

CHAPTER VIII

COMMERCE

Trade sources and commodities—A typical manifest—The old Jew goldsmith.

I CALL this chapter commerce. Not the commerce so dryly described in the mass of Zeila tabulated customs' returns that lie before me on the desk as I write. Into these figures, at a first glance, it would seem almost impossible to weave the slightest suspicion of adventure or romance. Yet the pursuit of our trade is not without adventure; often adventure of the good old-fashioned kind—well spiced with danger. But the main, and practically the only, industry of Somaliland is cattle raising, unless one includes the pursuit of war as an industry. If so it is a dying one. With the proceeds of the sale of his surplus cattle the Somal buys goods from all parts of the world. Cloth from America, Europe, Arabia, and India; bowls and other knick-knacks from Japan; the bulk, or all, of which comes to him through the great clearing house of the near east, Aden.

Although a couple of small coastal steamers

owned by an Aden firm visit our port at stated intervals, most of our sea-borne trade is carried in the holds of dhows. The Zeila fleet is not a large one, and plies between the comparatively near ports of Berbera, Aden, Jibouti, Perim, towns on the Arabian coast; Assab, an Italian port in the Red Sea, and several other unimportant places. From Assab come mats for covering the huts and tents; string, and the leaf of the doum palm. This latter the women of Zeila plait in their spare time, as our women do knitting, into long flat strips, which are afterwards sewn into bags and mats. But the best mat grass comes from Berbera, and I have one mat plaited from this grass which is truly a work of art. Interwoven with the plaited grass are thin strips of red and blue cloth, forming a diamond pattern of tasteful design; the result being an article that pleases the most fastidious eye.

Apart from cloth, dates, rice, and sugar are our chief imports. Dates are a splendid and highly nutritious food, eaten daily if procurable. They come to us from Mokulla, Muscat, and Basra, and are, more often than not, transhipped at Aden. But our dhows are enterprising craft and go a-trading themselves. Here is the manifest of one that arrived home to-day:

“Dhow Fathal Kheir, Master Said Musa; cargo:

- 250 packages of dates
- 30 bags of lime
- 2 bundles of mat bags
- 1 package of sweets
- 6 bundles of coir rope

—all from Mokulla.”

From Basra come, in addition to the dates, grain, carpets, and sweetmeats, the latter being the well-known Turkish delight. The carpets are disappointing, and it is to be feared that, though they actually come from Basra, the majority are made in Europe. I have only been able to secure one drugget of undoubtedly eastern manufacture, but it is so fiercely coloured that it will swear at everything in a civilised room. In the old days real, genuine carpets found their way here from Basra, and other ports. I have seen one such, though over fifty years of age, whose colours are as bright and fresh now as on the day it was made.

The dhows bring all sorts of delightful things to gladden the heart of the European collector. I picked up two lovely old brass-bound chests made from a rich black wood, finely carved by a delicate hand. None of your barbarous eastern designs. I have seen many old chests, but these of mine are, in my opinion, incomparable. They are to me a perfect joy, but can only be described by an artist,

and I am not alone. Sometimes I turn the massive brass key of one, and throw open the lid, when the faintest and most delicate smell of incense steals forth to tell how, long before these boxes came into my hands, they were used by Arab ladies to store their delicate silks and fripperies. What is their history? I know not. I was lucky to acquire them, for the old Arab families rarely part with such heirlooms; for heirlooms they are, or were.

And then, sometimes, one finds the most wonderful old pottery. Plates that the old Arab grandmothers, years ago, hung upon their walls for ornament, and, incidentally, to prove their very good taste. That these people do have good taste, and some cultivation, is shown by their high appreciation of such articles, all of which came to our shores in the dhow holds. Who dares to say that our commerce has not its spice of romance?

Of our exports skins are the most important. Horned cattle come next. From Abyssinia has been known to come, in one consignment, ivory, coffee, and civet. The coffee is from Harrar; famous for its long berry and delicate flavour. For the latter quality I can vouch. My cook buys the berries at eightpence the pound and has them roasted and ground by a woman expert in the town. Gums and frankincense, gathered from the wild trees, are also

valuable products that find their way nither in small parcels, hidden among the camel loads of grain and skins. Large caravans of the "ships of the desert" enter the town daily, and many are the stories of "loots" and wild doings they report of the hinterland through which they have passed. With the exception of a little of the coffee, incense, ghee (rancid butter), and grain, this latter from Abyssinia, all they bring goes to the dhows for export.

The incense is used by Somal and all Mahomedan women to perfume themselves. A small earthenware brazier is filled with burning charcoal, on which is sprinkled the incense. Over the brazier the lady stands, covering it and the smoke with her petticoat, should she wear one, or the sheet-like robe that drapes her body. As a result she is well fumigated, and if, afterwards, to the European nostrils she exhales a sickly smell of stale incense what matters it; for European prejudices she cares but little, and her husband has, I regret to state, an abominable taste in scents, and thinks she smells fine. Perhaps she does.

In our town the manufactures are few but interesting. There is the old Midgan woman who makes the earthenware pots and water ewers. She is a marvel of expertness. With her fingers she will mould a pot from a piece of mud whilst you are

looking at her. There is no wheel, no model; it is all done with the fingers alone. A water vessel with a slender neck appears as if by magic. It is as if she were making passes in the air with her hands, and the thing appears like the Indian conjurer's mango tree. Our pot woman would make her fortune on a London music-hall stage, and she is such a friendly soul; her smile is like a tonic.

Then we have iron, silver, and goldsmiths. The former make knives, daggers, spearheads and arrowheads for men, and little household utensils for the women. The silversmiths squat on their mud floors and mould and hammer out all kinds of ornaments: silver anklets, chains, bracelets, neck-amulets, and huge silver beads for the women; silver rings set with huge moon and other cheap stones, the bigger the better, for the men. Terrible affairs these rings, that set one's teeth on edge; but the other ornaments are well made and not at all inartistic. The little silver vessels, covered with filigree work, used to hold the black paint with which the women accentuate their eyebrows, and the henna for staining their fingers, always appeal to me. One silversmith has a box full of every kind of second-hand ornament. One day I was present when he turned it out and I pounced upon one of these paint vessels which he refused to sell. It was in pawn, as were the other articles.

The old Jew goldsmith has bars of gold shaped like small sticks of solder. Pure Abyssinian gold it is, too. He has old, old dies for making medallions, the inscriptions on which neither he nor anyone else in Zeila can read. These medallions, always of gold, are fashioned with tiny connecting links of chain into handsome necklaces. How I'd love to rummage through his boxes, but he is discouraging, and barely allows me a glimpse of the wonderful old things he owns, or perhaps holds in trust. He is our fashionable jeweller, but he, too, squats on his haunches on the floor to beat out the most beautiful things with his hammer, on an anvil no bigger than six inches of steel railway rail. He is anxious that I should commission him to make a pair of ear-rings for "Madam." I am to provide pearls and design, he the gold and craftsmanship. But then I am no draughtsman, and I am not sure whether "Madam" would after all appreciate our combined efforts! I have suggested that we let the matter stand over until I hear from "Madam," to whom I have referred it. He says it is a waste of time to wait. "Madam" is sure to say "Yes," and, if she does, I shall get good value for my money. If all is as it appears to be I most certainly shall. A golden trinket, when completed, he places in one balance of a tiny pair of scales, and balances it with silver four anna-bits. For every silver coin in the scale he pays him three

and a half rupees in settlement for the gold; then, for every rupee you have paid for the gold you add a quarter rupee for his work—and the article is yours . . . or "Madam's."