

SUN, SAND AND SOMALS

CHAPTER I

ZEILA

Early history—Slave trade—Gen. Gordon—Somali tribes.

ZEILA is a port on the British Somaliland coast. It lies some twenty-eight miles South of the French port of Djibouti, and is one hundred and seventy miles North-East of the Abyssinian town of Harrar. Little is known of its history, but here is the story of the "oldest inhabitant" for what it is worth. In essential details it is fairly accurate.

Sheikh Sa'du-d-din was the first Arab of importance to visit the place. He occupied the island named after him, situated a few miles North of the present town. There he built stone houses, and a large tank to preserve and store the rain water. The island is a dreary, waterless waste of sand, so what more natural than that the good man, who was a strict Mahomedan and a great warrior, should vary the monotony of existence by crossing to the mainland to raid and convert the heathen Galla, who grazed their herds in the vicinity of the present town.

The Sheikh married a woman from the Dowra

people who lived between the Danakils and the Abyssinians. When he was killed his progeny found their way back to their mother's town, where their descendants are still to be found. This town of Dowra or Daoua has, according to my informant, a custom or law that forbids any unmarried Mahomedan man to sleep within its precincts for even one night. Immediately on arrival the stranger is provided with a wife, who remains with him as long as he lives in the town. Should he leave it he may take neither wife nor children away.

For many years after the Sheikh's death no one knows what happened, but it would appear that Arab traders began regularly to visit the Somali coast, where they carried on a lucrative trade by exchanging grain and cloth for coffee, ivory, and other products, brought in from the high country round Harrar. At first these Arabs did not make their homes on the coast, but returned at the end of every season to Arabia. Probably the first residents at Zeila were renegade Arabs, guilty of some unpurged offence in their own country, to which they were afraid to return. When the other traders went away these men built huts and settled down. As nothing happened to them, and they probably did very well, their more honest brethren followed their example in taking up their permanent residence on the coast. In this way began the town of Zeila.

The first Arab Governor, "headman," would be a more correct title, known to my informant, was called Syyed. He cannot remember his full name, Syyed it was who built a wall around the town for purposes of defence, and his great-grandson, a carpenter by profession, lives in Zeila to-day. One fine day there came to Syyed the Governor, a Somal, by name Sharmarki Ali, to report his arrival and intention of relieving the former of his arduous duties. They were very casual in those days, and as this was the first Syyed had heard of Sharmarki Ali he exerted himself with such success to procure Sharmarki's departure that the latter found it most expedient to revisit Hodeida, from which port he had come, on urgent private affairs.

These attended to—they included the fitting out of a force of fifty Somals, armed with muzzle loading guns and two cannon—Sharmarki chartered two dhows and returned with his army to Zeila. This time nothing would induce him to go away. There was a violent argument which Sharmarki settled by loading up his two cannon to the muzzle with powder and sand and firing them close to the walls of the town. Syyed and his followers, who had never heard anything like the tremendous explosions made by these guns in their lives before, became afraid and ran away.

Sharmarki entered the town in triumph, assumed

the governorship, made overtures to the friendly dispa- tribes in the surrounding district, and was comfortably lining his pockets when history made arrangements to repeat itself. The Governor of Hodeida, ever short of cash, was bribed by one Abubakr Ibrahim Shebani, nowadays better known as Abubakr Basha, a Danakil, to fit him out with a small force of good soldiers which would be unlikely to run away from a big noise, for the purpose of taking Zeila. Without doubt the Governor of Hodeida considered he was leasing Zeila by contract, as he was quite entitled to do. Abubakr Basha, convinced Sharmarki Ali that for his health's sake he required a change of air, and was left in charge of the town. This he proceeded to exploit in much the same way that all his adventurer-predecessors had done.

The next person of importance to put in an appearance came with no less than five hundred soldiers and ten cannon. He was an Egyptian Basha, and proceeded to take charge of Zeila in the name of his government. He called in all the Somal headmen with their followers from the district, and as many of these as arrived he placed under restraint; setting them to build a stone pier, which is still standing, though much improved upon. The townsmen were also forced to assist in this work. Even Abubakr Basha was employed in carrying



GENERAL GORDON'S HOUSE AT ZEILA.

stones. The pier, completed a fort, now demolished, also a customs-house, were constructed, as a great trade had sprung up between the town and the interior; particularly with the town of Harrar, which now sent ivory, coffee, and slaves in exchange for the commodities it required, and which were procurable at Zeila from the many merchants who were beginning to settle there.

Having organised affairs at Zeila the Basha marched inland to Gildessa with three hundred soldiers. My informant says he went there to make friends with the Galla. Anyway, after he had been gone three months a large steamer landed one thousand Egyptian soldiers at Zeila. These troops marched up country and joined the Basha. He then attacked the Galla. The latter's losses were heavy, but the Egyptians' could have been none too light as they were obliged to send for a reinforcement of five hundred men. Fighting continued for some months ere the Basha reached and captured his objective, Harrar. It is stated that after his arrival in this town he sent for the Amir of Harrar and caused him to be secretly put to death by having his neck broken. But the Gallas found out all about it and were so exasperated that hardly a day passed without one of the Egyptian soldiers being murdered.

To put an end to such a state of affairs the Basha ordered two hundred Galla prisoners to be nailed

to the ground, crucifix fashion. Over some of these poor wretches boiling water was poured; then, if not already dead, they were killed, their heads cut off and these hung by the ears to a large tree, which, I am given to understand, survives to this day outside Harrar. And here ends the story as related to me by the old man of Zeila.

Meanwhile Abubakr Basha had been employed by the Egyptians as headman of Zeila, and when they evacuated the East coast, and the British established themselves in their stead in 1884, Abubakr was still living in the town, but died soon afterwards. Shortly before the evacuation General Gordon passed through the town on his way to Harrar. He made a great impression on the people, and is well remembered by the older people, who take a special delight in pointing out the house where he stayed.

Of course the first thing the British thought of was the suppression of the slave trade, and they took very thorough steps to this end. In its place they built up a trade in cloth and natural products, until, under their regime, Zeila reached the pinnacle of its prosperity. Had this trade not been with Abyssinia she would have remained prosperous, but, being so, other influences crept in and Zeila went under. After the Egyptians went away Harrar was handed over to the Amir Abdillahi who was responsible, in

1886, for the massacre of seven Italian gentlemen with their two servants, members of an Italian commercial and scientific expedition to Abyssinia. In 1887 Menelik marched on Harrar, met and put to flight the forces of the Amir some eight miles outside the town, which has remained in Abyssinian hands ever since. In 1888 the French landed at Djibouti, and the fate of Zeila was sealed. By constructing a railway to Dire Dawa—now completed close to Adas Ababa—they captured the bulk of the Zeila trade, which remains in their hands until, perhaps, some day the spin of fortune's wheel may render again to Zeila all she has lost.

The inhabitants are called Zeilawi, and are a mixed race of Arabs, Gallas, Abyssinians, Somals, Danakils, Soudanese, and others. They live by trade, but are gradually falling, like their houses, into decay. Related by marriage to the Somal tribes outside the town they have naturally a considerable influence over them, and lucky is he who in the old palmy days invested some of his trade profits in cattle, handing them over to his relations-at-law to be taken care of.

The first representative of our government was a consular agent appointed by the government of India. He built a fort—now in ruins—widened the pier, and made many other improvements. Water had to be carried from the wells of Tokusha, three

The government utilises the system roughly thus: In Somaliland instead of giving a man's address you state (a) his tribe, (b) his tribal section, (c) his sub-section, (d) his *rer* if necessary. If he is wanted at court a biladier is sent to fetch him; with the above information concerning his tribal history no difficulty will be experienced in finding him, although the Somals are the most nomadic of people and continually on the move. He is as well placed as Private Brown, of No. 1 Company, 1st Battalion, fortieth Regiment of General Green's army in the XYZ campaign. Sometimes instead of sending a biladier to call him a wanted man's Akil may be ordered to produce him.

He may, or may not, refuse to accompany the biladier. The Akil may, or may not, produce him, but that does not affect the idea of the system, which is quite sound in theory and as satisfactory in practice as may be expected in a wild country like Somaliland. A biladier is a man employed as a special constable on any odd job. When sent into the district to call a man he is given a red ticket, stamped with the court seal as a badge of authority, and the meaning of this all Somals know. A man refusing to accompany him is nearly always caught in the long run; often when visiting the town in the belief that the affair has been forgotten and that he is safe; and, in addition to the matter he was originally