

‘Dead flowers, eh?’

For they knew what she was doing. She was not the first Hungarian to make such a pilgrimage. And they opened the little box, and threw the

earth away. It was raining hard, and in a few moments it had turned to mud.

She stared at it. An old lady of eighty, staring at a little patch of mud.

II. THE ISLE OF BLISS

By SIR ERNEST BENNETT

From *News-Letter*, British National Labour Party Fortnightly

WHENEVER I have mentioned to anyone that I once spent two months in Sokotra, nine persons out of ten have replied: ‘Where is Sokotra?’ Here is an island, a Protectorate of Great Britain, of no mean size—it is roughly 80 miles long by 20 broad—which is to the world at large almost unknown. Well—Sokotra actually lies in the Indian ocean, south-east of Aden, in the track of an immense maritime traffic and every year travelers by the thousands see it as they pass between Europe and the farther East. Nevertheless, I doubt if within the last one hundred years more than a score of Englishmen have set foot on the shores of this lonely but delectable island: it is ignored by tourists, traders and missionaries alike.

No steamer ever visits Sokotra, whose scanty imports, in exchange for the *gbi* (or clarified butter) it exports, are brought in Arab *dhows*. It was in one of these primitive vessels that I crossed the 500 miles of sea between Aden and Sokotra—a nerve-racking experience. The *dhow*, although a good seaboat—the voyage took only five days—swarmed with vermin, and, as it was Ramadan, the crew slept all day and held revel all night, lighting open fires on the decks, which were oozing with *gbi*, and only hanging out

lights when they caught sight of a steamer. As a climax, the ship compass jammed and I had to steer the vessel by a small pocket compass on my watch chain.

Yet in earlier centuries Sokotra was far from unknown. Its very name, derived from the Sanskrit *Dvipa-Sakkadbara*—hence the Greek name Dioscorides—means ‘the island abode of bliss;’ and apart from its natural charms, Sokotra was a busy center of maritime commerce. According to Marco Polo, in the thirteenth century every ship bound for Aden called there and a vigorous trade was carried on in rice, frankincense, dyes and gold.

The inhabitants, too, in earlier times must have greatly exceeded the present population, which is only some seven to the square mile. Arab historians declared that Sokotra could place 10,000 soldiers in the field—more than the total population today. Everywhere signs exist of human energies and activities far beyond the range of the present race of islanders. Here and there one comes across the foundations of large and imposing buildings, with walls, in some cases, five feet thick; and all over the interior there are long stone walls, stretching from the valleys to the summits of the hills, which

have no significance whatever today, but which must once have been the boundaries of fields belonging to a population living on the soil.

II

The religious history of the island is full of interest. Christianity secured an early foothold in Sokotra, and local tradition still points out a ruined building in the southwest corner of the island as the church built by the Apostle St. Thomas on his way to India. My main reason, indeed, for visiting Sokotra was to discover any surviving traces of this early Christian church with, possibly, the chance of some stray manuscript among the archives of a mosque. The results of my researches in this respect were extremely disappointing. With great difficulty and the outlay of considerable *baksbeesh*, I persuaded the *Mullab* of a small mosque at Ghalansir to allow me inside. There were a few Korans in a box but not a trace of any other documents. On one of the stones of an arch, however, was a deeply incised cross. This symbol and a few other crosses cut in rocks and the fragments of some double wooden crosses in a cavern full of human bones were the only relics I could find of the ancient faith.

However, in the sixth century A.D., a Church whose members are described curtly by Abulfedd as 'Nestorians and pirates,' existed in Sokotra, owing allegiance not to the Pope of Rome, but the See of Baghdad. This Church was still flourishing when, nine centuries later, Nicolas Conti stayed for two months in the island. But, for some mysterious reason, the islanders' Christianity appears to have

fallen to pieces by the seventeenth century, and the Carmelite priest Vincenzo tells a strange story of how he found the churches in a dirty and neglected condition and the fonts anointed with butter, while the people marched in procession, carrying a cross and candle and worshipping the moon. He noticed the constant use of a word which sounded like 'Alleluia' and all the women were called Maria. Any faint traces of a decadent Christianity which may have survived were finally swept away by the flood of Wahabi fanatics who reached Sokotra from South Arabia in 1835. The Church of Sokotra may almost be said to have lived without a history and to have perished without a memorial.

Although definite Christian remains are almost non-existent in Sokotra, letters and symbols cut in the rocks at Eriosh and elsewhere indicate an early connection with Abyssinian civilization. I noticed, too, the interesting use of old Sanskrit characters for branding camels.

The people of this remote island enjoyed in the Middle Ages an evil reputation not only as pirates, but as sorcerers. They took heavy toll from passing merchantmen, and both men and women used magic to control the winds and so bring ships within their power. When their Archbishop rebuked them for their piratical habits they replied that all their forefathers had been pirates and they could not violate family tradition.

The islanders of today live lazy and contented lives, possessing all they seem to need for food and clothing. Their staple diet consists of dates and goats' milk, varied at times by sea fish, especially sharks, whose malodor-

ous bodies lie drying in the sun on every beach. The only cultivated land I saw was that of small garden plots. The houses are wretched structures of dried mud, while wool, camels' hair and palm leaves provide mats and clothing.

The population of Sokotra is very mixed. A rather unsatisfactory blend of Arabs and Negroes occupies the plains between the mountains and the sea; but in the highlands of the interior I came across a chocolate-colored race speaking a peculiar dialect—largely of Arabic origin—called *Sokoteri*. These interesting people dwell largely in caves, and are far more pleasant to deal with than the Negroid Arabs of the coast villages. Though nominally Moslem, they paid little attention to outward forms of worship and, as far as I saw, possessed not a single mosque.

III

The scenery of the interior is very striking. From a central plateau the great Haghier range rises to a height of over five thousand feet. Beit Molech, the highest peak, still awaits a climber who will face its precipitous crags, but I managed to scale the next highest peak, Jebel Dryet (4,400 ft.), and built a small cairn on the summit. In places the climb was largely a matter of scrambling hand over hand, and there were always unpleasant possibilities of contact on the ledges with snakes, whose rustling movements I often heard in the scrub.

I shot one of the handsome wild asses which are numerous in the uplands—a species peculiar to Sokotra—but the only other wild animals of any size, wild goats and civet cats, were rarely seen. Bird life was abun-

dant in the beautiful forests of the interior, and there was a native tradition of a gigantic bird which had once lived in the island—perhaps the cassowary?

What of the future of this delightful island? For generations its people have lived their idle and hand-to-mouth existence. Its fertile soil is utterly neglected; its agricultural and geological resources untried. The market for indigo, once a staple article of export, has been destroyed by the discovery of aniline dyes. But the juice of the dragon's blood tree, used in the manufacture of paint and varnish, we import from the more distant Sumatra and South America, though this strange-looking tree grows abundantly in Sokotra.

In earlier centuries Sokotra exported cotton, and the soil grows tobacco well; such crops within ten days of England might be worth consideration. Herds of cattle and sheep find good pasturage on the fertile uplands, but at present the islanders export nothing except a certain amount of the *ghi*, or clarified butter I mentioned previously, which is sent to the Arabian mainland.

The two main obstacles to any future development of Sokotra are the unhealthiness of the Tamarida plains, and the absence of any safe harbor in the dreaded months of the southwest monsoon. Neither of these seem insuperable. Modern methods could eliminate the mosquito from the low-lying areas, and in any case the fertile uplands enjoy a thoroughly healthy and equable climate. As to harbors, the bay of Tamarida provides good anchorage but would require an adequate mole to shelter vessels from the southwest gales.

At present not a single lighthouse exists to warn shipping from the dangerous reefs of Sokotra. Below the cliffs of Ras Momi, at the eastern end of the island, I saw the wreckage of a German ship, lost with all hands; and later came the loss of the Pacific and Orient liner *Aden* with a lamenta-

ble loss of life in these shark-infested waters.

What adventurous souls—Jew or Gentile—will undertake the development of this delectable island, and bring back its former prosperity and the significance of its old-time name—‘the island abode of bliss?’

III. AFRICAN SCAVENGER

By H. A. SPENCER

From the *Contemporary Review*, London Topical Monthly

AMONG the many useful scavengers which roam the veldt and forests of Africa, the Driver Ant, ferocious and inexorable, must be included. Over the sun-warmed earth of tropical and sub-tropical Africa ants of all sizes and species swarm everywhere, receiving scant attention from the grazing animals. Not so the Driver Ant. This insect is feared by every animal that roams the veldt, and horse-men coming upon a stream of Driver Ants crossing a road find it impossible to force their steeds over it. The sight, or perhaps the scent, of an army of these ants stampedes all animals from their neighborhood, and when they enter a house or hut, all vermin hurry from it on the opposite side, leaving their callow broods at the mercy of these ants, to be devoured. Even man, when these ants encroach upon his habitation, hastens from it and leaves everything to them until they have scoured it and have left the neighborhood. Their scavenging is extraordinarily effective and not a crumb will be left!

I have encountered the Driver Ants in the jungles of West Africa and on the veldt in Bechuanaland in South

Africa and studied them as they traveled and as they worked through a house, with deep interest; but the resolute manner of their advance, the speed at which they stream over the ground and over every obstruction opposing them, altering their direction this way and that in an instant, has sent a thrill through me on more than one occasion!

This species of ant appears to have been studied individually and in its life and activities below ground to a lesser extent than have other members of the family, which is perhaps understandable. Like other insects living underground, they appear to be blind or nearly so, exercising other faculties such as touch, hearing and smell to an unusual extent. They have, however, a single small eye, deep set in their heads, which is of simple construction, instead of the usual cluster of eyes found in other insects more dependent upon vision. They appear to communicate with each other by means of their antennæ, a touch with which is interpreted and responded to instantly and passed down a long line of ants on trek with extraordinary rapidity.