

DIARY

January 1925 (between 11th. and 29th.)

The account that I sent you last week of the tour we had just completed was necessarily a much curtailed one, as after returning there was only just time to catch the outgoing mail to Europe. Now I propose to give you a fuller account, as I think it may be of interest to you. It was a somewhat unusual undertaking, as it is not easy to obtain permission to sally forth so independently on an expedition of this kind.

As on previous occasions J-S. and I set off together, and again we arranged to be quite independent of outside interference during our tour !

Our transport consisted of a Ford Tourer and a Ford Vanette, and we were accompanied by two British Air Force drivers, and as usual by our two Assyrian men servants. The Ford Vanette was occupied by the two British drivers and by the provisions and camp kit for the party. The tourer was driven by J., and contained also myself, our servants and a little personal kit. We were a very cheerful party; and set forth in excellent humour. Nevertheless the outlook for the tour did not look too promising at the

start, the day being very cold with a heavily overcast sky, and with a clammy mist hanging about. Even moderately heavy rain makes all the roads impassable in this country, so of course this was a bit disconcerting.

We passed first by the desert track, converging at length upon the dense palm groves of Baqaba, where we crossed the bridge over the Diala river. The track thence continued much the same, usually open and uninteresting, but passing now and then by small palm-clustered towns. We stopped now and then in accordance with our usual procedure to collect information, or to mark our maps, and these delays together with slippery roads, and several punctures, prevented our getting further that night than Sharaban, which we reached at dusk, in a drizzle of rain. We found suitable accommodation in the police building, and before supper went to call on the qaqaquam. Sharaban seemed a prosperous little place, but by the light of lanterns and the bazaar flares we of course could not see much. One exceedingly picturesque glimpse I got through the heavy arched entrance to a Khan, in which was gathered a huge caravan for the night. Little lamps and camp fires glimmered mysteriously; moving shapes flitted silently amongst the bales of merchandise, and the half-seen shapes of camels, casting shadows even more grotesque than themselves, all produced an odd and unique impression.

The Quamaquam was polite, and turned out several town officials, including the "Mayor," in order to give us all the information we required; in fact, our arrival created quite a stir through the small town! The police building in which we lodged had been in 1920 the scene of the murder of four Britishers in the presence of the wife of one of them, who was herself captured by tribesmen. A tragic episode of the Revolt.

We went to sleep to the sound of gentle depressing rain; yet we refused to be depressed, and next day our optimism was rewarded by sunshine and clear skies.

Our next day's run to the little camp of Armoured Car Section at Kingerban passed pleasantly but without any special event. At Karagan, where the railway and road cross~~ed~~ the river on a combined bridge, we stayed some time making enquiries at the station, which, in spite of its very lonely position, has considerable workshops and repair depôts.

Charles W. is in command of the armoured cars at Kingerban, near Kifri, and we were given a most cordial welcome by him. You may remember his name from the old war days, when I was his observer at Kantara. Later he rose to the rank of Colonel -- but now as the result of misadventure is only a Flight Lt. again. The little camp

was most reminiscent of the old days, and we spent a most congenial evening. Charles has been stationed there for a very long time — usually the only officer, though at the moment he has also a junior fellow to assist him — and seems to love it.

Next day our way took us along a level track skirting the foot of the Kurdish hills. The scenery became more varied, and high snow-clad ranges make a stately appearance to the north. Frequently we had to traverse "water splashes" where the streams issued from the mountain country, and on one of these somewhat deeper than the rest, our car became stranded. However, with the help of some local Kurds, we managed to draw her across, none the worse. As far as Tuz, the new railway line was in course of construction, but most of the laid track still looked most wiggly and uncertain of itself.

At the village of Tuz, rather attractively situated just at the entrance to a gorge, whence a broad but shallow stream emerges, we had a long chat, and an agreeable lunch with Major H. and his cheerful and hospital lady. He is the constructor of the railway, and his plucky lady accompanies him even into these remote and lonely districts. They were in the midst of packing their possessions in preparation for Mrs. H's departure to Baghdad, where, I think, a small

addition to the H. family will very soon arrive !

It is most plucky of this little lady to accompany her husband as she does. This part of the country is still very unsettled. A Kurdish chieftain, named Khahfa Yunus often raids the district, to plunder travellers and caravans. The road along which we were passing had been the scene of a very recent raid on a rich caravan which had led to a good deal of trouble. At disturbed periods Mrs. H. takes refuge in the little camp at Kingiban. We were informed that in point of fact no Britisher is supposed to travel along this road unescorted by an armoured car. However, we made no effort to discover whether this was actually the case or not, and certainly we were not troubled by so much as the ghost of a brigand ! Anyhow our trusty drivers were armed with rifles and we also had our revolvers, so we were by no means defenceless. At one point we met the Armoured Car Patrol from Kirkuk, and had a chat with the officer, and gained information about the track and the river fords ahead of us.

It was quite dark before we reached Kirkuk, and very cold, so that we were not altogether sorry to gain the shelter of No. 6 Armoured Car Company's Mess. Next morning J. and I proceeded to call upon the local political officers, and then went for a long walk. Kirkuk is divided into two main sections, the lower and new town, and the ancient main

town built on a flat-topped hillock. From the new town there is an old five-arched masonry bridge leading over the river bed to the steep narrow path which is the main approach into the upper city. The contrast between the two sections is considerable, the lower being mostly new, and comparatively well constructed and clean, due to enterprise resulting upon the British occupation, while the upper is an intricate maze of extremely narrow and extremely dirty lanes, often quite overhung by balconies or covered in by arches. We proceeded right through this queerly picturesque area, in which we nearly lost ourselves, but finally emerged upon the other side of the hill-top. From there we climbed down to the more open country and by a detour eventually again reached the bridge, and then the old rambling house — one of the few old houses in the new quarter — which now provides pleasant and spacious Mess premises for No. 6 Armoured Car Company. Our return coincided with the return of an armoured car patrol, under the command of S., whom I knew at Cranwell. They had been out to escort a big caravan into Kirkuk, from the direction of Kifri.

The afternoon was spent in a shooting expedition with several of our "hosts" to a place called Jagah, some twenty miles away. The afternoon was bright though bitterly cold, and the shooting, mainly amongst orange groves, was quite

fairly successful, the bag consisting of black partridge, and teal.

Setting off fairly early, we proceeded through fertile country of a somewhat undulating nature. There were mountains on both sides of us, those to the north being high and snow-topped. Often we passed by little rivulets, brooks, and cascades, and indeed the pleasant sight and sound of running water is one of the things which is most noticeable after a long sojourn in the South. Kirkuk has little streams flowing through many of its gardens, and alongside the roads, even within the town itself. Then, too, the variety of trees and shrubs is an agreeable contrast. Palms are conspicuous only by their absence, and this is a relief after their rather monotonous predominance in the plains of Irâq. At about 5 p.m. we first came into sight of Arbil. This ancient city which has, I believe, existed on the same site longer than almost any other known town, is most uniquely situated on an abrupt and solitary conical hillock. Perched on the flat summit it is densely built and walled like a fortress. The immediate surrounding country is flat, but a splendid range of mountains looms up in the background, and from their snowy heights, though they gleamed in the sunlight, a piercingly cold breeze blew down upon us. Indeed this day's run had been more bitterly cold than any other so far.

At the base of the conical hill lay a small straggling suburb of mean houses. All the wealthy citizens, and many of the important tribal Aghas of the district have handsome residences in Arbil, but they are all in the upper town. We proceeded to the political officer's bungalow about a mile and a half outside the suburb, and then were given a hospitable welcome. There are only three British officials at Arbil, and none of them lives in the town itself, where the population is none too partial to Christians, British or otherwise ! There is also a camp of Assyrian levies, outside the town, with British officers. I had not seen these troops before, and they seem very smart and soldierly. They pride themselves intensely on being loyal soldiers of "King George of England," but unfortunately have no liking whatever for King Faisul, and have the strongest aversion to all their Muhammedan neighbours. This aversion can be easily understood, but is a most difficult factor in the situation in Irâq, to whose king they are nominally subject.

The political bungalow is shared by the administrative inspector and the police officer, both typical in character and bearing of the Britisher who undertakes lonely and difficult responsibilities in outlandish corners of the Empire. They were good-hearted, genial hosts to us, yet brusque in manner, and with a habit of life perhaps a little

less polished than that of the civilized centres from which they originated. These two rule this district drastically, I am told, yet with the greatest skill and judgment. Later in the evening young F. also joined the party. He is the Air Force Special Service Officer of this area, a lad only just over twenty who does his rather exceptional tasks - similar in many respects to that of the administrator inspector - with surprising success. He is still very boyish, and a very nice youth, but it was amusing to note his slightly self-conscious desire to appear as a really "tough" character.

Our next day's run was through very similar country, and we were accompanied most of the way by two additional cars conveying a Levy Officer and his kit to Mosul. We crossed the Greater Zab river by a primitive ferry at Guwair, but the only unusual incident was the visiting of an unexpected Assyrian Monastery at a tiny village. The Monastery externally looked like an ancient half-ruined fortress, and had not our Levy companion known of its nature, we should have passed it without stopping. It proved to be a most unique spot, and the black-robed priests, most of whom spoke fluent French, gave us a cordial welcome. The monastery dates back to very early times, and contained quite an impressive church, massively built with heavy arches and dark mysterious chapels

and corridors. Below the church are vaults and crypts even more mysteriously gloomy. In one of these vaults was a strong iron chain, with an iron collar. J. asked concerning it and received the startling reply, "Oh, Monsieur ! nous avons ici un fou !" Apparently the wretched madman is confined at night in this vault, secured by his neck to this chain, like a savage animal ! We did not see the madman, and were quite glad to get upstairs into the comparative light again ! But even the church was none too cheery, and as we reached the top of the stairs the sound of a monotonous chant greeted us, and slowly a long procession of black-robed men and youths filed into the place and then knelt before the altar. They were all pale and silent, and the youths wore a strange, black, close-fitting head-dress with a white cross marked upon the forehead.

We were told that the monastery had been repeatedly desecrated by the Kurds and Arabs and it bore signs of damage. Yet the architecture and carvings are so massive that not very much destruction had been accomplished. Outside the main building was a deep underground tomb, in which is buried the Saint to whom the monastery is dedicated. This also we explored, and then we bade farewell to the solemn but friendly priest, and gave a little offering for the church "Alms box." Before we went we signed

our names in the Visitors' Book, which dates back some fifty years, and contains a number of interesting signatures, including those of several German senior officers. As we left the courtyard, faint echoes of the solemn chanting followed us. It is strange how gloomy and even terrifying our religion can be made, when surely its real interpretation ought to be full of freshness and vigour and hope. And yet those priests have many of them lived the faithful life of martyrs, and it is amazing to find this tiny community of loyal Christians still surviving in the very midst of a hostile population so numerous and so merciless.

Not long after this we partook of our usual picnic lunch, being joined today by the Levy officer also. We astonished him by the excellence and variety of our supplies — even to the extent of a bottle of champagne ! J. attends to the catering on these tours, and having a long previous experience of touring in Irâq, and a keen dislike to poor and unappetizing food, he always produces the most delicious of supplies to my infinite relish as well as his !

Owing to punctures we did not reach Mosul till after dark, entering the town by way of Nebi Yunus village — where the tomb of Jonah ~~is~~ — him of the whale story !

is situated, or at least the alleged tomb of same. At Mosul we lodged with No. 5 Armoured Car Company, in their very comfortable modern mess. The following day we spent mostly in exploring the bazaars, in paying visits to the political officer, and one or two other people we know -- including the K's, my kind friends of Hillah -- and in the evening we visited the Officers' Club, a most cheerful spot, with much of the genial spirit of war-days about it. The Baghdad Clubs of the present time, with their efforts to be fashionable and correct seem merely to result in boredom and "cattiness."

Mosul's bazaars - mostly unroofed and with comfortably broad streets, and proved highly entertaining and full of a brightly coloured and quaintly varied crowd of people and things. I bought myself three excellent examples of the tall brass Mosul candlesticks at a very reasonable charge, to my great satisfaction. This town also struck me as attractive -- a mountainous background, plenty of trees and gardens, solid well-built houses, and a number of well-constructed streets. Mosul marble predominates in all the buildings, producing most pleasing results to the eye, tho' actually I believe it is not a very satisfactory building material, as it crumbles rather quickly. Altogether this is a most flourishing town, despite its still-existing

remoteness from a railway. The Baghdad line is seventy-four miles distant. In the afternoon I had a long chat with an Assyrian priest who came to call at the Mess. He mentioned to me the great anxiety of the Christian community at Mosul in regard to the ultimate decision of the League of Nations. It will be a ghastly scandal if Europe ever allows them to pass again without protection into the power of the Turks. The priest himself bore terrible signs of Turkish brutality. He had his ears hacked off when a prisoner — comparatively mild treatment compared with what many of these poor people have endured.

The following day there only remained the return journey to Baghdad. As far as the rail-head at Shergat the road was new to me, and en route we visited some Oil Works — the first I have so far seen. These works are of very great value, but as yet are only being partially worked, and that only for the British Army.

After that we passed through lonesome rocky hills, and then on through the endless and equally lonely plains north of Baghdad, all of which we had traversed on previous occasions. The 250 odd miles we accomplished in two days, staying one night at the empty and dilapidated little bungalow at Baiji, where as usual we made ourselves most cosy, with a glowing fire in the grate, excellent

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picnic fare, and finally the simple yet sufficient comfort which a camp bed provides. And so regretfully at length we reached Baghdad, and the end of another delightful and instructive tour.