

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

Yet another stage of my progress in new experiences, and this is my third day at Hillah ! In the days of the revolt this town was the scene of a brief siege, and considerable fighting, but when I reached Irâq, it was again in the hands of the British, and we used a small aerodrome here as an advanced landing ground. It was from here that I set off on that little individual raid against the Arabs one day, when they were worrying the British troops still besieged at Kufan.

I arrived here two days ago, by the weekly mail-train — a surprisingly comfortable train running between Baghdad and Basra each Friday. The first night I was the guest of the Eastern Bank official here, who is most hospitable and helpful. Captain G., the fellow with whom I am supposed to live, is away still on a district tour, but I have now moved into his house, just across a lane at the side of this bank house, for sleeping purposes. It is a typically Arab dwelling, but quite large. One approaches it down a narrow street, with white brick-and-mud houses on each side — balconied,

and mostly shuttered in the somewhat mysterious-looking manner of the East ! My front door is set in a high white wall, with barred windows above and shooting slots in the upper storey. It is a big arched doorway, with a heavy wooden door (and an enormous latch key !!!) to which one descends by two deep steps. Inside is a large courtyard with doorways around it, one of which leads to the stable; the upper storey is approached by a narrow stairway in the thickness of the wall, which opens out onto the broad upper balcony from which are reached the doors of the main living rooms — all very bare and quite primitive. Another narrow stairway leads to the flat roof also encircled by a loop-holed wall. Sanitary arrangements, are of course, primitive and really comic !! I slept in my quaint abode last night, in company with another fellow, who came on a visit from Baghdad. Tonight I shall sleep in my large house quite alone except for my Assyrian servant — and my large Wembley revolver !! Only three weeks ago, I was sleeping in my comfy digs at Knightsbridge, within comfortable sound of District railways, and buses, and other

civilized conveniences ! Tonight, like last night, I shall hear only jackals, and the occasional ~~excess~~ outcry of voices in the Arab houses around me. It is just a wee bit queer in my large shadowy house all by my lonesome — but it is thoroughly congenial as an experience ! My Assyrian servant is not too happy I fear, however, (and quite refused to be left in the house without me ! He is an Assyrian Christian, and as such is rather unique and not too popular in this place, which is intensely Mohammedan; Britishers, however seem quite popular now, and I have already had friendly chats with a local Shaikh.

The night before leaving Baghdad I went to a most interesting dinner party with the famous Miss Bell. We motored out to the country residence of one Hajji Najji. Miss Bell, now Oriental Secretary to the High Commissioner; - Cook, who has an unique appointment as Adviser to Awqaf, and supervises all Muslim religious properties and funds; Poulet, in the Ministry of Interior; Ingpen, Judge Advocate General, and self. We reached the house, longish and rambling, and were led to the roof, which

was spread with carpets, and set with a large low table, and divans, upon which we reclined. We chatted amicably with our host, and were fed with much queer but excellent food, and refreshed with long draughts of very cold, sour milk and water (sounds horrid but it was quite nice !). At about 10 p.m. we took our leave, and were escorted from the house by a little party of armed retainers. It was my first experience of an Arab dinner party, and was a most attractive episode, leaving an impression of broad, white roof-tops gleaming in the bright moonlight, and wide views of extensive areas of fruit-trees, and the smaller huts of our host's retainers grouped by the walls of the main house. The air was cool, and the night full of the high note of insects, while every now and then a wild wailing, and the sight of many scurrying shapes among the trees, gave evidence of the presence of great numbers of jackals. As we left, the eclipse of the moon started to take place, and then in every village, and at every small hut, could be heard the agitated beating of drums and tins and the firing of guns, as the alarmed peasants endeavoured to

scare away the terrible monster that was swallowing the moon ! Cook questioned one little group as to the cause of so much noise, and it was evident that they really were alarmed, and considered it a real duty to do their best to prevent the loss of the moon !!

..... Now for a little sleep ! — The moon is rising and there is the stirring of a breeze to refresh me. Good night, my dear folk, you would be amused to see me just now, all alone on my comic Arab bedstead, in my big, white, silent house ! But quite content and much interested by it all.

Letter dated 20th. September, 1924, from Hillah.

Have been well occupied ever since I last wrote, and have done a number of most entertaining things. A week ago I went out with K. in his car to the Galât of Shaikh Abbud al Haimuç. He is quite a young fellow, about twenty, and a bit of a k'nut in his way, rather inclined to modern ideas, and with a considerable pride in his personal appearance and prestige, I think! Our meals were served on a table, with knives and forks, and he was most attentive even if a little shy. Next day we rode out some miles to the larger tribal settlement of his elder brother Hantoush, quite a different type, much more primitive, and unable to read or write, but very capable, and of considerable local power. He is, I should imagine, a bit of a schemer, and much on the look-out for his personal gain, but quite genial to meet. While K. was attending to some business in connection with crops, I sat in the guest-house, and attempted to converse, and also inspected the Shaikh's horses. He possesses one stallion which is said to be the best over a big area, and is quite famous. He was a very fine animal indeed. Later we returned to young Abbud's house, where I remained an extra night, though K. had to go back to Hillah. Shaikh Abbud drove me back to Hillah

next day in his car - a distance of thirty miles or so. Much of the way he drove himself, and made quite a sound chauffeur ! He then came to spend the morning at my own abode, and chatted most cheerily. He is really quite a nice lad, and we parted on the best of terms.

Then last Friday I went off for a three days' visit to Shaikh Umran al Hajji Sadoun - the same fellow who captured those two officers of 30 Sq., as you may remember reading in my diary of the Revolt. It was most interesting to visit him under the changed conditions - but rather odd. It was his tribe also which had a big part in the disastrous show when the Arabs surprised the Manchester regiment on the march, and massacred or captured the whole regiment, and captured also a battery and an ambulance convoy. There were very few survivors. We passed quite close to the scene of this affair on our way to the Shaikh's house. He is most friendly now, and seems really quite a good type, as these people go. K. and Mrs K. were with me, and we motored in their car to Kifl, then by an Arab sailing boat up the river to Umran's abode. We were housed in a large reed hutment, of the sort typical of areas where reeds grow, which had been made most gay and comfortable inside with an abundance of coloured carpets and cushions. Mrs. K. in her

dapper riding kit, created much interest among the tribesmen, and during her passing through the little town of Kifl ! She is a very sporting woman -- I think inwardly she is rather alarmed at these tours, and the unavoidable discomforts entailed therein for a lady, but she goes about a lot with her husband, and is most cheery and plucky about everything. Next day we were all taken out in the Shaikh's car -- he owns a good car -- ! to see Najaf. The town stands alone in the desert, surrounded by high cumbrous walls and towers, and is approached by a rough twelve miles track across the ~~desert~~ It is closely built, the upper stories often overlapping across the narrow bazaars. The speciality of Najaf is its cellars, descending as much as five stories below the ground. Many of these are interconnected by passages -- what a scene for stories of mystery and crime. I did not see the cellars, but hope to do so soon, when I return to spend a couple of nights in Najaf to explore the town more widely. It seems a queer oppressive place, full of dark corners and furtive-eyed people.

Umran also took us to see a Bedouin tribe encamped near by on their annual visit from across the desert -- curious outlandish people, whose dialect even Umran found it difficult to understand. The last evening we

spent in some delightful gardens owned by our host, who fed us with fresh figs, oranges and dates, most reviving and cool ! Later that evening the Rais Beladaya (the mayor) of Kifl suddenly appeared upon the scene. The young man now presented a sorry spectacle, with blood-stained clothing and battered face. He proceeded to pour forth a tale of woe to his friend, Umrán. Apparently after a quarrel with regard to payment of certain money from town funds his superior officer the Múdir had taken off his shoe and beaten him over the face; this was all done in the public bazar, and the populace took the side of the Rais, and much disturbance resulted ! What a truly dignified affair between high government officials !!

Septem:20th. 1924.

Next morning early we bade farewell to our host, and proceeded, this time on horseback, to Kifl. The ride was pleasant but uneventful till after a point on the river bank opposite the town, where it became necessary to ford the river. Mrs. K. safely negotiated the steep descent of the bank, and we set off. In mid-stream the water was up to our knees, and it was just at this point that K.'s steed, slowly, but with complete determination, lay

down on its side and rolled. Agitated cries arose from Mrs. K. as her husband disappeared, increasing in urgency as her own horse began to show signs of making her follow his example. However, after a little excitement all was well, and we reached the bank all rather wet and dishevelled, but quite cheerful ! In Kifl we were again received by the Rais and the Mûdir with complete politeness -- but there was a strained atmosphere about the place of course ! and further trouble is probable. Entering the old Ford car we then bumped safely home again to bath and breakfast in Hillah after a most entertaining expedition.

The day before yesterday I motored over alone to Kerbala, my object being to see the town under pilgrimage conditions, the final pilgrimage of Muherram being now in progress; the roads were veiled in hot dust, and thronged through endless miles with Shi'a pilgrims, including many women. I had a letter of introduction to Agha Mustapha Khan, nephew of the Agha Khan, and stayed at his house. That night there was a big dinner party of Arab shaikhs, town notables, and a few young man -- and I was treated as "the guest of the evening." The dinner was most sumptuous, although the food and the manner of consuming same were entirely Arabian. The scene was set on a roof-top gay

with cushions and bright carpets, and lighted by lanterns and a bright moon. Next day I explored the town, an amazing mass of humanity, some eager and excited, others exhausted and languid. This holy city, unlike Najaf, is spaciouly planned, with pleasant gardens and trees, and streets far less narrow. But the inhabitants are an uncanny crowd, mostly Sayids and "holy" personages, with minds adept at sinister intrigue. They walk the streets with huge turbans, sleekly dressed, and with faces and eyes in which cunning seems malignantly personified.

There are no Europeans in Kerbala now — and I doubt if there is any feeling other than secret hostility towards us. Kerbala is as notorious for intrigue as Najaf is for its tendency to elaborate vice. A queer pair of "holy" cities !!

Indeed this is a strange land and a strange people altogether ! It is early to begin giving opinions, but certainly our position here seems curiously irrational ! Nobody seems quite sure who is really governing, whether King Faisul, the British, or the pro-Turk party, etc., etc.! Of course we hold a dominant position, and yet nominally in many cases Englishmen seem to be under the orders of Arab officials and absolutely illiterate and inexperienced shaikhs hold high government appointments, though there are also

certain very clever Arab officials, with Turkish training and the defects thereof. Also there is a strangely eager tendency in many directions to forget and forgive all the past, and to treat with cordial friendliness the very men whose recent record in the revolt is — well decidedly doubtful, to say the least ! After we had subdued the Revolt, we were absolute masters, the Arabs were ready to conform willingly to any conditions we imposed. Under direct government, the country showed signs of sound development and content, though I suppose the expense was heavy. Now no one is content, abuses are creeping in, and all seems very indefinite. Most of the Arabs seem to hate their own present government ! It seems that either we should definitely run the country or definitely leave it. Yet there are also unfortunate but obvious reasons why we are obliged, anyhow at present to continue the policy we now employ, a policy necessitating such tact combined with definite forcefulness as I think British adaptability alone could hope to handle with any safety at all !! But it must not be forgotten that with Eastern people especially, the forcefulness is as essential as the tact.

I may be starting off for a motor tour this afternoon

with Capt. O'C. (British Adviser to the Arab battalion here). We hope to tour for three days viâ Najaf, Kufa, Abu Sukhair, and other areas all known to me from the air, and interesting to explore more closely ....

DIARY  
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Hillah .... on a sleepy afternoon.

Through an open door I look out upon a wide shady verandah; a little beyond is a single rather spreading tree, green and pleasant still, despite the accumulated dust of the final weeks of summer. It stands in a narrow courtyard, to which it grants shade, brooding and beneficent, yet shattered here and there by fierce blade-points of intrusive sun. Across the far end of this courtyard is a very high wall, shutting away all unrestful observation from the throbbing street outside. In this wall, however, immediately opposite to me, is a wide arched entrance, with its big doors just now flung fully open. Through this, against a background of white uneven walls, trellised windows and overhanging balconies, I watched continually the age-old businesses of Arab life.

Across that brilliant patch of sunlight is drifting all the languid vividness of any stage-set legend. Men in flowing Arab robes; furtive women in black and mostly veiled, some carrying their copper water jars in graceful poise upon their shoulders; funny little boys, in garments like some gaudy night-shirt; porters with amazing loads upon their shoulders, and the inevitable donkeys loaded even more

amazingly; water carriers, their goat-skins bulbous-full and gleaming wet; young green-turbanned Saiyids, holy of pedigree and sensuous of eye; many gaily trapped and tasselled horses, and now and then a line of camels, monotonously moving to the urge of shrill peculiar cries from the Bedouins who drive them. Then through the archway comes slowly a young Arab man, tall and finely formed, his single robe of thin white linen girded about his loins for coolness and ease of movement. A lazy glance at the hot street behind him, and he ascends, with friendly eyes, towards me, bearing in his hands the earthen urn of fresh well-water for which I had sent him. . . . . Past my eyes the changing groups move and scatter and reform, and the murmur of voices, and the tinkle of donkey bells reaches me but vaguely as I watch, my thoughts all drifting in a lethargy of rich and languid dreams . . . .