

Sands and Date-Palms

By Julian Scutts

a treatment of time and consciousness

Derek's letter

Dharan, Arabian Gulf, 17th Nov. 1979

Dear Joe,

Many thanks for your last letter. It was good to learn that you've settled down nicely in your new job. For my part, it's been the same old grind working on the rigs and pipelines, and I certainly have no wish to bore you with all the details. You were always a one for telling anecdotes, so why don't you add this one to your cocktail party repertoire?

A few months back I got to hear about this Arab fellow - Rab ibn Heinkhal - who'd been admitted to the clinic for nervous disorders at a local hospital. Believe it or not, he had to get certified as insane if he was to escape a public beating. Apparently he'd been caught drinking water during daylight hours in the month of Ramadan, the month of fasting in the Moslem calendar. Anyway, his defence was that, though he fully appreciated that drinking during daylight hours in Ramadan was against the law, exception might be made if a person had been fasting solidly for a couple of hundred years.

Need I say more?

The doctors reached much the same conclusion as far as the general nature of his condition was concerned. They were not unanimous in the question of the cause of his condition, however. He could speak quite coherently about some things, but in others... well! At first he seemed completely ignorant of the basic facts of twentieth century life (or the newly born fifteenth century in terms of the Moslem era).

It seemed that he was suffering from selective amnesia. On the other hand, he did evince a lively interest in the developments of the modern world after being initiated into the basic events of recent history, and would incessantly ask questions about the oil crisis, how the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia had come to be established after the break-up of the Ottoman Empire, the Arab Israeli conflict and the rivalry of the superpowers. All the same, he consistently viewed everything from a most idiosyncratic perspective:

In his view the excessive consumption of two liquids had brought mankind to the brink of disaster. The one was in bottles, and addiction to it ruined a man's health and rotted his moral fibre. The other, a foul broth as black as sin, had intoxicated peoples, corrupted nations and undermined world peace. He was some kind of crank, evidently. Some inferred from his doting on a

miniature portrait inlaid with enamel showing a beautiful young woman that he was love-lorn, but then he was as old as Methuselah, give or take a few years. Again, this miniature dated from the late eighteenth century, so an expert in antiques said. One wag from New York was heard to remark: "Either you drink Sadiki juice or you read Washington Irving, you do not do both."

Sadiki juice, by the way, is a form of alcoholic spirits distilled and consumed by resident Westerners.

So this is what I did. I went along to the clinic equipped with my old tape recorder and had Rab tell his own tale. With the help of an interpreter friend of mine, I got his story translated into English. I enclose a copy for your edification.

Go steady on the booze.

Love to Sheila and the kids,

Derek

TRANSLATION

After selah I turned left on leaving the mosque. Soon I was jostling through the busy suq. At my every third or fourth step a familiar face bobbed up at me out of the sea of humanity through which I plied.

"Salaam aleikum, Rab ibn Heinkhal."

"Wa aleikum salaam, Walid ibn Hussein. Peace unto you, Rab ibn Heinkhal."

"And unto you peace, Mustapha Alhabbal."

"Peace unto you, Ibrahim."

"And unto you peace, Rab."

Then, just as I was leaving the suq, a little girl in a saffron dress came up to me and tugged at my thaub.

"Uncle Rab! It's me, Sarah!"

"Sarah, my pearl, my little rose, my jewel! What in heaven's name are you doing in the suq all alone?"

"Uncle, my brother Ahmed is with me. At the moment he's buying bread at the shop of Hadj the baker."

"I see, my dear, but don't you think you ought to help him? Give my love to your mother and father. Tell them I shall not forget to bring them some presents from the Nedj. I won't forget you and Ahmed, either. A lovely dress for you and a bedu headscarf for Ahmed."

"When will you be back, Uncle?"

"Before the end of Muharram I expect. I have to settle a very important matter. Must be getting a move on to make sure that everything is ready. Hope to reach the Wadi of Date Palms by nightfall. May the All-Merciful be your guardian, Sarah."

"And yours, too, Uncle Rab, " my niece said with a look of sadness as though it were our final parting.
Just then Ahmed appeared, his face all beams as usual with three loaves under his arm.

"I was just saying farewell to your sister. I'll be spending several weeks in the Nedj ... on business." Ahmed gave a knowing smile.

"To negotiate terms with Abu Bakr, father of Yasmin the fair, eh?"

"That's none of your business, " I replied trying to suppress a smile of my own.

"Going alone, Uncle? Because if you are, don't stay too long near the caves that border the Wadi of Date-Palms."

Scarcely had these words been said when his sister added, shaking her head with due emphasis: "Travellers have passed that way never to be seen again."

"I have no fear, children. I can take good care of myself. No ghouls or djinns can prevent me from concluding my negotiations with Abu Bakr, father of Yasmin the fair, " said I, and I do not doubt that my eyes twinkled as brightly as any star when I uttered my final words.

As the children skipped off home, I turned into the narrow street that led to the Western Gate. I inhaled the scents that came wafting from the stalls where spices, sweet-smelling woods and rose water were offered for sale. If the negotiations went my way, I might delay my return to Hoffuf for a few weeks longer, a few months, years, centuries.

The scent of that rose water was making me feel distinctly heady. Once, when on a business trip to Damascus, I had drunk wine. The feeling after a few glasses was much the same, but oh the headache afterwards! Doubtless, the Prophet had very good reasons for banning the stuff.

By the time I had reached the Western Gate, there were only three hours left before sunset. One of the slaves of my fellow merchant Salman al Fauzi, had seen to the necessary provisions. Baudwein, my trusty camel, was patiently crouching beside him outside the city wall. If I got a move on, I should easily enough be able to catch up with the last caravan in the course of the following day.

The camel had been watered, so there was no further impediment to my immediate departure. Baudwein was in fine fettle, and we proceeded at a brisk pace.

Well over an hour had passed and the town was out of sight. I was still confident that we should make the Wadi by sundown. I had not reckoned with a sudden change in the weather. Hardly had I registered the fact that a sandstorm was brewing up when I found myself in the middle of one that, it seemed, had been whipped up by a wind from nowhere.

Eternally the optimist, I thought it would turn out to be just another of those passing squalls that might obscure the horizon a little without seriously impairing visibility in the middle distance. Should I stay put and adopt sand-storm stations or return home? Neither, I decided. I would go on.

After a little time I had lost my bearings. The ground became hard and stony. It was only with great difficulty that Baudwein negotiated the boulders that lay in our path. Despite the poor visibility, I could just about make out what promised to be a suitable resting-place for the night, the spot being level, free of stones and protected on the farther side by a wall of rock into which a cave led. Clearly, this sandstorm wasn't going to dissipate in a short time.

It was getting on for sundown, not that I was in any position to witness it myself. Thus I was daunted by the prospect of being lost in a cheerless, moonless and starless night. I experienced a strange feeling of timelessness. Indeed, how can a person measure time, once deprived of the opportunity of detecting movement and change. I found myself unable to ascertain the correct time for evening prayers or the direction in which Mecca lay.

After prayers, I lit a fire, having been provident enough to take a sack of slow-burning wood and a tinderbox with me in case I might need them. I could also boil myself some qahweh. I enjoyed a repast of salted meat, bread and dates.

A sudden whim seized me. I placed twelve dates in a circle. Beginning with the one at the top and proceeding from left to right, I devoured each in turn. I replaced each date with a date stone. Having eaten the dates, I spent several minutes blankly staring at a circle of twelve date-stones. Just as I was laying my bedding down, my eye was attracted by the glint of some object near the entrance of the cave.

On closer inspection I found this to be a glass vial containing a cloudy green liquid. Some medicine left by a wayfarer, perhaps? Suspiciously I withdrew the stopper and raised the neck of the bottle to within a camel's hair of my nose. From the bottle there exuded a strange, exciting odour reminiscent of the resins of the Yemen. More than that, it was intoxicating like the wine I drank in Syria that time. Enough! This was no time to incur the wrath of Allah by inhaling anything that suggested itself as haram.

I tugged a leather thong that dangled round my neck and gazed at her image, the portrait of Yasmin, my bride-to-be. When I first called on her father that time - it was something to do with importing ornaments from Persia and India - she retired to the women's quarters demurely, and when on subsequent visits she served qahweh or fruit juice, how coquettishly she smiled through her very thin yashmak.

What poise! Ah! The day she so surreptitiously dropped that package at my feet, the package that contained her image.

How I pressed that image to my lips the first time I beheld it. As then, I kissed her again and again, for to me, she and her image were one. I yielded to an impulse that I now hold responsible for my present pitiable state. Holding that vial in my trembling fingers, I inhaled the vapours exuding from it, before - Oh, fateful deed! - imbibing its contents to the very last drop.

In a moment's ecstasy I was swept up to the very gates of Paradise before descending into a deep slumber. How deep let my following account reveal.

The Dream

This was the dream I had.

I opened my eyes. Everything was bright and clear. The sandstorm had passed as though it had never been. Suddenly I sensed movement. A youth appeared before me. His appearance was unfamiliar, foreign.

He was clothed in animal skins, his complexion was fair, his hair like fleece. Like a shepherd tending his sheep, he piped a tune. I could not say where he came from. Not from Arabia or from the lands that followed the religion of the Prophet, nor was he like any Nazrani I had met on my travels. He did not seem to belong to my age but to a time in the golden past. Such music lay in his music that I ceased to consider his origins. Indeed, his piping so wiled away the hours that a whole day passed in the twinkling of an eye and ended with a final glow of golden splendour. Scarcely had day yielded to night than three figures appeared at the entrance of the cave.

They then seemed to dance. As they came nearer, I could make out a maiden and two women, one in the fullness of youth's bloom, the other a crone whose wizened face shone with the wan pallor of the full moon. They danced in a circle round him. I saw cords about their waists. These they unwound and used to bind him. The maiden produced a small sickle-shaped knife from a leather pouch hanging at her side.

Gleefully the old woman clasped the youth's wavy locks and shore them off. Then they bore him into the cave from whence they had come. As I pondered this strange happening, I noticed something no less mysterious. The movement of the stars became perceptible. I could actually see the celestial bodies move in their course from horizon to horizon. The Great Bear moved like the spoke of a wheel. Constellations rose and declined at an ever-increasing speed. The eastern sky lit up, the sun rose to its zenith and declined, in the space of a few moments. Night, day, night, day, each shorter than the one before, passed by. My head reeled, as the succession of day and night became so rapid that both yielded to a flickering half-light. I sank back into my deep slumber.

My Awakening

Heat, intense heat was all I felt. I was sensible of being parched. The sun stood at its highest point in the sky. I must have overslept, I thought. I'll never catch up with the caravan now.

A sense of foreboding possessed me. It was my clothes, I think, that were the first ominous indication.

They were falling apart, coated with the dust of ages. I must have fallen among thieves.

Baudwein was nowhere to be seen. Where he had been tethered lay the scattered bones of some poor creature or other, but there was no sign of a living camel, none of Baudwein. Was this a nightmare without end?

My beard, so painstakingly trimmed and shaped, was long and tousled - worse still, it was white. No sign of my provisions, either. What I badly needed was water, but there was none of that around. I clutched at my breast. Heaven be praised! The image was still there, showing the same beautiful face, though just a little faded. So enchanted was I by the beauty of that face that I didn't seem to notice or mind that my palms were shrivelled and my fingers were withered to the bone.

I had to drink. From the vantagepoint of a nearby rock I spied out the land.

The landscape itself was half-familiar. At least the old hills were there, but the Wadi was parched as in late summer. I noticed something resembling a huge belt or ribbon stretching from horizon to horizon. The part of it nearest to me was within easy walking distance even in that heat. As I came closer, I discovered that this ribbon was in fact a highway carpeted with something like pitch.

Hardly had I set foot on this highway than I heard something roar in the distance.

You cannot imagine what terror possessed me when I looked up.

This thing was coming straight at me, some kind of infernal monster, I was sure. What could I do? Flee back to the hills? If, as I now feared, I had not only fallen among thieves but had been killed in the process, and I was awaiting collection by the angels charged with the task of accompanying the soul to its allotted place, it was pointless trying to make a get-away. If I was still alive, I needed all the help I could get - such is the courage of a desperate man.

The monster was getting horribly close. It roared and groaned like a camel in labour, and from its hindquarters issued forth dust and smoke. I feared that if this was a spirit coming to collect me, I was going to the other place. But no, the thing had wheels; yes, it was some horseless means of conveyance.

Now I could see men inside. It stopped its progress just in front of me. Doors opened and men in pantaloons got out. They hailed me in a dialect I could understand. Had I got lost? I looked rather the worse for wear.

"Allah be praised!" I cried as I prostrated myself before them. "Could I have some water?" I asked.

They said it was Ramadan (see note 8).

"Ramadan!" I gasped. Then I had been asleep for months. But Ramadan would fall in winter this year.

"What time is it?" I asked.

First they told me the hour by the hands of their timepieces so much smaller than any I had seen in Syria.

Then they told me the date, the 10th of Ramadan.

After a few moments awkward silence, I ventured to ask with a squeak in my voice: "...and the year?"

P.S. I'm not sure which broke down first, Rab or my old tape recorder. Sobbing pitifully, he buried his face in the palms of his bony hands; then, raising his head slightly, he mournfully cried (the Doctor noted his words):

"What conqueror has laid waste my habitation, has borne away captive Sarah and Ahmed, and Yasmin, my bride never-to-be. 'Time' you will answer, but again I ask: What is Time?"