

# MY FOUR YEARS IN TURKISH PRISONS

by Archibald Forder.

IN this exclusive article Mr. Forder tells the readers of THE SUNDAY AT HOME, to whom his work as a missionary in Palestine for twenty-five years is well known, the remarkable story of his terrible experiences during the war—a story in which His Majesty the King recently showed a deep and sympathetic interest. Our readers will remember that before the war Mr. Forder was known as one of the greatest living authorities on Palestine, and especially on work among the Bedouins.—The Editor

WHEN last I wrote an article for THE SUNDAY AT HOME, I little dreamed that I should ever have such a story to tell as that which I now sit down to write. My pen travels slowly. It is not merely that my hand is paralysed. My heart is almost too full for words. I feel I must confine myself to the simple facts of my imprisonment and of my release. I will tell the story as simply as I can.

When the war broke out, we who were working in Palestine had no idea that Turkey would be involved. Many missionaries left the country by order of their committees. We who were independent preferred to remain. Every week we were assured that we were safe. Suddenly came the news that Turkey had entered the war, and many residents in Jerusalem found to their dismay that they were detained.

On Friday November 6th, 1914, I was returning from the city, where I had been making a few purchases, when I was suddenly dropped upon by a Turkish officer and three soldiers.

"You're wanted," said one of them abruptly. "You are under arrest, and must come with us to the barracks at once."

The latter building was inside David's Tower close to the Jaffa Gate. Of course I had to accompany the soldiers there. On arrival I was taken before two Turkish officers. They used insulting language, and contemptuously handed me over to two Turkish soldiers saying, "Lock him up."

I knew very well that I was a marked man. As I had been there for a quarter of a century as a missionary I was well known. One of the men who had arrested me spoke English well, and addressed me by name.

I must explain that the week before, as

there was no post leaving Jerusalem, the foreign post office having been closed by order of the Turkish Government, several of the missionaries, including myself, had seized the opportunity to send letters home by an American who was leaving for Egypt. Unfortunately, these letters were intercepted in the Customs House at Jaffa, and handed for inspection to a German officer. He advised that as I was so well known in the country, especially among the Arabs and the Bedouins, I should be arrested. The strange part of it is that none of the writers of the other letters was interfered with in any way, nor was any reference ever made to my letters in any of the courts-martial before which I subsequently appeared. The letters in question were written three weeks before the outbreak of hostilities between Turkey and Great Britain. Had they been written later, some action might have been justified, but, as it was, the treatment that followed almost stunned me with surprise.

## Imprisoned in a Stable

First of all, soldiers took me to a room in which a horse was stabled. This place was about fifteen feet square. It had neither door nor window. Where there should have been a window there were stout iron bars; where there should have been a door, there stood a sentry, with fixed bayonet.

In this miserable place I was kept for two months, practically in solitary confinement. Once my wife was allowed to visit me, but an officer was present who understood English, and listened carefully to every word we uttered.

At the end of the two months I was taken before another Turkish officer. He asked me a few elementary questions. He

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said nothing whatever as to the reason for my imprisonment.

"Well," he said in concluding the interview, "we want the place you have been in for stabling more horses, and you will have to go to the common prison, and be shut up with the criminals."

So I began the new year in the common gaol, in a small cell that already held fifteen men. This place was alive with vermin. Rats scampered about us as we tried to sleep. The prisoners were of a low character. As I was an Englishman they soon displayed a violent feeling towards me. More than once they laid plans to kill me, but I was given warning each time, and claimed the protection of the governor of the prison.

### A Prison Riot

After about six weeks in this cell I was moved to a smaller one, the walls of which were soaked by running water, so that it was almost impossible to keep dry. Not one ray of sunlight ever entered.

One night there was a great riot among the prisoners, the cause of which was that they had had neither bread nor water for thirty-six hours. It was stated that the prison governor had sold the bread and pocketed the money in lieu of his salary, which had not been paid him. During the riot soldiers were called in and given orders to fire on the prisoners, with the result that six were killed and many wounded.

On the following day there was an investigation as to the cause of the outbreak, and we were lined up in the courtyard of the prison to see several who had been the ringleaders bastinadoed. This method of beating on the soles of the feet was only one illustration of the heathenish character of Turkish punishments.

Among those who had come to make the investigation was the Chief of the Police. On seeing me among the prisoners he said to the governor, "Who is that man?"

"I don't know anything about him," said the governor, "except that I had orders to keep him in safe custody and put him in the worst place I could find."

The Chief of Police was not satisfied. Eventually he got my name and gave orders that I should be taken to him at the *seriyya*, or town hall.

Here he put me through a severe examination, and then he told me he had received six telegrams from the court-martial at Damascus ordering him to find me and to send me there for trial.

"Until I saw you yesterday among the prisoners," he said, "I could find no trace of you at all, although I frequently asked the prison governor if he had you in his keeping. Now, you have been badly treated, and I'm sorry for you. I shall let you go back to your wife and family. Unless I receive another telegram from Damascus I will keep silent about you, for I have already told the court-martial you must either have died or have fled the country."

### Re-arrested

I was allowed to return to my home. Barely a week had elapsed before a policeman came one morning to tell me that another urgent message had come from Damascus demanding either my presence or the presence of the Chief of Police, and there was now nothing for it but for me to go to Damascus under escort.

So I said good-bye to home and to freedom once again. On the way to Damascus my escort relieved me of most of the money I had taken with me. Immediately on arrival I was taken before the court-martial, being accompanied by the American Consul, who was acting for British interests at the time.

The outcome of the first interview was an undertaking that if the Consul would be responsible for my good behaviour and for my appearance if called for, I should be allowed to have my liberty in the city of Damascus. It was agreed that there was no charge of any seriousness made against me.

Yet the following day had only just dawned when a police officer called me out of bed. I must proceed to the court-martial at once!

For five hours I waited, closely watched. When I was ushered into the presence of the court anything but a friendly reception awaited me. Seven Turkish officers seemed to vie with each other in insulting and threatening me. They even insulted my wife, my daughter and my son in the vilest way, and I could see that their object was to force me to say something upon which a charge could be founded. All the conversation took place in Arabic, but I chose my words with great care.

### Turkish "Justice"

After this objectionable cross-examination I was told to step outside. Half an hour passed. They called me in again.

"There is nothing against you," they said. "Now, if you will give us two

hundred pounds in English gold we will let you go."

I told them I had not got the money, and could not get it. They suggested various ways in which I could get it. All of them were impossible. At length, seeing that the money would not be forthcoming, they closed this pitiful mock-trial.

"Take this man away," they said to the police. "Put him in the common prison, and tell the governor to confine him in the worst place he has."

Reaching the gaol at about half-past five in the afternoon, I was at once put into a cell about 30 feet square in which were about seventy-five men, all awaiting trial. The place was indescribably filthy. There was no air. There was no water. It was so crowded that it was impossible for all the prisoners to lie down to sleep.

For eight days I remained in the fetid atmosphere of this cell, not knowing what was going to happen to me. As I write, in this well furnished cosy English home, surrounded by so many of the comforts of civilisation, those days seem like some horrible nightmare.

I needed all my faith, all my nerve at that time. One morning the governor of the prison came and told me I had been condemned to death by the court-martial and I was to be put in the condemned cell.

#### In the Condemned Cell

I will not harrow any reader's feelings by dwelling upon the days that followed. In the condemned cell there were sixteen men, heavily chained, who awaited death either by hanging or shooting. I saw every one of those sixteen fellow creatures led out to execution. . . . I was forced to go into the prison yard each time the execution took place, and each time I was told it would be my turn on the morrow.

Thus the time dragged wearily on. For seven months I was in that condemned cell. There was nothing to do but to keep on praying and hoping. At last there came a change. The prison governor came

and told me the death sentence in my case had been revoked. I was to be confined in a dungeon for three years.

#### A Foul Dungeon

They took me to a vault some fifty feet underground, in which were a hundred and fifty men, all condemned to imprisonment for life. This place, almost in darkness, was used as a dungeon in Roman times. It was in a foul condition. Many of the prisoners, knowing they had to spend their lives there, had fixed up rude benches so that they need not lie on the damp, dirty ground. For nine months I lived in this dreadful place, being allowed out for one hour every third day for exercise. The prison authorities refused me the usual allowance of coarse



Mr. Archibald Forder  
The writer of the article

bread, telling me that the American Consul must be responsible for feeding me. I had great difficulty in communicating with him, as I was not allowed to send any written communications out of the prison, and no one was allowed to visit me. Had it not been for the sympathy of some of the prisoners, who gave me scraps they did not want themselves, I might have starved.

At the end of the nine months I was told I was to be removed once more. I was taken up to the level of the prison yard, and put in a cell with about thirty other men, all murderers condemned to life-long imprisonment.

Many of the latter were men of very low character. At once determined to satisfy their spite against the Englishman, they set to work to devise complaints that would reach the authorities. I was always abusing the Sultan, they declared. I cursed their religion, ridiculed the Turkish officials, and so on. The principal charge they brought against me was that I was always saying the Turks would be soundly beaten by the British.

But for the goodness of God these dangerous misstatements might have silenced me for ever. Happily an investigation was ordered. My fellow prisoners were questioned, and no witnesses could be found,

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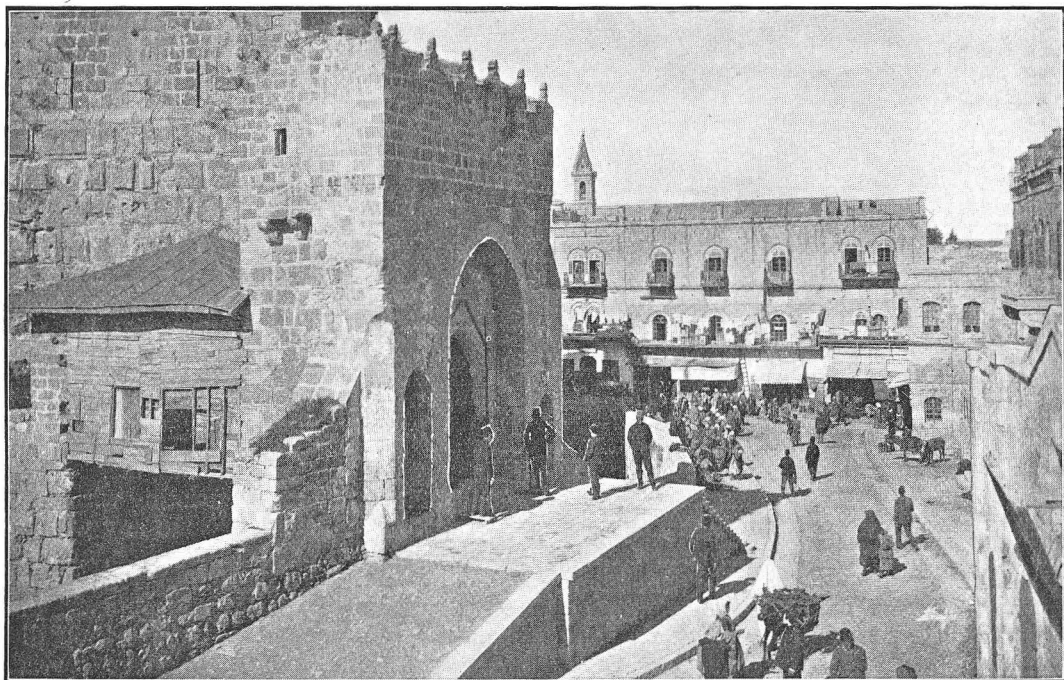
other than those who had made the charges, to say that I had spoken in such an unpardonable way. In the end those who had invented the stories were punished by being flogged and put in heavy chains.

All this time I was entirely ignorant as to what sentence had actually been passed upon me by the court-martial, neither did I know on what charges I had been thrown into prison. I do not want to exaggerate or over-colour the picture in any way, but the life in this prison was a hard one. The

### News from the Outer World

One day a man who was visiting a friend in the prison caught sight of me and asked who I was. "Oh," he was told, "that is the Englishman who has been condemned to three years' imprisonment." "Why," he said to his friend, "I remember that case being reported in the native newspaper. The report said the court-martial had sentenced him to three years' police supervision in the city of Damascus. There was nothing said about his being imprisoned."

To verify this he came again the next



David's Tower, Jerusalem, close to the Jaffa Gate, where Mr. Forder was first imprisoned

vermin and the rats were intolerable by night and by day. The hatred of some of the prisoners who were bent on working mischief was hard to put up with. The cold winds that blew across Damascus from the snows of Hermon were very severe, and as I had barely enough clothing to cover me it was difficult to sleep at night or to keep warm during the day. But for the kindness of one or two of the prisoners it would have been difficult to sustain life at all. I had no news of the outer world, though the prison governor or Turkish soldiers would come at times gleefully to tell me of some great victory of the Germans or Turks over the British forces. Neither could I receive any communication from my wife in Jerusalem or from my children, of whose whereabouts I knew nothing.

day, and brought with him a native newspaper several months old, which he showed to his friend and myself. It contained the decision of the court-martial as he had stated it.

At once I appealed to the prison governor. What was my sentence according to his committal papers, or according to his books?

He told me he had received no committal papers in my case. He even said he did not know what my sentence was, but promised to find out.

Some days later he informed me he had discovered that I ought never to have been imprisoned, and that I ought to be at liberty in the city. "Well," I said, "to whom can I appeal?"

"There is only one man who could help

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you," he replied, "and that is Jamal Pasha, Turkish Commander-in-Chief of the Fourth Army Corps. He has absolute power, from Constantinople right down to the Suez Canal."

With great difficulty I got writing materials. With greater difficulty I got a statement of my case, written in English, sent to headquarters. I heard afterwards that the Commander-in-Chief was greatly surprised to receive such a communication from the common prison. He said he had never signed any paper for the committal of an Englishman to prison, though he had done so in the case of a German, a Russian, and an Italian, all three of whom had died owing to the bad treatment they received.

### A "Pardon" from the Sultan

An inquiry into my case was ordered, both the court-martial in Damascus and the court-martial at Jerusalem being set to work, and the result was that one day an officer came to the prison and told me the Pasha was quite satisfied there was nothing against me, that my past record was good, and that I had been unjustly treated. As soon as possible he would obtain for me a free pardon from the Sultan in Constantinople. As he could not grant it himself, he could not do more at the moment than reverse the sentence of the court-martial.

I waited several weeks. Then the pardon came. And this is how I was released. One afternoon, late in January 1917, the prisoners were preparing their suppers when the governor of the prison appeared at the iron gates and called me.

"Put on your coat and hat; you are wanted outside."

He was not alone. With him were a Turkish major and four soldiers with rifles and fixed bayonets.

The prisoners knew well that when a man was taken out of his cell by the police at sunset he was to be hanged next morning, and that if the military came he was to be shot. It looked as if my turn had come.

I asked the prison governor to tell me what was the meaning of this sudden summons.

"By the beard of the Prophet," he said, "I swear I don't know. All I know is that by order of the court-martial I have to hand you over to these men and take a receipt for you from the officer."

### "Piling on the Agony"

For the next two hours I was paraded round the streets of Damascus between the

four soldiers. Eventually we arrived at the court-martial. Again I was taken before seven Turkish officers, several of whom had been there when I was examined two years previously.

They asked me all sorts of questions. To every answer I gave they replied, "you lie! Tell the truth, or you will be shot in the morning." For half an hour they bullied, badgered and threatened me. Then they were forced to tell me the truth.

"We have called you here to-day," the presiding officer said, "to tell you that there came a pardon from the Sultan this afternoon. You are free. There is the door. Go!"

"After two years and four months of such treatment as I have had," I said, "would you dismiss me in this way——"

"Don't talk about it," they said. "It's all been a mistake. Try and forget it. It will soon pass away like a dream. Now go."

Knowing that my pardon was lying on the table, I was not in a hurry.

"Before I go out into the street," I said, "I want a written statement to the effect that I have been pardoned by the Sultan and have been released from prison. As soon as I leave here I shall probably be arrested as a spy."

They refused this request, and would give me nothing. The expected happened. I had scarcely got outside the door of the commandeered house in which the court-martial held its sittings, when, while I was pondering as to what I should do next, a hand fell heavily on my shoulder and I heard the ominous word *Jasoos!* (Spy.) I was in the hands of a Turkish detective.

I tried to explain. The man was not to be baulked of his capture, and was about to haul me off to the police station. Fortunately for me, at that moment the officers of the court-martial appeared in the street. I called to them. One of them came over to where we were standing. "What I said would happen has happened," I said, "and I am taken into custody by this detective."

The officer spoke to the man in Turkish, telling him I had been pardoned, and before long I was free.

But imagine my predicament. I was the only European left in the city of Damascus—a marked man among half a million people. I wore European clothes. I had not the means wherewith to secure lodging at the cheapest hotel, even if, seeing my general appearance, anyone would take me

in. Only a few days previously my head had been clean shaved, in order to degrade me before the Turkish prisoners. I had friends in Damascus, but I knew it was useless to appeal to them, as any kindness shown by them to one of the enemy might result in their being hanged without delay. There had been many such cases.

I decided finally that I would go back to the prison governor and ask him to put me in the cell to which I had become accustomed. There at least I should have something to eat and a certain amount of protection.



On the Damascus-Lebanon Railway

#### A Friend in Need

Just as I was starting off with this intention, a voice cried, "Why, Mr. Forder, whatever are you doing here? Your time is not up. How on earth have you got out of prison?"

The speaker was a man who had known me in the prison. He had been imprisoned on a false charge made by an enemy. After waiting there for three years he had had his case gone into for the first time and in five minutes was discharged, there being nothing against him.

I told him what had happened to me, and this Good Samaritan at once took me to his little house offering me hospitality until I could find other shelter.

For some days I wandered about Damascus trying to find lodging. Time after time I arranged for a room, but the agreement was broken when the owner found I was an Englishman. There was too great a risk of exile into the far interior, if not of death, and no one wanted to have anything to do with me.

One afternoon, wet, and cold and hungry I was wandering in the narrow streets of the Christian quarter of Damascus, when I came face to face with a man whom I did not recognise, but who had probably met me many years before in another part

of the country and had not forgotten me.

"Whatever are you doing?" he cried, "wandering about in the rain like this?"

I described my plight.

"Well," he said, "have you seen —?" (One of the native teachers connected with the Irish Presbyterian Mission.)

I said I had never heard of him.

My new-found friend took me to see the teacher. The latter, on hearing my story, was very sympathetic, but said, "You know I have my wife and six children and a sick

sister to consider. If I show kindness to this Englishman we shall have to suffer for it. However, we will see if anything can be done."

He saw me again on the following day. There was, he told me, a small room connected with the church of the mission, and as all the missionaries were away in Ireland it would be quite safe for me to use it.

Needless to say, though I found this room unfurnished and in a neglected condition, I gladly accepted the offer. For the first few nights I slept on the bare floor with a thick layer of dust as a mattress, and my own scanty clothing for covering. Gradually the kind-hearted teacher collected for me a few bits of furniture, bringing them under cover of night.

I found an opportunity of seeing the Commander-in-Chief personally and thanking him for his kindness. It is only fair to say that, though he had a bad name, this Turkish officer showed me much consideration. By his permission my wife was allowed to come under Turkish protection to join me in Damascus. When he resigned and went back to Constantinople I lost a good friend.

#### A Tragic Bereavement

This chapter in my story I cannot write. . . . My dear wife had been worn

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out by constant anxiety, and by lack of nourishing food. She was not strong enough to resist an attack of cholera. Very soon after joining me she passed away. . . . At that time my son was serving with the Canadian forces. My daughter had found her way to England and was with kind friends.

For the next fourteen months the Turks harassed me to such an extent that many, many times I wished myself back in prison, and was tempted to commit some petty offence in order to secure the protection which, with all its horrors, the prison afforded. The police worried me continually, calling me before councils and courts to answer all sorts of foolish charges. They would drag me from my bed at midnight, take me to headquarters two miles away, then tell me to come again next day as the officer who wanted me had gone home. One night, during one of these absences, my little home was cleared of everything it contained, this being done by the police themselves.

### Semi-Starvation

Added to these worries was the lack of food. Provisions in Damascus were sold at an exorbitant price. I was allowed by the Spanish Consul, who had taken the place of the American Consul, five Turkish pounds per month, but as the Turkish pound was only worth 3s. on the market, and later only 2s., I had but from 10s. to 15s. on which to keep myself alive for a whole month. A tiny loaf of coarse,

black bread cost 3s. 6d., and this had to last me for many days. As a relish, I would buy half a pennyworth of onions or radishes, eating the green part in the morning and the remainder in the evening. Many a time I had to beg for a few broad beans from a garden, eating the beans in the morning and the husks at night. I would try to sleep all day to forget the pangs of hunger. I could get no new clothes. There were Damascenes who were my friends, but they felt obliged to boycott me, because of their own peril.

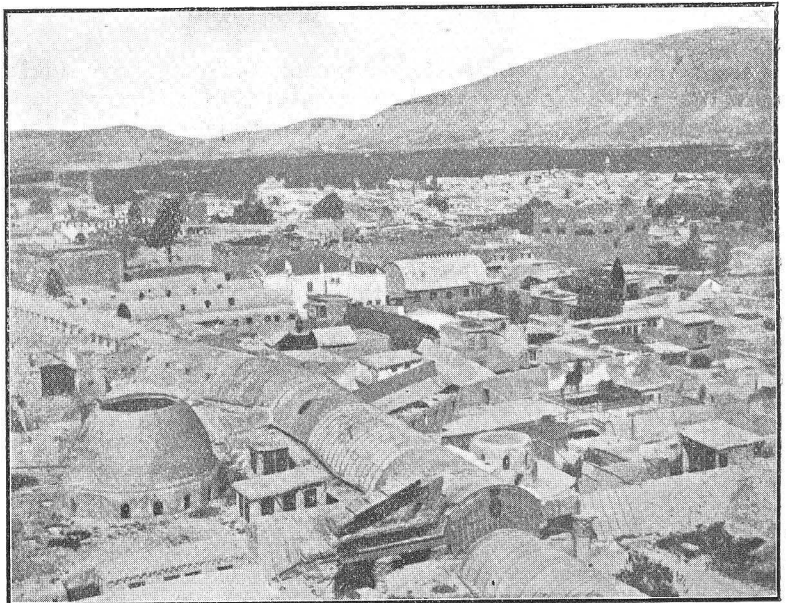


Jamal Pasha, the Turkish  
Commander-in-Chief

Who—almost alone of Turkish officers—  
showed some kindly human feeling to-  
wards Mr. Forder

### The Coming of the Dawn

Towards the end of my stay in Damascus I made friends with a young German soldier who had spent many years of his life in America. In return for a small loaf of bread I gave him lessons in conversational English. He was employed on the telephone staff of a German general, and was able to give me information as to the



A General View of Damascus

"The cold winds that blew across Damascus from the snows of Hermon were very severe, and as I had barely enough clothing to cover me, it was difficult to sleep at night or keep warm during the day"

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progress of the war. One day he told me of the general collapse of the Turkish and German forces near Nablous, in Southern Palestine. Probably, he said, he would not see me any more, as the Germans had orders to leave Damascus within twenty-four hours.

An hour after hearing this I met a police officer, a Syrian, who told me he had received orders from the Chief of Police to come with two others at midnight and arrest me. I was to be sent to the interior on the following morning.

"I have told you what I have to do," he said. "Now you know what you have to do."

I did. When they came for me at midnight, they found my room empty. The Turks after that were too busy considering their own safety to waste time in trying to discover my hiding-place.

On the following day I felt something as a shipwrecked mariner on a desert island must feel when he sees a ship.

I saw for the first time a British aeroplane flying over Damascus! Thank God! it seemed to say deliverance was near. I shed tears of joy and gratitude. . . .

During the next few days other British aeroplanes appeared. I was still in hiding, creeping from place to place where I thought I might be safe.

On Tuesday October 1st—one of those dates that will for ever be burned into my memory, I was told our soldiers were in the city. I could not believe it. "Yes," said my informant, "they are riding horses as big as elephants (in comparison, he meant, with the Turkish pony); and they have feathers in their hats. Go out and see for yourself."

### Found!

I knew he was speaking of the Austrians. I was hiding on the east side of the city, and I started out towards the main bazaar. In this thoroughfare I met two British officers in khaki accompanied by a native interpreter.

"An Englishman!" they said.

"Are you Mr. Forder?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good! we have received orders from General Allenby that as soon as we entered Damascus we were to search for you and find you, either dead or alive. Haven't had a very long task, have we?"

They at once conducted me to General Clayton, who was very kind to me. He handed me over to the Intelligence Department.

After six weeks, during which time I was well cared for, I was allowed to go to Jerusalem. From that time until I left for England, nearly a year, I was engaged in the work of the Syria and Palestine relief fund.

My story is done. I am afraid I have not told it very picturesquely, but such are the main facts. I feel I must add one word. Many times I have been asked, how did you spend your time in prison? Part of the time I spent in writing a book on my experiences, friends of the prisoners helping to supply the paper. For some time I conducted Bible classes for the prisoners. I had been allowed to keep my English Bible which I read every day. The prisoners were deeply interested in the book and wanted one in a language they could read. I managed to get into touch with the agent of the Bible Society, and Bibles in several languages were brought into the prison. We had a Bible class each day which thirty or forty men—some Mohammedans, one a Jewish Rabbi—attended. The prison governor, a strict Moslem, knew of the class, but did not interfere.

After my release from prison I obtained permission, after much difficulty, to bury British soldiers, who had died from their wounds, in the Protestant cemetery outside the city, and up to the time of the British entry I buried some forty-six, whose bodies would otherwise have been thrown by the authorities into a pit either to rot in the sun or to be devoured by the dogs of Damascus.

Looking back upon my four years of suffering and trial, I realise that my deliverance was due to the persistent prayers of Christian friends in all parts of the world. As far as my rather shattered health will allow, I propose to address meetings, and to advocate the claims of the Ishmaelites among whom I have spent so many years of my life. Those of us who have suffered in the war—and how few have not—cannot afford to grieve over the past. God knows, and cares. He never fails us. There is still work to be done. We must look forward with fresh hope and courage, trusting in Him.