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Red Sea Adventure

by

Stornoway

I had a horrible sick feeling in the pit of my stomach as I stood on the quayside with David watching our ship sail away. We were in Aden, and having a few hours shore leave, we had hired a taxi to go up to the old Arab town in the Crater. After fixing a price with the driver, everyone seemed happy, until on the way back to the port the car stopped and the driver informed us that he had raised his price. It was an old trick, for he knew that if we were to rejoin our ship, we would have to pay what he asked. Unfortunately we just did not have enough money, though he would not believe that. It was only when I threatened to throw him out and drive his taxi back myself that we got any action. However the illegitimate son of a sea-cook and a Yemen prostitute wasted so much time that when we got back to the wharf the ship had already up-anchored and was heading towards the Far East and Australia.

I was speechless as we watched her sailing away. David was using some horrible language in a dispirited manner, and the stupid taxi-driver was laughing his silly head off. That made me mad. I caught him by the shoulders, twisted him round, and kicked his arse so hard that he went sprawling in the dust; then David and I walked away without paying him anything. That stopped his laughing. He was as livid as an Arab can be, but all the other Arabs, Somalis and Ethiopians who make up Aden's waterfront population were highly amused. But as I said, we just felt sick. Our ship had gone, and we were left stranded in Aden with only about fifteen shillings, which was the agreed taxi fare, between us.

We decided that our best plan was to find our Company's agent and seek his assistance in getting on the next ship going through; in the meantime we might scrounge some means of subsistence until that ship arrived. He was not very sympathetic, and wasted no time in having us arrested by the local police as deserters. But the Arab policeman was not a bad sort of bloke; he gave us the choice of staying in the cells, or of remaining at large and reporting every day. We did not like the idea of the cells, so we chose the latter course, even though it meant we would be sleeping on the beach, and the even more difficult matter of getting food had to be contended with.

We left the police station; it was late afternoon and stinking hot. The long white street which is the only real street in Aden was comatose. Even the camels looked as though they were ready to pack up and die. Odd merchants, thinking we were tourists, invited us into their scruffy bazaars, but without pressure. In the dark alleys in the shadow of the great grey mountain which lies behind the port the Arab youths whispered soft importunings and lifted their sarongs in furtive and surreptitious invitation. Little did any of them know that we could raise only fifteen English shillings between us.

We wanted some beer, but could not afford it. In Aden there are two little squares where trees and plants grow in a lifeless disinterested manner and where there are water fountains. These are the only places

in that town where there is any illusion of coolness at all. We went into one of these parks and joined a queue of natives lined up for the drinking fountain. Then David pressed my arm.

«There's a man over there», he said. «He's looking at us.»

The man was a fat and elderly middle-Eastern type. We found out later that he was an Armenian. He smiled.

David grinned back. Red haired and freckled with a turned-up nose in an impudent face, he was a fairly typical East-End Londoner. And he had a natural charm and honesty which made him generally popular. His was the type of colouring not often seen east of Suez, and therefore intriguing to Orientals.

«Maybe he wants to have you away», David whispered.

«You, more likely, Davie old by», I answered. «And someone has to earn the rent. We're broke.»

It was not difficult to get into conversation with the man. Among other things, we found out that he was in Aden to buy carpets. He invited us back to his hotel for drinks. He seemed to be very interested in David who talked incessantly about all sorts of things, including our bad luck. After drinking several beers at the Armenian's expense I decided to take a powder.

I thanked the fellow and said I felt ill and had better take a walk. David got up also.

«No, you clown», I whispered. «It's over to you. I'll pick you up in a couple of hours.»

He gave me a murderous look but I only laughed and was gone before he could argue. The Armenian looked very satisfied.

I spent two hours looking at the shops in the bazaar, bargaining with the merchants, although I could not have bought much with the money in my pocket. When I began to feel hungry I went back to the Armenian's hotel, hoping that David had managed to raise a small loan from our late host. David was waiting outside; he had a grin which extended from ear to ear.

«I've got five Egyptian pounds» he said, waving them in the air. «And you're a bastard for leaving me.»

«Honestly?» I asked.

«Very honestly,» he said. «He was easy, and I can go back tomorrow if I like. He wants to take me to Istanbul. I don't know if I ought to give you anything, as you walked out on me, crafty and all that.»

I led him towards a small restaurant I had noticed that was a bit cleaner than most of the other places and where we were the only Europeans. We ate an excellent cous-cous and drank a rough red wine. Afterwards we had cigarettes and some muddy black Turkish coffee and we felt very good with lots of cous-cous and wine inside us. The proprietor told us he could fix us up with anything we wanted for the night. But even though we had five pounds we did not want to pay out any more money than was necessary. I felt also that Davie had done enough work for one night, so we made our way to a quiet part of the beach where we decided to sleep the night. Before we slept we stripped off and bathed. The water was like milk. A couple of Arabs seemed interested in us but did not molest us. They probably recognised us for

what we were, a couple of sailors adrift, without enough money to pay for a hotel room. But I rather wished that I had bought a knife for each of us, this being a useful article for a sailor to have when stranded in the Middle East.

Next morning we had some coffee and sweet honey cakes sprinkled with spices before reporting to the police, and then we went back to the beach, feeling rather bored. It was early, but already blazing hot and our clothes were saturated with sweat. As we were idly watching an Arab dhow loading up to go somewhere a young Arab about the same age as ourselves smiled and spoke to us in English. We learned that the dhow was to leave that day for Alexandria. David and I looked at each other, each thinking the same thing. Should we wait in Aden for the Agent to exert himself and get us on another ship, or should we try to make Port Said in the dhow? All Middle Eastern ports are full of sailors on the beach waiting for ships. The only other alternative was to stowaway, and this is almost impossible in Aden where all the ships anchor offshore, making it difficult for prospective stowaways to get past police and other officials. In Port Said where ships berth alongside a landing stage, it might be easier. We enlisted the help of our new friend whose name was Ahmed to bargain with his skipper. The old boy was reasonable and agreed to take us for three pounds, so we embarked, being passengers for the first time in our lives.

The Arab dhow, whose design has not changed in the least detail since pre-Christian days, was very different from the luxury liner we had recently left. However, being passengers was a new experience. Our accommodation was a few square feet of deck under an awning right for'ard, and we had a couple of mats to sleep on. The rest of the crew, six in all, lived aft. For Arabs, they were a friendly bunch, except their main steersman, Hassan, who for the most part ignored us, except when we talked to Ahmed. Then Hassan gave us very sour looks.

The dhow made from two to four miles an hour, depending on the wind. In the day we lay under our awning, sleeping for the most part, or just talking. Early morning and late afternoon we swam, for we could swim as fast as the dhow could sail. We dispensed entirely with clothes, partly because it was too hot to wear any, and partly because we wanted to keep what we had reasonably respectable. The Arabs wore nothing much either, except the skipper and Hassan who wore the Egyptian galabieh, a garment like an old-fashioned nightshirt, without which no fellahin is properly dressed. We kept well out of the way when the crew made their five daily prayers towards Mecca, but we ate with them, out of a common bowl, taking care to use only our right hands in the Arab manner.

David was very popular with the crew and at night he spent a lot of time with them down aft. He said he was learning Arabic. He did pick up a few words, which did not sound very nice, and which sent the Arabs into roars of laughter when he used them. They found his red hair and very fair skin intriguing. Moreover, he had been circumcised, and the Arabs approved of that; in their eyes it made him half a Mohammedan. I, being dark, very quickly developed the same colouring as the Arabs. When Hassan was on the tiller, Ahmed used to come and

talk to me, but when Hassan was relieved at dawn, Ahmed would go back to his own quarters.

It took several uneventful days to make Suez and the entrance to the Canal. If there was any real tension on board I was not aware of it until one night, just before Ismailia, Hassan approached me, and without warning, hit me in the face. Muttering in his own language, he drew a knife from the folds of his galabieh. Ahmed stood by, looking not very happy. I noticed he had a cut lip. The old skipper took Hassan away. Ahmed did not come and talk to me that night, and David came back early from his nightly visit to the after end of the dhow.

«Hassan is being naughty», he said. «He thinks Ahmed is too friendly with you and he doesn't like Christians. The skipper thinks we should take off at Ismailia.»

There were British troops stationed at Ismailia, and leaving the dhow at that point seemed a very good idea. At least we would be among our own people, and if the skipper were prepared to drop us there, that would be fine.

We lay down on our mats, sweltering in the heat, and eventually went to sleep. Suddenly I woke in a cold sweat. Hassan was standing over me looking like a mad dervish, with his long curved knife in his hand. I hardly dared to move, but I gave David a surreptitious kick to wake him. Then I lashed out with my other foot, as hard as I could, kicking Hassan right in the balls. He gave a yelp of pain and doubled up. Then another body leaped out of the shadows. It was Ahmed. He crashed into Hassan and sent him hurtling on to the deck. David and I were quickly on our feet.

«Quick, over the side», said Ahmed. «Hassan is mad, and means to kill.»

We were only a few yards from the canal bank. Oblivious of the passing convoy of ships going south we all three dived overboard. Hassan was quickly on his feet. There was a flash of metal in the moonlight and a cry of pain from Ahmed as we hit the water. We scrambled up the bank, David and I dragging Ahmed between us.

Horrified, I saw the handle of Hassan's knife sticking out of Ahmed's back. I pulled it out. Red blood gushed from the wound. I tried to stop the bleeding with my hands.

Ahmed smiled. «Hassan did not like for me to know you», he said simply.

He groped for my hand and closed his eyes. I felt for his pulse, but there was no pulse there. I tried to feel his heartbeats, but could not feel those either, and he had stopped breathing. There was a lot of blood, but that too had stopped flowing.

David was sick.

«The poor little bastard is dead,» I said, feeling numb. «We can't do anything for him.»

We could see the lights of the army camp about a mile away. We left Ahmed on the canal bank; there was nothing else to do. We met no one as we walked towards the camp. The sentry at the gates nearly fainted when he saw our muddy nakedness. We told our story, or as much as we thought he ought to know. We told him that we had taken

passage on a dhow, and the crew had tried to rob us, and that Ahmed had been killed helping us to escape. The guard called another soldier who took us to a tent where we were given mugs of hot sweet tea and some clothes. We lay down on some rugs but I don't think either of us slept. David put his hand in mine; it gave each of us a feeling of security to know that the other was there.

The soldiers were very kind. Next day there was a truck going to Cairo. They hid us in the back of it, and in Cairo they gave us some money and put us on a train for Port Said.

«Best of luck, mates,» they called as the train pulled out.

We needed luck. We had a little money, but no papers or documents of any sort. Arrived in Port Said, we made our way through the squalid streets of the Arab town down to the waterfront. There was a big passenger ship alongside the landing stage. The passengers thronged the bazaars buying leather bags, pouffes, dirty postcards and Spanish fly. By careful listening we gathered that the ship would sail in a couple of hours for England. We waited round the waterfront trying to look like passengers, and when a large group of people made their way up the gangway, we joined them. In the confusion of claiming passports which the Egyptians always hold when passengers go ashore we slipped past the police and joined a group of people looking over the rail.

Eventually the ship up-anchored and sailed into the Mediterranean. We waited until the pilot went down the ladder and his launch disappeared into the night. Then we went to find the Chief Officer.

We knew what to expect. He would abuse us and then parade us before the Captain as a pair of stowaways. The Captain would read the riot act and we would be given some hard and very dirty work to do, for which we could never expect to be paid. When we arrived in England we would be landed in gaol, with a three month stretch for desertion, and another for stowing away.

As we waited outside the Chief Officer's door, David looked at me rather glumly.

«It's nice to be going home, Joe. I don't think I'll ever go to sea again.»

I thought of Ahmed and felt unhappy about him. I wondered if his body had been found. I pressed David's arm.

«Davie old boy,» I said. «We'll do our little stretch and then go west next time. To South America. What do you say?»

David grinned. «Where you go, Joe, I guess I go too.»

Just then the Chief Officer appeared. His face was as friendly as a sandstorm over the desert. But we were on our way home and it was too late for him or anyone else to do anything about it.

Zürich 1957

A last minute change of plan had prompted Zürich as a starting point for a fortnight's holiday. At 31, one chooses one's holidays with care. Why Zürich, anyway? Why not Copenhagen, Amalfi, Dubrovnik? Why not