

Letter dated 17th. October, 1924, from Hillah.

..... As for myself, I have been spending this last week quietly, and have been doing a good deal of regular study at the Arabic. Each evening I have an hour's lesson from a Syrian schoolmaster - rather an unusually skilled and enthusiastic teacher - and I work alone of course also. But this is a queer country, as I have said before, I think ! and even my schoolmaster, quiet and retiring as he is, has a strange and restless history already connected with his life. Though a Christian, during the war he was conscripted into the Turkish army, and fought for some time in Sinai and Palestine, until one day rumours reached him that there had been terrible massacres of Christians near his home, and that his village had been wiped out. In order to discover the truth of this, he deserted, and after much difficulty arrived home, to find that this was all true. All his relations had been killed, male and female, with the exception of one young brother and sister who had escaped to an unknown destination, and a baby sister of five, who had been captured alive. Then after several years' search he discovered where his elder brother and sister were living, and determined, if possible, to rescue his baby sister also. With much difficulty, and the expenditure of most of his money, he eventually

discovered her, at the age of ten, living in a Kurdish village as a slave girl, and was able to buy her back ! Now they have all come to Irâq in order to be under British protection, and are earning a living most industriously. They are an educated family, who had held a position of importance in their own district, and he has had a university education at the American University in Syria, and speaks several languages. Now he teaches in a little school in Hillah, and the rest of the family carry on a combined tailoring and bootmaking business, and he also does a little work as an electrician, if ever such is to be found. A queer troubled history, typical of many of the Christian communities in this part of the world. My own personal servant, Georgius, is also a Christian, an Assyrian, very intelligent and keen, who also has been driven out of his home. However he has been lucky — only a few relations were murdered, and two brothers have emigrated to America and are doing well. His old mother lives in a refugee camp in Baghdad, and he seems a devoted son. Of course, he has rather a lonely time in Hillah, as he cannot even enter the bazaar and shops without meeting with hostility. He is however a cheery young man, and thinks himself infinitely superior to any Arab. The Assyrians seem a stouthearted race and are always very proud of their nationality. I have an Arab kerwas or attendant also, but he only accompanies

me on tour, or when out on local visits. Fortunately he and George get on very well together !

Though I have done no long expeditions lately, I went out with G. three days ago to take lunch with another section of the Bedouin Shammar tribe. Certainly they are far more picturesque than the settled tribes, but are fierce and primitive. These people had never been into Irâq before, and most of them had never seen an European. The Shaikh beside whom I sat had only just arrived back that morning, after several months spent in raiding expeditions upon other desert tribes. He said his luck had been fair. He seems a good-tempered fellow but took an embarrassing interest in my top boots ! I was dressed in uniform riding kit. For lunch we ate camel flesh and bread soaked in oil. I quite definitely don't like the taste of camel, but the bread and oil was not at all bad, though it may not sound very appetising. The Bedouins live extremely simply in every way.

G. was in Hillah just on one of his flying visits. He is immensely keen, and very clever at his work. I may be going down to join him for a few days at Diwanayah later, for a little expedition among the marsh Arabs, and then on to the residence of Shaikh Abdul Wahid -- a shaikh just now very much in the King's favour, a powerful influence in the land, but a notorious intriguer, and one of the most prominent leaders of

the revolt of 1920. I much want to meet him.

We had a local tragedy here last week. D., ^{member} ~~one~~ of our wee communities here, had been joined by his young wife and twins -- kiddies a year old. The D's have been married nearly two years, but had only been together previously about a fortnight. One day, a week after Mrs. D's arrival, when her husband was away on duty, and the doctor also out of Hillah, one child became very ill and died in her arms, while the other child also showed increasing signs of grave illness. Fortunately another British lady was in Hillah, and we all did what we could, and the doctor arrived within a few hours. But it was tragic to watch the poor young mother and her two dying kiddies. The other child died next day after most distressing pain. Apparently they died of acute internal trouble as the result of the climate and the food disagreeing with them. These things seem so much more personal in a small community like this.

DIARY.October 26th. 1924.

For the last two days I have been in Diwaniyah, a little tribal market town, about 60 miles farther down the river from Hillah. The town consists of hardly more than a shallow belt of mud built dwellings, extending for a little distance on the left bank of the river, and with a long roofed-in bazaar within it, where local articles are traded, for the most part with the tribesmen who come in from the tribal areas outside. It is decidedly picturesque in spite of the dusty aridness of its surroundings, and has quaint alley-ways, and the larger houses have high white walls, set with little slotted windows and projecting galleries. I have been living with the Administrative Inspector in his rather spacious official residence near the river bank, as G's queer little Arab house is already rather over full.

The two days here have been agreeably spent, the first in visiting the camp of the Shammār Bedouins — the same tribe I previously visited — who have now reached here on their southward wanderings, and the second in quiet exploration of Diwaniyah, and afterwards in partaking of dinner with the British Civil Surgeon, where I found all the small British community gathered in sociable mood, five of us in all. The visit to the Bedouins passed in the usual manner, except for one small additional adventure 'en route'. As the tribe were located near a track, we were proceeding by car, but as we were uncertain of their exact location we presently stopped, and G. got out and hailed a Bedouin whom we saw riding a camel. His only reply was to load his rifle immediately with five rounds, and to adopt an attitude of by no means a friendly nature. G. however, showed no concern, but gave the usual Arabic greetings, to which the Bedouin eventually responded, though he still refused to allow us to approach him. We ourselves were quite unarmed, as our Arab "attendants" who usually carry our revolvers, were not with us in the car. So we left the matter at that, and proceeded on our way. Today at about 10 a.m. G. and I accompanied by my faithful Abardi, left Diwaniyah,

again by car, on the first stage of our proposed tour in the Shamiyah district. We reached Umm al Barur about an hour later by way of the road which passes first across a barren area of scrub-dotted ground, and then by a banked road through the outskirts of the marsh land. Umm al Barur is a small town built beside a branch of the river, and at the end of a sort of marshy lake, the Haur al Najm. Owing to its well-watered position it is more than usually favoured with a variety of trees, but is a fever-stricken area in spite of its pleasant appearance, and mosquito-ridden in summer. Its main wealth lies in its date-gardens and rice fields and its trade is with local Arabs. It contains a very large Jewish community, who suffered severely during the recent revolt. Not only were they plundered and ill-used by invading tribesmen, but also were included in the unpleasant effects of the British bomb-raids against the same rebel tribes.

Lunch we took at the house of one Eliamu, a prominent Jewish citizen, and then having paid an official visit on the local Qaimmaqam, we embarked at about 1.30 p.m. in the little craft which was to bear us onward for the ensuing portion of our river-wanderings. This boat was long and somewhat narrow, with a prow and stern curved upwards.

There was a small platformed surface at each end, upon which stood a boatman, each of the two using either a long punt pole or a paddle, as circumstances made suitable. In the centre of the craft had been spread layers of palm leaves, covered with a carpet, and upon this G. and I reclined, facing one another, leaning back against cross-pieces, over which had been piled our respective saddle bags. Abardi sat in a space behind me, together with a 'Kurwas', who had been engaged to accompany us, so that we were in all a party of six.

The sun was of sufficient strength to produce a feeling of agreeable languidness, but not hot enough to be exhausting, and the prospects for the trip seemed delightful. Very soon we had glided beyond the town of Umm al Barur, with its clustered houses and projecting balconies encroaching close upon the river, and were in between the green banks of the country-side, rich with palm-groves and fruit gardens. The river was shallow but fairly broad — a little broader than the Isis at Oxford — and now and then it would widen out to embrace some thickly palm-covered island.

Amongst the trees there appeared at intervals the reed hutments of the marsh people, and occasionally a

small village of mud houses. Often upon the banks, or wallowing at the water's edge, were buffaloes, or sometimes we would pass a herd of shaggy sheep with a small boy in charge. Here and there an Arab woman was squatting at the water's side, busy with the washing of garments and copper pots, but never too busy to veil her face with elaborate precaution as our boat drew near.

We were proceeding down stream, and at a fair pace, nevertheless the distance to our first halting place took longer than expected, and it was already almost dark when we turned from the main stream into a narrow little channel, a few miles down which lay the settlement of Shaikh Sulman al Dhahir, with whom we were to lodge.

Just as we came to this point and were turning into the narrow channel, we met at close quarters another boat similar to ours, being towed up stream. In it were two passengers, one of whom was evidently an invalid, and was lying covered up in the bottom of the boat. This invalid we learned was the brother of Shaikh Jirri al Muaryah of the Zayad, who was being conveyed for treatment to the British doctor in distant Diwaniyah — no little tribute to the prestige of British medical knowledge.

By reason of the narrow and shallow limit of the

water, and the almost complete darkness, we found the last hour of our journey a little difficult, but eventually the long tunnel-shaped reed 'Mudhif' or guest-house of Shaikh Sulman loomed up upon the bank. We emerged slowly, and with ample deliberation from our boat, so as not to take our host too much by surprise, and sent on our servants to make it known tactfully that we wished for no feast to be produced, but only such food as could be easily prepared. Then we went forward and received the usual hospitable welcome.

Sulman al Dhahir is a prominent chief of the Khazail tribe, of ancient and aristocratic lineage, whose tribe has for long occupied this territory. He is at enmity with several newcomers, who have also settled in this area of more recent times; enterprising people, with a progressive following. Of course the respective interests clash, but on the whole the dignified Shaikhs of the old line are no match in intrigue for these wily upstarts, though in force of arms they could easily overcome them, except that Government definitely forbids so large and drastic an undertaking. Sulman is still most anxious to resort to force to suppress these tiresome nonentities. One of his chief rivals is Saiyid Muhsin abu Tabikh, a

very rich man who has property some miles further down the river, where we expect to visit tomorrow. We had much conversation with old Shaikh Sulman — who is keenly pro-British — and then after a satisfying meal, couches were brought for us to the head of the guest-house, and we retired to sleep.

October 27th. 1924.

We rose just before the sun appeared above the horizon — and for the first time since my return to 'Iraq I sensed a real chill in the early morning air. Soon after six we had again embarked, braced by sparkling sunshine and a briskness of atmosphere. Our boatmen, cheerful young fellows, both of them, made energetic headway, and within an hour we came into sight of the village where lay the property of Saiyid Muhsin. His exceptionally long and lofty 'Mudhir' was close to the river bank, but actually we landed at the little village on the opposite side of the water, where there was a police post. Saiyid Muhsin we knew was not at his abode, as he had visited us at G's house in Diwaniyan just before we left. His visit had been of a "confidential" nature, in which he emphasised that though he had been an

active enemy of the British previously — he had been banished from 'Iraq after the revolt, fled to Mecca and returned thence with King Faisal when we set the latter on the throne — yet he now intended to lead a quiet existence, and not again to intrigue against the British policy in 'Iraq. While we were supping coffee at the Police Post, Saiyid Ja'afa Abu Tabikh came across to pay his respects. He is the brother of the afore-mentioned man, but has always professed strong pro-British tendencies. In many families in 'Iraq brothers seem to adopt this opposing outlook, sometimes through rivalry, sometimes because it is convenient. For instance when Saiyid Muhsin was banished, Saiyid Ja'afa remained at home and safeguarded the property. Saiyid Ja'afa was richly dressed in heavy silks and welcomed us with much rustling amiability. He is a crafty-faced man, of early middle age, rather affected in his mannerisms, and with his well-tended finger nails elaborately dyed with henna — a curious custom not by any means attractive. He was pressing in his invitations that we should visit his brother's guest-house, but we politely but firmly refused on the plea of shortness of time.