

'THE BROADCAST'

THE BROADCAST.

Maurice Rowdon.

THE BROADCAST.

Maurice Rowdon.

The Broadcast.

A few weeks after my arrival in Baghdad I was asked to do a broadcast on the short-wave network. It was quite a routine thing for foreign teachers to be asked, but I still felt it as a terrific honour. I had never broadcast before, and the thought of actually sitting in front of a microphone with my voice going all over the world, or at least over thousands of miles of it, was exciting to me, even though it was difficult to imagine anyone listening. Perhaps there were a few amateurs here and there, a dozen or fifty, dotted about the world, who might listen! But it wasn't the numbers that counted; it was the thought of my voice travelling mysteriously through the air, to be picked up if need be in London. Also I could write to people in England and say simply, as if it happened to me every day, 'I'm broadcasting on the short-wave network at such-and-such a time next week, if you want to listen.'

The young man from the radio who came to see me during a break in the lessons was rather yellow-faced, plump and shy, with a certain lethargy and heaviness that seemed to hold him back from speech and thought all the time. He smiled and then withdrew the smile in an abashed way. I was introduced to him by another teacher, and the three of us sat together in the recreation room. At first he was too shy to ask me ^{for a broadcast} and left it to the teacher. And I, feeling too honoured to speak, tried to hide my excitement in case he suddenly withdrew the offer. What subject would I like to talk on? I shrugged and asked what subject he thought would be best. He shrugged too, and there was silence. He seemed very ill-at-ease. The other teacher was getting impatient---it took very little to make him impatient. "Well, decide something," he said, ^{as if to} two children. He himself had broadcast many times, and wrote out

a broadcast in a few minutes, with a complete indifference to the honour involved, which I thought was marvellous. He did everything with this magical swiftness, his brain teeming with words and ideas, of which a broadcast seemed a tiny particle, thrown off in a moment. But I knew that if I got down to writing one I would spend hours on it, going over it again and again until it made hardly any sense at all and lay before me without a touch of folly in it, nothing easy or unsupervised to give it interest; it would be clipped down to the economical minimum, because of my sense of the honour being bestowed on me. What an insult to the radio station just to talk, like a person, like me; not on your life, one must give them something so worked-on and reliable that it stood before them like a piece of sculpture---stone; but of course stone was very chill to the touch! And all the other teacher had to do was to sit down and write out a few pages in exactly the same magical way as he talked to me; and it was finished. I envied that so much, and resolved to try and do the same.

The subject was decided on, after a few minutes. I was to do what every other teacher had done before me, describe my sensations on coming to Baghdad for the first time. Very well, that sounded easy enough; all I had to do was to give a truthful account of what I had felt in the first few moments of seeing the city. In order to capture that magical ease of my fellow-teacher I must be natural and strictly truthful; there must be no little excursions, no revery; in that way I wouldn't get into difficulties and begin writing the themes for a dozen or so possible other broadcasts, but keep to one theme, my immediate sensations on coming into the city; for once in my life I would do something simple and easy, not bog myself down in torturing thoughts that by the end got the better of me and made me forget what the original theme had been.

Also, they paid well for these broadcasts. If I could do it well and without a lot of trouble I could make quite a bit extra, and have that affluent feeling of money coming in irresistibly, even against my will, with a flow of its own, as if my fingers had gold in them; that was how my fellow-teacher seemed to work; he didn't bother to pick up his cheques from the radio station for weeks sometimes; apparently, the radio station was very slow in paying; he let the flow look after itself. He was a person with a kind of Eastern magnificence, though he was English; I loved sitting in one of the river-side hotels with him in the evening listening to his talk; it seemed that the magical element of the city was in him too. He'd been there some years and already spoke good Arabic; he had nothing to do with Embassy people, and prided himself on never going to a British Embassy dinner, and on having only Arab friends; he gave Arab-nationalist speeches to his classes, always with the magical element that came into his other talk, into his broadcasts, and even---for me---into the way he walked up the stairs to his classroom in the morning, as if everything was an excitement for him. His impatience and irritation were enjoyable, too; I decided to set about my broadcasts with a similar hurried and restless prolificity, if I could; perhaps in that way I would prevent myself trying to bore too many tunnels in too many directions, through territory nobody had asked me to explore.

On the way back to the hotel that morning I thought about it, trying to find a possible opening; at the same time I tried not to think about it too hard, since I had agreed with myself not to go at it heavily this time. Also, if I thought about it like this too long all the pleasure would go---the pleasure of doing something light that would come naturally off the tips of my

fingers, and yer earn me money; why did I want to rob myself of that sensation? So I forced it out of my mind, or tried to. But I was excited. Would I be nervous when I broadcast?

As soon as lunch was over I leaped upstairs to me room and got to work. It had already occurred to me that perhaps the best way of approaching the subject was to compare Baghdad with another city, a quite different city, a European one perhaps. I'd been to Vienna about a month before: what about making a comparison with Vienna? So I set to work. I reminded myself that perfect truthfulness, or rather perfect fidelity to the facts, and even to the chronology of my sensations, was the thing; I would maintain an air of natural ease, and not disperse myself into ideas that I would later find too complicated to disentangle and too interesting to cut out. My room overlooked rooftops and I had a comfortable armchair with a little table in front of it; I set myself down to work with a pleasant sense of excitement. The thing took me a few minutes--- the rough draft; for I didn't allow myself to think of writing out the final broadcast at once; there had first to be the rough draft.

I made the comparison with Vienna. I compared Vienna to a museum, a kind of historical museum of towering, imperial monuments which dwarfed the modern citizen, whereas Baghdad thronged with things that visibly and obviously had been made by men's hands--- everything from the ramshackle one-steory buildings on either side of the main street to the uneven cobbles underfoot, and the robes and veils. Nothing towered above one and intimidated one. The air was loud with cries. It was like being swept into a hot, deafening, brilliant arena of ---people; the still, watchful monuments of our European world, that made us feel like dwarfs, weren't there; with the dirt and noise, the donkeys and mules who pushed past people on the pavements, the tumbledownroofs and the

muddy holes in the road; the rags of the beggars and the blaring radios from every cafe, there was also a new dignity into which one entered, of a world made to fit men, to fit their dreams, not of a monument made above and beyond them, so that a real intimate dignity no longer showed in their flesh; these people in the streets of Baghdad had it still showing in their black eyes and in the way they walked; and the noisy, sparkling street was like a dream I'd often had but had never hoped to actually wake into one day. I tried to put the matter baldly, as befitted a broadcast, and went through the draft cutting out sentences that seemed to rely too strongly on my own feelings; and I didn't grasp the comparison I was trying to make as neatly as I would have liked. But at least it was simple. That at least I could make sure of. Every sentence and phrase must have a limpid, disarming touch of simplicity; one broadcast, one theme; and the theme was a comparison between the European city ~~where~~ which was a 'monument' or 'museum' high above the men who actually walked its streets, and the Arab city where the people who walked the streets were the city---~~what~~ what the city was.

When tea arrived I had finished it. That wasn't surprising as I always did my first drafts quickly. It was only the doubts and self-examinations ~~that came afterwards~~ afterwards that cost the work. As it happened, my fellow-teacher called in on me in the evening and I showed it to him. To my surprise he said it was fine, though a little stylistic for a broadcast. We would take it along to the radio station that evening, and perhaps do the recording there and then; for most of the broadcasts were pre-recorded. There was also a chance that I could do a live broadcast; sometimes one was vacant until the last minute. Our young friend was at the studios every evening, and he would take the talk into the talks-director for a final O.K.

So that was that, and after dinner we went off in the fellow-teacher's car, an old Citroen with wide wings, dusty and noisy, with the same magical air as its owner. We drove to the outskirts, through muddy, yellow lanes with palm trees, in the warmish, autumnal air, until we reached the long, squat sheds of the radio station, where there were masts and concrete walls and an air of science quite different from the city. But there were still palm trees, and the studios inside had a less intimidating look than the outside led one to expect. We passed a studio where a string trio was rehearsing with serious, matter-of-fact expressions on their faces, before a microphone; there was the noise of atmospheric from a loudspeaker, and the sound of friendly, shouting voices from one of the control-rooms. Here, too, nothing towered above one; there wasn't the muffled, ordered, smooth-walled isolation I expected in a broadcasting studio; the corridors had no carpets, and the walls were rough, without distemper, their plaster crumbling like dried mud. We were greeted by the young man, who took my talk and asked us with a smile to wait in one of the waiting rooms, where there were those tubular-steel chairs that had once been the ultra-modern style in the Thirties. Yes, the young man said, a broadcast was due in about fifteen minutes; I could take this one. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Feathers started in my belly and I could hardly stop my hands from shaking.

We waited quite a long time. Ten minutes or so. It was perilously near broadcasting time. Then the young man returned, with a troubled look on his face. He had my talk in his hand. It wouldn't do at all, he said. The director had just read it and thought it was 'disgraceful', and he certainly wouldn't allow it to be broadcast.

What was disgraceful about it? we asked.

It 'attacked' Baghdad.

Attacked?

He held the first page out to me, showing me the first few sentences, as if the director had inspired him fully with his own indignation.

Where was the attack? I asked.

He watched his finger travel along some of the lines-----
'I saw a woman sitting on the pavement, her veil drawn across her face... I saw the cracked road, the piles of rubble, the broken pillars, the scaffolding, the walls beginning to fall away, the filth in the gutters... I felt that this was a city whose people didn't care for outward signs. For me it is only of the religious man that it can be said, 'He doesn't need outward signs'. I don't know why it is, but I instantly felt, 'This is a city of religious people.' We say 'London' and 'Paris', and what we mean are places, but if I say 'Baghdad' to myself I mean what people do here and what people are here, not what their buildings are, because the buildings are many of them ramshackle and dirty, many of them are on the way to falling down, it is a city of ugly sights and ugly noises, there is spit all over the pavements, refuse is thrown into the gutters, people sleep on the pavements, mules and donkeys go among the pedestrians, peoples walk barefooted in the streets.' That was insulting to Baghdad, the director had thought, and certainly he wouldn't allow such a thing to travel all over the world from Radio Baghdad!

I began to feel indignant, and the young man withdrew a little when I spoke, holding up his hand with a shy expression as if to say that he had no part in the quarrel. That was the truth, I told him. What ought I to have said, could he tell me that?

No, he replied, with his lips shivering ever so slightly,

he couldn't tell me that, he would never presume to do so.

What did the director think I ought to say, then?

Well, he believed the director wanted something nice said about the city; after all, I was a visitor, and naturally if I was asked to broadcast I couldn't expect to be able just to talk insults down the microphone.

"But these aren't insults!" I cried. "They're the very opposite! Why don't you ask the director to read further on, then he'll find that it all adds up to an appreciation of the city!" Had the director read further on?

No, he had only read the first page or so.

"Then please take it back to him with my compliments and ask him to read the whole thing, and then decide whether I'm trying to insult the city or not!"

He went back, and the other teacher and I discussed it quietly. Perhaps, he said, it was rather strongly-worded; after all, one had to remember that this wasn't Paris or London, it was a small country struggling to set up some sort of modern, industrial life; that might seem silly to us but for them clean, well-paved cities were an ideal, a test of a country's real value, and dirty cities were a matter of shame; one had to realise that if one started talking at once about the dirt, whatever one said afterwards, and whatever one's motives were, that at once conveyed something shameful to them. We couldn't go all over the world, especially the Arab world, behaving as we did at home, with the same kind of freedom; they hadn't reached that yet; and, very understandably, before they indulged in 'free' comparisons between themselves and Vienna or Paris, they wanted some of the social and political calm we were used to from childhood.

But I was indignant at this also; I said that whatever the

state of a country, whatever it looked forward to, there was always the truth, and that truth couldn't be altered; and that if this wasn't the time for truth, here and now at the radio station, then it wasn't the time for me to talk either, I would rather clear out and never come near the place again because I didn't like unfree people; freedom was a choice, not a development arranged by politicians, and these people were obviously afraid of freedom, they were sitting in positions which they had won corruptly, by family influence, this applied to the director sitting in his office there afraid to talk to me personally, and to the young man who was his pandar and tout, and of course they were afraid of freedom because they would be the first people to be pushed out if the truth were told! They were probably very well aware that if the truth about their dirty streets and their beggars and ramshackle buildings went all over the world people would begin to wonder---inside Iraq as well---what the small class of influential people were doing with public money, what they were doing with the profits that came from the oil-fields, what they were doing for their own people! Of course they didn't want freedom!

My fellow-teacher enjoyed my outbursts much as I enjoyed his, and he answered quietly, with a little smile, that this was all very well, and finally he absolutely agreed with me, but here we were in a radio station due to 'go on the air' (it sounded so professional, and a sense of the honour returned to me) in a few minutes, without a talk being ready. Could I write something else quickly, in place of the first paragraph? No, I was determined to make them take that talk or nothing!

The young man returned a second time and said that the director hadn't changed his mind, and couldn't read the whole talk at the moment because he was too busy.

Very well, could I see the director to talk the matter over with him?

No, he was afraid not, the director was too busy.

That was that, then! I took my talk back and told him that I had nothing else to offer.

The young man smiled and said that, after all, there were so many nice things in the city I could have written about!

Oh, I agreed! But what did he have in mind?

Well, he replied, for instance the King Feisal square; the city wasn't all dirty and ramshackle.

King Feisal square was the one tiny part of town, just outside my hotel, which was European in style, with pavements and ordered buildings round it, in the form of a crescent, not unlike the entrance to an up-to-date prison.

Wasn't that beautiful? he asked.

I agreed, it was certainly excellent, but it wasn't the truth about Baghdad, was it?

Why not, he asked, still with a smile, it was there, wasn't it?

Indeed, it was there, but it wasn't as much there as the rest of the city! And if I gave it out over the air that here was a well-paved European city where everybody wore jackets and trousers and all the buildings along the main street were department-stores, not only would it be very boring but people wouldn't believe me, and they would also call me a fool for telling them crass and obvious lies! But if that was what he wanted he should have told me at the beginning, the first moment he'd seen me, he should have told me he wanted propaganda and not a radio talk; and what I meant by propaganda was a smooth publicity designed to keep certain people in comfortable and entirely false social positions which otherwise

into struggles at the college, in my work. I gave lessons out of hours, organised a music-club, but it was misinterpreted as self-assertion, designed to do other people down. Yet, on the surface, they were agreeable. The matter of the radi-talk was a burning fragment in the midst of all this, through which I saw myself held back all the time, unable to say what I thought.

But, strangely, almost at the end of my first year, just before the examinations, the young man from the radio happened to come to the college again, and we greeted each other in the recreation-room. He asked me with exactly the same shy and gracious expression as before, in his hesitating English, if I wouldn't like to do a broadcast, he had been so disappointed the other time, and had expected me to come again; for himself, he said, the talk would have been all right, but there were other subjects, such as literature, which he was sure I would like to talk about; it would be a great help if I could give him a couple of short talks on any literary subject I cared to suggest; he had big timetables to fill up, and there weren't enough talks to make a programme.

So I did it. I went to my room that day and wrote two talks straight off, one on the role of the animal in romantic writing, the other on Stendhal. I didn't look at them when I'd finished them. They were compact and of one theme. They were done in a few minutes. No rough draft. I didn't really care about them. By that time, after nearly three terms, I had done enough talking not to want to do much more out of hours, and I'd got used to the sound of my voice.

The talks were taken at once; since, first, no one would listen to them, and since, secondly, no one at the studio could understand them, acceptance was easy; they were safely historical and recondite. I recorded them without much interest, certainly

without feathers in the tummy; I went alone to the studios. It was beginning to get frightfully hot, and this encouraged a kind of rich, easy indifference such as the sheikhs of the city always seemed to have. I read the talks through casually, one after the other, watched by three engineers in the control-room, who were laughing and joking most of the time. I couldn't hear them, only see them making gestures and smiling like people in a silent film. Then they waved to me when it was over, and the light in the wall turned green again. The tape was played back to me in the control-room. I was horrified at the sound of my own voice, when it came bellowing out of one of the speakers. It seemed to me, this little mechanism that stored and amplified voices, to offer the ultimate chasm of self-consciousness. I wanted to get away, feeling hot round the neck, while the engineers sat in the same attitudes as before, apparently not sharing the horror. I never wanted to make a broadcast again. It seemed a cheap, stupid thing to do. Fancy talking to people you couldn't see and never would see! What a nasty way of employing half-an-hour, in the dead atmosphere of a studio where everything looked fetid and uncleansed by light and air! I felt stained and dulled! How much nicer the city was with its stiff palm trees, and the stench from the river, and the hot, still air, and the blinding lights, and the minarets that glowed in the evening! The city of 'ugly sights and ugly noises' was so much nicer! Why talk about it to the silent air?