

CHAPTER XI

RAMATHAN

The Kharif—The month of Ramathan—The Sahib's gift and others

It is June, the season of the "Kharif"; the Kharif that has three elements—wind, dust, and heat. Zeila sky reminds me, this morning, of a Sheffield sky, covered at dawn with a pall of yesterday's foul smoke. The atmosphere is such as that near a huge furnace whose fires have burned out during the night. One can still feel the dead heat that will, later, take on a new, fierce life, as old Sol, then tipping the eastern horizon with a dull glow, rises higher into the heavens.

The sea is grey and dull, the dullness of a cooling mass of molten metal sprinkled with fine ash. Not the greyness, or dullness, that heralds a change of weather, but that of tired burned-out nature, waking unrefreshed from her night's sleep. All night long Nature has tossed in troubled dreams, and now wakes to life, haunted by a vague wild feeling of oppression; an undefinable oppression almost akin to despair.

There is no bright awakening here, with coloured

cheeks and sparkling eyes. The face that nature turns towards the pitilessness of the new-born day is drawn and anxious. She is too tired to plead for mercy; too listless to try anew the thousand wiles that she alone is mistress of. Here is the stokehold of the world, and the devils who control it are lighting the fires.

At midday the town of Zeila is fast asleep, for this is the month of Ramathan; the month that all good Mahomedans give up to prayer and fasting. The average Zeilawi, or Somal, cannot tell you why. The "Book" says it must be done, and that is all about it. They have heard and read something of Mahomed's son, or was it Mahomed himself, being poisoned by a Jew, and perhaps that is the reason. They will look it up and see. So, whilst the fast is on, they turn night into day and day into night. All those who can sleep through the day and pray and feast at night. The fast is observed between the hours of four a.m. and sunset. Others less fortunate, who must work through the day, have a hard time. Not a sup of water nor bite of bread will pass their lips until dusk.

It follows that the work suffers. The chairs and tables in my bungalow are thick with dust: the house is untidy and uncomfortable. My servants are fasting. At sundown they come to life, and, after prayer, break their fast. When they have administered to

my wants they go to the town, where they play, pray, and feast all night with their friends.

To-night I heard the cannon fired at Jibouti by the French authorities to warn their Mahomedan subjects that the day had passed. I had been to the sports ground where a few of the keener lads had turned up to play hockey. Syyed Khudar the Arab, and his brother-in-law, were there, also Sub-inspector Buralli. Just before I arrived Syyed and the brother-in-law had quarrelled. Hungry men are angry men; blows followed words, and Buralli arrested them.

Buralli explained to me that the trouble between the two men was of long standing—"rooted deep down in their stomachs!" Syyed is an independent trader, his brother-in-law is a carpenter. The latter's wife continually twits him with his poverty, comparing her own hard lot with the easy one of her sister. In consequence, when the carpenter sees Syyed the whole world turns black—according to Buralli. But then Buralli is fasting too. After a good meal the whole world will be lighter coloured for them all. But there was no hockey.

As the sun sank in the west nature bestirred herself in a half-hearted effort to brighten up the skies. But all the colours fell from her tired hands into the sea, and spread across the face of the waters. Old gold, gold, vermilion, purples, a mad riot of

tones, shades, and natural colours floated bewilderingly on the dull surface for a few fleeting moments, and were gone. Then the wind rose and lashed the sea into sullen anger, the while the crescent moon—symbol of Mahomedanism—smiled down complacently. Oh, Moon, well may you smile; *you* “that rule the night and see us not by day.” But the moon smiles on. Perhaps she can see a fairer land than this. On she goes, through a sky, now clear, and covered with a million flecks of gold dust.

A chant breaks out in the centre of the town. Farther away a crowd of men are reciting a kind of litany on two notes, “Allah” on a high note and “Allah” on a low note; Allah-Allah; Allah-Allah; a harsh breathing sound. Suddenly a horn sounds from one of the dhows at anchor. Toot-toot-too-toot-toot-too! There is a hush, the town is listening. Something is wrong. Lights appear at the end of the pier, and a boat puts off. A policeman runs to tell me that a dhow has broken loose. There is no one aboard except one small boy, and he it is who has sounded the alarm.

The chanting, praying, and singing in the town re-commences. Again there is an interruption. This time a woman screams. Scream follows scream, until I send to inquire what is happening. My orderly returns and informs me, with a grin, that a “bint” is being soundly spanked by her mother.

The young lady has been gallivanting without permission, and the sound of her cries heard all over the town will doubtless deter other young ladies from keeping their appointments this night. How the disappointed swains will bless her!

For a little while longer I sit listening to the noises of the night. The wind falls abruptly, and the sea calms down. Shoals of fish dash through the shallow waters with a noise like the splashing of cattle crossing a ford. I lie down at last on my camp bed, placed for coolness on the veranda, and dose off. I am awakened by the maddening throbbing of a drum, beaten to warn the faithful to pray and prepare the last meal of the night. I look at the time; it is only one o'clock and people may eat up to four. Oh, why do they beat that wretched drum at this hour? On, on it throbs. In despair I take my pencil, and write until the throbbing ceases. It has ceased now.

To-day, the 29th June, is the last evening of Ramathan, that is if we see the new moon. Yesterday evening the townspeople failed to catch a glimpse of her, and even though one man came from El Kori to say he had seen her in the western sky for a few seconds, and though the big gun at Djibouti fired ever so many shots at sundown, our Kathi must needs have four witnesses sworn on the Koran ere he could grant permission to the people to break their

fast. As for the big gun, have we not heard, but a few days ago, that the peace treaty has been signed, and might not the firing we hear from the French side be on that score. So all this day the Zeilawis have fasted, and at intervals the French gun has boomed out. I am certain we are a day behind, but the Kathi was quite right to run no risks.

Just now Buralli, and Mahomed the interpreter, came to ask for permission to bury an Arab close to the Sheikh's tomb. He was a very influential man who has died, according to the sub-assistant-surgeon's diagnosis, of carbuncle on the neck. Of all days in the year this is the best one to die, for on it the gates of Paradise are unlocked—no one is denied—and the Arab is considered to be a very fortunate man. Not that he had ever done anything to make his reception at heaven's gate in any way doubtful, but the accident of the day makes things certain. My servant, who is something of a radical, was much impressed with the fact, after I had granted permission for the body to be interred near the tomb (which, being near to the town, is closed to the public as a burying ground) that a distinction could still be made between a rich man and a poor man, even after death.

Well, to-day ends the Mahomedan old year, and it is, practically, in this part of the world, New Year's Eve.

I have been astonished to-day to discover how popular I have become, and I have met with nothing but thoughtfulness and consideration for my convenience and comfort shown by people, some of whom I hardly knew by name. This morning the jail-master came, personally, to see with his own eyes that the one and only cocoanut tree in front of my bungalow was properly watered by the prisoners. Again this evening he came, and, although fresh water is as precious here as beer in England, this jolly good-hearted fellow had that tree watered again. I was touched, but not to the extent of more than half a rupee.

It is New Year's Eve, you know, and one can show one's appreciation of thoughtfulness and kindness in others in the shape of a small gift—silver rupees preferred—without hurting the recipient's feelings. All the sahibs make small gifts at this time. My seryant taught me that. He said that, although he had never yet asked his master for a present on the Yom-el-'Id, and never would, he had never yet failed to receive one on that day. Being in a strong position to do so I felt tempted to break his record, but no ordinary mortal likes to be an exception to the rule, and I have fallen into line. The people expect it.

Haji Abū Kheiri, a Somal trader, and by way of being one of our Napoleons of finance, called on me

this evening to donate twenty rupees to the poor fund, a good way of ending the old year. He has made some profitable deals in cattle at Djibouti, and assures me that God expects it of him to come down handsomely for the wretched poor. He has already one wife, and is reputed to be looking round for another, with the result that there is much excitement amongst the ladies of the town. He is a stout man, and, compared with the slim handsome bedouin Somal, is rather coarse looking, but the majority of the townswomen would overlook that, and would jump at the opportunity of getting their pretty fingers inside his money boxes. Good luck to him I say. May Allah prosper him further; it will help the poor fund.

Unfortunately, the peace of this day has been upset by people whose nerves have gone a little wrong on account of the long fast and the broken nights. The Midgan, sandal-maker, passed from the hut of one of his wives, where he had been visiting, to that of another, who said to him, "You never take off your shoes when you come to *this* house," meaning by that he was paying too much attention to the other wife. As the shoemaker made no reply the woman took off her sandal and beat him with it, screaming the while for the police. When the police came she said: "You must lock us both up as we have been fighting." The police did, and

at this moment the Midgan is spending some time in the same compartment as his neglected wife—and has his shoes off. Then Fatuma binti Ahamed, aged fourteen, was sent by her mother to buy milk in the bazaar from a woman who measured it out in a dirty cup. Fatuma, being a clean little person, objected, and, as the woman refused to clean the cup, she called her some names, which, by the way, are quite unprintable. But the milk woman had a lusty daughter, and between the pair of them they dealt severely with Fatuma. An Arab says he found them playing at tug-o'-war with her; one pulling at her neck and the other at her legs, also it was a very frightened little girl who ran home half naked to report why the milk was delayed. Her father has been making a great fuss, and the law, as represented by the D.C. right down to the office boy, and even the jail-master, has been called upon by him to vindicate itself. He was so unreasonable that I was strongly tempted to put him in with the Midgan and his wife until he cooled down. But then, some European daddies are just as silly when their little girls get into trouble through their own foolishness, and I have overlooked his nonsense.

The people have now seen the moon. It is nearly seven o'clock, and, though the sky is grey, the waters of the full tide are tinted with gorgeous

colours, a phenomenon I have not yet seen in any part of Africa but here. Policemen, sailors, rich men, poor men, beggarmen, thieves, are all at this moment out in the open praying aloud to Allah. Strangely enough at this hour, and for the first time since I have been in Zeila, I hear the voices of children at play, above the prayers of the adults. The Jibouti gun is booming away, and, as if to mock it, someone is firing an old blunderbuss outside the town. There is, as usual, not a woman in sight, but I can hear a few girls' voices thrilling out the wild African call, "Lu-lu-lu-lu-luuh!"

The praying is over, and now to food. We have killed the fat sheep and prepared the tastiest of dishes. Neither little child, old woman, nor any single soul need go hungry to bed in this town to-night. The people are rejoicing, and all must share in their joy.