

Arabah -  
Xmas Eve [1930]

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Dear Mother,

This is the bath interlude, so I am taking the opportunity of starting a letter. We are having exceptionally hot weather for now. Last Xmas Eve it was bitterly cold after sunset, but this time we find it hard to keep cool in our thinnest clothing. Even the natives feel it. Sheikh Abdu Wahid came into the temple this morning & had quite a long conversation about the weather. He said we were having the big sun like in the summer & he was sweating so much that he felt quite uncomfortable, as it is evidently a polite thing to say we assured him we were also suffering from an excess of sweat.

We are not having a Christmas tree but are just giving the children bags of sweets, so Sardic has purchased on our behalf about 20 lbs of the most lurid horrors which he says will delight the hearts of all



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the children. we do not doubt him, but we have grave missgivings as to the effect on their tummys. & forsee many future demands for Eppy. or Castor Oil.

Our guest arrived yesterday. today she has been seeing the sights under the guidance of old Ahmud while we were at work in the temple. We came back for an early tea & went off for a desert ride in Joey. it was fun we bumped along over a surface like this  sometimes we came to a wady like this  & we had to prospect a little to make sure we could get out if we went down. when we saw the rise the other side had a fairly firm surface then swish went Joey down into the sandy gully, then snorting & puffing up he went the other side & waddled along until he came to the next obstacle. We got as close to the great limestone cliffs

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as we could, there are usually great sand-dunes at their base & Joey cannot tackle them, but in parts the going is fairly firm. About 8 miles from our camp, we saw some square cut holes in the face of the cliff about half way up. They must be either quarries or Tombs & we have decided to go & explore them some day, it was too near sunset to attempt it then. We returned under a flaming sky over a desert all tinted with soft pink & gold & mauve with the vivid green strip of the Nile valley in the distance.

Christmas morning. Such a hot morning.

I wished you both a Happy Xmas & wished I could send you a little of this sunshine.

I would much rather have my present on my return, I have rather set my heart on a new box for water colours with clips to hold pans.

but in the meantime the camp library would be very delighted to have a copy of the Persian Art book if you could send us one.

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Amice is sending you a Christmas card with her new stamp of our house.

**Dec 26<sup>th</sup>** We had such a jolly day yesterday, we did not go to the temple at all, had a real lazy morning, superintended the distribution of the calf that was to form the men's share of the feast, & received the good wishes of all our native friends who came to call on us in honour of the occasion.

Our turkey was a gorgeous bird & we had peas & sweet potatoes with him, & a Xmas pudding to follow & then fruit & sweets & coffee. It was so very hot that we all had a snooze in the afternoon & when it got cooler towards evening we decided to go for another desert expedition in Joey, our start was delayed by the arrival of the Coptic priest, so we had to entertain him to coffee & sweets, it was nearly sunset when we started, we had intended showing Miss Byles our favourite wady, going as far in Joey as possible &

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walking the rest. we had to make several detours to avoid long high sand ridges, & it was dark before we reached our destination. (there was faint moon light, so it wasn't really dark) we looked round Joey to see all was well before proceeding a short way on foot, & discovered a flat tyre. of course the only thing to do was to put on our spare wheel, none too easy a job in the dim light, however, we managed it without loosing any bolts or washers. of course it delayed us somewhat, also we mistook the light of a native camp fire for the light from our house & went rather out of our way in consequence. The result was poor Nannie got into an awful stew & sent all our servants out to look for us. we met them about half a mile from home & there was a great fuss & rejoicings to find we were all right.

After dinner we had the fantasia, on this occasion Joey provided the lime light

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& the audience sat round in a <sup>semi</sup> circle.

The play was more like a series of impersonations a boy took the part of a monkey led round on a chain by its master, the others teased it, & its infuriated attempts to attack them led to most amusing tumbles in the sand, & amazing agility on the part of the monkey.

The same boy took the part of a water buffalo with a small urchin for its calf. These two were brought to market to be sold & the attempts of would be purchasers to examine the wares caused the onlookers a lot of fun: to see the calf taking refreshment, & the buffalo affectionately licking the bare back of its offspring was very funny & our sides simply ached with laughing.

Another scene represented a tomb (packing case) & in this tomb was a dreadful afreet who made ghastly noises & scared all the passers by, so the people brought a holy man who sat & mumbled prayers to drive the afreet away, but

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he was'nt a success & the afreet carried on worse than ever. so they tried another holy man, this one was so holy that his limbs had got a permanent bend through kneeling at his prayers so long, two men had to help him walk. but he alas was equally unsuccessful. so they brought a still more holy man. this one was blind & shaking with the palsey & had an impediment in his speech. he was led to the haunted Tomb, & he prayed & he rocked him self <sup>to & fro</sup> about & waved his arms about & carried on to such good purpose that the afreet with one awful yell burst out of the Tomb (ex packing case) & was heard no more.

There was lots more, that one cannot very well describe in words, one needs to be in the atmosphere of the desert, to see & hear the people, & enter into the fun of it all with them & to have seen the places & the things they imitate, for instance they did a market

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scene with no properties at all except the wooden box. & yet one knew exactly what wares each man offered for sale, there was a water carrier, & for the goat skin, he slung a small boy across his back, it was perfect, in the dim light one was quite taken in, the attitude & the outline was exact.

There was another item that was really too absurd. The local magistrate issued an order that it was a crime for two men to wear the same garment, the police searched the place & found two men wearing one mat as a sort of cloak, they'd made a hole in it & put both their heads in it, these two of course ran away & the police gave chase - can you imagine a grass mat with two heads & four legs running round & round? of course they got hopelessly entangled & were captured & dragged off, these people have a genius for the utter absurd. I can't tell you properly how really funny it was.

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While the players were having a rest two small boys played a splendid game. They were both blindfolded, one had a tin with stones in it which he rattled occasionally, the other, following the sound gave chase; it was very funny to watch. Sometimes the boy with the tin would shake it violently & then dart off, but of course not being able to see, there was the possibility he might run into his pursuer instead of away. Another trick was to lay on the sand & rattle the tin & keep quite still, the other guided by the ~~sound~~ sound might pass quite close, even step over him without finding him. I think it would be quite a good game for English kiddies to play at the sea side on good sands it certainly gives the on lookers lots of fun.

There was some dancing & nabout stick play, & the audience <sup>& performers</sup> were regaled with tea & sweets & when at about 11.30 we gave the signal that the party was

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over. They came & said good bye in a most orderly manner & seemed to have thoroughly enjoyed the evening.

This morning we speeded our parting guest & settled down to work again, it is still very hot. The people say last Dec was the coldest they had ever known, & this year it is the hottest. We are hoping for the north wind soon.

Lots of love to you both & a  
Happy New Year to all.

Your affectionate daughter  
Myrtle.

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