

A BABYLONIAN LOVE LETTER 4,000 YEARS OLD

Also Documents on Marriage and Alimony and a Complaint Against Boarding House Fare and a Prescription for Toothache Were Found on Ancient Cuneiform Tablets and Deciphered by a Chicago Professor.



A Co-ed of Northwestern University Reading a Love Letter Written 4,000 Years Ago.

FOUR thousand years ago in Babylon a young man wrote a love letter to his sweetheart. He wrote it on a little chunk of damp clay with a stylus in cuneiform characters. Then he baked the missive and turned it into a brick, which has preserved the message to this day. The baked love letter was deciphered recently by the Rev. F. C. Eiselen, Professor of Old Testament Interpretation, in an address upon "The Recovery of a Lost Civilization" at the commencement of the Fall term of the Garrett Biblical Institute of Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill.

In addition to this cuneiform romance, Prof. Eiselen read inscriptions on other bricks setting forth marriage contracts of Babylon and Nineveh; contracts relating to alimony; complaint from a lodger in a boarding house against the fare; a prescription for toothache; business and Government records, and messages relating to the daily life of those ancient people whose capitals have been dust for centuries.

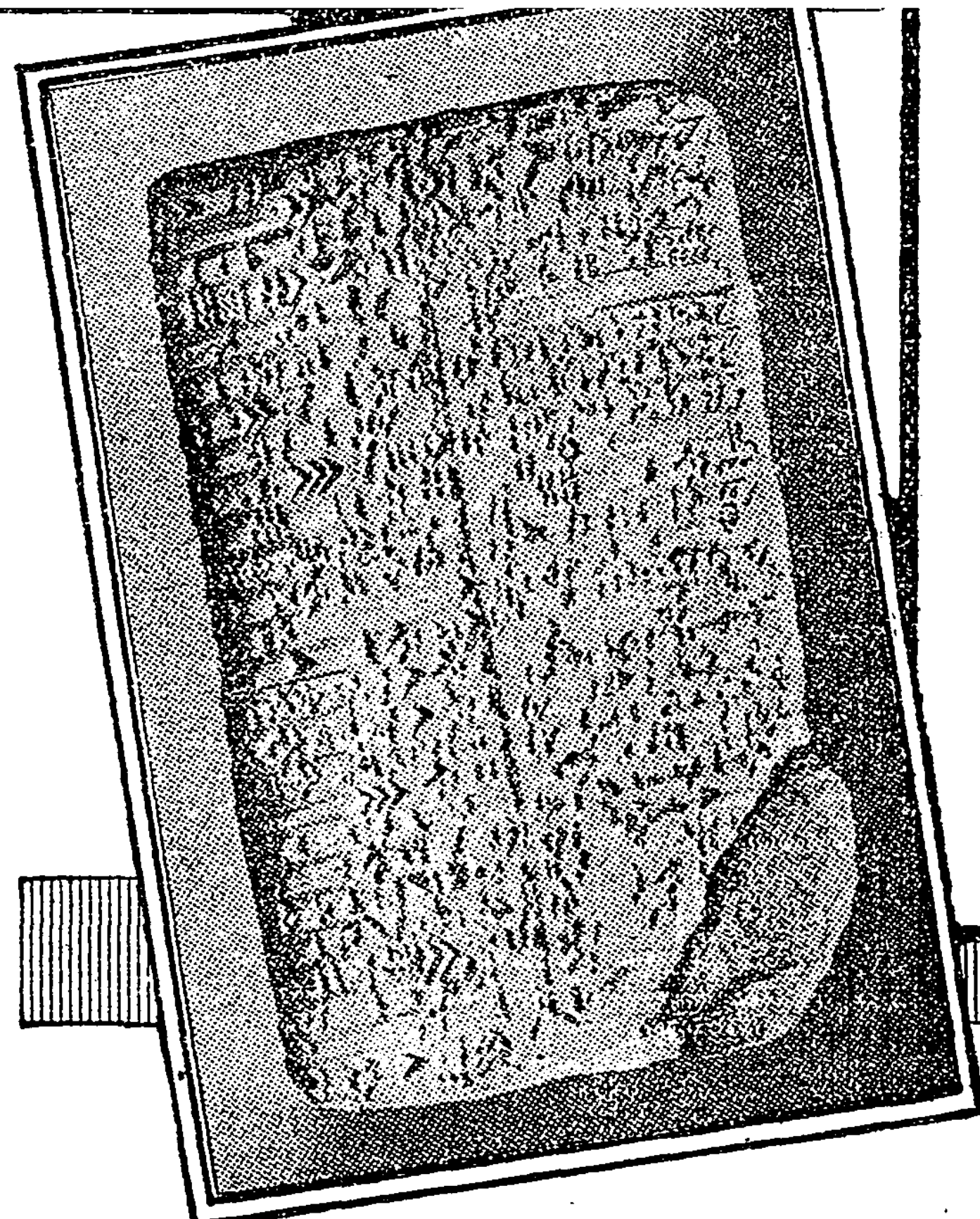
These bricks were unearthed by savants of the German Oriental Society, (Deutscher Oriental Gesellschaft,) who are now making extensive excavations on the sites of Nineveh, Babylon, and Ashur, which antedated Nineveh as the capital of the Assyrian Empire. The Northwestern University, recently has obtained sixty of these bricks. Many of the bricks are inscribed with temple records. Others are engraved with messages to the Kings, official records of Government, and letters of the common people.

The bricks vary in size. The largest are three inches long, two inches wide, and one-half inch thick. The smallest are not more than an inch long, half an inch wide, and one-fourth inch thick. The average is about an inch and a half long, an inch wide, and one-fourth inch thick. The temple records and the bricks which may be termed "official documents" are kiln baked. The love letter is likewise kiln baked. But most of the private letters are on sun-dried bricks. The bricks vary as greatly in value as in size. The temple records and the bricks setting forth official minutiae are valued at \$5 apiece. Others, especially those of historical significance, are valued at hundreds and even thousands of dollars. The cuneiform writings cover both sides of the bricks.

"Many of these bricks," said Prof. Eiselen, "were found singly or several together, scattered through the dust and debris of the ruins now being excavated. One of the most important finds of these ancient records ever made was that of the library of King Ashur-Ban-Apal, who flourished in Nineveh in 650 B. C. The library contained 30,000 inscribed bricks and cylinders. It was evident the bricks, or 'volumes,' as we should call them, had been kept on shelves, and a carefully kept index was found classifying and naming them. This library contained a description of the deluge which is supposed to have destroyed the world, and the Assyrian account of the creation.

"Most of the private correspondence of the ancient Babylonians and Assyrians was done on sun-baked bricks. The historical records and the writings intended for preservation were upon kiln-baked bricks. The letters were sealed up in envelopes of sun-dried brick. First the bit of clay inscribed with the message was baked. Then it was coated with a layer of clay, which was inscribed with the address and sometimes with a brief description of the contents. This outer envelope was in turn hardened in the sun. When the person to whom it was addressed received it, he cracked the envelope and read the letter.

"It is probable that letters were dispatched to their destination by messenger. These messengers were doubtless slaves. No evidence of any Post Office or system of carrying mails at



Cuneiform Document of Ancient Babylon.

public expense has been discovered. There probably was no Post Office. Both Babylon and Nineveh were cities of hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, and it would have been, perhaps, impossible to handle an extensive mail if the letters had been bricks. Imagine the postal authorities of such cities as New York and Chicago attempting to handle the mass of letters that pass through those Post Offices daily if the letters were bricks.

"The bricks are all inscribed with cuneiform or wedge-shaped characters. These ancient dwellers by the Euphrates and the Tigris had no alphabet. They wrote in syllables, words, and ideographs. The cuneiform inscriptions comprise more than 500 characters. It is less than a century that scholars have been able to read them. The key to their interpretation was found in parallel inscriptions upon an obelisk in three languages discovered in Persia. This tri-lingual inscription was to cuneiform writing what the Rosetta stone was to Egyptian hieroglyphs.

"The civilization of these Mesopotamian cities was of a very high order. Illiteracy, it would seem, was uncommon, and the laws of Hammurabi, who reigned 2,000 years B. C., were set up on pillars about the empire for every one to read. Nineveh was in its most flourishing period in the reign of Sennacherib from 705 to 681 B. C. It fell before the Scythians and Chaldeans in 606 and was destroyed by fire by its conquerors. Babylon became the centre of the Babylonian Empire around 2,000 B. C. It fell before the Medes and Persians under Cyrus in 538 B. C., but continued to be an opulent and populous city until the time of Alexander the Great, two centuries later."

The love letter read by Prof. Eiselen is written on both sides of a tiny kiln-baked brick, an inch long by half an inch wide. The name of the happy swain was Gimil-Marduk, and that of the girl he loved was Bibeya. Gimil-Marduk had gone to Babylon—perhaps from the country—to make his fortune. Plainly he had prospered. His mind turned to the girl he left behind him in

the home village or "down on the farm," and he sent for her to come to him. He says nothing of marriage, but one infers that Bibeya was to come as a bride. The little oblong of brick lays its magic upon the imagination and conjures up the journey of the girl to the great city, the wedding feast, and the happy beginnings of conjugal life in some pretty home in a bower of palms and orange trees. The letter which suggests this charming little idyl reads:

To Bibeya from, Gimil-Marduk. May Shamash and Marduk grant thee for my sake to live forever. I write this in order to inquire after thy health. Let me know how it goes with thee. I am now settled in Babylon, but I am in great anxiety because I have not seen thee. Send news when thou wilt come, that I may rejoice at it. Come in the month of Arakhsama. [November-December.] Mayst thou, for my sake, live forever.

Modern divorcees may draw much comfort from the brick inscribed with a contract by which a man just separated from his wife binds himself to pay her alimony. In Babylon alimony evidently meant merely the bare necessities of life. The alimony brick bears the date of 552 B. C., and reads:

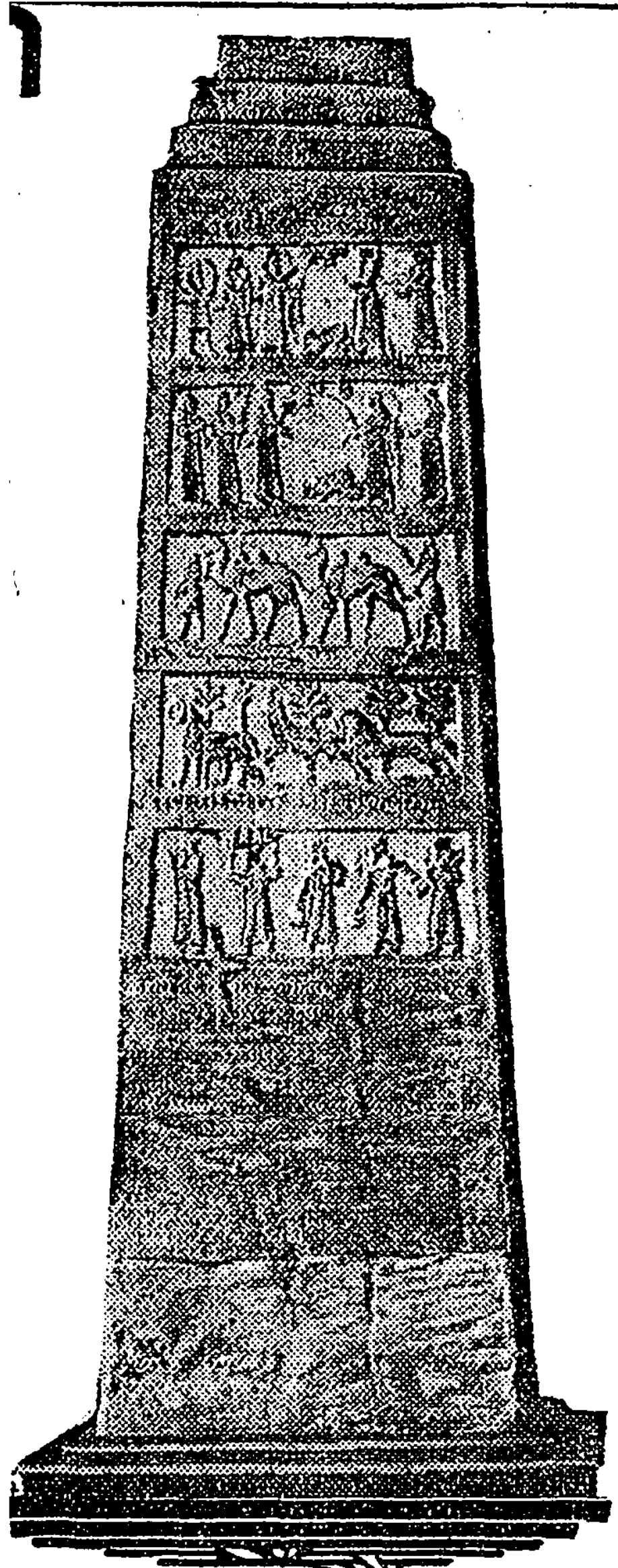
Na'id-Marduk, son of Shamash-balatsu-Iqbi, will give of his own free will, to Ramua, his wife, and Arad-

Bumti, his son, per day four qa of food, three qa of drink, per year fifteen manas of goods, one pi of sesame, one pi of salt, which is at the store house. Na'id-Marduk will not increase it. In case she flies to Nergal, the flight shall not annul it. (Done) at the office of Mushezib-Marduk, priest of Sippar.

Prof. Eiselen explained that a qa was about two quarts; a mana 900 grams, and a pi seventy-two quarts. "Fifteen manas of goods," he thought, meant material for clothes for the divorced wife and her son. As will be seen, the alimony of this Babylonian wife was food and clothing only, and contained not one shekel of coin of the realm.

A marriage contract dated 2200 B. C., by which a man takes a slave to wife, reads:

Rimsum, son of Shamshatum, has taken as a wife and spouse, Bashtum, the daughter of Belizunu, the priestess of Shamash, daughter of Uzibitum. Her bridal present shall be * * * shekels of money. When she receives it she shall be free. If Bashtum to Rimsum, her husband, shall say, "Thou art not my husband," they shall strangle her and cast her into the river. If Rimsum to Bashtum, his wife, shall say, "Thou art not my wife," he shall pay ten shekels of money as her alimony. They swore by Shamash, Marduk, the King, Shamshu-Ilu-na and Sippar.



Assyrian Obelisk.

The alimony provided for in this case is in money, but it is no improvement on that settled by Na'id-Marduk upon the unfortunate Ramua. Prof. Eiselen says the shekel referred to in this marriage contract is equal to 60 cents in money of the United States. So the alimony which Rimsum agrees to give his wife in case he divorces her amounts to only \$6. Prof. Eiselen says such lump-sum alimony—so utterly absurd to the modern woman—was common in Babylonia and Assyria.

Poor Food in a Boarding House.

A particularly touching brick deciphered by Prof. Eiselen was that written by a man who lived in a boarding house—most likely in a hall bedroom. The poor devil of a boarder did not say that his landlady set hash before her boarders three times a day, but he intimates that conditions were as bad or worse. The letter is to his father, and he incloses money and beseeches the old gentleman to send him some fresh fish and other food. One infers from the solidified wall that has come down from this boarder through the centuries that that ancient boarding house was as bad as any that draw upon themselves the anathemas of their inmates to-day. "Where I live," writes the unhappy Babylonian boarder, "there is no food I am able to eat." His letter in full reads:

To my father from Zimri-Eramma. May the gods Shamash and Marduk keep thee alive forever. May all go well with thee. I write thee to inquire after thy health. Please let me know how it goes with thee. I am stationed at Dur-Sin on the canal Bitimsikirim. Where I live there is no food which I am able to eat. Here is the third part of a shekel which I have sealed up and forward unto thee. Send me for this money fresh fish and other food.

The toothache evidently was a great mystery to these ancient people. They prepared a peculiar mixture to put on the aching tooth, but recited an incan-

Ancient Cuneiform Correspondence.

tation to help out the medicine. A toothache cure written on a brick is:

So must thou say this: "O worm, may Ea smite thee with the might of his fist." Thou shouldst then do the following: Mix beer, the plant sa-ki-bar and oil together. Repeat thereon the incantation thrice and put it on the tooth.

The explanation of the cause of toothache is as weird and is thus set forth upon another brick:

After Anu had created the heavens, the earth created the rivers, the rivers created the canals, the canals created the marshes, the marshes created the worm. Then came the worm to weep before Shash, before Ea came her tears. "What wilt thou give me for my food?" What wilt thou give me to destroy?" And the answer is, "I will give thee dried bones and scented wood." "What are these dried bones to me and scented wood? Let me drink among the teeth and set me on the gums that I may devour the blood of the teeth and of their gums destroy the strength. Then shall I hold the bolt of the door."

Here are some Babylonian proverbs deciphered from the bricks:

He that says, "O that I might take revenge and even add to it more" is like a man who draws water from a well in which there is no water and rubs his skin without anointing it.

The enemy will not be scattered in front of the gate of them whose weapons are not strong.

With disease that cannot be cured and hunger that cannot be stilled, a coffer of silver and a trunk full of gold are not able to restore health or to still hunger.

If I consume all my garble when the wind blows, my heart will be troubled when the rainy season sets in.

A drunken man has the strength of a worm.

The life of yesterday—it is every day the same.

Thou art so offensive that when thou goest into the river the water becomes foul, and when thou goest into the garden the fruit becomes bitter.

When the seed corn is not good, germs will not sprout and grain will not grow.

Because I must die, I will eat; because I must live, I will work.

Strife you find among the servants; gossip among barbers.

A servant in a strange town may be taken for a high officer.

Enter into friendship the very first day and thou dost thereby deliver thyself into everlasting servitude.

The ox of an enemy shall eat weeds; one's own ox shall lie in fat pasture.

The liberality of the King insures the liberality of the magnates; the benevolence of the King insures the benevolence of the Governor.

The Price of Slaves.

Letters from women, Prof. Eiselen says, are extremely rare among these ancient bricks. Here is one in which a lady of high degree makes an appeal in behalf of some slaves who have besought her intercession:

To my lord, the secretary of the palace, thy handmaid Sara'ai. My Bel, Bel of Babylon, Nabu, Tashmet, Ishtar of Nineveh, and Ishtar of Arbela, bless my lord. May they grant my lord long life with health of mind and body. The Governor of Bit-na'akant has sold to Marduk-erba the slaves, seven in number, whom he had from my lord. These people are now here and have come to the palace. Inform the secretary of the palace before we are conveyed to the house of Marduk-erba. My lord, the officer who executed the contract is now with them.

Some of the bricks show that slaves sold in Babylonia and Assyria for ten shekels of silver, which is equivalent to \$6. One brick, which records the sale of a slave mother and her unweaned child, says that nineteen shekels, or \$11.40, were paid for both. It is recorded on one brick that a man who rented a house in Babylon in 2,000 B. C. paid one shekel of silver, or 60 cents for a year's lease. Another brick, dated 2,200 B. C., records a contract by which a man hires a son from a mother to labor for two and a half shekels a year, or \$1.50.

An interesting astronomical record shows that the modern world is reckoning time after the system of the Babylonians. A report written probably for some observatory about 825 B. C. says: "On the sixth day of Nisan (about March 21) day and night were equal. Six double hours the day and six double hours the night. May Nabu and Marduk unto the King our lord be gracious."

The largest brick in the Northwestern University collection is a temple record containing an account of herds of cattle, sheep, and goats that had arrived at the house of worship, perhaps as tribute or free-will offerings. The record says the herds came from twenty-two cities with twelve shepherds and five other men, all under a chief shepherd. The largest herd consisted of nine bulls or oxen, 170 sheep and ten goats.

The Northwestern University recently has added to its museum of antiquities a replica of an obelisk found at Nimrud on the site of Calah, a city which succeeded Ashur as the second capital of the Assyrian empire. The original obelisk was set up by King Salmeneser III, who reigned from 860 to 825 B. C. On the monument are 190 lines of cuneiform inscriptions, describing the chief events of thirty-one years of the King's reign. Each line contains five series of sculptured reliefs. One of these reliefs represents the payment of tribute by Jehu, King of Israel, whose kingdom had been conquered by the Assyrians.