

CHAPTER SIX

I managed to get myself in trouble leaving Palmyra. I was walking, as usual, out to the east-west gravel road where Pete had dropped me two days before. A car stopped and the Arab driver offered me a ride. The car was going in the right direction. I poked my staff between bags on the roof-rack and squeezed myself into the back seat with three other Arabs, thinking all was well. At a small village called Al Husn, the car stopped. We all bailed out. My fellow passengers handed over a few paper notes to the driver as I retrieved my staff from the roof and pack from the trunk and hefted it onto my back. The driver snapped his fingers at me and rubbed thumb and forefinger together. He said something I didn't understand.

"Floos," he said, raising his voice. I didn't know the word, but the sign was obvious. Give me money!

That was difficult because I didn't have any, other than a few coins. The driver got mad. Police arrived. Someone explained to me that I had been in a car, not a taxi exactly, licensed to charge passengers. Ooops, I thought. What now?

A policeman ushered me across the road to a small police station, for my safety, I suspect. I sat on my pack in a corner while a debate raged as to what to do with me. I understood jail was one possibility. Deportation another.

"Where are you going?" an interpreter asked.

"Tel Kalakh; then Damascus," I replied, "after that to Beirut."

A flurry of words that constituted a conversation and an argument passed at high speed between the interpreter and the police, both assisted and impeded by a crowd of locals who had squeezed in to share the occasion. One point was obvious, some wanted me lynched, others would have had me jailed. I failed to appreciate either possibility. A voice of reason from a man dressed in a western suit suggested a compromise. Pointing to a page in my passport, he said, "He has a visa for Lebanon. I'll drive him to the border. He can cross there."

I didn't want to go to Lebanon yet. I wanted to roam the old crusader castle at Tel Kalakh. I wanted to explore Damascus. I stood and pleaded my case. My English was better than theirs. Their Arabic was better than mine – much better. I lost the case.

"You go Lebanon," a finger in my chest emphasized the decision.

And so, despite my protestations, the interpreter in the western suit ushered me out of the police station, into the back of a car and, a short while later, stopped at a Syrian border post. By this time the midnight hour was fast approaching. The Syrians stamped my passport and wrote something rude across my visa in Arabic.

My driver pointed into the future. "Lebanon," he said. "You go to Beirut."

My visa for Syria had been cancelled. I had been deported to the next country on my list. The way ahead was dark. I walked south, taking short steps down the middle of the road into the Stygian unknown. Annoyed at my unceremonious departure from Syria, because I hadn't seen as much of the country as I wanted, I complained aloud to myself. I had not yet been to Damascus, the oldest continually inhabited

city in the world. Faint laughter drifted to me from ahead, breaking into my soliloquy. A light flashed. A voice called in French, "M'sieu. Venez ici." Come here!

The Lebanese border guards proved to be highly amused at my predicament. Obviously, they didn't get much entertainment at that outpost. They made me tell my story, so much easier in French, and laughed at every nuance. They slapped me on the back. They fed me a meal of bread, dates, meat and rice. They gave me tea. And they persuaded me to sleep on their floor until daybreak. I was happy to comply.

In the morning, with the sun not yet visible in the east, I had more tea, and an omelet. The guards refused to accept any payment but allowed me to clean the dishes at an outdoor water pump. They suggested I wait. There would be a car or a truck, or a bus, or some form of transport along some time that day. I thanked them, pointed to my feet and said, "Non, merci. Tinker en marche à pied." And away I went, on foot, with a comfortable feeling in my belly, south along the coast road towards Tarabulus and onwards to Beirut.

Away from the border I found a path down to the sea. Not having had a good all-over wash for many days, I stripped naked and went for a swim. The water felt good as I rubbed the grime of desert travel from my pores. I took the opportunity to wash some underwear and socks, plus a shirt, all of which dried in minutes when I spread them on the ground under the hot sun. I stayed there the rest of the day and slept on the beach that night. I was clean and I was comfortable.

An Irish girl I met at the hostel in Beirut a few days later told me of a way to earn easy money in Lebanon. "Give a pint of blood at the university hospital," she advised. "I did and they pay five pounds sterling."

Five pounds was about twenty dollars. I gave blood, rested for a while, accepted a cup of tea and a sweet biscuit, and collected my money. I could live on twenty dollars for a few weeks.

Lebanon has long been referred to as the Switzerland of the Middle East. Beirut is a cosmopolitan multi-lingual city where Christians and Muslims live close together and in harmony. The narrow country has wonderful beaches on one side and forested hills on the other where the skiing is considered world class. Also up there in the hills is the 2,000 years-old Phoenician and Roman treasure named Ba'albek looking over the Beqaa Valley.

Less than three hours from Beirut on a narrow winding road with little traffic, it feels much more isolated. Like Palmyra, Ba'albek is far enough away from urban areas to have resisted the encroachment of group tourism – so far. I shared expenses with eight other nomadic Europeans in a passenger van driven by an exuberant Belgian from Ghent who had no idea of the rules of the road.

I closed my eyes and prayed as he raced around blind corners, somehow squeezed past a truck where there was not enough room and scraped the hillside too many times. By the time we reached Ba'albek we were all silently screaming in fear. And we still had to go downhill with him at the end of the day.

Thanks to the crazy Belgian driver, my nerves were not in good shape as I roamed Ba'albek. At most archaeological sites I explored with my mind focused on the location. At Ba'albek I found my mind drifting, worrying about the ride back to sea level. I knew there was no alternative. I either had to walk, pay an expensive bus fare – if a bus should come along – or walk all the way. I tried to concentrate on

the present and enjoy the wonders of the site. To bolster my spirits I reminded myself that Alexander came here as well, though not with a demented Belgian driving his chariot.

The temples attracted religious pilgrims to worship their favourite deities: Jupiter, Venus, Bacchus, and Mercury. Thinking of the coming journey, I wondered which one I should pray to. Should it be Jupiter? No, a god who sent thunder and lightning would not do. What about Venus? Again, no. Attractive though she was, a goddess of love could not help me. My feelings for the Belgian driver were quite the opposite. Bacchus was definitely out of the equation. So, Mercury it had to be. I decided his winged feet would be perfect to help me escape extreme danger. Mercury received my prayers that day and, as I realized later, he looked after me.

The journey downhill was a repetition of the drive to Ba'albek, only much faster. Needless to say, I was terrified that my young life might come to an end on a Lebanese hillside. I stepped out of the van in Beirut, just off the Corniche. My legs were shaking, and my chest felt too tight for normal breathing. That night I had a light meal and then went to bed. My dreams became nightmares as I re-lived the Belgian's bravado behind the steering wheel.

Undeterred by my ignominious early departure from Syria, I obtained a new visa by nefarious means in the Lebanese capital (yes, it was a forgery and it cost me five of my blood dollars). With dark ink spilled over my original Syrian visa in my passport, I went back a couple of weeks later, taking a ramshackle bus through a different border crossing from Beirut to Damascus. None of the border officials noticed the old visa or the new artwork.

Damascus. How that name resonated in my head. A city that had grown under the influence of Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine and Islamic cultures. A city that had existed for over 10,000 years – not in its present form, of course, but archaeological excavations have shown that there has been a settlement on the site for that length of time. And yet, according to my Bible: Isaiah 17: 1-2, "Damascus will cease to be a city and will become a heap of ruins." So far that has not happened and the oracle who spoke those words did not suggest a date for the destruction. May his dire predictions continue to be incorrect.

General Parmenion, one of Alexander's senior soldiers took Damascus in about 334 B.C. It is possible that Alexander came here as well, on his way from Egypt to what would become the battle of Gaugamela. Damascus hiccupped and lived on. The city was already ancient when Jesus Christ and his Apostles walked this much-contested land. One of its most significant visitors was Saul of Tarsus – an angry man determined to wipe out Christianity – all by himself if necessary. He beat Christians. He had them imprisoned. He had them executed. He was a relentless warrior against Christianity. All that changed on the road to Damascus from Jerusalem.

Not far from Damascus Saul was struck by a blazing light, so intense that it knocked him to the ground. Legend says that Saul then heard the voice of Jesus Christ reproving him for his campaign against Christians.

"Saul. Saul. Why do you persecute me?" the voice asked.

When Saul opened his eyes, he found he was blind and had to be led into Damascus. There, Saul resided in the house of Judas on the street called Straight. He remained blind for three days, until Ananias

converted him to the Christian faith and baptized him. Saul then regained his sight, no doubt with a huge sigh of relief, and became Paul the Apostle. Eventually the most famous of the twelve.

The street called Straight runs east and west for about a mile across the middle of the city. Although I walked the length of the street on both sides, I saw no sign that Saul or Paul had once lived there. The only interesting reminder of Greco-Roman times is the entry arch over that street called Straight.

As with most Middle Eastern cities, from Turkey to Iran and far beyond, the covered markets with narrow streets crowded with traders and buyers were highlights for me. Damascus was no different. I'm not a great fan of crowds, and yet I love those markets. I can immerse myself in their mysterious depths for days at a time.

I went looking for Pete, my friendly Syrian Iraqi truck driver. I found the apartments where he lived and I met one of his children, or so the boy said, only to discover Pete was away again.

"He's gone to Raqqa," his young son told me.

"Tell him Tinker came to say hello, will you, please?"

The boy nodded, smiled, and pocketed the few coins I gave him. I caught the next rattling bus back to Beirut. There I sold another pint of my precious blood and pocketed the payment. I wanted to go to Israel but the only legal way to do so at that time was to fly in as all land borders were closed. That meant by air to Cyprus and then again by air to Tel Aviv. Air travel was far beyond my miserable resources. I didn't have that much blood in me. Israel would have to wait for a few years.

I stayed a few more days in Beirut because I liked the city so much. I helped repair a truck and a car and earned a few more dollars. I also spent many hours on the Corniche, staring out over the Mediterranean and thinking about my journey so far.

I had travelled thousands of miles following ancient trails trod by warriors, statesmen and philosophers. I had explored Biblical cities and cities older than time. I had walked in the footsteps of Alexander, of Marc Antony, of St. Paul, perhaps of Jesus himself, and, assuming she did walk occasionally instead of being carried by slaves, I had walked in Cleopatra's tiny footprints. Those people, places and historic events had been my university.

I had also aged a year. In that twelve months I had grown physically stronger; mentally more agile. I had devoured knowledge and experiences with an appetite that seemed inexhaustible. I was more confident. I was happy, but hungry for more. It was time to leave the eastern lands of Alexander and of the Bible. It was time for something completely different.

Instead of spending money I didn't have to visit Israel, I travelled deck class on a small Greek freighter for an overnight voyage from Beirut to Port Said. A wealthy young American who introduced himself as Dennis from Pittsburgh sailed with me. He had a car with him, rented from Paris, he explained. The car spent the voyage perched on a cargo hatch. Dennis had the luxury of a berth below decks. I slept in the open. I fell asleep happy on a gently rolling Mediterranean Sea.

Dennis was travelling solo for six months without any particular itinerary, all expenses paid by his father as a gift for earning a degree in some discipline or other from Cornell University in New York State. He joined me on deck in the morning and offered me a free ride to Cairo, which I was more than happy to

accept. After a lazy day at sea our freighter threaded a meandering course between the ships waiting at anchor to enter the Suez Canal. We docked at Port Said in the early evening. The smells born on the breeze circling the harbour intoxicated me with their spices, their mystery. The smells said it all: This is Africa!