

EPISODE IX

BACK TO THE MIDDLE EAST

My time spent in England was now a quiet interlude. I visited my Hindle relations at Oxford in their cosy house in Winchester Road; and met friends again. The latter of course included old Mrs. W., mother of my earliest Pal of schoolboy days at a Tutor and afterwards at Christ Church Oxford. He, in the first World War had joined up as an officer in the Coldstream Guards. Poor lad, he very early gave his life for his country. An only child, he left his parents, and especially his mother, quite desolate. He had originally been posted as "missing", and his mother would never admit his death; for years a place was always laid for him at the table, ~~xxx~~ "in case he should arrive back unexpectedly". How pathetic sometimes is human hope. This dear lady passed the way of all flesh at the considerable age of 84 years. She had great wealth; in her earlier days she had been "spoilt" by an adoring husband and son, whom she adored exclusively in return; she had two handsome homes. Gradually she was bereft of all; her boy went first, and some years later her husband. In the recent war both her homes were shattered by bombs, and her household treasures lost. She lived then alone in a stately suite in one of London's great hotels; but old and rather exacting people are not welcome for long in such a setting, and eventually a pretext was made by which her suite ceased to be available. I had real affection for her and kept in constant touch throughout the years. Always on November 11th (Remembrance Day) I sent her a

cable from whatever part of the world I happen^s to be in, which seemed to please her. I think it appeared like a link with her boy. When I saw her last year, she was living in a small hotel in a part of London she disliked. She still had her wealth — but her loneliness was tragic and seemed to close her entirely within herself; a contrast indeed to the days of her great receptions and dinner parties. One faithful but somewhat austere personal maid was still with her. It was this maid who was her sole companion when she died a few months ago and who wrote to tell me of her passing. I grieved greatly at this breaking of a beloved link with the past, and I found myself overwhelmed with bewilderment as I thought of the strange contradictions which beset the ways of humanity, and the illusiveness of that strange state called "happiness". Never does it seem to be found in the service of "self", no matter how grandiose and propitious the circumstances; yet it seems an almost inevitable gift in serving others. Would that humanity as a whole could know and realise this profound yet simple solution of the world's great unhappiness.

My valued contacts with the Old Court House were resumed, - still a place of happy human relationships, whether concerning the host, his kindly but shy sister Ethel, the staff of "old "retainers" or the younger staff such as the amiable young footman. Constantly the house had guests within it, many of them young folk, starting their way in life, of whom no small number had much cause for gratitude for the generosity and "helping hand" of Norman and his sister. The handsome setting of the flat of Norman's elder brother Hamilton in St. James' street, was no less a center

of human kindness. There the host was a personality quite unique. He had all the kindness of Norman, though perhaps less of the grace of human wisdom; yet there was about him a charming almost "Fawn-like" whimsicality, which made his company a delight not only to his coevals but to young people equally. He was nearly 80 when he died; and this unique quality never left him, even after those terrible experiences of his in London air-raids, which, though they could not change his gaiety of spirit, yet gravely wounded his sensitive nature, and were in fact the true cause of his death.

Last but not least in this period of mine in England the qualities of my dear hostesses at Ravenscroft, are recalled to me. Many people can claim to be "well-born", but very few can claim that quality described by the rather beautiful words "gentlewoman" or "gentleman". This quality Lady Lillian Grenfell seemed to have at the very basis of her nature; a quality she has graciously bestowed also upon her daughters Daphney and Iris. Being of the younger generation, inevitably the latter too had come up against the franker influences of modern life; but in them also that basic quality of "gentleness" has kept them untouched by any of the flashier aspects of a modern way of living. It was a lovely house to be in; and by the kindness of these dear people it is still a "home" to me, in fact my only remaining "home" in my own dear land of England.

In London I had other interesting acquaintanceships, — such as Anthony Quayle, soon to become famous as a Shakespearian actor; Eric Anderson and Geoffrey Wincott of the same fraternity; Arthur Oswald, an established member then already of the staff

of "Country Life"; those inseparables Cal Dent and Sydney Cunliffe-Owen, respectively artist and author of distinction, who had a charming house at Arundle where Cal's mother, that most gracious and attractive woman, also had a residence. There were many others of various types and all made a pleasant variety of human experience.

My main personal activity was still at this time my campaign at the Board of Trade in attempting to make at least a definite personal gesture towards the removal of existing abuses in Merchant Navy conditions, which has been outlined in my previous account; but before this campaign was concluded, I again became ill; and after treatment at the R.A.F. Hospital at Halton this eventuated in my being admitted to the privilege of a sojourn at that Officers' convalescent home of which the famous Palace of Queen Victoria, Osbourne House, Cowes, Isle of WIGHT, and its lovely park, was the handsome background. I had already "convalesced" there once before in the year 1922, so the scenes were familiar. It was from this place that my concluding work for the campaign was carried out. Osbourne House is really a beautiful place, still very palatial, and most of its interior still furnished as in its days of Royal occupation. My own bedroom, - vast and stately even in its now modified fittings, - had been that of the Emperor William of Germany in the earlier days when he used to come over to visit his Grandmother Queen Victoria. Albert, the Great Prince Consort, had died at Osbourne House, - his room was still maintained in its exact state of his day, with his personal effects still in position. The place was full of Victorian reminders, including the little sitting room which had been the private sanctum of John Brown,

the Great Queen's famous servitor during much of her old age.

Towards the end of my sojourn, my mother came also to stay at Osborne House, for there was a "guest annexe" in which relatives of the officer patients were permitted to reside. We had in this way an agreeable spell together, and then my mother continued her visit by staying at the Royal Marine Hotel in Cowes, that wellknown center for visitors during the Cowes Week's Regatta.

I had with me as a fellow patient Major B., political agent in the Persian Gulf. He kindly invited me to join him in Egypt where he intended to complete his convalescence. This idea of course appealed to me vastly, and so the plans proceeded. I was to be my friend's guest at his flat in Zamalek for 3 months. Little did I realise when I set off from England that I should not return for 14 years. Such are the twists of fate! My friend preceeded me by some weeks. I planned for my voyage to Egypt to be again in a small cargo ship. This as it came about was the "Star of Cairo". Since, I believe, scrapped. She had an Egyptian crew and British mates and engineers.

I spent a happy Xmas Day at the Old Court House; and before leaving London I had a very pleasant "farewell party" when Daphne, Iris, and I, dined with Lord Fairhaven at his house, and then all went on to the "Versailles Ball",— a gay occasion, pleasant to remember.

The night before leaving London I stayed at the flat of my friend John Dukes, and next day he motored me to Newport, my place of embarkation, via Oxford. At Oxford we lunched at my aunt Ida Hindles' Home where my mother was staying.

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* Note: A week or two before I left for Egypt, I also had a somewhat unusual offer of an appointment in an exotic setting. This offer came from the Sultan of Muscat to take command of a part of his armed forces. I was however persuaded not to except disappointment by good friends of mine including Bobby Jope-Slade who had at heart kindly consideration for my welfare and strongly advised me against the unsalubrious climate of that part of the world. The content of the Sultan's Cable upon this matter is as follows:

Golden Cross House
2 Nov 1935.

CX 32 Muscat 27.2. 1215 W =
LC - Major Bremner care Lloyds Pall Mall London.

Following from Dholfur Recd your telegram of 21st October very grateful will be pleased to have officer you recommend.

Said.

John and I then proceeded on our way and spent the night at a Newport hotel before I went on board my ship on Sunday, December 29th. I soon became on amicable terms with my new ship mates, both British and Egyptian, — especially with young Salah, one of the three Egyptian apprentices, all of whom proved to be very likable young men. All have now become senior officers in Egypt's shipping world. As the old year passed out I drank a toast to the New Year in company with my new companions. On New Year's Day we set sail. The following two letters tell something of my voyage from two aspects.

To M.E.J. from ss. Star of Cairo, off Malta, 12th of January 1936.

"This is my third Sunday on board this small ship, and it does indeed seem a very long time since that parting glimpse of you at Oxford. It is curious how in even a few days one can seem to enter quite a different world, — for life on board this small ship is certainly a very different world to our life at Tunbridge Wells, ~~or~~ our life at palatial Osborne House at Cowes. My thoughts have been very much in your direction.

This ship is different again from my previous experiences of cargo vessels. She is a "tramp" steamer, which carries coal from South Wales to Alexandria, returning again with cotton or other goods to England. Our present cargo is all coal, with which she is heavily laden. This vessel flies the Egyptian Flag, and her crew are Egyptians, though the Master and Mates are *British* Englishmen, as are also the engineers. I get on very well with all on board both English and Egyptian. The Master is a Scotsman, very courteous to me, though actually perhaps a little austere; he is a very sound chap and as conscientious about his ship as he is about his religious principles, which are very strict, and therefore not always altogether popular with the rest of the crew!

We are having warm and sunny weather and I bask all day on deck. For the first week however we had continuous storms; I don't seem to have any luck with my weather in the Bay of Biscay, do I! This time again we struck a violent tempest and were "hove to" for 14 hours.

"I will stop writing now and add a note after our arrival at Alexandria. It has been a marvellous day today, brilliant sunshine again. It make my heart ache to think of you in the chilliness of an English winter. I do hope you will some day agree as to the benefit and ease with which we could share these things together again. I thought much of old times as I passed by Lisbon, Tangier, Algeciras and Gibraltar.

16th January 1936. Just arrived at Alexandria and off to Cairo tomorrow. I have had a letter of welcome already from my Cairo host. Au revoir."

To T.G. Jenkins Esq., Marine Department, Board of Trade, from the Turf Club, Cairo, January 28th 1936:

"My dear Jenkins, I have now arrived in Cairo, having voyaged out here upon another tramp ship in an endeavour to gain further impressions of sea conditions. The vessel I travelled in this time, in which I spent three weeks, is a small cargo ship conveying coal from South Wales to Alexandria. She sails under the Egyptian Flag with Egyptian crew and ~~XXXXXX~~ British Master, Mates and Engineers. There are also three young Egyptian "Cadets" on board, under instruction. I have been impressed by the fact that although this is a very old vessel which has already done 26 years had service, yet conditions on board compared favourably with much I had met before. The crew's quarters are aft instead of right forward and so are drier and safer; food is reasonably good; there is more adequate personnel for engine-room staff. Washing accomodation, however, is as before entirely inadequate, and as before there is no "mess room" for the crew and no accomodation for cases of sickness.

In the Bay of Biscay, I had a further experience of storm conditions. We encountered a very severe gale, during which a ship foundered only a short distance away from us. We were "hove to" for 14 hours and in considerable difficulties, being heavily buffeted by tremendous seas. The hatches in the forward well deck (these sort of forward well decks seem ~~to be~~ very vulnerable) were severely strained, but we came through with comparatively minor damage. It was most instructive and one received a real impression of the difficulties a Master is faced with in handling a heavily laden vessel during winter storms. This vessel was loaded at a generous computation of the lawful limit and the strain upon her was obvious. The recent seemingly too frequent disappearance of cargo vessels at sea is easy to understand if the regulations as to load are not enforced with severe strictness.

The Master spoke well of his Egyptian crew but found their lack of seamanship a difficulty in emergency.

The Young Egyptian "apprentices", who are young men of good family, seem keen. They appear to have become apprentices as the result of rather unduly optimistic persuasion on the part of a high Egyptian Official; and the fact that they have continued to serve already during three years, despite hardships which they had not at all expected, does them much credit, even though perhaps they lack instinctive aptitude.

I am likely to be in Cairo for a month or so and then hope to accomplish further voyages. With my very kind regards, I am sincerely yours,

H.H.J.