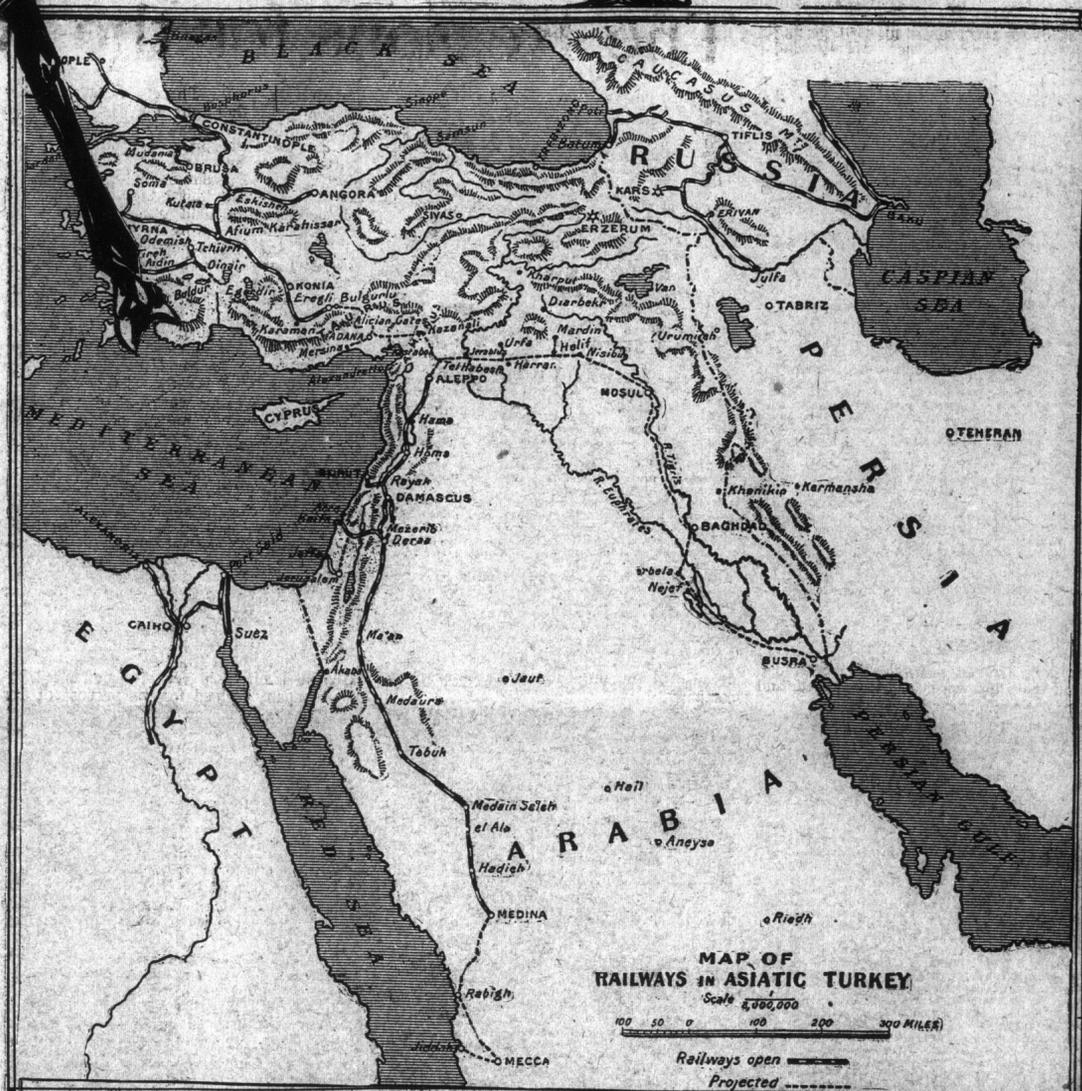
through a region of which geographers know nothing from European eyewitnesses, and will know nothing until the admirable account of the line up to El'Ala, recently published by Auler Pasha in Petermann's Mitteilungen, is continued to Medina. Thenceforward to Mecca little more is known.



THE GREAT CURVE OF THE RAILWAY TRACK AT THE OUTFLOW OF THE TELLECHEAR



A FORTIFIED RAILWAY STATION



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