

FROM BAGDAD TO BABYLON

BY R. A. MacLEAN

"The moving finger writes and having writ moves on."



N excursion from Bagdad to Babylon in a hospital train drawn by an engine of the London and South Western Railway, England, seems almost too modern a method of travel to put one into a frame of mind suitable to enter into the spirit of the past, or to visualize the scenes of ancient days. Add to this the fact that on this hospital train there were in addition to some few officers as honoured guests, a party of seventy-five nursing sisters from the Officers' Hospital, Bagdad, and No. 23 Military Hospital, and an observer might conclude that we were out for a picnic with no other interest in the world but the enjoyment of one another's company in a day's escape from the weary round of life in a hospital—weary, if you are a nurse and perhaps more so, if, like myself, you happen to be a patient.

But before proceeding further perhaps I should remark that it was the 25th of November, 1918; the armistice for which we had all been looking had at last been signed, and the feverish strain and stifling heat, which during four long years had almost wrecked body and mind of many a faithful nurse in Bagdad, was at last relaxed by a privilege graciously extended by G.H.Q. of spending a day amid the ruins of ancient Babylon. And lest my readers may conclude too prematurely that such an excursion, with all its romantic possibilities, was devoid

of archaeological interest, I might state that among the officers present, there were two well-known students of Babylon history, and among the sisters there was at least one whose knowledge of the East was not inconsiderable. So while it may seem ungracious of me to pass over all mention of the charms of those who graced our company, or to omit to dwell upon the lighter side of life which a mixed company usually brings into prominence, I can only plead this ungallant defense, that our company, delightful as it was, was only of secondary interest to the object of our expedition. I trust that this explanation may not materially lessen the interest in what follows.

At half-past seven on the morning of the 25th of November we left Bagdad, and before long the golden towers of Kazimain and the tall minarets of the City of the Caliphs faded in the distance. We were in the desert. Here was silence all about. There was nothing to gaze upon but an interminable featureless expanse. As far as the eye could see there was no natural feature to relieve the monotony of the plain. The desert was wrapped in the stifling dust of a west wind, the heat rose in waves from the sun-baked ground, and the mirage in the west like the margin of that untravelled world, seemed to fade forever and forever as we moved. A little farther on a jackal, or, in the more picturesque language of the East, "a son of retreat", leaped forth from a nullah,