

CHAPTER X

SOMETHING ABOUT THE SLAVE TRADE

British and French pressure—The general question—A naval narrative.

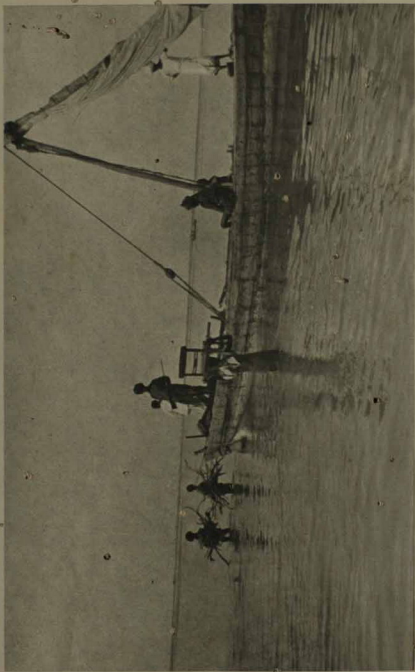
BUT though dhow captains and ex-slaves keep their mouths shut, the old records, fortunately, tell us something concerning the slave trade, which, thirty odd years ago, the British took such effective measures to stamp out in all territory coming under their influence. I am speaking of the Red Sea and Somali coast. Before the French began to make their presence felt in what is now French Somaliland, and whilst that territory was still a sort of no man's land between British territory on the south and Italian territory on the north, the principal port for the exportation of slaves was at Tajura on the gulf of that name, a small Danakil native town north-west of Djibouti. Danakil territory extends far north of Tajura along the coast into Italian territory, past Asab, another small port on the Red Sea.

The trade was in the hands of the Sultan of Tajura, his friends and a few other influential natives. These people owned dhows flying the Arab flag, and were in the habit of running their human cargo

into the port of Hodeidah. As British pressure was more and more brought to bear from the south, and similar Italian pressure from the north, it is easy to understand that the trade at Tajura increased greatly, particularly after that port, held for some time by a small Egyptian garrison, was finally abandoned by the Egyptian government, thus removing the slight restraint caused by the necessity of bribing the Egyptian officials.

But, simultaneously with their effective occupation of the Southern Danakil coast, stern measures were taken by the French against the Sultan of Tajura and his friends, whose activities were, in consequence, gradually curtailed, and finally forced to cease altogether. The Italians experienced the greatest difficulty of all in destroying the trade as their ports were situated in the Red Sea, and nearer to the slave markets. Dhows from there ran less risk of capture than those from the French and British ports, which had to pass through the straits of Perim. But the Italians were keenly alive to this fact, and spared no efforts to stamp out the nefarious trade.

In regard to the general question—the best means of suppressing slavery in this part of Africa, at the time of which I speak—the minds of the various authorities were much concerned, some advocating one course of procedure, others another.



A GOVERNMENT^d CHARTERED DHOW, ZEILA.

struck and the dhows held on their courses, rapidly diminishing the distance between them and the shore, now only about two miles distant. The order was then given to open fire with the Gardner guns in the Tops, at the dhows' poops where the steersman sits. The effect of the showers of bullets was instantaneous; the captain of the largest dhow was killed at once, and, no one caring to take his place at the helm, she came to the wind and the crew lowered her sail. An armed boat was sent to take charge of her.

"The ship then chased No. 2 dhow, who seeing the first dhow had given in lowered her sail and gave in also. In the meanwhile No. 3 dhow had got far away, and an exciting chase took place, the ship firing from all her guns at every possible chance, the dhow doing her best to get away; but a lucky hit brought her to, her captain, being struck while steering her by a shot from the Gardner gun, sprang up and fell overboard; she then gave in. While chasing this dhow, dhow No. 2 had tried to hoist her sail and get away, but the boat's crew promptly opened fire on her with their rifles; she then finally gave in. The crews and owners of the slaves were then brought on board (thirty-three in number). These men were in charge of the slaves, but the real owners are large merchants in Jeddah, Mecca, Hodeida, and other Turkish ports in the Red Sea.

The slaves, two hundred and four in number, were then brought on board; they were chiefly from the district of Goojan in Abyssinia; the females especially seemed to have been well taken care of as they fetch a high price. The dhows were then taken in tow and the ship proceeded to Aden.

"The greater part of the rescued slaves were Christians, amongst whom were some very clean, tidy, and intelligent girls varying from six to eighteen years of age. It seems monstrous that they should be taken to satisfy the lusts of Turkish Mahomedans. They were all well looked after on board, and seemed to recognise that they were among friends, for they were soon laughing and chatting; parties among them who had been separated in the dhows were hugging and kissing each other in a very affectionate manner. Whatever their future may be it cannot be worse than that from which they have escaped. A great many Europeans at Aden are offering to take care of them, and there seems every chance of the greater part at least having happy homes."

That report was written thirty-one years ago, and the slave trade is a thing of the past. At least, just so long as civilised nations continue to hold and administer this wild country. But the hearts of the men who are now our subjects are the hearts

of the slavers their fathers, fierce, cruel, and unchanged. I think the story told by the gallant sailor is sufficient justification for our coming here, and for our remaining here. It certainly convinces me.