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Lehi in the Desert, Part X - Conclusion

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LEHI IN THE DESERT

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X

CONCLUSION

WATCHING Lehi's travel-worn band wending its way down those delectable mountains to the sea, one is moved to reflect that they have come an unconscionably long way just to build a ship. Well, let the reader suggest some other route. The best guide to Arabia at the time of the writing of the Book of Mormon imagined forests and lakes in the center of Arabia,³²⁰ while insisting that the coasts of that land were "a rocky wall . . . as dismal and barren as can be; not a blade of grass, or a green thing" to be found.³²⁰ The Book of Mormon reverses the picture and has Lehi avoid the heart of the continent to discover smiling woodlands on the southern coast. Where else could Lehi have found his wood on the coast? "It is quite probable," writes a present-day authority, "that Solomon had to transport his ships, or the material for them, from the Mediterranean, for where on the shores of the Red Sea could timber be found for ship-building?"³²¹

And by what other route could Lehi have reached his happy shore? The terrain is more passable in the north, but he could not have crossed north Arabia and then followed the east coast, for to do so he would have had to pass through strong and hostile kingdoms: the northern route was closed to him for political reasons. Equally impossible for the same reasons would have been a move to the west: the Mediterranean was a world of closed harbors and closed seas. A direct route cutting diagonally across the peninsula would have taken the party away from the game-filled mountains of the coast and forced them to travel through what we now know to be difficult desert country, journeying three times as far in the sands as they actually did—and that was the limit of their endurance. Nor could they have followed the coast all the way, because the

whole southwestern corner of the peninsula, which Lehi avoided even at the price of traversing part of the terrible Empty Quarter, comprised the kingdom of the Sabaeans, probably the strongest, richest, and most thickly settled state Arabia has ever had.

So, long and painful though it was, Lehi's itinerary turns out to have been actually the shortest and safest, if not the only one he could possibly have taken.

On the shore of the Arabian Sea the story of Lehi in the Desert properly ends. Though this has been but a preliminary telling, still there is enough to justify certain reflections by way of summary.

SOME GENERAL CONCLUSIONS

We have never been very much interested in "proving" the Book of Mormon, for us its divine provenance has always been an article of faith, and its historical aspects by far the *least* important thing about it. But the "world" insists that it is a gross and stupid forgery, a barefaced fraud perpetrated by an ignorant rustic who could hardly write his name. They have made the charge; let them prove it. That should be very easy indeed if they are right, since the accused has committed himself in no uncertain terms and at unsparing length. The nature of the document he pretended to be translating is so singular and the conditions it must fulfil so unique and exacting, that its composer must certainly be convicted at a glance if he is lying. On the other hand, if his writing shows *any tendency at all* to conform to the peculiar conditions prescribed, its critics must be put to a good deal of explaining, and if it shows a *constant tendency* to conform to those difficult conditions, its critics will be bankrupt. We believe that this little study, tentative and limited as it is, nonetheless indicates such a tendency beyond reasonable doubt.

What has been proved? Simply that everything which the Book of I Nephi says happened really *could* have happened. Not that it *did* happen: to prove that is neither necessary nor possible. Unique events in history can never be reconstructed with certainty; but characteristic, repeated events—manners, customs, rituals, etc., things that happen not just once but again and again in familiar patterns—may be the object of almost absolute certainty. Hence they, and not specific particulars, are the hardest things to fake; in testing forgeries and identifying documents it is the general pattern that is all-important.³²² If a man claims, for instance, that he overheard a particular conversation or witnessed a certain act in Tahiti, we are wasting our time trying to reconstruct the particular event (which could happen anywhere) if only we can prove that the man was never in Tahiti—and on that head a few casual but searching questions will turn the trick. So in talking about Lehi in the Desert we have, as it were, put the old patriarch on the stand as a witness in the case of Joseph Smith versus the world. Joseph Smith has been accused of fraudulent practices, and Lehi is a witness for the defense. He claims to have spent years in certain parts of the Near East about 2550 years ago. Is he telling the truth?

Generations of shrewd and determined prosecutors have failed to shake Lehi's testimony or catch him contradicting himself. That should be enough to satisfy the most critical. But now, lo and behold! Out of the dust come new witnesses—Captain Hoshaiiah of Lachish, a host of sunburned explorers returned from Lehi's deserts to tell us what life there is like, the ancient poets of the Arabs—and with them crates and crates of exhibits, A to Z, seals, inscriptions, letters, artifacts from Lehi's own homeland. Whoever dreamed that Lehi would one day be

LEHI IN THE DESERT

(Continued from preceding page)

our guide confident and sure-footed, never retracing his steps to change his course, never hesitating a moment or seeking refuge in vague and non-committal vaporings, never begging to be excused and lamely falling back on an appeal to be understood in a "religious" sense only, never moving behind a smoke screen or becoming consciously or unconsciously confusing or involved.

The present treatment of the Lehi story leaves much to be desired (*we* can afford to crave the reader's indulgence for using the term *Jew* too freely or engaging in rather fuzzy speculation on language), but if only a fraction of our information has been sound, I Nephi cannot possibly be explained on the grounds of mere coincidence. To illustrate this, let the reader make a simple test. Let him sit down to write a history of life in Tibet in the middle of eleventh century A.D. Let him construct his story wholly on the basis of what he happens to know right now about Tibet in the eleventh century—that will fairly represent what was known about ancient Arabia in 1830. In writing your Tibetan fantasy you will enjoy one great advantage: since the canvas is an absolute blank, you are free to fill it with anything that strikes your fancy. So you should have no trouble in getting "smoothly launched into your narrative," one critic who seemed to think that is the only obstacle confronting the author of the Book of Mormon. But there are other obstacles, for in your chronicle of old Tibet we must insist that you scrupulously observe a number of conditions: (1) you must never make any absurd, impossible, or contradictory statements; (2) when you are finished, you must make no changes in the text; (3) you must give out that your "smooth narrative" is not fiction but true, nay, sacred history; (4) you must invite the ablest orientologists to examine the text with care, and strive diligently to see that your book gets into the hands of all those most eager to prove it a forgery and most competent to expose every flaw in it. The "author" of the Book of Mormon ob-

serves all these terrifying rules most scrupulously.

In your Tibetan epic you might get something right by happy accident once in awhile, but you need not expect to have anything authentic. For consolation you may now take these or any of the *best* historical novels of any age dealing with a period a thousand or so years before the time of writing; then take a red pencil and get to work, checking every anachronism, incongruity, misinformation, and inaccuracy in the book. The result is scarlet carnage. But be merciful! To realize what difficulties confront the creative historian, one has but to contemplate the laborious production of the Book of Mormon's latest critics.

It was all too easy for the present author, lacking the unfair advantages of either wit or learning, to show where the above-mentioned critic contradicts *herself* again and again. It wasn't even sporting. It required not one iota of "scholarship." Since then it has been possible for others more diligent and more astute to go further and show how this author has doctored the footnotes repeatedly, while a more careful examination of the star witness, the notorious Bainbridge court record, shows that that priceless treasure never existed!¹⁸⁸⁵

A Victor Hugo or an Anatole France can tell a convincing story when he is near to his own land and time, but let any writer, even the most learned, slip back a couple of thousand years and five or six thousand miles around the globe, and he finds himself in a treacherous slough from which he can only extricate himself by taking frankly to the wings of fantasy. It is not the particular events but the general background and atmosphere of their stories and a thousand little slips of detail that oblige Messrs. White and Douglas to wink knowingly and tell us it's all in fun. Any handbook on Greek and Roman antiquities can supply a writer with all the accurate detail he can possibly use, but no writer yet has succeeded in integrating a mass of such stuff together into a simple, natural, and flawless whole. Naomi Mitchison comes nearest,

perhaps, but only because she wisely confines herself to describing such timeless things as mountains, seas, and human emotions. Nephi imparts his information in such simple, effortless, and matter-of-fact discourse that the reader easily overlooks the vast mass of detail he has succeeded in weaving into a natural and uncomplicated pattern. What writer of historical fiction has ever remotely approached such an achievement?

But haven't we been decidedly partial in dealing with the story of Lehi? Of course we have. We are the counsel for the defense. Our witnesses have all been of our own choosing, but no one can deny that they are competent and unprejudiced. We invite the prosecution to cross-examine the witnesses. To date they have not done so, but instead have brought their own witnesses into court, up-to-date intellectuals who can tell us just exactly what the accused was *thinking* when he wrote the Book of Mormon. Such evidence is not evidence at all—it is bad science, bad history, and even bad newspaper-reporting and would be rejected by any court in the land. But it might impress the half-educated jury, and that is its purpose. We can best explain the new trend in Book of Mormon criticism by a little parable.

A young man once claimed he had found a large diamond in his field as he was ploughing. He put the stone on display to the public free of charge, and everyone took sides. A psychologist showed, by citing some famous case studies, that the young man was suffering from a well-known form of delusion. An historian showed that other men have also claimed to have found diamonds in fields and been deceived. A geologist proved that there were no diamonds in the area but only quartz: The young man had been fooled by a quartz. When asked to inspect the stone itself, the geologist answered with a weary, tolerant smile and a kindly shake of the head. An English professor showed that the young man in describing his stone used the very same language that others had used in describing uncut diamonds: he was, therefore, simply speaking

(Continued on page 824)

THE IMPROVEMENT ERA

LEHI IN THE DESERT

(Continued from page 806)

the common language of his time. A sociologist showed that only three out of 177 florists' assistants in four major cities believed the stone was genuine. A clergyman wrote a book to show that it was not the young man but someone *else* who had found the stone.

Finally an indigent jeweler named Snite pointed out that since the stone was still available for examination the answer to the question of whether it was a diamond or not had absolutely nothing to do with who found it, or whether the finder was honest or sane, or who believed him, or whether he would know a diamond from a brick, or whether diamonds had ever been found in fields, or whether people had ever been fooled by quartz or glass, but was to be answered simply and solely by putting the stone to certain well-known tests for diamonds. Experts on diamonds were called in. Some of them declared it genuine. The others made nervous jokes about it and declared that they could not very well jeopardize their dignity and reputations by appearing to take the thing too seriously. To hide the bad impression thus made, someone came out with the theory that the stone was really a synthetic diamond, very skilfully made, but a fake just the same. The objection to this is that the production of a good synthetic diamond 120 years ago would have been an even more remarkable feat than the finding of a real one.

The moral of this story is that the testimony brought out by the prosecution, however learned, has been to date entirely irrelevant and immaterial. It is hardly necessary to observe that it is also incompetent, since it is highly argumentative and based entirely on conclusions of the witnesses, who have furthermore already made up their minds, on other grounds, that the accused is guilty.

Another thing, the prosecution must prove their case to the hilt: it is not enough to show, even if they could, that there are mistakes in the Book of Mormon, for all humans make mistakes; what they must explain is how the "author" of that book happened to get so many

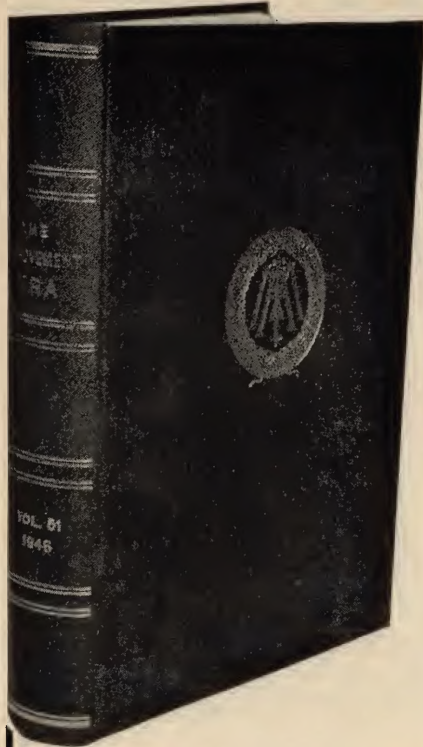
things right.²⁷ Eighty-odd years of zealous searching by the Palestine Exploration Fund have brought to light little or nothing proving the Exodus; to this day "of the story of . . . Saul, David, Solomon, or even of their existence, there is no trace whatever outside of Palestine." Yet this shortage of evidence by no means *disproves* the Bible. We should not have been disappointed or surprised to find all the records completely silent on matters relevant to the Book of Mormon; yet they have been far from that. If a man makes a mistake in solving a very complex mathematical problem, that proves nothing as to his ability as a mathematician, for the greatest make slips. But if he shows a correct solution for the problem, it is impossible to explain away his success as an accident, and we must recognize him, whoever he is, as a *bona fide* mathematician. So it is with the author of I Nephi: If we could find mistakes in his work, we could readily explain and forgive them, but when he keeps coming up with the right answer time after time, we can only accept his own explanation of how he does it.

One significant aspect of the story of Lehi in the Desert must not be overlooked. It is wholly, from beginning to end, a history of the Old World. There is in it not so much as a hint of the noble red man. Nothing in it ever betrays the slightest suspicion that the drama is going to end in the New World. Lehi's people thought they had found their promised land in Bountiful by the sea and were horribly upset when Nephi, who himself had thought the project impossible (I Nephi 17:8-9), undertook by special instruction to build a ship.

From what oriental romance, then, was the book of I Nephi stolen? Compare it with any attempts to seize the letter and the spirit of the glamorous East, from Voltaire to Grillparzer, nay, with the soberest oriental histories of the time, and it will immediately become apparent how unreal, extravagant, overdone, and stereotyped they all are, and how scrupulously Nephi has avoided all the pitfalls into which even the best scholars

(Continued on page 826)

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(Continued from page 824)

were sure to fall. There is no point at all to the question: Who wrote the Book of Mormon? It would have been quite as impossible for the most learned man alive in 1830 to have written the book as it was for the unschooled Joseph Smith. And whoever would account for the Book of Mormon by any theory suggested so far—save one—must completely rule out the first forty pages.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

³²⁰Corder's *Arabia, in The Modern Traveller* series (London, 1825), p. 14f; p. 9: "... small mountainous oases . . . seem to form a continued line from the southeast of Palestine to Omaun."
³²⁰*Idem*, p. 348f
³²¹Stewart Perowne, "Note on I Kings, Ch. X, 1-13," *PEFQ* 1939, p. 200

³²²This principle is well illustrated in Cheesman's criticism of Palgrave. Though the latter's descriptions of Hufuf are so full of "sheer inaccuracy" and "blazing indiscretion" as to appear almost pure fabrications, and though "Palgrave's map of Hufuf is so full of inaccuracies that I have not been able even to orient it," Cheesman nonetheless concludes that "The picture Palgrave painted of Hufuf, its gardens, its archways, and its industries and people . . . could only have been composed by an eye-witness." No matter how imperfect the details, the general picture presents objects that would not have been mentioned if they had not been seen. (*In Unknown Arabia*, pp. 67-71.) "It is only too easy," writes the same author, "however careful one may be, to fall into little inaccuracies in an endeavor to put color into one's own description of a country, and it is easier still, as I found, to come behind and point out the shortcomings of a predecessor." (*Id.*, p. 70.) This is a powerful argument indeed for the sober and detailed account of Nephi, whose mistakes of detail we could pardon if we could discover them. The same principle applies to the study of documents. How do we know, for example, that the text of Manetho, an ancient Egyptian, is actually preserved in the late Greek writing that has come down to us. Because, says Ed. Meyer (*G.A.A.* 1.2.24), it is just the sort of text that one would expect to find on an Egyptian papyrus. Details are secondary.

³²³"Scientific study of the historical topography of the Holy Land" really began with the first journey of Ed. Robinson in 1838 (*Bull. Am. Sch. Or. Res.* 74, p. 2). Yet forty years later a leading authority on Palestine writes, "Few countries are more traveled in than Palestine; and in few are the manners and customs of the people less known. . . ." (Clearmont-Ganneau in *PEFQ* 1875, 202f.)

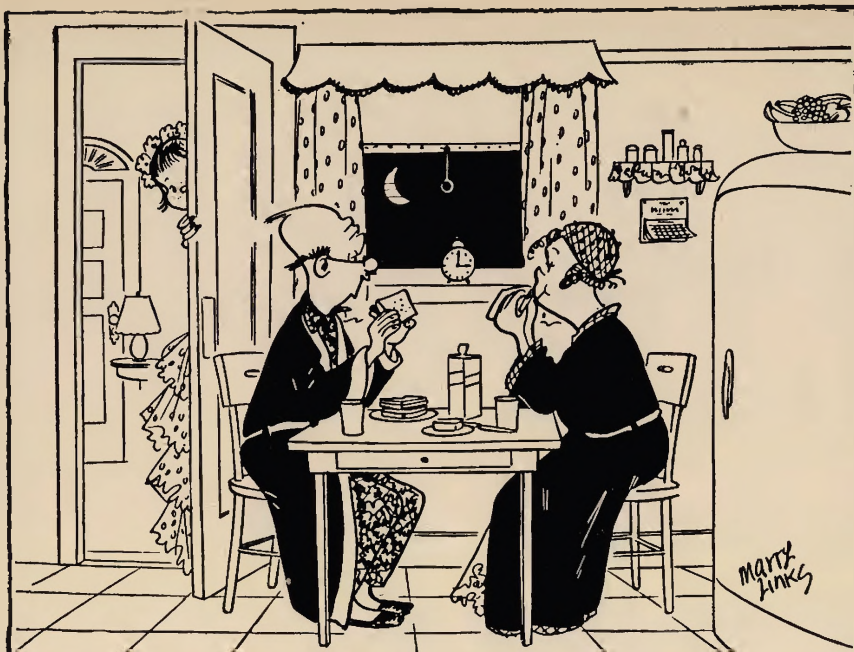
The official statement of the Palest. Expl. Fund. ten years later was, "There is scarcely anything definite known about the desert of the Wanderings." (Palmer in *Surv. Wstn. Palest. Spec. Papers.*, p. 73.) The Bible itself, instead of clearing up problems, is the main cause for the "great discrepancies" in the reports of observers, according to Palmer. (*Desert of the Exodus* 1, 2.) The classic example of this is Dr. H. Clay Trumbull's *Kadesh Barnea*, recommended by high authorities in 1884 as the standard work on the south desert and "accepted by biblical geographers as the authority on the district," right down to our own times, when Woolley and Lawrence finally showed it to be utterly "fantastic" and worse than worthless. (*PEFQ* 1914, p. 19f; *The Wilderness of Zin*, p. 71f.) As to Clarke's work on the same area, published in the *PEFQ* in 1883 (the year after Trumbull's farce), it was so absurd that the same critics content themselves with remarking: "We will not print comments on this," (*Wilderness of Zin*, p. 73, n. 1.) In 1935 Col. Newcombe wrote, "I had several books on the subject of the Wanderings, but nearly all were written by idealistic but very inexperienced visitors; most of these books had entirely missed the truth from lack of knowledge of the country or understanding of the Beduin mind. Each seemed to exaggerate grossly his own little theory at the expense of anyone else's." (*PEFQ* 1935, p. 110-1.) Yet even if the Bible were a foolproof guide, the story of Lehi goes far beyond it. The fact "that the Pharaohs were masters of the country in the time of Joshua and the early Judges . . . would not have been suspected by the readers of the Biblical narrative alone, but is one of the assured results of archaeology." (Caiger, *Bible and Spade*, p. 69f.) Just so the Book of First Nephi is full of things that "would not have been

(Continued on page 828)

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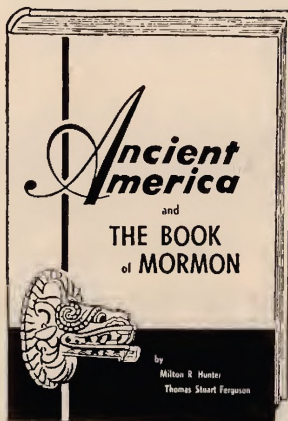


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Lehi in the Desert

(Continued from page 826)

suspected by readers of the Biblical narrative alone," and yet are now among "the assured results of archaeology." The complete and general disagreement of the experts as to what happened when Nebuchadnezzar invaded Palestine is nicely illustrated by Prof. Albright in *Jnl. Bibl. Lit.* 51 (1932), 88, 95, 97f.

³³⁴See preceding note. Doughty feels that it is necessary to correct persistent misconceptions of "Orientalism" in the western mind: the "tales of an European Orientalism" are entirely romantic and misleading (*Arabia Deserta* 1, 96); in Arabia there is "little (or nothing) of 'Orientalism.'" (*Id.* 1, 631.) "That fantastic Orientalism" (he writes in his index) "which is as it were the odour of a lady's casket, is not Arabian but foreign." Travel in the East is by no means a sure corrective to these warped views, and might even have the opposite effect, according to Ed. Meyer (*Gesch. d. Alt.* 1.2.10), for in the East in modern as in ancient times, unscrupulous guides and many other things conspire to "take in" the western traveler and exploit and excite his gullibility. A present-day traveler would have a harder time than ever to duplicate the conditions of Lehi's day, for in large parts of the East "the old Bedu tradition has been shattered but nothing has taken its place." (E. Epstein in *PEFQ* 1939, p. 69.) In 1865 the Palestine Exploration Fund was founded to dispel the clouds of ignorance and misinformation that still enveloped the Holy Land. (*PEFQ* 1910, p. 192.)

Most of the area covered in I Nephi has never been studied, and of the south desert, a main objective of the Palestine Exploration Fund for many years, a specialist could still write in 1938, "Our study of this interesting district has only just begun." (G. E. Kirk, "Archaeological Exploration in the Southern Desert." (*PEFQ* 1938, p. 214.) "Today Arabia is still almost absolutely closed to the investigations of science," wrote Pere M. J. Lagrange, *Etudes sur les Religions Semétiques*, *Revue Biblique* X, 39. In the 1920's Cheesman, preparatory to traveling in central Arabia, "searched all sources for first-hand information without avail." (*Unknown Arabia*, p. 15.) In 1921, according to the same authority, "Nothing was known of the coast of Oquair, beyond that it was a bay," (p. 31), though this is one of the most approachable parts of Arabia. Even Burton could write: "Of the Rub'a al-Khali I have heard enough, from credible relators, to conclude that its horrid depths swarm with a large and half-starving population." (*Pilgr. to Al-Madinah*, etc. 1, 3); Philb and Thomas have shown in our own day that its horrid depths do nothing of the sort, nor ever have. If intelligent people have let their imaginations run wild, it has been because there was no other way of supplying missing information: "The life of the nomad patriarchs and the wanderers of Israel (and, we might add, of Lehi) in the desert present the greatest contrast with our European customs," says Baldensperger (*PEFQ* 1901, p. 185), "and we cannot wonder that Colenso found in the book of Genesis so many statements which seemed to him incompatible with his own ideas." The proof of Genesis lies in the very fact that those statements are incompatible with western ideas. *Conder's Arabia*, p. 7, furnishes an interesting picture of how the best authorities regarded Arabia at the time the Book of Mormon was written: "The whole peninsula, Neibuhr says, may be considered as an immense pile of mountains, encircled with a belt of flat, arid, sandy ground," almost the exact opposite of the true picture.

³³⁵The writer is here referring to his *No Ma'am, That's Not History* (Bookcraft, 1946), and to the more basic investigations of Alma Burton of Brigham Young University. Especially, however, the reader is referred to the definitive handling of the court records by Dr. Francis W. Kirkham, *A New Witness of Christ in America* (Enlarged 2nd Edition, Zion's Publishing Company, Independence, Mo., 1947), pp. 370-394.

³³⁶Any reader possessed of boundless time and patience may discover the answers to these and hundreds of like searching questions in the foregoing articles. On one point the author has been taken to task by readers of the Book of Mormon in recent weeks:

At present the claim is being put forth in some quarters that the story of Laban's demise is absurd, if not impossible. It is said that Nephi could not have killed Laban and made his escape. Those who are familiar with night patrolling in wartime, however, will see in Nephi's tale a convincing and realistic account. In the first place, the higher critics are apparently not aware that the lighting of city streets, except for festivals, is a blessing unknown to ages other than our own. Hundreds of passages might be cited from ancient writers, classic and oriental, to show that in times gone by, the streets at night, even of the biggest cities, were very dark and hence very dangerous. To move about late at night without lamp bearers and armed guards was to risk almost certain assault. In times of social unrest we know from many sources,

(Continued on page 830)

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(Continued from page 828)

that streets at night were virtually given over to the underworld, as they were in some European cities during the blackouts of the late war. The extreme narrowness of the ancient streets made their blackout doubly effective. From the ancient comedy we learn how heavily barred and closely guarded the doors of private houses had to be at night, and archaeology has shown us Eastern cities in which apparently not a single house window opened onto the public street. East and West, the inmates simply shut themselves in at night as if in a besieged fortress. Even in Shakespeare's day we see the comical terror of the night watch passing through the streets at hours when all honest people are behind doors. In a word, the streets of any ancient city at night (the classic trial of Alcibiades proves this strikingly) were a perfect setting for the committing of deeds of violence without fear of detection.

It was very late when Nephi came upon Laban (1 Ne. 4:5-22); the streets were deserted and dark. Let the reader imagine what he would do if he were on patrol near an enemy headquarters during a blackout and stumbled on the unconscious form of some notoriously bloodthirsty enemy general. By the brutal code of war the enemy has no claim to a formal trial, and it is now or never. Laban was wearing armor, so the only chance of dispatching him quickly, painlessly, and safely was to cut off his head—the conventional treatment of criminals in the East, where beheading has always been by the sword, and where an executioner would be fined for failing to decapitate his victim at one clean stroke. Nephi drew the sharp, heavy weapon and stood over Laban a long time, debating his course. (1 Ne. 4:9-18.) He was a powerful man and an expert hunter: With due care such a one would do a neat job and avoid getting much blood on himself. But why should he worry about that. There was no chance of meeting any honest citizen, and in the dark no one would notice the blood anyway. What they would notice, even in the dark, would be the armor that Nephi put on. The armor, incidentally, like the sword, could be easily wiped clean. The donning of the armor was the shrewd and natural thing for Nephi to do. A number of instances from the last war could be cited to show that a spy in the enemy camp is never so safe as when he is wearing the insignia of a high military official:

No one dares challenge such people (who are often touchy); their business is at all times "top secret," and their uniform gives them complete freedom to come and go unquestioned.

Nephi tells us that he was "led by the spirit." He was not taking impossible chances, but being in a tight place he followed the surest formula of those who have carried off ticklish assignments. He was clear of the town before anything was discovered. In his whole exploit there is nothing the least improbable.

(The End)

Three Appointed to Y.M.M.I.A. General Board

(Concluded from page 766)

the mission in Czechoslovakia. Besides his twelve years in the mission field, he has served four years as a member of the Parleys Ward bishopric in Salt Lake City and been active in ward Mutual work.

He and Mrs. Toronto are the parents of six children—three sons and three daughters.

Elder Toronto has been assigned to the M Men Committee of the general board.