

Our Smallest Ally

A BRIEF ACCOUNT OF
THE ASSYRIAN NATION
IN THE GREAT WAR

BY

Rev. W. A. Wigram, D. D. *

April, 1915

Sara Kamish had put a stop to all ideas of an invasion of Russian territory, and a Russian advance on Van and Erzerum was at least probable. If that should take place, the position of the mountain Assyrians on the flank of such an advance was important, and there were political reasons for gaining their loyalty as well. The Armenian massacres were now in full swing, and the presence of the American missionaries in the land made it impossible to conceal them altogether. The Turks were resolved to continue them (Talaat, then Minister of the Interior, and later Grand Vizir, had declared that he meant to "settle this Armenian question for the next fifty years at least"), but the policy needed concealment and apology, and it would be an obvious advantage to be able to say, "Here is a Christian millet that has such confidence in our justice, that it has thrown its lot in with us in this war of its own accord." Hence very high bids were made for what the Turks called Assyrian loyalty, and the Assyrians, with their old ideas of a shadowy independence, called alliance. They were to have absolute freedom for education, were to be given good guns, with salaries for their Patriarch, for all their bishops, and for their mountain chiefs. Promises, in fact, were cheap, and the Turk was lavish of them; and there is no doubt that a party in the nation were desirous of accepting them. They could argue, with perfect truth, that the adherence of so small a nation to the cause of the Entente could make no difference to them; and that they

April, 1915

themselves, placed as they were absolutely in the jaws of the wolf, would never be blamed for making terms for themselves in the time of peril. Thus for a time things were in suspense. There was no fighting, but a good deal of dread of the future; and as a precaution the patriarchal family, and later the

Patriarch himself, left the isolated village of Qudshanis, and went down to the Ashiret district of Diz, and to the relative safety of its rugged mountains.

In the spring of 1915, events forced the momentous decision on the nation; the Russian advance commenced, and what was left of the city of Van fell into their hands. It was a town of ruins; for it had been the scene of desperate fighting between the Armenian Tashnakists and the government troops, and the theatre of some of the most awful massacres of that awful time. The great American mission, among other buildings, had been destroyed. Now, however, in April, it fell into Russian hands, and the conquerors sent down a deputation to Bashkala and Julamerk, calling on the mountaineers to rise and fight for the Christians against the Mussalmans who had proclaimed the general "Jihad." At about the same time the Russians re-occupied Urmi, where peace and amnesty was proclaimed, and a time of relative safety began for all the inhabitants. The men of the mountains had now to make their definite choice.

A meeting of all the notables of the nation was held in Diz, and the matter was fully and anxiously

May, 1915

debated; on the one side there could be urged the promises of the Turk, and the certainty of forgiveness by the English if the nation should elect to "play for safety." On the other there was undoubtedly the feeling that they were now being asked to play their part in the general quarrel of all Christendom, and the fact that it was very doubtful whether the Turk either could or would keep his promises, or defend them from the Kurd in the mean time. Ultimately, on receiving Russian promises of support, they decided for the nobler and more dangerous of the alternatives; they definitely threw in their lot with the Entente against Turkey, and the nation was called to arms on the 10th May, 1915. A definite and formal declaration of war was sent by the heads of the nation to the Vali of Van. They were committed; and as soon as they were thus definitely committed, the Russians withdrew to Van and left their mountain allies to fend for themselves in the peril that they had now called upon them to face on their behalf.

That peril became real at once. Qudshanis was attacked and burnt by the Kurds, the patriarchal library and the English mission house sharing the common lot. Even the church books which had

Cont'd on page 17

been concealed in what was held a safe place, were found and destroyed. The Turkish authorities had not lost all hope of winning over the mountaineers, and the Kaimmakam of Julamerk, Rajib Raghav Bey, sent frequent messages to the Patriarch at Diz. These, however, were all fruitless, and the spirits

May, 1915

of the mountaineers rose to meet the danger; Shamasha * Ephraim's war song, written about this time, expresses their feelings, and it was chanted from village to village among the hills.

ASSYRIAN WAR SONG

(By SHAMASHA EPHRAIM OF SERAI D'MAMIDAI, Van)

Brothers, up; arouse ye; shake off sloth and slumber!
Take each man his rifle for the battle with the Turk.
Now the day is dawning when we face our foemen.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

Rouse ye chiefs and princes, Maliks God-appointed;
Forward goes our army through the land we owned of yore.
Hear the rifle rattle echo from our mountains.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

Up, I say, ye captains; up, I say, ye Maliks!
Kings we had in olden time right mighty men of war.
Take we gun and powder; days of stress are on us.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

Lady of the Holy House, Surma stands amongst us;
Given of high counsel to her brothers from a child.
"Now the very babe must bear the bow and arrows."
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

Young men of the Nation, Clans renowned in story,
Stand by one another now in brotherhood and zeal.
Shall beloved Kochanes be a prey to foemen?
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

Young men of the Nation, bide a band of brothers,
Tiari fast by Jilu and Tkhoma fast by Baz.
Listen to the roll of battle drums ye warriors.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

David is our leader, valiant in the combat;
He shall be our captain and set us in array!
He shall go before like sun and moon to guide us.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

June, 1915

Forth we go to battle, raging o'er the mountains;
Hearts all yearning forward to Mosul's fertile plains.
Nineveh's fair city summons back her children.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

On the Tigris' banks lies Nineveh the holy;
Her old walls shall be to us a diadem and crown.
There alone, Assyrians, can our race be established.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

Hark, our Nation calls—our great Assyrian Mother;
Hark, young men, she calls you—calls each one of you by name.
Blest that youth for ever who will hear her calling.
Forth we go to battle in thy name, O Mar Shimun.

Now began a period of fighting that was desultory, but for all that severe, in the mountain districts, where the Assyrians, who could get no help except

a few rifles and cartridges from their Russian allies, stood at bay among their crags and gorges against largely superior forces of Kurds and of regular Turkish troops from Mosul. The decision had been taken at the middle of May, and before the end of June the Berwar Kurds, with the garrison of Mosul to back them, had begun an organised attack on the Lizan valley of lower Tiari, while the Artosh Kurds, led by the Kaimmakam of Julamerk, were threatening Chumba; and on the other side of the Zab the Agha of Chal had brought his forces against Salabekan and Tkhuma, and Sutu of Oramar, old enemy of the Assyrians, was taking the field against Jilu and Baz.

On the whole, this formidable series of attacks failed, or at least met with only partial success. The Lizan valley was occupied, with the village of Ashithia, but the attacks on Chumba d'Malik, Jilu and Salabekan were repulsed with heavy loss.

July, 1915

When the onset was renewed some five days later, there was severe fighting at Mar Sawa, on the Zab. The bridge at that point was taken, retaken by the Christians, and finally taken and held by the Kurds; still they were never able to improve their success at this point and cross the Zab.

Broadly, the result of a week of severe fighting was, that the Assyrians lost the districts on the right or western bank of the Zab, but were able to destroy the bridges and maintain their positions on the other bank. There was a pause after these first actions, and Mar Shimun employed it in a hurried visit to Diza in Gawar, where he could get into touch with the Russians in Van and Urmi, and ask urgently for help from both parties. This effort brought him plenty of congratulations and abundant promises, and a small but welcome supply of rifles and ammunition; but nothing more substantial than that.

Foiled, on the whole, in the open fighting, Haidar Beg Vali of Mosul, now sought to bring about the Assyrian surrender in a singularly dastardly fashion. Hormizd, the brother of Mar Shimun, was a prisoner in his hands. This young man had been in Constantinople for his education for two years before the war, and had been arrested and imprisoned there as soon as Turkey entered the struggle, so that there could be no political charge against him personally. He was now sent to Mosul,* and Haidar sent the following message to Mar Shimun: "Your brother

* Hormizd was arrested in Constantinople, and sent thence to Mosul," but it is not certain that he ever reached that place.

