

Colonel Sir Hugh Boustead, KBE, CMG, DSO, MC, Vladimir with cross swords, St George's Military Medal with one palm, a member of the Athenaeum, doyen of the expats, was born in 1895 on a tea estate in Ceylon where his father was a planter. His earliest ambition was to join the navy, a desire not hindered by the fact that his uncle Algie was Admiral of the Fleet Sir Algernon Lyons. He entered Dartmouth Naval College, became a midshipman and went to South Africa with HMS *Hyacinth* in 1915 before deciding that seasickness seven times in an hour, claustrophobia, and a love of horse-riding were not compatible with his chosen career.

So he deserted.

He left his uniform in a public lavatory at Cape Town, changed into civilian clothes, took the name of McLaren (which he often forgot, to his embarrassment), and joined the South African Scottish Regiment which was off to fight the Germans in France. He won several decorations, received a royal pardon for his desertion and, after the war, returned to England where he decided it would be fun to go to Oxford for a year whilst he awaited an army commission. 'I had been brought up in anything but an academic atmosphere. I had to sit an exam of sorts and was then accepted as an undergraduate. I decided to read Russian.' There were one or two beastly inconveniences caused by the fact that he was a jolly good boxer, shortly to become army lightweight champion. One evening when he promised to attend the Trinity Commencement Ball with some enchanting Danish girls 'as luck would have it, I was called to fight that same night in the lightweight competition against a French services team. My fight was put on early, about eight o'clock, as I had told the president I had to get back to Oxford. My Frenchman was a good deal heavier, but rather fat, and I was able to knock him out in the third round to an enthusiastic response. I hared off to Paddington to catch the nine o'clock and changed in the train into white tie and tail coat.'

A year later, in 1920, he captained the British pentathlon team at the Antwerp Olympics. After that he raised and subsequently commanded the Sudan Camel Corps before joining a

1933 Mount Everest expedition, 'enormously interesting' but 'hellish' nevertheless. When forced to retire because of frostbite he returned to base camp, had a shave, bought a sheep, and rode a pony across Tibet - 'the journey was one of the most memorable and enchanting I can remember'.

He then became a British political representative in many parts of Arabia before being invited by Shaikh Zayed to live out his retirement training horses at Mazyad, a village near Al Ain. Today, because Shaikh Zayed has come to the agricultural show, Sir Hugh thinks it is possible he might make a detour to see the stables. He has not been for such a long time.

Coincidentally and less dramatically, I also planned to visit the colonel. He is difficult to contact as he is not on the telephone, spends some of the year travelling, and a few months at his home on the New Mountain in Tangier. But two weeks earlier, in Muscat, we had made a tentative luncheon engagement through a third party he was visiting. He had said, 'Just ask. Anyone will know where to find me.'

As my rickety taxi bumped along the road from Al Ain I held little prospect of locating him, and even less of lunch. Mazyad is a single narrow street with one general store and no one seemed to have heard of Colonel Sir Hugh. There were vague pointings to the right, and we drove a few kilometres off the road, past some *barastis* and brick buildings with corrugated iron roofs until, convinced of our mistake, we turned back towards the Hilton in Al Ain and a mutton dip to which I had been invited. The thought of succulent baby lamb, crinkling over a barbecue, made me lick my lips. I tasted bitter dry dust from the desert which blew through the taxi's open window and hovered in specks before clinging loosely like prickly chiffon to the skin.

Just then, I noticed a cluster of green trees to the left, a mirage no doubt, to which we drove in the certainty it would disappear before we arrived. But it stayed, an ersatz Hampshire garden in this desolate piece of sand. There was a gate into a small drive and, behind that, a bungalow weighed down with unexpected greenery. An Indian appeared carrying a wooden spoon which I assumed was a cooking implement rather than an offensive weapon.

'Colonel Sir Hugh?' I enquired dismally.

'Hello, old boy. Glad you could make it. Come on in.'

An elderly man, stocky, slightly stooped but with fine sparkling eyes and weatherbeaten freckled face almost hidden by a wide-brimmed floppy brown hat, had materialized from the corner of the garden. 'Beer?' he asked, before introducing himself, and then 'Boustead.'

I felt I should have managed a sharp salute, handed over a cleft-sticked message from the Queen, and retired with a posse of cavalry into the distance. Instead, I was dishevelled, overweight, a Londoner concerned about missing lunch and about to do feisty battle with an Arab taxi driver who clearly expected a gargantuan fee for having brought two outlandish Britishers together.

'The others back?' Sir Hugh asked his cook.

'Not yet, sir.'

The taxi driver and I played the traditional game of mutual incomprehension, swore at each other for respective greed, and Sir Hugh took me through his small kitchen into a drawing-room furnished with bachelor comfort rather than style. He has never married.

A portrait of Shaikh Zayed dominated one wall and against another was a glass-covered cabinet full of strange medications. A desk cluttered with bits of paper was in front of a window framed by a tangle of orange bougainvillea, white oleanders, and Japanese hibiscus which stirred faintly in a breeze from the mountains stretching towards Oman in the distance. This was the heart of the Rub al Khali, the empty quarter, scene of so many diplomatic quarrels and oil-company duplicity.

'Would you like a dip before lunch?' Sir Hugh asked. 'We have plenty of water here.'

The setting seemed too ascetic for a swimming pool. Perhaps he was suggesting a bath.

'I have a tank outside,' continued Sir Hugh. 'Did you bring a costume?'

It had not occurred to me.

'I'll see if I can find you one.'

His room was cluttered, clothes were on the floor and chairs

and double bed. Memorabilia of his soldiering days were tucked into odd corners and there seemed to be everything but a spare costume.

'Pity,' said Sir Hugh. 'Better not go in starkers. Do you mind if I have a dip?'

The 'tank' was a concrete structure erected above ground to a height of about seven feet. There were steps to the brim which Sir Hugh climbed with agility and plunged in. The water looked dank and was covered in leaves. He swam four lengths in a gentle breast-stroke, carrying on conversation most of the time, clambered out, put on his hat, walked down the steps and went to change. 'Glorious day,' he said.

Inside the house a whiff of perfume mingled with the smell of curry, and lingered like sweet lilies altogether too dainty for such a resolutely bachelor establishment. It must be imagination.

'Do you know Lady Pamela?'

I turned. Sir Hugh had entered the drawing-room with the woman I had noticed earlier at the agricultural show.

'Lady Pamela Egremont,'<sup>1</sup> said Sir Hugh, and then to her, 'Did you manage to get your hair done?'

'Yes,' she said. 'But I only just got away before this mass of cars and soldiers came up to the entrance.'

'Lady Pamela went to have her hair done at the Hilton after the show,' explained Sir Hugh.

'Quite,' I replied.

'She's here on holiday.'

We sat down to an excellent curry lunch, talked about London literary life (her son, Max, had just written a book), and Shaikh Shakhbut. 'Of course he was extremely entertaining, with quite a sense of humour, and he used to listen to all the news,' said Sir Hugh. 'He insisted it was much safer to listen to Israeli radio because they are more truthful than the Arabs. He hated Egyptians.'

'But he was mean. He even kept his tea locked up. If he had a guest, a servant would come in, Shakhbut would go to a cupboard, unlock some tea, and then it would be brought back again afterwards. And he always forgot to pay people. One day the chief of police came and said, "Look here, you had better

pay. You haven't for four months". So Shakhbut got a box of rupees from under his bed and it was full of silver fish. They had eaten the whole lot. That shook him. It was after that he agreed to put it in the bank.

'Another time he was persuaded to put up some loos by the beach at Abu Dhabi. You see the problem was that everyone used the beach as a loo, and that didn't seem a very good idea in a seaside resort. So he got some contractors. But the Arabs didn't like the toilets. They thought they were insanitary and didn't use them. Shakhbut thought he had been swindled and put the contractor in prison.'

Sir Hugh spends much of the day as a doctor, treating bedou who come from all around. 'I see about twenty a day. They are jolly good chaps.' In the evening, he rides for one and a half hours on one of the fifty horses stabled nearby. Every day he awaits a visit from Shaikh Zayed, who since he became a world leader seems to have lost interest, but he enjoys living in such an out-of-the-way spot. 'I think it is largely the background one has grown up with, the people one has been working for and been interested in over the years.'

I left and returned in the amnesial afternoon to Al Ain. Traffic was stopped at a roundabout for Shaikh Zayed's Cadillac to pass. A couple of police cars were in front and a jeep behind, manned with two machine guns. He waved from the window but was deep in conversation with an unidentified man in a Savile Row suit. It is tough being a world statesman.

From across the sand the chant of the *muezzin* quivered for a while in the languorous air and vanished into the disappearing day. The *ulemas* often tape record their message now and mosques are fitted with stereo equipment. The money rush makes real people redundant.

Across the sands Sir Hugh cantered, and waited for a visit that never came.