

Tuesday 21st December 1920

"Parting is such sweet sorrow." Someone who wrote those words epitomised in five small words the thoughts that will remain in my mind for the two years that I am to be away - the poignant heart-ache of leaving one's own, one's dearest, softened and made bearable by the vivid expression of the love those dear ones bear to the husband and father who is leaving them. Those others who feel one's loss so keenly and the friends who wish one "bon voyage et bon chance" bring to the parting an overlap of happiness composed of loving thoughts and help which is the most precious thought to the exile, because he knows that although he is away he is not exiled from their thoughts and prayers. Godspeed! and God speed his return safe and sound. God will hear the prayers of my dear ones, surely - and the prayer of my baby, innocent and without sin - that He will keep Daddy safe in Mesopotamia and bring him back to us soon.

What a business kit-getting and packing is! The anxiety of the traveller to get the right things and enough of them - the gleaning of advice and tips from all and sundry who have been abroad as to what to do for health and comfort, which combined make so much for happiness. Mesopotamia, that land of the past and present, is an adventure to the tyro in travel and one wonders what is in store - excitement or ennui?

The start of the adventure. Up in the dark, doing everything for the last time for two years (will they be long years or short?), getting the baggage away, a hurried breakfast, but one is too full of emotion to want much food. Good-bye to one's kiddies, God bless them and guard them, and away.

The watching of that unusual baggage with its mysterious labels: Cabin, Baggage Room (Change of clothing), Baggage Room and BASRA: selecting that comfortable seat at Waterloo and so off to Southampton and the land of the Arabian Nights.

I was the only member of our party whose wife came down to Southampton. God bless her for her sweet kindness in coming to see me off. But she was spared the sight of the Boat's sailing as we learned on getting down to the Dock side that she doesn't sail until tomorrow. She is a boat of about 9000 tons called the "HUNTSGREEN", hired transport, a captured Nord-deutsches Lloyd boat one time called the "Derfflinger". She is very comfortable and well appointed and the stewards are all English and seem very decent men.

I rank as a Major and share a 3- berth cabin with two other Majors of our party. We are going out to join the Army Audit Staff in Mesopotamia. There are 100,000 troops there under active service conditions and the small Audit Staff is already very overworked. We shall be welcome reinforcements. The party consists of Lt. Col. Rice: Majors Heaton, Waldren, Prater, Barkham and myself: Capt. Nyillassy and Mr. Dawes.

My dear wife and I looked round Southampton without liking it very much. It was far more interesting in the docks where such famous ships as the Aquetania, Caronia, Mauritania, Teutonic, Carisbrooke Castle were at anchor, some ready to sail to America, South Africa and so on. After a day all too short I said farewell to my dear one and saw her return by the 6.40 from Southampton back to her home wither she is to be Mummy and Daddy too for two years. May they be short years. I have been given the greatest joy to know how brave and sweet she is and it helps me so to know and gives me confidence in leaving her, who has never been left on her own before. God, guide and guard her and bring me safely back to her again.

After dinner with Rice and his friend at the South Western Hotel (where by the way Lilly and I had a very nice lunch) I returned to the ship and although the surroundings were so strange I slept well from 11.30 until 6a.m. when they started cleaning down the passage outside.

Wednesday 22nd. December 1920

About 7a.m. our steward came in with tea and biscuits and we got up soon afterwards. It has turned out a gorgeous morning and a quick constitutional around the deck gave us an appetite for breakfast. It is a nice comfortable dining saloon and seats about 50. We had a menu comprising Porridge, Bacon and Eggs, Sausage and potatoes, Hake Rolls, Coffee, Tea, and Marmalade etc.

I have been around the sheds and found the man who matters, an official of the Ministry of Shipping named Mills, who has changed my cabin from 52 (4*13) to 1 and I am now in with Rice much to my delight, and I have no doubt much to the delight of Waldren and Heaton, my cabin-mates of 52. There is not much room for 3 men with their baggage in a cabin 8 ft. square but plenty of room for two. We now have a wardrobe each, a wash-stand each, a bunk each and a very comfortable settee, and the cabin is a little larger.

I went down to Southampton West Station and said goodbye to Capt. Thomas Hart who is going to Aldershot, and came back with Rice to the S.S. Huntsgreen to lunch which was very good. During the afternoon things were very busy and we amused ourselves watching the troops embarking of whom we have over 1300 now, to 2nd. Class passengers and about 50 officers.

About 3.30p.m. two tugs hitched onto the ship and about 4.15p.m. started to pull her away from the quayside. Soon she was moving under her own steam and I watched the shore recede ... Good-bye England, for two years. May they be short ones.

After tea we discovered that we were not proceeding via the usual Solent passage but going east through Spithead, leaving the lights of Southsea on ones left, or a-port. During dinner the 3rd. officer, who will sit at our table in Mess, told us the reason. U-ugh! There is dirty weather ahead. Nevertheless I had a good dinner,

but soon afterwards, the Channel swell overcame me and I was sea-sick. It was strange to observe from sea-wards after dinner when we had turned Culver Point the long dark line of Culver Cliff and the equidistant lights of Sandown, Shanklin and Ventnor, the latter surmounted by the dark mass of Boniface Down, and then St. Catherine's Light. The latter was the last of England I saw as the swell had mastered me and I turned in. It is idle to deny that I was very sick.

Thursday 23rd. December 1920

I cannot get up nor eat and I lie in bed all day. Passed Ushant about 3 miles east at 4.10 p.m. We are now in the Bay of Biscay O-o-oh! Going is so bad and the wind so dead against us that we are obliged to drop our speed. Great waves are breaking over the ship forward.

Friday 24th. December 1920

I was not sick today, but unable to get up, and stayed in bed all day. The only member of our party to keep free from sickness is Nyillassy, though Waldren and I are the only ones prostrated. But dozens of others are down and only 1 turned up to breakfast (Nyillassy). I had a little more to eat today. In the evening, some of them were fit enough to play and sing rag-time in the saloon until 11.30p.m. We have run into a terrific gale and have had to drop to 6 - 8 knots. Everything moveable slips off tables and smashes. The ships semaphore on the Bridge was carried away and during the night the stack of deck chairs fell down in an avalanche and was swept along the deck. Rice has been my companion most of the day.

Saturday Christmas Day 1920

We passed Cap Finisterre at 6.30 a.m. this morning and so are out of the dreaded Bay, so I made an effort to get up, But it was no good and I had to go back to bed. Rice has managed it all right and has eaten like a pig - at least compared with me. I made something of a meal tonight, however, and feel better for it - a piece of turkey, some Christmas pudding, an apple and Ginger Ale. We are travelling parallel to the Portuguese coast about 15 miles away but too distant to distinguish details although the mountains are plain enough. Yesterday we did only 200 miles.

Sunday 26th December 1920.

Last night we passed through a fog bank and it was very weird to hear the regular moan of the siren, never mind, said I, it will be calmer tomorrow and I shall get up. Right enough, at 7a.m. I got up and had a bath. By the time I got back the weather has suddenly got worse so after dressing as far as my coat and trousers, I went back to bed, where I have remained all day. Today has I think been the worst of all and about midday the rain came down in a deluge and another steamer, a big one, nearly ran us down. We could hear her siren

sounding nearer and nearer, and didn't spot each other until we were only a quarter of a mile away from each other.

The weather has been so bad that no Church has been possible either Xmas Day or today. We have two chaplains on board - one Church of England and one R.C. The troop officer says this is the worst passage to Gib. he has ever known - the weather has been bad the whole time since we left, dreadful the whole time. No intermittent spells of good or passable weather to enable the ship to pull itself together. My Luck! We did 234 miles yesterday. We passed Cape St. Vincent at 8.40 p.m. tonight about 7 miles away. It has rolled and pitched and pitched and rolled all day and at times it has been necessary to hold on to keep in bed. I have eaten quite well however and had boiled fowl for dinner. Just enough for a man lying down to have, but I slept very badly all night and I have made up my mind to get up tomorrow.

Monday 27th December 1920

After passing Cap St. Vincent the weather has improved and I got up this morning and went down to breakfast. The weather is quite mild and sunny and we are walking on deck in our ordinary jackets, everybody is smiling and it is the first morning that the ship has looked as if it was inhabited. I sent off a wireless telegram to my wife and watched the Marconi operator despatch it as it buzzed and crackled through space. I sent 12 words for 12/-. We passed Cape Tarifa Lighthouse at noon about 1 1/2 miles out and very pretty it looked with its white and yellow buildings shining in the sun. The coast of Spain is quite clear and very mountainous, the mountains coming right precipitously to the sea in parts, and soon after Gibraltar, but too far away to get a decent view. I snapped it however, but it will be useless.

Had a good lunch and soon after very bucked by the news that we are putting back into Gibraltar to land a man who has suddenly developed appendicitis. What an opportunity for another fortunate letter home. I rushed into the smoke-room and scribbled off a few lines - but as I had not got my journal written up, only having made notes during the last few days I could not make it the personal letter I had hoped and enclose the journal.

I had seen many pictures of the Rock Impregnable, but the picture of Gibraltar as we approached it with the sun on it, shining bright, and the forbidding heap of Centa black almost against the sun, is one I shall not forget. I suppose that is why one hears so little of Centa, that other Pillar of Hercules as the sun is always behind it and it looks so black. We arrived at Gib. harbour and anchored outside at about 3p.m. and immediately little boats shot out from all parts of the harbour. We wondered at first, but soon saw that each was rowed by one or two boys with a Spaniard in the stern and a big heap of oranges between them. They threw lines to the Tommies on board and were soon driving a roaring trade at 6 a shilling or 5 a shilling the troops passing the money down in a rush basket attached to the line and pulling the basket up again with the oranges inside. But

what shameless profiteering! Here in the south of sunny Spain, the home of the orange where one dreams of them as cheaper than the dirt, 2d. and 2 1/2d. each! But this didn't worry Tommy who cheerfully weighed out his shillings and was thankful. Other boats sold sun-dried figs, 2lb. a 1/-, and another cigars 5 for 1/-, chocolate 1/- a pound slab, cigs 30 a 1/-. My field glasses are very useful and I scanned the Rock end to end. As we lay in the Bay calm and warm, with the sun shining bright, and a few flecks of clouds, just to make the sky bluer in between, one could see how strong a fortress the Rock must be. Its very shape is that of a lion lying asleep.

The commercial Harbour seems to occupy the greater part of the Bay (called Algeciras Bay) and was full of shipping, great colliers, oil tankers etc. The little town of Mayorga to the North of the Bay and the more important place of Algeciras to the West complete the picture, backed by the mountains of Spain, the rocky barren Sierras, full of romance but little else. Their stony sides are hardly cultivated and hold little pasture that is visible from the sea, whatever it may be like inland.

Ultimately the stately Hospital ship arrived and our patient was taken aboard and slowly we steamed out at 4.30p.m. The four hours since lunch have been cram full if incident and one even grew so impudent as to complain of this having brought us in so near, and then, just like this rotten Government, not letting us ashore! I took a snap of Gib. as we passed Europa Point, the extreme southern end of the Rock, where that important man the Governor, resides, and the wireless station is, but the light was not good and it may not be worth much. The "other" side of the Rock is almost sheer upright, and quite barren. Soon after the coast disappears to North and South and we are in the Mediterranean Sea, out of land sight.

Dinner is 6.30 tonight, as a "Grand Concert" is to be given by the stewards at 8.30 in the Dining Saloon and everyone is going. After a good meal, and an exercise walk on deck we took our seats and the Concert began. Considering that every item was given by those self-same stewards, without any aid from outside, it was a wonderfully good programme, and the concluding item "Professor Giles and his celebrated Jazz Band" was an exposition of side-splitting energetic harmonic noise that screwed one's face up into a broad smile and kept it so to the end. It was splendidly done and I can quite believe the claim of "Professor Giles" that it was the greatest Jazz Band afloat. Charlie Chaplin made a collection for charity and we retired happy and contented to our virtuous cots.

Tuesday 28th. December 1920.

Yesterday's good weather seems to have completely recovered me. This morning I awoke soon after 6a.m. and feeling particularly frisky decided to have an early bath. So on with dressing gown and out at 7.10 en route to the Bath-room. On looking out on deck I could just see the tip of the sun peeping up over the sea and calling Rice to come and we watched the sun rise. "Rise" is hardly the word;

he simply leapt up above the horizon and the gorgeous reds and purples of the dawn changed in one moment into a wonderful blaze of golden light. It seemed as if it burst almost over the sea, flooding everything except the extreme West. The sea was now almost of a silky appearance just a slight motion on it, not a ripple, which has a sharp cut appearance, and not exactly "oily" which gives a wrong value to the shining clear blue of the water. So it has remained all day long.

After breakfast and our morning exercise I had to help in arranging for today's Sweep on the ship's run and this kept me busy until 12 noon when the run for the 24 hours from 12 noon yesterday was known. The run was 268 miles. I won nothing.

We had picked up the African coast soon after 8 o'clock and it has been most interesting to watch the shore of Morocco and Algeria as we passed along, not more than 4 or 5 miles from the land. Great mountains rise in the background, rugged and scored perhaps 10 - 20 miles inland, and then slope to the sea gently. It seemed a barren, sparsely populated country, although green enough. Only here and there did we come across a white low house or fields that seemed by their tidiness or shape to be cultivated, and there were very few cases during the days run that we could discern enough houses together, near the mouth of a wady, to justify our terming them villages. But when one remembers it is Africa we are sailing by, one hardly expects population.

We (the members of the Audit Staff) have appropriated a small portion of the upper deck, where one of the ship's boats has been hung out from, and here we have fixed up our chairs and sit in the sun and take our ease, watching the coast, or reading or chatting. During the afternoon there we sat and the sun was almost tropical in its heat, hardly a breeze even strong enough to flutter the leaf of one's book, the sea smooth and the sky deep blue. It seems impossible that a few days ago we were passing through such terrible weather, and I wondered what was the weather in London, this 28th day of December, only 3 days from the years' end. We watched the glorious sun set in his glory and drank in the wonderful colours opposite, shading evenly from East to West from purple to mauve, orange and blue to green. The mountains took on a darker hue and night, with its cooler time came on.

After dinner we watched the moon rise up from the water ahead, first a dull copper and gradually brightening to silver as she rose in the night sky. It has been a new experience to see the sun rise and set in the sea and the moon rise from the sea in one day. The stars were clear at first but as the moon got brighter and brighter, she almost eclipsed them, so light she shone.

The Promenade Deck had in the meantime been cleared and gaily decked with huge flags and bunting, and floured, and we had our first dance. There are only about half a dozen women in the first class, and most of the young officers danced together. I watched but felt little inclination to dance; thinking of someone

who would have been so delighted to have been dancing on the deck with me had circumstances been different.

At 10 o'clock the great event of the day took place in the Smoking Lounge. During the day the subscriptions had been collected for tomorrow's sweep, and were sold by Auction, making the thing into what is called an Auction Sweep. Although one has already bought tickets they are put up again and sold to the highest bidder. Such bidder has only a definite right to claim half the ticket bid for, unless the owner does not object to selling it. The bidder pays half his bid if he only gets half the ticket (which happens when the owner won't sell out) but pays the whole bid if the owner sells right out. In the latter case half the bid goes to the owner of the ticket and the other half in the POOL. All amounts bid except the owners half go into the Pool, which rose to £11 00. The ticket most bid for is that which it is estimated will be the actual run in miles tomorrow. I drew nothing of value in the first draw but bought two tickets in the Auction: neither won, however, although I had the consolation, such as it is, of buying the ticket showing 295 miles, only 2 from the actual run, which was 297 miles. Better running, considering that we are now losing 20 minutes per day as we run due East. That is, 12 midnight on the boat today was 11.40 at home and will be 11.20 tomorrow, 11 o'clock on the 30th and so on. We are getting ahead of Home time, as our days are 20 minutes shorter: not 24 hours long but only 23 hours 40 minutes.

Wednesday 29th December 1920

This morning we again watched the Sun rise from over the African mountains, but it did not have the same effect on me as the previous morning when we watched him shoot up from the sea. The mountains, being between us and the sun, were black on our side and seemed in some measure to diminish the reflection across the sea's mirror. But it has been another cloudless, sunny day - quite as hot as yesterday. We passed Algiers during the night and are still skirting the African shore and it was strange to see the snow lying in the ravines and hollows of the mountain sides opposite. Whether the snow had lain there some time or had fallen during the night I don't know but the effect was of something somewhat unreal. Snow in this broiling sun! It shows that, notwithstanding midday heat, the nights can be very cold and that this north coast of Africa is really as bleak as its reputation. But it is a grand, bold region, noble and silent.

During the morning we sat lazily out on the Upper Deck, reading and talking, watching the coast and enjoying the clean bracing sea air. Although we do so little actual exercise it is astonishing what big appetites we have, and notwithstanding that our forced fast of the first 4 or 5 days has something to do with it (we are making up leeway) it is undoubtedly the sea air which is the tonic. If the heat does not prove too irksome we ought to be pretty fit by the time we reach Basra.

One doesn't see much animal life, naturally, and the only living things I have seen since leaving Gib. are the porpoises which pick us up now and again. They keep

alongside the ship at the same point, about 6 yards away, all the time, swimming at exactly the same speed as the ship is steaming and at regular intervals of about 20 seconds leap out of the water, showing the whole of their sleek shining body. They apparently pick up some of the stale food thrown overboard. These strange creatures sometimes meet us singly, sometimes in schools and one can hardly believe that they are a kind of animal and actually suckle their young.

We have seen no birds the last few days, I thought Africa was a great place for birds in the winter. Perhaps this is a testimony to the real barrenness of the coast.

After lunch the Boxing Tournament which will last for some days was started. A ring was fixed up on the Troop Deck, with seats beside it for the Officers, while the troops fixed themselves up all around, some on the sides, on top of sheds, up the rigging, perched on spars, everywhere where a foothold could be got. There were over a dozen 3-round bouts, and an exhibition 3-rounds by 2 boxing Instructors. The latter was most entertaining, but with the exception of 3 or 4 bouts the others were slogging pure and simple, each man trying his hardest to knock his opponent out, in true British soldier fashion.

We had a talk with the Captain of the ship after tea: a very manly, interesting sailorman, and I must get him talking again if I can. The Roman Catholic padre is also an interesting and much-travelled man and gave us some details of his very strenuous life, in U.S.A. particularly and during the war in Palestine and Arabia. He is an old man over 65 I should say, little and with a long white beard. He is brimming over with kindness and is much liked. After dinner there was another concert: this time for the troops. The platform was on the end of the Promenade Deck and the troops were ranged underneath on the Troop Deck and the Poop Deck and as in this afternoons show, up the rigging and all around.

Looking back over the past 8 days it is difficult to realise that it was only a week ago today that we sailed from Southampton. Time has been so crowded and one's experiences so novel that one seems to have been away for weeks. If my time is to be so full as this or I am to find so much to interest it will go a long way to ease that separation, but I can't help wishing to have my loved ones with me.

Thursday 30th December 1920

I hear that we passed Algiers yesterday morning in the dark at 2.30 a.m. and Tunis at 5.30 this morning, so that we have missed these two important cities. When we looked out this morning we found that it was dull and cloudy and so it has continued all day but it is pleasant nevertheless and not cold enough by any means to necessitate overcoats or even waistcoats. We have been sitting up in our enclave enjoying the air and watching the coast and chatting and writing. We went evenly along in a calm sea, knot by knot, bearing straight along our true courses inexorably onward. How powerless one is in the grip of this great floating machine - neither storm or tide can turn it out of its course - there is no turning back. Always on, on, on we go: arrogantly elbowing our way through the sea in

this calm weather: so differently from last week when we were fighting viciously against the strength of the waves, almost on an equality, and only just, as it seemed, the winners. The days run to noon today was 290 miles, the best we have done so far. After lunch we went to the Boxing Tournament (continued) and saw some very good boxing, especially a 3-round bout between Sergeant Instructor Parry and Lieut. Mason, a Flying Officer, who has been acting as Referee. He, though quite a youngster, has been the runner up these last two years in the Middle-weights in the Inter-Service Boxing Championships, and was far and away the master of all the boxers here. He looks such a splendid boy stripped and he fought like the well-trained athlete that he is - quick and lithe as a panther.

During the bouts we passed the island of Pantellaria at 2.30p.m. It is used as an Italian penal settlement, and very suitable for the purpose I should say. It is oval in shape and rises from the sea just like half an egg lying on its side. It is dotted all over with white houses, but one could see no trees and it looked very barren and uninteresting. This is the last land we shall see until we reach Egypt, as we pass Malta at midnight tonight, when we shall be in bed. At least, I shall.

The sweep on the days run, ending 12 noon tomorrow is to be carried out as an Auction Sweep. After tea I helped the Sweep Officers in arranging for the draw and drew one number only -263- for my two shares. I then made out the a/c sheets for the Auction as I am to be Auctioneers Clerk tonight. The Auction was held after dinner, in the big Dining Saloon, ladies being present. It was consequently a much more decorous affair, there being none of the free fun of the previous auction. More money was realised this time, however, and the total was £12.16.6, which after deducting 10% for charity left £11.11.0. for the sweep - first prize £5.15.6. and two 2nd prizes of £2.17.9. I bought a half share in no. 266 for 6d! the number being fancied by nobody and the owner being absent, or he would undoubtedly never have allowed anyone to annex half his chance for 6d!

We passed Malta at midnight and St. Elmo Lighthouse at 2.45a.m. So I saw Malta not.

Friday 31st. December 1920

When we looked out this morning the sky was still overcast and the sea not so calm - here and there "white horses" marked the crests of the waves. During the day the wind came up a bit from the SW and gave some movement to the boat, which was most marked between tea time and dinner, but it wore off during dinner and calmed down again. So my fears of a rougher sea and mal-de-mer disappeared.

During the morning I started to write my letters which I intend to post at Port Said. If I am to get them done I shall have to get busy as they must all get in the post-bag by midnight Sunday. We expect to get to Port Said about 8a.m. Monday

and hope to get ashore for a good look round soon after breakfast.

At 12 noon the figures of yesterday's run were published and proved to be 276 miles. We have apparently been steaming against a fairly strong current which has knocked a few knots off. The result is that the half ticket No.266 which I bought at Auction yesterday evening for 6d. brings me £1.8.10. which in due course I drew. So far I really believe I have more in my pocket than when we sailed, which is satisfactory. I have had plenty of sport out of it, and it has proved a profitable investment. So far so good. The Boxing Tournament was continued after lunch (2p.m.) and the Promenade Decks being clear we took some exercise. One is beginning to feel the need of it. The Boxing, which consisted of mostly finals and semi-finals, was very good and Lieut. Mason again gave a polished exhibition of the noble art of self-defence - and attack. After tea I tried over my songs with one of our men who is a good pianist - Dawes. Three of our men play, Heaton, Dawes and Barkham, and Heaton is a very good accompanist indeed. Consequently he is in great request for the entertainments and is on the Entertainment Committee. He is good at arranging these affairs so that the Audit Staff, both at Entertainments and Sweeps is quite taking its part.

Dinner finished we held a New Years Eve dance, but as we have so few women among the First Class people (owing to the recent troubles in Egypt, India and Mesopotamia) the men mostly danced by themselves. The dance was rather spoilt, however, as a section of the troops on board, the Royal Scots Fusiliers, were inclined to be troublesome. They had had no pay (perhaps on purpose) and it is a sad, sad thing to a Scot to have nowt in his pocket on New Year's Eve. All ended well, and being so very tired I went to bed at 11.30. I intended to lie awake until midnight but I was off as soon as my head touched the pillow, so I didn't see the Old Year out and the New Year in after all, nor did I hear 16 Bells struck, the only time in the year when more than 8 bells are struck, 8 for the Old Year and 8 for the New. We are now quite a way from any land, and have only the sea for our horizon. It is strange, considering that we are right in the trade route that we pass so few ships. This night, however, we were interested in two - one on the Port bow, a Dutch boat brilliantly lit from stem to stern, presumably for the Old Year festivities, and one on the starboard bow, said to be a Swedish naval ship, which was flashing its searchlights all around, perhaps searching for the New Year, so near at hand. So ends for me the last day of 1920 - afloat.