CHAPTER IV

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ALEXANDER'S campaigns resulted in a network of Greek kingdoms on the north-west frontier of India. The road across Asia Minor lay open, and what intercourse there must have been in that old world, so full of splendour and magnificence, so noisy with armies and kings, can be guessed from the fact that the faces which look out at us from Byzantine mosaics have their double in the frescoes of east central Asia, and the casket enshrining Buddha's bones in the Peshawar temple was made by a Greek artist.

Under the Roman Empire, Roman ships went regularly down the Red Sea and as far east as Ceylon. Kings in ancient India issued coinage on the Roman model. Once or twice Roman trade representatives even went as far as China.

But the Germanic tribes overran Europe and overthrew settled government in 455. In the Dark Ages which followed, Europe was reduced to a semi-Asiatic condition, and life was so insecure that intercourse with distant lands died out. But with the lapse of centuries the Roman Church tamed the wild tribes, bishop and king working hand in hand brought order out of chaos: industries, towns, and a middle class developed, and the emergence of stable government once more liberated energy for progress in a hundred fields. One of those fields was the expansion of the races of Europe over the earth. Already in 1245 the first traveller set out for China, and in 1435 the first traveller came to Burma (p. 98).

But no regular intercourse was possible until a sea route could be found. Men set out to find it because it would bring fabulous profits. Before the eighteenth century, when it became normal for individual farmers to possess land of their own, enclosing it in a strong hedge, agricultural conditions in Europe were similar to those in Burma to-day.

The village lands, a wide expanse unbroken by the line of a single hedge, were worked under communal tenures. It was useless for an intelligent farmer to try new methods on his land, for they would require years to bring to fruition, and meanwhile the land would have been allotted to others. The common grazing of the unfenced stubbles, a feature of backward agriculture, spread disease among cattle and prevented the introduction of new crops, for a crop which was not off the ground at the same time as the rest would be trampled down. There was no rotation of crops, eatable fruit and vegetables were rare, and live-stock grew to only half their present size. Cattle were not slaughtered till they were too old or diseased to draw the plough; every autumn saw a selection of those which were not worth the trouble of stall-feeding throughout the winter, and they were killed for the brine-tub. Men had little but salt meat to eat, and it was so insipid as to need spices.

Spices were not produced in Europe but had to be imported from the East. They were brought up the Red Sea and across Egypt, or up the Persian Gulf to Basra and overland to Constantinople; and every time they changed hands, every frontier they crossed, increased their price. Things were made worse when the Turk captured Constantinople in 1453 and blocked the overland route. The idealism of European sailors was reinforced by business necessity, and governments became willing to spend money on exploration which would give them a cheap sea passage to the Indies, a direct route with no profiteering middlemen.

It is difficult to overestimate the heroism of those early explorers, sailing into uncharted seas which, to their belief, might at any moment swarm with dragons; and in point of fact their ships were so frail that sometimes they suffered damage from giant fish. Captains could not get crews, for the men insisted that the world was flat and if they sailed far enough they would tumble over the edge into hell.

In 1492 Columbus landed in the New World and came back announcing that he had found Japan, for to the day of his death he thought he had landed on the east coast of Asia. Most men would now hold that his was the greatest of the discoveries because it led to the finding of North America, but at the time men considered the tropical east to be the greater find. This fell to the Portuguese: in 1498 Vasco da Gama passed the Cape of Good Hope and found a sea route to India.[1]

The first representatives of the races of Europe were not such as to inspire liking. The Renaissance came to the Portuguese late and left them early, and they were below the average of civilisation in sixteenth century Europe. The level of their Catholicism may be imagined from the fact that Vasco da Gama and thirteen of his men, wandering into a Hindu temple at Calicut, mistook it for a Christian church and worshipped there, although they were somewhat puzzled at frescoes of saints with five arms.

They were second-rate soldiers and it was lucky for them that they did not come into contact with the fighting-races of northern India, but their equipment was sufficient to annihilate opposition in southern India and Indo-China. It was this fighting superiority that enabled them to give full play to their avarice and persecuting zeal. Their cruel treatment of the natives roused the indignation not only of mission priests like St. Francis Xavier but also of the saner laymen among themselves who, when the downfall came, recognised it as a divine judgment. It came primarily from economic exhaustion. Between 1450 and 1550 they ruled the seas of half the world and tried to build up simultaneous dominions in Brazil and the East Indies. The effort proved too much for so small a nation, numbering barely a million. By 1550 there were not sufficient men left in the country to man the ships, and even the sweepings of the jails did not bring the crews up to complement.

But apart from exhaustion, the Portuguese could never have retained an empire because they had a genius for disloyalty, and consequently no administrative faculty. A Portuguese captain in distress could seldom rely on help from his colleagues for they were probably rejoicing at his misfortune. Crews deserted wholesale and took to piracy against their own countrymen before rejoining.

Yet they were good sailors and brave men. The story of their voyages is one of the great epics of the human race. What with scurvy, pestilence, and wreck, not 60 per cent. of the men who left Portugal reached India. Their ships were so ramshackle that bombardments sometimes had to be stopped because the recoil from the guns injured the ships more than the shot hurt the enemy. In 1534 one Diogo Botello sailed from India in a boat sixteen and a half feet long, nine feet in beam, four and a half feet to the keel; he had only three white companions and his native crew mutinied out of misery, but he held on his course and finally brought the boat safe into Lisbon harbour.[1] The success of the Portuguese rests on something more than superior equipment: they had a moral superiority. Trained by long apprenticeship in the wars of Europe, hardened by facing the dangers of unknown seas, they stood up with a gay heart to encounter odds that were sometimes literally a hundred to one, and they grew so contemptuous of their native adversaries that they would fling aside their armour and go into action half naked. But their vigour depended on racial purity, and this they destroyed by a professed policy of mixed marriages. Their superior morale depended on their remaining true to their own traditions, and these they abandoned, deliberately imitating the worst type of native diplomacy so that their crookedness became a byword.

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[1] *Whiteway.*

Their rule never extended a day's march from their ships. All they wanted was a chain of fortified trading stations, for it took the European courts nearly two centuries to realise the weakness of oriental governments and the ease with which an extensive land empire could be won. Goa on the Bombay coast was their headquarters, and Malacca in the Straits, occupied in 1510, their principal port in the farther east.

Burma attracted them less because she lay off the track, and her goods could be bought in Malacca. Her spices were few, and her civilisation was too backward to produce articles of fine workmanship such as were made in China and Japan. There were only two Portuguese stations in Burma, Martaban and Tenasserim (pp. 122, 202). Martaban was important because it tapped not only the trade of Burma, but also of Siam by the overland route. Tenasserim, held by the

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[1] *Stevens* I 379.

Siamese till 1765, was more important still because it commanded an even better overland route direct to Ayuthia, the capital and port of Siam ; indeed, Tenasserim was a rival to Malacca. The importance of both Martaban and Tenasserim declined in the eighteenth century when the English gained control of the sea route through the Straits, and it disappeared altogether with developments in navigation which robbed the voyage round Malaya of its last dangers.

The overseas discoveries resulted in a redistribution of power in Europe. Hitherto civilisation had centred round the Mediterranean. But these discoveries reduced the Mediterranean to a lake, and power shifted to the north-west, especially to England. From being a remote power of the second rank lying at the end of the land routes across Europe, she became the starting point of the new sea routes, the centre of the land masses of the globe, and the greatest of maritime powers. It was this command of the seas which enabled her to seize the far places of the earth and to expel rivals of whom some, such as the French, were no whit inferior as colonists but succumbed because support could not reach them from home.