

### BRITISH SUBJECT BY BIRTH\*

'Come in', said the boy, and my visitor entered, removing his sandals at the door.

'Come in', said I, in the sort of tone that tried to suggest that I was not being interrupted in the middle of Bardell versus Pickwick. The boy rumbled out a phrase from which I guessed the visitor wanted something for a cold. (I never could catch what the boy said - why is that one's own servants always seemed to speak much less clearly and connectedly than anyone else's?)

My visitor then explained he had a cold in a sort of English no easier to understand than the boy's Arabic; but I had nothing for a cold, not even an aspirin.

'Sit down', I said, offering my canvas easy chair. He refused it, and sat on the little upright one drawn up face to face with mine.

Hot rum, I thought to myself, is good for a cold, but there is only gin, and hot gin might not be. In any case, alcohol is forbidden to the locals. It would, I thought to myself, be a good thing to have some rum. I too have a cold. These houses in hot countries, I thought to myself, are so draughty.

My visitor had in the mean time been speaking, so I gave the reply suitable for all occasions: 'Pour coffee', I said to the boy. We both drank coffee and shook the cups to signify we had had enough.

'Where do you come from?' I said.

'I come from the next room', said my visitor. I noted this mentally; had I been more competent I should have realised this.

'I mean where does your family live?'

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\* This story was found among the papers of the late Peter Lienhardt and was dated April 14th, 1954. It is published here for the first time with the kind permission of Godfrey Lienhardt.

'I am not married.'

'But where did your father and grandfather live?'

'Have you heard of Latfffzsl?' (I didn't catch the name clearly.) From the expectancy on his face I realised that I ought to have heard of it, so I compromised.

'The name sounds familiar, where is it?'

'He was my grandfather. He was the English Consul in Muscat.'

'Have some chocolate.'

I learned that his family were of the Shi'a sect of Islam and came originally from Sind, but had been settled in Muscat for a couple of centuries. They are merchants who know Arabic and other languages, but even after all this time still speak and write in their original language among themselves.

'You have come here to work for Gray McKenzie?' I denied that I was working for the shipping agents, and tried to explain that I was doing some private research for a degree at an English university, and was going to write a book on the life of the people in the Persian Gulf for an examination.

'Yes, I understand,' said my visitor. 'You find out everything and write it down in a book, and then give it to the people who send you so that they know all about the country. The English are very great political men.'

'But I am not doing anything at all political,' I protested. 'I am working for myself.' He smiled an enormous clever smile and his eyes twinkled behind his blue-tinted spectacles.

'The English are very great political men,' he said. 'They wait and wait and they learn about everything, and they wait and then they say, "This is good for you. Let us do it for you," and "that is good for you. Let us do it for you." They wait and wait until they have done everything not from the top (here he made little wiggling motions with his hand just above the carpet) and then they say, "Why are you in this country? We have done this and we have done that and we have done everything, and this is our country. Go away." Tell me, is this not true?' I said I didn't really know.

'How do you say you not know and you are English? It is not possible. My grandfather was the consul in Muscat and I know. The English are great political men.'

Then my visitor had to go and I returned with relief to *The Pickwick Papers*. Had Dickens united the characteristics of Messrs Dodson and Fogg and of Mr Pickwick in one composite personality he would have described a truly eastern character.

The next evening, the pressure lamp lit up the face of my new friend peering in at me through the open window.

'Come in', said I.

'No,' he replied, 'I am just going to pray. I will come in after supper.' I thought of saying that I had to go out, for I feared that the political conversation would begin again, and if there is anything both tiresome and unprofitable it is trying to defend, let alone explain, the behaviour of the British Government in these parts. So many Palestinians had come up, even with printed copies of the Balfour Declaration, or more picturesquely, toying with small daggers, that I had come to wonder whether it would not be a good

thing if we really did what the newspapers blame us for doing, so that we might have a slight practical advantage with no worse reputation attached.

He did come back after supper. He asked my name and I told him it was Peter, then he asked me my father's name and I told him that the name of my family was Lienhardt. He told me his name and explained why the name of his firm was different.

'My grandfather was given the name of W.J. Town by an Englishman who was a big Pot.'

'I beg your pardon?'

'He was a big Pot from London. He came to Muscat and he said, "I will give you an English name. W.J. Town is a big English name." I do not remember the name of the man. What are the names of the big Pots in London, Mr Peter?' (He pronounced the name to rhyme with 'better'.) I put an expression of thought on, but the big Pot's name escaped us, even when I was, after some calculation, told that he died in 1942.

'What is a Khoja?' I asked.

'We are Ithnaashari.'

'That means that you believe in twelve imams? And that you come from India, so the name means that you are not followers of the Aga Khan. My friend said that the Ismaili religious leaders, the Aga Khans, were humbugs.'

'Our Imam is hidden and will not come again until the end of the world. The Aga Khans are not true Imams. The true Imam knows everything; he knows what is your front and what is your behind.'

I hastily made a jocular remark, for I knew that to laugh at his unfortunate expression would be most unsuitable, but also that laugh I must in spite of the seriousness of the subject.

'Listen, Mr Petal,' said he, responding jovially to the laughter, 'I will tell you a story. There was an old man who was an Ismaili and he sent his son to school to learn everything, and he went to school for a very long time, and when he had learned everything, got School Certificate etcetera, started to think about religion.'

'He thought he would be a Sunni because they will not sit with us, and he thought that the religion of the Ismailis was wrong, and so he followed our religion but he kept it secret. His father was a very old man, and he knew that he would die soon. So he went to the Aga Khan and said, "I want you to give me a paper so that when I die I will go straight to heaven." The Aga Khan asked if he had any money, and he said, "Yes, I have a lot of money." So the Aga Khan wrote out a paper and signed, and said, "Tell them to bury this with you, and the angels will not ask any questions when you are in the grave, but will take you to straight to heaven first class." The old man gave forty thousand rupees to the Aga Khan and went home and told his son and then he died. The son washed him and put the grave clothes on him, and took a paper with writing on and showed it to the religious men. He said, "This is the paper that the Aga Khan gave to my father so that he could go to heaven first class and I am going to put it in his grave clothes." The religious men said, "Yes, do that and he is sure to go to heaven first class, when the angels read the letter from the Aga Khan." So the son put the

paper in the grave clothes, and they buried the body. But it was not really the paper that the Aga Khan had written; the son had kept that paper and had written another one, and put it in the grave clothes.

'The next morning the son took the real paper that the Aga Khan had written to the religious men. He said to them, "My father came to me in a dream last night, and gave me this paper back, and said, 'Go and give the paper to the Aga Khan. Tell him that I gave him forty thousand rupees, and he gave me this paper, and when I was in the grave I gave the paper to the angels. I told them that the Aga Khan said that I could go to heaven first class. They said, "First class full, second class full, third class full. You'll have to go to hell.'" So the religious men sent a letter to the Aga Khan. The Aga Khan said, "Give him back the forty thousand rupees and make him promise not to tell anybody."

'He was a very clever political man,' said my friend. 'The English are like that. They go to a thief and say, "You go and rob that house." Then they go to the owner and say, "Somebody is coming to rob your house." The owner stands at the door and waits, and whilst he is at the door the thief comes in at another door and takes all his money. There was an English consul who was getting off the boat with his wife, when a Bedouin came and pinched his wife. The consul looked very pleased and gave the Bedouin two rupees. The Bedouin said to himself, "What is this? I pinch his wife and he gives me two rupees!" So the Bedouin saw the shaikh walking with his wife, and he went up and pinched the shaikh's wife. The shaikh turned round to his soldiers and said, "Shoot him", and so they shot him. When they told the consul what had happened, he laughed and laughed, and he said, "I do not like to shoot people myself."

'That is the way of the English,' said my friend, 'they wait and wait, and then they get what they want. This is what they are doing here. They have asked the Shaikh for three things, and he does not want to. The first thing is that he gives them the customs, like Bahrain.'

'Surely the British don't take any money from the Bahrain customs,' said I. He looked at me with an expression meaning, 'You're a caution.'

'Of course they do,' said he. 'They take all the customs and give the Shaikh a salary.'

'I cannot believe that,' said I.

'You ought to read the *Saut al-Bahrain*,' he replied. I didn't point out that the *Saut al-Bahrain*, in making a short report about myself, had been sufficiently inaccurate in its facts to make me sceptical of its reliability in greater matters.

'What else do they want the Shaikh to do?' I asked. My friend faltered a little as though he thought I was trying to get information out of him, as, in a way, I suppose I was.

'They want to make a municipality to clean the dust from the streets.'

'Surely that would be a good thing?'

'Of course it would be a good thing. By God Almighty, I say to you I wish they would take all these countries. I am a British

subject. I have written on my passport, "British subject by birth". The English work; not like these shaikhs, two days in the town and then ten days in the desert, hunting. Before they came, the countries were wild; now they have soldiers, so that the Bedouin do not raid the towns. I hope they will take all the countries and make them like Bahrain. The English work. I read the great English poet Longfellow when I was at school.' (Then he quoted a lot of verses that I can't remember, though there was a line beginning, 'Let the dead bury the dead,' and another about not being like a cow.)

My friend, having worked himself up a little, turned over into Arabic. 'My cousin,' said he, 'was living in the Batina coast, and the Arabs came up and said, "Give us your money or we will beat you." So he gave them money, and went to see the Consul at Muscat. The consul said, "Don't be frightened. Now you have told me, go back home." As soon as he got back, there was the consul in full uniform getting out of an aeroplane with some soldiers. He went straight to the shaikh and said, "Give this man his money back." The Shaikh was frightened and gave my cousin the money, and then the consul turned round to the shaikh and said, "If you molest this man again I'll pluck your eyes out." That was years ago, and there has been no trouble since. Another time the government said it didn't want to have us in the country, and we said we were perfectly ready to go because it was a poor country anyway, but we had fifteen houses and eleven shops and what were we to do with them? We went and told the consul, and he said, "Don't be frightened, if they try to turn you out I will give you refuge in my house." Then he wrote a letter to the government and it was all settled with no more trouble. I wish the English would take all these countries, by God Almighty, and they will, you see if they don't.'

I expressed some doubt on the subject and tried unsuccessfully to point out that, without the oil revenues, it would be hard to do the sort of work that has already been done in Bahrain, and secondly that Kuwait is doing very well for itself without over-strong British influence.

'Look at yourself, for example', said my friend.

'What have I got to do with the matter?'

'Oh, you know, you come here and you find out everything about the country and then you come back to be consul.'

'I don't do anything of the sort.'

'Of course you do. Why did you take notes on Muhammed's wedding, all about the red canopy?' I could not quite see what use it would be to a future Political Agent to know what happened at Muhammed's wedding or anyone else's, but more important I couldn't understand how he could know I had taken any notes without coming in and reading them when I was out, an idea which made me rather nervous as to what else he might have read. Had he, for example, seen that in all good will I had said that Muhammed's father had a face like a beetle? And if so would he tell Muhammed's father?

'Why do you come to this dusty country from England, leaving your family behind? Who do you sit and eat meals off the floor with your hands? All the English people do it and at home you would be eating with spoons.'

'Politeness', said I.

'Policy', said he. 'I was talking to an Englishman about cigarettes, and I said, "Why do you smoke, when it is not good for your health?" He said, "We make all the cigarettes, and we make a lot of profit out of them, and were we not to smoke ourselves people would notice it and say there must be something wrong about cigarettes and stop buying our cigarettes."' He laughed with glee at this admission of policy.

'If only the English would take over these countries quickly! These people here are like animals. Do you know that when the first wireless sets were brought here, the people heard the Arabic news, and they said, "By God there's a man sitting in that box talking." Then when the Arabic news finished they heard another voice talking, and then another. They said, "By all that's wonderful, there are three men in the box, an Arab, an Englishman, and a Baluchi. But if they spend all their time in the box, where do they eat? There must be a hotel in the box too."'

'No, these people are just animals,' said my friend. 'The English should organise them, Mr Petal. If the English came here they would dredge the creek and make a good port, whereas these people care nothing for trade. Just animals! They have no export or import licences!'

PETER LIENHARDT