

Our favorite Arabian traveler, Leopold Weiss,—alias Mohammed Asad,—describes part of an automobile journey that he made from Aleppo to Baghdad.

The Road *to* BAGHDAD

By MOHAMMED ASAD

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THE desert unfolds. It lies before our feet, the old caravan road to the Euphrates stretches before us. Aleppo lies behind, a memory of extraordinary flavor and richness, a cradle of stone filled with strength.

We sit in a little Ford automobile. We journey over the Syrian desert. Sometimes it lies as smooth and flat as an asphalt pavement, often extending the whole length of the horizon in an uneven wave. A brick desert village flies past, its houses resembling honeycombs just like those in the 'desert paradise' of Aleppo.

Gradually the Euphrates appears on our left, muddy and quiet, with low banks. A calm lake, you cannot help thinking, until you see a swiftly drifting bit of wood, a raft, or a boat that the mighty stream is carrying. It is a broad and superb river. It makes no noise. It needs no romantic landscape to emphasize the still vastness of its

life. It does not roar or splash; broad wide, unconfined, it moves noiselessly across the open plain. Its numerous curves are not caused by mountains and rocks; it chooses its own way through the invisible obstacles of the desert.

Hours pass, more hours, and days of travel still lie before us. Beside the Armenian chauffeur sits a young, well-dressed Bedouin. He will get out somewhere en route and disappear into the desert. His tribe's province—it is one of the many branches of the Anazeh, the greatest tribe in Arabia—lies west of Deirez Zor. He sits with his knees raised, one leg hanging over the side of the automobile. New shoes of red leather glisten on his feet. Probably he bought them at the Aleppo bazaar during his last day there. His face is brown and thin, and he looks like a bird that keeps always on the alert. My other companion is Ibn Zuqair of

Aleppo, a very rich merchant from Nejd. He is going to Deirez Zor to look over a big herd of camels that are being driven for him from northern Nejd to Syria to be sold. It is a pleasure to have him beside me, for he has an inexhaustible supply of stories.

Often we encounter camel riders who appear in the middle of the desert, stand still for a while, watching the automobile pass, and then set their beasts in motion again, continuing their journey with that swaying motion that makes the rider feel as if he were on the ocean wave. They are shepherds, and the sun has burned their faces bronze. A little tumble-down caravanserai, in which we take on fresh water for our engine, lies in the middle of the desert. A troop of about twenty Bedouin soldiers are resting in a little courtyard roofed over with palm leaves. They are Ageyl, named after one of the leading families in the middle of Nejd, for very nearly all these bold soldiers in Syria, Iraq, and Transjordan have come from Nejd, the home of so many Arabian warriors and adventurers.

As I draw near, most of them are engaged in prayer. They have left their guns leaning against the outer wall of the caravanserai, and their horses stand somewhat apart under the shelter of the palm leaves. The men gradually rise from prayer, surround us, and invite us to take coffee with them. Almost all of them know the name of Ibn Zuqair although their garrison is in Tadmur, or old Palmyra.

'We are the last who ride horses and camels,' one of them says. 'The other detachments are all equipped with automobile trucks.' Thus our ridiculous twentieth century has begun to mechanize the riders of the desert.

We journey five hours, six hours, seven hours, brief pauses in solitary caravanserais being broken by endless empty stretches. A strong wind blows the sand sharply against our faces. We cross long flinty expanses and occasional stretches of grass or thorny bushes. On our right rises a chain of hills, barren and cleft, their chalk stone crumbling under the hot sun. They shut off the endless expanse of the great desert from our eyes. What is on the other side of that small range of hills? Although we know well enough that the same flat or hilly wastes of flint present their undisturbed ruggedness to the sun, we cannot help feeling that there is something mysterious in the air. What may there be on the other side?

Again we come upon the broad expanse of the Euphrates, and it seems like meeting an old friend. Its sedge-covered banks form a fertile strip covering this sleeping expanse of earth. Half a kilometre to the right and left of the river grow high, green grass and bushes, with a wild palm here and there emerging from the muddy soil. But everywhere else, both right and left, there is nothing but desert, and a sharp line divides the living from the numb, for the desert is paralyzed, not dead. Occasionally it wakes from its dream, gives forth breath, and a bed of dry grass emerges between sand dunes and stone. It also sends forth its breath in the form of hundreds of little emerald-green birds the size of swallows, which fly through the air, slim of body and slender of wing. Now and then we also encounter a cloud of grasshoppers, gray and blurred, roaring like an angry army over the earth.

We follow a barely discernible road.

The chauffeur, an Armenian from Aleppo, does not seem to know the meaning of fatigue. The hours of our journey pass one by one. The seventh is over, the eighth, the ninth.

When the first faint touch of twilight begins to descend, we find ourselves clattering down a stony mountain-side. The automobile bounces all over the place, jolts across blocks of chalk, and curves sharply around steep hanging cliffs. Does n't the Armenian's hand at the steering wheel look a little uncertain? He wants to reach Deirez Zor before night. His eyes have an irritated look. We have to stop and pour water from leather buckets into the radiator. One of those chains of blue-gray pearls that the Bedouins hang around the necks of their horses to ward off the evil eye hangs from the radiator. It seems as if the desert and its spirit were stronger than the machine.

II

Again we set forth. Twilight deepens. We have now been going more than ten hours. We encounter more sharp turns and ghostly rocks jutting out in the middle of the road. Here a stone, there a sharp corner, there a hole in the ground. Quail fly past, gray in the gray twilight. We can hardly see them, although they are so close we could almost reach out and touch them with our hands. Completely at the mercy of the chauffeur on whom the safety of our bones depends, we look at nothing but the road. Only the young Bedouin in the front seat gazes indifferently ahead of him as if he were sitting in a coffee house at the bazaar. He still has one foot with its red shoe hanging over

the side of the automobile, and he smokes one long cigarette after another.

A hole in the road gives us a terrific bounce. The automobile, twisted off its course, moves uncertainly through the rough country. If we had gone a hand's breadth further to the left, we should have flown head over heels through the air. Now we stop. The motor snorts and quivers like a living thing that has been mistreated. Between the bags on the running board I discover a half-melted cake of chocolate and give it to the chauffeur, who breaks it with unsure fingers. It is an appeal to his strength, and I want to do something to prevent us from coming to grief.

Eleven hours have passed. Night and stars. The mountains swim in a haze of graphite gray. Their outlines can barely be discerned, one above the other, apparently barring our road, though at the last minute there is always an opening for us to pass through. Finally we emerge on a high plateau where a road has recently been built. It is almost a boulevard. It shines so smoothly in the glow of our headlights that our bodies lose their tension. Far ahead of us we suddenly see a little light flicker—Deirez Zor, Deirez Zor. And the lonely desert town receives us with open arms. We emerge from darkness into light and from the desert into the midst of houses.

The caravanserai in which we spend the night is a new one and bears the marks of modern times. It has no stalls for animals, only a big courtyard with the traditional arcades so spaced as to admit automobiles. Above we find clean, bright rooms for travelers, devoid of furnishings, since

people in this part of the world always take their more or less adequate bedding with them. The air in this desert village of Deirez Zor is cool and free of the mosquitoes from which Aleppo suffers. We lie down gratefully on the blankets that we have brought and let sleep come over us like a long-expected guest. Even in our dreams we still feel the vibration of the motor.

The next morning is cloudy and veiled in a soft mist. The main road runs broad and straight through the little town. It is halfway between a Syrian town and a Bedouin desert metropolis, and two worlds meet here in a curious way. While we are buying up-to-date, badly lithographed post-cards in a little shop, two Bedouins nearby are talking about the Hammada and discussing the rumor of a war between Ibn Saud—the greatest of all Bedouins even in the minds of those over whom he does not rule—and the King of Yemen. Romantic Arabian flint muskets with long barrels and silver-inlaid stocks, weapons that nobody buys any more because the modern repeating rifle is much better and shoots much further, collect dust in a dark corner between American rubber tires, lanterns from Leipzig, and brown Bedouin cloaks from southern Iraq. Yet the new things beside so much that is old do not make a strange impression. Their usefulness has given them citizenship here. The alert realism of the true Arab does not cling to traditional relics for the sake of tradition if they have no other value than what tradition bestows. On the other hand, when the Arab takes up anything that is new and that did not exist yesterday, it becomes one of his inner posses-

sions. It is as if these things breathed the same air as he and had some of the same blood in their veins. He does not take them in but takes them up—and loses none of his own inner reality in the process.

This happens because the Arabians—and I speak of the true Arabs, the Bedouins, and the inhabitants of eastern Arabia, not the mixed Levantine people that dwell near the sea-coast—possess a tremendous endurance of soul, a peaceful assurance full of explosive possibilities but always anchored to an undisturbed, restful core that gives them the strength to take up with the things of our passing era and not be corrupted by them. For this era has finally reached them, even the most remote and faraway, although they do not regard it as anything hostile. They receive it with childish curiosity and feel it out from every side. They do not submit to it as slaves but bring their own alert observance to bear. They could not do otherwise, and that is what saves them.

In Deirez Zor the passenger list of our Ford automobile changes. My friend, old Ibn Zuqair of Aleppo, leaves us to look over the herd of camels that are to be driven here from Nejd, and the young Bedouin with the red shoes has already started for his native tent. A new traveler takes the seat beside the chauffeur, an Arab from Nejd, a Wahabi, strong and chary of words, with the characteristic red-and-white striped headkerchief. At first he is very retiring, and in spite of my Arabian clothes he detects the foreigner in me. But when he hears my name he takes notice, for he has heard of me in Riad and Medina. He himself comes from Bor-

eye in the centre of Nejd and deals in camels. He has been away from his native mountain land for many weeks, traveling across the Nefud desert through Hammada and southern Syria to Damascus. Having sold his animals, he is now returning to Baghdad to close the circle of his journey by way of Koweit and the deserts of northeastern Arabia.

III

We leave Deirez Zor in the morning. In the middle of the desert the chauffeur discovers that he has forgotten to take water to cool the engine. There is not a spring or settlement anywhere around. As far as the eye can see there is nothing but flat hills of brilliant white limestone and bushes growing here and there. A light warm wind, in spite of the time of year, blows over them, or rather falls horizontally along them without beginning or end, the hot breath of eternity.

The chauffeur, casual as all Levantines, remarks, 'Oh, well, we'll go along this way to the nearest caravanserai.' But it seems that we do not go along. The sun shines hot. The radiator boils like a tea kettle. We meet shepherds riding on camels and ask for water. 'No, there is none within a fifteen-hour camel journey.'

'What do you drink?' asks the amazed chauffeur.

The Bedouins laugh. 'We drink milk,' and they point to the grazing camels scattered all over the plain and gaze in silent amazement at these comic people, sitting in a swiftly traveling devil's wagon and asking for water in the middle of the desert, where every young shepherd boy

knows that there is no water the length and breadth of the land.

The chauffeur gradually loses the casual pose that he has assumed. He stops the car, opens the radiator cap, and a column of steam juts white and whistling into the air. I have a little water in a big canteen and sacrifice it to the god of the machine. A little oil is added, and the brave Ford carries us somewhat further. An unpleasant picture presents itself: here we are, stuck in the middle of the desert without food or water, obliged to wait until another automobile passes—perhaps to-morrow or the next day. On the road between Damascus and Baghdad it would be quite different, for that is a regular highway and hundreds of people go in both directions every day. Here, however, between Aleppo and Baghdad the traffic is very sparse and irregular.

'Perhaps we'll find some water over there to the right,' says the chauffeur. 'That hill looks as green as if fresh grass were growing on it, and, if there is fresh grass there at this time of year before the rainfall, why should n't there be some water?'

Logic always has something compelling about it, and even now it takes effect. We leave the road and cross a few kilometres of rough country and hills. But there is no water. The hill is merely covered with jade-green stone. The motor gurgles. The cylinders knock. Gray smoke pours out of the hood. A little further, and the motor will crack. Our search for water has led us far off the caravan road. If the motor stops now, we shall be left hopelessly in waste land. Almost our entire oil supply has now been put into the radiator, and the chauffeur is half crazy with nervous-

ness. He looks for water left and right. He shakes every receptacle but cannot find any water, and the bottle of cognac that he pours hopelessly into the radiator does no good. We soon find ourselves wrapped in a haze of alcohol smoke, which the man from Nejd regards as almost a sin.

This, however, shakes him out of the stony motionlessness in which he has sat congealed up to now. With a scornful gesture he pulls his head cover further down over his eyes, leans over the side of the automobile, and looks keenly at the ground with that precise, careful air peculiar to people who have lived a great deal in the open and are accustomed to looking out for themselves. We wait to see what will happen, for, as he told us before, he has never been in this part of the world. Finally he points his hand northward and says, 'There.'

The word works like a command, and the chauffeur, delighted to have somebody take the responsibility off his shoulders, instantly obeys. We move northward, our motor knocking loudly. The man from Nejd suddenly leans out of the automobile, lays his hand on the chauffeur's arm, and has him stop. Then he sits for a while with his head leaning forward as if he were a hunting dog picking up the scent, and his tight lips vibrate with a barely perceptible tension. 'Go that way,' and he points in another direction. 'Quickly!' and again the chauffeur

obeys without a word. After a minute he shouts, 'Stop,' and springs lightly from the automobile, raises his mantle in both hands, and runs in a straight line. He stops, turns, seems to be listening or smelling, and circles about a few times. For a moment the marvelous spectacle of a man trying to orientate himself to nature has made me forget the motor entirely. Suddenly he runs further in long strides, disappears in a hollow between two hills; then his head appears, and he waves his hands: 'Water.'

Both of us run toward him. In a little pocket protected from the sun by overhanging bits of rock a little pool of water glistens. It is a remainder of the last rain, yellow-brown and slimy, but it is water none the less. Water. The man from Nejd possesses an incredibly keen desert instinct, and, while we carry water in cans and empty gasoline containers and pour it into the maltreated motor, he walks smiling, a silent hero, up and down beside the automobile.

In the evening we reach the village of Abu Kemal, the last French outpost before the boundary between Syria and Mesopotamia. The broad Euphrates flows silently in the damp evening, past the few mud huts of the village and the tumble-down caravanserai. The reeds stand motionless on the bank in bunches, looking like men of some remote time bowed down in prayer, offering their wordless requests to the elements.

A famous team of Russian humorists ridicules the attempt of a Soviet writer to produce a Communist version of *Robinson Crusoe* as outlined for him by a scrupulously orthodox Communist editor.

A SOVIET Robinson

By I. ILF AND E. PETROV

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THE editorial offices of the fortnightly illustrated Soviet magazine, *Adventure*, were suffering from a terrible lack of masterpieces capable of arousing the interest of young readers. There was no dearth of literary material, but it was not of the kind that the editors wanted. It was all written in too deadly earnest and would bore young readers instead of exciting them. The editors therefore decided to begin a serial story and summoned the novelist, Moldavantsev, who seated himself the next day on the comfortable sofa in the editorial office.

'You understand,' said the editor, 'that the novel must be exciting, fresh, and full of interesting adventures. It must be a Soviet Robinson Crusoe novel and so thrilling that the reader cannot put it down.'

'Robinson, good,' said the novelist laconically.

'No, not just Robinson Crusoe, but a Soviet Robinson Crusoe.'

The novelist, however, was not a talkative fellow. Obviously, he was a man of action.

He finished his novel on the appointed day. Moldavantsev had not wandered very far from the famous original. It was to be a Robinson Crusoe, and that is just what he produced. A young Soviet citizen is shipwrecked. A wave casts him up on a desert island. He is alone and helpless. Mighty nature presses in on him. Dangers threaten on every side, wild animals, the jungle, heavy rains, but the energetic Soviet Robinson overcomes every difficulty, however insurmountable. After three years a Soviet expedition discovers him and finds him in the best of health. He has conquered nature, built a house, surrounded it with a green ring of gar-