

PART I

CHAPTER I

THE SUDAN COAST

IN thinking of an unknown place it is inevitable that some image should rise in the mind and recur until it is finally shattered by the revelation of its almost total falsity which a visit to that country brings about. My own imaginings, based on what I had seen in passing through the Red Sea on my way to Zanzibar, were fantastically unreal. I saw blue mountain tops like jagged teeth appearing over the horizon at sunset, and combining these with what I had seen of the reefs and islands of the Gulf of Suez and Bab-el-Mandeb, it came as a shock, some years later, to find that the essential of life on the coast is the great maritime plain, the mountains remaining in the distance, still inaccessible for me.

My first actual sight of the country was typical of the cloudy weather which sometimes occurs in winter. Our little steamer was entering the great gap in the barrier reefs five miles out to sea, directly opposite to what is now the harbour of Port Sudan. Then it was only "Mersa Shêkh Barûd¹," a saint's tomb forming the only work of man for many miles. Grey sea and sky, blue mountains, faintly visible beyond the great dull plain, greeted me; later, the little tomb, built on a knoll of yellow coral rock at the entrance of the inlet, a mark for sailors, gleamed white out of all this greyness. Coming nearer still, one saw that the shore is composed of a low level line of yellowish cliffs, about six feet high, undermined below by the constant wash of the waves and sloping inwards at

¹ For the story of Shêkh Barûd's death see p. 37.

their summits. The shore is separated from the blue-black water by a broad band of green shallows, its outer edge defined by a thin white line of breakers. This is the edge of the fringing reef, which is practically uniform and continuous through the length of both shores of the Red Sea. We were sailing in a channel of fairly deep water partially protected from the waves of the open sea by the barrier reefs. These are a series of shoals and surface reefs, extending parallel to the shore, at a distance of one to five miles out to sea.

This, my first view of the country, may be taken as typical of the whole coast, variations in its uniformity being few. The weather that day was rather exceptional, for often in winter there is all the incomparable sparkle of sunshine and crisp breeze of Egypt, and the mountains, in this wonderful air, come nearer. There are days when I have seen distinctly all the light and shade of their precipices 80 miles away. I leave to your imagination the clearness, almost brilliance, of the great mountains seen at only 15 miles on such days as these. Even so they do not lose their dignity of form and distance, while revealing their vast precipices and terrible ravines, all bare rock, no vegetation, or even soil, to soften their outlines. Truly they are a "great and terrible wilderness." So too is the plain, vast and uniform, all open to the sky—neither the few acacia bushes¹, nor the sparse tufts of apparently dead and almost woody grass serving to render it soft and pleasant to the eye, nor to cover its grey sand and gravel from scorching in the rays of the sun. Great and terrible, a naked savage land, every feature typifying thirst and starvation, so it became to me during my first visit. I was glad indeed to leave, half hoping I should never return.

In absence savagery and poverty faded, and I found myself picturing the mountains at sunrise, ruddy clear, the peacock blue of the deep sea with white waves, the light blues, greens, yellows, and browns of the coral reefs and the submarine gardens they shelter, and so back again to the

¹ *Acacia tortilis*.

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mountains at evening, veiled now in the tender blues and purples of our hills at home, but behind them sunsets of indescribable magnificence. To memory came back that great plain, its openness, its sense of freedom wild as the sea itself, which indeed once gave it birth. I thought of how after a little winter rain there comes the spring; the sand is dotted with little flowers, weeds elsewhere perhaps, here brave conquerors of the desert; the shallow watercourses are full of grass. The acacia bushes become a tender green with a moss-like growth of tiny curling leaves giving out the sweetest of scents, recalling our larches at home. Later they are covered with flowers, like little balls of scented down on slender stalks.

Two of those transiently appearing plants, amongst the commonest of all, have special claims. One, the little "forget-me-not" of the desert, is loved individually for its pure white flowers, the other, for its effects when growing in mass. This latter has a peculiar form, a network of branches springing from a central stem, spread out horizontally over the sand, bearing cylindrical bright green leaves and tiny yellow flowers. The whole plant is of great delicacy, and would be unnoticed by the non-botanical observer but that it is sometimes so abundant as to carpet the ground like a bright green moss, which later is golden from the abundance of its tiny flowers. At the approach of summer, the heat of which has an effect like a touch of frost in England, its leaves take on splendid autumn tints. Once I landed on an islet circled with the low grey-green bushes always present on sand islands, within which I found a display of colour the beauty of which will enrich my store of memory pictures for the rest of my life. The principal scheme was a golden carpet of these tiny, almost microscopic flowers merging into a bright and tender green, and on to all kinds of orange browns and reds. Here and there another of the plants of this peculiar salt-loving flora gave patches of wonderful deep crimson. These vivid colours were thrown up by the dull

grey green of the encircling bushy plants, which remain the same all the year round, and by clumps of a “grass¹” which is of a deep glossy green colour like that of rushes, the whole being in a shallow depression in the dull yellow coral rock. All the transient beauty of changing bracken, moss, and heather was here, but with a wonderful quality of translucence under that blazing sun. As a background to all this imagine the bluest of blue seas and mountains seen over the water, and the picture is complete.

The only really conspicuous flower of the coast lands is a *Pancratium*, a bulb-plant with pure white delicately scented flowers about the size and something of the shape of the British wild daffodil. Unfortunately, this is rather rare, but after all size is but one quality out of many, and certainly not one essential to beauty or interest. An *Abutilon* is found in dry stream beds.

The existence of perennial, herbaceous vegetation, remaining green after the winter vegetation has shrivelled, in a country where there may be no rain at all for four years², a land of scorching sun and hot winds alternating with steamy damp days, where the wells are so salt that ordinary plants die at once when watered from them, where sand-laden gales may cut one's face and grind the surface of glass, is a wonderful display of the power of adaptation to the most adverse conditions, a magnificent success in the struggle for existence. We have the development of a special flora, a selection of plants from many distinct families, which has acquired the ability to live in the salt sands and in crannies of bare rocks by the sea. The commonest of these are two plants which have special beauties. One, *Statice plumbaginoides*, grows generally on bare coral rock, and has large flower-heads of a beautiful pink colour, like sprays of heather contrasting with its dark green leaves. The other, *Suaeda volkensii*, which

¹ A species of *Carex* I believe.

² I am writing of the neighbourhood of Lat. 22° N. About Suakin conditions are better, at least for plant life.

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grows only in sand, has nothing that looks like leaf or flower, but seems to consist of branched rows of translucent green beads. The special beauty of this plant, apart from its shewing green life on such inhospitable sand, is the wonderful tints it takes on at certain times. Every autumn longer spikes appear, which become of brilliant translucent orange or crimson, like the changes of leaves in northern woods. It is a case where the colour is due to the flower bracts, the flowers themselves being inconspicuous.

A few pictures, of summer calm and storm, and my foundations for a visual impression of the country are laid. Just south of Suakin is an area of (approximately) 100 square miles consisting of a labyrinth of coral reefs with winding passages of deep water, and here and there open pools. Slowly my vessel picks its way through the wholly uncharted and unbeaconed maze. There is, indeed, no immediate necessity for aids to navigation, for the breeze, fresh but not strong, ripples the water so that the reefs shew among the blue-green of the deeper channels as clearly as the white squares of a chess board. They are all beautiful shades of green as the water over them is more or less shallow, merging into yellow where a sand-bank approaches the surface, and richest brown where beds of living corals grow. Ahead is the outer reef, an unbroken line of foam separating these calm waters and lighter tints from the deep blue, the colour of a peacock's neck, of the open wave-tossed sea. Landwards are the mountains, faint and hazy in the heat. The coastal plain is invisible under the horizon; despite our shallow waveless water and the presence of reefs, we are far out at sea.

Two or three native boats, painted dark red, add a finishing touch to the colour scheme. They are anchored in these landless harbours, while their crews are scattered in canoes, mere black specks, searching for the pearl shell oysters which occur here at rare intervals.

My storm picture (see frontispiece) has a similar reef harbour for its foreground, but we are only five miles out at

sea on the barrier system, north of Port Sudan. To-day the reefs are barely visible, for with us it is almost a dead calm. All those colours of shoaling sand and coral beds are only visible when the water is rippled. A few stones, mere specks here and there above the glassy surface alone shew the presence of a reef on which no swell is breaking.

Calm is thus more dangerous to a steamer than storm, for should she approach the reef areas before picking up the beacons and lighthouse that mark the entrances to Port Sudan and Suakin, she runs great risk of striking an invisible reef. Sailing vessels are safe, as whenever they are under way the water is rippled and the reefs easily seen.

But landwards peace gives way to storm. The mountains are purple, inky clouds with lurid white edges blot out the blue. The sea is black with wind, white puffs of spindrift rise, drive over the water and disappear again. Some native vessels, which last night may have anchored in land-locked harbours some miles astern of us, are racing before the north wind, only daring to shew a corner of their great lateen mainsails, while we have not wind enough to find our way out of the reef-labyrinth in which we anchored for the night. Later arises a dun-coloured cloud in the north—a dust-storm. Rapidly this bears down upon us, increasing in size as it comes, till it reaches towards the zenith, blotting out the storm clouds, mountains, and plain with a pall as dense as a curtain. For those in the cloud the wind is burning hot¹; the fine dust covers the face, cakes the eyelashes and even the teeth. One's face is made sore with the impact of the coarser particles; sight is as impossible as in the densest London fog. One must lower one's sails and trust there are no reefs within the distance the vessel may drift before the storm blows itself out. After the dust may come a furious squall of rain.

Here, where rain is so visibly the coming of life to the earth, it is fitly heralded by the full majesty of vast cloud

¹ Actual temperature of the wind 100° to 115° Fahr.

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mountains with snowy summits, from whose dark bases issue continuous lightnings and thunder. In such weather heavy squalls may be expected from any quarter, causing much anxiety to sailors used to the regular winds of the Red Sea. One cloud mass may grow until the sky is covered, mountains hidden in a black veil of rain, a furious wind hiding the shore by a great brown cloud of dust. Before the squall reaches the vessel sail is reduced to a mere corner of the great triangle usually spread, amid much excited shouting. Lightning and thunder become almost continuous and the sea is lashed white with rain and spray. It is as cold and dark as night, and impossible to see more than a few yards ahead, all idea of entering harbour is given up and a look-out is kept *downwards* in case the vessel may pass over a shoal (which would be visible five fathoms down, in the clear water) on which she could anchor till the storm passed off. Suddenly a tiny rift appears in the cloud mass ahead; a mountain top becomes visible through the rain, then the masts of a vessel in harbour. In five minutes we may have passed from darkness, storm, and anxious peering through rain, to the bright sunshine and calm of a summer sea.

Could the love of beauty, the artist's sense of colour, find any object in this bare land, dead yellow rock and sands bordering a waste of sea? What is there to replace the infinite variety of colour, of ferny rock, heathery moors and sedgy pools of the desert places of our own land? At times the lover of beauty, even of colour, can be fully satisfied, for the sun alone can throw over this emptiness a glory like that of the golden streets and jewelled gates of the prophet's vision. The sea becomes one splendid turquoise, the coral rock more beautiful than gold, the mountains, mere heaps of dead rock though they are, savage and repellent, change to great tender masses of lovely colour, ruddy violets and pinks, luminous as though they had some source of light within themselves and shared in the joy they give to the solitary beholder; changing as the sun sinks to deeper colder shades, announcing the

benediction of a perfect night. Vessels entering harbour, their crews returning home after a week at sea, become fairy craft, each sail like the rare pink pearls found within the rosy edge of certain shells.

To visit sunset land is but a dream of children, happiness is nearer than the sunset clouds. That gold has been thrown about our feet, over the common stones and bitter waters, and we have gathered spiritual wealth. The kingdom of heaven is within us and the vision of Patmos realised.

One thing necessary to the happiness of a nature-lover the desert can never supply. One needs some sight of luxuriant, riotous life, some equivalent for the rapid growth of grass and trees, that overflowing of life that in other lands causes every vacant inch of soil to bear some weed or flower.

The satisfaction of this desire is easily found *in* the Red Sea, not above it. At present the love of the sea gardens is an esoteric pleasure, some day we hope it may become as universal as the love of wild nature inland. Corals to take the place of plants, fishes and lower animals of all kinds, beautiful, bizarre, useful and poisonous, making gardens of teeming life under water, where the very worms are often beautiful as flowers. In the harbours where the water is stagnant, but clearer than any British sea, besides corals are weeds of all kinds and shapes, among which swim numbers of little fish of comical form, quaintly tame and gorgeously coloured. The biologist knows, however, that these strangely coloured weeds, brown, grey, green, violet, red and yellow, are mostly animals like the corals, some are sponges, some, like clusters of brown or grey daisies, a kind of cousin of the coral polyps. That large feathery flower, white, yellow, or reddish brown, will vanish like a flash if touched. It is nothing more nor less than the head of a worm, not much like the slow-moving senseless earthworm, but one which builds a house for its protection among crannies of the stones, into which it can withdraw its plumed head, sensitive to even a passing shadow.

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The multitude of forms assumed by the corals, their frequently gorgeous colours, equal anything to be seen in a land garden. These grow in greatest luxuriance outside the harbour where the water is of astonishing clarity. It is owing to the vigour of their growth that the edge of the reef is nearly a vertical wall, so that looking down strange beautiful shapes are seen one below another, weird fish entering and leaving their lairs under the coral tangle, till in the pure blue depths the forms of coral and fish become indistinct and pass into the haze of water 60 feet or more deep.

The portion of the coast I have described is typical of the whole. The mountains may be lower or higher, the plain is narrower in the south, broader in the north, and the sea is varied with a few islands about Rawaya and islets of coral rock or sand form the Suakin Archipelago. These sand cays, if always above highest water-level, are peculiar in bearing quite a dense border of low-growing woody plants, at a level immediately above high tide. The rocky islets are almost entirely bare, yellow in colour, surrounded by cliffs like those described at Shêkh Barûd (Port Sudan), and generally level-topped.

In the thousand miles of this side of the Red Sea coast below Suez there are but two towns, Kossêr, in Egypt, now decayed to a mere village, and Suakin. The new town, Port Sudan, the building of which only began in 1905, is, as the name implies, merely the end of the railway communicating with the real Sudan, "the country of the blacks" far over the mountains, by the Nile. It has no significance as a part of this country; the Briton came, took over the bare desert round the wonderful natural harbour of Shêkh Barûd and built there a perfectly modern town, quay walls that the largest ships may lie alongside, electric cranes for their cargoes, and electric light for the town, a grand opening railway bridge over the harbour and every modern need of a great port and terminus. No longer is the tomb the only mark for sailors; one of the finest lighthouses in the world

stands on Sanganeb Reef, and the harbour itself is complete with all necessary lights and beacons, the entrance being naturally as safe and easy as if it had been planned by Providence as a harbour for big steamers¹.

The Romance of Modern Power did attempt to live with that of the Eastern beauty of a desert metropolis in old Suakin, but the site was too cramped and Suakin is now left much as it was before the railway linked it with the Nile and made it, for a brief season, a station on a great thoroughfare.

Owing to the existence of the barrier reefs the approach to Suakin is down a 30-mile passage parallel to the coast, and from two to five miles wide. The shore becomes very low, and the fringing-reef wider than near Port Sudan, so that the distinction between sea and shore would be almost untraceable but for the presence of those salt-loving plants which grow everywhere along high water-mark. Suakin is situated two miles inland, at the head of the inlet which forms its harbour, yet so low is the land that its houses appear over the horizon as though standing in the sea. A cluster of tall houses becomes distinct later over the starboard bow and finally, when the town is nearly abeam, a channel in the shore

¹ Besides the completest possible system of harbour lights, the quays, etc., with every facility for handling cargo, the needs of shipping are well provided for by a large stock of coal electrically handled, tugs and water barges, and a complete dockyard for repairs of any kind up to a considerable magnitude. Since 1910 a salvage tug has been stationed here and the slipway at the dockyard has been completed and is in use. The town water supply, though healthy, is slightly brackish (though much less so than most desert wells), but the very large condensing plants produce and sell fresh water very cheaply. The railway of course runs alongside the shipping, the Customs godowns are liberally and conveniently planned, and the railway bridge rises vertically upwards so that any vessel may pass up to the dockyard without obstruction.

A first-class hotel has just been opened.

Spite of the harbour's being practically tideless its water is perfectly pure, all garbage being collected in barges and towed out to sea, where they are emptied at a distance of about five miles from land.

The whole town is a fine example of what can be done by scientific forethought given free scope and a clear desert site, unhampered by the presence of partially obsolete arrangements and conflicting vested interests, and keeping ever in view the great extensions of every department which the increasing trade of the Sudan will soon need.