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GREAT PEOPLES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

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several hundred years later the Children of Israel came out of Egypt by the way of the wilderness and settled down in Canaan. But the Jews were not the only people who left the desert and came to dwell in a "good land" in this way, though they were the only ones who had any religious beliefs about doing so. The Canaanites and the Amorites and the men of Babylon and Assyria were all Semitic peoples who had come out of the wilderness at different times; and when we remember what life in the desert was like, we are not surprised to find that all through history men have tried to push their way out of North Arabia into the fertile countries round about.

They did it in two ways. Nearly all the time the Semites were coming gradually to the desert edges and settling there, a few at a time, in this way. Even in the earliest times they used to call at the towns and villages as they passed near them, in order to exchange spare animals or sheepskins for metal weapons or anything they wanted and could not make for themselves. Then they noticed that people in one town often admired some article which came from another place, whether it was for sale or not, so they took to buying things which they did not want themselves, simply to sell again in another village. In this way some of the Semites became traders, and special parties or "caravans" used to make extra journeys, not in search of pasture, but carrying goods for sale. In order to travel faster and do more business, the merchants then began to leave their wives and families and flocks in some safe convenient place near their starting-point, and in this way their first settlements were made, either in the cities that were already there, or in new ones built by the Semites themselves. They also came out of the desert every now and then in great numbers, when a series of dry seasons had made pasture scarcer than usual, or had dried up some

of the wells. At these times there would be a regular invasion of the fertile countries, to which the people already settled there naturally objected, even if they were themselves Semites and the descendants of men who had done just the same thing a few centuries before.

In later days the Jews thought that the times and ways of Abraham were the best they had ever known, but as a rule the settled peoples rather looked down on the nomads. There is an Egyptian story which shows this in rather an interesting way. It is called "The Romance of Sinuhe," and describes the adventures of an Egyptian noble who, having some reason to fear the king's anger, fled away and took refuge in the desert. The Egyptians had built a fort to protect their land from the "sand-dwellers," as they called them, but Sinuhe managed to escape past the guards by night. Next day, when nearly dead of heat and thirst, he heard the lowing of cattle, and a band of men from the desert came up and saved him. They gave him water and boiled milk, and took him away with them. Wishing to get as far from Egypt as possible, he was handed on from tribe to tribe, and at last came to the lands of a chief who was already sheltering some other Egyptian refugees. This chief was very good to him, gave him a rich piece of land for his use, and married him to his daughter. In return Sinuhe helped him in his wars, so that all his enemies "trembled in their pastures by their wells." Thus the Egyptian lived for many years as a regular bedouin sheikh; his friend and protector sent him daily rations of bread and wine, cooked meat and roast fowls, much butter, and milk prepared in every kind of way; and he spent the time fighting, hunting, helping travellers, rescuing the lost, and punishing robbers. He was once challenged to single combat by a native champion who was jealous of this fortunate foreigner; Sinuhe was victorious, killed his enemy, and took his tent and his cattle and

all his possessions. His sons grew up and prospered likewise.

But as he grew old he became homesick for Egypt and its comfortable ways. He wanted cool clothing of fine linen, a proper bed to sleep in, baths and ointments and such things, which were unknown in the desert. Above all, he hated the idea of dying among the bedouins, and being buried like one of them, wrapped in a sheep-skin, in a sandy grave, instead of having a splendid funeral and a fine stone tomb such as his countrymen had. So at last he wrote to the king, asking permission to return home; and it is quite pleasant to know that he was welcomed back, and nothing worse happened to him than to be teased by the other nobles at court about his foreign manners.

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The Semites of Arabia were not the only wanderers without kings. Far away to the north, in the southern parts of the countries which we now call Russia and Siberia, there lay another great stretch of country where people could best live by constantly moving about. On this vast grassland, many hundreds of miles from east to west, lived a great number of nomadic tribes who are called the Aryan or Indo-European peoples. They were better off than the Semites in several ways. Their home was much bigger than Arabia, so that they had more room; in fact, it was so large that when they had spread all over it, the tribes at opposite ends never saw each other, and grew very different in their language and religion, though there was always a family likeness between them. Then their land was nowhere so barren as the worst parts of Arabia, and in places was very fertile, so that some were able to settle down and cultivate their own country, and we find that they were fonder of farming and less interested in trade than the Semites. Near by there were forests, so that they learnt to fell

trees and make houses and carts with the timber. Lastly, and perhaps most important of all, in the eastern parts of this grassland there roamed hords of wild horses, which the Aryans gradually learnt to tame and use. They rode them, harnessed them to their wooden carts, and had the milk of the mares for food, so that they could travel more quickly than the men of Arabia with their donkeys and slow-moving herds of sheep and goats.

But in spite of these advantages the Aryans were no more content to stay in their own land than the Semites were. Some parts of it were certainly poor and barren,

Scythians taming horses.
(From Minns' "Scythians and Greeks." Cambridge Press.)

and no doubt there were times of drought when the tribes who lived there found that they could stay no longer because of lack of rain, just as in Arabia. We all know what happens when a few people in the middle of a crowd begin pushing to get out; they disturb everybody, even those on the edge. The Aryans seem to have been disturbed from within rather in the same way, and so we find the outermost tribes pushing or being pushed southwards, towards the very regions which the Semites tried to enter. Thus, although at first the Northerners, as we shall call them, were a long way from Mesopotamia or Syria or Egypt, in time those lands were attacked from

both sides. (The map opposite page 158 with the arrows will help to explain this.)

We might wonder why the Aryans did not spread out over the flat lands northwards and westwards, instead of turning southwards towards the great mountain-barrier of Greece and Asia Minor and Iran. Probably they had two very good reasons. First, though they had no books or newspapers or cinemas to tell them about foreign countries, they must have known that the lands to the south were warmer and pleasanter than those to the north. Secondly, they depended a great deal on their herds, and did not want to change their way of living, though some of them had to do so by degrees. There were mountains to the south, certainly, but you can take cattle and horses up one valley and down another across hills; and in the north in those days there were dense forests, where it is no use trying to take droves of animals. As a matter of fact, some Aryan tribes did make their way northwards and westwards; but they went into lands where history does not begin till a good deal later, and so we do not hear about them.

We have no stories about the Northerners in their own old home, like those about Abraham and Sinuhe; they could not read or write, and for a long time were not visited by any one who could do so, and so the stories of their early days were forgotten. But as the centuries passed, there came out of that dim unknown land some of the greatest races in history. The chief of these in ancient times were the Persians, the Greeks, and the Romans; and though there is no space in this little book to tell anything of the Greeks and Romans, the stories of these three nations and their doings are some of the finest that ever were written.

If you look at the page before the beginning of this chapter, you will see quoted there the opening words of the oldest history-book in the world, the History of

Herodotus. Herodotus was the author who wrote down in that book the account of a famous war between the Greeks and the Persians, which we shall hear something about later. He was the first to tell that great tale, but who will be the last to tell it no one knows; for it is one that will never be forgotten while the world lasts. The same is true of some of the Roman stories. But they are all more interesting if you know something of what happened beforehand; and that is really why this book has been written.

CHAPTER II

THE GOLDEN AGE OF BABYLON

We have heard already of the king who ruled Babylon in the days of Abraham; here is a picture of him, with

Photo W. A. Mansell & Co. (British Museum.)

Hammurabi.

"Hammurabi, the minister of Anu, the servant of Bel, the beloved of Shamash, the shepherd who delighteth Marduk's heart; the mighty king, the king of Babylon, king of Sumer and Akkad, king of the Four Quarters of the World, the king who hath built anew the shrines of the great gods . . . the founder of the land . . . am I."

some of the titles of honour which he used. In his time Babylon was becoming a great city, though it was not yet a very old one. It had not been one of the ancient Sumerian towns like Ur (p. 3), but had only become important when some of Hammurabi's ancestors made their way out of the desert, conquered part of the Euphrates valley, and took Babylon for their capital. But it remained a very important place all through ancient times, partly because it was in a splendid position for trade, and partly because of the good start which this wise king gave it.

Let us imagine that we are travellers visiting the city one day while Hammurabi is king. We are standing looking round us in an open square, where a market is being held. It is crowded with people buying and selling, and here and there merchants from a distance are unloading the donkeys they have driven in, laden mostly with dates and rolls of woollen cloth. The folk around us vary in looks, in dress, and in speech. Some of the men are shaven, and wear a short skirt and a mantle thrown over the left shoulder, reminding us of a Highlander's kilt and plaid. They are the conquered race, the Sumerians, and they still speak their own old language, but there is no longer any ill-feeling between them and the tall, bearded Semites who mingle with them, closely wrapped in long robes. Indeed, the Sumerians were at first the more civilized people, and their conquerors have been wise enough to make friends with them and learn all they could from them.

As we watch the crowd, we see that the women move about freely and are not kept shut up in their houses. Some of the rich ladies are very gorgeous with their flounced dresses and gold ornaments, ear-rings, finger-rings, and heavy bangles, and their little train of slaves in attendance. We notice that nearly every well-dressed gentleman has some small object tied to his wrist by a

fine cord. A group of prosperous-looking traders are standing near us, discussing prices and prospects, and planning to go partners in a business venture to Egypt. Another man joins them, and holds his hand up proudly to show his friends what is fastened to his wrist, so we see it too. It is a new seal-cylinder, which the jeweller has just finished for him; a small rounded piece of dark-green serpentine, about an inch and a quarter long, beautifully engraved with a scene from the Babylonian sacred stories, and threaded on a length of fine gold wire. All his friends admire it, but one of them points out that the wire is not quite securely fastened, and the owner says he will have it seen to at once. It would be very serious if he lost it, for the impression of a man's seal is the same thing as his signature or private trade-mark, and with it he signs the letters which a secretary probably writes for him because he cannot write himself, receipts his bills, stamps his goods, and perhaps even "locks up" his house or shop by securing the door with a pat of clay sealed with his sign—for locks and keys are unknown.

One of the other merchants now leaves the group and hurries away, and we observe how respectfully two lightly-clad working-men, lounging outside a beer-shop close at hand, make way for him. In Babylon distinctions of rank are very strictly observed. Men of a higher class had certain privileges, but on the other hand they were liable to be more severely punished for certain crimes, and they were obliged by law to pay their doctor a higher fee.

Now we hear two ladies chatting behind us. One of them describes a fine wedding-feast at which she has lately been a guest, and speaks of the handsome dowry which the bride's father had given her—a beautiful set of gold ornaments, a house and garden of her own, and several slaves. She asks her companion if she knows

whether it is true that the daughter of a well-known citizen has really decided to join in order of temple-votaresses instead of getting married as every one expected. But the other lady does not know, and confesses that she is too anxious about her husband's affairs to be interested in such gossip. It seems he is a merchant who has been unfortunate in business of late, and only this morning news has come that his agent, travelling with valuable goods, has been robbed and murdered by the wild men of the desert, which means another heavy loss. After this tale of woe it is pleasant to overhear a poor woman joyfully telling a friend that her husband, who was only a slave when she married him, has just saved up enough to buy his freedom, and is now his own master.

We leave the market-place and stroll along one of the streets, which are mostly straight, cutting each other at right angles. The government sees to it that the people keep them clean. The houses are built of brick, one story high, and roofed with brushwood laid upon poles and covered with beaten clay. People often sleep on the flat house-tops in hot weather. The lower courses are usually of hard kiln-baked brick, but the upper parts are of brick which has only been dried in the sun, and as there has been heavy rain recently repairs are needed here and there. A very severe law made at this time shows that Babylon suffered from jerry-building. We see no stone houses, for here the rock lies far below the rich soil which the rivers bring down year by year, too deep to be quarried. We venture to peep into one small house, and find that the furniture is very simple—several chairs of a sort, a bed in one corner, a big double water-jar which filters the water in it, some plates, and two or three bowls. But the pottery is not very pretty or interesting, and the family's chief treasure seems to be a big copper pot.

As we go on our way we meet two men leading a large

animal with some difficulty up the street. The beast creates quite a sensation, though you and I know it well ; small boys call to each other to come and see it, and even grown people look at it with curiosity. They call it " the ass of the east," or " ass of the mountains," and wonder whether it is really as strong and useful as an ox or a donkey ; for in Babylonia men are just beginning to know the horse.

The street leads down to the river bank, and we find another busy scene, for boats of various sizes and shapes are passing up and down, or loading or discharging cargo. They bring corn and dates, timber from far upstream, and jars of oil. Two boatmen, managing a heavily-laden craft unskilfully, bring her into collision with another, tied up to the quay ; some damage is done, and a hot dispute follows as to whose fault it is, for the boatmen have to make good any losses to the owner of the cargo. Very likely there will be a lawsuit about it, so, not wishing to be summoned as witnesses, we hurry away. Some distance off, a tower excites our curiosity, and making our way towards it, we soon find ourselves at the gates of Babylon's chief temple, E-sagila, the " lofty house " of the great city-god Marduk.

Before we go in, we had better pause for a moment and think about religion in the ancient world generally, for we must not imagine that it meant then what it means to us to-day. Religion in these far-off times had often very little to do with questions of right and wrong, and was largely concerned with what we might call ways of " managing " the gods, and obtaining good gifts from them by various means. Most early peoples believed that there were mighty unseen beings in the world who controlled nature and human life in one way or other, sending sunshine or rain, good harvests and increase of cattle, or perhaps victory in war or other good fortune. If the god was angry, he would send evil instead ; and

in any case he would only help and fight for the city or tribe who worshipped him. To please such deities, a man did not need to live what we should call a good life, he had only to offer the proper sacrifices and go through the ceremonies which the god expected. Some gods and goddesses were even believed to demand from their worshippers acts which we should consider positively sinful, such as wild drunken feasts in their honour, or the cruel sacrifice of little children. In Babylon, however, men had outgrown this stage, and thought that the great gods at least were lovers of justice and righteousness; but they believed in lesser spirits as well, who were evil and cruel.

The most important of the gods worshipped in Babylonia were Anu, the god of the sky, Enlil, the earth-spirit, and Ea, who ruled the waters. Enlil, whose chief temple was at a city called Nippur, was at first considered the head of all the gods, and was therefore called "Bel," or Lord; but in Babylon men gave this title to Marduk, and held him in the highest reverence. Ea was said to have come up from the sea to teach men how to live in civilized ways. Hammurabi's subjects also adored Shamash the sun-god, who was thought of as the rising sun coming forth from the gates of dawn and appearing over the mountains, and also as a righteous judge and lover of just dealing (see p. 25). There was a god of the moon as well, Sin, who had a great shrine at Ur. A god of storms was known as Adad; and a gloomy, destructive deity Nergal, with his wife

Shamash appearing over the mountains.

(*From Ward's "Seal-Cylinders of Western Asia."*)

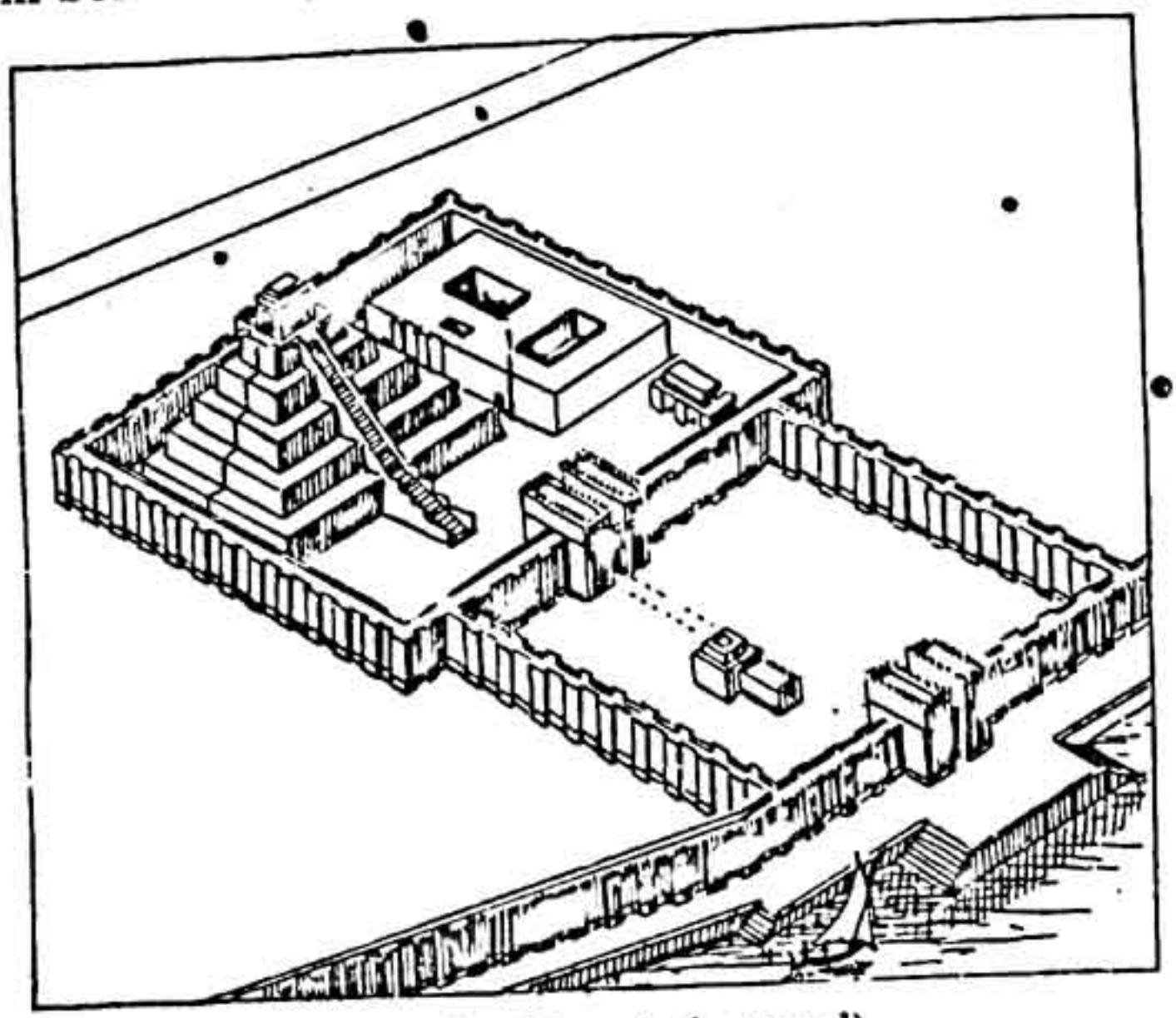
Ereshkigal, was said to rule the underworld where the spirits of men went after death. The other gods had wives as well as Nergal, but they were not considered very important, and the chief goddess was always Ishtar, the queen of love and war.

Many stories were told of these divinities. Marduk, it was said, had won his place as chief over the three older gods (Anu, Ea, and Enlil) because in the war with Chaos at the beginning of all things he slew the dragon Tiamat and made the earth ready for men. Afterwards mankind so displeased their makers that Bel sent a great

Ishtar, Lady of Battles.
(*From Ward's "Seal-Cylinders of Western Asia."*)

flood to drown them all, but Ea, kindest of the gods, saved one man and his family alive. One tale told how Ishtar, whose husband Tammuz had died, made her way down to the dark realms of Nergal, and passing the seven gates of his seven-walled citadel, at last rescued Tammuz from him and his cruel queen. Another related how Ishtar once loved the hero Gilgamesh, and then, hating him because he scorned her, sent all manner of

evils upon him. After fighting lions and passing through many other trials sent by the angry goddess, Gilgamesh came to the Islands of the Blest, and was near obtaining immortal life both for himself and mankind, but failed in the end. The Babylonians had very gloomy views about death and the hereafter. They thought that unless a man were properly buried with a supply of food and drink beside him, he would wander on earth as a restless



Babylonian Temple (restored).
(By permission of the Medici Society, Limited.)

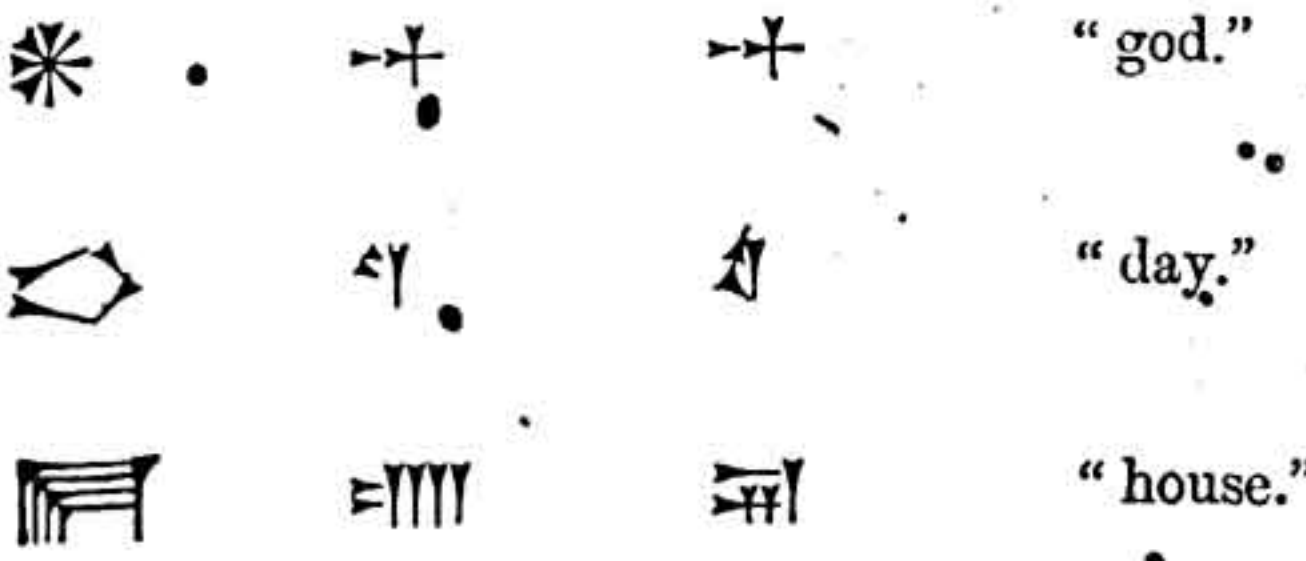
hungry ghost. In spite of this idea, however, they did not make very durable or elaborate tombs. But as a rule they thought that the spirit went to Nergal's kingdom, the " Land of No Return," a dull, misty place somewhere beneath the earth, where all the spirits, bad or good, lived a shadowy half-life together.

Now let us enter the temple of Marduk. It consists of the great step-like tower or ziggurat, and several other

buildings, enclosed in a large courtyard. All the buildings are of brick, but they stand on a high mound, out of reach of the floods. To the Babylonians a temple was, so to speak, the palace of the god, where he lived, unseen, very much the same sort of life as the visible king, needing fine rooms, splendid furniture, and the service of many priests, just as the king required a royal household. In the central shrine stands the great image of Bel-Marduk, before which the chief ceremonies are performed. Every ruler of Babylon in turn has to grasp the hands of this statue before he can be considered the rightful king, and again at every New Year's feast throughout his reign. The courtyard is crowded, and does not suggest our idea of a holy place. Here and there worshippers are bringing animals for sacrifice, and oil to pour on the altar. There is a little crowd round a flat slab or "stele" of stone on which is engraved the king's great code of law; men are consulting it before engaging in lawsuits, or finding out the legal rate of wages due to them, or perhaps, fearing they have broken one of its regulations, are anxiously looking to see what is the penalty. In one place men are waiting in twos and threes to have business contracts or other legal documents drawn up by the priests. This is partly because it is not every one who can write, and partly because it is the priests who know the proper forms, and will make the contract legal and binding, having a religious sanction. We watch them at work; the contracting parties say what they have agreed to, and the

Bringing offerings in a temple.
(From Ward's "Seal-Cylinders of Western Asia.")

priest writes it down on a moist clay tablet with a sharp stylus in "cuneiform," or wedge-shaped characters;



Cuneiform signs, showing differences in different times and places.

(From British Museum Guide.)

the others then produce their seals and stamp it. The tablet is then baked to harden it. If the document is a letter, it is powdered with dry clay, wrapped in a clay envelope and addressed, before being baked.

After seeing this we are not surprised to find priests sitting as judges to hear legal cases, in another part of the building. Sometimes the king himself acts as judge when the matter is serious or important. We pause and listen to one or two of the cases which the priests are trying. One concerns the rent of a field which was to be paid out of the crop, and is not forthcoming. Another is an inquiry as to who shall bear the loss of several missing sheep; the shepherd who is responsible says a lion carried them off, but the owner does not seem to believe this explanation. In a third case, a gentleman is suing a surgeon for damages, because he has treated some eye-trouble for one of his slaves so unskilfully that the man has lost his sight altogether, and is, of course, useless to his owner. Stranger still to our ideas, we come across a merchant who is borrowing money from the

temple revenues through one of the priests; for the temples owned lands and flocks and herds, and the priests carried on banking business with the money they received. In fact, in Babylonia and all Semitic lands, the temples were centres of trade and money affairs, as well as of religion, and this helps to explain why the Jews, even two thousand years later, saw nothing wrong in using their sanctuary for business purposes.

Still exploring, we find a school, where the priests again are teachers. Some of the scholars are learning to read and write, not only their own, but the ancient Sumerian characters, in which many of the sacred books were written. Others are being taught the stories of the creation of the world and the doings of the gods. Mathematics are also being studied, for the Babylonians had a regular system of weights and measures, and used the division of the circle into 360 degrees, just as we do. The priests also teach astronomy, but it is a good deal mixed up with astrology—that is, the art of foretelling the future by the stars. And here is a man who is expounding a very strange subject to his class. He is showing them another method of divination, very much practised in Babylon. It was believed that the future could be foretold by studying the markings on the liver of a sheep slain for sacrifice; these markings vary in each animal, and were supposed to have certain meanings. The future priests are learning how to interpret these by means of a model, rather like a modern palmist's or phrenologist's chart. These practical, businesslike people still hold a strong belief in magic, and besides knowing how to foretell the future, a priest has also to learn the incantations and ceremonies which he would have to use if called upon to drive away one of the demons who were supposed to bring ill-luck or sickness.

It is getting very hot here amongst the crowds and in the stuffy buildings; let us go down to the quays again

and take boat on one of the canals, to get out into the country. Soon we are away from the town and passing by pleasant country houses with gardens and orchards. We are on one of the main canals, and meet many other boats, some rather like rafts, some round like coracles. One kind of boat, made of skins stretched over a wooden frame, always carries a donkey. We ask why, and our boatman tells us that these skiffs come from the Tigris, and that the owner means to sell the timber, which is scarce in Babylonia, and carry the skins, and anything else he may buy, home again on the donkey's back. The country is a perfect network of canals, large and small; some are no more than ditches leading water away to the fields. It does not rain much except in the winter, and without irrigation the fertile soil would bear no crops. Here and there we pass simple machines, worked by oxen, for raising the water from the streams to the level of the plough-land. Fishermen, sitting on the banks, seem to catch plenty of fish.

We leave the main canal, and after a while, turning a corner, we find we can go no further, for the canal bank has slipped in, and all traffic is stopped. On the far side of the obstruction quite a number of boats are collected, waiting to continue their journey. Most of the boatmen take the delay calmly, but two tired-looking travellers are pacing up and down on the bank, looking anxious and impatient. When they see our boat they beckon to us; we draw in to the side, and they come and ask whether we would object to waiting here while our boatman takes them on to the capital, for they are witnesses in an important trial, specially summoned by the king, who has bidden them travel day and night. As we are only sight-seers, we agree gladly, and leaving the boat we climb the bank to get a better view.

The country is flat and well-cultivated. Date-palms grow in large numbers, but they are almost the only

trees to be seen. There are villages dotted about, little groups of mud-brick houses, or huts made of bundles of reeds tied together. Men are ploughing with a wooden plough drawn by oxen. A little way off we catch sight of a body of men approaching. As they come nearer, we see that they are nearly naked, and are yoked together two and two like animals, in charge of several drivers. They are the public slaves, convicts or prisoners taken in war, and they are kept busy on forced labours for the city. They have been sent to dig out the canal, that the boats may pass once more. As they halt and set to work, we notice one man particularly, because of his weary, sullen face; he is evidently not used to hard out-door work in the hot sun. One of the boatmen tells us that a few weeks ago he was a royal official, but being found guilty of defrauding the king and oppressing the poor he was deprived of his office and sent to hard labour. Hammurabi, "beloved of Shamash," the righteous god, is not a king to tolerate injustice to his people.

We leave the slave-gang at work and turn away from the canal, and at last, following the directions of a peasant, we strike a track that will take us back to the city on foot. Before long we meet a party of soldiers on the march, armed with bows and arrows, axes, lances, and short curved swords. Soon afterwards we overtake some men who are driving a few sheep and cattle towards Babylon. It is their way of paying taxes, for money is not much used yet. The animals will be added to the royal flocks and herds, in which the king takes a great interest. The royal shepherds have to keep accounts and bring them at times to be inspected. At sheep-shearing time there is a great gathering held. All this reminds us that it is not long since the race that now rules in Babylon were tent-dwellers and shepherds like Abraham. In the same way their habit of burying the

dead in a simple grave, wrapped in a mat of plaited reeds (before they learnt to use two large jars placed end to end as a coffin), reminds us of that kind of funeral, the prospect of which was so disliked by Sinuhe.

At last we are back in Babylon, and we feel that we should like to see this King Hammurabi, of whom we have heard so much. But on inquiring where we can see him we hear that he is away at the war, fighting his old enemies in the south. He has to spend a good deal of his time in fighting, we are told, but for all that he finds time to do much for his people's welfare. Babylon is proud of her king, and well she may be. He has cut a great new canal to bring unfailing water for Sumer and Akkad, and he sees to it that the old ones are well kept, each village doing its share. He has had a fine granary built, and fortifications where needed. He is a very active ruler, and messengers are always hastening with his clay-tablet letters to and fro in his kingdom, so that his officials are kept under strict control and do their duty properly. Above all, it is his wish to give justice to every one, and to protect the weak, the widow, and the orphan. That is why he has made his scribes write down the ancient laws of the country, together with some new ones, and has set the great code in Marduk's temple for all to see.

We glanced at the stone before in passing, but now, before night falls, let us go back to E-sagila and look at it once again. There it stands, with its columns of lettering crowned by the carving of King Hammurabi himself, standing reverently before Shamash, the god who had taught him to love righteousness. It is a finer monument, surely, than any picture of battle and conquest. This king is not one who delights in war, though he is a good fighter at need, and he never boasts of his conquests. Instead, he is proud to say of himself, "I collected the scattered peoples . . . in abundance and plenty I pas-

tured them, and I caused them to dwell in a peaceful habitation."

Hammurabi before Shamash.

(From British Museum Guide to Babylonian Collection.)

With Hammurabi's death the best days of Babylon

came to an end. The city kept its great trade, because of its position, but was constantly beset by enemies, and often in subjection to a more warlike nation. Centuries later she blossomed out afresh for a short time in great splendour, and then we shall hear of her doings again. But for the present we must leave Babylon and pass on to another famous land.

CHAPTER III

THE SUBJECTS OF KING MINOS OF CRETE

SOME five or six centuries later than the days of Abraham and King Hammurabi, and rather nearer to our own land, a little town lay on the shores of a beautiful bay in Crete. The people who lived there had a lovely view before them, whichever way they turned. To the north was the clear blue bay with its rocky shores, one island peeping over the shoulder of another near the opening, and the wide sea beyond. Inland there were first the fields in the valley, and then the hillsides—steep, bare, stony slopes in places, but elsewhere covered with woods. Westward, in the distance, rose a higher peak, Mount Dicté, with a crown of shining snow. No one knows what the town was called in those times, but nowadays it is spoken of as Gournia; and in one of its narrow streets, many centuries ago, there lived a carpenter and his wife and children. The man's name was Theras, and he worked busily at his trade, sometimes for his neighbours, and sometimes for the nobleman who lived in the big house in the middle of the town. There were three children, a boy about ten, whose name was Æthon; his sister Æthra, about seven; and a brother called Merion, who was only a baby still. Their mother, of course, was kept busy looking after them and the house.

The life of this family was in some ways very like ours, in others, of course, very different. The street in which their house stood was very narrow, because

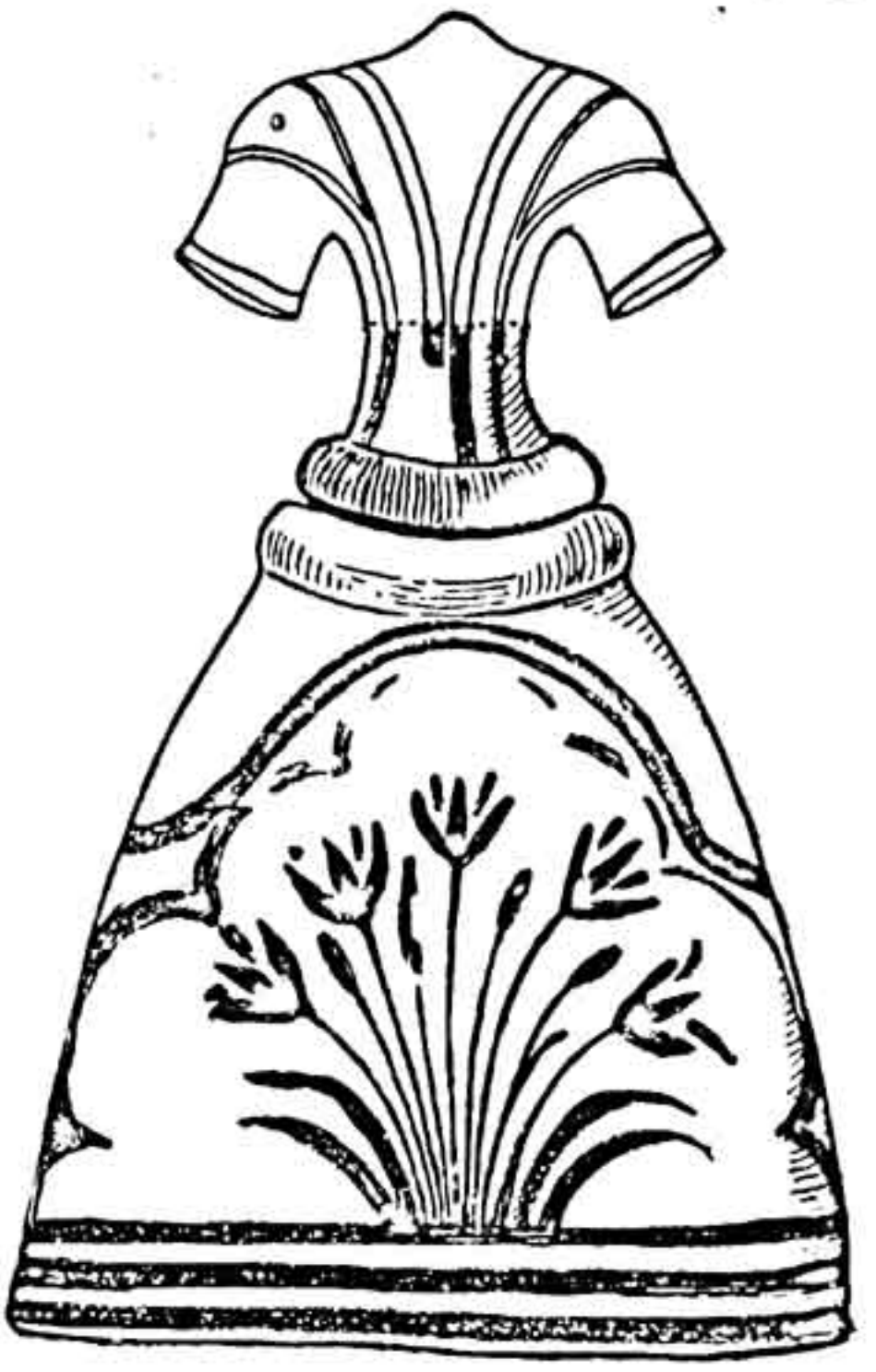
people did not use horses or carriages in Crete at that time, and broad roads would have been just a waste of space, besides letting in too much of the hot summer sun; so it was only five feet wide, but it was well paved with stone. The house was built of stone below and brick and timber above; its wall rose up straight from the street without any garden or railing. Inside there were six or seven rooms, rather oddly arranged, because the house, like a great many others in this hilly land, stood on a slope, and had two storeys in front and three at the back. So Theras could get into the big cellar which he used as a workshop and storeroom either downstairs from the kitchen or by the back door which opened straight into it. You could not see much from the front windows, because of the houses so close opposite, but from the back you could look out over the bay and see the fishing-boats go in and out, and sometimes a bigger ship taking shelter from a storm.

If you and I could somehow fly back through the centuries and visit that house, I think we should find it very small and empty. The first thing we should miss would probably be the fireplace, for in Crete it was warm enough to do without a fixed hearth, a brazier full of charcoal gave all the heat that was needed even in winter. Even in the kitchen there was no range, but just a place where you could make a fire of sticks to heat up a big three-legged pot. Their cooking was very simple. They ate a good deal of fish, which was easily to be had, and fruit, and drank wine or water.

In the living-rooms there was not much furniture. There was probably oiled parchment in the windows instead of glass, but there may have been little curtains across them. There were small tables and low seats, but the Minoans, as the Cretan people of that time are called, very often just sat on the floor. There were no books like ours on the shelves, though the Minoans could

read and write ; no piano, no photographs, no mechanical contrivances of any kind. Theras had made most of the wooden furniture himself, for in those days people did far more for themselves than we do now. At night they used oil lamps, flat open dishes with one or two wicks floating in the oil ; some had handles for carrying about, others stood on tall carved standards.

Theras and the other Minoan men dressed very simply, in a waist-cloth held up by a thick belt, and a pair of boots, with a cloak about their shoulders at times Theras had a "best" waist-cloth of beautiful embroidered material, and a belt with a gold clasp. His wife's dress was more elaborate ; she wore several skirts, with the shortest outside, and a very open bodice with short sleeves. She was very proud of having the slenderest waist in the street. Both she and Theras wore their hair in long ringlets, two or three of which were done up with hairpins in a little topknot, but she put on a hat with ribbons when she wore her best dress, while her husband went bareheaded.



A Minoan lady's dress.

(*From Annual of British School at Athens.*)

Æthon and Æthra had a very happy life. They did

not go to school, because at that time very few people learned to read and write, and scarcely anything else that we learn in school was known or taught at all. History, for instance, was the stories about old times that the oldest people you knew would tell you when they were not busy; probably they had heard them from the oldest people they knew when they were young. Geography was what the sailors said about the lands they had seen on their voyages; and if you wanted to learn foreign languages, you had either to go abroad yourself or make friends with some poor man who had been stolen from his home across the sea and brought here to be a slave. But, on the other hand, you had to know how to do many things by yourself that we do by machinery nowadays.

So Æthra spent most of her time in the house with her mother, learning to cook and spin and weave and embroider. Æthon was learning his father's trade, and could handle all the tools, which were very like a modern carpenter's, except that they were made of bronze, and the hammers had stone heads. When his father was out working he sometimes wandered round to see the potter, and watch the bowls or vases coming into their beautiful shapes on the flat whizzing wheel. There were two potters whom he used to visit. One made the ordinary plain ware for cooking and household use; the other had a bigger workshop and employed several men, and he made all sorts of pottery in quaint and pretty shapes, decorated with patterns of flowers and sea-creatures. At this workshop there was one old man in particular, whom Æthon loved to watch as he painted the vases before they went to the baking-kiln. The younger workmen rather laughed at this man, because he went on making designs in colours, that had gone out of fashion. But Æthon would stand by him, delighted to see the gay colourings, and sometimes would

ask him to paint a vase or bowl in a certain pattern—"Put a big octopus on it! right in the middle with his legs all curling round him!—Oh yes, and there are his eyes—and some bits of seaweed near his mouth—and are you making a whole procession of fish round the edge? That's simply splendid!"

For Æthon was very fond of the sea, like most Minoan boys, and he often went down to the shore and played there, swimming, picking up shells, peeping into rock-pools, and watching the strange and beautiful creatures that lived in the clear blue waters. Indeed, he often said he would rather be a sailor than a carpenter. Many of his father's friends had boats, and sometimes they would take him with them when they went fishing. One day he was taken quite a long voyage—right out of the bay and round the coast to a bigger town than Gournia. Here he saw men diving from the rocks for sponges, and was also shown how they made a beautiful purple dye by crushing a certain kind of spiky seashell. On the way back it was rather windy and rough, and the boatman told him such weird stories about storms and pirates and fights with sea-monsters that he was quite glad to get home. So for a little while he said no more about being a sailor.

Octopus vase found at Gournia.

(British Museum: by permission from Hall, "Ægean Archæology." Methuen, 1915.)

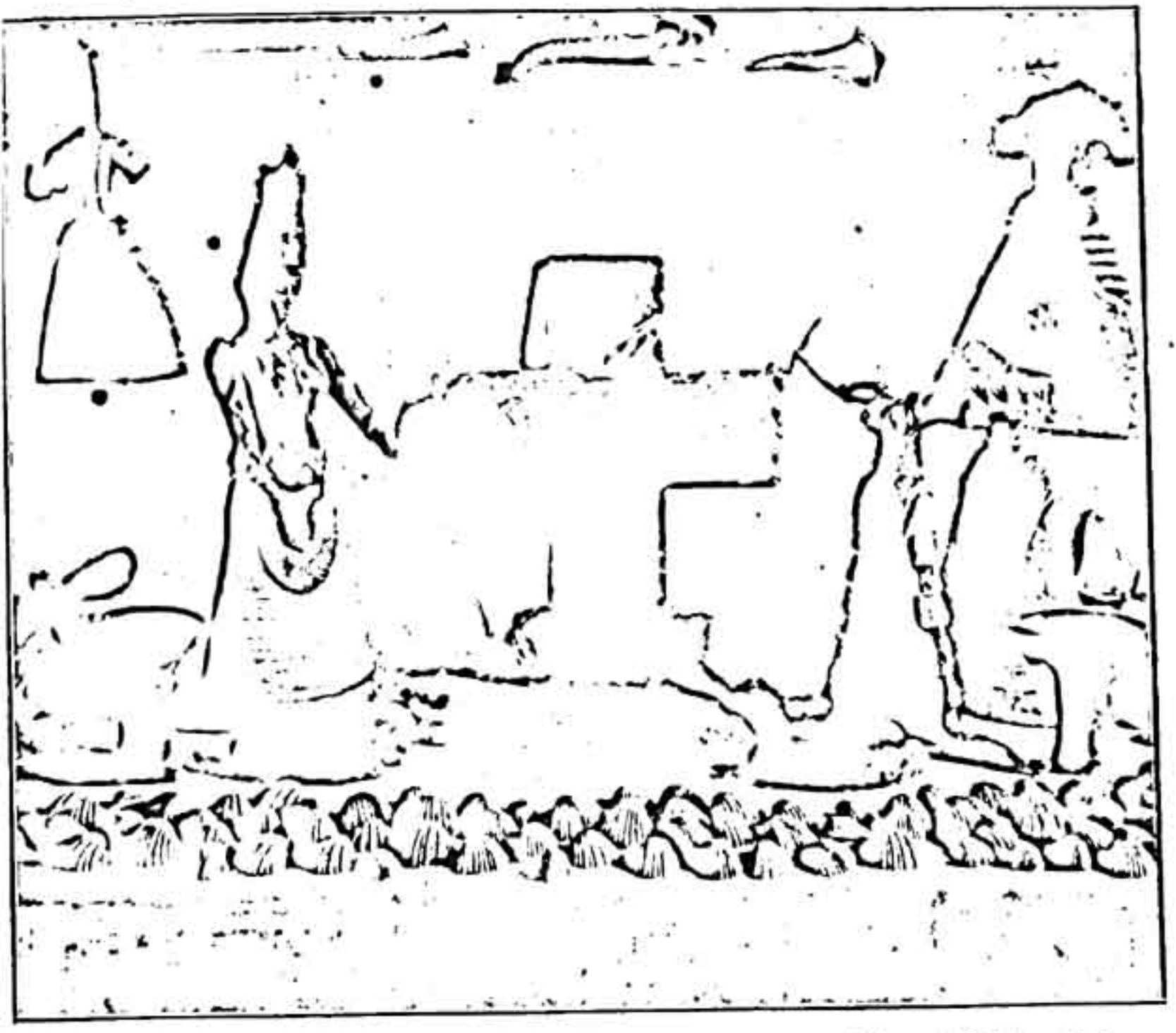
Sometimes when his father was not busy he would take Æthon for a walk inland, towards the hills. Every

year the fields were gay with flowers, in the short spring-time between the rains and the hot scorching summer. In the autumn there was the vintage to watch, or the noisy processions with which the villagers celebrated their "Harvest Home." Or you might meet men going out to hunt, up on the hills where the wild goats lived. Æthon would have liked to follow them; but his father seemed to think he might meet worse things than goats. There were certainly wild bulls, and Theras hinted that there were also spirits and Little People in the high woods, whom it was best not to intrude upon.

There were no Sundays in Minoan life, and nothing that we should call a church to go to. But in the middle of the town there was a little open space with a low wall round it, and within, under a tree, was a shrine where there was a small image of a goddess, with a snake twined about her arms, and doves clustering about her. In front stood a low three-legged table, that served as an altar, and had several vases marked with the holy sign of the Double Axe upon it. Their mother sometimes brought the children here and showed them the proper way to do reverence to the "Lady of the Wild Creatures," the kind Mother-goddess who loved trees and birds and the animals of land and sea too.

In this way life went on happily enough for Theras and his family. But at last there came a dreadful day that Æthon never forgot. Strange ships appeared in the bay, and their crews were seen making ready to land and attack the little town. It was decided that everybody should bury or hide their valuables, and that the women and children should take refuge in the woods, while the men made an effort to drive away the pirates. So Æthon saw his father taking up part of the floor in the passage and hiding his tools there as the safest place he could think of, while his mother collected some food and wraps and some of her most precious jewellery.

Then they set out in the twilight from their home. Theras bade them good-bye and went off to meet the other men at the nobleman's house, where they were to have weapons given out to them; and they never saw him again. Æthon led Æthra by the hand, and his mother carried the baby, crying softly as she walked, and with the other



Shrine of a Goddess with offerings of shells, models of flying-fish, doves, dresses, etc. Found (in fragments) at Knossos.

(*From Annual of the British School at Athens.*)

families they made their way into the woods, and prepared to camp out there.

The first night was quiet. But in the morning the pirates made their attack, and they could hear in the

distance the noise of the fighting, though they could not see what was happening. Then came silence again, but the strange ships still lay by the beach, and no one came to tell them they might venture home again. Then there were new noises, shouts of triumph and drunken singing; and as twilight fell for the second time, they saw smoke and flames rising from the town, and the sea-rovers, laden with plunder and driving their captives before them, staggering back to their ships and pushing off.

Gournia was never properly rebuilt after this, for practically all the men had been killed or taken prisoners, and there was nothing for the women to do but find shelter as best they could in other places. Æthon's mother made her way by degrees to the chief town on the island, Knossos, where she had relatives. Unfortunately she had an accident on the journey, through catching her foot on a tree-root. She herself was not hurt by the fall, but the child in her arms was, and walked lame all his life because of it, though she made a pilgrimage as soon as she could to the holy cave on Mount Dicté, and left an offering there, hoping that the kind goddess would straighten the little twisted foot. But that was the last of the family's misfortunes, at least for a long time.

We will pass over their early adventures in Knossos, and begin the story again twenty years later, when the mother is dead and the children are all grown-up men and women. Æthon is a sailor now, and has seen many foreign lands. Æthra is married to a man who has a post as a clerk in the king's service, and she has a little boy and girl of her own. Merion, still lame, of course, lives with them, learning to be an artist in stone, and promising very well.

Knossos was a much bigger and finer place than Gournia. It stood on a low hill beside a little river, and

in the middle was the dwelling of the king who at that time ruled all Crete and some of the neighbouring shores and islands as well. His name was Minos, and so many wonderful stories have been told about him that we do not know what is true and what is not. But he certainly lived in a very beautiful palace of shining white stone with all his servants and courtiers round him, and foreign peoples sent him tribute. He had a navy too;

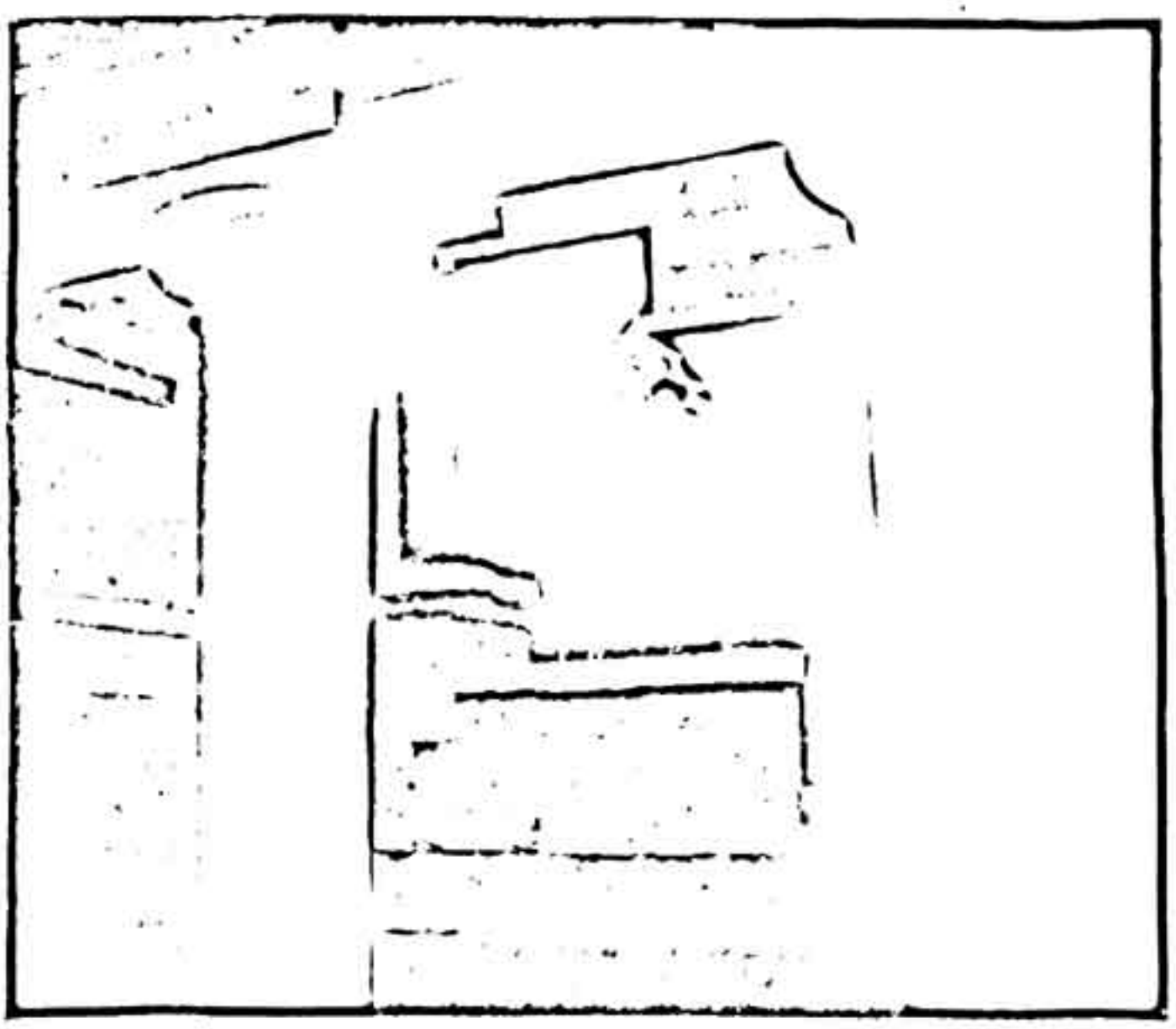


Photo by H. R. Hall

The great staircase at Knossos.

(*From H. R. Hall's "Ancient History of the Near East"* (1924). *Methuen & Co., Ltd.*)

and in his days Crete was safe from pirates, and many towns flourished all round the coast.

King Minos had several dwellings, but he liked Knossos best, and lived there in great style with the queen and the court. The palace did not look very imposing from outside, because it was built on a hillside

like many of the ordinary dwellings, and straggled about on the slope, full of long corridors and stairs and terraces —a regular "Labyrinth," in fact. In the middle there was a great paved courtyard, lying open to the sky on the highest part of the knoll, with the buildings arranged round it. On the left as you came in a wide stone staircase led down to the part where the royal family lived. There were three splendid pillared halls here, painted with beautiful pictures on the walls; one of these was specially kept for the queen and her ladies, but they were not shut up there all the time, as in many other countries. Near at hand were blocks of small rooms for the servants of the palace, and here lived not only cooks and bakers, waiting-women and messengers, and the king's clerks and secretaries, but potters, masons, carpenters, jewellers, stonecutters, painters, and so on. They were all kept busy repairing and decorating the building, turning out fresh ware for use and ornament, and making pretty things for the courtiers to wear, for men as well as women were fond of bracelets and collars and other jewellery.

Æthra and her husband and children and brother all lived here among the royal household. Merion was very happy learning and working among the palace artists, and when he grew older he did some very fine work, which was greatly admired. The courtiers and even the king himself grew to know the lame sculptor as he limped about the corridors, adding a touch here and there to the carvings, or seeing that the slaves put in its proper place some heavy standard lamp of stone or great ornamental jar, fresh from his workshop. This was a pleasant room quite near the royal apartments, on the level of the central court, and sometimes the little princes would come and watch him working with his men, and tease him to make them little toys, just as his brother had done with the potter at Gournia, years ago.

He did not see much of Æthon now, as he was mostly at sea, but he always came to the palace when he was at home, full of tales of adventure, and bringing little ornaments and trifles from abroad for his sister and the children.

Æthra's husband, whose name was Procles, was mostly busy in the rooms on the far side of the courtyard, where the government work was carried on. Here was the throne-room, where King Minos sat in state to receive guests and ambassadors from foreign lands, a great many of whom came to the court at Knossos. Near by were the offices where Procles and other scribes worked, noting down the payment of tribute, keeping lists of the shields and weapons in the king's armoury, and checking the palace accounts. Sometimes they wrote on little tablets of clay, simply pressing the shape of the letters on the soft clay with a sort of undivided pen, and sometimes they used ink and wrote on a material more like our paper; they could write more quickly in this way, but the documents did not last so well. Procles' special work had to do with the arms and other supplies for the fleet, about which King Minos was, of course, very particular, as so much depended on it. Procles was sometimes able to pass on very useful practical suggestions made by his sailor brother-in-law, so that he was well thought of by his superiors in the office.

Æthon in the meantime led rather a wild wandering life. At first he sailed in other men's ships, but afterwards he had one of his own. It was rowed by twenty men, sitting at great long oars, but it had a single high mast amidships with a big square sail as well. The rowers sat on deck, with an awning over their heads, and all sorts of strange cargoes came to Knossos in the stuffy hold below (see p. 42). Sometimes Æthon made short trips to the neighbouring islands, taking out sponges and purple-dyed cloth, and bringing back perhaps marble

for the carvers in the palace. On the mainland (which we call Greece) there were wealthy families whose ancestors had once lived in Crete, who were always glad to buy delicate pottery and luxuries which their new country did not provide yet. At other times he sailed to the Keftiuan coast (the south part of Asia Minor) or to the Syrian ports, where Minoan vases and jewellery were much in demand and fetched good prices. Once or twice he went to Egypt, and very much admired all he saw there. Sometimes too, when there was no profit to be made by peaceful trading, he and two or three other ship-masters would join together and raid some little out-of-the-way harbour, seizing any gold or valuables they could lay hands on, and carrying off boys and girls to be slaves in the palace. From one such voyage he returned with a quantity of plunder, a pretty young wife, and a great sword-cut on his head; and after that he hired out his ship to another man and stayed quietly at home for a while.

Of course he lost no time in introducing his wife, whose name was Clymene, to her new relations at the palace. They started one fine morning from Æthon's little house by the harbour, and walked along the wide paved road up the valley to Knossos itself. He showed Clymene the big gateway with the guard-house, at which the king went in and out, but they had to get in by what you might call the " tradesmen's entrance " to the palace, a smaller courtyard to which supplies and tribute were brought, just beside the storehouses and the clerks' rooms. They found Procles in his office, and he welcomed them warmly, and said they had come on a lucky day, for there were to be sports that afternoon which they could all go and watch. They took a walk round, to show Clymene the great store-chambers and the wall-paintings and some of Merion's lovely carvings, and then went to have dinner all together in Procles' home.

In the afternoon they all made their way to the little open-air theatre just outside the palace, where the sports were to be held. The king and queen and the royal children were there, with the lords and ladies in their gay dresses sitting about them, all chatting and laughing together. The sports consisted chiefly of a display of

Storehouse at Knossos.

(*Photo H. R. Hall: by permission from "Ægean Archæology." Methuen, 1915.*)

boxing and wrestling, and the crowd grew very excited, clapping and cheering to spur on the men who were taking part. Afterwards musicians appeared, and a kind of solemn dance was performed. Procles said there would soon be a much more exciting show, at which there would be bulls, and Æthon said he would bring Clymene to see that too.

So some days later they came to the palace again and