

"S. O. S."

BY C. STANLEY G. MYLREA, M.D.



DR. MYLREA ON A SHIP OF THE DESERT

*On the march to Subahyeh,
December 18, 1917.*

Dear Mylrea:—

I am on my way back seedy; have had fever for five days and feel awfully weak—chills. Perhaps you could come out to meet me at Subahyeh or on the way. I'm in a funk that I may not be able to make Kuweit, if I get any weaker. The fever won't leave me, and I've come to a full stop two days' march south of Subahyeh. Could you send me some Englishman if you can't come yourself? Am wandering part of the time. Bring a small tent with you—I have plenty of provisions.

Yours sincerely,

R. E. A. H.

It was a cold winter's night for Kuweit and I was sitting in front of a nice fire about 8:30 o'clock when there was a loud knocking at the gate. "Who's ill now?" I thought, as I left the house to investigate. "May Allah make your evening good, I have brought you a letter from

the Colonel Sahib. Fast camel riders have but now come in from the desert with despatches for the Sheikh—this letter was among them, and I was bade deliver it with all speed.”

A letter from the Colonel Sahib! We had been expecting him back from the interior for some days, but did not know just how he was coming. Was he merely letting me know that he was almost home? On reading the letter, however, my first expectation was quickly dispelled. The Colonel was out there in the desert, alone, four days' march away; no doctor with him, no one to whom he could even speak English. The fearful loneliness of his position burned itself into my very soul as I stood there at the gate, a gale from the north howling round me, reminding me what the desert, the open desert, must be like at that moment. “I must see the Sheikh's secretary,” I said to the messenger. “Wait for me while I get a hat.” In a few minutes we were off to the secretary's house; we found him at home evidently expecting me. “Well,” I said, after the usual greetings, “when can we start?” “Oh! The day after to-morrow,” he replied quite naturally. “The day after to-morrow!” I cried. “The Sahib is ill. We must leave here to-morrow morning.” “I'm afraid it can't be done,” answered the secretary; “the camels must be got ready—tents and provisions must be collected. But we'll try.” “Can we see the Sheikh?” I suggested. “Possibly; we can go to the palace, but I fear we shall find that the Sheikh has retired for the night. Like his father, may Allah have mercy upon him, he goes to bed early.” It turned out as the secretary had feared—the Sheikh was not to be seen. So I did the only thing possible, made an appointment to see him next morning at sunrise, asked the secretary to speed up preparations as much as he could, and went home.

The Sheikh received me the next morning with the assurance that the Colonel was not very ill; he had questioned the men who had brought the letter. He had probably been able to travel on and might be within two days of Kuwait by this time. “Would I start to-morrow?” I said that I should like to start as soon as I could get ready. “You can start whenever you wish,” assented the Sheikh; so after a few minutes' conversation and some coffee I rose to go, leaving instructions for the caravan to come out to my house as soon as it was ready.

It was about noon when we rode away from Kuwait. Our caravan consisted of twelve camels and ten men, besides myself and including the two men who had ridden in with the Colonel's letter to me. These two men were fine specimens of the desert man, Rejaan and Aamr. I questioned them as to their ride in. “When did you leave the Colonel?” “Two days ago,” was the reply. “We were only one night on the road. By Allah! It was a terrible journey—rain, hail, thunder and lightning; our clothes wet through, our bodies worn out. We wished to die.” “My camel”—it was Rejaan who was speaking—“left camp with a fine big hump; he arrived in Kuwait with none—his

heart was broken, he was finished." "Your camel was no good," said Aamr, "mine didn't feel it. See. This is she, going back none the worse. She would do the journey over again under the same conditions and would take no harm." He patted the camel with his cane as he made the boast.

Outside the city we halted at some wells to fill the waterskins. This took about half an hour. Then we rode on till the sun was nearing the horizon and the sea had disappeared from view. I had asked the Sheikh for one small tent, but two large ones had been provided. The one the men put up for my accommodation that night was a most elaborate affair, a tent within a tent, four-square, and lined with fantastic embroidery, reminding one of the specimens of tent work that tourists buy in Cairo. The inner tent was twelve feet square, and I was told the whole thing was worth \$1,000 and was Persian work. As soon as my tent was up—an operation which was performed with a rapidity that rather surprised me—the men put up their own simple single-fly tent. In the meantime some of them had gathered a large quantity of desert brushwood and a fine fire was soon roaring to the skies. This fire served to cook dinner and to keep every one warm—it was amusing to watch the men sticking their bare feet into the flames and take no harm. This desert brushwood is a wonderful provision of nature; it is to be found growing almost everywhere in Arabia and furnishes pasture for the camels and firewood for man. In Kuwait it is the most popular form of firewood.

By this time the camels had grazed to their satisfaction and came running up to the camp begging for their evening meal of dates—in their importunity they fell over tent ropes and got in every one's way, with the result that fluent curses were rained upon them. A little later they were all couched in front of the men's tent receiving their portion with evident relish. You remember Kendrick Bang's definition of the camel? "The camel is a lumpy sort of a beast with pneumatic feet and a hare lip." It is a very good definition as far as it goes, but in reality the camel is a magnificent animal, without whose presence life in the desert would be impossible. He is one of the two essentials for existence in Arabia—the other one being the date.

At least two hours before sunrise I was awakened by the sound of some one pounding coffee. I was soon up myself and having my breakfast. By the time I had finished, the camp was ready to move on, with the exception of packing up my tent, which was all done in some twenty minutes. The morning was cold, and every one was glad when the sun's rays were high enough to be felt. We rode till noon, passing many miles away to our right, a large caravan of camels bound for the Nejd, and grazing as they went. Our halt at noon was only for about twenty minutes, just enough for the men to observe the noon prayer and make the inevitable coffee. Not far off was a small hill perhaps two hundred feet high, a conspicuous enough object in the

desert, and we had been riding towards it for hours. I now noticed two Arab shepherds standing on its summit, their figures sharply silhouetted against the clear sky. They, too, were performing the noon prayer, and one could not but be touched by their simple and at the same time artistic piety. Robert Hichens, in his "Garden of Allah," makes one of his characters say, "I love to see men praying in the desert." There is no doubt that in their way these childish, cheerful, hardy and enduring Bedouins live very close to Allah.

By late afternoon we were in sight of the small expanse of bare plain where the wells of Subahyeh are situated. There is nothing to remind one of Walter Scott's oasis in the desert, with its date palms and crystal water. Picture a lonely, muddy, filthy spot, littered with the leavings of a thousand caravans and pierced with three wells containing what I should think must be the dirtiest water in Arabia, for the mind can conceive of nothing dirtier. Three or four sinister-looking vultures gloated over the scene, completing the utter desolation of the landscape. I decided to camp as far away from the place as possible.

We had not been on the march long the next morning when we espied on our left a caravan making for the wells we had just come away from. My men broke into a shout, "This is the Sahib's party, if Allah will!" and urged the camels into a trot. I was not at all sanguine, for the caravan was quite a small one; but, with the men, it was a case of the wish being father to the thought. The strangers were merely ordinary Bedouins, and like all of the few people we had met since leaving Kuweit, could give us no news of the Colonel. It was now quite evident that he had not moved far from the place where he had written me. "We must push on faster," I said to the head man. He replied that we could move faster if our baggage camels were less heavily loaded. A caravan is like a squadron of cruisers going into action: the pace is set by the slowest, and it is not safe to separate. However, later on in the day we came on a party of shepherds and arranged with them to take care of the large tent, some other unnecessary impedimenta, and the two slowest camels. From then on for most of the time we moved at a steady trot.

That night the weather changed, and we had sharp thunderstorms, accompanied with hail which pounded the tent as if it would punch holes in it. Towards morning my servant came and asked if he might finish the night in my tent, as the men's tent was leaking just where his bed was. Morning broke clear and cold; all round us were pools of water: in fact, in places the desert was a silver sheet. One could not help thinking of the text, "He turneth the wilderness into a standing water." The men hailed the scene with delight, and hastened to fill all waterskins with the sweet, though muddy, water. Not only was it sweet, it was also beautifully soft, and I enjoyed several most excellent washes. It occurred to me that the rain was a fortunate thing for the

Colonel, as his camp was a long way from water. We were still without news of him; in fact, we had seen no one for twenty-four hours. There was a fair amount of life about, but it was the life of the unconscious denizens of the desert. On several occasions we sighted gazelles, now and again a hare darted past us; we even saw a badger, rather a rare animal in the desert. There were a fair number of sand grouse and wild turkeys about, while meadow larks were everywhere. There were plenty of birds I was unable to name.

The perspective of the desert is interesting to one unfamiliar with it. Small elevations are visible from comparatively great distances and appear very much larger than they really are. At one time I had noticed a mound in the distance for at least half an hour, but when I rode up to inspect it, it proved to be only a grave with the earth mounded up to a height of a couple of feet or so. Some one had fallen out on the march and had been buried where he fell. A lonely grave in the desert! Here another delay took place. One of the camels had dropped his load, and I muttered to myself Kipling's lines, "Somebody's load has fell off in the road—Wish it were only mine." It was now noon, and I realized that we must reach the Colonel's camp that night. I arranged, therefore, to push on and let the baggage animals come on after us as best they might. Before long they were far behind and we were covering a good seven miles an hour.

All at once as we topped a rise in the ground a caravan came in view. From the very first it was almost certain that it was the object of our search. I was sorry that I had omitted to bring my field glasses. The caravan consisted of some fifty camels, besides two horses, and a couple of the rather rare Arabian antelope, the Oryx Beatrix. These latter are white except for black patches on the forehead, the underbody and legs being also black. Their horns are long and straight, and the alignment of the horns is so good that in the distance, seen in profile, the animal seems to have only one horn. This has led to the rather far-fetched idea that the Oryx is the unicorn of Job. It is extraordinary what some people will say. As we approached each other I tried to make out which of the riders was the Colonel, but was unable to recognize him, and it was not until we were quite close that in the bearded Arab who now rode towards us I knew my old friend. Evidently he was better or he would not be marching. "It was awfully good of you to come out to me. When did you leave Kuwait?" was his first simple greeting in rather a weak voice. "We have been just seventy-two hours on the road," I replied. "You have done very well," was his comment; "suppose we camp here," he went on; "I think I have ridden enough for to-day." So we camped there and then, and soon he was telling me how the fever finally left him the day previously, and he had broken camp some three or four hours before. The next day was Christmas Day, and in the morning as soon as it was light the whole camp put on its best clothes and visited first the Colonel's tent and then mine, to wish us the equivalent of a Merry Christmas.

That night the Colonel and I had an excellent Christmas dinner—mock turtle soup, sardines, mutton chops and kidneys, roast wild turkey, and a real Christmas pudding from London. We finished up with hot chocolate which the Colonel had made with his own hands. My host was not able to do the same justice to the cheer as was his guest, but still it was something to be able to celebrate the day if only by watching some one else eat.

The ride home was enjoyable but uneventful. It took four days, as we did not hurry. At intervals we were saluted by men who had come out with letters from the Sheikh of Kuwait, asking after our healths, etc. At midday on the last day of our journey, as we approached Kuwait, we saw that a large party of horsemen was coming out to meet us. Later on we could make out that the Sheikh himself, riding a handsome black horse, was heading the cavalcade. Presently the horsemen all wheeled far to one side, and then with tremendous shouts of "Welcome! Welcome!" they rode across our path at full gallop, firing their rifles at the same time. Our party stood still, acknowledging the salute by firing its rifles into the air. After this every one dismounted, and there was a general handshaking and exchange of greetings. This over, we remounted and proceeded on our way, the Sheikh and his horsemen going on in front and acting as escort. We were still some distance from home, and as we closed in on the town, the Sheikh allowed his party to get a long way ahead of us, while we on our part turned aside for a cup of tea at my house. The final acts in the day's drama were the call on the Sheikh at his palace and a reception given by the Colonel to all his men at his residence. The men consumed Christmas cakes and coffee, smoked cigarettes and withdrew. Last of all I withdrew, having been away from home exactly one week.