

(final version)

THE RIOT.

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At the time of the riot in Baghdad I was working at one of the colleges as a teacher. It was called the Queen Aliyah College, and was for girls only. Opposite, behind an uneven wall, with the brickwork of its face exposed and rough like a mediaeval building in Europe, was the College of Arts and Sciences for men. And at the end of the road there was one of the gates of the city, a wide square where the buses stopped, with palm trees and a dusty road-surface, and a kind of platform in the middle where criminals and sometimes political prisoners were hung early in the morning, and left there hanging for three hours.

Nearly every year there was a riot of some kind among the students, in the cold weather, before or after Christmas, according to the state of politics; sometimes the riot was mild and sometimes violent. The most violent one had been after the signing of a treaty with Britain, when Ernest Bevin was foreign secretary. Since then they'd been fairly quiet. But it was said that the city, and therefore the country, couldn't go on for long in this state; there were too many communists, too many Russian agents living in the tall, squalid blocks of flats near the gate on the other side of the city, where the better-class brothels were.

Students in the College of Arts and Sciences used to read Lenin and Marx under the lids of their desks rather as

if they were pornographic. There was a steadily growing class of dissatisfied professional people who wouldn't tolerate Iraq's connection with England much longer; the treaty was represented as an act of slavery, only a voluntary treaty on the surface; the ministers were looked on as lackies of the British Embassy, and much odium surrounded the person of the Prince Regent Abdullilah, who was later murdered; he was said to have his finger in every big commercial deal in the city, especially if it was a crooked deal, and to have amassed an immense fortune by corrupt bargains with the government over property and building contracts.

There were also too many poor people. But they didn't complain. It was the students and the professional people who resented and smouldered. They hated the fat, illiterate ministers and under-secretaries who kept them waiting in ante-rooms. The son of the prime minister was also hated. He was said to be one of the lowest rakes in the country.

Of all the things that were said about the people in charge it was difficult to know what was true. When later these people were murdered, their bodies dragged through the streets, it no longer mattered what the truth was; the only important fact was that the anger had been allowed to accumulate too long, and nothing could stop it.

During this riot, which wasn't a particularly bad one, I realised that I was looked on, hated and admired simultaneously, as an Englishman, not at all a friendly teacher from

a foreign land as I thought I was. It was my first experience of being looked at with political hatred, that is, a hatred which is blazing and fierce, quite without mercy, yet in the strangest way without anything personal in it. My own students, especially the ones who were close to me, in my own class, were those who now looked at me most venomously; the girl who had the reputation of being my favourite student, and who against all precedent had come to my hotel-room in my first term at the college to ask me all sorts of questions about existentialism and Byron and life in London and Paris, came up to me and hissed an insult in my face.

The other students took little notice of me---those who worked mainly under other teachers. They seemed blind to me---their eyes looked vaguely past me when they turned in my direction, silvery, with a damped flame, smoky. It was a miscalculation on my part to be in the college at all on the morning of a riot. Usually the day of rioting was known beforehand; after all, there had to be some plan for a riot; and the 'friendly' teachers, those who weren't identified with the government or the British Embassy, were nearly always warned. But this time there was no warning. Even the teacher who was famous for his Arab nationalism didn't know. Afterwards I was told that this riot was the most spontaneous there had been so far; there really had been no plan.

It started during one of the classes. I realised what was up the moment I heard shouting outside, like a wail, because this was the week in which rioting was expected more

or less. I was sitting in my favourite classroom, which looked out on to a quiet quadrangle where the sun blazed down peacefully, making it look like a courtyard in the middle of the desert, in one of the sheikh houses. Baghdad is called 'the city of two springs', and the loveliest weather is at the beginning and the end of summer, when the air is slightly crisp and the sunlight extraordinarily dazzling and clear.

Most of the girls came to the college in their abbas. These were blackcloaks that stretched to the ground and went over their heads like a hood, simply folded over, so that they could draw it across their faces if they had to. Only the old women of Baghdad, and then usually those of the poorer classes, wore the veil proper, a piece of black cloth stretched across the face just above the nose, leaving a slit for the eyes. The educated classes had dispensed with it on the whole, and women covered their faces at will, if they went into the streets at all. Not all the girls wore the cloak, even those from the traditional families; the Christian Arabs and the Assyrians never did, but came in ordinary western clothes.

The head of the college was a Turkish woman, a spinster, and her assistant a Canadian married to one of the government ministers, who was later imprisoned for some years by the revolutionary government. The result was a slight element of suffragettism in the college, though of course it made poor weather against its total opposite outside. When the girls took off their abbas and put them on hooks in the entrance

hall they revealed western clothes underneath---highheeled shoes, tight jumpers, little trinkets and clasps, and most of them wore lipstick.

The noisiest part of the morning was always the break, when the long recreation-room was filled with girls, and lemon-tea and Turkish coffee were served. At first I went there every day but it always meant doing extra tuition--- a girl would always rush up to you with a problem. So by the end of my first term I was having tea on my own, in a little room reserved for the clerks and the bursar of the college. But the recreation-room was the more pleasant: it had cheerful frescoes and little tables, and settees along the wall.

After the first yelling started outside the head of the college, a pale, quiet, sad-faced woman, came round to each classroom and told the girls to sit quietly in their places and to by no means take part in what was going on outside; anyone who did would be punished. She said this with narrowed, slightly fluttering eyes, her lips pursed, but clearly she felt apprehensive. Her hand was shaking a little as she closed the door again. Some of the yells outside were rather blood-curdling, and the girls began to get up from their places, taking not the slightest notice of me. There was a bustle in the hall outside.

It happened to be near break-time, and people began drifting into the recreation-room. As yet there seemed to be no violence outside. The Canadian woman, hurrying past,

told me it would be better to stay in the college. There wasn't another teacher to be seen. Even the bursar wasn't in his little office, nor were the clerks. It was a bright, clear day, and the sun streamed through the tall windows. There was no one serving tea. Even the head of the college had disappeared. There were only students and me. I began to hope that they liked me---all of them.

The yelling outside increased, and then there was the sound of smashing glass. I went out into the narrow quadrangle that gave on to the street and saw that most of the students of the college opposite were collected on the roof and were dropping sizeable boulders down to stop anyone getting into their college. The police were collecting in the road, which was otherwise quite deserted as I'd never seen it before. The students were slinging small stones and pebbles down at them, and the police were moving about dexterously, finding little areas of shelter, crouching down, their rifles cocked and ready, though almost certainly they had government orders not to fire. To one side, standing by an official car, there was a police-officer directing operations. No vehicles were to be seen. The usual beggars and mules and donkeys, the sun-bleached, creaking carts and old, cloaked women gliding quickly along the pavements, were no longer there.

I noticed that there were also girls on the roof opposite; they were waving down to our girls, who seemed to be taking the situation quite lightly. But then the stones

started flying dangerously---the students must have spent hours getting these armaments together on the roof, behind a low parapet. It seemed that the police were trying to force an entry into the college from the side, in order to clear it with tear-gas, and as they got nearer the building in a flank-movement the boulders and stones began flying with a vengeance, making dangerous-sounding thuds on the sandy ground. One of the windows of our college was suddenly smashed, and everyone ran inside. The police pushed the remainder of the girls back---and, since I felt exposed, with my European appearance, I went back too; then the doors were made fast. I decided to go and sit in the recreation room, and to look as unconcerned as possible, though I was very frightened. I reminded myself that on the whole foreigners were left alone, but I knew there could be accidents. I sat down on one of the settees and tried to look as if I was reading.

Still none of the girls took any notice of me. It was the negligence of people with absolute power. But at least the doors were barred, and the girls themselves weren't dangerous. I was wrong. Something opened with a crash--- it might be a door or window---and I had the sudden impression of someone rushing into the hall outside in a frantic way, then a babble of girl's voices. At first I saw no one but then I was aware of a young Arab in the hall, hardly visible because of the excited girls round him. I thought at once that he might be followed by a horde of others---

that the police had lost control---and also I began to think that I, as the only Englishman in the building, might be the target. The young man seemed to push his way through the girls---I noticed for the first time, as if I'd been deaf before, that he was shouting at the top of his voice, without stopping, while the girls made a strange kind of crooning noise in sympathy, and I saw that his face was covered with blood, his hair matted and disordered, and that his loose shirt was torn. He was trembling violently, and his teeth and eyes made a striking impression on me in their whiteness, because they contrasted so much with the rest of his dark, bloody face. He then saw me---or seemed to---and started coming forward quickly from the hall; I went absolutely still with terror---my book was being squeezed tight between my hands, and I simply waited. He went on coming forward, his eyes---if you could say they were concentrated on anything at all---blazed into mine. The girls followed him, and he walked straight into the recreation-room to within a few feet of me. I tried to smile---it crossed my mind in that moment how ages of civil politeness could rise in one's blood in an emergency---and his eyes showed absolutely no recognition whatsoever. And all this time he continued to shout, his teeth and eyes flashing. I wondered if he had a knife. I was so transfixed with terror that I was even not trembling any longer, but as rigid as what I was sitting on, my book clamped so hard between my fingers that it was hurting me. My breathing and my heartbeats seemed to be one rigid operation.

But slowly I began to realise that he hadn't seen me. A girl was pulling him away---she wanted to bathe his wound. And within a few more seconds he was out in the hall again. Relief went through my body like a slow wave, and I began to wake up to distinct sights and sounds again---the brilliant sunshine on the window, the girls' voices, the yells and thuds outside; it was really like waking up in the morning. The young man's shouting ceased. A few of the girls returned---his speech seemed to have stirred them---and gave me some hateful glances. The girl who'd once asked me about Byron and existentialism pushed her face close to mine so that our noses were almost touching and hissed in her broken English, "How do you like it now, eh?" I smiled at her in an aimless way and shrugged, and she walked out with a last biting glance.

I realised that my first few months at the college had been based on a mistake. I'd been invited out to Baghdad by Arabs, not by an official British organisation, and I'd assumed that for this reason I wasn't identified with Embassy politics, whatever they were. But I was wrong. For the first time in my life I was hated in my flesh, for a matter that was beyond me, which I'd never created and which I knew next to nothing about. It was a peculiar sensation, like gooseflesh.

I started feeling defensive about it. Who was to blame if the British used influence where influence was tolerated? Instead of saying that the British were behind everything bad that happened, even the weather, that all Englishmen were spies etc etc, why didn't they stand up and

make a government of their own, and clear their cities of slums, and rally the poor people? Why build me into a figure---a poor damned fool of a teacher!---unless they were burning with envy, that little maggot with a political face sometimes called 'freedom'. I couldn't help it if they felt inferior! And who were these people who felt inferior? Who were these girls who hissed in my face and bared their teeth at me; who were their younger brothers across the road? Quite half of them came to college in long, bright, American limousines! It was the done thing among the girls to offer me a lift at the end of the morning---me, the imperial master, who hadn't even a broken-down Ford, even a bicycle! Their servants swarmed round the gates every morning, salaaming and smiling, come to fetch the little ones! These were the purveyors of 'freedom' to the people---the sons and daughters of the very men who squeezed the people to their last drop of blood! And they certainly needed their political slogans---to hide the brutal discrepancy between themselves and the malaria-ridden, tubercular, half-starved masses under them! Yes, they needed a scapegoat!

In fact, much fewer than half the girls came in limousines. There were a handful of rich girls. Most of them were the children of professional people---lawyers, teachers, doctors. They were middle class and their hatreds were of an abstract kind.

Then I was rescued. A Kurdish friend, hearing the noise of a riot from the ministry of justice where he worked, phoned my home to see if I was there, found I wasn't and

came straight across. He liked making grand gestures, and he enjoyed walking slowly from his car through a hail of stones to the college, dressed in his perfect white suit, with a panama hat at an angle. He prided himself on knowing most of the important communists in the city, and on being the only landowner they treated as a friend. He'd taken me one evening, with an air of conspiracy, to a communist cell, in a flat high above the main square of the city, where there were two small, urgent-looking men with revolvers in their belts. I remember we sat on the terrace looking over the iron rail at the flat roof-tops where people lay on hammocks and divan beds in the heat, and at the twinkling lights of King Feisal square, and the rolling, brown river in the distance, with lighted mosques on the other bank. He told me that this communist cell was like hundreds in the city, there were armed men waiting for 'the day', which would happen in two years, five years, ten years; but it certainly would happen. And it did happen, in about five---to the surprise, apparently, of the diplomats and the so-called Arab experts. The prime minister was murdered and dragged through the streets with his feet cut off, the Prince Regent and the king were both shot, the British Embassy was burned to the ground. A Kurd became the leader.

I was certainly happy to see him in the doorway of the recreation-room, looking immensely tall next to the girls. We walked out of the building arm in arm, with the stones still flying about. Not much notice was

taken of us. The police had gained an entrance into the college, though there were still students yelling on the roof. Things had abated somewhat. The road was uncannily still and deserted, apart from the policemen ducking down behind walls and trees like soldiers in battle. It wouldn't last much longer, my friend said. It was a 'damp squib'. The police were well in control.

Next day the students were as cheerful and talkative as ever. The Byron girl smiled at me in the old way. I peered into their faces but couldn't see a trace of the feelings of the previous day. The girl who had run across to the men's college was called to the head's office and given a severe talking-to. But she wasn't punished. There was still a sign of fear in the head's face. She had a sad, lip-biting manner underneath her authority. The other teachers drifted back and sat in the recreation-room or the clerks' office as usual, not mentioning the disturbances. Most of them agreed with the principles behind it, anyway. They wanted some sort of social position, which they didn't have, and they saw people like me, much younger, coming from England or France or America, getting salaries that made theirs look silly.

I was surprised to see the bloody young man, too. He came across to take a glass of tea with his sister. We even spoke to each other. He had kindly eyes and a charming smile. I asked him what he'd been saying the day before but he looked quite blank. I even began to feel unsure that it had happened. Perhaps abstract hatred, besides being the

deadliest hatred there is, is also the quickest forgotten.

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