

(February 14th, 1916.)

Syria and Arabia as Factors in the Schemes of Germany.

BY REV. CANON S. GOULD, D.D.*

AT a regular luncheon of the Club held on the 14th of February, Canon Gould said:

Mr. President and Gentlemen,—The rapidity of modern communications has modified many things in connection with this war, but up to the present at least it seems to me only to have accentuated the importance of the old routes and of the old battlefields. Flanders and the marshes of Poland have furnished marching routes and battlefields for more than a hundred generations. With the extension of the area of conflict we find that the same fact holds true of the Balkan States, and the borders of Syria and Mesopotamia. Therefore my subject to-day is "Syria and Arabia as factors in the Schemes of Germany." And I purpose to deal with it from two standpoints, from the military standpoint and from the political standpoint. From necessity as a layman I speak with a great deal of deference and diffidence on the first point, from regard for the military character of our Chairman.

"Syria and Arabia as Factors in the Schemes of Germany." Since I gave this subject to your Secretary, through the kindness of one of your members I have seen an article published in a leading English Journal on this subject, written by Hilaire Belloc, in which he sums up his conclusions in this way—"The line is already completed with a double track as far as Beersheba, at which point we may conceive that large stores of munitions are already beginning to accumulate."—I am speaking of the proposed campaign against Egypt. I am going to say nothing about the projected attack on India. I only know the territory through Persia by association with men who know it thoroughly; and speaking as a loyal Englishman it seems to me utterly out of the bounds of probability at the present time. Whatever may happen on the frontier of Egypt, the frontiers of India are safe for the time. (Applause.)

Now in spite of the authority making the statement, I want

*Rev. Canon Gould has spent many years in Mesopotamia as a missionary, and was, therefore, in a position to give first hand information of the greatest interest regarding the war in the Eastern area.

to show, in the brief time at my disposal, that he gives altogether too alarmist a view of the situation. It is a most extraordinary streak in the make-up of a good many Englishmen that they seem always under the necessity of making out absolutely the worst case for themselves and the best for the enemy. (Laughter.) Let us take the matter up from the other end. Mr. Belloc says that it would require a third of a million men to invade Egypt successfully. The munitions for such a force must be drawn from Austria-Hungary and Germany. Let us take up this statement and see what considerations may modify his opinion. The Bagdad Railway, from the Bosphorus opposite Constantinople, stretches a distance, as the crow flies, of five hundred miles to Aleppo in construction at the northern end of Syria. When the war began two very serious breaks in construction were still left in this line, one of twenty miles through the Taurus Mountains, requiring several tunnels, one a very long one, and several viaducts; and the other through the Amanus Mountains. From the main line as surveyed it is fifty miles or more to Aleppo. The railway south from Aleppo was built by French concessionaires. I suppose that a proper railway, a railway which best responds to the definition of a desirable railway, is one which has the closest correspondence to the definition of a straight line—the shortest distance between two points—but this one was built under a kilometric guarantee by the Turkish Government, consequently it follows almost the farthest distance between two points; winding down the valley like a snake. (Laughter.) This is a wide gauge railway to the Junction at Riyak where it joins a narrow gauge railway from Beyrout to Damascus. The latter climbs the passes of the Lebanon, two thousand feet high, making use of a couple of switchbacks to attain that level. In some parts there is also a third rail in the form of a cog. We join it at Riyak to pass on our way, over the flanks of the Anti-lebanon, to the city of Damascus.

The Hejaz Railway, so-called, chances to carry pilgrims from the concentration point at Damascus to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, is undoubtedly a military railway, built under a German engineer whom I remember very well, Herr Meisner. The Turkish way of doing things may be illustrated by the fact that this railway was built by the Minister of Marine. The Turkish knowledge of geography may also be illustrated by the fact that a telegram came from the Minister of Marine, that if any British cruisers called at Nazareth, a town which is situated thirty or forty miles inland, the officials were not to allow any of the crews to land! (Laughter.)

The Hejaz Railway parallels the Jordan Valley southwards to the Province of the Hejaz with a junction at Deraa; from there a branch line descends to the Jordan Valley, six hundred feet below the level of the sea, and climbs the valley between Little Hermon and Mount Gilboa up to the old battlefield of the world, the Plain of Esdraelon, and thence passes to the harbour at Haifa, the only possible natural harbour on the coast of Syria.

We now take up the discussion at the point where the railroad southward to Beersheba diverges from the branch of the Hejaz railway which crosses the Plain of Esdraelon. I was there two years ago this very day. At that time they had begun constructing a branch through the mountains of Samaria to the City of Jerusalem, one of the most difficult countries, I should think for a railway, practically bare limestone. They might have taken a better route, through the Pass of Megiddo between Mount Carmel and the mountains of Samaria, by which the Egyptians marched on their expedition to the Tigris, and descended to the Plain of Sharon. A plain country all the way to Beersheba. That route was impossible for this reason, a good deal of it would be open to attack by the British naval forces along the coast.

Just to show you how unreliable many of these articles are, let me instance another article, which is illustrated by sketch maps and makes some amazing statements. The builder of the Hejaz Railway was the Chief Engineer at Bagdad. From the junction at Riyak he drew a straight line to the opening of this pass at Megiddo and marked it as a completed railway to the port of Jaffa, utterly regardless of the fact that in running a railway paralleling the range of Lebanon, he would come to a point where there is a sudden drop of several hundred feet to the hills of Upper Galilee, a lofty region criss-crossed in every direction with deep "wadies," with a further drop to the hills of Lower Galilee and again to the Plain of Esdraelon! Let us remember that not only munitions but everything required for building a railway has to be brought from Germany and Austria. There was only one Scotch boiler in the lower country. It was the property of a German miller; and the country is so destitute of fuel that, in order to keep steam up, he had to burn enormous quantities of the tibbin, or chaff, from threshing. The mere matter of ties is a serious one. Every rail, every engine for the Hejaz Railway had to be brought from Belgium. When the war began there was not a single mile—I speak subject to correction—but I believe there was not a single mile of double track railway in Asiatic Turkey. It surely seems impossible that

they could have completed this difficult section, through a difficult stretch of country, the Taurus and the Amanus Mountains, that they could have changed the narrow gauge to a broad gauge road, remodeled all the engines and all the tracks required, and could have, as Mr. Belloc says, reached Beersheba with a double track, and be accumulating there at this time very considerable stocks of munitions.

Between Beersheba and Egypt there is practically a waterless tract, much of it covered with drifting sand, for a hundred and twenty-five miles distance. The Turks made their raid on the Canal probably with a force of thirty thousand men. That force represented the maximum number which the transport facilities at the command of the Turks would enable them to transport to the banks of the Canal. It seems, for this year at least, utterly beyond the bounds of probability that the Turks, aided by the Germans, could do better than double that number of thirty thousand men. And remember this fact it is only during the three months of February, March and April that the pasturage for the enormous number of camels required, and other animals, would be fairly abundant on much of the route; after April the whole desert route is a sun-baked and a barren wilderness.

From a political standpoint—here I deal more particularly with the second phase of my subject, Arabia—there are four great influences in Arabia and Syria, the British, the Turks, the Germans, and last and not least, to make the fourth, the people of the countries themselves. The English and the Turks entered Syria and part of Arabia during the Wahabi Movement, the great Mohammedan Puritan movement which took place during the end of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth centuries. This Movement brought England from India and the Sultan from Constantinople. The latter to reassert his authority over the holy places of Mecca and Medina. The fact that prayers are offered for the Sultan of Turkey in every Mosque from Delhi to Morocco rests mainly upon his position as the protector of the holy places. I have read most of the proclamations of the Kaiser, and have noted this, that every one could be translated word for word into the Arabic language, and distributed through the Mohammedan world, and would pass muster as the utterance of an orthodox and militant Mohammedan ruler. Only within the past few years, have the Turks consolidated their authority beyond the Jordan. For the three years I lived there I knew that there was not another man of my language and blood between me and the Consul General at

Bagdad to the east; and not one between me and the military forces of Britain at Aden on the Red Sea to the south.

The Turks slowly entered and penetrated that country. They slowly consolidated it. It is only four or five years ago that they ventured to impose conscription, causing a revolt of the native tribes. This revolt was suppressed with the capture of the ancient town of Heran near the south end of the Dead Sea. Many Arabs and other inhabitants were taken prisoners. I have it from one who was in that city, that the evening entertainment after supper on the part of the Turkish Officers was of a most extraordinary kind. There are immense old banqueting halls there, built by the Crusaders. There these prisoners were brought in and tortured in a most excruciating way—I cannot describe it—tortured to death, and their bodies were thrown outside the casements, to be devoured by the pariah dogs and jackals. That was the condition for three or four weeks. The Turk has been reported as acting as a "clean fighter" at the Dardanelles; it may be so, but the Turk facing the European is one man, and the Turk facing his Turkish subjects is another man. Whether dealing with Armenia or with rebellious natives of his own religion, he is absolutely without any bowels of charity whatever. I have entered great subterranean prisons, of which it is needless to speak, filled with hundreds of exiles from all parts of the Turkish Empire; in these at one time were three hundred and fifty Bulgarians brought from European Turkey. They were cast into these subterranean prisons to rot and die.

But I want to emphasize the fact that the Sultan of Turkey poses as the protector of the holy cities of Mecca and Medina, and should Germany succeed in dominating Turkey, bereft of the Hejaz Province, and the holy cities, she could not dominate as she wishes the Mohammedan world. Therefore it is of vital interest that the British power should maintain its status throughout Arabia and Mesopotamia.

A very few words with regard to that status: What is it? Before entering on this subject, I want to make this proviso: the Arab, remember, is a creature of circumstances, expressed in terms of military power, and nothing can be more utterly insane and suicidal than for the British power to launch a small force into any part of that country, and leave it to be surrounded, captured, or destroyed. (Hear, hear.) The Arab is a creature of circumstances, expressed in terms of military force.

Now what are the conditions at the present time? Beginning at Aden, along the coast of Arabia, on the Indian Ocean, and turning up the Persian Gulf, it is an English Protectorate.

Beginning with 1822 and onward, treaties have been made with all the Arab Chiefs. The latter are called Trucial Chiefs, and the League so formed, the Trucial League. The Arab has been taught that the way of the robber and the pirate does not pay under British power. (Hear, hear.) The British Government in India gave to Arabia at great cost the survey of the four thousands miles of Arabian coast, those splendid lighthouses which are found there at the present time, the submarine cables which unite it with the outside world and by its magnificent mercantile marine carries from the ends of the earth everything which the Arab of the interior requires. Britain has two uncrowned kings of Arabia, the British Consul-Generals resident at Aden and at Bushira on the Persian Gulf. The latter composes the whole of the arab squabbles, every quarrel is referred to him as arbitrator. He has two or three gunboats at his disposal, and also a despatch boat. In the Cologne Gazette, about fifteen years ago, appeared an article, by an unknown writer, from which this extract is taken:—

"Southern Persia, the Gulf, Eastern Arabia, and the Land of Oman have fallen completely within the English sphere of influence. This state of affairs has not been officially ratified but exists as a matter of fact. That will last until some movement comes about to restore the proper balance. Meanwhile the English are the masters. They are so accustomed to manage the whole Persian Gulf that if the least thing occurs that they have not foreseen or themselves arranged they completely lose all self-control."

Notice those suggestive words: "That will last until some movement comes about to restore the proper balance. Meanwhile the English are the masters. They are so accustomed to manage the whole Persian Gulf that if the least thing occurs that they have not foreseen or themselves arranged they completely lose all self-control." That is a very characteristic Prussian statement. I imagine, gentlemen, the writer had some very recent experience of the power of Britain on the Persian Gulf and along the littoral of Arabia.

My time is very nearly gone. (Cries of "Go on!") I should like to ask the question, how does the account balance? We find Germany in forcible control of the material and the human forces of Syria, and to a considerable extent of the Arabian peninsula also. We have recently read of the assertion made by one among the German Officers in Berlin, referring to the beleaguering by the British Fleet; the area, he said, from Berlin to Bagdad constitutes an "economic unit" which cannot be beleaguered into surrender. Syria this last

Spring was swept by an unprecedented invasion of locusts; everything was swept clean, even the trees in many cases being barked. A man who has lived in the country many years said there was good reason to suppose that those voracious armies of locusts actually devoured at Haifa one or two infants left inadvertently in their pathways. There is not a great deal except fruit, to export even in normal times. The dream of the Germans that great food trains would be loaded at Constantinople and unloaded at Berlin is, at the present time at least, a vain dream. Munitionments will not represent the only drain of Turkey upon Germany. If the truth were known, there are great areas of Turkey-in-Asia which to-day are on the verge of starvation, and the suicidal policy of attempting to exterminate virile, hardy Armenian people at this juncture will react most disastrously upon the murderers. (Applause.) I venture to assert that, if the truth were known, Constantinople is nearer the verge of starvation at this moment than any other of the great capitals of the countries engaged in the war.

Germany is in alliance with the most distrusted and best hated man in Syria and Arabia, and that man is the Turk. I read the other day the report of one of the sons of a city rector, who is at this time, I believe, with the beleaguered forces at Kut-el-Amara. "Saturday evening," he wrote, "we were asked to go and give a short entertainment for some of the Turkish prisoners; and after it one of the Turkish Captains said: 'We are grateful for the entertainment you have given us, and we shall be still more grateful when you take Constantinople.'"

The account of Britain—how does it stand? One great asset is England's work in Arabia itself, which is of enormous value; and a second great asset is England's work in Egypt. I have talked with Turks everywhere, and with Arabs of the desert, the merchants in the city, and the fellah of the village, and one and all were immensely impressed with what England had done in Egypt. The true record of what England has done in Egypt has yet to be written! (Applause.) She has taken over the Government of a needy, broken, bankrupt country, cleansed the channels of justice, unblocked the arteries of commerce, and struck the usurer and the despot from their thrones. The transformation of that country has gone on until, instead of being the by-word of the East, on account of its disintegrated condition, it is now the glory of them all, and the glory of England's work in Egypt will stand as long as the British Empire itself. (Applause.)

That brings me to my last point: England's reputation in the Nearer East as an asset under the present critical conditions. The Arab of the desert—I speak of the man right away from the heart of Arabia, untouched and unpolluted, if you will, by contact with Europeans—is a man of rather varied faculties and capacities, but among his faculties he possesses this one in a very superior degree; he is the most innocent, the most convincing, the most persuasive and pertinacious, the most plausible and the most incurable liar on the face of the whole globe! (Laughter.) But when the Arab would desire to impress upon the other fellow—I have heard the phrase—that at least he had his eye fixed on some little gleam of veracity in the heavens, or, to change the figure, that he was trying to plant his feet upon some little rock of truth in the quicksands of falsehood, he uses the phrase "Bi-kilmat-El-Inkleez"—"By the word of the British, what I say is true!" (Applause.) It is one of the most magnificent tributes to British rule I have ever heard. How did he get it? By his knowledge, and the knowledge of his fathers, of what the word of the British represents. (Hear, hear.) They had learned that amid a world of liars, when an Englishman spoke in the name of his government, the friends and the enemies of the British Government knew that what he said was true! (Applause.) So the phrase passed into a piece of family history, handed down from father to son, then into a proverb, and then into an oath—"Bi-kilmat-El-Inkleez"—"By the word of the British!"

A German naval officer, speaking of the naval state of the conflict the other day, said, "This war occurred for Germany ten years too soon." Certainly that statement is true of Syria and Arabia. What, then, was the unexpected and disturbing factor in this connection? Undoubtedly it was England's entrance into the war. It was a disappointment to Germany, which was confident that in supine indifference, in putrid self-interest or in craven dread, England would stand aside, thus giving Germany a chance to destroy France and paralyze Russia. That she would then have time to create and equip two new armies to provide a new German army and to drill and discipline the armies of Turkey, to complete the railway system in Syria and the Mesopotamia Valley, and to transform the area between Berlin and Bagdad from a state of a potential into that of an actual self-supporting economic unit. Having done that, and having enlarged her fleet, she could then face England alone, and launching armies of Austrians, Turks and Germans, throw her forces on the borders of India and into the heart of Egypt. The unexpected entrance of England

into the war shattered those hopes. Britain's position, and Britain's reasons for entering the conflict cannot be more adequately set out than they were by Mr. Asquith in the House of Commons when he said: "It should be clearly understood when it was and why it was, that we intervened. It was only when we were confronted with the choice between keeping and breaking solemn obligations between the discharge of a binding trust and of shameless subservience to naked trust that we threw away the scabbard." When Britain was confronted with the choice, the scabbard was, without hesitation, thrown away! And that is not all. The story of Britain's faith, of her keeping her word to Belgium, has been repeated through every Arab camp from Morocco to the Gulf, to Bagdad itself. (Applause.)

That is one of the incalculable factors—imponderable, immeasurable, intangible if you will—but one of those vital factors in this great conflict which is now touching the historic lands of Arabia and Syria. Britain's faith, Britain's past work, the record of her soldiers, her sailors, and her administrators, form one of the great bulwarks to-day in keeping back the armies of Germany which would advance to carry out her schemes of aggression in Syria and Arabia. (Long Applause.)

Canon Gould here closed his address, but at the invitation of Major Deacon, the President, a few questions were asked of him by members of the Club, to which the Canon replied as follows:

Asked as to the material for constructing a railway in Syria, Dr. Gould said that the only possible source of material, apart from importing it from Germany, Austria, or other European countries, were the branch railways already built there. South of Damascus for a distance of forty miles, there is a French railway paralleling the Hejaz Railway; and the Germans might absorb that and other similar material.

In reply to a question as to the actual condition of the railway down to Beersheba, Canon Gould said: "It seems to me very probable that an English Aviator, taking a photograph of the railway has what appears a representation of a completed railway, but I think it very probable that the embankment is finished down to Beersheba; possibly also there is sufficient material to be had by destroying the branch lines already built."

In regard to the peoples and their attitude, Canon Gould said that some of the people in the Lebanon Mountains are of the Druze nation, who inhabit also the Mountain called Jebel

Ed-Druze. They have always posed as "the British of the East," and undoubtedly their sympathies are altogether on the side of the Allies.

In answer to a question about the present situation of the British in Mesopotamia, Dr. Gould said: "I think if the little force which is beleaguered in Kut-el-Amara is not relieved, it may possibly have a very serious effect. I put in that statement with regard to the character of the Arab as being a creature of circumstances with that contingency in view."

One other question was put to Canon Gould, as to the conditions in Persia, and in reply he said: "The Russians of course have been in occupation of a considerable portion of Persia. You remember the rebellion and the beleaguering of the consulates at Tabriz; the Russian forces relieved those consulates. Russia, we must remember, passed over and occupied a portion of that territory for a military purpose, not as an act of aggression, but as a defence against the known fact that Germany and Turkey were already in that part of Persia arming and drilling the local tribes." (Appause.)
