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## The Frog and the Scorpion

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A SCORPION wished to cross the River Nile. He met a frog, and asked the frog to take him across on his back. "No," said the frog, "for you will sting me." "Don't be stupid," said the scorpion. "I can't swim, and I should drown." This argument seemed reasonable to the frog, and he invited the scorpion to jump on his back. When they were half way across, the lethal urge of the scorpion overcame him, and he stung the frog. As the dying frog sank beneath the water, he said to the scorpion, "Why ever did you do that?" "Ah!" said the scorpion, "it's the Middle East."

John Bulloch's book, *The Making of a War: the Middle East from 1967 to 1973\**, seems to fit in with the frog-and-scorpion syndrome. It is essentially a journalist's book, not a historian's. The book is breathlessly full of facts, somewhat jumbled together; but it does not really explain what underlies them. A man from Mars (or from Britain, for that matter) could be excused

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\* Longman £5, 213 pp.

on the evidence of this book for thinking that all Middle Easterners are lunatics. Surely Arabs and Israelis have so very much to contribute to each other, that their combined skills, experience and fortune could turn the ephemeral oil bonanza into a permanent era of prosperity for the whole Semitic-speaking world? Money from Arab oil, and the skill of Israeli technologists, could be brought together to make the whole area one of the richest on earth. Instead, we are presented with a spectacle of men making a war from which nobody could gain. Apart from the wastage of resources and the human suffering involved, the likely political consequence of continued instability is surely that one or more of the Great World Powers will be forced to intervene and take over the whole area.

Somehow, I do not believe that Arabs or Israelis are noticeably different from each other, or from us. What I should like to know is how and why they have got themselves into this mess. Part of

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the trouble is that no-one, not even the erudite Mr. Bulloch, can really answer such questions at such a short remove from events. The primary documents on which a balanced view must be founded will assuredly not be available for another quarter of a century.

There are some primary documents which would give the story some historical perspective. There is the record of the interrelations of the peoples in the Middle East

in the first half of this present century, which would help set the context of the present struggle.

Apart from the sheer fascination of story-writing, the point of recording and studying the past is to understand something about man, which will help us in the future. The trees which Mr. Bulloch delineates are large and beautiful. What I should like to do is to see the wood. This needs a deeper sense of history.