

LETTER FROM LEBANON

OCTOBER 17

BECAUSE the population of the Republic of Lebanon is almost evenly divided between Christians and Moslems, the country has sometimes been referred to as "an uneasy compromise" by experts on Middle Eastern politics, but when I arrived in Beirut, the capital, one afternoon not long ago, the uneasy compromise seemed to exist chiefly between the city's motorists and pedestrians. Demoniactal automobilists, stampeding through the narrow streets, may or may not have been doing all they could to keep from bowling over the pedestrians in their path, but it was quite clear that the pedestrians, scattering like hens before the oncoming machines, were doing all *they* could to keep from being tagged. The compromise between the two factions seemed to be that the drivers generally stayed off the sidewalks and the pedestrians did not lynch the drivers. A taxi ride in Beirut animates the sluggish and prostrates the nervous. Many of the city's winding, sharply graded alleys are so narrow that two laden mules can barely pass each other. The streets were not built to accommodate the magnificent confectations of Detroit, many of which are here used as taxis. Unfortunately, one *has* to take taxis to get things done, the city being large and the archaic French field-telephone system usually inoperative. During my first few days in Beirut, I was driven about by various cheerful lunatics, who passed other cars when a third car was approaching from the opposite direction; coasted down all hills with the ignition off, on the theory that new brake lining is less expensive than gas; ignored all animate or inanimate objects in their path as long as there was an inch



of freeboard; rarely used their brakes unless they wanted to come to a complete stop, on the theory that brake lining is expensive, after all; never held the steering wheel with more than two fingers; and were vociferously contemptuous of streetcars, wriggling between and around them at full speed, even though streetcars, the dreadnoughts of Beirut's street battle, are considered to have an unfair advantage in width and weight.

Perhaps the most astonishing feat of stunt driving was performed by a swarthy, dynamic, alert-looking young man I engaged one day, who customar-

ily kept one hand on the horn and used the other to emphasize his over-the-shoulder comments to me on the rotten state of affairs in Lebanon; he spoke good English, which he brightened up with French exclamations. Roaring down a street so narrow that it would have been one-way in any more restrained city, he started to pass a big American car on a blind curve. The other car refused to be passed and gave battle. At that moment, a streetcar rocked around the curve, heading straight for us. My driver tooted his horn and the motorman jangled his bell, but neither one condescended to slacken speed. There was only one way out, and my driver took it, showing admirable split-second reflexes. He pulled the wheel sharply to the left in a turn of almost ninety degrees, and propelled the car into the driveway of an apartment house that Allah had put there to save our lives. The driveway was about four inches wider than the car. There was a sickening scrape and lurch, and I instinctively shut my eyes. When I opened them, the car was standing still in the driveway, one front wheel on the bottom step of a stoop. A matronly woman was sitting on the top step, surrounded by four small children, who were screaming at the top of their lungs. Behind us, the

streetcar raced by, jangling merrily. The driver saluted the matronly lady with perfect poise and appeased the screaming kids by distributing candied fruit, which he must have kept handy for just such emergencies. He gave me a reassuring wave of the hand, put the car in reverse, and, without bothering to look right, left, or behind, shot backward out into the street. When I regained the power of speech, I

asked him how long he had been driving. "Since December, 1945," he said, and passed back a bundle of driver's licenses for my inspection. "Never had an accident." He spat out the window three times in deference to superstition. I hired him on the spot for the rest of my stay in Lebanon.

His name was Ali. He was a first-generation motorist in his late thirties and had grown up in a village in the mountains. His family was poor in those days, owning a small house, a few mulberry trees and goats, and a mule. The sudden transition from the mule's halter



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to the steering wheel of a big car must have been bewildering, and Ali had not quite recovered from it. He was clearly trying to compensate for his unmotorized childhood, and he liked to refer to himself as "the best driver in Lebanon, which has the best drivers on earth." He was pleased when I admitted that Lebanese drivers are even faster than Russian jeep drivers. I once suggested that he connect his horn to the ignition, so he could have a constant blare, but he said nonsense, banging on the horn kept him awake.

Ali's car was a sleek '52 Buick that belonged to an uncle of his who lived in Bakersfield, California. The uncle had sent the car ahead to Beirut a few months before and was expected to arrive soon himself by air. "He's going to build himself a ten-thousand-dollar house up in the mountains and retire," Ali said. Many Lebanese Americans come home to retire, perhaps because they never wanted to leave their homeland in the first place; Lebanon is a beautiful, mountainous country on the east coast of the Mediterranean, but it has never had enough land under cultivation to feed its population, which is steadily increasing anyway. Since the late nineties, Lebanon has been forced to export people as other countries export goods. An average of fifteen thousand people now leave every year. Because of their fear of their Turkish masters prior to the First World War, many Lebanese who might have moved from the mountains to the rich plains of Bekáa and Akkar, where the annual rainfall is thirty-five inches and enough food could be grown to support everyone, stayed in the security of the mountains or else went abroad. During that war, an estimated hundred and fifty thousand Lebanese perished, as a result of hunger, disease, and Ottoman persecution. Dread of the prosperous but mortally exposed plains persists today; the population density is a hundred and ten to the square kilometre in the protective wilderness of the ten-thousand-foot Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains and only thirty to the square kilometre on the defenseless plains. The current population is 1,300,000. There are three times as many Lebanese in foreign lands as there are within the borders of Lebanon. Detroit and São Paulo have bigger Lebanese populations than any Lebanese city except Beirut. In Detroit, the Lebanese (often inaccurately referred to as "Syrians") are esteemed for their mechanical aptitude. In New York, they control a large part of the lace-



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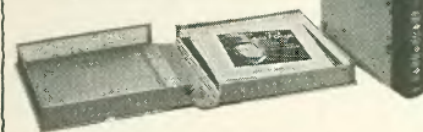
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and-embroidery business. Almost every Lebanese either has lived abroad or intends to.

The export of people has paid off handsomely. Lebanese in foreign countries mail a substantial part of their earnings to the folks in their native villages. The family and the village are the anchors of a Lebanese's life, no matter where he may be living. To the world at large, Dr. Charles Malik is Lebanon's brilliant representative at the United Nations, but to his fellow-Lebanese he is still just a boy from the village of Bitirram. I know a Lebanese from the village of Lala who has lived in Illinois almost forty years but still gives all his sentimental allegiance to Lala. Remittances from overseas now account for a large share of Lebanon's national income; in fact, whole villages sometimes live on the money that comes from relatives abroad.

Elderly Lebanese who return to the land of their fathers rarely fail to bring along the latest, fastest, shiniest model of an American car. Anything but a really resplendent vehicle would cause a serious loss of face in one's village, where the people know a lot about automobiles. If the car becomes too great an expense, it is often sent down to Beirut to be a taxi. Beirut is the only city on earth where I have seen custom-built Cadillacs, Lincolns, and Chryslers used as taxis. There are far more taxis than customers. The Lebanese say that "Lebanon is not a country but a garage." They say it with pride or bitterness, depending on whether they hit and run or run not to be hit.

The Lebanese government refuses to publish statistics of automobile accidents. Officials say, vaguely and optimistically, that the rate is "surprisingly, low." Beirut's newspapers rarely bother to report accidents unless a good deal of blood has flowed. Only brief mention is made of cars that fall off the three-thousand-foot precipices in the mountains. Evidence of an accident is quickly removed. Lebanon's towing-truck system is efficient and nationwide, and is sparked by a patriotic sense of duty; even pedestrians, mindful of Lebanon's reputation as a garage, lend a hand in cleaning up the debris and quietly notifying the next of kin.

Prospective drivers in Lebanon must pass tests so difficult that few foreign residents dare take them. The ones who do, and pass them, soon find they can't stand the pace, and turn the wheel over

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to a Lebanese chauffeur with steelier nerves. There are different tests for taxi-drivers, truck drivers, "gentlemen drivers," and motorcyclists. Ali had passed them all. "One of the tests is to drive five hundred yards at forty miles an hour between two taut ropes that leave you a clearance of five inches on each side," he told me. "Then you have to back up along the same course. If one of your fenders touches the rope, you're finished, and you can't take the test again for a year."

Ali had never owned a car himself—what with customs duty and ocean freight and commissions, a new Chevrolet costs thirty-five hundred dollars in Beirut and a new Cadillac comes as high as seven thousand, and he wouldn't have been happy with a drab second-hand car—but by driving a taxi for three years he had managed to save enough money to buy part of a license plate. In Lebanon, license plates are bought and sold like any commercial commodity. The government will not increase the number of license plates in circulation, on the ground that any increase in the number of vehicles might both decimate the populace and completely clog the country's roads. As a consequence, the price of a license plate has been bid up until one now costs more than nine thousand Lebanese pounds—almost three thousand dollars. When Ali's uncle sent his car over to be stored pending his arrival, Ali and two friends, both chauffeurs, pooled their savings and bought a license plate. Now they use the uncle's car as a taxi, unbeknownst to the uncle. Between the three of them, they drive the car twenty-four hours a day, in the noble spirit of Lebanese free enterprise. Their rates are variable, depending on the passengers' bargaining abilities. All three of them, in common with most other Lebanese motorists, feel a great admiration for the United States—an admiration that may well be rooted in the ever-increasing size and speed of American cars. There is some anti-American feeling among Lebanese pedestrians, but their hostility never reaches the violent pitch of anti-Americanism that one finds in the other Middle Eastern countries.

Toward the end of the Second World War, when automobiles were scarce and license plates sold for as little as a hundred dollars, one of Ali's friends bought up twenty plates. On this investment of two thousand dollars, the friend has become a millionaire, owning a fleet of twenty taxis. He is an object of reverence in



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Beirut, where business acumen is both honored and a necessity of life. The Lebanese, partly descended from the ancient Phoenicians, have always had to trade to survive. Their little country, hardly a third the size of Maryland, has negligible mineral resources, no oil, no hydroelectric power. According to all economic laws, Lebanon should be bankrupt. Actually, it has the highest standard of living of all the Middle Eastern states, and the lowest rate of illiteracy. Almost eighty per cent of the Lebanese can read and write, compared to an average ten per cent elsewhere in the Arab world. At the latest count, Beirut, a city of three hundred and fifty thousand people, had thirty-five daily newspapers. Most are short on news and long on views. There is no outright censorship, but personal attacks on the President and members of the government are not permitted. Lebanon is the most civilized and the most advanced Middle Eastern country, and the least violent in political matters, although it borders on, and was once administratively connected with, Syria, the most violent one. There is little resemblance between the resentful, high-strung Syrians and the lighthearted, business-minded Lebanese, both of whom were under French mandate from 1920 to 1941. (Although the mandate officially ended in 1941, the French did not get around to evacuating their troops until 1946.) Lebanon, a member of the Arab League, is often criticized by its fellow-members for a lack of militant nationalism and for engaging in brisk, clandestine trade with Israel, by way of Cyprus. As members of the League, the Lebanese were forced to join the official Arab boycott against Israel, but by temperament they are more concerned with trade than with politics. Lebanon is the only Arab League nation that lets ships bound for Israel pass through its waters. It would trade openly with Israel if it were not afraid of incurring the wrath of Egypt, which might cut off its tourist traffic to Lebanon.

Tourism has become a major source of income for Beirut, which has one of the most beautiful harbors in the world, with mountains rising almost directly behind it. Its white steel-and-concrete apartment houses, its modern hotels, its beaches, promenades, and palm trees, and its pine-studded mountains make it look like a somewhat seedy Oriental annex of the French Riviera or of southern California. (Beirut is on the same parallel as Los



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Angeles.) It is popular with the men of the American Sixth Fleet, stationed in the Mediterranean, for its wide-open waterfront dives and their complaisant ladies. Beirut's geographical position on the fringe of the Middle East's much-disputed oil area, as well as its pleasant living conditions, has attracted many adventurers and promoters. The atmosphere is French. The French are still bitterly resented in Syria, but they have made an astonishing comeback in Lebanon. It is sometimes said that their influence is stronger now than it ever was during the mandate. The French control banking, industry, and the public utilities, and have a strong cultural and culinary influence. The Comédie-Française gives performances in Beirut, French authors lecture there on the greatness of France, the Paris establishments of *la haute couture* send their shows there, and the city has the only genuine French restaurants and French shops east of Menton.

Nowadays, Lebanese boosters refer to their country as the Switzerland of the Orient. The mountains behind Beirut are dotted with rustic hotels and resorts. Lebanon's mild climate, fine beaches, ski lifts, and scenic panoramas (only a few hundred of the famous cedars of Lebanon—some of which King Solomon used for the construction of his great temple—are left, however, mostly in sacred groves; the others were chopped down under the Ottoman regime) have become popular with affluent sheiks from Saudi Arabia to Libya, and with American and European employees of the big oil companies in the Persian Gulf area. Beirut's Allenby Street has almost as many travel agencies as Zurich's Bahnhofstrasse. The Lebanese have built the largest airport in the Middle East in Khalde, just outside Beirut—a thirty-million-dollar complex of hangars and runways, which has already seriously affected business at the airports of Cairo and Damascus; many airlines now prefer Beirut to other stopovers, where political unrest might discourage passenger traffic.

Like the Swiss, who have prospered in spite of their country's almost complete lack of natural resources, the Lebanese have become not only enthusiastic hotelkeepers but enthusiastic money-changers. In Beirut, one can deal freely in any currency, and import and export, buy and sell, deposit and withdraw gold in any form, without restriction. The city is now the biggest gold market between Tangier and Bombay. Although the Lebanese pound is linked to the French franc—the bank of issue is the

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NEXT to automobile racing, the favorite pastime of the Lebanese is criticizing their government. Ali and his friends, as well as practically every other Lebanese I have met here, are ardent detractors of the government leaders. A local student of history rationalized this attitude for me. "Under the Turks and, later, under the French, it was considered patriotic and smart to criticize the men in charge, because they were foreigners," he said. "It hasn't quite filtered down into the people's consciousness that nowadays the men in charge are Lebanese. After the people have dreamed of independence for thousands of years, it takes more than six years of its actual existence to make it seem real to them." Lebanese school children still memorize the names of the rulers of their country as American school children memorize the names of the Presidents. Among those rulers were the Phoenicians, Sargon I of Babylon, Shamshi-Adad I of Assyria, Subiluliuma the Hittite, Rameses II, Nebuchadnezzar, Artaxerxes, Darius III, Alexander the Great, Antigonos, Andromachos, Memnon, Pompey, Augustus, Helio-gabalus, Hadrian, Quirinius, Apollodorus, Valerianus, Diocletian, Constantine, Julian, Heraclitus, Belisarius, the Omayyads, the Abbasids, the Seljuks, the Templars, the Hospitalers, Tamerlane, Selim I, the Druses, the Kaimacams, the Mutessarifs, the Turkish governors, Generals Allenby, Gouraud, Catroux, and Wilson, and many, many others. For five thousand years, the Lebanese have been understandably skeptical about the advantages of foreign rule.

Suspicion of outside interest in Lebanon crops up in the most unexpected ways. When the United States offered Lebanon help under Point Four, the first reaction was hostile and cynical. By and large, the Lebanese refused to believe the motivations behind Point Four were as lofty and idealistic as President Truman had stated. "What's in it for you?" the Lebanese, firm believers in the profiteering system, would ask the American officials charged with setting up Point Four. The Americans would answer, truthfully, that the aim of the program was to raise the standard of living in underdeveloped areas of the world and thereby create political stability. The Lebanese remained unconvinced, and it was not until Secretary Acheson talked of American "hard-headed self-interest" in the program



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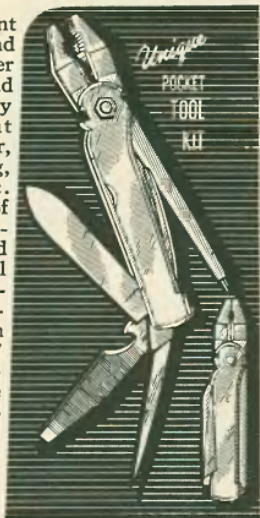


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that they sniffed an idea they could understand, and gave in. Now Point Four is actively engaged in such projects as the improvement of livestock, the importing of hybrid corn, and the development of new methods of harvesting and marketing citrus fruits, which, aside from population, are the only important export of this agricultural country. Other programs include an anti-malaria campaign, classes for public-health nurses, the improvement of water supplies, the exchange of students, and a major irrigation and electrification scheme in arid southern Lebanon. There, and in the far north, poverty is severe, and the inhabitants of many of the villages, unable to buy even rice, live on lentils, bread, and curdled milk. Communism is spreading rapidly in these areas, which once were flowing with Biblical milk and honey.

No religious census has been taken in Lebanon since 1944, for everybody is afraid the figures might show that the Christians outnumber the Moslems, or vice versa, which would upset the country's delicate religious and political balance. After the war with Israel, Lebanon was forced by the Arab League to accept a hundred and thirty thousand Moslem refugees from Palestine, and this ten-per-cent increase in population has the Christian groups worried for fear Lebanon will become a Moslem country. Under Article 9 of the Lebanese constitution, all citizens are guaranteed freedom of worship, and all religions are considered equal before the law. (The constitution is modelled after the French constitution, but the president has the powers of an American president, rather than those of the French president, who is merely a figurehead.) Wherever possible in politics, the Lebanese have exercised the principle of uneasy compromise. Traditionally, the president is a Christian and the prime minister is a Sunni (Orthodox) Moslem. Actually, the Christians have a slight edge in political power and a somewhat greater edge in education.

Among the Christians, the Maronites are the largest sect, accounting for about thirty per cent of the total population. They use the Syriac liturgy and are linked to the Vatican through the Eastern Congregation. Other Christian sects are the Greek Orthodox, the Greek Catholic, the Roman Catholic, the Armenian Orthodox, the Armenian Catholic, the Syrian Orthodox, and the Syrian Catholic, as well as various Protestant sects. Among the Moslems are the Sunnis, the Shi'ahs (who split from the Sunnis in the first century of Islam), the

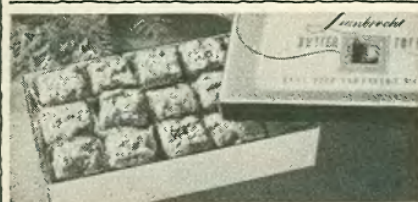
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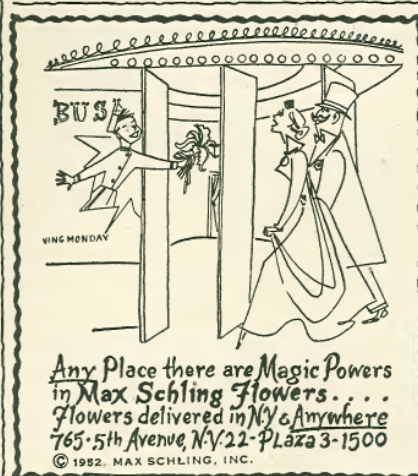
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Druses, the Metawila, and the Nusairis.

The most important minority in the country is sixty thousand Armenian refugees who fled Turkey at the time of the First World War and who still live in dreadful poverty in the slums north of Beirut. Soviet-inspired agitators have long tried to induce them to follow ten thousand of their countrymen who have gone to the Soviet Union, lured by the promise of a new Armenian Soviet Republic—a promise that has not been kept. A story is circulated of one Armenian who arranged to let his friends in Beirut know about life in Russia by a photographic code. It was agreed that a picture of him running would mean that everything was just wonderful; if the photograph showed him walking, things would be fair; if it showed him sitting, the situation was terrible. A few months ago, the first snapshot arrived in Beirut. It showed the unhappy emigrant lying on the ground, face down.

BEIRUT has two of the finest colleges in the Middle East—the Université de St. Joseph, which is operated by French Jesuits, and the American University of Beirut, known as the Syrian Protestant College when it was chartered, in 1863, under the laws of the State of New York. (Most of the money for its founding came from New York, and most of the early trustees were New Yorkers.) Under the French mandate, the American University, a private institution, was often discriminated against, and its diplomas were not officially recognized in Lebanon until 1933. The French were distrustful of the American system of education, and, being mostly Catholics, of the University's credo, which was stated in 1871 by Dr. Daniel Bliss, its first president:

This College is for all conditions and classes of men without regard to color, nationality, race, or religion. A man white, black, or yellow; Christian, Jew, Mohammedan, or heathen, may enter and enjoy all the advantages of this institution for three, four, or eight years, and go out believing in one God, in many gods, or in no God. But it will be impossible for anyone to continue with us long without knowing what we believe to be the truth and our reasons for that belief.

By 1920, the University comprised schools of arts and sciences, commerce, medicine, pharmacy, and nursing, as well as a hospital, a preparatory school, and a school of dentistry, since discontinued. In 1936, another American college in the Middle East—International College, in Izmir, Turkey—

Our guest is snarled by his own yarn, dear!



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moved to Beirut, became affiliated with the University, and took over its English-language preparatory school, its French-language *section secondaire*, and its Arabic elementary school.

The University's campus is extraordinarily beautiful, consisting of more than seventy acres of semitropical gardens filled with flowers and pines, all overlooking the blue Mediterranean. There are athletic fields, swimming pools, and fifty-odd buildings. The University's twenty-seven hundred students represent forty nationalities—including a few Americans, whose families live in the area—and twenty-one religious groups, among them Sunni Moslems, Shiah, Druses, Jews, Bahais, Alawites, and Confucians, in addition to various Christian sects. The University has been coeducational since 1924, when the first women—seven in all, one of them a Moslem—enrolled in the school of arts and sciences. There are student societies and a student council, a campus paper, *Outlook*, and athletic competitions. Medical students clean up slums and work as internes in the interior of the country, and the University clinics serve about forty thousand patients a year. Last year, the Ford Foundation contributed five hundred thousand dollars toward the establishment of an agricultural school and experimental farm, and a Point Four grant has enabled the University to offer a hundred and twenty-four Technical Coöperation Administration fellowships in public health, public administration, agriculture, engineering, industrial chemistry, and economics. The appointments to the fellowships are made by the governments of Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Ethiopia, Aden, Eritrea, Libya, and Liberia. All over the Arab world there is great demand for graduates of the University, particularly as educators, but teachers in this part of the globe are paid as badly as anywhere else, and many graduates take up more lucrative careers in business and politics.

The University does not "Americanize" its students; indeed, it is a hotbed of Arab nationalism. President Stephen B. L. Penrose told me, "We try to instill American ideals without being dogmatic. We seek to create in our students an appreciation of Christian life, but we have never attempted conversion. Most of our students come from countries that have had only a few years of independence. They are in a state of fermentation. We want them to make a life principle of integrity. We want to build moral char-

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acter. Isn't it more American to let them say freely what they believe in than to tell them what to believe?"

DURING warm weather, when Beirut gets a little stickier than is admitted in the travel ads ("The temperature is never excessively high or low"), everybody who has access to a car drives into the mountains in the evening to enjoy the cool air and visit relatives in the villages. Around five o'clock of a hot afternoon, Lebanon's motorized populace engages in a brisk, sportsman-like race up the narrow, daringly built, often unpaved mountain roads that wind and twist their way, in crazy hairpin curves, from sea level to the slopes of the eight-thousand-foot Djebel Sannine and Djebel Kneisse. On one such evening, I made the trip with Ali and his two business partners. As soon as we had left the outskirts of Beirut, Ali really stamped on the accelerator. He overtook timid drivers on curves at the rims of precipices and never looked back to see if he had edged the other car over the brink. He challenged two cars coming at us abreast—one trying to pass the other—and at the last minute shot by them on the wrong side. We were on the main road across the mountains to Damascus, he told me, and added that so many cars have fallen off the road into the abysses that it is now considered safer to make the sixty-mile trip by plane. I had been told that the ride into the mountains offers magnificent views of Beirut and the harbor, but I am unable to say whether it does or not, having kept my eyes closed most of the time. Ali was in great form and was constantly urged to new triumphs by his partners, both of them enthusiastic advisers. He would sit nonchalantly at the wheel, half turn toward the back seat, where I was, to point out village irrigation dams that had been built by the Phoenicians and were still being used; picturesque monasteries; and houses owned by his relatives. I never saw any of them. The houses with tiled roofs, he said, belonged to people who had members of their family in America; houses of less privileged Lebanese had roofs made of dried earth. Every now and then, we would stop at a roadside stand operated by a cousin or an uncle. One sold American soft drinks, cigarettes, and shaving sticks, and another French perfumes and English woollens.

Eventually we arrived at Ali's village. His family lived in a substantial stone house with a tiled roof, built with the help of contributions from various



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10 to 14 big pears, a great favorite

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relatives in California, Illinois, Indiana, Cape Town, and Rio de Janeiro. It was almost surrounded by olive and mulberry trees, and behind it was a terraced vineyard enclosed by a sturdy stone wall. In the divan—a central living room with large bay windows—a group of solemn, bearded brothers, uncles, cousins, and friends were sitting, drinking *arrak*, a powerful, absinthelike liquid made from dates. They got up and shook hands with me, and an old man, Ali's father, said "*Baytee, baytak*" ("My home is your home"). They had been speaking Arabic, but when I came in, they switched matter-of-factly to British-accented English, which most of them had learned at a nearby British mission school. Ali and his family are Maronite Christians; their forefathers had escaped to the mountains in the seventh century, when the tide of Mohammedanism swept over the coastal plains. But there were a few Moslem friends present, drinking lemonade instead of *arrak*. They all got along fine. An old man wearing baggy pants, white socks, and carpet slippers said that things were very bad in the south, where he lived. "There are agitators who tell the people that the Russians will be coming next year. They urge people to join the Communist Party, and promise a house to everybody who joins now. People are stupid and believe them. One house in my village has already been promised to thirty different people." (Lebanon's Communist Party is illegal and underground. Until last year, it accepted few new members, and the entire Party strength, an estimated five thousand, was molded into hard cadres, but now an energetic membership drive is under way in the villages and in Beirut, where there are fifty thousand unemployed white-collar workers. Communism is also spreading among the Armenians, in their desolate shanty towns, and among members of the Greek Orthodox Church, who regard Russia as their god-mother.)

An old, clean-shaven man in an American-looking suit spoke up, and everybody listened respectfully. Ali whispered to me that after living for thirty-two years in New Jersey the old man had returned to his native village to spend the evening of his life lording it over his friends and relatives. "Too much politics in Lebanon," he said. "Too many bureaucrats for a small country. Too many speculators and guys who want to get rich quick. People in Beirut build apartment houses and invest their money in big deals that bring

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a fast return. Real-estate prices have shot up as much as three thousand per cent. Moneylenders now charge twenty-five-per-cent interest on a ninety-day loan. The electric-power supply is always breaking down, but no one bothers to invest money in new utilities. Back in New Jersey, we sometimes thought things were bad. But the lobbyists and politicians here! A bunch of guys who want to get rich while they are in power. There is too wide a gap between the government and the people. The government is only interested in keeping the status quo. The people are ahead of their leaders, but they can't voice their opinions."

Ali disagreed cautiously. "The 1947 election was rigged, all right," he said, "but last year's election was honest. Even the people who were beaten admit that. We're making progress all the time."

The old man remained unconvinced. "The younger generation!" he said. "What do they care about good government? They leave their villages and go into the city to get rich quick."

IT was after midnight when Ali took me back to Beirut. The moon shone over the mountain ranges, and the pines and stone terraces threw deep shadows. Down in the valley were the blinking lights of the city. It would have been a pleasanter ride if Ali hadn't insisted on coasting the whole way down, with the engine off, and it would have been an altogether delightful ride if he had put on his lights. But he didn't. It would have been a ridiculous waste of electricity on such a beautiful night, he said; lights were for sissies. Somehow, he got me safely to my hotel. I went to bed right away, but I slept fitfully. Once I was awakened by what sounded like a distant crash of fenders, but perhaps it was only a bad dream.

—JOSEPH WECHSBERG

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