

Letter dated Septem:30th. 1924. from Hillah.

Have just completed a delightful morning ride, and at the present moment am sitting in the office of Capt. O'C. in the camp of the battalion of the Arab Army stationed at Hillah. O'C. is the British adviser to the Arab Army here, and is a very congenial and interesting fellow, with whom I have lately become very friendly. He too has most of his meals with Dr. P., with whom, as you know, I am now living — though he has a large house of his own, near the doctor's, where he lives. We have formed a pleasant kind of little Mess of three, and are a most contented household ! O'C. often lends me one of his horses, and it is with him that I have been riding this morning. Outside the town we happened to meet a venerable looking Arab, also riding our way. He turned out to be a local land-owner, and as we were near his property he invited us to rest awhile in his guest-house — the usual large reed hutment, but especially pleasant as it was placed in a large shady garden. There we have been resting comfortably amongst the gay carpets and cushions, being refreshed with coffee, and fresh dates eaten with butter — the latter a really excellent admixture ! It is a very delightful thing, this spontaneous hospitality which

the Arabs extend to one. Always there is given the impression of being extremely welcome to one's host -- and this produces a nice comfortable sensation, even though one knows quite well that there may sometimes be some quite unsuspected "ulterior motive" mixed with the kindness ! However, I really think the pleasure they express is often quite genuine and quite disinterested.

Just now I am living for three nights in O'C's house, as the doctor has been entertaining the medical Inspector General and his wife, and I have moved out temporarily to give extra space for the occasion. O'C. has long experience of this country and of the East; he is a man only a few years older than myself, and his household is most quaint and entertaining in many ways ! He runs his establishment much more on the lines of an Arab Shaikh, than of a Britisher ! He has a large "entourage" whom he rules somewhat despotically, but who all seem devoted to him !

I have accomplished another "tour" since last writing to you, this time by car. Again I went with O'C., and the car was his property - an Overland. I took with me my Arab "attendant" and O'C. took his Arab Army orderly.

The first night we spent at Najaf, which city we explored much more thoroughly on this occasion - indeed

a queer uncanny city ! It positively exudes a sense of its religious fanaticism, though I must say the people seem far more friendly than those in Kerbala. In Kerbala the atmosphere seemed to me even more oppressive, and the attitude of the people sullenly resentful of any intrusion from the unbeliever ! Music and all displays of gaiety are officially forbidden in both cities, though privately there is an immense amount of licentiousness, even amongst the most holy of the teachers ! This is quite openly acknowledged by most of the Arabs themselves, if one discusses the subject, especially Najaf is notorious for its "double living."

As is apparently usual, the city was full of rumours, but at the moment the people were particularly agitated by a report that 10,000 Wahabis were approaching to attack Najaf ! This is no impossibility at the present time, though certainly it is quite unlikely. So many wild rumours are deliberately set going by conflicting parties in this country, to suit their own particular intrigues, and this one is typical of them. But the people were genuinely agitated, knowing the intense hatred with which the Wahabis regard them.

Amongst other things we were shown over the school at Najaf, and I was much surprised to find it being run by very

reasonably sound European methods. We listened to classes of instruction being given on history, English, and arithmetic, and all seemed to be intelligently carried out. Some of the young scholars are the sons of desert Shaikhs; surely a very different education to that received by their fathers. All the "professors" were of course Muslims.

We lived in Najaf at the Arab Police Headquarters, our host again being Mohammed Ali, the agreeable young Police Inspector. We slept on the roof; in front of us, beyond the city walls, a wide expanse of desert, and behind the queer broken outline of the city itself with its jumbled mass of houses. Looming shadowy in its midst was the great golden dome of the mosque, its outline, and that of the four golden minarets, being set with lighted lamps. I woke at dawn, and was greeted by a really stirring sunrise -- as usual impossible truly to describe. Strange deep tones of yellow and gold, with long thin wisps of cloud in curious extended lines right across the sky, stillness and mystery everywhere. There is something mentally disturbing and yet attractive about the deep curious tones of a desert sunrise. Somehow one feels uneasy and helpless and yet delighted amidst the queerness of it !

From Najaf we moved to Kufah, and inspected the scenes of the siege there during the 1920 revolt. O'C. was one

of the survivors of the little garrison that was shut up there during three grilling and anxious months. You have heard me speaking of this town before and of my own small adventure there. O'C. summoned one Hajji Abbūd — a loyal townsman — who also endured the siege. The Hajji arrived in a condition of extreme delight and vast perspiration — he was a most quaint old figure, with a great big cheery face and an enormous cheery-looking tummy ! He almost embraced O'C., as they discussed the old times. The Hajji recounted with especial relish how every night the tribesmen used to come and call out: "O Hajji, thou father of fatness, how good it will be to slit that fat belly of thine ! Indeed thou wilt be a slim young man when we have done with thee !" or words to that effect !! At the time, I believe, these words used to terrify the old man dreadfully, but now he recounts his perils with great pride. He was the keeper of the Kufah bridge of boats, and it seems, much annoyed the Arabs by his assistance in keeping it open for the British. He insisted on taking us to his queer wee house in the very midst of the bazaar, and produced for our comfort his most choice cushions, and his most tempting fare, even including a hidden bottle of beer from a secret place.

Thence we proceeded, by way of roads as usual of a

humpiness quite surprising to Abu Sukhair, in which place we intended to spend the night. Abu Sukhair and Ja'ara are twin villages, situated side by side on the river banks, in exceptionally pleasant surroundings. The Euphrates here splits into many small channels and there are trees and gardens everywhere. Indeed some of the river glimpses were strangely reminiscent of English river scenes! The Serai in Sukhair, and many buildings, show evidences of the fighting in the revolt. O.C., who had once been "governor" there, by personal influence with local Shaikhs was able to relieve a small garrison besieged there in 1920. He went alone to this, then intensely hostile village, with certain shaikhs, upon whose good faith he had to rely entirely, and then persuaded the local people to allow the small garrison to pass unharmed to join the force at Kufah. And it must have been tricky work. Incidentally he was very nearly shot down by the very people he was trying to help!

In Sukhair and Ja'ara there are also evidences of our bomb raids, and I was able to locate a certain large house I was once sent personally to bomb. It is uninhabited, and still much damaged. I located, I think, the damage due to my own unpleasant duty, but it had received further extensive destruction as well. It seems a pity to have had to bomb these pretty villages so heavily, but they were then

amongst the most actively hostile centres of revolt.

We had a pleasant time in Sukhair, including a highly refreshing early morning bathe, and then slowly bumped our way back again to Hillah, stopping now and then for a chat and a cup of tea or coffee at local way-side rest houses.

As I write this letter O'C. and the Arab Commanding Officer, Kurshid Beg, are interviewing Arab soldiers for promotion to N.C.O.s It's all most interesting to me. This is a depôt and recruiting centre, and it seems to me amazing that it has been possible to produce such apparently keen and smart-looking young troops in so short a space of time, especially remembering the material from which this army is drawn and their original absolute ignorance even of the meaning of military - or any other - discipline ! But it remains for them to prove their actual worth in warfare. And for their Irâqui officers to prove their qualities of leadership. We shall see in due course !

Letter dated 12th. October, 1924, from Hillah.

Have safely survived my little tour of exploration amongst the tribes, and have just returned after seven most interesting days. I have learned a lot that is useful, in addition to improving my knowledge of Arabic. Of course, I spoke not one word of English during all the tour. They are indeed a weird lot of people these Shi'a tribesmen, and for all their hospitality and courtesy there is something uncanny in the nature of them and utterly at variance with our outlook on life. In every direction there seem impossible barriers to mutual understanding. There are very many points about them which cause real admiration, and yet they are consumed with cruel, narrow prejudices. Yet I enjoyed every moment of my tour, and short as it was, I feel that I have learned a great deal from it. Also in a sense I have made a number of good friends. I got on particularly well with Shaikh Umr al Khalil, an experienced and knowing old fellow, the supreme chief of the Jabar tribe. He was very badly bombed by the Air Force during the revolt, and my reception at first was frigidly courteous and terribly formal, but by the end of the day we were on such good terms that he produced a special entertainment for me, and he has already been in to call on me here in Hillah since my return!! We have

discussed all sorts of difficult subjects, including the status of women, and the merits of Islam -- the latter subject entirely at his wish, for I never open up any mention of religion of my own accord ! The whole area through which I travelled was acutely hostile to us when I was last in Irâq ! Times change, and it appears we have to change with them; but one wonders whether the Arab really changes so much as may appear !! But at any rate, every assistance and hospitality was extended to me everywhere. Amongst others I spent a day with a Bedouin tribe, as the guest of Arfit al Agab, son of Shaikh Agab ibn Agil, who was himself away on a political visit to Baghdad. They are a wild but attractive type, and have queer furtive expressions like fierce animals. The local settled Arabs dislike and fear them.

The Bedouins lent me a camel to take us on over the four hours' track to my next halting-place - great fun ! I had never ridden and guided a camel all myself before ! I only had difficulty in one place when he refused to cross a wide ditch ! However with much persuasion and a lot of beating, all was well. But he was most obstinate !

I kept a diary throughout the tour, of which I hope to send you a copy sometime ere long.

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Yesterday I went out with a party to see Bir Nimrûd, near here. It is the site of an old city, and contains a very high tower set on the top of a high sandy mound, which is one of those reputed to be the Tower of Babel. From the summit of the mound one gains an excellent view over the flat country, green and fertile towards the river, and yellow and barren as it fades into the background away from the water. There are the lines of old silted canals, and the outlines of streets or houses covered deeply with sand, all telling of the great prosperity that was here before invasion and disasters overwhelmed the country long ago. I have also revisited Babylon recently with O.C. We bathed in the river and had a picnic tea, but did not explore the ruins much, as we both happened to be tired, and also had both seen Babylon before. Later we found ourselves stranded owing to the breakdown of O.C.'s car, and spent most of the night at the rest house -- a comfortable and picturesque building, once German property, before the war, till another car arrived to fetch us. We were quite sorry when it came, as we had by then settled comfortably to sleep !

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October 13th. 1924.

No special personal news, but today Hillah has been the scene of the execution of a shaikh from the Nasariyeh district, convicted of political murders. He was hung early this morning, and his body afterwards strung up in public in the big market square, for all to see. It was expected that there might be some sort of trouble, but all has passed quite quietly.

The English official in charge of the hanging arrangements came to see us here the day before yesterday and seemed to be suffering from nerves. He is a young man, but has been in this country for nine years, and for a long time has been in charge of these rather distressing duties. He was to have dined with us last night, but did not turn up, saying he was too worried. Dr. P. was present at the execution, and says the Shaikh - an old man - took his fate quite calmly, and smoked a cigarette up to the last moment. It is said by the Irâq Government that this execution is an essential and well-merited one. Yet there are strange bazaar rumours that his most serious crime was a too obvious pro-British bias !