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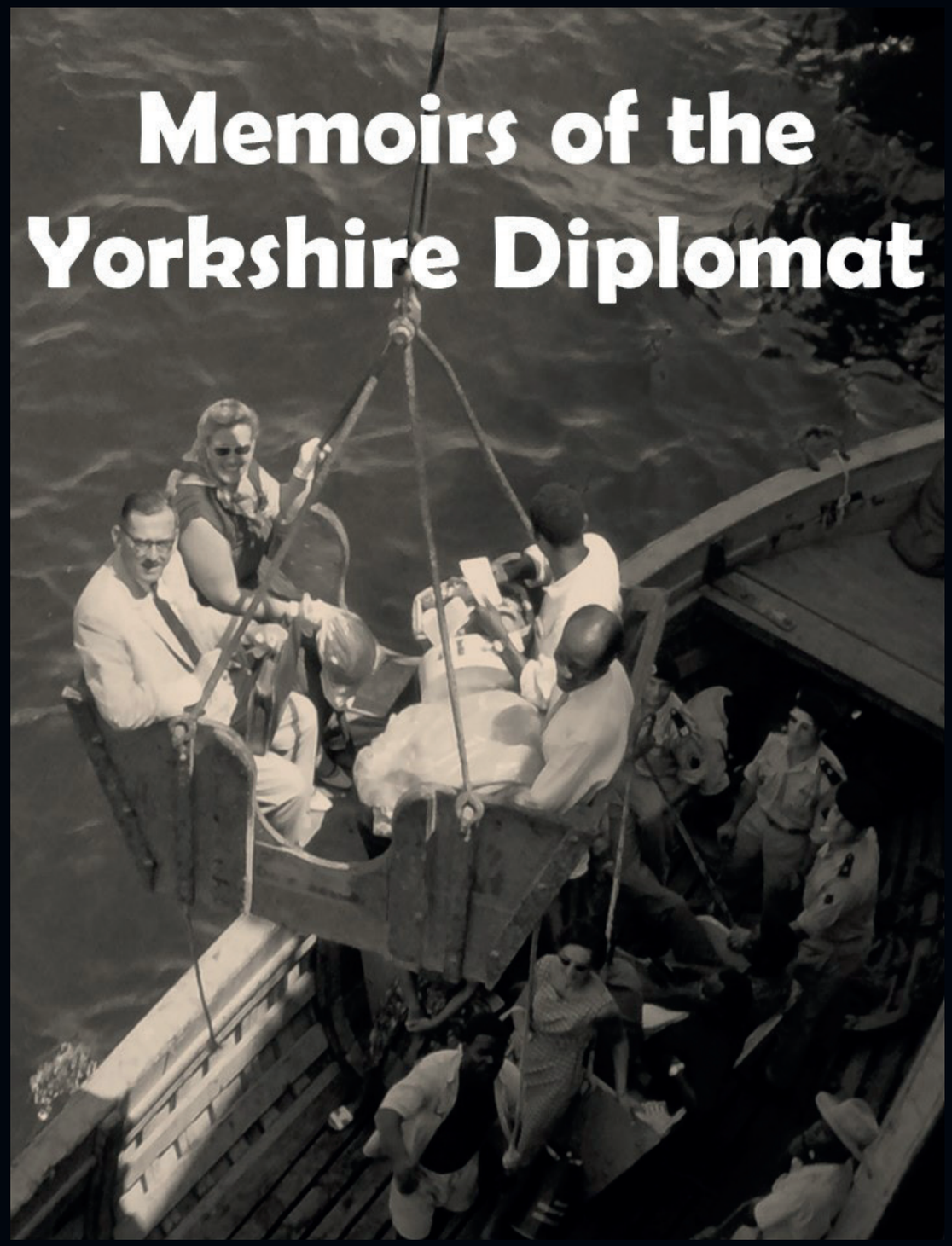
Memoirs of the Yorkshire Diplomat

Paul Kemp



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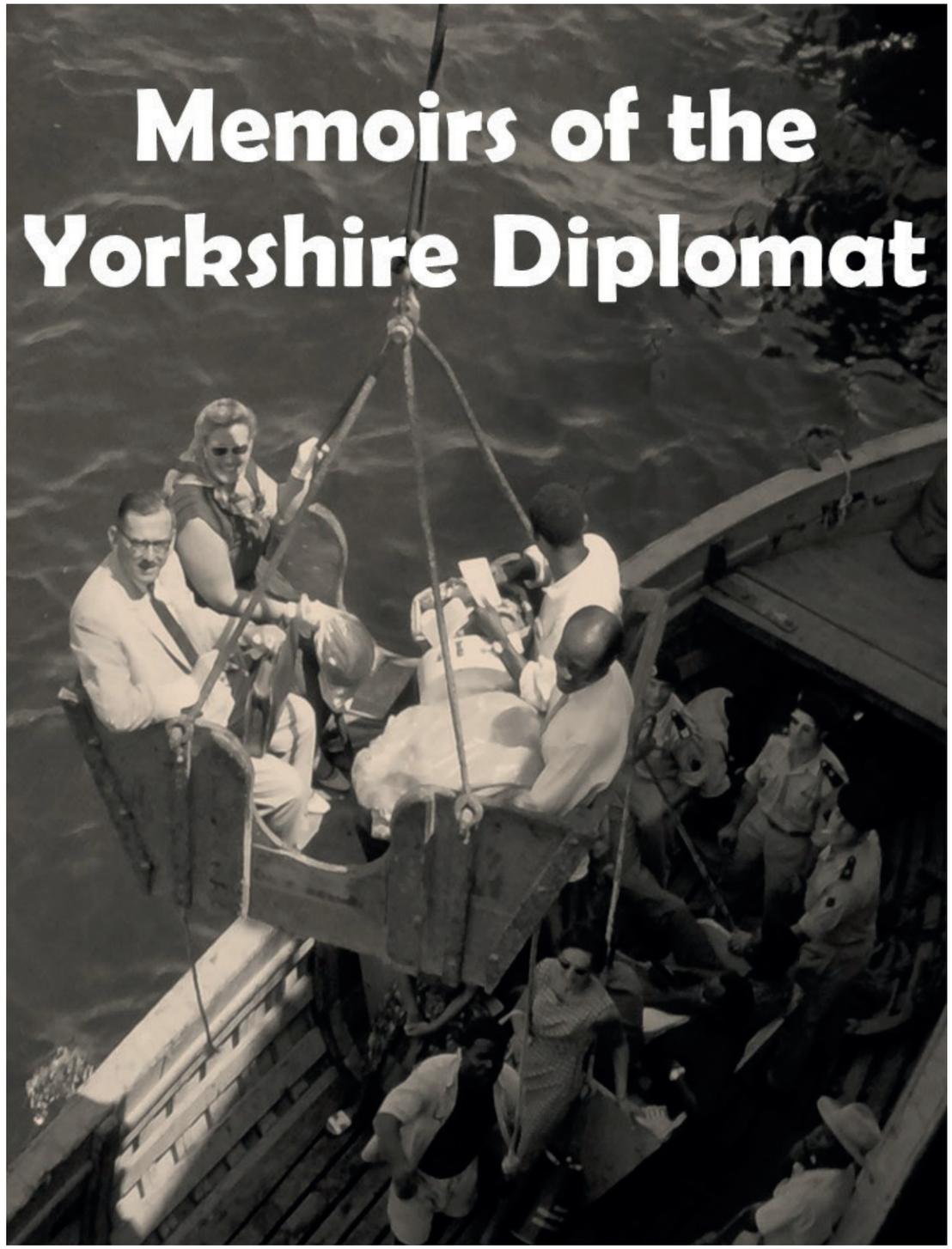


Paul Kemp

FOREWORD

My Grandfather, Oliver Kemp, was born in 1916 and raised in Stanley, Wakefield, as part of a mining family. His father, Walter, was forced into retirement after breaking his pelvis while working down the pit, an event that no doubt ensured that neither Oliver nor his older brother, Albert, chose to follow that particular career. While Albert entered teaching, and ultimately became a headmaster, Oliver was unusual in that, despite his background, he won a scholarship to Oxford University, after leaving Wakefield Grammar which he attended between 1927 and 1935. At Oxford he studied Classics, which included Latin, Greek and ancient history. He was a proficient linguist, and despite not studying in the Department, won a "German language" competition, for which the prize was a trip to Germany, just before the outbreak of the war. However, despite his academic capabilities, his first love was for music. He was an accomplished classical pianist, having played the piano since the age of 5 or 6, and later tutored by the Yorkshire based and world famous Fanny Waterman. Schumann was one of his favourite composers. What might have been a career in music, however, was ended at the start of the war when he was enlisted into the East Yorkshire Regiment. During the war he fought in the Western Desert and Middle East campaign against Rommel, the Desert Fox, and the Afrika Corps, where it was, "so hot you could fry an egg on the bonnet of a car", and gained the rank of Captain. Towards the end of the war he was promoted to Major, after being posted to Bletchley Park where he worked in Block D, Hut 3. Operations in Hut 3 developed with a vast increase in information traffic after the fall of France, and focused on intelligence

analysis of the decrypted army/air force material. Bletchley Park shaped developments in the Cold War era, and at the end of the war Block D activities played a critical role in preparations for D-Day (e.g. Double Cross operation of misinformation and turning spies).

After the war, Oliver joined the Foreign Service (1945) and gained the experience on which these memoirs are based. They were written over many years, but finalised in the early to mid- 1980s, and provide retrospection of his career, and the many postings he secured with his wife, Henrietta (née Taylor from Portobello in Wakefield, married in Wakefield in 1940). Their first posting was to Moscow in 1946, where, according to the account of another Foreign Office employee (J.P. Waterfield) Oliver was the 2nd secretary in the Chancery and, "Small, untidy, moustached, with a strong Yorkshire accent and garrulous….. But he had a good heart". According to this account, Oliver "had an astonishingly varied career in the most remote and difficult situations which the unkind Personnel Dept. could find, including being Ambassador to Togo [1962-1965] and to Outer Mongolia [1967-1968]". In addition, he served in Egypt, Indonesia, the Yemen (Charge d'Affaires 1957-58), Laos (Head of Chancery, 1958-60), and Luxembourg (Deputy Head of the UK Delegation to the European Communities, 1965-67). What follows is Oliver's account of his and Henrietta's experiences during these postings, providing a narrative that ranges from interesting descriptions of the life of the people of the countries they visited, to their duties as representatives of the Foreign Office under the shadow of the Cold War, and personal observations of the everyday challenges they faced, including creating gardens and protecting piano's under difficult climatic and environmental conditions. These

memoirs are followed by a series of short stories, intended to describe the more humorous elements of their experiences. Often with names changed, they present amusing details of the trials and tribulations of various activities, including golf, gardening and the diplomats most important of engagements, hosting dinner parties. Throughout their story that describes life in the far flung and fascinating regions of the world to where they were posted, there is frequent reference to Yorkshire, their home and place to which they returned to retire and spend the remainder of their days.

This book is dedicated to all those friends and relatives who helped and encouraged us on our sometimes arduous way, to the officers of the greatest of all Services, the Foreign Service, and above all to my devoted wife Henrietta, who put up uncomplainingly with all the hardships and cheerfully sustained me through the more trying hours.

ONE DIPLOMAT'S ODYSSEY

My fate in the post-war diplomatic service was sealed one crisp spring morning in 1946, when the then Head of the Personnel Department summoned me to discuss my next posting, and as I crossed St James Park from the cosy intimacy of the Refugee Department to the sumptuous décor and baronial stairs of Carlton House terrace, where the administration was housed, I could not suppress strong feelings of exhilaration and high purpose at the thought of my first posting into that wide world I had savoured and loved so much during my war service in the Western desert and the Middle East. When the psychologist/examiner at the Foreign Service reconstruction examination had asked me what ambitions I had for a post-war career, I had told him I wanted to play a significant part in crime detection. He had headed me off, demurring that I was not tall enough, too short-sighted, would have to serve the beat, etc, etc, but had added that I would no doubt fit in with a career abroad. Perhaps his assessment was right; both Henrietta and I loved travel and the open air, and have always been drawn to languages and the cultures and ways of life of other peoples.

I entered the room in some awe and trepidation, for the Head's presence matched the dignity of the imposing high ceiling, the beautifully decorated walls; and the imposing full-length portraits of former Foreign Ministers looking down on us. He received me affably enough, then volunteered that he could actually offer me a choice of posts, a thing unheard of before, and one which certainly did not happen to me ever again. But in 1946 many post had to be filled quickly, as officers recruited before the war moved up into posts vacated by Ambassadors, Ministers and Counsellors who had

been frozen in their posts during the war and must now retire because they were well over the age limit for retirement.

The choice was fascinating, between two posts as different as cheese and chalk. Would I like to go as Consul to Denver, Colorado, or would I prefer a political posting to the Chancery in Moscow? With the benefit of hindsight and the rapid growth in the importance of the commercial side of diplomacy since then, I should no doubt have chosen Denver, which would have put us on the North American circuit and perhaps provided us with a more comfortable material existence. I wonder? We might have become fat and effete on steaks and barbecues, and I might have become bored with a surfeit of paper work and long indecisive meetings, for which I had not then the appetite. It is idle to speculate. In 1946 there was no doubt at all about the choice. Moscow in those days was remote, an unknown quantity crying out to be explored, for little information ever filtered back to the general British public, in spite of the wartime alliance, our Embassy and military mission, and contacts established by our seamen facing the ever present deadly perils of the Northern run to Murmansk and Archangel. Soon the spotlight was to be directed on Stalin's ruthless tyranny, the complete isolation of the Russian people from foreign contacts, the absolute incompatibility of an alien Communist creed with our democracy, and the total absence of any will on the part of the soviet authorities to break out of this mould. But the iron curtain had not yet finally descended, and many people in the West still cherished illusions that a lasting friendship might still grow out of the wartime alliance, forged for the grimmest of all necessities, that of national survival. The first few weeks in Moscow were enough to dispel any such illusions on our part.

The first posting was to decide the pattern of my whole career, for after two years in Moscow I was considered knowledgeable enough on Soviet affairs to be invaluable in the crises and upheavals which were shaking the free world and its most vulnerable part, the developing countries. For however tight the censorship, however complete the segregation of the Soviet people from the foreigner, however plausible the Soviet cover-up of their intentions, one cannot stay two years in their capital without reading between the invariably opaque lines, and making a shrewd guess at their likely moves in any given situation.

Our postings thereafter became more difficult and more distant as our reputation for thriving on them grew. Mob demonstrations against the British in pre-Nasser Egypt, pillaging and sheer insecurity in Indonesia, the unpredictable behaviour of that mediaeval potentate the Imam Ahmed, Communist insurgency in Laos, Army revolt in Togo, and eventually back to the round-the-clock surveillance in Soviet-dominated Mongolia. If this were all I had to tell, I would have backed away from the task of committing it to paper. But all these countries, however remote or unpromising they might sound, have each their own special kind of beauty – the crunch of fresh crisp snow at dawn in Moscow's Red Square, the eternal rustling of the sand of the Western Desert, the brooding stillness of the midday jungle, the purple cliffs of the Red Sea rift looking North from Taiz to Mecca, the three-dimensional vault of blue sky over Mongolia. All the different races and people we have known have the same longings and desires, whatever regime they live under. They are born, live, love and die in the same way, however diverse their cultures. They are united in their strivings and aspirations, transcending natural and temporal vicissitudes and political

differences, and this identity of purpose will, I hope, be a main thread knitting together our varied experiences.

MOSCOW 1946-7

A host of vivid new impressions flooded in on us during those first few weeks in Moscow – the sunshine glinting on the gilded domes of the Kremlin churches, the Moscow River carrying its heavy burden of dynamited ice beyond Moscow to the plains, where it could safely melt away without endangering the capital's basements, the companionship of the Chancery log fire, a favourite meeting-place for other Secretaries and Attaches, brilliant National Day receptions, the ballet, theatre, their beloved Russian music at the Tchaikovsky Hall, fine old Russian masters at the Tretyakov Gallery, the good-humoured earthiness of the peasant market, where they sold only their best produce for their own private profit, the shimmering light of silver birch forests, little kids with skates strapped to their felt boots making rings around your legs at Gorki Park, as they skated up and down the artificially frozen paths leading from the lowliest of seven ice rinks to the rink of the grandmaster class, the serene quietness of Sokolniki Park, where little wooden huts catered for the chess player even in winter, and the splendour, even in 1946, of well-stocked luxury shops in Gorki street, where the privileged classes could buy all they wanted.

The abundance in these shops clashed glaringly with the ill-stocked and often empty shelves of the Universal store and other shops intended for the general public. Such contrasts between the privileged and the poor were to hit us for the rest of our stay. The wadded jackets worn year-in, year-out by the milk-girl and the gang of women breaking up the ice of the roads jarred badly, for instance, with the fashionable furs and the well-heeled boots of the upper class ladies. As did the one room assigned

to the poorer class families, however numerous, kitchen shared with the other families in the block, with the three or four room town houses plus country dacha enjoyed by the privileged elite. Of course the ravages of war had created very many shortages, and such luxuries as there were would not have gone very far if generally distributed. But the wide gulf created by privilege still exists as firmly entrenched as ever. A situation of overall shortage has long since disappeared, only to be replaced by chronic shortage of specific foods and goods, as agriculture and the transport supply situation fails to cope with their targets and the needs of the consumer. Most people are by now better dressed and better housed, thanks to a vast programme of apartment block building in the main towns, and the trend can only go upwards. Chernenko can solve the agricultural and supply problems and keep the lid on the expenditure on military hardware demanded by his military backers as part of the pay-off for their support.

Our most shattering experience of all, however, was our total isolation from any meaningful contact with people. A 24 hour guard on the gate effectively kept us apart from any but the authorised Communist contacts, people in the streets shunned our gaze and hurried past, the parents of children playing with Peter never showed themselves, and on the rare occasions when somebody became inquisitive about the West and arranged to see us again, he would never turn up. I was never conscious of being followed on my many walks from home or the Embassy, but then it was not necessary, for wherever I might drop in, there was the KGB agent, the head waiter, perhaps, or the barman, recognising me as a foreigner for my clothes, watching all that transpired, and ready to pounce at the slightest interest shown, by ordinary workmen enjoying a well earned beer after a long summer shortage, soldiers returning from the

front full of goodwill for us, or Red Army officers in the restaurants anxious to dance with the ladies in our company. The warning never changed: "Pay your bill and get out. You are talking too much to foreigners". Crestfallen, the more prudent would withdraw, but many, especially the officers, would remonstrate that it was no crime to wish to converse with their allies. That was that; they were frogmarched out and dumped in the street, and lucky if it stayed at that.

We were living through a most crucial and uneasy period during that first year. The educated and intellectual classes had come through the war with high hopes that relations with the Western allies would from now on be based on a permanent friendship forged in the great patriotic war. To win the war, controls had been relaxed both at the front and in Kuybishev, to which the Government had withdrawn as the Nazi armies approached Moscow, and where the Embassies rubbed shoulders with the intelligentsia – actors, writers, pressmen, ballerinas – much more closely than had ever been the case in the capital. The Red Army had seen other ways of life, private property, individual freedom, the acquisition of wealth and material comforts, and other capitalist fruits forbidden to them. They came back, in spite of a period of "reeducation" at rehabilitation camps, clamouring for the same privileges, while the intelligentsia demanded closer cultural relations with the West and more freedom to express their own ideas and choose their own forms of artistic creativity. Such an explosive situation could not be allowed to continue, and so, just as Molotov presented rebuff after rebuff to all Western overtures for a genuine peace settlement, so the whole of Russia's intellectual life was, between the spring of 1946 and December 1947, put back into the straightjacket of hard, undeviating Soviet Communist

orthodoxy. It is a measure of the strength of the intellectuals' resistance, passive if you like, but nevertheless a drag on the speed with which the move could be completed that it took the Party a year and a half to do so.

The campaign began with attacks against the short story writer Zoshchenko and the famous poetess Akhmatova for allegedly copying Western bourgeois models in their writings, ran through every form of intellectual life including the press and the theatre, and ended up one Sunday morning in December 1947 with a whole front-page denunciation of their great composers and the whole musical world for aping Western bourgeois standards, suitable no doubt for the sound-tracks of decadent American films, but not at all what the faithful Communist could whistle on his way to work. Shortly afterwards a full confession of the errors of their ways, coupled with the inevitable required attack on the Americans for stealing their music, appeared in Pravda over the signatures of Prokofiev, Shostakovitch and Khatchaturian, the Director of the Conservatoire was made the scapegoat and disappeared, there was a fortnights' lull, then back came the full bourgeois repertoire of such forbidden masters as Bach, Beethoven and their own beloved masters!

The Russians have long since developed their own way of living with the ubiquitous controls, a kind of resilient disapproval which makes itself felt, even if their protests can come to nothing. On the night of Stalin's full blast against the musicians, there was to be a Beethoven/Mussorgsky concert at the Tchaikovsky Hall, for which we had tickets, and we decided to go to see what would happen. There sure enough was the protest, a seething mass of angry, disappointed music lovers, choking the foyer, cloakroom and ticket office, and giving vent to their annoyance by demanding

their money back and in other ways which left them unidentifiable short of the arrest of everyone present. When press attacks against Britain and the West became too vituperative, Communist friends authorised to mix in diplomatic circles would become embarrassed and try to reassure us, not there and then at the party where informers and electronic devices abounded, but in the safety of the centre of the Red Square (no longer safe from sophisticated electronic eavesdropping, I fear). They would point out, if it were any consolation, that it was 30 years since any sensible man had ceased to believe in anything the Soviet press wrote. But they could do nothing about this kind of unscrupulous denigration of the opponent with every crime that could be invented, an infernal technique, which even the highest in the land had to experience when they fell from grace.

Such protests as the intellectual world could muster were, however, as ineffective as they were dangerous, the terror was daily being intensified, and by early 1948 contacts with Western diplomats had become just too risky to sustain. Some disappeared without trace or satisfactory explanation, Mikhoels[1], for instance, the leader of the Jewish community, and his deputy Vladimir Ilych Potapov, who were said to be victims of the anti-Jewish riots in Minsk, but whose untimely deaths must remain obscure as rumour succeeded to rumour. The diplomatic community would never have known, had not the Moscow Evening News made a mistake and prominently announced their deaths in its obituary columns. Vladimir Ilych had been well known among diplomats under the pen name of Golubov, a very happy, likeable

[1] Solomon Mikhoels was a Soviet Jewish actor and artistic director of the Moscow State Jewish Theater. During the war he served as the chairman of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, and his position as a high profile leader of the Jewish community led to him being a target in Stalin's increasing anti-Semitic persecution. Disguised as a hit-and-run, he was murdered along with his friend, Vladimir Ilich Golubov (Potapov), who was a well-known journalist and drama critic, in January 1948.

man who after war time service in Murmansk had become a ballet critic. He valued and sought after our opinion on the often bad miming posing as ballet which would be staged from time to time for political reasons. "The Flame of Paris" about the storming of the Bastille, for instance, which was put on at short notice to please the French, who had every appearance at that time of sitting on the fence. Nothing could be more calculated to destroy the dance than the horses stamping and prancing across the stage, nor the droppings they left here and there as they did so. We told Golubov what we thought and what he knew already, and shortly afterwards he had it taken off. He took many risks to come and see us, and was certainly outspoken in his criticism of the hard line, and perhaps the Jewish community for some reason unknown to us had been taught a lesson. Mikhoels and Vladimir Ilych had become two more victims of the ruthless reinstatement of the Party's iron control, which effectively throttled the intellectual world's yearnings, nurtured and encouraged during the war, for more freedom of expression and closer friendship with the west.

The isolation and tense climate began after a while to have its psychological effect. Fortunately, as diplomats we at least lived in a gilded cage, for credit must be given to Burobin, the organisation providing for foreigners' needs, that even in the direst postwar shortages and the most difficult periods of confrontation, they provided us with most of the material comforts enjoyed by their own elite (excepting the most exclusive Gorki Street shops closed to diplomats). Our home was part of the former Finnish Legation, in a quiet alley near Krasnie Vorota metro station, panelled throughout with oak wainscoting, and warmly heated from the town's central heating supply (a necessity in these cold countries and even more effectively copied in

Mongolia). Marusia, a Byelorussian, and Dusia, Ukranian, were very happy to serve us, Marusia in her rather superior way, Dusia more forthright and down to earth, my mental picture of whom will always be a sturdy peasant woman, skirt tucked into her bloomers, washing or polishing the parquet floor Russian style with rhythmic scything movements of her right leg. She was indeed a rough diamond, reputed to have been a Stakhanovite until a girder hit her over the head and she was from then on judged unfit for any other but domestic service with diplomats. Certain it was that she had a streak of devilment in her which would impel her to argue with our guests, and to teach Peter, then only two, all the pithiest Russian swear words she could muster, to be trotted out against her sworn enemy the battleaxe who did day shift on guard duty. She delighted on feast days, of which there are many in the Soviet calendar, in hoisting Peter on her shoulders and making for the Red Square, where religiously and repeatedly she would point out to him the members of the rogues gallery. "Look, Petenka", she would say, "there's Uncle Stalin ("Dyada" in Russian sounds much more endearing), there's Uncle Lenin, there's Uncle Molotov, and there's Uncle Beria", and so on. Not surprisingly, he knew them all by heart, and there was a sequel. We went on holiday that year on board the "Sestroretsk" from Leningrad to London, and going into the salon for tea, Peter was overjoyed to recognise in the bald head waiter his old friend Uncle Lenin. Even greater was his joy when, looking around for more rogues to identify, he spotted the French Military Attache sipping tea at a corner table. "And there's Uncle Stalin!" he cried, recognising him from the shock of black hair and heavy black moustache. Both recipients of the honour were highly amused, and responded with a show of recognition; thereafter Peter contentedly accepted, with his

two uncles protecting him, the rough seas of the Baltic, and the corkscrew movement of the ship peculiar to that sea. Nicolai, Marusia's husband, chauffeured the Ford V8 pickup which he had with difficulty got on the road by cannibalising the wrecks lying around from the war. He gave Henrietta her first driving lessons, but he had been a tank driver in the war, traces of which still show up from time to time in her shock tactics at the wheel.

We spent much time around the house entertaining, pursuing our interests and hobbies, or just resting from the trying psychological climate. In winter the rather nondescript garden became a star attraction, for the tennis court which we flooded when the frost was at the right temperature made a superb skating rink. Preparing it was a major ritual. First the hosepipe would be warmed up in a hot bath, then I would run out to attach it while the dvornik rushed downstairs to turn on the tap before the drops of water in the hosepipe could freeze up. I would begin at once to lay an even surface, swishing the hose rapidly from side to side, for any rest or hesitation would have built up a mound of ice as quickly as any icing cake. Many colleagues came to try out the rink, the best skaters being the Hungarians and the Americans, the worst the British. Lots of snow had to be shovelled off regularly, or rather cut out with one of those huge wooden plasterboards which was an ideal snow remover, and gradually huge mounds built up around the rink, the ridges of which became the favourite haunt of our lovely Samoyed bitch, Moiska. She would lie there for hours contentedly watching the pirouetting, straddled across the ridge with front paws stretched out over one side and rear paws over the other, belly buried deep in the cold snow. So hardy is the breed.

The Muscovites are justly proud of the brilliant ballet, opera and theatre life. Glittering spectacles such as ‘Swan Lake’, ‘Sleeping beauty’, ‘Eugene Onegin’ and ‘Prince Igor’ are a vital part of their cultural heritage, identified by each and every member of the audience as part of their very own private legacy, and the rounds of spontaneous and rapturous applause greeting each well-known scene or movement would bring the house down. For most of them it was a rare, memorable occasion which, as it was a reward for work well done, would be unlikely repeated, but which they would treasure for the rest of their lives. There was not just one theatre, famous as the Stanislavski is, but twenty or thirty; even running to a Jewish and a Gypsy theatre, colourful and fascinating to begin with, but fading like everything else after a while under the endless repetitive pounding of the same old hard ideological line. Few forms of art and entertainment escaped the Communist dragnet, but when they did, they were loved the more for it. Obraztsov’s puppet theatre (his pen name means ‘Image-man’) comes to mind at once, that highly gifted glove puppet show which never ceased to create the illusion, minutes after it had begun, of watching real, live actors, and drew gasps of astonishment from the audience at the end when the puppet manipulators rose like giants from the well of the stage to take their bow. It became one of the favourite haunts, and a magical, fairy world for young Peter, as the ‘Jungle Book’, Gogol’s ‘Night before Christmas’, the ‘Nutcracker’, ‘Dr Ai Bolit’ (‘Dr Ooh, it hurts!’) and other famous Russian tales unfolded before his eyes. The Zoo and Circus, where the renowned clown Kar An Dash (“The Pencil”) was then at the height of his powers, were also favourite distractions, and the 30 Kilometre limit on diplomats’ movements embraced not only the Parks, but also the Moscow/Volga Canal, a popular

boat journey past droves of bathers, some in the nude, enjoying themselves in the hot sunshine on the canal banks. Also one of our best-loved picnic spots near Podolsk, set in the translucent silver birch woods on the banks of the crystal-clear River Mocha (which means 'Urine' in peasant parlance, I'm afraid), where we could pick wild strawberries and swim in the pure, clear water among the nibbling fish to our hearts' content. Only the KGB, alerted as usual by Nicolai the chauffeur, would have their man there, whom we would accept and chat with as though it were the most natural thing in the world to have him along with us.

To break out of the 30 kilometre cordon without detection was well-nigh impossible, but the Head of the Embassy Russian Secretariat, the Air Attaché at the French Embassy who had served in the Normandie/Niemen squadron near Orel during the war, and myself succeeded in breaking out early one fine Sunday morning, long before the guards were awake. We were heading for Tolstoy's country estate at Yasnaya Polyana in the Tula area, and the going was very bad, far worse than it could have been in Tolstoy's day. For big Panzer battles had been fiercely fought over the terrain, gouging out huge chunks of the road surface, and most of the time we were travelling on the grass verges. The country house had been spared, and so had the lovely vista through the long avenue of tall trees pointing to the Western horizon, where Tolstoy wrote much of 'War and Peace'. One of Tolstoy's descendants gracefully received us and showed us round. Everything was jealously treasured and meticulously preserved by the Soviet authorities, a peaceful haven and a fitting place for pilgrimage to the home of Russia's greatest son. But an unpleasant shock awaited us back at the car. An irate KGB officer was waiting for us with a bombardment of

awkward questions. How had we left Moscow? Who had given us permission, etc., etc.? Talk of the Constitution's guarantee of freedom of movement or of our wartime alliance cut no ice, and we were getting nowhere with an officer more worried than we were, when the Air Attaché suddenly produced his expired Soviet pass for the Niemen squadron. The effect was electric, the officer's attitude changed completely, he smiled, clicked his heels, and with a salute wished us a pleasant incident-free journey home. We called on the way on the family of our French companion's wartime girlfriend in Tula. They were terrified, so deep was the dread of the secret police, and although with traditionally warm Russian hospitality they gave us tea, they were visibly relieved when we cut the visit short and made for home.

What a golden opportunity Stalin missed at the end of the war. He had won the war by rallying the overwhelming forces of deep patriotism and love of the motherland. The people had endured untold suffering for Mother Russia, and it would have been a stroke of genius to have relaxed the Communist stranglehold and to have given them, under a more benevolent form of dictatorship, some of the freedoms for which they yearned. Many were deluded into thinking that the easier war-time relationship would be carried over into the peace, just as many in the West thought that winning the war together would lead to a real friendship and cooperation making for lasting peace and stability. No such thing was ever on the cards. The Party had to reassert its iron grip the moment danger had passed, reverting to all the measures familiar to the Russians as far back as Tsarist times – secret police surveillance, repression of all opposition, secrecy and censorship, and isolation of the foreigner from the Russian people, and the Russian people from contacts with the West. If this

had been the limit of their resumption of control, one might, while deploring the dangers of the isolation from the West, have seen in it simply the return to a harsher dictatorship made necessary by the unrest. One might have argued that it was needed to restore stability in an Empire made up of so many restless nationalities, and incorporating not only the Western-orientated Baltic States, but also the more advanced nations making up their East European buffer zone. Another constant factor, even in 1948, was the fear and mistrust of China, with whom there are several borders in dispute, requiring them to watch on two fronts at once. But the Party did not limit its measures to the internal situation only. It is permanently committed to the ideological duty of proselytising the non-Communist world, and to this end the old Comintern was revived in the guise of the Cominform, which however never really took off, and for all practical purposes was more effectively replaced by the direct involvement of instruments of the Soviet State in any form of subversive activity which might undermine the capitalist world. Quite apart from the national Communist parties, which depending on the party are to a greater or lesser extent furthering the aims of Soviet policy, the Soviet Union is itself directly engaged in overt and covert propaganda and espionage, exploitation of weaknesses in the West and the developing world, and peace campaigns and other publicity offensive directed at Western public opinion with the aim of influencing the people against the declared policies of their government and above all their resolve to maintain a strong defence. No wonder there is deep mistrust of this alien system, which never ceases its attempts to foist itself on Western democracy, and of the prodigious build-up of their armed forces and nuclear arsenals out of all proportion with their defence needs.

There can be only one policy for the Western allies in the face of these grim realities, and that is a policy of strength, firmness and cohesion in Nato, coupled with patience and readiness to enter into meaningful negotiations whenever possible. For the Soviet leaders are above all hardened realists respecting strength when they encounter it. Forms of appeasement such as the unilateral nuclear disarmament movement are simply seen as signs of weakness and exploited by them for their own ends. Change cannot be brought about by such manifestations of Western pacifism, but only through evolutionary processes in Russia itself. Thankfully there are some signs of this – for instance, a steady improvement in the material conditions of life and greater consideration for the demands of the consumer, provided always that whatever improvements are made do not impinge on the Party's all-powerful control of the State. The present rulers are also showing a more enlightened awareness of the dangers of the international situation and a cautious circumspection in dealing with its problems. Perhaps, with the west remaining firm and united, with patient, persistent diplomacy, without interference in each other's internal affairs, and through steady evolutionary processes, it might be possible at last to establish and maintain a more stable era of peaceful coexistence.

EGYPT 1950 AND 1956

Two years was the normal stint for a tour in Moscow, and we found it long enough. At the end of that time we were badly in need of a change, both from the effects of the climate and the psychological impact of continuous isolation from the Russians. But everything is relative, and to the American diplomat doing his six months tour of Vladivostok, Moscow must have shone out like the bright lights of Paris would have done for us. The poor fellow had literally nowhere to go and nothing to see for the whole of that period. His consulate was floodlit day and night, the harbour was boarded up as much to prevent him seeing anything as to check theft, and the highlight of his week was Friday afternoon tea at the local restaurant with his Chinese Nationalist counterpart. They just sat opposite each other, and as neither spoke the other's language, simply got up and bowed ceremoniously to each other from time to time.

On the face of it, the Personnel Department were treating us proud with a posting to the kinder climate and more luxurious lifestyle of Alexandria. Not, to be sure, the Northern coast of the Mediterranean basin which I had always in my post preference form declared as my first choice, but not to be sniffed at, as our genial Head of Chancery persuasively put it. He must have sensed that I was not amused, now considering myself, with the callow inexperience of youth, henceforth a political officer, and Consular matters beneath my dignity. How wrong can one be? Experience in diplomacy as in everything else only comes by plunging into the hurly-burly of everyday problems and by helping other people along as much as possible, while

building up a large fund of experience and case history in doing so. This vital lesson was dramatically brought home to me on my very first morning in the Consulate, when the Consul-General, a very experienced Middle East expert of the old Levant Service, took me round. He stopped at the public counter serviced by five locally-recruited clerks, and said, "This is the heart of the Consulate-General, Oliver. And I don't want any member of the public to be kept waiting more than five minutes". The voice of long experience indeed, and how often since have I wished, and when sorely provoked frankly said so, that this should be the motto of everyone dealing with the public, junior clerks, perhaps, too engrossed with their papers or their gossip to notice anyone there, or high-ranking personages in any hierarchy wanting to impress the waiting visitor with their lofty station in life.

Our joy at being released into the full liberty of the Western world knew no bounds, and we flung ourselves enthusiastically into every activity which Alexandria had to offer, a seductive mixture of life in the open air, the sybaritic pleasures of the cosmopolitan community, and the irresistible draw of the Arabs and their language and culture. It had rare beauties to offer – the dry warmth and invigorating tang of the pure desert air, the street vendors' cries and the muezzin's calls to prayer, made distant through the shimmering heat, turtle doves cooing on the roof tops, the faithful kneeling in prayer at sunset, the bazaars heavy with the scent of spices, incense and coffee, stalls laden with valuable carpets, ivory, perfumes and other Oriental merchandise, orange groves, date and mango plantations, and pervading all, the overpowering scent of jasmine.

We had everything we wanted for a healthy outdoor life, with the desert and its white untrodden beaches a few kilometres away, and at our doorstep popular bathing spots like Sidi Bishr, whose scorching and dirty dry sand is never, alas, washed by the tide-less Mediterranean. For quieter bathing we made East to the blue waters of Aboukir Bay's rocky inlets, or West to the long deserted stretches beyond Agame. The desert would beckon if we had a day to spare for a picnic or its remoter white beaches, shared only with the scurrying crabs, or on its jutting headlands, frequented only by lizards and desert rats. It is never still, for even without the animal life, the sand is constantly rustling as the breeze blows the tiny grains over its surface, and one is never alone for long, even in the remotest parts. Its horizons must induce a highly-developed kind of long-sight in the Bedouin, for they would spot us at a tremendous distance and make their way towards us, to stand or sit around at a respectful distance and exchange greetings, or politely accept whatever we had to offer. The Bedouin, and the peasants in the Delta, endeared themselves to us for their simplicity, long-suffering, and great dignity. They live their hard, poverty-stricken lives scratching a bare existence from the land or from their herds, uplifted by the uncomplicated tenets of the Koran and its moral teaching, and untouched by the sophisticated ways which seem to take hold, the moment an Arab has donned a dark suit. They still live very much as I imagine Muhammed did on his long camel journeys trading in the Levant, content with the spartan frugality of their lot, so long as they have their own tent, their family and few belongings, the open space around them, and the bright stars and open vault of Heaven to inspire them with a belief in one God and the simple teaching of their faith.

We would occasionally visit Burg el Arab, about thirty miles out, where one or two retired British struggled against the encroaching sand to cultivate their garden, and against even greater odds to teach the Bedouin how to sink a simple artesian well. Only in the early spring could they dispense with the well water, for it is only in February/March that enough participation rolls in from the Mediterranean to water the sand, and within days produce carpets of anemones and jonquil stretching as far as the horizon, the existence of which would not have been suspected days before. Once a year in October we would with the British Community make the pilgrimage to El Alamein, a sad occasion leaving an indelible impression of futility and waste as one gazes over the rolling hillocks covered, as far as the eye can see, not with the reds and blues of the desert flowers, but with the unending rows of simple white crosses marking the graves of the British and their allies, the Germans and the Italians who fell there.

We lacked for nothing. The succession of homes we lived in were comfortable, if modest compared with some of the mansions around us, our devoted servants would have protected us to the death against the rabble, and when times were normal, we would have an embarrassing choice of outdoor pursuits: - the vast harbour of sailing trips, the beaches, and all the sports one needed at the Sporting and Smouha clubs, above all golf which attracted many devotees because of the cool, lush fairways, kept in immaculate condition by the many groundsmen. There was a thriving musical life, encouraged by a small band of enthusiasts and by soirées sponsored by the wealthier members of the Community. But the atmosphere was cosmopolitan rather than Arab, and for the real flavour of Arab history and culture we would visit Cairo, which never

ceased to fascinate us with the constant bustle of its teeming streets and bazaars, the interminable hooting of car horns fortunately made distant by the heat, the everlasting mystery of the Pyramids, a parching camel trip around which would be followed by refreshing drinks on the shady balcony of the Rest House at Giza, that welcome oasis of green waiting to greet the hot and weary traveller coming in from Alexandria on the desert road. When we wanted more quiet, we would pay a visit to the astonishing treasures of the Museum, or to the Citadel and its magnificent mosque towering high above Cairo's busy streets, and a favourite haunt for the kites, with views of the Nile surrounding countryside stretching to the distant hazy blue horizons of the Delta. We were always drawn to the cool half-light of the Muski, that famous covered-in bazaar displaying all the skilful handicrafts of the East. The craftsmen would be sitting in their open shops working their bronze, silver, ivory or ebony into a variety of chess sets, ivory elephants, goblets, and trays and table tops with Koranic inscriptions decoratively engraved on them. Assiduous traders would press us to take on the backs of our hands a sample of this or that exquisite Oriental perfume, until our heads reeled and we were no longer capable of distinguishing one perfume from another. Other more opulent merchants would even more insistently beg us to enter their cool store-room to inspect their range of priceless carpets, until we could no longer resist. They did not seem to mind that they did not make a sale, knowing full well that they were dealing with an Englishman, and an impecunious one at that. They would roll out for our close scrutiny one beautiful Turkish or Persian carpet after another, in the most varied colours and ingenious patterns, with a thick silk pile one hesitated to tread on, in spite of the merchants' pressing encouragement to do so. A long session drinking

sickly-sweet Turkish coffee was then obligatory in spite of having made no sale. Perhaps in their wisdom born of long experience the merchants knew that with such a cordial reception their reputation would spread the more easily to more wealthy clients.

The Azhar University, renowned as the centre of Koranic learning throughout the Moslem world, was before Nasser open for the infidel to visit. It was not far from the Muski, and we would be impelled to go there, take off our shoes, and wander through the spacious halls, colonnades and porticoes, where schools of students from all over the world were learning and reciting aloud their Koran. They came from as far afield as Pakistan and Indonesia in the East, Morocco and Mauretania in the West, and Nigeria and the Cameroons in the South, yet seemed to be on good terms with each other, united no doubt through the common bond of Islam. Every professor at the Azhar aspired to be imparting to his pupils as dispassionate a view as possible of Mohammed's religious doctrine and moral code, at least before Nasser's advent to power. He destroyed this scholarship by making Islam a political weapon to rally support for his regime. The teaching became indoctrination, which was all too easy, given the crusading element in Islam, the imams turned their sermons into sycophantic political speeches, and Fridays in Cairo were made hideous by the blaring out of their sermons from loudspeakers sited on the minarets of the city's mosques. No wonder that Indonesian friends who visited us in Cairo in 1956 were appalled at this blatant exploitation of their religion, for to them Islam is their own personal religion, and worship intended to be confined to the mosque and their own homes.

Alexandria owed a great deal of its prosperity to British investment and enterprise, and we were particularly strong in shipping, cotton growing, and spinning and weaving. A few had become wealthy in the process, and enjoyed a correspondingly lavish life-style. It was here for the first time that we came across that most excruciating form of social torture, the cocktail prolongé. Our first brush with it was at the palatial home of a very kindly and socially conscious lady, who took a pride in expending herself on giving. We went along to her cocktail prolongé expecting, as the name suggests, to be there no more than an hour or so longer than the usual cocktail time. But we encountered, not only a salon and bar easily absorbing some 250 guests, but also some 15-20 bridge tables set out in adjoining reception rooms and buzzing with the animated conversation and recrimination of compulsive bridge players. For many members of the British community were mad about the game, to the extent even of neglecting other more important occupations and devoting all their leisure hours, and more, incarcerated in the men's section of the Union Club playing bridge. Guests at the cocktail were moving at will from the tables to the bar and back again, emerging out of the haze of the tobacco smoke to a more solid drink, then vanishing again to their own or another table, glass charged to the brim for the next bridge round. It was here that we were cured for good of any bridge ambitions. Henrietta was invited by our hostess to make up a table, and had the misfortune to partner one of Alexandria's experts. She had in her hand a Yarborough with only the two in the suit in which he worked himself up to a grand slam. She made no bid throughout, but when she laid down the hand, he complained that she should have shown him the two diamonds! This was way beyond any convention she was aware of,

and in great dudgeon she left the table and sent me to continue the game. We have not played since, avoiding it really for the same reason as the cocktail prolongé, for by 10 p.m. the evening was just beginning. The Nubian servants entered in their flowing silk gallabiyas bearing on high silver platters charged with every kind of fish, meat and sweets imaginable, and the game was broken off for the length of time needed to regale oneself.

We were lucky on that occasion to escape by 2 a.m., but after four years, or rather four winter seasons, the burden had become so oppressive that we begged for a posting, a thing one should never do in an organisation as big as the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, which always has one or two difficult posts it finds hard to fill. The trouble with Alexandria's social life was that with a community of expatriates so large (2500 English alone), one faced the dilemma of whether to accept all the hospitality offered, or none at all. One could not pick and choose, and to avoid an invidious situation, we chose the former course, which worked really well when I was in a relatively junior capacity, but became greatly aggravated as I was promoted, and eventually acted as Consul-General for the best part of a year. At each hierarchical stage we mixed with our opposite numbers, junior executives as Vice-Consul, directors at the Consular stage, and finally as acting Consul-General the chairmen and board of directors and even the estate owners. Accepting and returning the hospitality of all these levels meant coping in the end with three or four cocktails and a dinner a night. All this in the 15 mile tongue of land, sandwiched between the sea and Lake Mariut. It became imperative to leave before the fifth season came upon us.

It was all very cosy, a Community living for itself and its pleasures, with its own Union Club defending its exclusiveness to the last, its monopoly of the sporting clubs, and entertainment within its own charmed circle, as if it would go on for ever and there would be no ominous groundswell from the clamour for full independence, the Moslem Brotherhood and Arab nationalism fired to white heat by the war with Israel. These pressures were, to be fair, masked by the cosmopolitan nature of Alexandria and the close relationships which had existed for many years between the British and leading Arabs and Copts. But the evidence of the impending crisis was already there, in the savage mob attacks on isolated soldiers during the withdrawal from the Delta, the daily agitation for the evacuation of the Canal, the shadowy activities of the Moslem Brotherhood, and the Government's toleration and indeed encouragement of demonstrations by the rabble against the British.

Mob violence was never far below the surface. It never erupted spontaneously, but once the agitators had whipped up the crowd, it became hard to control the situation or to predict where it would end. The demonstrations in Alexandria were incited by the Government as a gesture of defiance against the continued British occupation of the Canal zone, and generally to shore up its waning popularity. Five piastres a day was the backshish rate paid to anyone joining in, so that by 9 a.m. on demonstration days a motley collection of port riff-raff, loafers and little boys would have been assembled in the port area ready to march on the commercial and residential quarters. I had an early warning system in operation, selected observers in offices along the demonstrators' route, who would ring in as the rabble reached them. As the church was nearest the port, the Archdeacon was always the first to sound the alarm

with his laconic “They’re at it again, Oliver”; thereafter the warning calls came in until the mob had reached the busy shopping centre and Barclays Bank, when it was time to remind the Governor of his responsibility to protect British life and property. We were lucky at that crucial time to have a fine, upstanding Governor in Mortada Moraghi, a deeply religious Muslim, who like all devout Muslims put his duty to his fellow-men first, and was determined to defend British life and property without fear or favour. He would have the police trailing the procession in an apparently haphazard way, until at a chosen point more police would block the way, drive the demonstrators into cul-de-sacs, and lay about them until they scattered, for that day at least. Demonstrations would be made during the night against obvious British targets, the Boys’ School or English Girls’ College, for instance, and I would be called to ensure they had the necessary protection. I still have a vivid picture in my memory of our faithful old Armenian retainer kneeling in the cockroach-infested garage and begging me not to go out to be killed. But I had to, and reckoned that in any case if they had wanted to kill me, they would have done so at my home; they threatened us often enough, usually with threats to kidnap the baby. Fortunately the demonstrations would come to nothing. The Governor would be there on the scene and order the crowds’ dispersal, and we could return to bed in the small hours. The problem of the safety of the 12,000 odd British subjects in their homes also greatly exercised me. Not so much the Maltese or Cypriots, for they were largely absorbed and integrated into the communities where they lived, but the English scattered in the residential areas along the whole length of Alexandria. Their very dispersal seemed to provide their best defence, and the security plan was based on that. They were advised in times of danger to stay at home or at

most link up with their immediate neighbours. Some senior members of the Community resented this apparent inaction and would have had the British making their way through hostile streets to rendezvous at known British institutions, which they would have hoped to have defended to the last. The events of January 1952 proved the soundness of dispersal and in that month's violent uprising the British Community in Alexandria escaped unscathed. Credit for this is also due in large part to the steadfastness and devoutness of the Governor Mortada.

We returned to Egypt in 1956, a few months before the Suez fiasco, to a complete change of mood and atmosphere. It was safer than in 1952, the Army saw to that, but all the happiness of life in Egypt had gone out of the situation, to be replaced by the hideous din of endless parades and rallies which Nasser staged to bolster his popular appeal. It was miserable having to sit there and listen to the tirades against the British, to the flattery of their leader, and to the everlasting chanting of "Long live Gamal, Gamal Abdel Nasser". Contacts with the regime were severely limited, although one did get to see Nasser's journalist friend Hassanein Heykal whenever Nasser had a message to get across. The secret police were not obvious (the long gallabiyah proved the perfect disguise), but they were everywhere, and one stumbled into them from time to time. In the later phases of the crisis I was sent to Alexandria to hold the fort in place of a sick colleague. The first thing I did was to call on all my old Egyptian friends. They were delighted to see me again, but some rang me up afterwards, anxiously begging me not to call again, to spare them a second disagreeable visit from the secret police. Others were defiant, putting their friendship above their fear of reprisals. In each case they had a close connection with Islam, a

father who had been rector or professor at the Azhar University, perhaps, and clearly felt powerful enough through that link to defy the authorities. Their faith had instilled into them the overriding importance of the bonds of friendship.

The Third World leaders were at that time busily playing off the West against the Soviet Union in order to get the maximum aid from both sides, and Nasser was doing his share at this most critical time. By so doing he obtained from the Soviet side a great deal of military equipment for his Army and Air Force, but also the many advisers, both in the Armed Forces and civilian life, which are an inevitable concomitant of Soviet arms deals. But the most fateful step at this juncture was the Soviet financial and technical support for the construction of the Aswan Dam, which guaranteed the funds for his cherished dream the West had failed to provide, and thus set in motion the train of events leading to the Suez disaster.

It seems tragic at this distance in time, that the Americans and their allies were not willing through the World Bank to put up the finances for the Dam and allowed the Russians to outmanoeuvre them, and that they were not prepared to reach an accommodation even at the eleventh hour over the nationalisation of the Suez Canal. It was also a cardinal mistake to join with the Israelis in the invasion of the Canal, and above all to imagine that the operation need only be confined to the Port Said area in order to overthrow Nasser. A wave of patriotic fervour was running through the nation and the Army, and it would undoubtedly have been necessary to come to Cairo to unseat him, a prospect which no military commander would have relished and which would have led to the bloodshed we avoided in 1948 by withdrawing our forces from the Delta.

And so relations were broken off and the Embassy closed down, after a brief period in which the essential staff were incarcerated in the building (the wives and children of the staff and of the British Community had been evacuated during the autumn months). Nasser promised that the lives of the remaining British residents would be protected, and kept his word. To do so, however, he was obliged to evacuate the last British by train across the Libyan border, rather than allow them to drive the distance by car; but in the end everyone left safe and sound.

Could the course of event have been changed if the West had worked harder for an accommodation with Nasser? Some members of the British business community in Cairo strongly criticized the Government for failing to appease him, or deflect him from his objectives by any gesture which might have saved his face or flattered his ego. They were in my view profoundly wrong in their assessment of the situation. Nasser was not to be deflected, once he had made up his mind. He had strong support in the patriotism running through the nation, and was confident that he could obtain from the soviet bloc what the West was not prepared to give him. The French and British Governments were in no mood to give Nasser all he wanted in a negotiated settlement, and there was still enough gunboat diplomacy around for them to believe that Nasser wold be brought to heel by a show of force on the Canal. The price was also far too high for the Americans, who hand not yet woken up to the extent of financial aid required in order to forestall Soviet influence through aid in the developing world.

In the event, the situation righted itself surprisingly quickly, and Egypt largely severed her connections with the Soviets and returned to her natural affinity with the

West. The Americans eventually realised the extent of the involvement required of them and took over massive aid and investment programmes, and the French and British came back to play their special role in fostering the traditionally close cultural and commercial links which have made significant contributions to Egypt's prosperity and her Western orientation.

INDONESIA 1953

Heeding our plea for a posting from Alexandria's social round, which had become just too arduous for us, the Foreign Office sent us to the Consulate at Surabaya, capital of East Java, which had been vacant for several months but required urgently to be filled because of the growing insecurity and lawlessness. I must admit that when we heard the news, we had to consult the atlas to see where it was, and were not reassured. Only a few degrees South of the Equator, it boasted a hot, humid climate with a humidity rate never far short of 100%, from which the cooler humidity of the hills provided only a relative respite, and the edge of the Australian winter none at all, as cold, clammy humidity replaced the hot. It was far from home, among peoples with a very different cultural background, and extending far out from East Java into unknown, undeveloped regions, as a result of my responsibility for the protection of British lives and property throughout the whole Eastern Archipelago, as far as Portuguese Timur and Darwin. We could not help asking ourselves what it would be like in so remote a post, how we would get on with the Javanese and other races, and how British lives could be protected from the widespread pillaging and rampokking. It needed all our courage and sangfroid to accept the challenge.

We were let in easily during the first few days. The month-long journey out on the Dutch Royal Mail liner 'Oranje' had been a marvellous experience, particularly when we reached the sparkling Indian Ocean and were accompanied by porpoises, flying fish and impressive tropical sunsets, and in the last stages when we glided past the golden, palm-strewn beaches of Sumatra and its dense jungle, broken only by the

occasional pillar of smoke rising from some isolated settlement. We were well received and looked after by the Ambassador and his wife, but were filled with apprehension when, at our first brush with the earthy realities, we boarded the decrepit old packet boat pretentiously named the 'Plancius', which plied between Djakarta and the Spice Islands, and which was to take us to Surabaya owing to the dangers of the overland route. West and Central Java were in uproar and far too unsafe to attempt to cross. East Java was relatively safer, for its Governor had taken draconian measures to quell any looting and rioting in his province, and to restore law and order. The boat was packed, and the open deck littered with local people returning to East Java and beyond with their belongings, large hessian sacks, wicker crates and baskets, and the pigs, goats and other livestock they had bought in Djakarta. The stench was overpowering, but even then not enough to drown the all-pervading odour of rotting copra, the packet boat's main cargo. Large scaly brown cockroaches ran over the water glasses in our cabin, and rest was impossible in all the clamour and foetid heat. Not a very auspicious introduction, but thankfully a once-for-all experience, which served only to highlight the gracious living, among a kindly and well-disposed people, which awaited us in Surabaya.

The Residence was an imposing building in a fashionable quarter, so constructed as to provide cool air in the humid heat before air conditioners came into vogue, through a lofty dome over the central rooms, marble floors, large ceilings fans, windows and doors open to the elements, and not least a tiled Dutch bath from which to ladle cold water as necessary over one's heat-wracked body. It was reputed to have been a police HQ during the Japanese occupation, and was still supposed to be haunted

by the tortured victims, but this did not deter the Indonesians from flocking to visit us, both because we were very much in their good books, the British having helped them obtain their independence, and because we could offer them regular practice in English conversation, which was then much sought after. The salon was big enough for any size of reception likely to be needed, and to eke out the sparse Ministry of Works furniture, we hired a new Steinway concert grand, for the ludicrous rental of £2 a month, because the Dutch owner of the music shop considered it safer in the Consular Residence than in his shop. The tall open windows led to a balcony, from which a garden stocked with the most exquisite tropical shrubs, blushing double hibiscus, fragrant frangipani, and show bougainvillea, ran down to the Brantas River. There the gardener had constructed a lotus bed to keep away the crocodiles (Surabaya means in old Javanese 'Where the shark meets the crocodile', being located at the mouth of the Brantas). He never quite succeeded in eliminating the snakes, which would nest under the stones for coolness, and a sharp eye had to be kept on John, who was then only two and delighted in turning over the stones to watch the writhing mass of young vipers underneath. Fortunately, we had a very attentive and energetic nanny, and snakes were much quicker at getting away than we are, provided they have an escape route.

A row of shacks, or godowns, housing the kitchen and storerooms formed the boundry between us and my Dutch neighbour, and here shortly after our arrival we encountered our first white ants attacking the soft-wood drinks crates. As I went into the storeroom, I was met with a high-pitched hum as a seething mass of white ant stripped the wood and even the labels from the bottles. They quickly devour clothes, hats, and any soft wood, leaving behind only skeletons of the inedible. Furniture has to

be protected against their ravages by placing it on the chocks of hard wood such as teak or mahogany, and of course the casing and felts of pianos destined for the tropics must be poised against the marauders. Following the advice of our Chinese administration office, we poured kerosene round our stores, and for a while had some peace. But after a fortnight or so they were back in strength. All we had done was to drive them into our Dutch neighbour's adjoining godown, and he had applied the same kerosene remedy. At last we decided to dig out the queen ant, the only way of getting rid of the scourge. To do so I am afraid we had to demolish the garden and dig down several feet to reach the nest!

Fortunately the snakes and white ant, the sharks and the mosquitoes were the troublesome exceptions to a very happy life surrounded by great natural beauty and among a friendly, soft-spoken people. One of our greatest assets was the team of devoted servants numbering not two or three, the norm for the Arab world, but three or four times that number! This derives from the traditional Indian way, whereby one servant does one job and will not even temporarily do that of another. If our head servant/waiter dropped something, he would not stoop to pick it up; that was the duty of the houseboy. And so on with the cooking, cleaning, washing up and laundry (an important duty because of the frequent changes of clothing). It was quite a family supporting many dependants, and unlike the fractious Middle East, living in the perfect harmony with each other, and with us, enjoined by the Hindu background. We grew very fond of them, and would have been loth to see any of them go, even if at times I wondered how many mouths we were feeding.

Although the religion in East Java is Islam, Hindu influences are very strong and such relics of Hindu civilisation as the great Borobudur temple are counted among their proudest treasures. The two strains are inextricably mixed up, and it was not an uncommon occurrence for us to see devout Indonesians, wearing tarbushes and burning incense and candles, reciting their Koran in front of the remains of a Hindu temple! To them Islam is their own personal religion, without the political overtones of the Arab variety, to be practiced in the intimacy of the home or the mosque. Together with the tolerance learnt from Hinduism it makes them the gentle compassionate people they normally are.

The wives of the officials, many of them related to the Court of the Sultan of Djokdjakarta, were particularly close to Henrietta, and as the friendship grew would consult her about their personal or family problems. They were conscious about their colour, and would from time to time ask her whether Mrs So and So was not darker than they were. It was a serious problem, for even a short exposure to the sun would make them darker. Hence the chalk or ochre with which peasant women obliged to work outdoors cover their faces, and the insistence with which one Indonesian lady later visiting us in Cairo begged us to take her quickly away from the sun beating down on the Pyramids to the deep shade of the tulip trees at the Gezirah Club, even if that meant watching an incomprehensible game of cricket. They dreaded most of all the thought that their husbands might one day take a second wife. Unlike the Arabs, it was the exception rather than the rule for the Indonesian to do so, but when he did, it sent a shudder through Henrietta’s group. They would gather around to show their

sympathy for the tearful, disconsolate first wife, and consult Henrietta how best to keep their beauty and line, and how to retain their husbands' affections.

As might be expected in a country so exposed to the dangers of the unknown and the violent manifestations of nature, Indonesia is rich in legend trying to explain away in their own simple terms the frightening phenomena, for instance how the great volcano Bromo came into being. Bromo fell in love with the lovely volcano Ardjuno next door, and asked her father for her hand in marriage. He agreed, provided that by dawn on the seventh day he had built a causeway from the mountain to the sea. Bromo was overjoyed, and returning home created and created, until towards dawn on the seventh day he was on the point of completing the causeway, when Ardjuno's father, realising that the work would be completed on time, rushed to the hen-house and pinched the cock, so that he crowed before the dawn. Thus thwarted, Bromo gave vent to his fury, and for ages threw out his molten rock and lava until all the surrounding countryside was obliterated. In another legend, the Goddess of the South Sea is jealous of anyone wearing green, and snatches them away from their loved ones. It was told to us in all seriousness one day when an American colleague bathing in the Indian Ocean had been overwhelmed by a mountainous roller and swept out to sea. His body was never recovered; but he had been wearing green bathing trunks.

They are a gifted race both for their art and their music and dance. The shadow theatre, weird waxed paper effigies of characters in Hindu legend, manipulated from below on two sticks and performing behind an illuminated screen, provided much diversion and amusement at fairs and parties. Both Java and Bali have a long tradition of accomplished wood carving, creating life-like dancing girls, busts of maidens and

warriors, long-boats, rice birds, and a host of other subjects all worked in the hardest woods such as mahogany, teak, or the local sawo. But classical dancing, to the haunting strains of gamelan music, is their greatest passion, slow and stylised in Java, but quicker and more vivacious in Bali.

The chance of a dancing session, usually performed by little girls of ten or so, was never missed, and in Bali there would be a dance somewhere every night, for a birth, a wedding ceremony or a funeral, or just for the love of it. The drivers of the Den Pasar Hotel's primitive horse-drawn buggies, which were made to take the rough roads but not for the passengers' comfort, would always swear that the dance that night was no more than ten minutes' ride away. We would be lucky if it took not more than an hour, but it was worth the discomfort to see the fresh, exuberant movements of the village girls, often performing on nothing more than the dusty ground of the village square or communal hut. And once more we would come across that love and compassion enjoined on them by their religion and traditions, as the older women watching the spectacle gathered to their bosoms and comforted the orphans of the village.

A clear limpid sky, placid blue sea, sharp light, bright colours, and above all a warm, friendly and artistic people. What more could the Belgian painter Meyrier have wanted, when years ago he came to the paradise garden of Bali, married a beautiful Balinese dancer, and settled down to live on the beach? We called on him on one of our visits, at a time when the beaches, of the purest white sand, were deserted, and his was the only dwelling in sight. The guest bedroom was not in the house, but set on the sands themselves, a wooden structure rather like a bandstand, elevated a few feet and

roofed over for protection against the morning rains, but otherwise open to the sea breezes on all four sides. We visited Bali three times, each time for an official reason such as the inauguration of a new Governor. They were memorable occasions, from the momentous flight over Bromo and three other extinct volcanoes now holding lakes coloured blue, green and white from the chemical content of the ash, to the ceremonies themselves, performed by Brahmin priests to the light of innumerable tallow candles set in coconut shells around the garden paths, and to the Balinese dancing depicting well-known passages from the Ramayana. Bali was indeed very lovely and restful, and the people very gentle and easy-going, but we would never have chosen to retire there. For over everything hangs a veil of timelessness alien to the Westerner, who cannot resign himself to the all-pervading feeling of being of no account in the cosmic scheme of things. Decay and a fatalistic acceptance of life and death are the overwhelming impressions left by visits to the countless delapidated rice temples or the shrines dedicated to the sacred monkeys, or to a cremation, to watch the funeral pyre sink gradually to the ashes which are then scattered over the Indian Ocean.

We were always glad when Saturday morning came round and we could make for the open air, exploring new horizons on our picnics or visiting friends on the plantations and at Tretes, the nearest hill station high up on the slopes of Ardjuno. The car engine would be at boiling point when we got there, but it was very refreshing in the pure, cool air, and there was much gaiety as the guests relaxed over drinks or a meal. Our favourite picnic spot was, however, at Pasir Putih, or white sands, on the shore of the Java Sea, a good 100 miles away, but we thought nothing of such distances. We would share its lovely stretches with one or two local fishermen and a

host of chattering monkeys, who would come down and perch on the car bonnet in search of titbits. Bananas were their preferred morsel, which they would quickly stuff down, then throw the skins at each other, and at us if we gave them half a chance. The devil in them simply drives them on to throw any implement that might be to hand, and while banana skins were harmless enough, it became serious business when on some plantations they would from the safety of their dens high up in the palm trees hurl coconuts at us, with deadly accuracy, great force, and a trajectory with no bend, then shriek with laughter as the coconuts burst open on the road. The only safe way to get past them was out of the range of missiles' trajectory. The fishermen at Pasir Putih would assure us that it was safe from sharks, but we never wholly trusted the bathing and stayed in the shallows, having on several occasions seen the sharks' triangular dorsal fins only yards out.

Above all we loved the cool, quiet solitude of Bromo, where we would stay at the secluded villa of a Dutch friend, set high up on the mountainside, in a clearing of the dense emerald jungle, and disturbed only by the wheeling birds of prey and the warthogs in the undergrowth. From the balcony we could see over the treetops to the distant silver sea, and the volcano towered above us, luckily far enough away to be safe. It was still a stiff climb to the crater, first by jeep, then, when the jeep could go no further, by spirited mules to the very lip of the extinct part of the huge crater, now a sand sea a mile or two across, out of which rises a smaller active cone throwing out molten rock and volcanic ash. The olive complexion and long twirled moustache of the muleteer so fascinated Henrietta that she had to photograph him. Once on the fiery mule her normal equanimity deserted her, and she forgot to wind the camera round. On

arrival at the edge of the sand sea, she was so overcome by the breath-taking view that she had to take a photo of it, horizontal-wise. The resulting photograph was startling, and so unique that it has been purloined long ago – a fine figure of a man prostrate in a newly excavated sand, and so well preserved by the climate and high altitude that even his moustache and facial expression were still intact.

We were determined to look inside the active volcano. From its base we were obliged to climb its steep slopes on foot, ankle-deep in black volcanic ash so fertile that plants were already growing on its outer edge, although the rest closely resembled a raging inferno. The scene from the top down into the volcano was awe-inspiring. An almost perpendicular shaft descending some 2000 feet to the boiling cauldron of multi-coloured lava below, from which intermittent upheavals would hurl up rock and ash to mingle with the sulphurous fumes. We could now understand, in the volcano's unharnessed power, the origin of the Bromo legend, and why sacrifices of goats are still made to assuage it at the summer solstice, an extremely cold dawn ceremony requiring winter clothing, though near the Equator, because of the height.

Longer excursions to our coffee and rubber estates became necessary from time to time to fend off the threat to their security, or when the Ambassador and his wife made a tour of my area. The planters were mainly Dutch who had been there for years and were used to the loneliness and the difficulties of controlling the plantation workers. They were on the whole happy with their lot and made themselves as comfortable as the situation would allow. Most of them had swimming pools in their grounds, and at the higher altitudes streams diverted through heated ducts to provide hot baths, a luxury we did not have even in our Surabaya mansion. The race of some

of these mountain streams can be so boisterous that the water in high altitude swimming pools changes itself within the half hour. Too cold to enjoy for long. In general, the rubber plantations at sea level struck us as rather dull, and certainly too hot and steamy for comfort, whereas the coffee estates at 4000 feet or more were fresh and invigorating. The coffee bushes in full bloom ranging over the hills as far as the eye could see were a most impressive sight, even if our heads reeled from the overpowering scent of the coffee blossom.

The outlying areas, and particularly Indonesian Borneo, were very unsettled, and required a visit when the rampokking came too close to our estates. In Borneo the Malay and Bandjar races had at independence expected to be allowed to run their own affairs, and when the Javanese took over, hated their new overlords at least as much as they had the colonial power. All too often they would go berserk, and massacre every Javanese man, woman and child on the Government estates, which sometimes adjoined our own. It was high time to go out and make our presence felt, Henrietta accompanying me because some areas had strong matriarchal traditions. We would arrive in Borneo's rat-infested, mosquito-ridden swamp of a capital Bandjermasin to find that the Governor and his security forces were confined to the town and had left the remote estates to fend for themselves. I would convey to him Her Majesty's grateful thanks for all he had done to protect British life and property, and this was enough to ensure that within hours a strong guard of police or army were posted to each estate.

We had the good fortune during one of our visits to call on the Bupati (Resident) of the diamond mining area Martapura, where we had some estates. He was

a tall well-made figure with a military bearing and the olive complexion Henrietta seemed to find so attractive, and, unusually, had two wives. It was touching to see how well they got on with each other; as we arrived in the drive, we could see the young wife pushing the older one forward to be the first to receive us. They sat in on the conversations, but maintained a discreet silence in the presence of their lord, until we got up to go, the Resident strapped pistols and cutlass to his belt, and I asked the ladies if they did not want to accompany us, at least to the diamond mines. They jumped at the chance, although he remonstrated, rushed to put on their make-up, and returned with their faces heavily ochred against the dreaded sun. The Resident pretended that his objections were due to the hazard of the journey to the mines, but his real reason for not wanting them with us became apparent when we got there. Large high-carat diamonds were being rough-cut and carelessly tossed into Palmboom margarine tins as if they were marbles, and his wives had a field day, clamouring for this or that scintillating gem. Grudgingly he gave in and let them choose the diamonds they had set their hearts on, for although Martapura is geared to the New York and Amsterdam markets and we ourselves would have been obliged to pay their full international market value, his ladies could have their pick because the diamonds were staying in the country. We had to be content, I'm sorry to say, with aquamarines, albeit of a high quality. Later that week the Governor held the National Day celebrations in Bandjermasin's central hall. Some 600 guests were foregathered, but still the Resident had not arrived. Two guests whispered to us "Wait until he comes, and you will see something. He has two wives, you know". Clearly the Resident was in the habit of arriving late and clearly this was to ensure a full house for the spectacle. At last he

made his entry, followed by his spouses, and the whole concourse gasped, and parted, as neatly as the parting of the Red Sea, to let them pass. His ladies were covered with diamonds, in tiaras, necklaces, broaches and rings, which flashed and glittered as they moved through the sun's rays, until we had to turn away from a sight too dazzling to behold.

We felt great sympathy for the Dutch, who had done so much for the country over the long period of their rule, and who found it hard to relinquish their most precious possession. Perhaps they clung to power too long, and when we were there, it was fashionable to decry what they had done for Indonesia. But they had built excellent townships and roads, hospitals and schools, and had effectively managed the banking, commerce and export business, mining, shipping and oil industry. They therefore had every reason to expect that they would be welcome back when peace came, and had while in the prisoner of war camps planned in detail the new colonial administration which would take over, even designating the officials for every post from Governor-General downwards. The war had, however, changed all that, and had fostered a fervent nationalism which was in no mood to acknowledge the Dutch legacy, nor to accept anything short of full independence. An ugly situation developed throughout Java, and in Surabaya one of our Indian Divisions had to intervene to quell the uprising. The situation had quietened down by the time we arrived, but the hatred still smouldered on towards the surprisingly large number of Dutch who had stayed on in the key posts. The animosity was strongest against the métisses, the product of the policy of encouraging intermarriage, whom the Indonesians found it impossible to accept as part of their race. Most of them eventually emigrated to Holland, where at

least they had a better chance of being accepted into the community. The Chinese were also much disliked, and it was common knowledge that in the drive against the Communists in East Java in the late 1940's, many old scores had been settled against the Chinese shopkeepers. Worst of all, the Javanese replacing the Dutch throughout Indonesia disported themselves as the master race and incurred the odium of the other races, who had wanted to rule themselves, and resenting the intruder rose up in sporadic revolt, often running amok and killing every Javanese in sight. Throughout this chaotic period, it was my constant preoccupation to defend our own subjects and their property. I had only indirect methods of doing so, by exerting pressure and influence on the local authorities, or when necessary showing a presence, but happily no one was harmed nor damage done to British property.

When the situation became more stable, it was only natural that the Indonesians should turn again to the Dutch for help in running their economy, and to stay on in an advisory capacity in business and in the schools and hospitals. The Indonesians were happy to have them back in this capacity, to provide expert advice and guidance to the many cadres whom they had trained over the years and who were now able to take over in all walks of life. Relations returned to normal, and the Indonesians reassumed their mantle as one of the kindest, most gentle and most likeable peoples in the world.

THE YEMEN 1957

The Yemen, to which I was posted immediately after the Suez catastrophe, was a very different part of the Arab world from the Egypt of Nasser. Cut off from the mainstream of Middle Eastern affairs and protected in its mediaeval fastnesses by the rugged terrain, it was to most foreigners a closed book, which for those fortunate enough to enter it, opened up into a remote, pastoral mediaeval kingdom. The mountains of this southern tip of Arabia, which catch the monsoon rains from the Indian Ocean, give it a more moderate climate and greener valleys and terraced hillsides, than its more barren Northern neighbour Saudi Arabia. Careful terracing and channelling preserves the soil and the rainwater, producing abundant crops on fertile land. The main crop should be coffee, for which the height and the climate is ideal and to the particular brand of which Moka gave its name, but unfortunately for the physical and financial wellbeing the Yemenis prefer to cultivate the spindle tree, whose tender shoots make up the narcotic qat, a debilitating drug which is much appreciated for the visions of grandeur it induces.

In 1957 the country was important, both strategically for its control of Bab el Mandeb, the straits commanding entrance to the Red Sea from the Indian Ocean, and politically because of the Imam Ahmed's irredentist claims to Aden, now greatly inflated through its notion that after the Suez debacle Great Britain was no longer powerful enough to resist him. The border with the Aden Protectorate was in uproar as rival tribes fought and skirmished for this or that part of barren wasteland or useless crag. Dissidence was fomented in Aden and the Protectorate albeit in a somewhat

desultory fashion, and when the going became too hot for them, the dissidents would be brought up to the Southern capital Taiz, to add colour to the scene as they strolled around in their gay turbans and short girly skirts reminiscent of Evzone warriors, and to put up a show of strength before me as H.M.'s Representative by playing football all day long just outside the Legation gate. Only they weakened the intended impact every time the children or one of us went out by insisting on our taking part in the game.

The perpetual feuding was, however, only one of the Imam's preoccupations. Ahmed was the all-powerful potentate of a mediaeval kingdom hardly touched since Mohamed's day; he was his own Prime Minister, Foreign Minister and Treasurer, and the officials who did the real work were merely his deputies. His over-riding concerns were keeping his mountain fiefdom the closed book it had always been, and trying to guarantee the continuity of the dynasty, which was being badly shaken by the refusal of the Zaidi tribal chiefs, led by the imposing and redoubtable Naib of Ibb, to accept the Crown Prince Badr as heir to the throne. None of this was immediately apparent as we entered his realm, and it seemed to us that the Imam had such an iron grip on his country that he would be able to quell any opposition. All too soon his hold was to be shaken to its foundation, as the ferment of the Egyptian revolution swept through the Arab world, even to the closed society of the Yemen, introducing new and heady Arab socialist and liberalist ideas, subverting some of the Imam's most influential advisers, and introducing as its inevitable accompaniment a strong Soviet influence, which took advantage of the backwardness and troubled state of relations with Aden and the Protectorate to insinuate itself, the Egyptians acting as handmaiden, and foster a Palace

revolution as close to the Imam as the Crown Prince himself; an amiable and likeable personality, but far too naive to see through the machinations of the pro-Egyptian, pro-Soviet faction. An added reason for this point blank refusal of the conservative Northern tribes to accept him.

The daunting natural barriers which make the Yemen so remote hit us as soon as we had left Aden and the last row of wooden shacks, all selling qat, before the everlasting sand and boulders of the Protectorate took over. It was only 125 miles from Aden to Taiz, but it generally took us 12 hours to negotiate in the Land Rover, and only then if we had crossed the deepest ford by 2 p.m., when the morning's rains high up in the mountains would come gushing down and transform it for several hours into a swirling, impassable torrent. Stunted tamarisks and the odd chameleon were the only relief from the sand drifts and rock-strewn river beds, and only after several hours of purgatory in the searing heat and moonlike landscape did respite come as we began to climb up the cooler valleys and rough mountain tracks in the Yemen itself. Then the occasional gazelle leaping across our path, or the man-shy troops of baboons, chattering their curses at being disturbed, and shepherding their young to the safety of the hills, would herald our approach to the higher, cooler altitudes. The Land Rover driver had to be a very devout Moslem to endure, year in and year out, that monthly return journey. Having made the pilgrimage to Mecca, our driver Haj Mahmoud Ali Seif was just such an intrepid, imperturbable character, without fear for the many unknown hazards on the way. He simply followed what the Koran ordained, and wherever we might be at the six prescribed prayer times of the day, stopped the Land Rover, rolled out his prayer mat, and facing North to Mecca knelt in prayer to Allah.

Thus fortified, he would accept, unquestioningly, any tribulations that particular journey might throw up. He also had a wife in Aden as well as in Taiz, which gave him as good an incentive as any for putting up uncomplainingly with the intervening discomfort.

The sun was setting as on that first journey we reached the track's highest point, and rounding the bend began the descent into Taiz. The view was breath-taking; the sun's dying rays were throwing their last golden glow on the white walls of the tall mansions outside the city ramparts, and bringing them out in sharp relief against the green terraced foothills of Djebel Sabr and the inky black raincloud capping its summit. The Yemenis are just renowned for the skill and fine workmanship of the masons, and the imposing houses we were now seeing, some six or eight storeys high and built with hand-cut blocks of multi-coloured stone, bore witness to the high standard of their craftsmanship. The Yemenis must need all the floors, for they love to build themselves these lofty dwellings, often perched precariously on a mountain crag or the tip of a steep precipice, no doubt for reasons of security. The upper floors are reserved for the women, the ground floor for the menfolks' afternoon sessions devoted to chewing qat and smoking the hubble-bubble pipe. This is where I did most of my negotiation, with the Foreign Minister (Deputy) or the Crown Prince, a fascinating but disconcerting experience at the best of times as they chewed their qat and at crucial moments transferred their gobstoppers of the stuff from one cheek to the other.

The influence of the Jewish craftsmen from the closely-knit Jewish community, which once lived there before the Imam agreed to send them to Israel, is perpetuated in

the ubiquitous motif of the Star of David, which the Yemens' craftsmen continue to this day to incorporate in the designs of the fanlights over the doors and windows.

We dropped down through these arresting outskirts, entered the gates of a walled enclosure, and had arrived at the Legation which was to be our home until the Imam decided otherwise. Only two storeys high, it had been solidly built of the same hand-hewn stone blocks, and looked very attractive as the sun picked out the distinctive colouring of each stone. The living quarters were on the upper floor, and from there and the flat roof we had a magnificent panorama spread out before us: the white houses and minarets of the walled town nestling at the foot of Djebel Sabr, the impressive homes of leading personalities climbing up the steep slopes, and to the Northwest the range of rugged precipitous cliffs reaching out to the far distance and pointing the way to Mecca, which had millions of years ago been part of the rift out of which the Red Sea was formed. Our devout servants could not have wished for a more inspiring sight as each evening at sunset they rolled out their mats on the raised parapet of the artesian well and facing the direction of the rift and Mecca, said their prayers to Allah.

Even the rocky garden of the Legation compound was terraced because of the incline on which it was built. Euphorbias and poinsettias were growing there in wild profusion, and our first gardening chore was to provide as much colour as possible from the seeds of sun-loving plants we had brought with us. The zinnias, cosmos, arctotis and gerberas loved the climate and merged well with the exotic sub-tropical shrubs we imported from Kenya – plumbago, brunfelsia, acacias, gold mohar and solanums. It was a major feat timing their delivery from Nairobi and planting them

before they could dry out. The nursery supplying them required a ten day quarantine period before lifting and despatch, the RAF courier service from Aden to Nairobi and back flew twice a month, and we took the courier to Aden once a month. But at last they had arrived in Aden, and our good-natured and lovable assistant Ken Oldfield, whose untimely death we still mourn, set off to bring them back. After all that planning, there was the inevitable hitch. He could not find the plants anywhere. I swore they had arrived, and asked him to look again. At last he found them – behind the piano in the RAF officers' mess! The nursery had bundled them together in a large round ball with elongated stem entirely covered in sacking, and someone had thought they were a new type of African banjo or bass for the band, and stuck them in a corner where he presumed they belonged. Even so, over half survived to give us lasting pleasure. To make a lawn, we dug out clumps of creeping grass from the wadi and set them just below the would-be lawn's surface. At first the effect was of stepping stones, then of a huge spider's web, but very soon with the copious rains the clumps shot out more and more spiky tentacles, until the ragged appearance was replaced by a lush, springy carpet, which, however, required frequent rolling to keep the clumps at an even level. Our roller was an oil drum filled with water, which we pushed up and down, with difficulty, envying all the time the cricketers at home who had it so much easier.

There was a sprinkling of Europeans there whose friendship we greatly valued, and with whom we shared our leisure hours in mutual entertainment. The Italian doctors at the Government hospital were the most numerous contingent, some 30 in all. They were overworked with all the cases on their hands, Bilharzia for instance was

endemic, spread through the infected water troughs blocking the doors of the mosques, through which the faithful had to pass to wash their bare feet before saying their prayers. The doctors were particularly overstretched whenever there was an outbreak of smallpox or other virulent disease. But they found time to entertain us back in their own homes, and delighted in regaling us with all the varied pasta dishes imaginable, washed down with delightful Italian wines, the likes of which we had never dreamed existed. Amadeo Gillet, the Italian Chargé, was a staunch friend and ally, particularly when the going got very rough for us, for he had made a friend of the Imam during the war by his exploits in escaping from the British in Eritrea and fleeing to the Yemen by Arab dhow, disguised as an Arab. A handful of Swedish pilots and a few German telephone engineers from Siemens made up the European representation. The latter had been given the almost impossible task of installing an automatic telephone system of some 250 subscribers. The trouble was that they never got to the end of their travail, for they had to do the manual labour themselves, and just as they seemed to have finished, the Imam, obsessed with his security needs, would demand yet another long and arduous extension up the mountain side, to yet one more loyal chieftain. Reliable reports have it, apocryphal as it may sound, that when the exchange was finally completed, it was immediately put out of action by a wag who rang up as many subscribers as he could, to say that their wives were deceiving them. The exchange is alleged to have been jammed with all the irate recriminations which flew back and forth, and just gave up the unequal struggle. No doubt the ladies of the harem were closely guarded by the little boys who had not yet reached puberty, and who lived in the harem, where they acted as scouts for the husbands. But if any interloper had

wished to try it out, the disguise was there ready-made in the disfiguring black or brown cowl and tent-like cloak with which the women covered their faces and bodies down to their ankles, and in the stout shoes worn indiscriminately by men and women alike as protection against the sharp flints strewn all over the terrain.

The greater part of Taiz is the walled city, a reminder of one-time marauders and wild animals, and the gates are still closed and barricaded at nightfall. We would go there only when we must to buy in provisions, for the narrow alleyways would be teeming with beturbaned menfolk who did not miss the chance to catch a glimpse of the blonde, unveiled English woman, who had the temerity to venture into the suq to help the cook choose the best cuts of fly-covered meat, a thing their own women, veiled in the deepest purdah, would never do. But we were intrigued by all the unfamiliar sights and sounds, and loved the freedom of being able to move about without let or hindrance.

The market-place in Taiz was a staging post between Aden and Mecca for the many faithful from Pakistan, Malaysia and Indonesia who made the pilgrimage overland, a gruelling, thirsty form of self-torture from which some would never return. Before attempting the long stage across the burning Tihama Desert, the camel drivers would make sure their camels could survive, and have enough water in their humps for any emergency, by force-feeding them, that is stuffing large bundles of fodder down their unwilling gullets. I can still hear the sound of their belching and raucous bellows as they protested against the indignity.

Manacled prisoners would be let loose in the daytime and left free to wander about and talk to the passers-by, presumably as a deterrent to other would-be

evildoers. With ankles chained together, they could not have got far, and were herded back to prison at nightfall.

The savage punishments of Islamic law were rigorously applied, and an execution would be the occasion of a public holiday. The spectators would flock to witness it, some taking their sons with them, perhaps to be dipped in the blood of the victim to discourage any propensity to crime. Fortunately a rare event, it would be carried out by the sword, on the football field, in front of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and for years we had a grim memento of one such occasion. The son of our Palestinian interpreter Selim was a crack photographer, and he had contrived to take a photograph from behind the executioner just as the sword had swung through, the head was falling, and the body beginning to topple. Mr Selim was so proud of his son's photographic prowess that he decided he would make it up into a Christmas card for his dear friends the Kemps, now declared persona non grata and in a new post as remote and unpredictable as the Yemen. The card did reach us for Christmas, a sheet of official blue paper folded neatly into two with the photograph stuck on the front and the laconic greetings inside: "To my dear friends Mr and Mrs Kemp, a Merry Christmas and Happy New Year". With typical Arab insensitivity, he had not realised the incongruity of the message nor of sending it to us at that particular time. But it was indeed a brilliant piece of photography, and so unique that it has disappeared long ago, just like Henrietta's photograph of the Indonesian muleteer buried in the sand sea of Bromo. Only this time we were not sorry to lose so gruesome a reminder of the severity of Islamic Law.

We were free to move about as we wished, only there would usually be one of the Imam's bodyguard hovering nearby, recognisable for his round black turban and short blue skirt drawn tight at the waist by the wide embroidered belt holding the broad-bladed ceremonial dagger, or djembia, which is worn almost as part of the national dress. We would pick wild gaillardias or red hot pokers, relax on the soft grassy banks of the wadis, practice archery in the shade of the tamarisk trees, or climb the low slopes of Djebel Sabr to admire the views, and also the skilful way in which the water had been channelled through the smoothly plastered conduits into the storage cisterns. Our leisure hours were fully occupied, but we needed a change from time to time, and did not then jib at the exhausting courier run to Aden, where we could cool off in the sea – but only in an area securely staked and fenced off against the sharks. Air trips to Sanaa eight thousand feet up were very welcome for the change to a reinvigorating coolness, and even cold and snow in winter. The high buildings which are the proud legacy of the Yemani mason are more numerous and closer together there, and with its many fine mosques make an imposing sight from the air. The open-stall bazaars exhibited all the familiar Oriental merchandise, bronze and silver trays, inlaid tables, ivory and so on, and the garden produce, above all the luscious grapes, were all the more succulent for being grown in the cooler climate. The Republican Government made Sanaa the capital when it came to power, which is perhaps a logical acknowledgement of the great influence of the Northern tribes and of the waning commercial importance of the links with Aden, now largely replaced by trade through the port of Hodeida. The Western Embassies are now more numerous, and hopefully find as much to occupy their leisure time as we did, especially if the new roads built by

the Russians and Chinese make possible a variety of excursions into the surrounding mountains.

The Imam Ahmed was a ruthless old tyrant; he had to be to run the country and keep the tribal chiefs under control. But there was also a kindly side to his nature. He showed compassion, for instance, when an English wife he loved fell ill and homesick, and out of her depth in the harem's intrigues, and finally agreed to let her go home to her family in Cardiff (where there is a large community of Yemeni émigrés). He also had a certain dry sense of humour. He would for instance reward anyone he thought had served him well with heavy bags of Maria Theresa dollars, those worthy, weighty crown pieces struck expressly to satisfy the Yemeni's love of tangible wealth, and the only currency in vogue in the Yemen in my time. Of course the beneficiaries of his munificence were much too overloaded for an air flight out, and would have needed more than one camel to take the bags out by road. And so they invariably ended up giving the hoard back to the Imam, with profuse thanks for the thought. I met him once when a Senior Foreign Office official came out to finalise Crown Prince Badr's state visit to Britain. He received us in a long night shirt and night cap, for all the world like the portrayals of Scrooge in the Christmas Carol, except that the shirt was gathered up round the waist by a bejewelled belt shot through with gold thread and holding the traditional ceremonial djembia, the hilt of which was also studded with gems. His warm hospitality gave the lie to any impression of his being a Scrooge at least on this occasion.

By the end of 1957 Egyptian and Soviet influence had gained a firm hold in influential court circles and among the urban élite. Egyptian revolutionary ideas,

broadcast over the air to the point of saturation, spread like wildfires among the upper classes, even to the ladies of the harem. Egyptians were brought in to replace Palestinian teachers and advisers, and both Crown Prince Badr and the Imam's brother Hasan courted Egyptian support for their rival claims to the succession. The Russians used two Arabic specialists, the Sultanovs father & son, from Azerbaijan, to gain favour with the Crown Prince, and Soviet tanks were assembled along with much other military equipment in the port of Hodeida for the unlikely purpose of deployment over impossible tank country against the Protectorate. Neither the Crown Prince nor the other leaders close to the newcomers seemed to realise how dangerous the situation was becoming. The Imam, however, was fully aware, and tried to halt the course of events by proposing to us a settlement of the conflict over Aden and the Protectorate similar to the status quo agreement which his father the Imam Yehia had made in 1934. Only this time he asked in return that the Crown Prince might make a State Visit to Britain, to boost his prestige among the tribal chieftains. The mission began well and showed every sign of being a success, but failed in the event through the intrigues of the opposing pro-Egyptian camp and the sudden intervention of the Russians with the offer of 50 million roubles worth of aid to build a road from Hodeida to Taiz[2]. Neither the prospect of a settlement with us over Aden nor the scale of American offers of aid at that time could match such massive aid, and it was left to the Chinese, then in open hostility to the Russians, to cap the Soviet offer with an aid programme of 60 million dollars to build a road from Hodeida to Sanaa. The Yemenis thus succeeded

[2] On the 25 January 1958, Zaidi tribesmen allegedly attempted to overthrow the Imam, the British became the scapegoat. Oliver Kemp, the British Consul, dejectedly wrote to London saying: "It now seems probably that the Imam will accept the Soviet loan and open a Soviet legation". London chimed in with the observation: "Whatever the truth about the origin of the plot the effect will be detrimental to the efforts of the US to establish any sort of a position in the Yemen" (R.C. Barret, The Greater Middle East and the Cold War: US Foreign Policy Under Eisenhower, p. 56).

in playing off the Chinese against the Russians, if not the Russians against the Americans.

I was declared persona non grata – then promptly invited on the Crown Prince's return to a banquet to celebrate his successes! We were sad to have to leave a country and people we had come to like so much, but the banquet, which I had been persuaded against my better judgement to attend, gave me the chance to sound a note of warning. The newly-appointed Soviet Chargé d'Affaires had been learning Arabic, and to show off his knowledge repeated to the Crown Prince a well-known alliterative Arabic proverb: "Al gar qabl ad dar" ("Choose your neighbour before your house"). The Soviet press was there in full flood with cameras clicking and light bulbs flashing everywhere. The opportunity was too good to be missed, and so I invented and equally alliterative phrase, and chipped in with: "Ay nam, wat taswir qabl at tazwir" ("Yes indeed, and photography before deception"). The whole concourse dissolved into laughter, and the little boy at the end of the table who was there to spy for the Imam slipped away and rushed off to his master to report what I had said. My warning was to prove all too prophetic.

On the death of the Imam in 1962, the Egyptians moved in to occupy the country and install a most unpopular regime, hated as much for its colonial rule as for its ubiquitous intelligence system. The Crown Prince fled to the Northern tribes and led them valiantly against the invaders and their puppet Sallal. The war dragged on for five years, but it was an unequal struggle in spite of the loyal support of Saudi Arabia. The new roads built with Soviet and Chinese aid enabled the Egyptians to move up their arms and equipment very quickly, and the fight took on the guise of a war

between a modern regular army and guerrillas. But at last the more moderate Republicans succeeded in ousting Sallal, and in 1968 signed a concordat with the Royalist supporters of the Crown Prince. Soviet influence remained until they backed a rebel leader who was crushed, and the Republicans turned against them. Since then they have returned to the conservative regime they are most familiar with, following their traditional ways of life, and maintaining a political balance between the Army, the powerful Northern tribes and the educated urban élite. There is no secret police, nor pressure to change their customs, such as removing the veil, for doctrinaire or ideological reasons. Freedom has returned to enable the traders and merchants to pursue their affairs without interference, and the ordinary Yemeni to live his simple life according to the tenets of his faith, and the customs and traditions he has inherited from his forefathers.

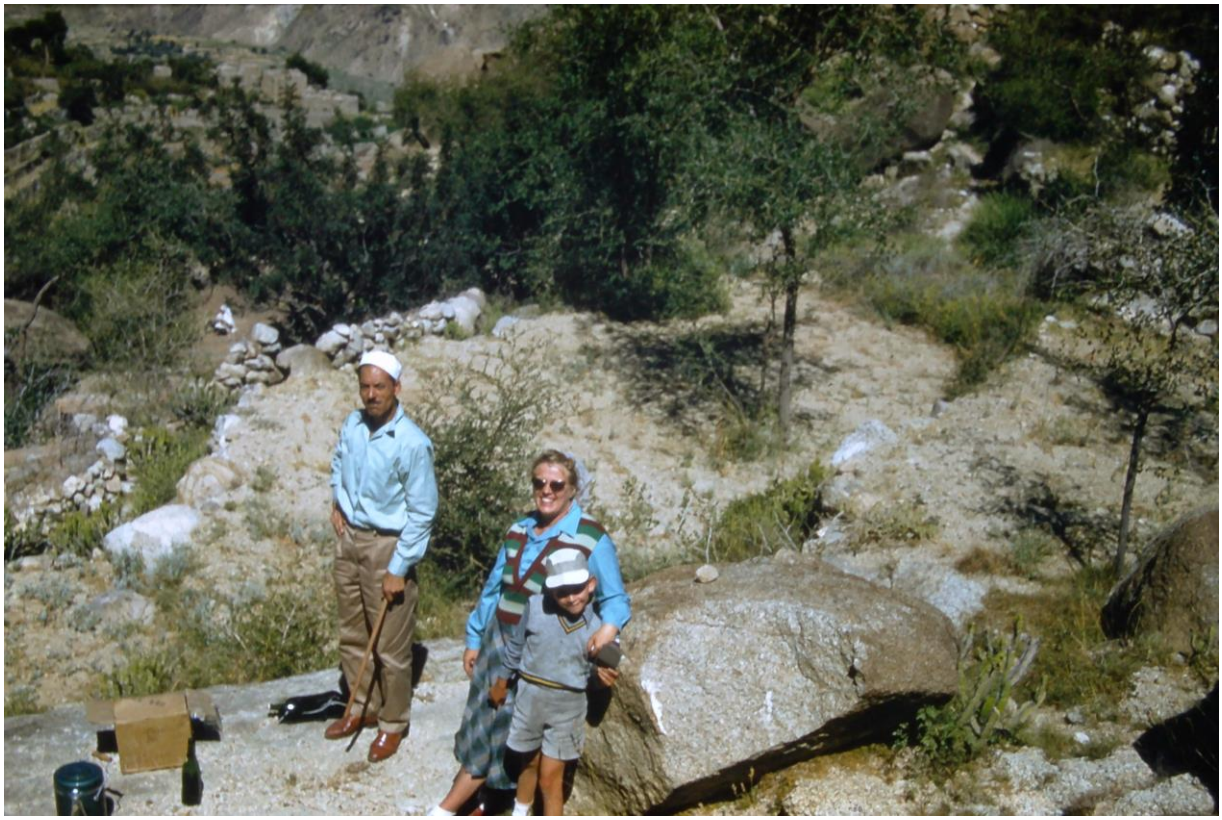
Yemen, 1957.

Example of Yemini stone masonry.

Terracing in the Yemen.

Medina, Yemen 1957.

Mudhaffa Mosque, Taiz, 1957.



Grounds of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Taiz 1957. Festivals and executions would take place in front the Ministry building.

John (age 7) and dog in Legation garden.

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Slopes of Djebel Sabr from Legation roof (processed Jan 58)

Mosques in the distance, Taiz.

Legation garden, Taiz, 1957.

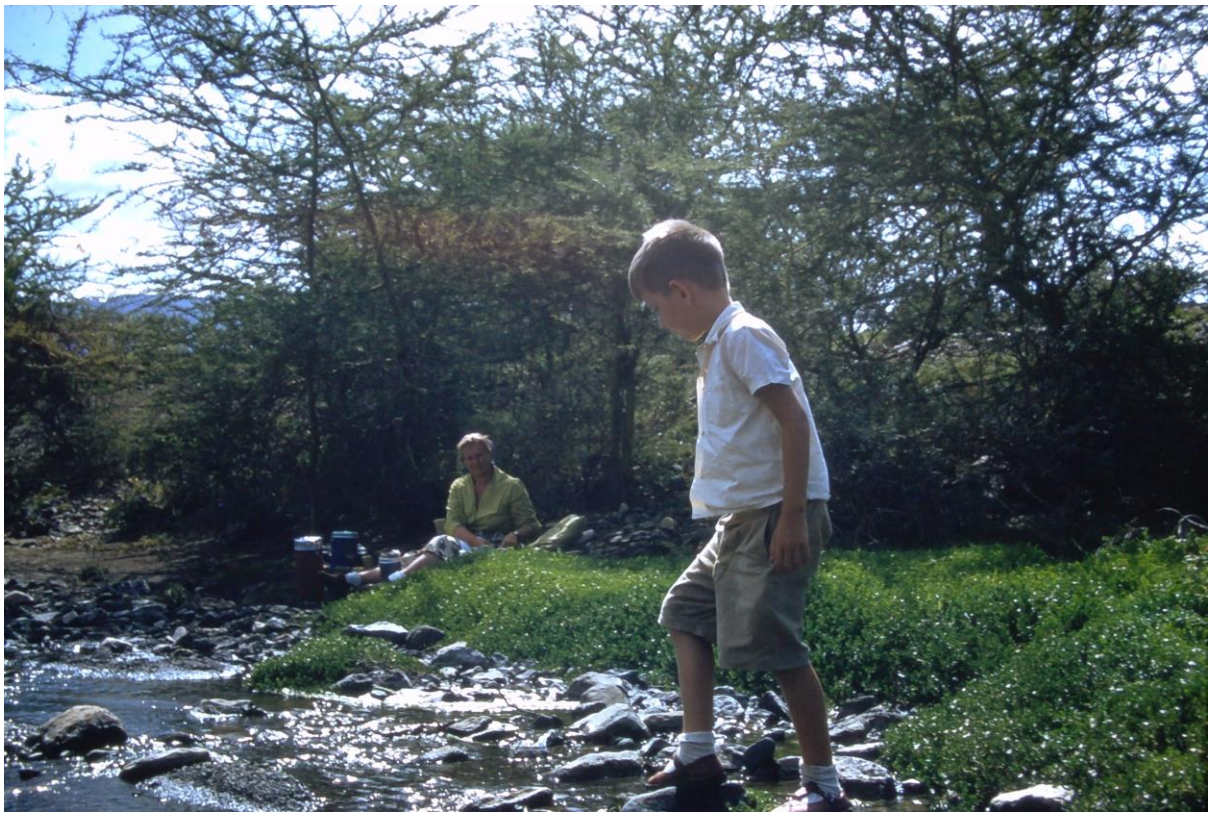
Yemen, 1957.

Sanaa, Yemen 1957.

Yemen, 1957.

Group photo in Legation garden, Taiz.

John and friends, Yemen 1957.



Oliver preparing garden in Yemen.

Legation and garden (Taiz, 1957). Red barrel used to roll the lawn and another example of stone masonry.

Legation garden and Oliver walking over the home-grown lawn.

Corn in Yemen.

Taiz mosques and citadel in the distance.

Citadel, Taiz, 1957.

Taiz 1957.

Festival 1957.

Sanaa, Yemen 1957.

John walking through the wild gaillardia.

Yeminis, probably near Sanaa 1957.

Water cistern, part of a water supply system.

Family photo, Yemen.

Henrietta in Legation garden, Taiz 1957.

LAOS 1959

Before the Vietnam War, Laos was known to the French as their Indochinese Shangri La, a peaceful retreat from the strident bustle of Saigon, where they could refresh themselves in the cool upland drift, among a simple, happy and uncomplicated people. It no doubt owed its reputation partly to the mountains and green valleys watered by rivulets, pools and the great Mekong River, but also to its remoteness from the mainstream of Indochina's economic and commercial life, and to the atmosphere of indolent wellbeing which Hinduism and Buddhism always seem to foster in their followers. For Hindu influences are strong here and in Cambodia, where the temple of Angkor Wat, that priceless monument to Hindu culture, now languishes amidst the chaos wrought by the Vietnamese invasion and the horror of bloody civil war. The Annamite chain was in history the watershed and natural barrier between the Hindu civilisation of these countries, and the Chinese culture on the Vietnamese side of the range.

The Laotians are Buddhists, and it is the time-honoured custom for their boys to serve and study at the pagodas for several years, under the hard discipline of the senior monks. They do no work, but spend the day from 4 a.m. onwards studying their scriptures, chanting and praying, while the local community feeds them. The monks at the temple near us used to parade at dawn past a group of kneeling local ladies, who would put into each monk's basket a small parcel of food so that at the end of the line they had enough food for the day. No words of greeting were exchanged, only a respectful inclination of the head to acknowledge the gift. Their religion has left its

strong mark on the people's character and bearing, for they are imbued with a happy acceptance of their lot, a tolerance and a compassion towards their fellow-men, which it would be hard to match in any other part of the world.

The King ruled from the Royal capital of Luang Prabang, a beautiful mediaeval township set high in the mountains above the Mekong, and remote enough to be hardly touched by modern civilisation. The King was benign and friendly, but so far removed from the running of the country as to be in effect a constitutional monarch. His elderly relative Prince Boun Oum ran the Southern provinces, in more feudal conditions, but the effective government, by princes of Royal family and high ranking families, was centred on Vientiane, a dusty unremarkable town just across the Mekong from North Thailand, relieved only by the presence of that river, its sandy shores, and treelined approaches.

All would have been well under this half feudalistic, half paternalistic regime, had Laos been left to its own devices. But Vietnam was already on fire and the whole of Indochina in ferment. The war in Vietnam was already spilling over into the North of Laos, which quickly fell under Communist control as far as the central plateau around the Plain of Jars. Fierce resistance was put up by the mountain tribes, which, so far as we know, even now smoulders on, in spite of repeated bombings and punitive expeditions. The Americans were represented in force as advisers throughout the country, and did all they could to stiffen the Government's resolve to resist the Communist encroachments. The leaders conformed to this all-pervasive influence, and occasionally the Americans would find a new strong man, who would be put forward as the real answer to the Communist threat, only to be proved incapable of stemming

the tide at a later date. Only Prince Souvanna Phouma, the neutralist Prime Minister supported by the French, tried against these American pressures to set up a government representing all shades of political opinion in the country. His fortunes fluctuated as he moved in and out of office, and his efforts were in any case doomed to failure as the confrontation grew between the American and Communist sides. On the one hand the right wing doing its best to shut out a Communist voice in the government, on the other the hard-line Pathet Lao led by Souvanna Phouma's half-brother Prince Souphannouvong, who with his Vietnamese wife contributed much, in spite of his princely origins, to the eventual fall of Laos to Vietnamese communism.

We were not at that time greatly troubled by the Communist threat. It was a shadowy but very real presence in the North and on the Southern borders with Vietnam. We could travel about reasonably freely, but always uneasily looking over our shoulders, in outlying areas not under Communist control. In Vientiane, life went on as if nothing were happening. We had a house on the main road out to the airport, a Mediterranean-style villa built directly on the ground, unlike most houses in the vicinity, which were wooden huts raised up on stilts, to provide cool air currents all round the house, a harbour for the cattle underneath the hut, and safety from snakes. We would envy the owners when the temperature and humidity soared, or when the odd snake came into the sitting-room out of the rain and took shelter beneath the easy chairs.

Once again we were blessed with good, loyal servants. The attractive cook Thi To and her husband with the improbable name of Vim To were, with their aunt Thi Ba who also served us, refugees from Hanoi, and kept themselves very much to

themselves and their ancestor worship. Especially when after a cocktail Thi Ba would mix all the alcoholic left-overs, to produce a horribly potent brew capable of driving away even the most malignant of evil spirits. Sot the sweeper and odd-job man was a wily Northern Thai peasant boy who made far more extra money than he earned with us, plying a pedicab on the streets of Vientiane, and Thai boxing at weekends in the villages just across the river. He only really came to us for the shelter and companionship; he was fond of John, then only 8, and taught him the art of Thai boxing, which uses the feet as much as the fists, with impressive resounding claps as the blow hits a particularly fleshy part of the buttocks. Great commotion was caused when later at his public school John was invited to box, and did so in the only way he knew how, with deft use of the feet as much as the fists. It was a heart-burning experience both for him and the gym master to unlearn what Sot had taught him, and to conform to Queensbury Rules.

The Mekong was a boon whenever we wanted to escape from the heat and the dust, for a short break on its breezy beach. We would make for a quiet place up-river, set up the picnic, hit a golf ball (thus laying in much bunker practice), and bathe, if the ever-changing currents were not too treacherous at the time. The men would sometimes retire a way off to bathe in the nude, to the accompaniment of loud, merry giggling from the Thai girls doing their washing and watching through the bushes on the other bank. Weekend picnics called for longer excursions, on precarious roads and rickety rafts, North to the rolling blue hills of Phou Khaw Kwai in Meo country. Like their fellow mountain tribesmen and the Black Thai race, they maintained a rugged aloofness and independence as they went about their simple, hard life of wood-cutting

and peasant husbandry. That is, until the Communists came and they rose up against them in ferocious resistance. Only intensive modern warfare, including napalm bombing, subdued them. And destroyed what had been a naturalist's paradise, remarkable in particular for the host of large tropical butterflies, of every conceivable species and colouring, which hovered over the surface of the pools. A profusion of orchids flourished at a lower level, at remote grottos and places of pilgrimage, where clusters of rare orchids would hang down from the rocks and crags, mostly untouched and guarded by the scorpions nestling in their roots, and by the many snakes in the brushwood, which only slithered away at the very last moment in front of our tread.

We saw a lot of the Americans, both from the Embassy and the various aid missions, and enjoyed their company and generous hospitality. They had most of the six pianos in Vientiane, and were only too happy to let me play on them. The rain on the corrugated iron roofs of their prefabricated houses would sometimes interfere with the tape recording, or even drown the music, and during the monsoon the snakes would glide in to seek shelter in the dark recesses, and curl up fascinated by the music. The geckos, with their ruby-red eyes and scaly emerald armour, would peer over the back of the upright pianos to see what had disturbed their slumbers, and on one occasion it seemed that a breakthrough in communication with the animal world had been achieved, when the little Rhesus monkey pet of an American friend leapt on my right knee and lay there spread-eagled, staring up at me with her soulful protruding eyes. The reason for her bliss was not, alas, the quality of my playing, but simply that with each up and down movement of the pedal her backside was scratching on the edge of the keyboard and getting rid of her fleas on me.

A break in Bangkok was necessary once in a while, to rest from the dry season's dust or from the hard political and material realities, and to adjust once more to the bigger dimensions of a sophisticated part-Westernised capital city. We would travel around for hours on its canals just to observe the scenes of domestic life being enacted on the balconies of the wooden shacks raised up on stilts above the lapping water. The vendors of food, clothing and other household needs would skilfully manoeuvre their boats up the "street" from one landing stage to another, and every kind of merchandise was traded from boat to boat. Many canals, or "Klongs", have since been filled in, which is no doubt better for hygiene, but less picturesque than the old-style waterways. We were irresistibly drawn to the Sunday morning market, set out under gaily coloured awnings, which subdued the direct sunlight, but caught the suffused lighting reflected from the dancing waves of the canals, and there admired and were tempted to buy, the exquisite tropical shrubs and plants on display. Tropical fish of every species and hue abounded in the adjoining aquarium, which again it was hard to resist, although it later proved impossible on the return night train to Vientiane to keep the water in the small aquarium from slopping over the brink, or the mosquito larvae, sold as an essential accompaniment to the fish by the sharp Thai trader, from hatching out and tormenting us all through the tropical night. For the evening entertainment of its guests, the Erawan Hotel would put on shows of Thai dancing, enacting famous passages from the Ramayana and closely resembling the dancing in Indonesia, more akin perhaps to the Balinese model because of its livelier movements. Above all we were drawn to the capital's many outstanding temples, a priceless treasury of Hindu art and culture, where devout Buddhist monks in saffron robes

would carry out their day-long prayer duties and minister to the heartaches of the bereaved or lonely pilgrims. The Temple of the Dawn has the most imposing site on the waterfront, but the Temple of the Emerald Buddha is perhaps the most beautiful for its proportions, its frescoes, statues and decorations, especially when the sunlight reflected from the pavement casts its indirect glow on the ceilings and walls.

The Laotians enjoyed their feast days in their simple, uninhibited way. Each temple would in turn stage a gala to make some money, and it was an outward and visible sign of the close relations between the monks and their flock to see how well the sacred and the profane mixed together. The booths and sideshows familiar to our fairs were rigged up around the pagoda's open spaces, and there would be several rings for the Thai boxing. But the star attraction never varied: a raised dance floor, on which the local girls condescended to dance with all comers – provided they were prepared to pay beforehand, for about two minutes' dancing time, the local equivalent of 10 cents a dance. Water was always a precious commodity, especially just before the monsoon broke, when the Mekong was reduced to a trickle and the women had to trek far out into the river bed to do the washing and collect their pails of water. That was the ideal moment to hold the Water Festival, and woe betide anyone who ventured out to watch, for young men on trucks, carts and anything that moved would from large containers drench as many passers-by as they could, hoping no doubt by such prodigality to provoke the water gods into an early delivery of the monsoon rains.

Fertility also preoccupied them, and the purpose of the Fertility Festival was to give thanks for past blessings, to stimulate the imagination, and to provide an occasion for the young ladies to meet their braves. As they sat tending their parents' stalls set

out on the roadside, dressed up in their Sunday best, the young men who were attracted to them would come up and sit beside them, helping to sell their wares and thus indicating to the parents their serious intentions. The highlight of the Festival was the yacht race. Huge phallic symbols had been painted on the sails, and the objective seems to have been less to win the race than to match a male with a female sail. The Mekong's breezes provided the necessary agitated movement as the one sail intertwined with the other.

The greatest of all the festivals was, however, the That Luang Festival, the annual national jamboree in front of the golden-spired pagoda of that name attended by the King and the whole diplomatic corps. The usual booths and sideshows were there, but the proceedings were greatly enlivened by a mammoth kind of hockey match called Tiki, between some 40 members of the King's bodyguard, in their Lincoln green or vermilion uniforms, and a similar number recruited from the populace. Blows were aimed as much at the opponents' shins as at the ball, as was to be expected in the meléé of 80 players, and it was the unchangeable tradition that the bodyguard should always lose out to the townsfolk. Each diplomatic mission was called upon to contribute to the festivities, usually in the form of a display stand. In addition, we made a spectacular contribution by arranging for a Scottish pipe band, followed the next year by the band of the Cheshires, to fly up for the ceremony from Singapore. It was one of our proudest moments when at 10 a.m. sharp on the first day, just as the band had deployed before the King, RAF fighters flew past in salute, timed to the second in spite of the long flight from Singapore. The King would not take his eyes off the players, for bagpipes are also played by the North Laotian tribes, and long parades

were held in the morning and late afternoon on both days. No more memorable nor colourful a sight could be imagined than the kilted bandsmen beating a haunting Retreat beneath the golden pinnacle of the pagoda, and merging gradually with the crowd and the monks as the setting sun illumined with its glow the golden spire, the saffron robes and the tartan colours of the band. An awe-inspired hush descended on the many thousands present, followed as the band left the parade ground by round after round of delighted applause.

In spite of the clouds of war over Vietnam, the communist infiltration along the Ho Chi Minh trail and into the Northern and Southern provinces, the political upheavals and the looming disaster, we spent a happy time in Laos among its gentle, uncomplicated people, and we would like to think that under the Communist dictatorship the ordinary people and monks can still pursue their simple desires and aspirations with the minimum of interference. Sadly, the steady influx of refugees into Thailand indicates that the opposite is true, and that it will be hard, if not impossible, for the Laotian to cling to his traditional untrammelled way of life. But it must be just as difficult for the regime to wipe out their centuries-old customs and beliefs, and make good Communists of them; the barren Communist faith just does not mix with the Laotians' easy going ways and the Buddhist creed of tolerance and compassion. They have at least been spared the horrors of the war in Vietnam and the cruel, bloodthirsty civil war which has engulfed Cambodia. Fortunately, Thailand has also escaped largely unscathed, apart from problems with the refugees and ensuing border clashes, thanks to the stout determination of the Thai to defend his country, and to the protective umbrella of SEATO. The danger to Thailand is also greatly lessened

because of the internecine warfare on the other side and the struggle for power and influence in Cambodia between China and her arch-enemy Soviet-backed Vietnam.

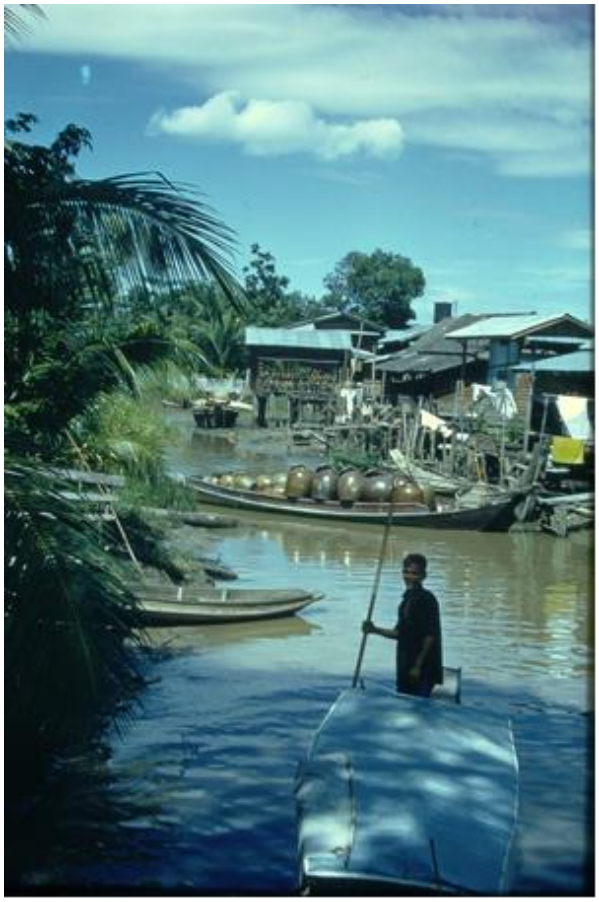
John on board the RMS Carthage in June 1958 at Port Said, with the Suez Canal Company office and Harbour Police Station in the distance.

Port Said; on the way to Singapore.

RMS Carthage was a Royal Mail Ship launched in 1931 to serve the Peninsular and Oriental Steam Navigation company's India and Far East Mail Service until 1961. Oliver Kemp and family embarked on her from Southampton to Singapore in 1958.

RMS Carthage on her way through the Suez Canal, 1958.

Stop off en-route, RMS Carthage to the left.



Kings bodyguards (in red uniform) playing Tiki against the public at the That Luang festival. The bodyguards were expected to lose to the town folk.

Wat Arun, Bangkok.

Pipers, Laos.

TOGO 1963

Travelling by leisurely liner down the West coast of Africa in the early 1960's, it would have been hard to picture the backwardness of the continent with which the new leaders were wrestling, and the unrest, political upheavals, and above all tribal feuds which characterised that struggle. The climate on this coast is warm but pleasant, as balmy sea breezes blow in from the Atlantic, and one is spared, at least up to Nigeria, the heavy rains, heat and humidity usually associated with Africa. The coast is more like an extension of Morocco, only this time with untrodden beaches fringed with palms, and boisterous Atlantic rollers replacing the tideless Mediterranean.

The coastal belt is moreover wide open to Western influences, as trade and commerce pours in and out of its ports. The French have left a visible imprint on Dakar, the beautiful capital of Senegal, whose wide boulevards and imposing public buildings bear witness to the enlightenment of their former French-educated leader President Senghor. Abidjan, the capital of the Ivory Coast, also has some impressive buildings, and shows many signs of the French heritage under the leadership of President Houphouët-Boigny, who has steered a moderate, stable course for many years. Of course there are tribal differences as in the rest of Africa, but these were not immediately apparent way back in the 1960's. They were also muted further South in Liberia, where long-standing enmity exists between the tribes around the capital Monrovia and the interior, but where in those days President Tubman reigned unchallenged over his country's destinies. But there were none of those prestigious buildings of the French zone on Monrovia's waterfront. Only a quaint old-world row

of wooden shacks housing shops, storerooms and cafes reminiscent of a Middle West settlement of the 18th century, a reminder of the American origins of the first Negro settlers. Coming to the countries formerly under British rule, both Ghana and Nigeria were obviously much wealthier, and more prosperous, and showed it, from the Gold Coast tribal chieftains displaying the well-to-do status by the amount of gold on their head-dress, robes and staffs, to Ghana's well-endowed and commercially powerful market mammies and the bustling emporia, clubs and restaurants of Lagos.

Tiny Togo and Dahomey, the former a German colony up to the end of the First World War and then French until independence, the latter previously under French rule, fall between these two rival giants, and owe part of their significance to their strategic position as a buffer between the two. Much poorer than both, they nonetheless succeeded in keeping up, in their coastal capitals, a veneer of European standards and life-style. The seafront of the Togolese capital Lomé, otherwise a palm-strewn beach washed by Atlantic rollers with a modest pier jutting out into the sea for unloading the lighters, was at the same time remarkable for its Roman Catholic cathedral, the President's palace, modern government buildings, and the Benin Hotel, while further into the town the new Independence Square fulfilled a useful function long after the Independence celebrations by providing bright arc lighting for the droves of eager students flocking their after nightfall to study on the edge of the curb. For none of their homes would be lit adequately for them to study.

The picture was very different as one left the coast and moved North into the interior. Rough roads, thick jungle alternating with extensive areas of scorched skeletons of trees caused by the pernicious habit of burning down the vegetation to

provide a poor arable soil, and needy, backward villages characterised most of the 600 mile journey to the frontier with Niger. After miles of this torrid landscape still reeking from the acrid smoke, we would arrive at the next Kabrai or Chokossi village, a modest collection of round straw huts enclosing a dirt square, in which the women, nude to the waist, still pound their meal in huge wooden pestles while the children scramble around amid the colonies of mangy dogs. The luckier ones found their way into the unassuming townlets which straddle the main artery to the North, or installed themselves in small communities, half cave dwellers, half living in straw huts, on the rocky hillsides of Central Togo and Dahomey. Drinking and African dancing were their main distractions from the harsh realities of their life, and very frenzied it all was. Seizing on any pretext for an orgy, the funeral of a very aged village woman, for instance, they would turn the children out of the home, and for days throw themselves into drinking and wild dancing, urged on by the pressing non-stop beat of the drums. Frenetic, totally abandoned to the hypnotic power of the beat, the whole village would dance in perfect step, responding as if by electric impulse and changing step and direction with every change of the rhythm. Until from sheer exhaustion they would drop where they danced, to stay there until they had slept it off. The children were left to fend for themselves, and during one of our stays at the local guest house, naturally made a beeline towards the hurricane lamp throwing out its powerful light into the dark night. When asked about their life, they all made a point of expressing a dread of snakes. For unlike Europeans or their more cautious elders, they had no boots to protect their feet, and gave no time for the snakes to get away as they ran barefoot on the leaf-covered jungle pathways, looking for firewood or the odd game. Some tribes

seemed to find pleasure in dancing on hot coals in ritual, ancestral fire-dancing rites, a pastime which the Roman Catholic missionaries did nothing to discourage, but tolerated even during their own religious festivals. A significant indication of the Roman Catholic Church's tolerance and benign perseverance, which enabled them successfully to carry their mission to the furthermost regions of Togo and Dahomey.

The final destination of our long treks was always the Dahomey game reserve on the border with Niger, a vast area of savannah, the beauty and overpowering stillness of which it is impossible to convey. A humble but well-stocked hunting lodge run by a French couple catered for all our needs. From the security of the lodge we could listen to the roar of the big game on their pre-dawn hunt, and to its comfort we would return before nightfall, to a feast of venison served with French wine and other incongruous French delicacies. The cold, exhilarating air of the jungle dawn would greet us as we set off on the day's expedition, and as the light grew stronger, we would catch glimpses through the tall parched grass and scrub of herds of wildebeest, monkeys and gazelle, small groups of ugly warthog, or the odd lion slinking nonchalantly away, indifferent to us after his dawn feast. By midday the sun would be beating down overhead and it would be too hot to continue. It was time to seek the shade at the edge of the lake and picnic, watching as we did so the lazy antics of the hippopotamus as they wallowed in the deep water, rising only occasionally to look at us and give us an indolent, disdainful snort. A mantle of somnolent silence would descend on the jungle, broken only by the shrill call of a solitary bird. The hushed stillness would remind us how remote and isolated it all was, far away from the more equable climate and day to day bustle of the coastal belt.

The colonisers originally created the West African states in their present form by cutting out strips of territory with artificial frontiers running arbitrarily inland from the coast. They took little account of ethnic boundaries, but simply absorbed the tribes which happened to be within their borders, so that some tribes were split in two, while others were incorporated willy-nilly with tribes who were their traditional enemies. This has caused much unrest and feuding since independence, as the African's first loyalty is still to his tribe, and he has not yet fully replaced it with the higher loyalty to his country. Togo is no exception. The dominant tribe on the coast are the Ewe, a race of astute businessmen and women, to which President Olympio belonged, whereas the interior as far as Niger is inhabited by a variety of other tribes. The most important are the Kabrai, a race of diligent and thrifty farmers who made good mercenaries for the French Army. They had no say in government, but were kept at arm's length and dispossessed by the ruling Ewe. Herein lay the roots of President Olympio's overthrow and assassination.

His criminal, cold-blooded murder was a disaster of the first magnitude for Togo. He was a leader of great presence, determination and sagacity who dominated the life of his country, a man of towering stature ranking with the greatest West African leaders. Trained in business and economics by the United African Company, he was who laid the foundations of independent Togo's future economic advancement. He pursued an enlightened pro-Western policy which provided a solid base for his country's stability. He was friendly and approachable, and open to advice from Western sources of technical aid, the inevitable consequence of which was to have everyone vying with everyone else to provide more aid.

Except for the work of the U.N. Special Agencies, the aid programmes had a strong flavour of self-interest in them. Being non-political, the U.N. programme was perhaps the one closest tailored to Togo's needs. The WHO provided doctors at the Government hospital and carried out an effective campaign of malarial eradication, while the FAO taught methods of intensive cropping and improved ways of traditional fishing. The Israelis, to counter Egyptian and Arab infiltration into West Africa, were strongly represented by Army officers whose main contribution seems to have been to teach the kibbutz system of farming to the brightest pupil. The course was to last two years, at the end of which the young aspiring farmer was to be installed, with his new wife and a few animals, on a small holding, on land given to him by the village headman. The latter, however, resented the appearance on his fiefdom of anything like modern methods, which would challenge his undisputed hold on the village, and refused to surrender any land, or at best only those strips impoverished by years of soil erosion. And so the scheme failed, although no doubt the training was worthwhile in itself. The Americans concentrated on road building and similar projects likely to require heavy equipment, and also made valuable contributions by teaching rural development techniques such as the drilling of artesian wells. The Germans set up a model dairy farm away from the tse-tse fly belt, a pilot project which however never took off because of difficulties with the Togolese workers, not least their dodging the clocking-in system. Their EEC partners the Frency eventually persuaded them, much against their will, to build a port at Lomé in recognition of their longstanding relationship before the 1st World War and the German cultural links which even now remain from that time. Commercially, it did not make sense, with a port at Cotonou in

Dahomey only 50 miles away, and Takoradi within easy reach in Ghana, but each newly independent state, however small, had to have its own prestige project, which in the case of Togo became the port. The French had no such aid to offer, but limited themselves to the cultural work of the Alliance Française and to their traditional role of managing the highly profitable export-import business. They became the chief political advisers when after Olympio's assassination his fellow Ewe and close relative Grunitsky assumed the heavy burdens of the Presidency. The Egyptians maintained a representation, but mainly so far as one could judge to balance off the Israelis, while the Russian Embassy seems to have been there only as a listening post, and if possible to forestall a Chinese Communist entry, for at that time both Communist powers were engaged in keen rivalry with each other for the attentions of the newly independent African states.

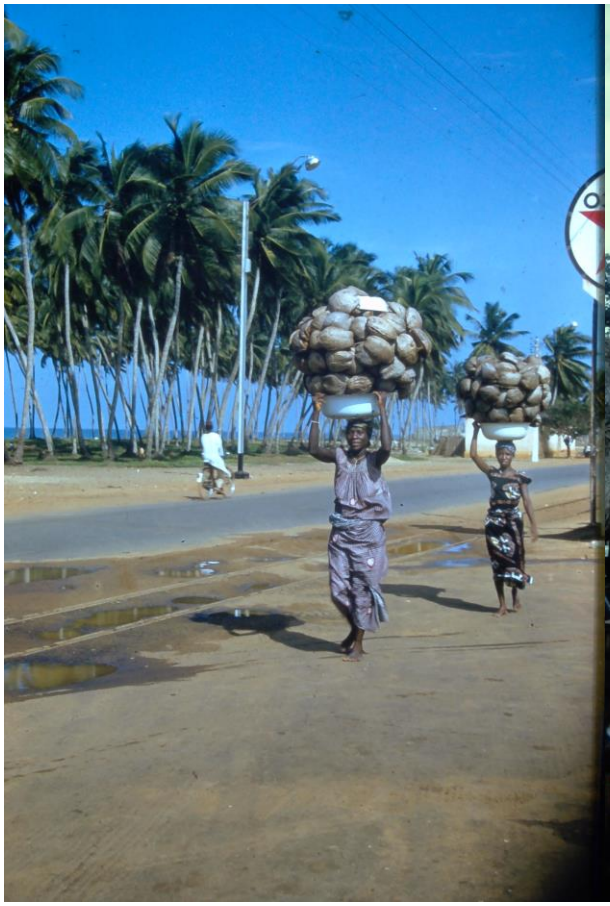
President Olympio had been insistent that we should teach his young intellectuals as much English as possible, and went out of his way to provide us with a suitable building, a well-constructed two-storey building occupying a commanding corner site. The Ministry of Works co-operated fully to renovate and modernise it, and soon we had on the first floor provision for a large library, a news room where the students could listen to the BBC World Service, and quiet rooms for study. The ground floor was transformed into an information section and Cinema holding 200 guests, for the projection of news and feature films on rainy nights. The shows were held outside on fine evenings, in what had once been a junk yard, but which much toil and perspiration turned into a garden, with a lawn of tough grass capable of resisting the tread of many feet, surrounded by rose beds and tropical shrubs and trees. The

roses were hybrid tea or floribunda species flown in from Marrakesh. We bought the shrubs and trees, each charged at a shilling irrespective of their rarety, quality or eventual size, at Aburi botanical gardens near Accra, a superb collection of tropical flora, still painstakingly tended by devoted Ghanaian gardeners, which a dedicated English enthusiast had created way back in Victorian times, taking as his ideal model the Botanical Gardens at Kew. The trees we brought back from this gardener's paradise were planted as saplings, no more than 2 or 3 feet high, but within months had shot up to their full height of 40 feet or so and were already bearing their clusters of tulip-like flowers or other exotic blooms.

The trouble was that the Togolese had no idea of the value of manure, for to them the camel dung was no more than fuel for their fires. And so it became necessary for me, and whoever cared to join me, to prepare the holes for the tree roots by heaping manure in them, stirring it up with the soil, then treading it down ready for planting, a bizarre spectacle which roused the curious onlookers to uncontrolled peels of ribald laughter.

The Library had not enough books, in spite of inheriting the Takoradi Library, the British Council allowance fell far short of the need, and so I turned to all the well-known booksellers for help. Their response was astonishingly generous, and soon the shelves were filled to capacity. Some students' favourites were black with finger marks within weeks, and would be replaced by the munificence of the supplier, for instance the "Teach Yourself" series, and above all "Teach Yourself Nursing", which proved to be the most popular with the young girl students both because of their aspirations, and more immediately and practically to tend the ailments of the family.

Sylvanus Olympio's assassination was followed by a short period of extreme tension fuelled by the fear and confusion, and the now white-hot hatred between the Ewe and the Kabrai. Gradually, however, President Grunitzky, aided by a Kabrai Vice-President, succeeded in restoring order and calm. He relied heavily on the French in doing so, and soon a certain level of Togo's former prosperity was restored, as trade and commerce returned to normal. On his death, he was succeeded by a Kabrai President, and so far as I can tell, the country now ticks over quietly, presumably enjoying the same commercial advantages as before, with the tribes pursuing their traditional ways of life, and with steady improvement from the efforts of the U.N. Special Agencies and all those who have given technical aid. Progress if slow will come about in the long run through evolution, for if one thing is certain, it is that their youth is fired with an insatiable thirst for knowledge and a relentless drive for self-improvement, which will stand the country in good stead in the years to come.



Hardwood logging Monrovia, Liberia 1962 (on the way to Togo).

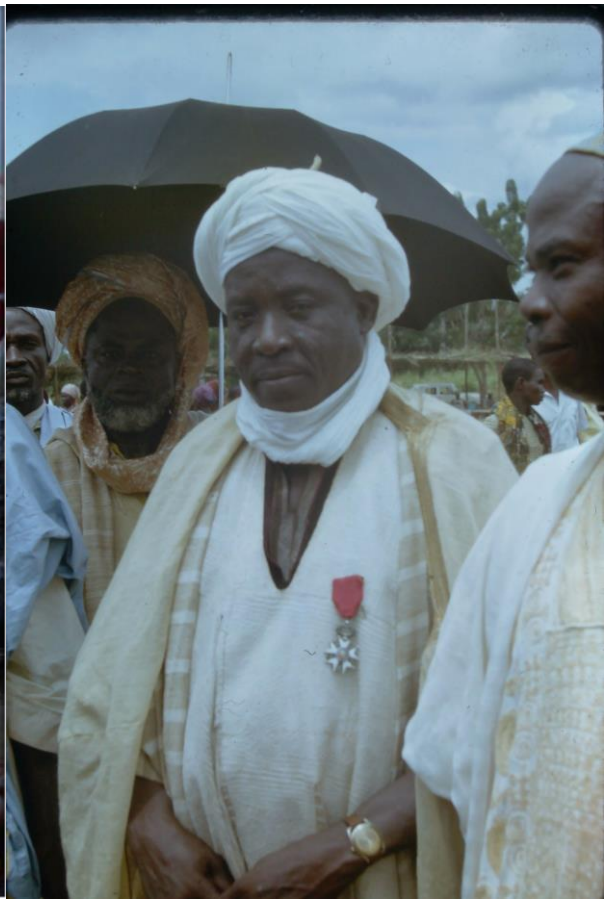
Residence, Lomé (Capital of Togo).

Ferry boat girl and water maidens, Togo.

Hotel Le Benin.

Visiting in Togo, March 1964.

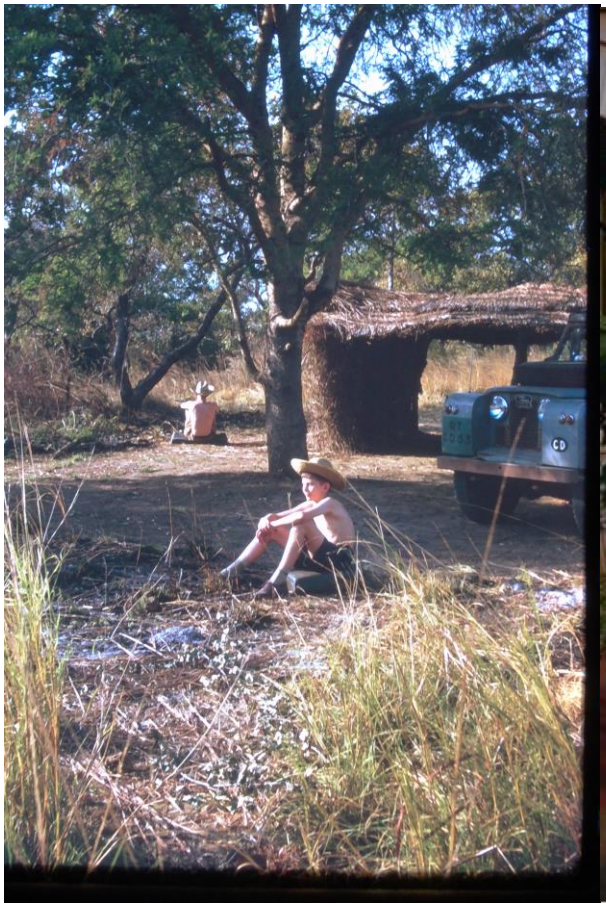
West Africa, Togo.



Gift to Togolese.

Leaving Presidents residence with escort.

Haircut in Palimé, Togo.



Scots Pipers opening Centre, Lomé, Togo

African archer

Grinding meal.

Nutty Warrior.

“Cannibal pots” North Togo.

Picnic spot at gardens near Palimé.

Houses, North Togo, Jan 1964.

January, 1963.

Villagers; Moslems, Palimé.

Villagers: Dassa-Zoumé, Benin, Jan 63.

San Sana Mango, Jan 1963.

Group in Palimé.

Beach, Togo.

Village near Keta, Ghana, near Lomé.

Over the border from Lomé at Keta, Ghana.

Part of flooded road to Lagos.

Boat man on ferry trip

Dahomey lake village, 1964. Dahomey is a Kingdom that is now part of Benin.

Trip to lake dwellings near Cotonou, 1964.

Lake Village near Cotonou (Benin) - possibly Ganvie, 1964.

Buying mangos.

The Adomi Bridge crosses the Volta River south of the Akosombo Dam.

Chateau vial a Palimé. Note the style indicates the German influence in Togo.

Cascade, Palimé, Togo.

Flower garden in Mountains, Palimé.

Picnic lagoon, 1963.

MONGOLIA 1968

Our stay in the Mongolian People's Republic made a lasting impression on us, in spite of the discomfort of the intense cold, the system of unbroken surveillance universal in the Soviet bloc, and material deprivations. The hardships tend to be forgotten with time, and our memory recalls rather the pure, rarefied air of the Asian steppe, the bright sunshine for 300 days in the year, even on the coldest days, the brilliant colours of the long Kaftan-like national dress, the del, which has its silk on the outside and the sheepskin on the inside lining, the daring aerobatics of accomplished boy horse riders, and the exuberant holiday atmosphere of the May Day parade.

Passing through Moscow 22 years after our first posting there was both fascinating and revealing. Our stay between the inward Aeroflot flight and embarking on the Trans-Siberian was necessarily short, a day and a half only, but that was long enough to register the improvements – the better clothing of the passersby, the bustling, crowded hotels and restaurants, where the prosperous élite, both Russian and Soviet bloc visitors, foregather, the apparent freedom of the youth to engage in conversation and even to bargain for my son's fur-lined motorcycle boots, and the more helpful attitude of the police in directing us to our old home in the street near Krasnie Vorota which no longer bore the same name. Clearly nowadays some relaxation and the outside trappings of freedom are tolerated, provided that the all-powerful control of the Party is not challenged and no one steps ideologically out of line.

The Trans-Siberian took 5 days and 5 nights to bring us to Ulan Bator. It maintained a remarkable punctuality at each of the 40 odd stations and halts on the way, even in the depths of the Siberian winter. At each halt the train would cut down on the allotted 20 minutes if it was running late, and woe betide anyone who had gone to the station Kiosk to buy eggs or other provisions. The station guard, often a woman, who also had the responsibility for the safety of the line to the next halt, would wave the train on, with scant regard for those passengers who had alighted for a breath of fresh air and who would sprint to jump into the last coach as the train moved out. A longer stay was made at Omsk, although the town seemed to be mainly a collection of wooden houses stretching up the hill-side as far as the eye could see, and at Novosibirsk, a much more substantial town and important scientific research station.

Our compartment, dating from Tsarist times, was warm and comfortable, and we could settle down happily to enjoying our enforced leisure, under the watchful but benevolent eye of the lady in charge of the coach, and its samovar at the end of the corridor, who seemed just as keen to protect and keep us supplied with fresh tea from the samovar as to watch over our contacts with our fellow passengers. We spent much time gazing out of the windows at the Siberian winter scene, a bleak endless expanse of desolate, snow-bound tundra or forest, with no metalled roads, and only the occasional snowed-up truck, seemingly coming from nowhere and going nowhere. Siberian pines were interspersed with larch and Scots pines, and silver birch grew plentifully, their trunks twisted from the intense frost, in copses dispersed along the whole length of the line. Otherwise the vast whiteness was unbroken except for a wooden cottage here and there, surrounded by fencing intended to keep the snow at

bay, but more often than not bowed down under its weight. This unending emptiness seemed far from the Soviet Government's drive to industrialise Siberia and exploit its immense known resources in oil, coal, timber and precious metals. Certainly the great difficulties – the inhospitable climate and permafrost, the vast distances and intractable nature of much of the terrain, and the reluctance of workers to go there willingly will always militate against its full development and exploitation of its resources, but industries and industrial communities are growing up rapidly near the mineral fields and sources of hydroelectric power. It is most unlikely that an extensive network of roads as we know them in the West will ever be achieved, and the settlements will be fed mainly by branch lines from the Trans-Siberian lifeline and eventually the BAM (Baikal-Amur) railway.

To counter the long hours of sitting without exercise, we at first used the halts to alight and walk vigorously up and down the platform, but the novelty wore off as we realised that there was a risk of the train's leaving without us, and that in any case we had to spend much more time than the odd 15 minutes available for the exercise wrestling to get into our woollen underware and the heavy winter clothing needed to ward off the searing cold.

The close confines of the Trans-Siberian create its own particular kind of camaraderie among the passengers. Red Army officers in mufti going out as technical advisers to outlying parts of Mongolia, and Soviet and Eastern bloc advisers and teachers returning to their posts, all promised extra money and perquisites for undertaking their assignments, seemed only too anxious to share their lot and engage in a non-controversial chat in the corridors or the Mecca of everybody, the restaurant

car, although conversation there was much more inhibited by concentration on the food, the slow service, and not least the sharp scrutiny of the head waiter. The food was plentiful, though monotonous after a while, but a strange disrupting mealtime routine seemed to take a grip on everybody as we moved further East. The train remains on Moscow time throughout the whole length of the journey, for reasons which were never explained to us, so that the further East we went, the later the meals were served. Breakfast thus slipped back later and later, until by the time we were approaching Irkutsk it was being served nearer midday! And everybody conformed to this bizarre ritual in spite of their pangs of hunger; they even seemed to relish the chance it gave them of turning up at midday in their pyjamas.

The train was divided at Ulan Ude, capital of Buryat Mongolia, and the Ulan Bator section was uncoupled and shunted on to the line going South. This was the signal for elaborate preparations to be made as if for a siege. Everything moveable was cleared and locked away, the restaurant car was taken off, and the passengers were issued with eggs, yoghurt and black bread for the next morning's breakfast on the run-in into Ulan Bator. The main part of the train continues its journey Eastwards along the Southern shores of the legendary Lake Baikal, that vast stretch of water ranking among the deepest and widest lakes of the world. Though now threatened with industrial pollution, which the authorities are doing everything in their power to control, the lake teems with its own distinctive flora and fauna, and feeds the great Angara River and its hydroelectric plants. Further East, the train will run parallel with, and not far from the contentious and heavily armed Sino-Soviet border, a weak strategic point in the

defence of the Soviet Far East, which the Government are making strenuous efforts to remedy by the construction of the ambitious BAM railway much further North.

It was bitterly cold as we alighted that December morning on the ice-covered platform of Ulan Bator station, and I could feel the cold penetrating my sheepskin-lined boots and thick woollen stockings as we were welcomed by the Mongolian Head of Protocol. The moisture was freezing in our nostrils, we were blinking through a thin veil of ice crystals, and our breath froze in mist with each exhalation. No wonder the Head of Protocol quickly dispensed with the formalities and briskly referred the ceremonial to a later date, when I would present my credentials to President Sambu.

The Mongolian climate in winter is dominated by the fierce Siberian cold, which often reaches -40°C and can drop even down to -60°C. In that intensity of frost one does not go out, but at higher temperatures still well below freezing the air is generally still, and provided that one is adequately dressed, in long johns, woollens, furs, and silk inside the sheepskin gloves, a walk in the crisp air and sunshine can be exhilarating. Ulan Bator is situated between Siberia and the Gobi Desert, which in summer generates a dry, arid heat and occasional storms. It lies on the edge of the tree belt, which affects the vegetation on the surrounding hills, so that it is common to see hills whose Northern side is clad in pines, while the slopes facing South and exposed to the sun are barren of trees and shrubs. The countryside is mostly upland steppe interspersed with marshland and rivers, which when frozen solid in winter form smooth highways for the lorries, much more satisfactory and quicker than the rough roads. The steppe is covered in spring with edelweiss, gentian and many other alpine species. It provides very good grazing for the cattle – yaks, horses, sheep and goats,

and a heavy cross between buffalo and yak called the haynag – which are tended by the herdsmen out in the open all the year round. The total herd adds up to some 27 million head of cattle, which is a lot for a population of less than 2 million, so that corralling or providing enough fodder for the winter is hardly a practical possibility. The mixed herds simply roam the countryside, and if the winter is not too severe, survive from the very fact that they are mixed. The horses and larger beasts paw through the frozen snow with their heavier hooves and graze off their preferred grasses, while the smaller goats and sheep follow on and feed on the different grasses which are suited to them. In the worst winters, however, successive layers of icing and frozen snow can make an impenetrable barrier which even the heavy animals find it hard to break through. In these atrocious conditions known as the dzud, 3 million head of cattle, or 10% of the whole heard, have been known to perish. Corralling and the production of enough fodder would be most valuable improvements to their husbandry, if they could be achieved.

Survival in Mongolia's harsh conditions demands toughness, and the Mongolians are indeed a tough race, proud, ruggedly independent, and fired with a love for the steppe's distant horizons. They are nomads at heart, wedded to the simple life in their round tents, or yurts, even when many have become bureaucrats and office workers, and even in spite of an increasing drift into the towns to swell the urban population. The blocks of flats behind the Ulan Bator Hotel where we lived were largely inhabited by civil servants. Come the first of June, and many flats would empty as the great exodus to the countryside began. They had chosen to pass the summer out in the country within reach of the capital, and to commute to work each day over the

badly surfaced and pot-holed roads; it sufficed simply to find a lush valley with a pure stream running through it, and they were content to pitch their yurt there and then.

They are great horse lovers and horse riders, learning to ride in their early childhood, and perfecting their art in their teens, until they are as much at home riding on the horse's side or under its belly as in the saddle. All-in wrestling is another favourite sport, reminding one of the huge Japanese wrestlers or our own colossi, as their oiled, fleshy torsos lock together in a combat of giants. They are also gifted in the gentler arts of music and painting, which closely resembles the Tibetan school; their rich and thriving literature cannot unfortunately be known in the West except to a few specialists because of the difficulty of their unique language. The faithful are Lama Buddhists, and are allowed to practise their faith, and pray, in an ascetic and self-debasing sort of way, on hard wooden trestles, at the few surviving pagodas. Their closest relationship, if they had a choice, would be to the Chinese, not only because of their most natural channel for the trade and the supply of silk for their national costume is with China, but also because of the deep cultural affinities, and simply because they are Orientals together.

We were by Mongolian standards privileged to be lodged in the Ulan Bator hotel, for which I was to be the last Ambassador to preside over an Embassy which had both its offices and the staff's living accommodation in the Hotel. The suites of rooms were presentable and comfortable, and facing South had the benefit of the sunshine, without the biting winds which made the offices facing North so cold in spite of the double glazing and an efficient central heating system, which carries the heat from the town power station throughout the city. The servants were friendly and

very helpful, especially the maid Nomensol, who still remained slim and youthful in spite of her four little girls (all incidentally named after different berries), and the chauffeur Batsukh, who would bring us presents of onions and other salad things in the spring, if he could find them himself. A tall, strong figure of a man conscious of his own worth as an individual, and without any fear of the many difficulties, bad roads and tracks, iced-up rivers and swampy terrain – or simply officialdom. Of course there was constant surveillance, by the otherwise kindly lady at the end of the corridor, and by more sophisticated means. The restaurant, run in our time by a succession of despairing East Europeans, left much to be desired. Koumiss, a green fermented mare's milk, was available for those who fancied it, but the staple diet was fatty mutton in all its forms, cold, roast, stew, any way other than tasty curry which might have gone down more readily. When after a while we sought a change, we would find the diplomatic shop very short of provisions, except for frozen carcasses, from which the butcher would hack whichever piece we chose without really knowing what it was. The Russians had their own shops, well-stocked with every conceivable food, to which they admitted their East European colleagues, but to which we were never invited. It was essential to augment our supplies from an export house either in Denmark or Hong Kong, which we did once or twice a year, paying 100% on the cost of the items for freightage on the Trans-Siberian or via the port of Nakhodka. It was a red letter day when the consignment arrived, but regrettably the stores seemed to last far too short a time.

I often wonder how my successors and their staffs fared in the Embassy building, which was being prepared and renovated in my time to house the entire staff,

the offices and recreational facilities. It is by Mongolian standards a substantial building, towards the Soviet Embassy on the road out to the East, and we were lucky to be offered it, because the Cuban Ambassador who had lived there before took one look at Mongolia and the cold, did not like what he saw, and made a precipitate retreat back to sunny Havana. It was admittedly in a very poor state when we took it over. Houses in Mongolia cannot have ventilation running under the floors for fear of the occupants freezing to death (the very opposite of the wooden houses on stilts in Laos, where the air circulating all round the house keeps the occupants cool); they must be constructed directly on the ground, with the result that dry rot had taken possession and run like wildfire through every beam, which all needed replacement. But I can imagine it being a very agreeable home when completed by the Ministry of Works. Its siting gave it a particularly Mongolian atmosphere, just opposite a large yurt settlement, each yurt supplied with electricity, chimney to let out the smoke from the open hearths, and water bought in by municipal tanks twice a week. It appears that some 40% of Ulan Bator's population are still housed in yurt encampments similar to that opposite the Embassy, for the influx from the countryside cannot all be accommodated in the existing blocks of flats and wooden dwellings, or by the building programme. Not that the residents would complain about living in a yurt, which is as much part of them as the steppe, their horses and their herds.

Sukhe Bator Square, named after their national hero who gave them independence in 1921, is the centre of Ulan Bator, an imposing wide-open space suitable for an evening stroll past some fine buildings, the Government offices, cinema, and theatre and opera house constructed by Japanese prisoners of war after

1945, and the Ulan Bator Hotel built by the Chinese, along with the Departmental Store and several attractive blocks of flats, before the Sino-Soviet rift put an end to their activities in the early 1960's. An inviting garden runs along its South side, in which the trees and shrubs have been planted, and which is scrupulously maintained, by the voluntary efforts of young members of the community.

The theatre provided the mainstay of the evening entertainment. Sometimes a mixed blessing, we would be invited very frequently and always at short notice, to the celebration of one or other of the many feast days in the Soviet calendar, Mother's Day, Red Army Day, etc. The boxes were invariably occupied by the diplomatic corps in order of precedence, that is their degree of loyalty to the Soviet Union. In the first box the Russians with their faithful acolytes the Bulgarians, in the second and third the East Germans, Poles, Hungarians and Czechs, in the fourth the recalcitrant Romanians and Yugoslavs, and finally in the last box the hapless British Ambassador and his wife along with the Chinese Chargé d'Affaires and his interpreter. The routine was always the same, an excruciatingly long speech in Mongolian, followed by a break for refreshments of mineral water and sweets, then the real show, sometimes a boring ideological opera or mime, but more often an exquisite spectacle of dancing and music, singing in a style close to the Chinese, or a concert played in unison by an orchestra of young, pig-tailed girls on their long and unique Mongolian lutes. Unfortunately, the Chinese Chargé d'Affaires and his interpreter never got to see the show, for every speech contained insulting remarks against Mao Tse Tung and his "running dogs of imperialism". Long before this passage was reached, the interpreter had marked it in the Russian translation, and when the speaker got there, the two

would stand up, stamp their feet to make as much noise as possible, overturn their chairs, and slam the door or the box as hard as they could as they left. An awkward pause and embarrassed silence would ensue, for the Chinese Chargé had yet again been made to lose face, and this was the last thing their fellow Orientals, left to their own devices, would have wished to do.

The Chinese representation was kept to very small numbers and on a low key because of the Sino-Soviet dispute. They remained proudly aloof, with the minimum of social intercourse. In general, however, there was a relaxed atmosphere between the diplomatic colleagues. I was the only Western representative in a corps made up almost exclusively of Soviet bloc representatives, with the exception of my French friend Monsieur Peruch, who came out at regular intervals, while preferring to spend most of his time in Mongolian affairs at the Quai d'Orsay. The Russians and their wives were friendly whenever we met, and had a most charming and gifted additional Ambassadress in Madame Filatova, the wife of the Head of State, Tsedenbal. The Hungarian doyen, who had already been there seven years, the Poles, who were most of the time out of favour because of the Jewish entraction of M. Gomulka, the Czechs immediately before the events leading up to the Soviet invasion of their country in 1968, and the East Germans, who welcomed anyone speaking German, all made friendly gestures, but it was the Romanians and Yugoslavs, each pursuing their own independent path to Communism, who made most effort to keep up a normal social relationship. The Oriental representatives kept very much to themselves, mixing only with each other – including the Chinese.

It was a narrow, forced social circuit, from which we sought a respite, whenever possible, in the open air. The lovely valley of Nukht a few kilometres West would invite us to its sheltered seclusion, to its snow-laden pines and silver birches, and the tits chirping in the branches. The rolling hills and valleys on the North side made an ideal setting for picnics, and picnicking round a bonfire on the frozen river became a favourite pastime. The cold never seemed to worry us, and as the days grew warmer, we would find time to search for alpine plants, or watch the horseriders, or the herdsmen tending their horses and cattle. An idyllic, simple nomadic life, if only climatic conditions had not been so hard.

The Mongolian People's Republic is under the firm domination of the Soviet Union, to whom she is a valuable buffer protecting its Siberian borders against the Chinese, and a bastion of Soviet power in the Far East. The Red Army is everywhere in evidence, and little effort is made to disguise their heavy armament and missile sites. Moreover, when Mongolia's traditional trade links with China were severed by the Sino-Soviet conflict, she turned to the Soviet Union and her East European allies for economic help, and joined Comecon in 1962. The Soviet Union responded with massive technical aid and heavy investment, in return for the military advantages. Hundreds of technical advisers were sent out, and a large programme of heavy technical work was carried out, mainly by Red Army Soldiers, so that they were, and probably still are, very much in evidence in the capital and elsewhere, engaged in building flats, constructing electricity power lines, and other heavy work. The East Europeans contribute to the development of light industry, for instance meat canning,

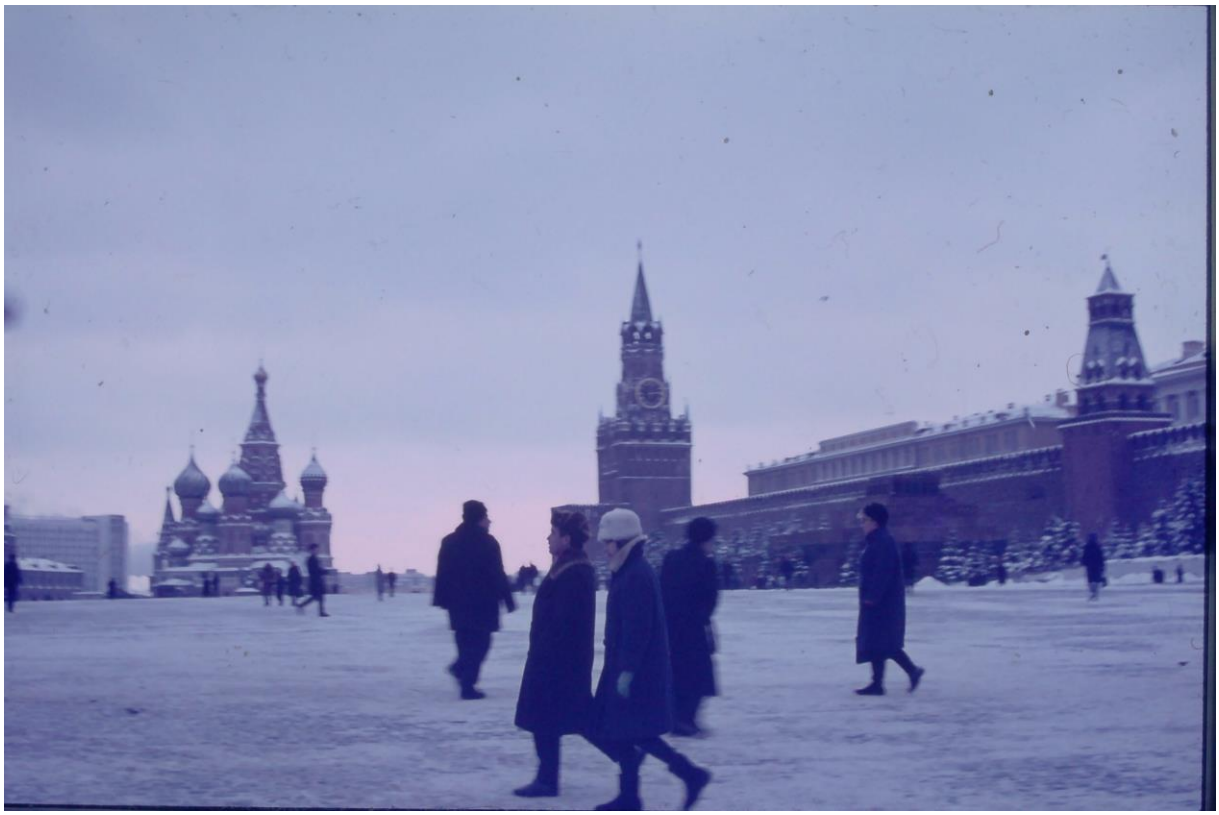
an East German initiative in co-operation with an English firm, which does away with the necessity of driving the cattle on the hoof into Siberia for slaughter.

All this aid has helped the Mongolian people to develop their economy and to make rapid strides forward in electrification, coal production, and other fields, and has brought a certain prosperity most evident in the towns. But at a price, for Mongolia is now tied to the Soviet bloc economically as well as militarily. Ninety-five percent of her trade is with the Comecon, and 90% of her exports go to Russia. Small wonder then that a temporary flirting early in 1968 with national Communism on the model of Yugoslavia and Romania at the time of Tito's state visit was as shortlived as Dubcek's attempt later that year. The Foreign Minister at that time M. Dugersuren was despatched as Ambassador to the Soviet Union and replaced as Foreign Minister by the hardline head of the Ministry's Soviet department M. Toiv, and Mongolia had returned to the Soviet fold.

What of the future? Mongolia seems set on a path of steady development if only from the sheer weight of the Soviet bloc presence there. But there are, as one would expect in a fundamentally nomadic society, inevitable brakes on the rate of progress. More education and technical training are badly needed, and measures are urgently required to curb the rapid rise in imports of consumer and luxury goods and the consequent inflationary pressures and adverse balance of payments. The flight from the land to the urban areas will also have to be checked to ensure that the small farming population remains adequate for the large size of the herds. A lot will be demanded of Comecon in countering these difficulties.

Our contribution was necessarily very modest. We would have liked more direct trade in such commodities as fine quality Kashmir wool, or more acceptance of such advanced machinery as modern sheep shearing equipment, but the Russians always stood in the way, insisting that any trade should be conducted not direct, but exclusively through them. In addition to the meat canning plant, however, we have succeeded in maintaining a thriving interchange of students of English at Leeds University.

In spite of all the hardship, we spent a happy time among the simple, nomadic and highly gifted people of Mongolia, and were sorry to leave. We wish them every success and prosperity in the future.



Red Square, Saint Basil's Cathedral and the icy Moskva River in Moscow.

Kremlin citadel in Moscow prior to taking the Trans-Siberian railway to Mongolia.

Train and station at Omsk on the journey to Mongolia on the Trans-Siberian railway.

Views en route on the Trans-Siberian railway.

Christmas tree in Sukhe Bator Square, Ulan Bator. The monument is of Sukhe Bator, the revolutionary hero who brought communism to Mongolia.

Lama Buddhists practice the faith on wooden trestles in front of the Pagoda.

Children skiing in Mongolia in 1967.

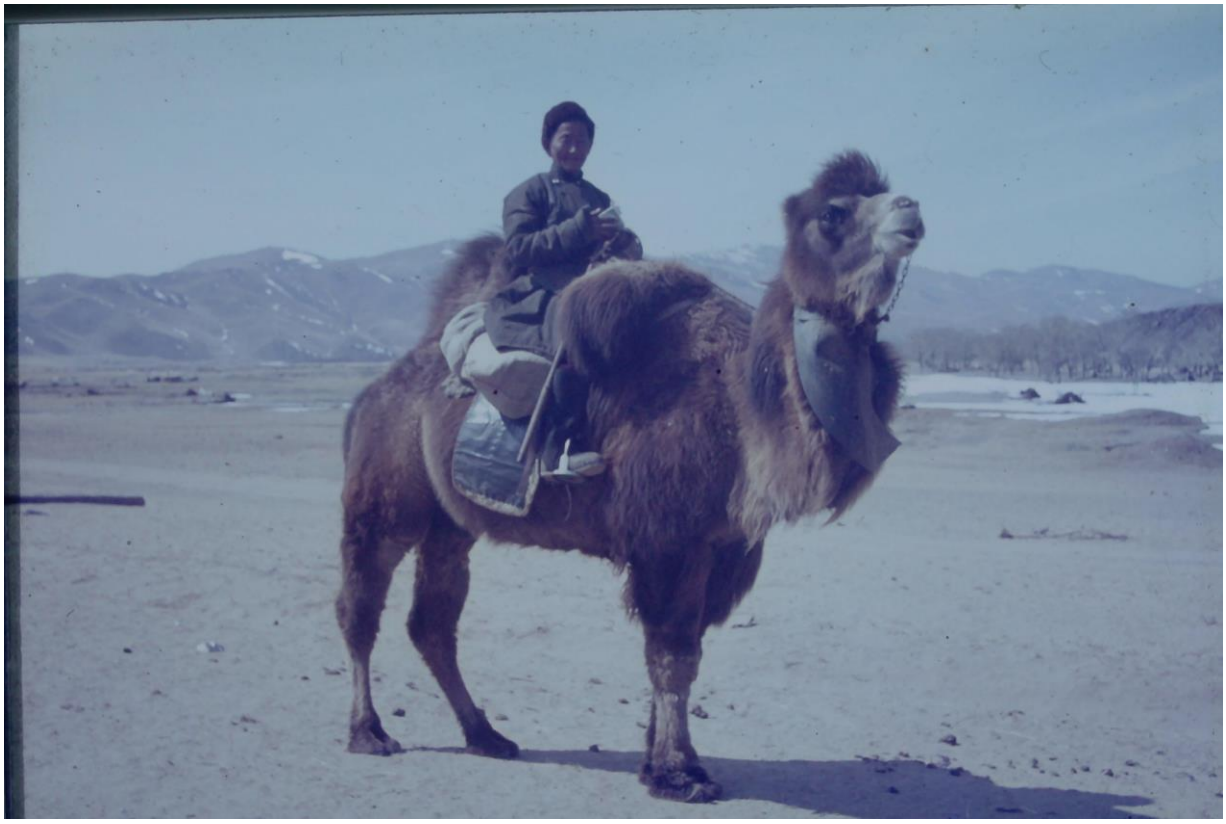
Mongolian landscape, probably valley of the Nukht, in winter and summer.

Rural Mongolian settlement comprising Yurts in the distance.

Horsemen of the Mongolian steppes.

Mongolian cattle (Yaks and Haynags) on the steppes.

In addition to their cattle and horses the Mongolians depend on the two humped Bactrian camels, descendants of the rare wild camels of the Gobi desert.



Rural Mongolian family standing outside a Yurt and wearing the traditional coat, the del.

Young cattle are protected with thermal insulating coats, but significant losses of cattle occur during the Dzud, the lethal Mongolian winters.

Parade in Sukhe Bator Square, Ulan Bator.


ВЬЕТНАМ ЯЛНА


БИД ВЬЕТНАМ

SOME FINAL REMARKS

I propose ending my narrative here. I had two tours of duty in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, and spent many years on EEC affairs, first as Head of our Delegation to the High Authority of the Coal and Steel Community in Luxembourg, an assignment which was intended to last only six months until the fusion of the three Executives, the Commission, Euratom, and the ECSC, into one, but which was prolonged for over two years through General de Gaulle's quarrel with the President of the Commission; then, prior to Britain's accession, a period guiding Whitehall departments through the quasi-political, quasi-legal jungle of Community secondary legislation, which had to be adapted to fit in with British needs and practices, the preparation of authentic texts of that legislation, and the technical aspects of the Treaty drafting; and finally, as British Steel's man in Brussels, ensuring that the BSC's voice was fully heard and her interests protected. But to describe these periods in my career in any detail would hardly fit in with what has gone before. It is rather subject-matter for a serious treatise, and has in any case already been comprehensively dealt with by many competent specialists. Such an account would also no doubt be more matter of fact, and might detract from the interest which I hope I have aroused so far.

The distant horizons of the posts in which we served, their climates and countryside have been described to create a backcloth to understanding the peoples among whom we lived, their political conditioning and cultural heritage, their own unique ways of life, their aspirations, work and leisure pursuits. It is a far cry from the daily catalogue of fighting and destruction, famine and disease which afflict many

parts of the globe, and on which the media rightly concentrate. But good news is not newsworthy, and it is necessary to adjust the horrific record from time to time by remembering that over the far greater part of the world many millions of people are living their lives in the same kind of peaceful setting which we found in our posts.

I wish to avoid a lengthy conclusion, but there are two vital points which must be underlined.

The first is the urgent necessity for more study of Soviet affairs, to understand the motivation of the Soviet authorities, and above all the cardinal principle that their system is totally alien to Western democracy, and irreconcilable with it. "Peaceful coexistence", however much abused by Western critics, and however misused by the Russians, is no empty catch-word. It is the only conceivable way in which the two systems can live together in mutual toleration, hopefully in peace. Patient, persistent talking, and where possible negotiation, while always maintaining a strong guard, are a very necessary part of the process.

The second is the crying need for a much bigger effort, by both sides, to promote the more rapid development of the poorer parts of the world. Not in a spirt of grabbing as much as possible by the developing countries, nor in a spirit on the part of the West of stealing an economic advantage over one's neighbour, but as a properly co-ordinated, well-financed effort such as can be achieved under the expert guidance of the special institutions that exist for this purpose.

I considered it a great privilege to be part of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, the greatest service of all. I accepted without demur the postings, the rough with the smooth (chiefly rough), and served in them with all the devotion and

objectivity possible, reporting back on the situations exactly as I saw them, without embroidery intended to please, and leaving it to the Office at home to make of it what they wished. And the great majority of Foreign Service offices have done likewise, cherishing a modest ambition for their own careers, perhaps, but above all else carrying out their duties with the utmost loyalty, often in trying material and psychological circumstances. Highly respected and influential wherever they serve, Foreign Service officers are doing a wonderful job, day in and day out, keeping the peace, fostering good relations, and watching over British interests. Of course too much is expected of the Service, not only by those who do not know, but also by those who should know better. It is by its very nature close to events and to trends and developments worldwide, and maintains a superb reporting service to Whitehall and Ministers. But it cannot be expected to have prior warning of every clandestine plot, coup d'état, or premeditated attack, which of their very essence are the secrets most closely guarded. Nor can it exceed the limits of its accreditation by interfering in a country's political or administrative arrangements, or in the legal side of cases involving British subjects. But short of such intervention, it does all in its power to help and sustain British subjects in difficulties or caught up in legal suits abroad. Persuasion and negotiation are its most effective weapons, not only for defending British interests, but also for extending the weight of its authority far beyond that first requirement into maintaining an ongoing closeness with government and influential opinion. Great things are being achieved daily, which can hardly be denigrated by the ephemeral and ill-advised attacks that are made from time to time on the Service.

Friends have often asked us where we would most like to have retired. To the life of a lotus-eater in Bali, perhaps? Few Englishmen would, we think, stand up to the submerging of their individuality in the Buddhist/Hindu concept of the cosmic scheme of things. Even retirement across the Channel must have its difficulties. Acceptance into French society for instance, must take years, and then only after a long period of "rodage" or running-in. To settle in Spain must be less easy still, and demand an early choice between its flamenco culture or identity with the life-style of the large British expatriate community, and for all the sun and colourful life, we would not have wished to retire to Egypt or S.E. Asia.

We chose instead to retire to Yorkshire, in which we were born and which is part of us. More specifically to Scarborough, that beautiful watering place largely unchanged since Victorian days, where the most prestigious long-established tailor still displays a sign proclaiming himself to be "Indian and Colonial outfitter", and where the coastline and majestic rolling moors remain largely unspoilt. When we need a change, we will delight, always provided we can rake up enough money, in visiting once again the places and peoples we have known and loved.

POSTSCRIPT

As the reader can well imagine from the remoteness of some of our posts, we encountered many hilarious situations on our travels, which for one reason or another it would be inappropriate to include in the main body of my narrative, but which it would be a pity not to share with the reader. They were just as integral a part of the human story which unfolded before us as the more serious part of our life, and are I think amusing enough to bear retelling. I have therefore decided to share some of these experiences with the reader by including in this postscript five short anecdotal stories, which I hope will give him a further insight into the lighter side of our life, and as much pleasure and amusement as they did us.

THE QUEEN'S CORONATION DAY CELEBRATIONS IN EAST JAVA, 2ND JUNE 1953

I was Consul in Surabaya at the time of the Coronation, having been posted there at a very unsettled time when British interests were under threat across the whole of Eastern Indonesia, a vast archipelago stretching from East Java and Kalimantan (Indonesian Borneo) in the West through the Celebes to the Moluccas, the Spice Islands and Timor in the East. A huge area indeed, very primitive in the outlying parts, but everywhere very beautiful. Volcanic lakes made blue, green or white from the chemical compound of their ash, tropical flora and fauna in every conceivable form, all the colours of the rainbow from the plants and flowers, and streaks of yellow, blue, green and red as the Java sparrows darted through the trees and shrubs in the humid, orange glow of sunrise just after the daily early morning downpour. Above all a warm, friendly people, with natural gifts for sculpture, wood carving, music and the dance, and mime and drama drawing inspiration from their rich folklore and legend. Glamour and still more colour were imparted by the women in their bright sarongs, each batik pattern identifying the region from which they came, and by the ceremonial dress of the Djokdjakarta court, from which most of them came or to which they were related.

Against this rich backcloth of art and natural beauty, we quickly decided that the celebrations for the Queen's Coronation must match the people's inborn love of colour, rhythm and music. We would invite the Governors of the six provinces in my area, with their senior staffs, the East Javanese officials with whom I had most

dealings, Army and Navy representatives (Surabaya being the main naval base), Dutch and other colleagues and well-wishers, and not least members of the Commonwealth and the British community, who up to then had been bitterly divided by the lingering shadows cast by the Japanese occupation. Some seven hundred guests in all, but easily absorbed in the large garden (we could count on the weather being fine). We would invite them for 6.45 p.m. to ensure that they were foregathered before tuning into the actual Coronation Ceremony at 7.30 p.m. Toasts would then be exchanged with the East Java's genial Governor Mr Samadikoen, after which the Community would celebrate with a show of English and Scottish country dancing, and medleys of British tunes would keep up the festive spirit until the small hours.

There was enthusiastic support from all sides. Philips provided the necessary equipment to bring the Abbey ceremony into our midst, a Chinese friend offered a highly polished platform for the country dancing, the Indian and Pakistani ladies provided spiced food suited to the Indonesian taste, and the local branch of Calico Printers built the magnificent Crown, five feet in diameter and illuminated from within, which would surmount the main pole above the platform in the centre of the lawn, and from which eight strings of white light would run to the flagpoles of the Commonwealth. Finally the young bloods of the British Community plunged into the three months' practice needed for the reels and dances, for which it was necessary to chalk out on the marble floor of the reception room an area four metres square, to avoid anyone falling over the edge of the raised dai's on Coronation night. Their enthusiasm seemed to stem indeed from a keen desire to show what they could do, but

I have a lingering suspicion that our comely, well-endowed Yorkshire nanny was also a major attraction.

The Admiral of the Indonesian Navy had generously agreed to his band's playing music throughout the evening. Thirty lusty drummers and blowers of brass as powerful as any Black Dyke Mills band, making their practice Nissen hut quake with the decibels; but the garden took it on the night. I had a further headache when I tried to find the music. The owner of the music shop, a helpful Dutchman who had loaned me a brand new Steinway concert grand for £2 a month because it was safer in the Residence than in his shop during a period of intense rampokking, helped me to find some Australian Community song books from which to make up a medley of British tunes. But we had to ransack his shop for "God Save the Queen", which after much perspiration we actually unearthed in the form of "God Save the Queen": Schott's florid contribution to Queen Victoria's marriage to the Prince Consort! Great was my consternation when I heard the band play it the day before the reception. It started off with the first stanza of the National Anthem, then broke into a long and ornate variation, second stanza, similar flowery effusion, and so on, all played with the maximum decibels. "No, no, no" I protested, "you do play it well, but it should go like this, short and sweet. Firm roll of drums, then straight through the whole anthem, no ornamentation". I was crossing my fingers on the night, in the trepidation that it might falter.

The flowers began arriving soon after the sun's rays had dried up the puddles left by the morning rains. All were creations of the Chinese flower shops, and very fine they were, large tableaux representing every conceivable Royal subject – Crowns,

Prince of Wales Feathers, Windsor Castle and Buckingham Palace, and even likenesses of the Royal Family. At first we arranged them on racks round the reception rooms, but soon they came so thick and fast that they had to be placed all round the garden, to add to the natural cascade of colour. It was a beautiful setting for a memorable evening, but Sefton Delmar, who called that morning, had his own way of putting it. “Good God”, he exclaimed on entering, “it’s just like Golders Green crematorium!”

We had hardly emerged from our ablutions (euphemism for a Dutch tub from which one ladles cold water over one’s hot perspiring body) and were cooling down nude under the ceiling fan, when the first guests arrived, nearly an hour early, the Army contingent who like their colleagues everywhere never miss a moment’s drinking time. Never have I put on a black tie so quickly, nor perspired so much in the process. Henrietta fared even worse, as she wrestled desperately with the wayward hooks of her tight bodice.

At last all the guests were foregathered, in their most lovely sarongs, their best uniforms and most exquisite court dress, and we could go over to Westminster Abbey, to the joyful singing, the clarion calls, the moving moments of the actual crowning, and the last majestic outburst of choir and organ as the ceremony moved to its close. The company were spellbound by the magic of it all. Only after the last rapture notes had died away could we tear ourselves away, back to our own party, spectacular in its own way, but necessarily more mundane after the glittering pageant we had in imagination just witnessed. Our toasts were exchanged, national anthems played (without a hitch, in the event), and warm applause rang out as I announced the

conquest of Everest by Hillary and Tensing – a further bond to cement the close relations between East and West forged by that night's proceedings.

Now it was the turn of the young men and women to show their dancing skills. Thanks to their weeks of practice, and perhaps our Yorkshire nanny's active encouragement, they had been welded into a coherent team, and amazement and admiration greeted them as, in their showy tartan kilts and sashes, and in perfect step, they gave us a flawless exhibition of the Gay Gordons, Hamilton House and other famous reels and dances. The official Antara news agency was at that time denouncing the decadence of Western music and dancing, but the writ of Djakarta propagandists clearly did not extend as far as East Java. The ladies in their brilliant court robes and jewellery could not draw their chairs close enough to the raised dais, nor did it seem that they would ever be satisfied. Round after round of applause was followed by encore after encore, until the dancers could do no more.

The Navy band then took up the threads, and (with the encouragement of a case of Scotch to whet their whistles) played their medleys of well-known tunes until far into the night. Only fatigue put a stop to the jollity; the guests one by one came to take their leave, and we said goodbye, with many smiles and greetings, to almost the same number we had greeted (some had fallen by the wayside). Our arms ached from the handshaking, and we had that fixed, rather vacuous Cheshire cat grin which comes from cheek muscles tautened through abnormal exercise, when the following morning we stared at ourselves in the mirror. We have had great sympathy ever since for the Royal Family, who to cope every day, always smiling, with this form of exercise.

The celebrations had been primarily to pay homage to Her Majesty and to mark a great and joyful occasion, but they left their own permanent stamp on life around us. The small British Community, no longer divided and demoralised, held its head high, conscious of its new stature in the eyes of the Indonesians. Anglo-Indonesian relations in my part of the Archipelago took on a new cordiality, enabling us to throw an even bigger umbrella over British interests in the vast area. Whatever remote island the defence of British lives and estates took us to during the storms of looting, murder and inter-tribal fighting, the renown of the British and their woman Raj had gone before, and it was enough on these occasions to express to the Governor Her Majesty's gratitude for the excellent measures he had taken to safeguard the lives and property of Her subjects, to ensure that within hours a posse of armed police or army were posted to guard each British estate. This was only one obvious way in which the Coronation celebrations had had their effect. The more intangible repercussions were manifested in the friendship and mutual respect which characterised our day-to-day relations throughout that insecure period of transition. For in the longer term the protection of our interests must be anchored in deep-rooted friendship and mutual trust based on mutual respect for each others' cultures, traditions, needs and aspirations. The Queen and her family excel in fostering such warm and close relations around the world. Henrietta and I defended them, in a period of great insecurity, by building up as close a relationship as we could, socially and culturally as well as politically. The Queen's Coronation celebrations made an immense contribution to this objective, and we like to think that it is still remembered, and still has its strong influence, in the Eastern Archipelago.

THE DINNER PARTY

A feeling of uneasiness came over Jane as she sat at breakfast thinking about the dinner party that evening, the kind of malaise which assails all hostesses when they begin to ask themselves whether some important detail has not been overlooked in the final preparations.

She could not pinpoint any tangible reason for her misgivings. It was not as if she lacked experience, and her household was by now as well organised as any in Alexandria: Ahmed her gifted cook, who could make the best Yorkshire pudding in the Arab world, the devoted Nubian Fahmy, and Walid the houseboy, who was reputed to be Ahmed's nephew, but who never seemed to be spared the heaviest donkey-work on that account. Of course they had their upheavals. Peter had once more had to rebuke Fahmy, once more as a final warning, for taking his siesta in nanny's bed while they were out at the beach, and for stealing the sugar, which at that time was rationed. But this was an old saga dating back to the time when nanny had found sand from Fahmy's unwashed feet at the bottom of her bed, and had vowed to watch him even more closely since, as regards both her bed and the rations cupboard. Ahmed had been smoking hashish as usual. His bulging, blood-shot eyes and vacant expression gave him away, and even as she sat sipping her coffee on the balcony, she could see his bare feet sticking out beyond the corner of the terrace. He would be sleeping off his drugged stupor in the warm morning sun just round the corner, and would be too far gone to realise that his feet were sticking out beyond the wall. She would not disturb

him just now, but would let him slumber on, in the hope of his being sober enough in an hour or two's time to discuss the dinner menu.

The weather should surely cause her no qualms. It was already warm although it was October, and by 7.00 p.m. there should still be enough warmth left on the front balcony to make for a cosy pre-dinner drinks session. If later it turned cooler as the sharp sea breezes got up, it would not matter greatly, for by then the guests would be moving indoors for dinner.

It was to be an informal Saturday evening get-together followed by dancing at the Union Club's weekend hop, and they had invited friends from the British Community together with H.M. Minister and three Secretaries from the Embassy who had stayed behind as duty officers for the summer (it was the regular annual routine in those days for a rump of diplomats to stay for the summer, and to transfer to Alexandria when the King took up residence at Ras el Tin Palace, while their wives and remaining Embassy staff left for extended holidays in Europe). The diplomats, and especially the genial good-natured Minister, would mix well with their friends from the business world of cotton and shipping, and should ensure that the party went at a lively, exhilarating pace.

They were taking it easy over the coffee, probably their last chance to relax before the end of the day, when a phone call from the Minister shattered their peace and galvanised them into action. "Good morning, old boy", he said, "I'm ringing because I clean forgot I had invited Omar Pasha and his wife to dinner this evening". Not a word more, certainly no excusing himself from the party, just an awkward pause. Peter had not time to consult Jane, but reacted quickly and instinctively. "Why

not bring them along with you? They would be very welcome, and we would all be delighted". "Are you sure, old boy? That's marvellous! See you at 7 o'clock then". He rang off, leaving Peter to explain to Jane, and to sort out with her what was to be done about their table arrangements. She was very practical about it. "We could extend the table, darling, but the dining room is just not big enough to take it. We will have to set it out on the back balcony, where there's plenty of room. But it might be too chilly for the ladies there at this time of year, and there just isn't enough lighting". There was no doubt about it, the back balcony, a fine lofty trellised bower decked with vines, jasmine and plumbago, would have to be converted into the most comfortable venue possible, if it were to be honoured by the presence of so high-ranking a personality as Omar Pasha and his beautiful young wife. They decided to make it impervious to the chilly night breezes by hanging up oriental carpets, the best they could find, as tapestries all round the trellising, very much in the style of a desert caravanserie. Any electrician would soon be able to rig up an extra flex for a couple of table lamps, if only they could find good ones on a Saturday morning.

They had to move quickly if they were to get it all done in time. Finding an electrician was easy enough, but the lamps and carpets entailed much journeying up and down the long, narrow tongue of land sandwiched between the sea and Lake Mariut which is Alexandria.

The shops in Rue Sherif were still open when they arrived, and they had no difficulty in choosing two tall, well-balanced table lamps, with lampshades decorated in rich red and orange tints, to impart a mellow glow to the table while giving enough light for the guests to see what they were eating. But the tapestries they had in mind

eluded them; they just did not seem to exist anywhere. They must have ransacked a dozen shops before a helpful Egyptian merchant suggested that they might try Murai Mohammed in Bacos Market, an entrepreneur well known for putting up just such damask and tapestry awnings at big Arab banquets – at a price. As luck would have it, they found him at home, a jovial, portly and plainly opulent businessman, who delighted in rolling out at the feet of his clients his most expensive Persian and Turkish carpets, then sitting over a sickly-sweet Turkish coffee to haggle about the fee. Shortage of time curtailed this essential part of the ritual, but, though deprived of his fun, he did give his customer a bargain price because Peter had quoted the Arabs' favourite bargaining gambit; "Niqsim el balad fee nussayn", or in plain English, "Let's divide the terrain in two", meaning to cut the difference between the two ideas of price by half. With his help they made a wonderful choice, and at once he rustled up a handful of craftsmen and despatched them to the Consular Residence. The tapestries were up by the time Peter and Jane had had lunch. They were a wonderful sight, the finest Bokhara, Shiraz and Isfahani carpets, in radiant hues and ingenious designs, with a silken sheen on their nap, completely enclosing the balcony on all sides and effectively shutting out the sharp sea air. The deep richness of their colour stood out even more in the glow of the lamps, making a vivid contrast to the resplendent crockery, sparkling glasses, and glittering silver.

A stiff breeze was blowing off the sea when all the guests had foregathered, and observing that Madame Omar was dressed in a lovely turquoise lace gown which set off her dark beauty perfectly, but which was much too flimsy for the chilly evening, Jane decided to cut short the drinks session, and suggested to Madame Omar that they

might go into dinner, led her guest through the house to their newly-created dining room. Gasps of amazement rose from their lips at the dazzling display which greeted them. Omar Pasha, visibly pleased with the tribute to Bedouin taste, was full of praise. “How splendid!” he cried. “You know, these carpets very often have a Koranic inscription in their centre-piece”. One of the most earnest Secretaries stepped smartly forward and volunteered, “I’ve been learning Arabic. Let me read it for you”. Unfortunately, Mursi Mohammed’s craftsmen had in their haste hung the carpets upside down, so to do so he had to turn his head a full 180 degrees. A moments’ hesitation, then “It says ‘This is the property of Mursi Mohammed of Bacos Market’!”. Omar Basha stared blankly at him. Peter could have punched him on the nose. Why had he not thought up a Koranic verse? After all, it did not require much inventive genius to repeat the Koran’s most famous surah of all, ‘Allah is great, there is no God but He, and Mohammed is His prophet”.

There was an embarrassed hush, as each guest struggled to supress his mirth and maintain a polite, diplomatic facade, and a heavy dampener threated to descend like a black cloud on the party. Luckily Omar Pasha burst into laughter, the others including the hapless Secretary gave vent to their pent-up amusement and joined in, and a jovial hilarity and warm intimacy took charge for the rest of the evening. Unfortunately, there were further trials to come.

Completely ignoring their presence and that of the chair and table legs, the landlady’s half-wild cats would persist in chasing each other across their favourite playground, much to the discomposure of the Minister who was allergic to cats, and it was only with difficulty and after much lunging at them with the carving knife that

Peter persuaded them to go home. The lamp flex and servants disoriented by hashish also did not go well together, and only the deftest of guiding hands made sure that the bowls of hot vegetables and the steaming roast joint landed on the table, and not on the neat sharkskin jackets of the men or the décolleté necks of the ladies. Fahmy seemed to have forgotten all his well-rehearsed drill, and had not yet presented any wine as the fish course approached its end. Nettled at the omission, for he had dearly wanted to show off his fine Moselles, Peter brusquely prompted him. “Oh yea, the wine”, he replied, flaying his arms about in the air. He rushed to the bar, wrapped up the whisky bottle in his napkin, and was just about to pour Madame Omar a very stiff tot indeed, when the long arm of the ever-watchful nanny reached out for his collar from behind the tapestries and jerked him back to reality behind the scenes, where the wine for the next course was waiting at room temperature, a very old Aloxe-Corton presented to Peter some years before in the vineyard itself.

It must have been well after 10 when they had finished their coffee. The conversation was lively, the atmosphere warm, and no one made a move to go, although Omar Pasha was restive and showing signs of wanting to retire, no doubt as much from fatigue as from a desire to be alone at last with his loving wife. To forestall a premature exodus, Jane quickly proposed that they should now move to the Union Club. Omar looked glum, and was just about to excuse himself when he was interrupted by Madame Omar’s enthusiastic acceptance of the invitation, for she was a sprightly young thing loving nothing more passionately than a dance. As is the wont with older husbands wishing to please their younger wives, he gracefully capitulated, and they all made their way to the Club dance.

From the moment of their arrival the Omars were the objects of much admiration and attention. The Nubian guarding the door bowed low in deference, although it was unheard of at that time for an Egyptian to enter this British holy of holies. The more senior British guests felt proud and honoured by his presence, and it did not take long for the more astute businessmen among them, especially the Jewish element, to realize that Madame Omar was very fond of dancing. They came up in droves to pay homage and to beg her to dance, and she sportingly accepted them all. Omar Pasha became progressively more morose and ill at ease. The Jewish community in Egypt had for many years been completely integrated into the Egyptian society, and mostly taken out Egyptian nationality, and had been greatly respected for their substantial contribution to music and the arts and to the country's financial and economic prosperity. But with a new Palestine war looming, it was not exactly a propitious time for his wife to be dancing with Jews, whose position must become more and more ambiguous as the hostility between Arab and Jew grew more intractable. He had to go, if only to keep his slate clean, and with a peremptory command to his wife, they took their leave and left.

And so it came about that the Egyptian Gazette's social column on the Monday morning announced that, "Owing to indisposition, his Excellency Omar Hussein Pasha and Madame have cancelled all their engagements for the next two weeks".

It is beyond the purview of this story to try and lift the veil of privacy from the laconic announcement, to unravel what lovers' chidings, proud defiance, fond reconciliation and blissful surrender lay behind it. Our tale ends with Jane thankfully slipping of her tight shoes and heaving a tired sigh of relief that at last they could

relax. In spite of the mishaps, her party had surely been a success. She was above all grateful to Mursi Mohammed for so promptly and so brilliantly coming to the rescue, and to her loyal and devoted servants, who had once again proved their worth, in spite of their pernicious addiction to hashish. But the nagging worry remained, and would no doubt surface at the next party, that however careful and detailed her planning, external forces over which she had no control were always liable to come in and temporarily take over – at least in that part of the world.

GOLFING TRIALS

We left Moscow, where no such decadent, capitalistic game of golf exists, in a raging blizzard, and arrived in our next post Alexandria in one of those scorching sandstorms known as a Khamsin, where mountainous columns of sand blot out the sun, and can in minutes strip the paint off your car and pit its windscreen if you are unlucky enough to be out driving in it. Such a sudden and vicious change of temperature was hardly bearable, and we thanked God we had given our faithful white Samoyed, Moiska to friends in the Moscow Embassy, rather than attempt to bring her to what to her would have been an inferno.

The storm subsided on the second day, leaving thick layers of grit and dust on everything, even to the furniture in shuttered rooms, and at last we could venture out to the Alexandria Sporting Club, that jewel of Britain's imperial past which the Nasser revolution left unscathed, no doubt because the Egyptian élite loved it as much as the British, for its indoor games, for sitting on the cool, shady balcony sipping tea, playing baccarat, exchanging gossip or just taking a fiendish delight in the physical agonies of the players below.

We took one look at the sporting English, lobster-red from the heat and exertion, bath towel wrapped tightly round their heads to keep the perspiration out of their eyes, as they chased after the tennis ball across sweltering red asphalt courts, then looked at each other, shook our heads, and in one breath said, "Not for us". In complete contrast, the cool, lush green fairways stretched out invitingly to the white boundary fences of the racecourse and beyond. Numerous groundsmen were busy

keeping it in perfect condition and preparing for the evening's inundation. For every evening after the last player had left they would open huge taps situated at vantage points around the course, and flood it with life-giving Nile water until only the raised greens showed above the water level. The rich colour and texture of the emerald green were thus preserved for next day's play. As if to emphasise the freshness of the game, comely ladies of all nationalities, in fashionable skirts and beribboned straw hats, with brims broad enough to ward off any rays from the blazing summer sun, strolled nonchalantly around, stooping from time to time to hit the ball, in that cool and collected way of the golfer, and with that exaggerated swing of the hips which ladies love to cultivate.

The choice in favour of golf was never in doubt, and we were soon learning its arcane secrets from mild little Angelini and his friendly assistant Hussein, who were very good at teaching the rudiments of the swing, but like all pros had the impossible task of imparting a skill which, beyond all the techniques and wrinkles, every golfer must feel for himself. The instinct is to hit as hard and as far as one can, to take an almighty swipe – and of course to miss the ball altogether. "Don't try to hit the ball, just take an easy swing, and let the club head do the work". All very sound advice for the seasoned golfer, but what does the beginner, wrestling at one and the same time with head, body, shoulders and wrists make of it? His head is instinctively raised, to follow his ball's flight and to know where to retrieve it. He sways, moves sideways, transfers his weight to his left foot too soon or too late, and the ball, faithfully reflecting every distortion, trickles a few yards, plummets to the ground like a seagull, or twists and turns to the right or left with a flight only reminiscent of a corkscrew.

"Look over the left shoulder on the upswing, and over the right on the downswing". Even now I can only look over my left and right collar bone, but the beginner, exaggerating every instruction, must tipple over either forwards or backwards. "Cock your wrist" was never fully explained, so that for many years my club head almost hit my left buttock and never returned in time to hit the ball fair and square. Slogs, slices, topping and skying were the order of the day, until many lessons on we began to feel the pivotal role of the body, the full pendulum arc of the backswing, the natural turn of the wrist, head down, relaxed rhythm, firmness with flexibility, and so on and so forth.

As if all this were not enough, Egypt and other remoter posts threw up their own particular brands of tribulation. The kites would be there very early, waiting to swoop down on the ball and carry it off to their nests, thinking they had a large succulent egg with which to feed their young. Maddening, especially when the replacement drive was a muffed shot. The hazards in Indonesia were even worse, and came in twos, large fissures in the petroliferous terrain down which the balls would disappear with depressing regularity, and the snakes infesting the course; they would if left alone slither harmlessly away before you approached, but the Indonesian caddies were terrified, as perhaps they had reason to be in their bare feet, and would round up the hapless snake and beat it to death with a club. "Ular" (Snake) was the first word we learnt is Bahasa Indonesia.

Ostensibly to guard against the kite's marauding raids, forecaddies were employed in Egypt for matches and tournaments, and by anyone willing to pay the stiff backshish. For they had a very important use, which was only to dawn on us much

later, when one day a lady friend, whose invariable wins used to baffle my wife, lent her her forecaddie. Now from going barefoot all their lives, the caddie's toes splay out, leaving a gaping hole between the big and second toes, big enough to grip the ball securely. Her caddy for the day had just such a gap, and as the game proceeded, used it to lift any ball in an awkward lie or in the rough, run forward, and place it in the middle of the fairway, forty or fifty yards further on. I imagine that if the backshish had been rewarding enough, they would have been happy to carry it even further.

The amateur championship was an important event in the golfing calendar, to which aspiring players flocked from far and wide. Everyone fervently hoped that he would not be drawn against John Plant, the reigning champion with a handicap of four over par, who had nothing to do but play golf. Ill-luck would have it that the draw fell to a friend from the Embassy in Cairo, a born golfer and scratch player, whose wood shots were a joy to behold as they soared straight and far on an ideal low trajectory. He must have had an off-day, or been unnerved by the formidable opposition, or something, for he lost all first 9 holes in succession and with them the game. He rang me up at the Consulate in the late afternoon. "Hello, old boy", he announced, "Would you do me a favour? If B_____ rings up to ask how I got on, could you please tell her that I was beaten on the 9th by John Plant? Thanks. I'll see you later at the 'Beau Rivage'". A reception, to which we too had been invited, was being held that evening in this lovely hotel, set in a dominating position on the Alexandria Marina overlooking the whole coast-line.

Time ticked by, 6 o'clock. 6.30, and still no ring from his wife. Finally, around 7.15, anxious not to miss the reception, I summoned the duty Consular messenger, a

willing but very dim Nubian boy orphaned in the war and given by the army the improbable name of Hussein Scout, and entrusted him with the message. “Hussein”, I said, “Have to go now. If Mrs _____ rings up from Cairo to ask how her husband played today, please tell her that he was beaten by John Plant at the 9th hole”. To make sure that he grasped the message, I gave him the message in English, then in colloquial Arabic using the word ‘madroub’ (beaten, defeated, struck) and in the classical Arabic, using ‘maghloub’ (defeated, vanquished). No room for misunderstanding. Or was there? “Yes sir, I know, sir. I will tell her”, he replied, eager to have something to do, and we left for the ‘Beau Rivage’.

What transpired next might have come out of the Arabian Nights. B_____ duly rang up, and the conversation ran something like this. “Oh, Mrs _____ your husband has been badly hit by Mr Plant at the 9th hole”. “Badly hit? What do you mean?”, she asked, greatly perturbed, “how did he hit him”. Hussein Scout would never have admitted he did not know, and invented the rest. “He was hit by the stick, I think”. “Where?”. “Over the head, I think”. “Then he must be in hospital?”. “Yes, I think so”. And so it transpired that while her husband was tripping the light fantastic at the ‘Beau Rivage’, she was ringing to locate him around all the hospitals in Alexandria, of which there were many, thanks to the past generosity of the foreign communities and religious orders.

After all the sun and colour to which we had grown accustomed, it came as something of a shock to play golf in Europe. Instead of shirt sleeves and white Navy shorts, we needed several layers of sweaters and on the coldest days woollen mittens, however much they might hamper the grip. Coldest of all was forest-clad

Luxembourg, but it was a dry continental cold which never interfered much with the game, for we seem to have played quite a bit with red balls on white snow. The fairways there were cut out of the wood, so direction had to be straight to avoid lost balls and unplayable lies. Everyone who could played, from relatives of the Grand Duke and his Chamberlain to Embassy and Commission staff, American businessmen and their wives, and lobbyists with the High Authority like myself. But it was never exclusive like the Brussels courses – Ravenstein, or Waterloo – where the subscriptions are so steep that, with little time to spare, we reckoned that each round would have cost us £15-£20; that is, if we could have afforded the entrance fee!

Not Filey golf club, but the clubhouse at Ganton, another Yorkshire golf course, summer 1968.

Now we have everything, well, nearly everything, for the sun is severely rationed, at Filey Golf Club, and at a very reasonable cost. The course is long and interesting, the surroundings with the sea and cliffs nearby attractive. Light if bracing

sea breezes caress the player in summer; and when in winter the N.E. winds straight from Scandinavia are too piercing even for three sweaters and mittens, there is a cosy bar and good company to welcome you in – a very warm Yorkshire welcome from solid Filey people.

A warm sun is shining after weeks of grey, stormy weather, euphemistically categorised by local folk as “fresh”, my day’s quota of household chores are completed, and I think I will play a few holes, or perhaps take a much-needed lesson from the pro on how to combine firmness of purpose with unlimited flexibility in the perfect swing.

STING IN THE TAIL

It had been Colin's most enjoyable weekend ever in Bangkok. He had volunteered for the unpopular courier run from Vientiane to the Bangkok Embassy in order to escape for a while from the pre-monsoon dust and heat, when the wide and swift-flowing Mekong River is reduced to a trickle, tempers are short, and the normally smooth running of the Embassy turns into a nightmare of petty quarrels and seemingly insurmountable problems. Bangkok offered him the refreshing breezes of her many waterways and the cool shade and hushed tranquillity of her serene temples, the spell of which is never shattered, however many grieving mourners or pilgrims might burn a candle or turn a prayer wheel for their loved ones, or roll a stone for the soul of their departed partner. He had also looked forward to being taken to the beach at Pattya, where the uncanny stillness of the miles of white sand is broken only by the wheeling of the birds in the eddies of warm air, and the rustle of the hermit crabs as they peer inquisitively over the parapets of their funk holes, and, if they think the coast is clear, scurry cautiously across the sand, with that weird sideways shuffle which ought not to make any progress at all, but which is really very fast.

He also had the most valid ulterior motive of all for his journey. His girlfriend Marianne, whom he had known in the French Embassy in Moscow, had written to let him know that she was arriving in Bangkok that weekend en route for the French Embassy in Vientiane. She was the ideal of every mans' dream, petite and beautiful, with black curls tumbling about her bright, smiling face, and with a placid and amiable disposition which made her many friends, and had drawn him close to her ever since

their first meeting. On hearing the good news, he had taken it upon himself to organise her onward journey from Bangkok to Vientiane, naturally by the longest route to give him as much time as possible with her, and had arranged separate compartments on the all-night train from Bangkok to Nong Khai (the Thai border town near Vientiane) for the Sunday evening of that weekend. Comfortable Pullman compartments, but falling somewhat short of Orient Express standards.

Colin's friends had left no stone unturned in making it a truly memorable visit. They watched the racing, played golf, and swam together at the exclusive country club, they visited night clubs so dimly lit that fellow guests were invisible, and ate at scrupulously clean outdoor Chinese restaurants where superb cooking whetted the appetite with such copious portions of crab claws, King prawns and Bombay duck as are never seen in their pale European imitations. They spent much time together in the intimacy of his friends' home, over leisurely meals or a drink, trying to catch up on all that had happened to them since they last met. Marianne responded in true Gallic fashion, encouraged by the all-pervasive festive mood and her appreciative male audience, and speaking English with that most attractive French accent, she chattered merrily on until bedtime. Friends had of course arranged that trip to Pattya. They sunbathed the whole day on wind-swept sand, making only occasional sortie into the foaming rollers, and when they were hungry sat down to a gargantuan picnic, the inevitable sequel of which was that drowsy half-sleep making even more delectable their awareness of the sun's warmth, the softness of the white sands and the caresses of the light zephyrs.

The greatest moment was yet to come, however. On the Sunday morning Colin took Marianne to the open flower market, a brilliant display of all the most spectacular tropical plants imaginable, showy double hibiscus which starts the day pure white only to turn to blushing pink as twilight falls, prolific apricot and purple bougainvillea, waxy sweet-scented cream frangipani, deep blue thunbergias, lantanas, ixoras, and, most striking of all, the whole range of orchids from the tender star orchid with its small white crystalline flowers to the cymbidium sprays bowed down under the weight of their delicately tinted trumpets. Set under gaily coloured awnings which dimmed the direct sunlight but suffused a translucent glow to everything as the sun's reflection danced on the surrounding canals, it presented a handsome picture which drew a gasp of wonder from Marianne. Fascinated, Colin plunged recklessly into buying all the plants he could, some specimens two or three times over, to bring form and colour to his own arid patch of a garden back in Vientiane. The car was soon full to bursting, but there was one more thing he really must buy. He had promised the little Laotian orphan he had adopted that he would bring him back some tropical fish, and there in a corner of the garden display area was just what he wanted, an aquarium with tropical fish so colourful that as they streaked through the glass tanks, they appeared like shafts from a rainbow. He could not resist it; he had to buy a tankful, together with a tin full of mosquito larvae which the astute Thai salesman persuaded him his fish could not do without. The car was by now so overloaded that poor Marianne was wedged tight between the hibiscus and the tank. She remonstrated, but thought better of it and held her tongue, conscious of the greater cause for which she was sacrificing her comfort.

Their goodbyes said, they made their way to the Nongkhai express. The porters lifted down the consignment one by one, and as the pile grew, the sleeping car attendant stood dubiously by scratching his head. “I don’t think we can get all that into your compartment,” he said politely, “you take the tank and tin can, and I’ll put the plants in the shower cubicle at the end of the corridor.” Colin thanked and duly rewarded him, and the couple settled down, glad to have the twiggy mass off their hands, and thought no more about it.

Until a loud bellow roared down the corridor audible even over the rhythmic rattle of the train wheels. The shrubs were just too many, and too thick, for the human form to insert itself comfortably under the shower, least of all the portly figure of the G.O.C., Northern Command Area. He had bent down to pick up the soap and pricked his bottom on the bougainvillea. He stormed down the corridor, burst into Colin’s compartment where the two had looked forward to a quiet evening’s courting, and threatened the direst penalties for such lèse-majesté, even to a worsening of Anglo-Thai relations. Colin deployed all his diplomatic skills to turn away the general’s wrath, but it was Marianne who saved the day. Smiling sweetly at him, she spoke about the repercussions of the war in Indochina, the threat to Northern Thailand in particular, and the grave responsibilities which must therefore rest on his shoulders. He was flattered, and preening himself like a cock pheasant began to expound on the extent of the threat, and his plans to avert or at least minimise it. The whisky did the rest, and cordial relations were restored; but at a price, for they had lost their quiet evening together.

The general left at about 11, and with so many hours' journey ahead of them, they settled down again to enjoy each other's company for a little longer. But not for long. Their moments of bliss were abruptly shattered as two or three mosquitoes, which had been hovering over them with that particularly unpleasant high-pitched hum, decided of one accord to attack. The larvae were hatching out in the damp heat of the tropical night, first one, then another, and another, until a hungry black cloud bore down on them as savagely as any infuriated swarm of bees or wasps. They opened the door to flee, but this only increased the pandemonium as their tormented fellow passengers came threatingly at them to protest. "Get the flit gun," one cried. There wasn't one. "Open the windows," yelled another. They wouldn't open. At last in desperation Marianne, who was the really practical one, picked up the can of larvae and poured it down the lavatory, thus removing the source of the plague. Colin was cross at the loss of his fish food, Marianne's even temper snapped, and they quarrelled. That was the end of their intended intimacy, and with true Gallic haughtiness, Marianne stalked from the compartment and retired to the pure mosquito-free air of her own.

The atmosphere between them was strained the following morning as, in the warm morning sun and pure riverside air, they were ferried across the Mekong, on that rickety wooden raft which seems too ramshackle even for the foot passengers, let alone the cargo of cars and lorries it carries. She was particularly distant with him as she earnestly asked herself how, if she married him, she would be able to cope with all his eccentric ways and dog-in-the-manger attitudes. He had been frustrated by the unwanted interruptions of the previous evening, and quite unreasonably, but very

much in the manner of thwarted lovers, directed his irritation against the object of his love.

They went their own way as soon as they reached Vientiane, and for a short while did not seek each other's company, but the estrangement was not to last for more than a few days. As the weekend approached, Colin began to yearn again for her company, and it was high time he planted the mass of shrubs he had bought. They would all need careful soil preparation, siting and staking, for which another pair of willing hands would come in all too useful. And so he plucked up courage, rang her, and was delighted when, bitterly regretting their differences over so trivial an affair, she accepted, a little too eagerly, perhaps, than she should have done, to help him with the planting and to share his weekend with him.

Their close, happy relationship was soon restored as the serious business of creating a garden began to absorb them. They broke off from time to time for cool drinks, to prepare the evening meal, or just to laze in the shade, but by Sunday evening the garden was beginning to take shape, each shrub in its ideal setting, in well manured soil, securely staked and watered in. It was to become a firm link in the bond between them, for whenever Marianne entered through the gateway, now arched with a showy apricot and salmon pink bougainvillea, and saw exotic hibiscus and thunbergias beyond, she would smile at the recollection of their origins in Bangkok's Sunday morning market and the agonizing train journey which had really brought them closer together after all. Once married, however, her keennesss to help with the gardening quickly evaporated. She unilaterally declared the hard part of it his province, and as all wives contrive to do, contented herself with cutting flowers, floral arrangement, much

unsolicited advice on siting and landscaping, and just sitting back in the chaise longue to issue directions to him and to appreciate the garden’s beauty and Colin’s hard spade-work in maintaining it.

THE PIANO LESSON

As long as he could remember, Albert Thistlethwaite had been passionately fond of playing the piano. There was one bad spell early on, when as a small boy he would revolt against being kept in to practice, away from his playmates and football in the alley, and would take it out on his parents' most treasured possession by kicking it as hard as he could. But this phase soon passed as a fuller understanding of music and greater facility on the keyboard led him to boundless horizons, across placid seas and billowy clouds, to distant lands, with sun-drenched beaches and gay feasts and carnivals. His beloved parents and elder brother encouraged him as much as they could, but no one ever explained to him what sacrifices were needed to become a great pianist, the hours of lonely practice, the years of repeating difficult passages until they became automatic, the endless, never to be satisfied striving for perfection. He invariably fell miles short of his goal, and was made painfully aware that self-tuition would never take him beyond the intermediate, competent, but fallible standard he had reached, and that he would need the expert guidance of a master to break through the barrier and advance to higher stages of virtuosity. He made up his mind that he must wherever possible find a master to guide him; but this objective was to prove more elusive than he had ever imagined.

His greatest enemies were time and the inexorable demands of other masters, the grammar school and university calling for ever more hard work and study, the war years teaching him the rough martial arts, which left no appetite for anything so fancy as piano-playing. And so it was not until after the war, when he was in his first

diplomatic post in Moscow, that he had anything like the spare time needed to give the piano the respect it demands and deserves. The Soviet authorities generously cooperated by providing him with a fine German grand piano, but unlike today, there was no teacher, or course at the Moscow Conservatoire, to help him unfreeze his fingers stiffened by the enforced inactivity of the war years. The Soviet musical profession had, like every other, been decimated in the horrors of the Nazi invasion.

It was a beautiful instrument, but suffered great indignities when it was delivered one icy cold winter's morning, across snow blown into great drifts, and with dark, scudding clouds threatened more. As the six stalwarts swung it down from the lorry and across the ankle-deep snow, loud jangles of protest issued from its inside, growing to a strident crescendo as they hauled it through the French windows into the stifling hot-house temperature of Moscow town's central heating supply. They then had the nerve to advise letting it settle for 48 hours before playing it, as if any more harm could be done by Albert's delicate touch! They would not accept any payment for their services in roubles; sausage and black bread, and a bottle of vodka, quickly uncorked by a sharp tap on its bottom, and as quickly demolished between them, was all they asked for.

He spent many happy hours playing that piano, ensconced in the warm, cosy sitting room, the oak panelling providing a perfect sounding board (as well as a snug refuge for the families of rats nesting behind it). He could now escape on quiet evenings from the tedious platitudes and repetitious slogans of the Soviet press, the trying hurly-burly of Moscow social life, and the bleak daily routine of trudging through the snow and slush. Music-lovers from the Embassy and foreign community

flocked round in search of a respite from the psychological tension engendered by the total isolation and the round-the-clock surveillance which it seems to be the eternal lot of succeeding generations of Moscow's foreign colony to have to bear. Many hilarious occasions helped to while away this time; Alexander would play the Russian pieces he had been brought up on, ending with an impatient discordant thump whenever his technical skill ran dry; Jack would execute Rachmaninov's second piano concerto in grand style, with all the flamboyant gestures and air and graces of a pretentious virtuoso. Other performances were ruder, but nonetheless contributed to the conviviality which passed the hours and evenings that would otherwise have been spent in loneliness and boredom.

Ostensibly to give him a change for the better, the Foreign Office next posted him to one of Egypt's delectable fleshpots, which even in 1948 lacked for nothing. He was in luck, for he succeeded in finding both a fine Bechstein upright and an enthusiastic tutor in the smiling, happy-go-luck Piero. In true Italian style, Piero taught him all the rubato playing, warmth of expression and musical sensitivity he could wish for, and Albert felt a sense of great loss when he eventually left to set up his own quartet which was to win a high reputation in French musical circles.

What Piero had left unsaid and undone was made good with a vengeance when some years later Albert persuaded another master, Victor, to give him lessons privately. Victor brought to his lessons all that is best in the German tradition; precision, exact timing, close attention to detail, and a firm touch making every note sing its full value, while maintaining the greatest possible flexibility. Understanding the instruments' demands and his pupil's shortcomings, however, he let much go by

default, only to come back at every turn to the essential simplicity of music's message. He treated the great masters with respect bordering on reverence. "Say a prayer before each piece", he would remark devoutly, with the same fervour which radiates from all his works, compositions of great freshness and originality which have justly brought him renown.

The discipline to which the schooling of his two masters had subjected him was to stand him in good stead in the wilder parts of the world to which in due course he was posted, and where no such amenities as he had enjoyed were to be found. A powerful self-confidence and will-power had gradually been built up within him and had taken command, so strong that he would gladly accept, without fear or flinching, the material hazards and political dangers these posts flung at him. He could resign himself to all the upheavals in store, provided that he could find a decent piano to play, and gather around him like-minded musicians with whom to share his enjoyment.

He was rather spoilt in Indonesia, thanks to a brand new Steinway concert grand he managed to hire, for the absurd rental of £2 a month! "You can have it for £2 a month", the rather phlegmatic Dutch owner of the music shop had said. "You're joking", Albert replied. "No, I'm not" came the riposte, "It's far safer in your residence than here. It's yours, provided I can borrow it back whenever there is a concert". A superb instrument, fully tropicalized, the ivories pinned down instead of glued, and all the felts and woodwork poisoned against the white ant, that dreaded maggot which can reduce any but the hardest woods to powder within hours, and had already reduced a case of Albert's sherry to nothing but the bottles and metal tops. The cool, lofty marble reception room provided the ideal setting for the main recitals

Albert and his friends gave, and only twice during the whole of his stay was the piano called upon for a public concert. The resonance of the room accentuated the Steinway's crystal tones, and as the music echoed through the tall open windows and doors down to the river, it would challenge the nightingales to match it with their own pure, limpid song.

It was much tougher going in the other difficult posts, the Yemen for instance. Albert's Bechstein had been transported from Aden to Taiz, at that time the capital of the Imam Ahmed's kingdom, over terrain which it would be a euphemism to call a track, 125 miles of huge rocks and boulders, dried-up river beds and paths fit only for the mountain goat. The casing withstood the severe jolting, but the strings were knocked completely awry, and jarred hideously as the piano was hoisted through the rough-hewn aperture of the upper room window. Four lusty German technicians, there in Taiz to build of all things an automatic telephone system, helped him to put it together again, but despite their repeated efforts they never succeeded in tuning it to last for more than a day. They would sit round every evening discussing, and as the imbibing progressed, disagreeing about this or that pitch, only to be greeted the next morning by the same hideous cacophony. Eventually one of the Germans spotted the cause. The Yemeni craftsmen builders (who are incidentally outstanding stone masons and carpenters) had used tamarisk trunks, gnarled by the ferocious heat, for the beams of the Legation building, so that the floor of the upper room sagged towards the centre, thus throwing the piano strings permanently out of true! A spirit level, a few chocks here and there, and a liberal dram of a harder spirit sufficed to put the tuning on course for the rest of his stay in the Yemen.

This episode bears eloquent testimony to the sturdiness of the Bechstein. It survived all the tribulations inflicted on it on its odyssey to Mongolia, the days of rocking to and fro on the Trans-Siberian from Moscow to Ulan Bator, the precarious tossing about on a lorry from Ulan Bator sidings to the Hotel, and finally the rough manhandling and scurrilous cursing of the six Mongolian wrestlers who helped to lift the piano's dead weight up the stairs to the Ambassadorial suit.

The Mongolians are a cultured and musically very gifted people, and the grand was put to many valuable uses encouraging their talents. But again the tuning proved to be almost an insoluble problem, until it was decided to tune it by accordion, which maintains its pitch at all times and even in that severe arctic climate. Two accordionists were accordingly assigned to him for the job, spirited young fellows who seemed to savour Schubert and Chopin with as much zest as his Scotch.

Laos was the most remote and hair-raising post of them all. It was not unusual there for the recitals to be interrupted by external forces, as when an untropicalised Yamaha seized up through excessive humidity in the middle of a performance, or a sudden tropical storm drowned the soft cadences of a Brahms Intermezzo as the sheets of rain bounced off the corrugated iron roof. But the wild life usually quietened down when he played. Emerald geckos with their bright ruby-red eyes and rough, scaly armour would peer over the top of the upright, curious no doubt to discover what had caused the shattering noise disturbing their slumbers. Snakes abounded, and slithered softly into the shack, not at his feet, thank God, but into the darker recesses and under the chairs. "Leave them alone, and they'll go home", he would mutter anxiously to himself, for he knew from his orchid expeditions that, left to themselves, snakes prefer

to get out of the way. But the melodious sounds fascinated them, and they only left after the last notes had died away. He thought he had made an even bigger break-through in man's communication with the animal kingdom, when one day the tiny Rhesus monkey pet of an American friend jumped on to his lap as he was playing, and lay straddled across his right knee, staring soulfully up at him with her mournful protruding eyes. "What a conquest", he thought to himself, "this must surely go down in zoological history". Great was his disappointment when the reason for the little creatures bliss dawned on him. Every up and down movement of the pedalling was scratching her back against the edge of the keyboard, releasing her from the everlasting purgatory of the fleas, at least while the pedalling lasted!

With all this wealth of musical experience behind him, it was foregone conclusion that on his retirement (which came early because of all the difficult posts in which he had served), Albert would devote all the time he could to the piano. He ran at once into grave problems. So far he had commanded a fairly wide range of well-known classics, but now, with all the leisure time he could wish for at his disposal, he set himself the task of covering the whole classical repertoire, and, of course, badly over-reached himself. He just had not attained that standard of technical excellence which could master with ease the towering difficulties of the repertoire's great works, Chopin's B minor sonata, for instance, or Schumann's F sharp minor sonata, or for that matter Liszt's prodigious output. His frustration knew no bounds, as he began to realise that he had been playing the same pieces, day in, day out, and making no progress. He sat down in desperation to think out what should be done. A born perfectionist, there was really no other solution for him, if he were to continue at all.

He had to turn again to an expert tutor for guidance, or perhaps to a masterclass. He browsed through the musical journals in search of the ideal teacher, and was eventually attracted by a most seductive advertisement in a French magazine, to the effect that Mlle N., who lived in a small fishing village near Marseilles, would be disposed to take one or two advanced pupils not averse to the immense task confronting them. Albert was all the more intrigued because of Mlle N's., reputation, not only as a leading exponent of the piano, but also as one of the most beautiful women in France, cold and distant in manner, perhaps, but with a sparkle in her eyes and a briskness in her gait which revealed a vivacious personality and an all-consuming love of life. He lost no time in writing, in his most polished French, begging her to accept him. She replied quickly, saying that she never accepted anyone without an audition; would he please practice a piece of his choice, and come along in a month's time. So began the most fateful relationship of his life.

Overjoyed, he ran through his old favourites, debating for a long while whether it should be this one or that. He ought, for a lovely French lady, to have chosen Debussy, one of his light, translucent Arabesques, for instance, which would have been well within his capabilities. But he wanted to impress, and chose instead one of the hardest works, Brahms' very last composition for the piano, the great Rhapsody Opus 119. A work of rugged, primeval power, monumental pyramids of sound reaching up to the Heavens in homage to music, a paean of thanksgiving from its grand opening chords to the resounding finale. He plunged into the long, strenuous practice the work demanded with all the happy abandon of a two-year old setting out on his first walk, and made progress, although the five hours he could spare every day

of that month fell far short of the long apprenticeship the work called for. But he was confident he would make a good showing on the day.

He nevertheless felt a tremor of trepidation as he approached the villa, a pleasing white Mediterranean-style house surrounded by sun-baked courtyards and shady arched patios, nestling against the pine woods of the hills overlooking the bay. The lizards scampering over the patio walls reminded him of the emerald geckos he had charmed out of their hiding place in Laos, and his thoughts flashed back to the full-throated song of the nightingale in the starlit night of Java as he heard someone playing the most delightful Mozart, to his ear without a fault.

Albert Thistlewaite dreamt of one day becoming a concert pianist, but needed the guidance of a master.

The prim little maid led him through the hushed hall and showed him into the salon, the fresh beauty of which took his breath away. Large enough to hold two suites, in light green brocade to match the tapestry, it was flanked by two leaded

French windows, all tall as the room itself and leading out into an Italian garden resplendent with acacia, plumbago and scented white jasmine. A semi-circular display alcove facing him contained a marble bust of Beethoven, rather out of keeping, he thought, with the delicate touch of the French decor. Mlle N. stood waiting there to receive him, dominating the room with the sheer strength of her personality, and riveting Albert's whole attention on her presence. Dressed in pale blue to match her eyes, her jet black hair immaculately arranged in a trim French-style bun, the sunlight thrown back at him in the dazzling brilliance of her necklace, she appeared to him like some imposing Grecian goddess, and he later had to admit that at that instant an overwhelming desire to come closer and embrace her had come over him. She was not unmindful of his admiring gaze- and his distinguished military bearing – and betrayed in it the warmth of her greeting. But the split second of magic vanished, and resuming her facade of aloof detachment, she waved him into an easy chair, to return without more ado to the little blonde girl who had been playing such exquisite Mozart.

He settled back to listen, and a warm feeling of well-being came over him. He began to daydream of future lessons, of piano duets with Mlle N. at his side, of picnics on the sunny beach or in the cool shade of the pine woods, and of romance blossoming out of their shared passion for music. His reverie was rudely shattered by her sharp rebuke to the little girl. "Your timing is all wrong, listen to the metronome", she was saying, "you haven't done your homework, and I'll tell your mother". She put on the metronome, and only then was it just noticeable that the tempo was dragging. The little girl wilted, but her playing did not seem to suffer. At last the girl's mother came to pick her up, paid the fee, and nothing was said.

Albert was badly shaken, and trembled at the thoughts of the massacre awaiting his rendering of Brahms, if this was the treatment meted out to well-nigh perfect Mozart. He shrank deeper and deeper into his chair, and clutched his music more tightly to his side, as if the tornado would tear it away from him. “Now Mr Thistlethwaite, what have you brought along?”, she asked, turning to him with a winsome smile. “Brahms Rhapsody Opus 119”, he muttered, half attempting to disguise the fact. She stared at him in sheer incredulity. “You must be good, then, who were your tutors?”. He stammered out their names and reputations, overcome with stage fright. “Never heard of them. Well, let’s hear what you've brought”. By this time he was petrified, and completely forgot as he sat down to adjust the Beethoven stool from the girl’s height to his. With Mlle N. sitting immediately over his right shoulder, he began. Years of training deserted him. He broke out in a cold sweat, and his leaden fingers refused to do what he was asking them. He realised that he must be playing at less than half the required speed; there was no mishap, but of course at that speed all hope of interpretation had disappeared. The ordeal over, he just sat back exhausted, his arms hanging limply at his side.

She never told him what she had thought at that first meeting. She was no doubt exasperated at all the amateur, even beginner’s mistakes, and angry that he had had the nerve to come to her at all. There was a deathly hush as the notes died away, longer than any he had ever experienced on Armistice Day. It must have been five minutes before she broke the silence with a deep sigh and the verdict. “Well,” she said, “I loved your great sensitivity, but your technique is shocking. I will accept you as my pupil, provided you do exactly what I ask you to do. At least five hours a day practice,

and please follow implicitly the exercises in this book". She marked off half the book, easy classical pieces broken up into runs, arpeggios and chords intended to be practised until they became automatic. Perhaps to raise his morale and show him that all was not lost, she also set him a Bach suite, to be completed by the next lesson the following month.

He returned home as satisfied as might have been expected, and impatient to start. He loved the Suite's dance sequences, particularly the Gigue at the end, and thought highly of his efforts by the time his next lesson came round. But he never got to the Gigue, nor for that matter beyond the first few bars of the first sequence. "Who taught you to finger it like that?" she snapped at the very first chords. Albert pointed to the editor's name at the top of the page. She looked at it, then with one bold sweep of her thick carpenter's pencil struck it out. "He's no good", she declared, in a tone that brooked no contradiction, "and please do not come again with your music so clean and devoid of markings. I want to see your fingering and phrasing, which is all as vital to the mastery of the piece as anything else". She was cross with him for his dilettante approach and neglect of detailed preparation, and cross with herself for giving vent to her feelings. He too was angry at the slight of his hard work, but suppressing his feelings, listened intently to all her criticisms, and vowed to do better next time.

For the second lesson she set him some Scarlatti sonatas and Chopin Mazurkas, for dexterity of fingering, clarity and sharp brilliance. The same thing happened. An early disagreement about balance between the hands roused her Gallic temper again, and left him non-plussed and apologetic, anxious to make his peace in order to stay with her, both for her tuition and not least just to be in her company. And so the

lessons continued, hanging by a hair's breath, an unbridgeable void preventing any agreement between them. Mlle N. was wanting to impart to him all the techniques, the precision and the minute attention to detail which make the professional pianist, while Albert was prepared to settle for a lesser competence, realising the mountain of work that would be needed to achieve her objective. Inevitably they quarrelled, Mlle N. unable to control her outbursts or stop upbraiding him, he resenting it but accepting it philosophically, if only to continue being with her.

The dam burst after a few months. It was a hot, sultry afternoon with a Saharan sirocco blowing and temperatures well into the 90s, and Albert had had an exhausting journey. He found Mlle N. reclining on a settee, listless and irritable, and quite clearly even less inclined to tolerate his imperfections. A new disagreement, to Albert trivial, to her all-important, sparked off the row, only this time she went on to accuse him of coming to her under false pretences, frittering her valuable time away, refusing to listen, and so on. Albert choked back his indignation, for she was at her loveliest when angry, and made to go. He could have chided here with her unbending severity, her excessive criticism, and her failure to praise the progress he had made, but deciding that it would make no difference and might exacerbate the situation, he walked in stony silence to the door.

She blushed profusely and bit her lip as she realised he was going. She struggled desperately to suppress her pride and beg him to stay. He was almost at the door when, her finely chiselled features white with anxiety, she got up and rushed towards him. "Don't go, my darling!" she cried, flinging her arms around him, "I love you, stay and be mine. I want you for my own. I have so much wanted to give you all I

know, and to make you the finest pianist in the world". Deep-rooted emotions of love, passion and rapture welled up in him, wiping out in one swoop the irritations and frustrations of recent months. He bent down and kissed her passionately and with all the reverence of a lover. "My darling", he muttered, "I love you, I have loved you ever since our first meeting. I have done all I can to please you, however much I might have fallen short of your dreams. I long to shower all my love on you, and my happiness is at your side". Joy and bliss mingled with their tender caresses as in ecstasy they sat together planning their future happiness.

Albert resting in between virtuoso practice sessions.

Their love and passion were matched only by their passion for music, and as the years went by and their numerous offspring bore witness to their undying love, the bonds between them were further strengthened by her constant guidance and patient

instruction, until the day arrived when technical difficulties were almost a thing of the past and he could devote all his time to moving interpretations of the great works of the masters. As he played, his mind would flash back to the many lonely but happy hours he had spent on the piano in such diverse and difficult parts of the world, and when the two of them played duets together, he remembered with affection the many hours he had played Mozart and Schubert duets with Victor. Only now it was different; his happiness was at last complete in the bliss of shared love and the devotion of a caring family around him. While they toured the concert halls of Europe together, they had now firm roots in the family and the villa in Provence, and Albert never let it be forgotten that his fame had been predominantly the work of his darling wife, who had so doggedly persisted, against his own instincts and lazy disposition, in making him a concert pianist.