

A GLIMPSE OF SOCOTRA,
THE LATEST BRITISH POSSESSION.



SOCOTRA, the island upon which the Indian Government has recently re-planted the British flag, is just outside the Gulf of Aden—about 148 miles east of

Cape Gardafui, and consequently in the direct route of ships going from the Red Sea to India. The fact that it measures eighty miles or so in length, and from fifteen to twenty in width, gives but a vague idea of its size; but when we remember these figures represent it as being something like four times as long as the Isle of Wight, and from two to seven miles wider in different parts, we are led to form a more adequate notion of its area and importance. Its value as a coaling station in the earlier days of steam-vessels was seen to be immense, and with the view of making use of it for this purpose, it was thoroughly surveyed by Lieutenant Wellsted in 1834. The result of his investigations was that a negotiation was opened with the Sheikh of Keshin for the purchase of the island. But the Eastern ruler, small as were his domains, preferred the inheritance of his fathers to the acquisition of gold, and refused to listen for a moment to the representations of John Company, in spite of the length of his purse, or the crafty charming of his specious words. Spanning a little space with his fingers, the chieftain swore, "As surely as there is but one God and He is in heaven, I will not sell even so much; this island was a gift of the Almighty to the Mahras, and has descended from our forefathers to their children, over whom I am Sultan." But in this instance, as in most others, the old saying held good—

"That they should take who have the power,
And they should keep who can,"

and accordingly a detachment of the Bombay Native Infantry took possession of Socotra, and held it for their masters as long as it seemed good to them, which proved to be a period of four years, until the capture of Aden, a spot thought to possess all the capabilities and none of the disadvantages of the little isle, which was immediately abandoned, and reverted to its Sheikh, who retained it till 1876. At that date longing eyes were cast on this coign of vantage-ground so conveniently near the Red Sea, and so much more important than it was before the construction of the Suez Canal, that lest it should be occupied by either of the Powers jealous of British supremacy in the East, the Political Resident at Aden was sent to the Sheikh to make arrangements for the frustration of all such inimical designs. After some little exercise of diplo-

macy a treaty was drawn up and signed, which secured the dignity of the Arab as well as the safety of his paternal acres, and the increase of his modest revenue. He accepted the annual payment of a thousand dollars from the Government of Great Britain, and agreed not to allow any alien residents to settle in Socotra, nor to cede any portion of it to any foreign Power without her consent. He thus became a feudatory of England, and it was but a step from the state of things then established to the supremacy now declared and manifested.

The island may be described as a table-land varying in height from seven to 1,900 feet above the sea-level, and resting on limestone hills, and granitic mountains abutting more or less precipitately on the northern coast, from which they are separated by plains two or three miles in width. These rocks are intermingled with porphyry and other igneous formations, but support no vegetation save a species of moss, while the plains are sandy, only diversified with hillocks covered with low scrub and coarse grass. The soil in the eastern districts is a reddish earth, wherein grain, vegetables, and fruit flourish, and which produces abundant grass crops. There are good pastures in the western part, and valleys of extraordinary beauty and fertility run right across the table-land.

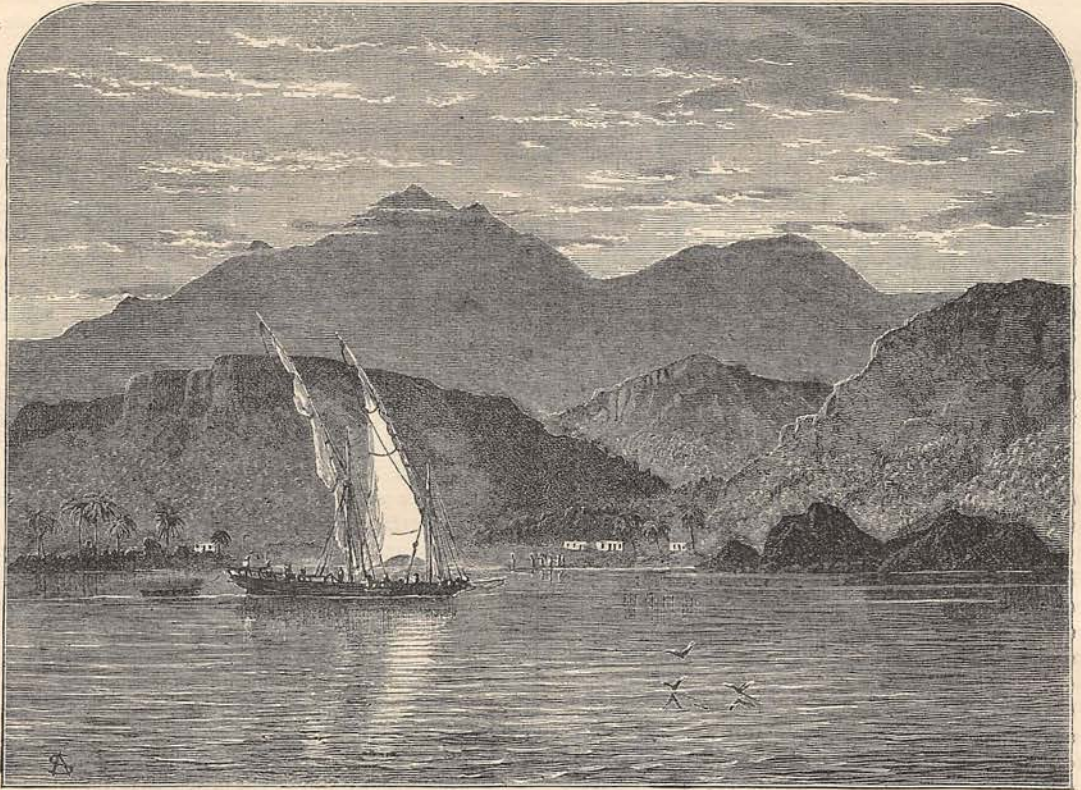
In most of the northern plains, water is found in abundance at a depth of from eight to ten feet below the surface, and numerous streams fed by the heavy monsoon rains run with considerable velocity in different directions, but in hot weather become nearly dry. Some few, however, are perennial, especially in the neighbourhood of Tamarida. The climate is cooler than that of Arabia, in consequence of the sea-breezes blowing across the island, as well as the elevation of the central hills. The north-east monsoon blows from October to April, after which torrents of rain fall, causing the thermometer during that period to range from 70° to 80°. These pleasant months are terribly dangerous to navigation, because of the constant squalls that rise and blow, and unfortunately there is no good harbour, though there is tolerable anchorage near Tamarida, but it is not available at all seasons of the year.

The chief commercial product of Socotra is the aloe, the juice of which, when pure, is said to be the finest in the world. The plant grows all over the island, reaching a height of some ten feet where not stunted, and if judiciously managed and cultivated would become a profitable source of revenue. The Hebrew tradition is that the aloe grew in the garden of Eden, which is likely enough, as it is pre-eminently an Eastern plant, and commonly called the "tree of Paradise." Its broad, long leaves, sharp-pointed as lances, grow in a circle, from the centre of which rises the stem, covered with tassels of lily-shaped flowers, red or white, and occasionally orange-coloured, shaded with scarlet. More than a hundred blossoms have

been counted in one cluster. The gum into which the juice hardens is well known in medicine, and was accounted by the Jews in olden days to be worth its weight in gold. The natives of Socotra sell theirs for the most part to the merchants from Bombay.

The "dragon's blood," obtained in the island in sufficient quantities to be considered an article of commerce, is a reddish resin which exudes from *Pterocarpus Draco*, a species of Dalbergia. The amara yields an odoriferous gum, the tamarind flourishes, while tobacco, cotton, and indigo thrive sufficiently well to indicate the sources of prosperity

is cultivated. The tree begins to bloom in March or April, and the male spathes are opened when sufficiently advanced to crackle under the fingers. The workman gathers the cluster and divides it into fragments, which he places in the hood of his *burnous*, and climbs the female tree with great agility, supporting himself by a loop of cord passed round his loins, and at the same time round the trunk of the tree. Gliding between the leaf-stalks, and avoiding the thorns with some difficulty, he splits open the spathe with a knife, slips in a fragment consisting of two or three blossoms, interlacing them with the growing cluster, the fecunda-



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which may be developed in the future. The hills might be terraced like those of Palestine, and the whole land become an oasis of plenty.

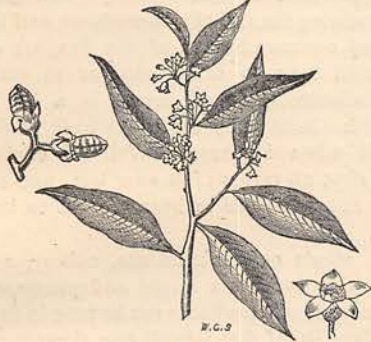
The date-palm, the "prince of vegetables," of which the natives say that it plunges its foot into the water and its head into the fires of heaven, is their staple article of food, and raises its straight, column-like stem eighty or ninety feet high, crowned by an ample tuft of forty or fifty leaves, each of which floats from the summit like a feather. From the axils of the leaves issue spathes which open on one side, and permit the passage of long branching panicles which ultimately bear small flowers, male on one tree and female on another, so that to produce fruit it is usual to have recourse to artificial impregnation of the female blossoms, a practice which has been carried on from the earliest times in all countries where the date

tion of which is thus rendered certain. The dates hang in bunches under the leaves, the bunches often weighing as much as twenty pounds. The Arabs enumerate 360 uses to which the trunk, branches, leaves, juice, and fruit of this tree can be applied, and one who lived for years among them said he had slept on bedsteads made of its wood, under a roof formed of the leaves; it had served him for baskets, mats, brooms, poultry-cages, and walking-sticks; he had crossed rivers on bridges made from it, burnt it as fuel, and eaten a honey-like sweetmeat compounded from its sap. What wonder that the Oriental who was brought to England to see the wonders and glories of the Western world should have observed, "It is a very fine land, but it has no dates!"

The fruit of the *Lotus nebea*, of about the same size as the cherry, is also abundant and valuable; beans

and cucumbers are grown in little plots and highly prized. The only grain cultivated is millet, which with its long reed-like stalk and soft leaves clothes the fields with a delicious green for a few weeks after it springs up, and produces three crops in the year.

The domestic animals are sheep, goats, oxen, camels, and poultry. The camels are fine, strong, and



THE ALOE.

numerous, and the cattle small and without humps, their flesh being remarkably good. The sheep are of the kind common in the East, whose tails are so large, long, and fat as to be worthy of the name of a fifth limb. Goats of several species abound, and as some are considered wild, may be had for the catching, so that the native need never be in want of a joint of goat or kid to seethe or roast. The horse no longer exists, though it was once in common use; and donkeys, which were the ordinary beasts of burden before the introduction of camels, now wander wild in great troops. The civet-cat and chameleon are common all over the island; turtles are found on the southern coast, and the sea offers a rich harvest to the fisherman. Among birds, there are plenty of wild ducks, wood-pigeons, flamingoes, plovers, crows, swallows, owls, and vultures. There are but few poisonous snakes, but an abundance of scorpions and centipedes, as well as a species of spider which lives among loose stones, and is capable of inflicting an unpleasant if not a dangerous bite.

The capital of Socotra is a small town called Tamarida, built near the northern shore, and only containing about 100 inhabitants, though capable of accommodating a large number. Most of the houses are empty and deserted, and the tombs are exceedingly numerous. The dwellings are built of coral and soft stone, and consist of two storeys, the upper one of which is set apart for the female portion of the family. The roofs are flat, and surrounded by high parapets. Near Tamarida there is a pearl fishery said to be tolerably rich, and producing gems of good quality.

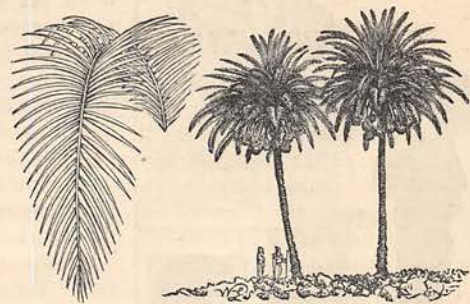
A short distance to the east of this town is Beni, the settlement of a large mixed population, as well as a tribe of Bedouins, who are probably the aborigines of Socotra. They are a handsome race, of Jewish appearance, tall and well proportioned, with black, crisp, curly hair, and finely developed features. They live in patriarchal style, each family occupying its own bounds, and the whole community presided over by a

judge or elder. The women go unveiled, and are usually remarkably pretty, with clear soft skins, and complexions a shade lighter than olive. They are a purely pastoral people, wandering from place to place with their flocks, and seeking shelter in the caves with which Socotra abounds, during the greater part of the year, but returning to Beni as head-quarters.

They profess the Mohammedan religion, but observe neither its ritual nor its regulations, with the single exception of circumcision, which they probably derive from an ancestry who flourished long ages before the Prophet of the Faithful was born. The other inhabitants are the mixed offspring of the waifs and strays of many nations cast by various chances on the island—Hindoos, Arabs, Africans, and Portuguese; but they speak the same language, wear the same dress, and profess the same low form of Mohammedanism.

The only other places of any importance, if such a term may be applied to them, are Kathub and Galansie, both of them fishing villages on the northern shore, and the latter consisting of fifty families or so. Shaab and Galansie Bays, Ghubbet Ne, Bander Delishi, Bander Garrieh, and a few others afford some shelter for shipping in one or other of the monsoons. The ruins of a temple may be seen at a spot among the hills called Nebektrees, and there are a few hamlets or groups of huts scattered here and there.

Between Socotra and the main-land of Africa there are many islets or points of land, which are the upper portions of a submarine plateau extending over the whole distance. One of them, a rocky strip of land twenty-five or twenty-six miles long, is inhabited by a small community of shepherds and fishermen, and is called Abdal Kuri, and the curve formed by its southern coast forms a welcome harbour, known to seamen as Leven Bay. The Kalfarans, a small group where vast numbers of sea-fowl congregate, is a rich depôt of guano, the value of which is not altogether unknown to Arab traders, and another little cluster has been named the "Brothers."



DATE-PALM AND LEAF.

The history of Socotra stretches back in a dim, shadowy, traditional fashion to the time of Alexander the Great, who is said to have colonised it with Greeks from Attica. In the ninth century of our era some Byzantine Christians were shipwrecked there, and not only converted the inhabitants but conquered them; whether this feat was accomplished by the force of arms or faith not being recorded. A hundred years

later Socotra had prospered so wonderfully as to be able to furnish 10,000 fighting men. Truly those shipwrecked mariners must have been wondrous folk!

Three hundred years later, the Venetian traveller Marco Polo gave the world an account of Socotra, though, as he had not visited it himself, his information partook very much of the character of hearsay. According to him, Christianity still prevailed, and Socotra had attained the dignity of an archbishopric, though both primate and people rejoiced in a reputation of being successful and skilful practisers of the black art.

In the early years of the sixteenth century, Nicolo Conti found the inhabitants to be Nestorian Christians, and in 1506 the Portuguese took possession of the island and rejoiced the hearts of the natives by delivering them from the yoke of the Moors. Portugal took them under her protection out of compliment to their faith, and, with a keen eye to her own projects and the commanding position of Socotra, fortified it strongly. After this the people embraced a different ritual, set up the cross as an object of worship in their churches, wore it on their clothes, reproduced the names of the twelve Apostles *ad infinitum* among the lords of creation, baptised all the weaker vessels as Marys, and opened the sanctuaries for service three times a day, the prayers being read in the tongue of the Chaldees.

The Portuguese abandoned Socotra after a few years, but the natives, though still nominally Christians, had adopted some very free-thinking notions and abolished all ecclesiastical dignities. St. Francis Xavier paid them a visit soon afterwards, but found

the signs and tenets of the Crescent and the Cross commingled in strange juxtaposition, and the Chaldean language, in which services were still conducted, as much of an unknown tongue to the majority of the race, as Latin was to the British rustic in Reformation days.

In 1656, Pope Alexander VII. sent a Carmelite missionary to the East, who, on his arrival in Socotra, found the so-called Christians offering sacrifices to the moon, practising the rite of circumcision, and following those good commandments of the Prophet of Islam which forbid men to drink wine or to eat pork—that unwholesomest of all meats in a hot climate. Thenceforth Christianity seems to have sunk out of sight, and when Lieutenant Wellsted explored the island in 1834 all traces of it were lost, and not even a relic or ruin remained to bear witness to its former existence.

Socotra wants only inhabitants, culture, and good government to become a fertile and prosperous little spot. Colonists will probably not be long in flocking to it, in the firm belief that British rule alone is safe and equitable in the East. Perhaps some of the unfortunates who have lost their all in the late disastrous war between Russia and Turkey might be drafted there to the advantage of every one concerned. Home can be no longer home to multitudes among them, the past can neither be re-called nor blotted out, but in a new land where a little industry is rewarded by plenty, the saddened Osmanlis might live peaceful, happy lives, and might learn to look back on their struggles, privations, and miseries as a bad dream or a troubled phase of some scarce-realised previous existence.

ELIZA CLARKE.

HOME-MADE SWEETMEATS.

BY PHILLIS BROWNE, AUTHOR OF "COMMON-SENSE HOUSEKEEPING."



SUPPOSE that there are not many grown-up people who have not, at least once during the period of youthful days, indulged in the supreme delight of "boiling toffee." We can all remember doing it: first laying our plans, then persuading the cook to admit

us into the kitchen, then obtaining possession of the requisite saucepan and ingredients, and after a time, when the house was filled with a scent suggestive of a sugar refinery in flames, producing a compound

burnt and sticky and horrible, which yet was "sucked" with appreciative gusto, and presented in minute portions to intimate friends as a conclusive and valuable proof of esteem and regard.

We have grown wiser since those days, and have come to understand that confectionery is one of the fine arts, and is not to be taken up and practised at a moment's notice. Perhaps we have been favoured with a view of French sweetmeats, and have seen the chocolate creams and liqueur bon-bons, the flavoured tablets, the almond and pistachio soufflés, the Psyche's kisses, and the brochettes of dried fruits, the brilliant rosolios and imitation fruits, the bouchées and the prâlines of Parisian manufacture. These have affected us much as a picture by Millais would, or a sculptured figure by Woolner, or a brilliant pianoforte performance by Rubinstein. We acknowledge the beauty of the performance and the wonderful genius which it displays, but we feel that it is something quite beyond us, and that if we were to attempt to imitate it we should be sure to fail most ignominiously, and, more than that, our good materials would be wasted and destroyed.