

III. ARABIAN NIGHT

Fred glanced up from his desk in our stateroom on the ENTERPRISE and asked, "When do we get to Beirut?"

"What difference does it make?" I answered. "As far as we're concerned, we get in a half hour after we finish this report." I shoved my papers and notes aside and put my feet up on the desk. "Besides, what are you going to do ashore, your address book doesn't extend to this latitude."

"Oh, doesn't it?" Fred chortled. "Remember Commander McGreavy, by roommate on KEARSARGE off Pearl Harbor last month?"

"Don't tell me you've got a phone number!"

Fred stood up to stretch. His hulking six-foot frame was built in the shape of an inverted cone; broad at the shoulders and narrow at the hips. he was clad only in his shorts, and his hairy chest and legs and long arms reminded me of man's closest relative. A smile spread across his suntanned face and a glint came into his eye. "Yep, got the number of a belly dancer."

"So," I replied, "belly dancers are nocturnal animals. That still doesn't answer what we do in the blinding light of day."

The faraway look in Fred's eyes showed he still wasn't quite with it. "How far is it to Cairo?" he asked.

I sensed that he had something on his mind, but being more interested in the afternoon's entertainnt, I changed the subject.

"And Jerusalem ... you've heard of Jerusalem?"

"Yeah, that's where Jesus was born."

So ended our planning session.

After the twenty-one gun salute next morning and after we'd given the ship's office our report to type, we went ashore.

Beirut is a mixture of the old and the new; cobblestone streets echoing the rickety rattling trams and new hotels surrounded by large American cars; veiled women and turbaned men, and chic, dark-haired, brown-eyed lovelies in spiked heels arm in arm with Savoy-tailored oil executives.

In the open-air market, just off the elongated square in the heart of the older district, Aladdin himself could have been present. The sight of the lovely dark red cherries made my mouth water until the smell of fish and overripe tomatoes began to take priority. The loud din of bargaining gave a human side to the Scheherazade setting.

"This is really it, eh John? How about buying some cherries?"

"Do you remember those timely words of wisdom that came over the PA system Fred?"

"Yeah . . . don't, but if you do use contraceptives available from sick bay."

"No, the other one, about fresh fruits and vegetables."

"So . . . we wash 'em."

Still munching Fred's cherries, we walked into the American Express office. There we met Hilmi, the first of a series of English-speaking Arab travel hawks we were to meet in Jerusalem, Cairo, and Alexandria. Even Fred, in his flights of fancy, hadn't thought of Damascus or Alexandria, and he asked me, "Where's Damascus?"

"It's where Paul was going when he became a Christian."

"Oh."

Fred can save pennies by the barrelful, but his eyes lit up like Christmas tree bulbs at this modest little sightseeing trip proposed by our roly-poly Arab friend. And before I had time to wipe the sweat off my dark glasses, we were shepherded by Charlie, one of Hilmi's drivers, toward a waiting car. The car, an American one, was as black as the obsidian eyes of a sphinx, as long as the width of two Beirut streets, and had red leather upholstery fit for the master of a forty-wife harem. Our "English-speaking" guide, Charlie, then pronounced the only two words of English we were to understand for the next four hours: "We go."

I would be the last person to say this was an uninteresting tour. Within the first block, Charlie, the name of all English-speaking guides, had honked the horn ten times and nearly run over twenty people. Before my heartbeat could return to normal, I was reconsidering my thoughts on Mohamedism. If Mohamed could preserve the life and limb of Arab drivers, donkeys or pedestrians, then he must be as potent as our Christian God. Charlie broke more traffic laws and safety rules than I even knew existed.

He performed one of his best tricks at the few stop and go lights where he deigned to stop. Charlie would test his reaction time to the light turning green and without glancing either to right or left, he blew his horn and floor-boarded the throttle. You've never seen Arabs scamper so fast.

I never realized until we got onto a country road with shepherds driving their sheep that cars were built so high off the ground. At fifty kilometers per hour, Charlie would approach a flock scattered completely across the road. Then without slowing down he would blow his horn and turn around and say something to us, probably asking why we both had our eyes closed, our teeth gritted, and why we were holding on with a rigor mortis grip. After each such episode, we would look out the rear window and see what appeared to be a whole flock of sheep scattered completely across the road, still trudging along, prodded by angry shepherds. After about a dozen such incidents, we decided to keep our eyes open and try to figure out how it was done.

Our first hypothesis was that this wasn't a car at all, but a hovercraft, riding on a cushion of air. We rejected that because the horn sounded too much like a car horn. And besides, with all the power required to honk the horn, there wouldn't be enough left to make the cushion of air.

Next, we figured it wasn't really a herd of sheep at all, but only a mirage. The sound of sheep bells and the loud ejaculations of the shepherds which caused Charlie's ears to go a little pink convinced us that these were indeed real. The smell of the sheep clinched it.

Perhaps these were a new kind of sheep, compressible sheep. This theory held up pretty well, but the question became 'do the compress horizontally or vertically?' We concluded they compress horizontally.

They take up the whole road before, during, and after passing through them, so they must compress horizontally. Also this would explain why the hub caps and lower parts of the car were so well polished.

Many near-accidents later, we arrived at Biblos, an old Crusader's castle. Biblos castle was built out of and on an old Roman Forum, which was built out of and on an old Greek temple, which was built out of and on an old Phoenician burying ground, from granite brought from Egypt. Charlie had hardly stopped the car before the local "official" English-speaking guide came out of no-where and announced, "I am official guide, follow me."

And Fred asked, "How much?"

This identical conversation was repeated about five times like some of my boy's phonograph records, until Fred skipped a groove and said, "We'll just look around."

"Can't look around, need guide."

"What do you mean, can't look around? We have eyes."

"Guide required, follow me."

After five more minutes of establishing rapport with unshakable guide, he took us across an arched stone bridge, high above a dry moat, into the castle.

The view from Biblos castle is enchanting; to the west, the deep blue columns of an ancient temple silhouetted against the blue cooling waters of the Mediterranean; to the north, a minaret rising from the squat, light-colored adobe houses of the village, and to the east, a high verdant mountain range dropping into the sea to the south. Massive walls of yellow stone enclosed airy halls, dingy dungeons, passageways, and parapets in the dusty castle itself. Granite columns of earlier pagan temples, cross-sectioned like logs, were laid on their sides to make up part of the castle wall. The white circular sections stand out in vivid contrast among the larger yellow square blocks.

After our guided tour Charlie conducted us to the local bazaar. Fred asked about this expensive leather bag, that expensive lace table cloth, and the camel saddle and the hassocks - and bought two postcards. In the meantime, I, who hate shops of any sort, at any time, and under any circumstances, bought a tablecloth, a lace doily, and a set of napkins that had probably been bought wholesale at Sears.

Our trip back to Beirut was routine. We passed cars on hills, on curves; we drove on the center line, to the right of the center line (but not very often), and to the left of the center line. We slowed down, if there was no one on the road. We speeded up every time we approached a town, a flock of sheep, a mass of people, or a line of cars in our lane, especially if there was also a line approaching in the other lane.

But it was always "okay" (the third understandable English word of our driver) because he always rides the horn, even when meeting someone approaching from the other direction. Of course, this was just as well because one or both approaching cars could be in either lane or neither. In fact, it was always a toss-up until just before the expected crash, whether we were using English or American rules of the road. To top off this peaceful ride through the rustic countryside, Charlie raced a fellow guide in another highly polished, large American car into Beirut. We finally landed back at the American Express office.

The color slowly returned to our cheeks. That nauseous feeling subsided as our stomachs lowered themselves back into position. Hilmi, the Arab travel expediter, met us with a big smile. Fred soon regained his voice, pointed to his black book and asked Hilmi, "How do I phone this name, Salome?"

Hilmi looked at the name and number and backed off three paces so that he could reassess the real stature of my boy Fred.

"You know Salome ... yowee! Let's see phone number wow! She best in Beirut ... Let me get her on phone."

My respect for Fred went up when without hesitation he took the phone from the awed Hilmi and in an Errol Flynn voice said, "Salome, this is Fred Harvey ... Fred Harvey, a friend of Commander McGreavey ... Oh, he's fine. Well, not for awhile, he's in the Pacific. Didn't you get his letter? Maybe if we could get together tonight I could tell you all about him." In response to Salome's next question Fred's face fell about six inches as he said, "I'm not staying at any hotel." Fred perked up a little, however, as he continued, "Oh, you are going to Damascus tomorrow ... Good, planning to go to Damascus tomorrow, how can I reach you?"

A new Damascus phone number returned the smile to his face. He hung up.

With his first love, women, satisfactorily postponed for a day, Fred turned to Hilmi and asked, "Where's a good place to eat in Beirut?"

Hilmi, now quite impressed by the caliber of man he was dealing with, gave Fred his card and said, "Give this to manager at Sinbad's -- he treat you right."

Hilmi was right. Later, at Sinbad's, Fred enjoyed the cuisine of pickled sheep lung, special spiced bone marrow, sauteed sheep kidney, raw liver, heart in tomato sauce, eucalyptus leaf salad, and sheep spleen in oil (diesel oil). These tidbits were accompanied by two water-clear liquids, which when mixed, turned a milky white in your glass, but just turned in your stomach. At least in my stomach. The combination of absinthe (licorice), alcohol, and water was too formidable for me. Fred, on the other hand, enjoyed the ersatz milk more and more as he sipped of it more and more. And this, I learned, was the idea of the whole thing to begin with.

We were soon sitting like lab rats who had just learned the maze; that is, well satiated. I with food (if you use the word loosely) and Fred with food plus whatever you might choose to call that alchemist's delight. The waiter then informed us, and I explained it again to Fred's rather licorice-saturated mind, that ordinarily the main course followed the hors d'oeuvres. The waiter sensed, however, that perhaps we were no longer hungry and suggested coffee. After another conference with Fred's other mind, I agreed that coffee (Turkish style) would be fine with Fred, but I'd take tea.

The Turkish coffee, which I presume is to be drunk and not eaten with a spoon, although I'm not sure how one could be quite certain, soon disappeared. And as it disappeared, Fred's eyes came back into focus and his mind also began to focus on his other interest, women. However, I reminded him that Salome was for tomorrow in Damascus. It wasn't too hard to convince him that sleep was in his best interest.

Next morning Fred discovered that the same ingredients that dissolve licorice so well weaken knees and cause throbbing heads. But he still remembered.

"John, we got to get to Damascus today. When's the first liberty boat?"

"Slow down, Fred. What about starting off with breakfast?"

"Okay, if there's lots of orange and tomato juice."

"There will be. You weren't the only one ashore last night."

Fred, gingerly sipping orange juice while I was heartily eating scrambled eggs and bacon, said, "Do you suppose we ought to cut out the trip to Baalbek and get straight on to Damascus?"

"Look, Fred, even if Salome were the Queen of Sheba, she is still only a woman. There are other women, but not many Roman ruins like Baalbek.

"I'll be ruined if I don't see Salome tonight in Damascus."

"I'll venture you'd live through it."

We traversed over, under, around or through the same droves of "compressible" sheep on the way to Baalbek that we had on the way to Biblos. But in addition we saw camel caravans that had apparently gotten lost in Moses' time and were still plodding, looking for the Promised Land.

At Baalbek, Fred was impressed with the size and majesty of the columns, the delicacy of the carved stone ceiling arches, and the enormity of the whole complex. In things, size and antiquity impressed him, but in people, at least female people, he demanded trimness and youth.

"John, don't you think we ought to hit the road for Damascus?"

"What's the hurry? Are you planning on becoming a Moslem convert?"

"I'm already converted to belly dancers. Let's go."

As we traveled south down the broad green valley of the ancient caravan route, we saw cedars atop snow-covered ranges to our right and barren lower-lying ranges to our left. I kept wondering when we would cross the lower range into the desert and on to Damascus.

"Got your passport ready, Fred?"

"I've got more than that ready."

"I know, but since Damascus is in Syria and we're in Lebanon some stuffy official at the border just might be more interested in your passport than your desires."

We mounted the pass toward the border and stopped at the little shack.

"Give me your passports, me fix," said Charley.

"That's living, eh, John? A virtual manservant."

"Real living. We bake in the car while he goes and gets a coke in the shack."

But all was not well. The minutes ticked away while the temperature in the car approached the boiling point. Finally, Charley returned with a frown, not his usual smile.

"Need you inside," he said, "some mixup."

"Wonder what those red-tape artists want," Fred said. "I'll take care of them." He stormed into the immigration shack.

Inside, the puzzled official asked, "How did you get into Lebanon? Your passport isn't stamped. Since you're not officially in Lebanon we can't let you cross the border into Syria."

It was true that our passports weren't stamped; a liberty boat had dropped us off at the dock in Beirut and we had not gone through any immigration formalities. Although Fred fumed and Charlie carried on a heated argument with the border guard he was not persuaded and in the end Charlie ushered us back into the car and we drove back in silence to Beirut where we caught a liberty boat back to the ENTERPRISE.