

(November 20, 1933)

Strange Tales from the Far East

BY MR. LOWELL THOMAS.

MR. ARSCOTT:—Gentlemen, we have as our guest of honor today Mr. Lowell Thomas. I should like to say we are very much indebted to the Sun Oil Co. for having brought him to Toronto and making him available at this club meeting. Mr. Thomas, notwithstanding his youthful appearance, is probably the most travelled man in the world today. There are few men who have had lives so full of adventure. He has travelled very extensively in Europe and Asia, including India, China and Japan. He was in charge of two expeditions to the Arctic circle and during the world war was commissioned by the United States government to go to Europe and report the history of the Allies; and in that capacity he came in touch with practically every army in combat on the many fronts. He has also written twenty books, the first of which you will all remember under the title, "With Lawrence in Arabia." Among his other activities he broadcasts each evening under the sponsorship of the Sun Oil Co. Today he has chosen for his address "Strange Tales from the Far East." I hope he will have time also to give us a few of his interesting and numerous experiences on the radio. I have much pleasure in asking him to address us.

MR. THOMAS:—Mr. Chairman and gentlemen, in spite of the remarks the Chairman has made in his introduction I suspect that the most proper introduction I could receive these days would be a cynical remark that a friend of mine made in New York some time ago. You folks here in Toronto are probably not aware of this, but in some parts of the country on the other side of the line I happen to come on the radio just ahead of two rather well-known

fellows, and this cynical friend of mine called me up and said one day, "L. T., when you die they are going to put on your tombstone the following epitaph:—'Here lies the bird who was heard by millions of people who were waiting to hear Amos and Andy'."

Some years ago I made several tours of Canada and my impresario, the big chief, the man to whom I looked for my orders, is now sitting on my left, Major Fred Ney of Winnipeg, of the National Education Council of Canada, and whenever I am introduced I cannot help thinking of Major Ney. One day—I think he was there, at any rate, it was out in Winnipeg—I was speaking at a luncheon and I was introduced by a Colonel in the Canadian forces, a man whom I had known overseas, and I had never known him at a loss for a word, certainly not on the parade ground. At any rate the Colonel had a vocabulary that was second to none. Well, at the luncheon on this day for some reason the Colonel became confused. The Colonel got up and stammered for a moment, uttered one sentence and sat down in confusion. All he said was, "I have the honor of introducing the author of the greatest book that was ever written." I looked around at the faces of some of those distinguished people in Winnipeg, and, if I remember correctly, the Sky Pilot was among them and several others who had written books, and I could tell by the expression on the faces of the people in front of me that there were several who were sceptical. The Colonel passed the Shakespeare and Emerson and Elinor Glyn and all the best people. Naturally my head size became distorted, but before I left Canada it was put in its proper place again. I made my last speech in Canada on the tour for Major Ney in Halifax the night before the Dominion election. I was to speak in Nelson Hall, and the man who was to introduce me was called away to speak at some neighboring town, and at the last minute the committee had to call in someone else, and the man who was called in to introduce me was an Englishman just out from the British Isles. And he said, "I understand that the speaker tonight is the author of a book." Then he went on, "As I came into the auditorium I met a man who had read the

book." And then in the charming British way he put me in my place by adding, "I understand it is readable, in fact you might say quite." And he sat down. So I went back home quite normal I assure you.

Nearly everywhere I go these days, instead of being asked about my experiences in distant parts of the world, I am asked about my adventures in connection with the radio, and one of the commonest questions is concerning the mail that goes with a radio hour. Before I had anything to do with the air I had heard there was an avalanche of mail usually came in. I thought the stories I was told were exaggerated. However, I found they are not. And I am asked what sort of item it is I give out at night that attracts the most attention and brings the greatest response in the greatest volume of mail. Is it some story that concerns Herr Hitler, or something about Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal? Or is it a red-hot story from Hollywood or some thrilling story my friend Frank Chamberlain has put in the *Toronto Star*, or just what is it? Well, in my experience on the air it has not been anything of that kind. The greatest response I ever got came one night when I used a news item that originated in Ireland, sent over by some American correspondent to his New York office to the effect that in Ireland there were some distinguished scientists and archaeologists from the Universities of Dublin and Cambridge engaged in scientific investigation along the River Shannon and these gentlemen had uncovered some ancient tombs and in the tombs had found some skeletons and objects which indicated the tomb was two thousand years old and these men deduced that the skeletons were the remains of the ancient Royal families of Ireland. In my naive American way I had always thought of the River Shannon in connection with comic Irish stories, and because of that I told this story even more solemnly than I would have told about the finding of King Tut's tomb on the Nile. I described it all, and the objects found, I said, indicated it was about two thousand years old. Then my twisted sense of humor got the better of me and I could not resist the temptation to add one sentence. All I added was that these were undoubtedly

the Royal ancestors of Pat and Mike. And you should have seen the response I got. As soon as I came out of the studio in New York the page boy came to me and said, "Every telephone on the floor is being held for you." And a page boy came from the floor below and said, "Every telephone on the floor below is being held for you." I picked up the first one. All the incoming lines of the N.B.C. were clogged. I picked up the next one and it was not Father Coughlin, but Father O'Reilly of Brooklyn. And the telegrams and letters began pouring in, nearly all from Irish people who seemed to think I was throwing something at the Irish race, and they didn't like it. That was in the days when I was associated with famous magazines, before I had risen from literature to oil. Nearly every telegram and letter that came in contained the same sentence. "Cancel my subscription." And they were coming not by the hundreds but by the thousands, and the editors of the *Literary Digest* and the managers particularly, were walking up and down the halls tearing their hair and came and asked me if there was not something I could do to counteract this damage. One lady was connected with an educational institution in the middle west and each child subscribed to the *Literary Digest*. She wrote in and in one letter cancelled seventy subscriptions. I wrote back as diplomatically as I could, explaining my wife was Irish and my firm superintendent's name was Pat and the chief in our *Literary Digest* was a Brooklyn Irishman named Coudahae, and I would be the last person to throw anything intentionally at the Irish race. The most interesting letter was from a lady named Miss Flannigan and all she said she put in one sentence, "I spit on you, you Orangeman."

And another evening I used an item that brought a rather curious response. This came from an American correspondent wintering in Eastern Europe who sent it from the Balkan states. It was a dispatch stating that in a little town in Bulgaria there was a woman who had just reached her one hundred and fiftieth birthday and it was so unusual that all the Bulgars in that town declared a civic holiday in her honor and came out on the central

square. And the little lady stood up and said the reason she lived to be one hundred and fifty was she had always slept with a Bulgarian potato. And you should have seen the response I got. The letter that I had framed came from a lady who said, "I may be eighty years old but I don't sleep with any potato. It would not be hot enough for me." And she put a postscript at the bottom saying, "I always sleep with a hot water bottle."

My friends and acquaintances for years have been making the same remark to me. They always say that they think I have been rather lucky because I have had a chance to spend most of my life wandering up and down the globe. They say, "What an inspiring thing it must be to see the wonders of nature and to go into the north and watch the icebergs break off from the glaciers or to visit Lake Athabaska and hunt for bear and caribou, or get in a plane and fly over spouting volcanoes, or penetrate some remote deserts like the Sahara, or climb some dizzy mountain range like the Himalayas where you can stand on a peak ten thousand feet high and look across the valley at one twenty thousand feet high!"

Of course it is inspiring. But the thing I have enjoyed most of all has been the opportunity to come in contact with interesting and unusual people. I have enjoyed telling the tales of these men I have met; and some of the most picturesque I have known I met in the eastern campaign. I happened to be during part of the war associated with your armies in the near east and, as you gentlemen know, a large proportion of the troops who fought in the Holy Land against the Turks came from Australia and New Zealand and, as you also probably know, next to the Canadian dog-team driver and the Missouri mule-driver the Australians are the most profane men in the world. The fact that they were fighting for the Holy Land did not seem to cramp their style at all, if anything it simply increased their vocabulary. My view on profanity has always been a little unorthodox, having spent most of my youth in a mining camp in the west. It always seemed to me ninety-nine per cent. of the profanity was not profane, because the man behind it had no such intention. It

was simply a case of not having had the opportunity you have. His vocabulary was limited. He wanted to express himself, ran out of words, and simply filled in the blank spaces. And I am sure that was true of the Australians. They were unorthodox also at first so far as military affairs were concerned. I remember on one occasion an English major, trying to find the so-called Walls of Moses, came upon an Australian private and asked could he tell him the way and the private said he had never heard of them, but seeing an Australian captain, he said, "Hey, you, come on over here and tell this British blighter how to get to the Walls of Moses." And the Australian captain did so politely and after the captain had walked away the British major looked down from his horse and said, "How do you get away with that in your army?" The private replied, "Well, out in my country when this war broke out, a lot of us who owned mines and sheep stations and cattle ranches joined up as privates in the Light Horse, and a little later some of the fellows who worked for us went in training camps and turned-up as officers; and that bird was a cow-puncher on my place."

On one occasion there was an Australian fellow who went into the red light district in Cairo and involved himself in some sort of embarrassing difficulty. He described this to some of his associates a little later on and they were all angry over this and decided they would get revenge. They perhaps had a few drinks before the decision. And several came out of Sheppard's Hotel and happened to see the Rolls Royce car of the Commander-in-Chief. They stopped right there and lit a fire under the car and burned it up and went down into that section of Cairo. They got mixed up in a fight and the result of it was some one started a fire and a great section of Cairo was destroyed in one of the greatest fires of Northern Africa.

There was another little anecdote of something that occurred at that time. I think I was probably the first to bring it up. There was an English major who always wore a monocle in his eye and he came out and found his Australians all wearing little round discs in their eyes. And he went right through the day's program as if noth-

ing unusual had happened, making these Australians keep the discs in their eyes. And after he finished he threw up his monocle and caught it in his eye, and he said, "Do that, you blighters," and turned on his heel and walked off. They didn't get the better of that Englishman.

I spent a good deal of time in the Eastern campaign with the 10th Light Horse and it had the reputation of being the toughest of them all and, as luck would have it, it was the 10th Light Horse that played the most important part in the capture of Jerusalem. It was famous for another reason. The men of the 10th Light Horse were natural born thieves. I don't mean thieves in the bad sense. They were robbers of the better sort. They would take anything in Palestine that was not nailed down, as a souvenir, just as the American doughboys did in France. But they seemed to have a padre who understood their psychology perfectly.

Every night the padre would call them together and tell them something of the biblical history of the place. If they were going to fight at Beersheba, he would tell them the story of Lot and his wife. If they were going to fight where Joshua told the sun and moon to stand still, he would tell them about that. The result was that they would go into action and fight with more enthusiasm. And eventually they approached Jerusalem, and the night before the padre told them tomorrow they were going to be fighting on the Judean Hills where nineteen hundred and seventeen Christmases ago the shepherds were watching their flocks, and an Australian said, "Yes, padre, and they had better watch their flocks tomorrow night." And there were a number of incidents in connection with the Palestine campaign which I never related on the platform, when I was speaking to mixed audiences, under the auspices of Major Ney and his distinguished organization.

These Australians involved their British chiefs in some rather embarrassing situations in Palestine. After the capture of Bethlehem they took Jerusalem and, as you gentlemen know, the story of the fall of Jerusalem is one of the greatest tales of all modern history. The complete story has not been told, and it would not do for me to tell it

over the radio, because if I did then I would get a response. Jerusalem, as you know, being students of the Bible, is the holiest city in the world—to the Jews, Mohammedans and Christians, and the Turkish soldiers were entrenched behind the walls of Jerusalem. What was the allied chief of a great army to do? Obviously if the Allies turned their large artillery against the Turks it would demolish all the sacred places, probably destroy the Wailing Wall of the Jews, and that would arouse the Jewish people, and probably demolish the Mosque of Omar on the site of King Solomon's Temple, and arouse the Moslems; and perhaps the artillery would even destroy the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, said to cover the spot where the Saviour is entombed. So Allenby performed one of the greatest feats of all military history. He captured Jerusalem without firing a shot in that direction, not even a rifle. He drove the Turkish army so far back that he pinched the Turkish soldiers out of Jerusalem and they had to flee by night to keep from being captured. And when the next morning came Allenby's army had captured Jerusalem and they were several miles away and they had not even seen it.

I was with the 10th Light Horse. Next was the 60th King's Cockney Division. This was one of the old tales told by Major Gilbert. He lost his voice, and responsibility for the story has fallen to me. There was a cook with this unit who was a most wonderful forager for food. The officer sent out a party with this cook, and asked it to try and find a village and bring back supplies. They lost the way and wandered on down a big broad road. They were on the old road to Jerusalem, up which the cedars of Lebanon had been taken, by which the Crusaders had marched, and they did not know it. And they rounded a bend and saw a hill and on top of the hill they saw a great walled city with walls and minarets. They did not know what city it was. But they were face to face with Jerusalem and they were the first representatives of the Allied armies to approach Jerusalem in almost one thousand years since the Crusades. And they saw a cavalcade coming through the gates and on a big red horse was the Mayor of Jerusalem and he was coming out to surrender Jerusalem

to this great Christian leader. The Mayor with great Oriental solemnity insisted on turning over the key. And the cook said, "I don't want heny keys to heny 'Oly City; what I wants is heggs for my hofficer." But the Mayor insisted and the cook got back and reported to General Watson. Every general wanted to play some part in the capture, so General Watson sent back the cook with the message that he would arrive in a few hours to accept the surrender. Arrangements had to be made to have it done properly.

A few hours later a second surrender was made and the mayor got up on the walls beside the towers of David and made an eloquent speech, surrendering Jerusalem and the crowd sang and cheered. And when General Watson got back he reported to his C.O., Major-General Shea, an Irishman, and Shea sent back a message that he would arrive next day to accept the surrender of Jerusalem. And this is a historical fact, General Watson had to dash into the city and get hold of the mayor and get it done over again. And next day Shea came with his staff and the people were on the roofs and they sang and cheered—not quite so enthusiastically—and the mayor made a speech—not quite so eloquently. And for the third time Jerusalem surrendered. Naturally Shea had to report to the Allied chief, General Allenby, and Allenby sent back a message that he would arrive in a few days to accept the surrender of Jerusalem. So General Shea had to go into the hilled city again and get the mayor to arrange for it to be done all over again. And a few days later General Allenby came with representatives of some twenty-eight or twenty-nine allied nations. There was a Colonel of Cavalry representing Uncle Sam. Spain, Portugal, Italy and all the rest of them were represented. Flags were flying, people were on the roofs and they sang and cheered—rather feebly. The Mayor got up on the walls and made a speech—rather huskily. And for the fourth time Jerusalem fell. And a month later the Mayor of Jerusalem died of pneumonia. The story told of Jerusalem at the present time is that the Mayor died of exposure from having to make that speech so many times. But that is not the incident that would get me into so much trouble if I told it over the radio.

I am sure you will understand the background and will forgive the Australians even if you do not forgive me. You know the Jerusalem of today is not the Jerusalem of old, because the Bible tells us Jerusalem was destroyed, not one stone was left upon another, we are told. So the historical places pointed out to us today may not be the exact sites. But of course, a long, long time ago the first religious pilgrims began to arrive in Jerusalem, and they wanted to know where King Solmon's Temple stood, and where other historic sites were and the people of Jerusalem being hospitable wanted to be accommodating. And as years went on tradition marked these sites, but all biblical students agree, no man knows where these things took place. So that may take just a little of the sting out of what I am going to tell you.

When General Allenby captured Jerusalem he issued an order to his army and it was that none of his men were to enter Jerusalem until after the official surrender. He didn't explain, but every man knew why. He did not want any Canadian from the Yukon or my friend Boyle's Rifles or any big Australian miner or American from the mines of Butte, Montana, to get into Jerusalem ahead of his military police, because he might become inebriated with some of the delicious Jerusalem wine for which the Jewish people are so famous and if that happened there might be some embarrassing religious episode. Well, when that order came to Col. Barney Todd, an Irishman of the 10th Light Horse Artillery, he was disgusted because he figured by all the laws of war and rules of average in war that before the time came for his men to see Jerusalem—and they were the only Australians actually to take part in the capture—it would be just their luck to be shoved to some other point. They might be shoved off to France, or Egypt, and probably never see Jerusalem at all. So Todd, despite Allenby's orders, took them into Jerusalem. The first place they went was the American colony store near the Jaffa gate. Many years ago there was a lawyer in Chicago who had a tragedy in his life and he and his wife went to Jerusalem to await the fulfilment of prophecy, to await the second coming of the Lord. They went into

business, and this is not disparaging at all, they were fine people. Todd made a beeline for that store and bought all the picture postcards in that store and sent one of these cards to each of the rulers of the earth. One went to the Prime Minister, one went to President Wilson, one to the King of England, the King of Italy, the King of Spain, and all the Sultans and Maharajas whose names he could remember. And all he said was, "I have just captured Jerusalem, yours truly, Barney Todd."

But these Australians should be forgiven even if I am not, because after all they were the men who brought true the dream of Jew and Christian for almost a thousand years. They were the men who freed the Holy places.

In conclusion, may I tell of another experience which I had one night in connection with the radio. I have been on the air for over three years and during that time I have made all the bonehead plays that have been made in the history of radio. My predecessor on the air was a chap named Floyd Gibbons. Floyd was a much wiser fellow than I. He always kept a list of words at his side at the desk, words which must never be used for fear he might mispronounce them. If he did it would not be that word it would be another and he would lose his job on the air. I never was so wise. As a result I have always been in hot water. One night I took an item that must be absolutely true, first because it was vouched for by the A. P., one of the greatest press organizations of the world, and second, because it was on page one of the *New York Sun*, one of the great papers of the globe. So it must be true. And it was to the effect that over in Pennsylvania amongst the Pennsylvania Dutch there are still many people who are superstitious, who believe in demons and evil spirits and they have a saying, "blankety blank, blank," to protect them. If one used that magic phrase you were free of all harm. Even a working girl coming to New York or Toronto and using that magic phrase could be free from harm. I thought what could be more courteous than to use that phrase as my concluding words, and "so long until tomorrow."

Well, you should have heard the response I got from

the Pennsylvania Dutch. One college president wrote and said, "Young man, you may know all about some foreign countries and a few foreign languages, but you know absolutely nothing about the 'Pennsylvania Dutch'." Because that sentence didn't mean what you thought it did. Long years ago, probably so long ago you do not remember, we had a gesture in this country of putting one's thumb in one's nose, and," he said, "Your concluding phrase tonight meant the same thing."

The only reason I mention that now is to show you what kind of hot water you can get yourself into if you happen to be connected with the radio, and also because it gives me the honor of expressing the hope that you long ago have been able to use some magic phrase like that in conquest of the so-called depression.

CHAIRMAN ARSCOTT:—Mr. Thomas, I don't know when we have spent a more pleasant fifty minutes. We have enjoyed your most excellent address. You will observe from the rapt attention of the audience that all present have followed you intently. We are glad of the opportunity of welcoming you to the Club and we should like to express appreciation to the Sun Oil Co. for bringing you here. I hope in the future we may look forward to having you with us again.