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**Letters from Mesopotamia in 1915  
and January, 1916, from Robert  
Palmer, who was killed in the  
Battle of Um El Hannah, June 21,  
1916, aged 27 years**

Robert Stafford Arthur Palmer

# Imprint

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*He went with a draft  
from the 6th Hants  
to reinforce the 4th  
Hants. The 6th Hants  
had been in India since  
November, 1914.*

[3]



War deemed he hateful, for therein he saw  
Passions unloosed in licence, which in man  
Are the most evil, a false witness to  
The faith of Christ. For when by settled plan,  
To gratify the lustings of the few,  
The peoples march to battle, then, the law

Of love forgotten, men come out to kill  
Their brothers in a hateless strife, nor know  
The cause wherefor they fight, except that they  
Whom they as rulers own, do bid them so.  
And thus his heart was heavy on the day  
That war burst forth. He felt that men could ill

Afford to travel back along the years  
That they had mounted, toiling, stage by stage —  
— A year he was to India's plains assigned  
Nor heard the spite of rifles, nor the rage  
Of guns; yet pondered oft on what the mind  
Experiences in war; what are the fears,

And what those joys unknown that men do feel  
In stress of fight. He saw how great a test  
Of manhood is a stubborn war, which draws  
Out all that's worst in men or all that's best:  
Their fiercest brutal passions from all laws  
Set free, men burn and plunder, rape and steal;

Or all their human strength of love cries out  
Against such suffering. And so he came  
In time to wish that he might thus be tried,  
Partly to know himself, partly from shame  
That others with less faith had gladly died,  
While he in peace and ease had cast a doubt,  
[4]

Not on his faith, but on his strength to bear  
So great a trial. Soon it was his fate  
To test himself; and with the facts of war  
So clear before him he could feel no hate,  
No passion was aroused by what he saw,  
But only pity. And he put all fear

Away from him, terming it the offspring  
Of an unruly mind. Like some strong man  
Whom pygmies in his sleep have bound with threads  
Of twisted cobweb, and he to their plan  
Is captive while he sleeps, but quickly shreds  
His bonds when he awakes and sees the thing

That they have bound him with. His faith and will  
Purged all evil passions from his mind,  
And left there one great overmastering love  
For all his fellows. War taught him to find  
That peace, for which at other times he strove  
In vain, and new-found friendship did fulfil

His thoughts with happiness. Such was the soul  
That he perfected, ready for the call  
Of his dear Master (should it to him come),  
Scornful of death's terrors, yet withal  
Loath to leave this life, while still was some  
Part of the work he dreamed undone, his goal

As yet unreach'd. There was for such an one  
A different work among those given,  
Who've crossed the border of eternity  
In youthful heedlessness, — as unshriven  
Naked souls joined the great fraternity  
O' the dead, while yet their life was just begun ...



And so he went from us unto his task,  
For all our life is as it were a mask  
That lifteth at our death, and death is birth  
To higher things than are upon this earth.

L. P.

[5]

Flashman's Hotel,  
Rawal Pindi.

*April 25th, 1915.*

To his Mother.

They are calling for volunteers from Territorial battalions to fill gaps in the Persian Gulf—one subaltern, one sergeant, and thirty men from each battalion. So far they have asked the Devons, Cornwalls, Dorsets, Somersets and East Surreys, but not the Hampshires. So I suppose they are going to reserve us for feeding the 4th Hants in case they want casualties replaced later on. Even if they come to us, I don't think they are likely to take me or Luly, because in every case they are taking the senior subaltern: and that is a position which I am skipping by being promoted along with the three others: and Luly is a long way down the list. But of course I shall volunteer, as there is no adequate reason not to; so I thought you would like to know, only you mustn't worry, as the chance of my going is exceedingly remote: but I like to tell you everything that happens.

Four months after he wrote this, in August, 1915, Robert was on leave at Naini Tal, with Purefoy Causton, a brother officer. [6]

Métropole Hotel,  
Naini Tal.

*August 3rd, 1915.*

To his Mother.

It has been extremely wet since I last wrote. On Saturday we could do nothing except laze indoors and play billiards and Friday was the same, with a dull dinner-party at the end of it. It was very nice and cool though, and I enjoyed those two days as much as any.

On Sunday we left Government House in order to be with Guy Coles during his three days' leave.

It rained all the morning: we went to Church at a spikey little chapel just outside Government House gate. It cleared about noon and we walked down to the Brewery, about three miles to meet Guy. When he arrived we had lunch there and then got ponies.

We had arranged to take Guy straight to a picnic with a nice Mrs. Willmott of Agra, who comes here for the hot weather. So we rode up past the lake and to the very top of Agarpatta, one of the humps on the rim of hills. It took us over two hours, and the mist settled in just as we arrived, about 5, so we picnicked chillily on a misty mountain-top; but Mrs. Willmott and her sister are exceptionally nice people, so we all enjoyed it. They have two small children and a lady nurse for them. I never met one before, but it is quite a sensible plan out here.

We only got back to this Hotel just before dinner, and there I found a wire from Major Wyatt asking me if I would command a draft and take it to the 4th Hants in the Persian [7] Gulf. This is the exact fulfilment of the calculation I wrote to you in April, but it came as a surprise at the moment. I was more excited than either pleased or depressed. I don't hanker after fighting, and I would, of course, have preferred to go with the regiment and not as a draft. But now that I'm in for it, the interest of doing something after all these months of hanging about, and in particular the responsibility of looking after the draft on the way, seems likely to absorb all other feelings. What appeals to me most is the purely unmilitary prospect of being able to protect the men, to some extent, from the, I'm sure, largely preventible sickness there has been in the P.G. The only remark that ever made me feel a sudden desire to go to any front was when O'Connor at Lahore told me (quite untruly as it turned out) that "the Hampshires are dying like flies at Basra." As a matter

of fact, they only had ten deaths, but a great deal of sickness, and I do enjoy the prospect of trying to be efficient about that. As for fighting, it doesn't look as if there would be much, whereon Purefoy greatly commiserates me; but if that is the only privation I shan't complain!

I'm afraid your lively imagination will conjure up every kind of horror, and that is the only thing that distresses me about going: but clearly a tropical climate suits me better than most people, and I will be very careful to avoid all unnecessary risks! both for your peace of mind and also to keep the men up to the mark, to say nothing of less exalted motives.

I know no details at all yet. I am to return to Agra on Saturday, so I shall only lose forty-eight hours of my most heavenly fortnight here.

I got this wire Sunday evening and Purefoy sat up talking on my bed till quite late as we had a lot to say to each other.

*August 4th.* On Monday morning it was pouring harder [8] than ever, quite an inch to the hour. I walked across to the Telegraph Office and answered the Major's wire, and got wet through. After breakfast I chartered a dandy and waded through the deluge to the station hospital, where the M.O. passed me as sound, without a spark of interest in any of my minor ailments. I then proceeded to the local chemist and had my medicine-case filled up, and secured an extra supply of perchloride. There is no Poisons Act here and you can buy perchloride as freely as pepper. My next visit was to the dentist. He found two more decayed teeth and stopped them with incredible rapidity. The climate is so mild that though I was pretty wet through I never felt like catching a cold from being operated on. He was an American with a lady assistant to hold one's mouth open! I never feel sure that these dentists don't just drill a hole and then stop it: but no doubt teeth decay extremely quickly out here.

Then I went back to the Telegraph Office and cabled to Papa and got back in time for lunch after the moistest morning I ever remember being out in.

This hotel is about the worst in the world, I should say, though there are two in Naini reputed to be worse still. It takes in no newspaper, has no writing-paper, only one apology for a sitting-room, and can't supply one with fuel even for a fire. However, Moni Lal is resourceful and we have survived three days of it. Luckily there is an excellent custom here by which visitors belonging to another club, *e.g.*, the Agra Club can join the Naini Club temporarily for 1s. per day. So we spent the afternoon and evening at the Club and I spiflicated both Purefoy (giving him forty and two turns to my one) and Guy at Billiards.

On Tuesday (yesterday) we got up at 7.0 and went for a sail on the lake. Guy is an expert at this difficult art and we circumnavigated the place twice before breakfast with [9] complete success and I learned enough semi-nautical terms to justify the purchase of a yachting cap should occasion arise.

After breakfast we were even more strenuous and climbed up to Government House to play golf. It came on to rain violently just as we arrived, so we waited in the guard-room till it cleared, and then played a particularly long but very agreeable 3-ball, in which I lost to Guy on the last green but beat Purefoy three and one. We got back to lunch at about 3.15.

As if this wasn't enough I sallied out again at 4.0 to play tennis at the Willmotts, quite successfully, with a borrowed racquet, my own having burst on introduction to the climate of this place. Mrs. W. told me that there was a Chaplain, one Kirwan, here just back from the Persian Gulf, so I resolved to pursue him.

I finished up the day by dining P. and G. at the Club, and after dinner Purefoy, by a succession of the most hirsute flukes, succeeded in beating me by ten to his great delight.

I went to bed quite tired, but this morning it was so lovely that I revived and mounted a horse at 7.0 leaving the other two snoring. I rode up the mountain. I was rewarded by a most glorious view of the snows, one of the finest I have ever seen. Between me and them were four or five ranges of lower hills, the deepest richest blue conceivable, and many of their valleys were filled with shining seas of rolling sunlit cloud. Against this foreground rose a quarter-circle sweep of the snows, wreathed and garlanded with cloud wracks

here and there, but for the most part silhouetted sharply in the morning sun. The grandest mass was in the centre: Nanda Devi, 25,600, which is the highest mountain in the Empire, and Trisoul, over 22,000. There were six or eight other peaks of over 20,000 ft. [10]

I got back to the Hotel for breakfast, and from 9.30 to 10.45 we played tennis, and then changed hastily and went to Church for the War Anniversary Service. The station turned out for this in unprecedented numbers—churchgoing is not an Anglo-Indian habit—and there was no seat to be had, so I sat on the floor. The Bishop of Lucknow, Foss's uncle, preached.

After the service I waylaid the Revd. Kirwan and found he was staying with the Bishop, who immediately asked us to lunch. So Purefoy and I went to lunch—Guy preferring to sail—and I extracted quite a lot of useful information from K. Incidentally the Bishop showed me a letter from Foss, who wrote from the apex of the Ypres salient. He isn't enjoying it much, I'm afraid, but was quite well.

When we left the Bishop, it was coming out so fine that we decided to ride up and try again to see the snows. So up we rode, and the cloud effects were lovely, both over the plains and among the mountains; but they hid more than half the snows.

We rode down again to Valino's, the nutty tea-shop here, where we had reserved a table on the balcony. Guy was there before us and we sat there till nearly seven listening to the band. We got back to dinner where Purefoy had secured one of his innumerable lightning friends to dine with us, and adjourned to the Club for billiards afterwards: quite a full day.

*Thursday: Government House.*—Another busy day. It was fine again this morning, so we all three rode up to Snow View and got an absolutely perfect view: the really big snows were clear and cloudless, while the lower slopes and hills and valleys were flooded with broken seas of dazzling cloud. I put it second only to the Darjeeling view.

After breakfast Purefoy and I came up and played golf. Guy took fright at the chance of being asked in to lunch here [11] and went

sailing again. A shower made us late in starting, and we only got through twelve holes, after many misfortunes. I ended dormy five.

Lady M. had been in bed ever since we left, but is up to-day, looking rather ill still.

To-night there is a dinner party.

*Friday.* — The dinner party was uneventful. I sat next a Mrs. — —, one of the silliest females I ever struck. Her only noteworthy remark was that of course the Germans were well equipped for the War as they had been preparing for it for arcades and arcades.

It is wet again to-day. No mail has arrived. I start for Agra after lunch. I have had a delicious holiday. My address now will be:

"Attached 1/4 Hants Regt.,  
I.E.F. 'D,' c/o India Office, S.W."

and post a day early.

Naini Tal Club.

*August 4th, 1915.*

To N.B.

I got a telegram on Sunday asking me to take out a draft to the 4th Hants, in the Persian Gulf, so my address till further notice will be "I.E.F. 'D,' c/o India Office, S.W." I thought I should hate the idea of going to the P.G., but now that it's come along I'm getting rather keen on going. We have been kicking our heels so long while everyone else has been slaving away at the front, that one longs to be doing something tangible and active. The P.G. is not exactly the spot one would select for a pleasure trip: [12] but on the other hand there is likely to be more to do there that is more in my line than the purely military side of the business. The main trouble there is sickness and I'm sure a lot of it is preventible: and though in a battle I should be sure to take the wrong turn and land my detachment in some impossible place, I don't feel it so beyond me to remind them to boil their water and wear their helmets.

I don't know when I'm off, having heard nothing but the bare telegram. They don't want me back in Agra till Saturday, so I shall

almost finish my full fortnight's leave. It has been heavenly here and the memory of it will be a joy for months to come. The forests are lovelier than ever: the ferns which clothe the trees are now full grown, and pale purple orchids spangle the undergrowth. Wild dahlias run riot in every open bank, and the gardens are brilliant with lilies and cannas.

It rained with drenching persistence for three days, but the last two have been lovely. I got up early this morning, rode up a mountain and saw the most superb view of the snows. The brown hills between me and the snows had their valleys full of rolling white clouds, and the result was a study in deepest blue and purest white, more wonderful I think than anything I've seen.

The whole station turned out to the Anniversary Service to-day. It is dreadful to think that we've all been denying our Christianity for a whole year and are likely to go on doing so for another. How our Lord's heart must bleed for us! It appals me to think of it. [13]

Government House,  
Naini Tal.

*August 5th, 1915.*

To his Father.

I have written all the news to Mamma this week. The chief item from my point of view is that, as I cabled to you, I am to take a draft from our two Agra Double Coys. to reinforce the 4th Hants, who are now at Nasiriya on the Euphrates. I got the wire asking me to do this on Sunday, but have heard no details since (this is Thursday night), so I presume they know nothing more at Agra or the Major or Luly would surely have written.

On the other hand the Major wants me back in Agra by Saturday, so I suppose I shall be starting some time next week, but unless I hear before posting this I can tell you nothing of the strength or composition of the draft or the date of sailing.

Everyone insists on (α) congratulating me for going to a front and (β) condoling that it is the P.G. I don't really agree with either sentiment. I'm afraid I regard all war jobs as nasty, and the more war-

like the nastier, but I do think one ought to taste the same cup as all one's friends are drinking, and if I am to go to any front I would as soon go to the P.G. as anywhere. It will be a new part of the world to me and very interesting. The only bore is being separated from the regiment.

*Friday.* — I had a talk on Wednesday with a Chaplain just returned from Basra, and he told me we're likely to stand fast now holding the line Nasiriya-Awaz (or some [14] such place on the Tigris). An advance on Baghdad is impossible without two more divisions, because of the length of communications. There is nothing to be gained by advancing to any intermediate point. The only reason we went as far as Nasiriya was that it was the base of the army we beat at Shaiba, and they had reformed there in sufficient strength to be worth attacking. This is not thought likely to happen again, as the Dardanelles will increasingly absorb all Turkey's resources.

It seems to me that what is wanted here pre-eminently is thinking ahead. The moment the war stops unprecedented clamours will begin, and only a Government which knows its aim and has thought out its method can deal with them. It seems to me, though my judgment is fearfully hampered by my inability to get at any comprehensive statement of most of the relevant facts, that the aim may be fairly simply defined, as the training of India to self-government within the Empire, combined with its good administration in trust meanwhile. That gives you a clear criterion—India's welfare, not British interests, and fixes the limit of the employment of Indians as the maximum consistent with good government.

The *method* is of course far more difficult and requires far more knowledge of the facts than I possess. But I should set to work at it on these lines: —

1. Certain qualities need to be developed, responsibility, public spirit, self-respect and so on. This should be aimed at (i) by our own example and teaching, (ii) by a drastic reform of higher education.
2. The barbarisms of the masses must be attacked. This can only be done by a scheme of universal education. [15]



3. The material level of civilisation should be raised. This means agricultural and industrial development, in which technical education would play a large part.

Therefore, your method may be summed up in two words, sympathy and education. The first is mainly, of course, a personal question. Therefore, preserve at all costs a high standard of *personnel* for I.C.S. Try to get imaginative men at the top. Let all ranks understand from the outset the aim they have to work for, and let Indians know it. Above all let every official act prove it, confidence is a plant of slow and tender growth here. Beware of phrases and western formulæ; probably the benevolent autocrat, whether English or Indian, will always govern better than a committee or an assembly.

The second — education — is a question of *£ s. d.* The aim should be a far-sighted and comprehensive scheme. A great effort to get the adequate funds should be made and a scheme capable of ready expansion started. Reform of higher education will be very unpopular, but should be firmly and thoroughly carried out; it ought not to cost much. The bulk of the money at first should go to technical education and the encouragement of agriculture and industry. This will be remunerative, by increasing the country's wealth. Elementary education would have to begin by supplying schools where asked for, at a certain rate. From this they would aim at making it gradually universal, then free, then compulsory. But that will be many years hence inevitably.

I should work at a policy on these lines: announce it, invite Indian co-operation, and meanwhile deal very firmly with all forms of disorder. [16]

Agra.

*August 12th, 1915.*

To R.K.

This last list is almost more than I can bear. It is hardly possible to think of poor dear Gilbert as killed. Do let me know how Foss is and how he gets on. Your letters are such a joy, and they give me news I get from nobody else.

I'm afraid my share in the correspondence may become even less than before, as I shall henceforth be on more than nominally active service and under the eye of the censor.

Luly is clamouring for lunch, which we eat at 11, and I shall have no peace afterwards till the ship reaches a landlocked bit of Gulf: so goodbye for the present.

"S.S. Varsova,"  
Bombay.

*August 16th, 1915.*

To his Mother.

I shall just have time to write you a line about our journey so far, and may be able to write to Papa later.

They gave me a very nice farewell dinner on Friday at Agra. Raju came and sat next me and it all went off very well. Almost the whole station turned up. After dinner we sat outside, playing the gramophone, etc. Swift, seconded by Luly and Purefoy, made a determined effort [17] to make me tight by standing me drinks and secretly instructing the Khitmagar to make them extra strong; but I was not quite green enough for that and always managed to exchange drinks at the last moment with the result that Swift got pretty tight and I didn't.

I sat in the bungalow talking to Purefoy till 2, and was up again at 6. From 6 till 11 I was busy with seeing to things and hardly had a moment's peace. We paraded at 10.45 and marched to the station, with the Punjabis band leading us. It was excessively warm for marching orders—96° in the shade—and the mile to the station was quite enough. There was a great crowd on the platform and everyone was very nice and gave us a splendid send-off. I was too busy all the time to feel at all depressed at leaving Luly and Purefoy, which I had rather feared I should. Partings are, I think, much more trying in the prospect than at the actual moment, because beforehand the parting fills one's imagination, whereas at the moment one's hopes of meeting again come into active play. Anyway, I hadn't time to think much about it then, and I was already very sleepy. We started at 12.5.

At 1.30 Sergt. Pragnell came running along to say that L/C. Burgess was taken very bad; so I went along, with the Eurasian Assistant-Surgeon, who was travelling with us to Bombay. (These Eurasian A.-S.'s are far more competent than the British R.A.M.C. officers, in my experience.) We found Burgess with all the symptoms of heat-stroke, delirium and red face and hot dry skin. A thermometer under his armpit, after half a minute, showed a temperature of 106°. So the A.S. had all his clothes removed and laid him on a bench in the draught and dabbled him gently with water all over from the water-bottles. Apparently in these cases there are two dangers, either of which proves fatal if not counteracted: (1) the excessive temperature of the body. [18] This rises very rapidly. In another half an hour it would have been 109°, and 110° is generally fatal. This he reduced, by the sponging and evaporation, to about 100° in the course of an hour. But the delirium continued, because (2) the original irritation sends a rush of blood to the head, causing acute congestion, which if it continues produces apoplexy. To prevent this we wanted ice, and I had wired on to Gwalior for some, but that was three hours ahead. Luckily at about 3 we halted to let the mail pass, and a railway official suggested stopping it. This we did, I got some ice which soon relieved the situation. But of course we couldn't take poor Burgess with us, so we wired for an ambulance to meet us at Jhansi, and put him ashore.

Meanwhile at Gwalior a pleasant surprise was in store. We had "train rations" on the usual measly Indian scale, but for tea on Saturday we were to rely on tea provided by Scindia at Gwalior. Happily a Maharajah's ideas of tea are superior to a Quartermaster's, and this is what we had for fifty men! Unlimited tea, with sugar, twenty-five tinned cheeses, fifty tins of sausages and twenty-five 2lb. tins of Marie biscuits! This feed tinted the rest of the journey rose-colour.

The only other incident was the loss by one of the men of his haversack, which he dropped out of window.

Yesterday, Sunday, was much cooler. When I woke at Bhopal it was only 76° and it only got even as high as 89° for about half-an-hour. We ran into rain in the afternoon.

We reached Bhusawal at 7 p.m. and had to wait four hours to be picked up by the Nagpur mail. In the refreshment room I met a Terrier gunner officer who was P.M.C. of the Mess at Barrackpore when we messed there in December. He was just back from a course at Mhow and had been positively told by the Staff Officers there that his and most other T. batteries were to be sent back to Europe [19] in a month's time: and moreover that a whole division of Ts. was going to the Persian Gulf and another to E. Africa.

The air is full of such rumours. Here the Embarkation N.C.O. says 78,000 K's have already sailed to relieve us. But the mere number of the rumours rather discredits them. And the fact of their using us for drafts to P.G. seems to show they don't intend moving the units.

We left Bhusawal at midnight and arrived here at 9.15 without incident. Bombay is its usual mild and steamy self, an unchanging 86°, which seemed hot in November, but quite decently cool now.

This boat is, from the officers' point of view, far more attractive than the "Ultonia." Being a B.I. boat it is properly equipped for the tropics and has good 1st class accommodation. She is about 6,000 tons. The men are, I'm afraid, rather crowded. There will be 1,000 on board when complete. We pick up some at Karachi. We sail tomorrow morning. If not too sea-sick I will write to Papa and post it at Karachi.

I am going out now to do a little shopping and get my hair cut, and I shall post this in the town.

P.S.—The whole country is deliciously green now, not a brown patch except the freshest ploughed pieces, and the rivers no longer beggarly trickles in a waste of rubble, but pretty pastoral streams with luxuriant banks. [20]

"S.S. Varsova,"

*August 21st, 1915.*

To N.B.

I don't know when I shall next get one of your letters. It will have to follow me painfully round *via* Agra. And if I post this at Basra, it will have to go back to Bombay before starting for England; though