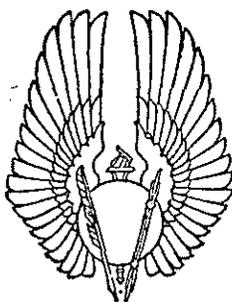


LOWELL THOMAS

WITH LAWRENCE

IN ARABIA

Illustrated With Original Photographs
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COLONEL T. E. LAWRENCE, THE MYSTERY MAN OF ARABIA

CHAPTER XI

LAWRENCE THE TRAIN-WRECKER

FA TE never played a stranger prank than when she transformed this shy young Oxford graduate from a studious archæologist into the leader of a hundred thrilling raids, creator of kings, commander of an army, and world's champion train-wrecker.

One day Lawrence's column was trekking along the Wadi Ithm. Behind him rode a thousand Bedouins mounted on the fleetest racing-camels ever brought down the Negb. The Bedouins were improvising strange war-songs describing the deeds of the blond shereef whom General Storrs had introduced to me as "the uncrowned king of Arabia." Lawrence headed the column. He paid no attention to the song lauding him as a modern Abu Bekr. We were discussing the possibility of ancient Hittite civilization forming the connecting link between the civilizations of Babylon and Nineveh and ancient Crete. But his mind was on other things and suddenly he broke off to remark:

"Do you know, one of the most glorious sights I have ever seen is a train-load of Turkish soldiers ascending skyward after the explosion of a tulip!"

Three days later the column started off at night in the direction of the Pilgrim Railway. In support of Lawrence were two hundred Howeitat. After two days' hard riding across a country more barren than the mountains of the moon, and through valleys reminiscent of Death Valley, California, the raiding column reached a ridge of hills near the important Turkish railway-center and garrisoned town of Maan. At a signal from Lawrence all dismounted, left the camels, walked up to the summit of the nearest hill, and from between sandstone cliffs looked down across the railway track.

This was the same railway that had been built some years before to enable the Turkish Government to keep a closer hand on Arabia through transport of troops. It also simplified the problem of transportation for pilgrims to Medina and Mecca. Medina was garrisoned by an army of over twenty thousand Turks and was strongly fortified. Lawrence and his Arabs could have severed this line completely at any time, but they chose a shrewder policy. Train-load after train-load of supplies and ammunition must be sent down to Medina over that railway. So whenever Lawrence and his followers ran out of food or ammunition they had a quaint little habit of slipping over, blowing up a train or two, looting it, and disappearing into the blue with everything that had been so thoughtfully sent down from Constantinople.

As a result of the experience he gained on these raids, Lawrence's knowledge of the handling of high

explosives was as extensive as his knowledge of archæology, and he took great pride in his unique ability as a devastator of railways. The Bedouins, on the other hand, were entirely ignorant of the use of dynamite; so Lawrence nearly always planted all of his own mines and took the Bedouins along merely for company and to help carry off the loot.

He had blown up so many trains that he was as familiar with the Turkish system of transportation and patrols as were the Turks themselves. In fact he had dynamited Turkish trains passing along the Hedjaz Railway with such regularity that in Damascus seats in the rear carriage sold for five and six times their normal value. Invariably there was a wild scramble for seats at the rear of a train; because Lawrence nearly always touched off his tulips, as he playfully called his mines, under the engine, with the result that the only carriages damaged were those in front.

There were two important reasons why Lawrence preferred not to instruct the Arabs in the use of high explosives. First of all, he was afraid that the Bedouins would keep on playfully blowing up trains even after the termination of the war. They looked upon it merely as an ideal form of sport, one that was both amusing and lucrative. Secondly, it was extremely dangerous to leave footmarks along the railway line, and he preferred not to delegate tulip planting to men who might be careless.

The column crouched behind great chunks of sand-

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stone for eight hours until a number of patrols had passed by. Lawrence satisfied himself that they were going at intervals of two hours. At midday, while the Turks were having their siesta, Lawrence slipped down to the railway line, and, walking a short distance on the sleepers in his bare feet in order not to leave impressions on the ground which might be seen by the Turks, he picked out what he considered a proper spot for planting a charge. Whenever he merely wanted to derail the engine of a train he would use only a pound of blasting gelatin; when he wanted to blow it up he would use from forty to fifty pounds. On this occasion, in order that no one might be disappointed, he used slightly more than fifty pounds. It took him a little more than an hour to dig a hole between the sleepers, bury the explosive, and run a fine wire underneath the rail, over the embankment, and up the hillside.

Laying a mine is rather a long and tedious task. Lawrence first took off a top layer of railway ballast, which he placed in a bag that he carried under his cloak for that purpose. He next took out enough earth and rock to fill two five-gallon petrol tins. This he carried off to a distance of some fifty yards from the track and scattered along so that it would not be noticed by the Turkish patrols. After filling the cavity with his fifty-pound tulip-seed of dynamite, he put the surface layer of ballast back in place and leveled it off with his hand. As a last precaution he took a camel's-hair brush, swept the ground smooth,

and then, in order not to leave a footprint, walked backward down the bank for twenty yards and with the brush carefully removed all trace of his tracks. He buried the wire for a distance of two hundred yards up the side of the hill and then calmly sat down under a bush, right out in the open, and waited as nonchalantly as though tending a flock of sheep. When the first trains came along the guards stationed on top of the cars and in front of the engine, with their rifles loaded, saw nothing more extraordinary than a lone Bedouin sitting on the hillside with a shepherd's staff in his hand. Lawrence allowed the front wheels of the engine to pass over the mine, and then, as his column lay there half paralyzed behind the boulders, he sent the current into the gelatin. It exploded with a roar like the falling of a six-story building. An enormous black cloud of smoke and dust went up. With a clanking and clattering of iron the engine rose from the track. It broke squarely in two. The boiler exploded, and chunks of iron and steel showered the country for a radius of three hundred yards. Numerous bits of boiler-plate missed Lawrence by inches.

Instead of provisions, this train carried some four hundred Turkish soldiers on their way to the relief of Medina. They swarmed out of the coaches and started in a menacing manner toward Lawrence. All this time the Bedouins, lining the tops of the hills, were popping at the Turks. Evidently one Turkish officer suspected that the lone Arab was the mys-

terious Englishman for whom rewards up to fifty thousand pounds had been offered. He shouted something, and the men, instead of shooting, ran toward Lawrence with the evident intention of taking him prisoner; but before they had advanced six paces Lawrence whipped out his long-barreled Colt from the folds of his aba and used it so effectively that they turned and fled. He always carried a heavy American frontier-model weapon. Although very few persons ever actually saw him, it was well known among the British officers that he spent many hours at target-practice, with the result that he had made himself an expert shot.

Many of the Turks dodged behind the embankment and began shooting through the carriage-wheels; but Lawrence, in anticipation of this, had posted two Lewis machine-guns just around a curve in the track where they covered the opposite side of the railway embankment behind which the Turks had taken refuge. The gun-crews opened fire, and before the Turks knew what had happened their line was raked from end to end and every man behind the embankment either killed or wounded. The rest of the Turks who had remained on the train fled panic-stricken in all directions.

The Arabs, who were crouching behind the rocks popping away with their rifles, charged down, tore open the carriages, and tossed out everything on board that was not nailed down. The loot consisted of sacks of Turkish silver coin and paper currency

and many beautiful draperies which the Turks had taken from the private houses of wealthy Arabs in Medina. The Bedouins piled all the loot along the embankment, and with shouts of glee commenced dividing it among themselves, while Lawrence signed the duplicate way-bills and playfully returned one copy to a wounded Turkish guard whom he intended to leave behind. They were just like children around a Christmas tree. Occasionally two men would want the same silk Kermani rug and begin fighting over it. When that happened Lawrence would step between them and turn the rug over to some third man.

Early in September, accompanied by two sheiks of the Ageilat Beni Atiyah from Mudowarrah, Lawrence left Akaba and trekked up to the multicolored sandstone cliff country which the tribesmen called Rum. In less than a week he had been joined by a force of 116 Toweiha, Zuwida, Darausha, Dhumanyah, Togatga, Zelebani, and Howeitat.

The appointed rendezvous was a small railway bridge near Kilo 587 south of Damascus. Here Lawrence buried his usual bit of tulip-seed between the rails, and stationed Stokes and Lewis guns at vantage-points three hundred yards or so distant. The following afternoon a Turk patrol spotted them. An hour later a party of forty mounted Turks put out from the fort at Haret Ammar to attack the mine-aying party from the south. Another party of over a hundred set forth to outflank Lawrence from the north, but he decided to take a chance and hold his

ground. A little later a train with two engines and two box-cars moved slowly up from Haret Ammar, machine-guns and rifles spitting lead from the roofs and from loopholes in the cars as the train advanced. As it passed, Lawrence touched his electric switch and exploded a mine directly under the second engine. The jar was sufficient to derail the first, demolish the boiler, as well as smash the cab and tender of the second, up-end the first box-car, and derail the second. While the Arabs swarmed around looting the wrecked train, Lawrence fired a box of guncotton under the front engine, completing its destruction. The box-cars were full of valuable baggage, and the Arabs went wild with joy. In all, seventy Turks were killed, ninety taken prisoner, and an Austrian lieutenant and thirteen Austrian and German sergeants blown up.

Every fourth or fifth man of the famous fighting Howeitat tribe is a sheik. Naturally the head sheik has but little power. Frequently these men would accompany Lawrence on a raid. On one such expedition to the railway near Biresh-Shediyah he had to adjudicate for them in twelve cases of assault with weapons, four camel-thefts, one marriage settlement, fourteen feuds, a bewitchment, and two cases of evil eye. He settled the bewitchment affair by counter-bewitching the hapless defendant. The evil eye cases he cleverly adjusted by sending the culprits away.

On still another occasion, during the first week of the following October, Lawrence was sitting out in

the open near Kilo 500. His Bedouin followers were concealed behind him in the broom-brush. Along came a heavy train with twelve coaches. The explosion following the turning on of the electric current shattered the fire-box of the locomotive, burst many of the tubes, hurled the cylinders into the air, completely cleaned out the cab, including the engineer and fireman, warped the frame of the engine, bent the two rear driving-wheels, and broke their axles. When Lawrence put in his official report on this raid he humorously added a postscript to the effect that the locomotive was "beyond repair." The tender and first coach were also demolished. Mazmi Bey, a general of the Turkish General Staff who happened to be on board, fired two shots out of the window of his private car with his Mauser pistol, which then evidently jammed. Although it appeared advisable for him to take to the camels and the distant hills, Lawrence and his band swooped down on the train, captured eight coaches, killed twenty Turks, and carried off seventy tons of food-stuffs without suffering any losses.

His only European companion on some of his wildest train-blowing parties was a daring Australian machine-gunner, Sergeant Yells by name. He was a glutton for excitement and a tiger in a fight. On one occasion, when out with a raiding-party of Abu Tayi, Yells accounted for between thirty and forty Turks with his Lewis gun. When the loot was divided among the Bedouins, Yells, in true Australian

fashion, insisted on having his share. So Lawrence handed him a Persian carpet and a fancy Turkish cavalry sword.

Shereefs Ali and Abdullah also played an important part in the raids on the Hedjaz Railway and in the capture of great convoys of Turkish camels near Medina. In 1917 Lawrence and his associates, in coöperation with Feisal, Ali, Abdullah, and Zeid blew up twenty-five Turkish trains, tore up fifteen thousand rails, and destroyed fifty-seven bridges and culverts. During the eighteen months that he led the Arabs, they dynamited seventy-nine trains and bridges! It is a remarkable fact that he participated in only one such expedition that turned out unsatisfactorily. General Allenby, in one of his reports, said that Colonel Lawrence had made train-wrecking the national sport of Arabia!

Later in the campaign, near Deraa, the most important railway-junction south of Damascus, Lawrence touched off one of his tulips under the driving-wheels of a particularly long and heavily armed train. It turned out that Djemal Pasha, the commander-in-chief of the Turkish armies, was on board with nearly a thousand troops. Djemal hopped out of his saloon and, followed by all his staff, jumped into a ditch.

Lawrence had less than sixty Bedouins with him, but all were members of his personal body-guard and famous fighters. In spite of the overwhelming odds, the young Englishman and his Arabs fought a

pitched battle in which 125 Turks were killed and Lawrence lost a third of his own force. The remainder of the Turks finally rallied around their commander-in-chief, and Lawrence and his Arabs had to show their heels.

At every station along the Hedjaz-Pilgrim Railway were one or two bells which the Turkish officials rang as a warning to passengers when the train was ready to start. Nearly all of them now decorate the homes of Lawrence's friends. Along with them are a dozen or more Turkish mile-posts and the number-plates from half the engines which formerly hauled trains over the line from Damascus to Medina. Lawrence and his associates collected these in order to confirm their victories. While in Arabia, I often heard the half-jocular, half-serious remark that Lawrence would capture a Turkish post merely for the sake of adding another bell to his collection; and it was no uncommon thing to see Lawrence, or one of his officers, walking stealthily along the railway embankment, between patrols, searching for the iron post marking Kilo 1000 south of Damascus. Once found, they would cut it off with a tulip-bud—a stick of dynamite. When not engaged in a major movement against the Turks or in mobilizing the Bedouins, Lawrence usually spent his time blowing up trains and demolishing track.

So famous did this young archæologist become throughout the Near East as a dynamiter of bridges and trains that after the final defeat of the Turkish

armies, when word reached Cairo that Lawrence would soon be passing through Egypt en route to Paris, General Watson, G. O. C. of troops, jocularly announced that he was going to detail a special detachment to guard Kasr el Nil, the Brooklyn Bridge of Egypt, which crosses the Nile from Cairo to the residential suburb of Gazireh.

It had been rumored that Lawrence was dissatisfied at having finished up the campaign with the odd number of seventy-nine mine-laying parties to his credit. So the story spread up and down along the route of the Milk and Honey Railway between Egypt and Palestine that he proposed to make it an even eight, and wind up his career as a dynamiter in an appropriate manner by planting a few farewell tulips under the Kasr el Nil, just outside the door of the British military headquarters.