

ገዢ እት ሄሰስሎ፡ ረከብ ኩ፡  
 ሙገሰ፡ በትዮ፡ ማኪ፡ ተመጠዊ፡  
 ብትንሃ፡ ፍጠት፡ ቤ ሎ፡ ህብ፡ በእ  
 ረከ፡ ሰነ ዳሃን፡ ጠላም ከክ፡ ፍ  
 ህጠት ረከብ፡ ሙገገቦ፡ ህበሰ

ማያት፡ ፍጠ ይ. ሳ. ስኦ ግዢ እ  
 ትዮ፡ አልቦ፡ ህንቲ፡ አስትንሃ፡ ተ  
 መጠዊ፡ ፍጠት፡ ቤ ሎ፡ አልቦ፡ ያ፡  
 ኑያ፡ ስነ፡ ህበሰ ማያ ት፡ ፍእስሎ፡  
 ስማሰኩ፡ በመጽ ሐፈ፡ ፡ 10. ሃት፡



እንደ፡ ያ፡ በሎ፡ እስሎ፡ ህክንደዩ፡  
 ረከሰ፡ ያ፡ ከብር፡ ፍጠ ይ. ሳ. ስኦ  
 ነ፡ ህንቲ፡ ሳረዮ፡ ከፍጠት፡ ቤ ሎ፡

እግዛእት ከማርያም፡ በአዮ፡ ስ፡  
 ይት ከህሰኩ፡ ገቢ ረከንዙን፡ ገ፡  
 ሎ፡ አኅተ፡ ፍሰተሰ፡ ያት ከሃሰኩ፡

Plate 1 Illustration from an unpublished XVII century MS in the Abbey of Cusquam.

DAVID MATHEW

# ETHIOPIA

The study of a polity

1540 - 1935

LONDON  
EYRE & SPOTTISWOODE

## LIST OF EMPERORS OF ETHIOPIA SINCE 1500

### EMPERORS RULING BETWEEN 1500 AND 1784

Naod, son of Baeda Mariam	1478
Lebna Dengel (David II), son of Naod	1508
Galawdewos or Claudius, son of Lebna Dengel	1540
Minas, brother of Galawdewos	1559
Sarsa Dengel, son of Minas	1563
Yakob, natural son of Sarsa Dengel	1597
Za Dengel, son of Lesana Krestos and nephew of Sarsa Dengel	1603
Susenyos, natural son of Fasilidas who was grandson of Lebna Dengel	1604
Fasilidas, son of Susenyos	1632
Yohannes (John I), son of Fasilidas	1667
Iyasu I the Great, son of Yohannes	1682
Takla Haimanot I, son of Iyasu I	1706
Theophilos, brother of Iyasu I	1708
Yostos (Justus) the first usurper, a grandson of Yohannes through his mother	1711
David III, brother of Takla Haimanot I	1716
Asma Giotgis (Bacaffa), brother of David III	1721
Iyasu II, son of Bacaffa	1730
Ioas, son of Iyasu II	1755
Yohannes (John II), brother of Bacaffa	1769
Takla Haimanot II, son of Yohannes	1769
Solomon II, a usurper	1777
Takla Giorgis, brother of Takla Haimanot II	1779

### SHADOW KINGS NOMINALLY RULING BETWEEN 1784 AND 1855

Iyasu III, son of Atseku son of Iyasu II	1784
Takla Giorgis (second period as king)	1788
Hezekias, son of Iyasu II	1789
Takla Giorgis (third period as king)	1794

## LIST OF EMPERORS

vii

Baeda Mariam II	1795
Takla Giorgis (fourth period as king)	1795
Solomon III, son of Takla Haimanot II	1796
Ionas	1797
Takla Giorgis (fifth period as king)	1798
Solomon III (second period as king)	1799
Demetrios	1800
Takla Giorgis (sixth period as king)	1800
Demetrios (second period as king)	1800
Egwala Seyon or Guarlu, son of Hezekias	1801
Ioas II, brother of Guarlu	1818
Gigar, Son of Iyasu II	1821
Baeda Mariam III (reigned for four days)	1826
Gigar (second period as king)	1826
Iyasu IV, son of Solomon III	1830
Gabra Krestos	1832
Sahela Dengel	1832
Gabra Krestos (second period as king)	1833
Sahela Dengel (second period as king)	1833
Yohannes (John III), son of Takla Giorgis	1840
Sahela Dengel (third period as king)	1845
John III (second period as king)	1850
Sahela Dengel (fourth period as king)	1851

## RECENT EMPERORS

Theodore II	1855
John IV	1868
Menelik II	1889
Lij Iyasu	1913
Zaoditu (Judith)	1916
Haile Selassie I	1930

## LIST OF KINGS OF SHOA SINCE 1750

Amba Iyasu	1745
Asfaha Wasan II, son of Amba Iyasu	1775
Wasan Sagad, son of Asfaha Wasan II	1808
Sahela Selassie, son of Wasan Sagad	1812
Hailu Malakot, son of Sahela Selassie	1846
Menelik, son of Hailu Malakot	1863



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## FOREWORD

IT IS MY PRIVILEGE to express my deep sense of indebtedness to His Imperial Majesty the Emperor Haile Selassie I for the gracious permission to journey and study in the Ethiopian Empire. I must express my gratitude to Their Imperial Highnesses the Crown Prince of Ethiopia and the Duke of Harar for hospitality in their provinces and to His Excellency the Vice-Governor of Harar for his most cordial reception in that city. I am grateful to His Excellency the Governor of Tigray and to the civil governor of Aksum for their kind assistance in my different visits. His Excellency the Minister of the Pen, who holds also the portfolio of the Interior, has aided me in my understanding of the traditional Ethiopian State. I need hardly say that my studies in the Private Secretary's Office, presided over by Ato Tafari Woyq, have aided me in understanding the structure of the polity that culminates in the Solomonic Throne.

I am especially grateful to His Beatitude the *Echeggi* Gabre Giorgis for the deeply sympathetic assistance that I received in my study of the historic role of the Ethiopian Church and for the hospitality of his monastery at Debra Libanos. I must also mention my debt to the archpriest of the church of St. Mary of Sion at Aksum.

To His Britannic Majesty's *Chargé d'affaires* and Mrs. Cook and to the British Consul and Mrs. Taylor, I am indebted for the most generous welcome. The library at the Legation was invaluable for my work, and no one who has visited it can forget that compound; the grey stone Legation in the Aston Webb manner, with its hall and the coffered ceiling, a little reminiscent of the Royal Naval College, Dartmouth; the barracks for the Legation guard; the falling park land, the little cemetery and the sweet grasses and that lovely view; psychologically, a thousand miles from Addis Ababa.

I must thank the head of the French *Mission Extraordinaire*, Comte Jacques de Blesson, for permission to use the library of the French Legation and to borrow rare works on Ethiopian history. In this connection I am particularly grateful for the loan of photographs to John Littler and Fieda Collier, both in turn in charge of

the British Council's institute at Addis Ababa, and to David Buxton for a most remarkable reproduction of the detail of the church at Ghemb Mariam.

I am deeply grateful to His Excellency the Belgian Minister, for his unemotional and penetrating comment on the general subject of this work. To my talks with him and to those with Clive Molesworth and his wife and with Dr. Hollob, I owe more than I can say. My friend, the late Blata Guetta Belatchao, gave me an insight into the traditional political thought of his country. I must thank the heads of the Tafari Makonnen and Empress Menen Schools for the impression of existing Ethiopian traditions, and I should here mention His Excellency Lij Yilma Daressa, Vice-Minister of Finance and acting Director General of Education.

I should express my warmest thanks to His Excellency Mgr. Khidane Mariam Kassa and to his vicar general Abba Gabre Jesus, who shares my approach to the great Emperor Theodoric. I must make a short litany of my brethren in Ethiopia who have in effect aided my researches, Abbas Haile Mariam and Wolde Medehin at Adigiat, Baraki and Tesfa Giorgis at Dessie, Tesfa Selassie, André Marsay, Simon Amenou, François Gugsu and Khidane Mariam in the capital; all these I thank. I have studied certain Ethiopian traditions with Abba Petros of Asfa Tafari.

I now come to those whose views have aided me and who are associated in my mind with the compound or with Ras Imru's house in Casa Inces or the house in which I made my own headquarters; Maurice and Sally Taylor, Kevin Devenish, Colman Watkins, John Boyce, Peter Halliday, John Gardiner, Douglas Marr. I have been assisted by those who were not actually in Ethiopia with me, by my cousin, Charles Mathew, formerly the Emperor's legal adviser, and my friend, Arthur Hughes, Bishop of Hieropolis. Colonel Sandford and the Rev. Godfrey Matthew gave me the views of the older generation. To Gaston Wiet I am indebted for a clarification of the relations between Egypt and Ethiopia in the later Middle Ages, and to my brother Gervase for a careful valuation of remote Byzantine and other cultural influences. Ronald Chapman has lent MSS including unpublished letters from the late General Sir Edward Francis Chapman, describing the campaign of Magdala. It has been a real assistance to exchange views with Margery Perham, who approaches the subject of Ethiopia with an unrivalled African experience. Finally, my

brother Gervase has worked over the whole volume and guided me at each stage.

Ethiopia leaves an impression on the mind that is quite ineradicable. Those first nights in Addis Ababa in the house on a cleaned-up lot to the west of Churchill Street, are unforgettable, the thin air at eight thousand feet above sea level, the grunt of the guard beneath the window as he lay sleeping with his rug and gun, the sound of the hyenas and the breath of the soft wind in the eucalyptus trees.

DAVID MATHEW.

ADDIS ABABA, *March*, 1945—LONDON, *February*, 1946.

## CHAPTER I

### THE ETHIOPIAN SETTING

IN ETHIOPIA the past lies heavy, very remote, actual and indcipherable. In a sense that ancient land seems masked behind her capital. One can look southwards from Entotto Mariam to where the city lies spread out on the many hills of that high plateau and find the very landscape alien to old Abyssinia. For the royal tents and the shifting *ghibbi* of the Solomonic Throne have at last reached their resting place where the high swaying eucalyptus groves mark Addis Ababa.

This is a capital created by a regal tradition whose quality has something of the immemorial while its expression is versatile, sensitive and contemporary. Along the miles of sandy road spread out the huts called *tukals* sometimes thatched, interspersed with new white houses and big compounds and that wilderness of European flowers. The atmosphere is singularly clear; the lovely light lies on the gritty soil and the dun mountains. The mild sun of these high altitudes bears down upon the corrugated iron of Africa and the sharp obvious clusters of the bougainvillea. In spring, against a pale and cloudless sky, the faint airs stir the tall and feathery eucalyptus trees, which seem to keep the city tethered.

The old *ghibbi*, built some fifty years ago as a palace by Menelik II, lies cast upon a wide expanse of hill, the gates reminiscent of Pekin as envisaged by the Paris Exhibition of 1890. It has the walls, the seclusion, the pavilions which the French taste of that epoch held to be expressive of magnificence. To the north west there rises the bulbous-domed stone mausoleum, so similar in its stark emphasis to all those churches which the Tsardom in its last phase strewed about its zone of influence. It is a little strange to come upon that Russo-Byzantine expression of nineteenth century Muscovy. In the city at a meeting place of four roads stands a greying bronze equestrian statue of Menelik II, that chiselled face, the hoise, the heavy crown, an integrated rather dull conception. The emperor died in 1913 and there he rides, a German's idea of a

southern Chaulmagne. How swiftly does the Ethiopian Throne accept each transient architectural mood and with what little care they pass away. The impact of Europe is evanescent. The statuary moulders in time, perhaps the eucalyptus trees. Here is a brief study of Ethiopia as that land is seen within the framework of its royal tradition.

\*            †            ‡

It is simplest to begin any survey of the period of history now under consideration with an account of the physical features of Ethiopia. The great plateau of the Amharias, and more especially the northern portion of that tableland, has always formed the core of the ancient empire. This plateau, with its wheat crops and Mediterranean trees and flowers ripening in a temperate climate which resembles that of the Highlands of Kenya, is set apart from the rest of Africa. It stands in contrast to the burning plains to east and west. In consequence it is not surprising that a singular distinctness from the accustomed scene in Africa is presented by the people of the plateau; the Amharias separated by their Christian Coptic Faith from the Moslem world. The tide of Islam was all about the base of their great hills, an Islam often filled with a hot zeal from the proximity of Mecca.

The northern wall of the Amharic plateau is formed by the mountains which divide the high country of Eritrea from the desert to the north. This relatively short range begins at a point about one hundred miles to the south of Suakin and reaches the Red Sea coast above Massawah. The eastern face of the plateau is marked yet more clearly for successive ranges of mountains run almost due south across the whole length of the four hundred miles that separate Massawah from the lip above the endless plain to the east of Addis Ababa. On their eastward slope these mountains fall steeply, terrace upon terrace, to the empty stone-strewn desert. Coming from across the Awash, the way inland by the caravan tract from the Somali coast, and seeing for the first time this great range by Debra Berhan conjures all one's boyhood pictures of a King Solomon's Mines country, the withered thorny *sunt* plant, the dried-up river beds and the whole western sky filled by the immense cliff face. Once the mule tracks have been negotiated, for the camels are left behind in the hot plains, there opens out the vision of a new country which is utterly without relation to the heat-laden provinces with their few nomads.



*Plate 2* Mountain scenery in the Southern Tigris





It is not only that while the desert people are Moslems one comes on the plateau to Christian land, it is rather that there is something in the quiet light and the freshness of this lovely country that both calls to the European and explains the profound attachment of the Amharias. Here, after so much toil, the European tends to find an echo of his own far landscape. Two examples, very remote from one another, bear this out. The Portuguese travellers<sup>1</sup> of the sixteenth century noted a resemblance in this high rolling plain to the wide ploughed lands of Entre Minho e Douro; Lord Edward Gleichen on the road to Addis Ababa in the year of the Queen's Diamond Jubilee was reminded of the dog roses and the brambles of the North Downs. The resemblance may be fleeting, but it is objective; it is not mere nostalgia.

On reaching the plateau from the east the traveller comes to a high tableland, crossed and intersected by ranges of a certain height, and stretching for close on three hundred miles. The great cliff face is itself the watershed, and streams make their way westward. It is hardly accurate to describe the whole plateau as tilted westward, but certainly towards the Sudan there is no sheer precipitous cliff. When the descent begins the land seems to fall away in broad terraces, each hotter and more tropical, down into southern Nubia.

The plateau is the scene of all the central episodes of Abyssinian history. Beginning from the north, it contains within its frontiers Asmara in the Hamasien, then Aksum the spiritual capital, Adowa and Adigrat, Gondar, Debia Tabor and Magdala successive fortress strongholds, Ankober and Addis Ababa. Yet it is a plateau of deeply varied character with none of that unity of mood of the great Russian plains. The whole country is seared and scored with gorges. Thus, in one such chasm, amid hot tangled forest far below the corn and maize lands of the high fields, there flows, swift and unnavigable, the Blue Nile, a river which here in its upper reaches is called the Abai. This gorge swings in an immense curve from the south-east shore of the huge shallow Lake Tana, another feature of the plateau, until it plunges out to the Sudan. It is obvious that the gorge of the Abai and those of its tributaries make communications difficult between the various highland

<sup>1</sup> Francisco Alvarez, *Description of Ethiopia*, p. 78. This whole chapter is deeply indebted to the admirable preliminary survey in *A History of Abyssinia* by A. H. M. Jones and Elizabeth Monro.

provinces, which have always tended to a considerable measure of independence. To the outer world this sanctuary appeared for centuries as almost impenetrable. Such contact as was made with the northern and eastern world went forward along those difficult and confused tracks which led in time to the harbours on the Red Sea coast. With this preliminary we can now consider how the Amharas, their faith, their throne and kingdom came to this high inaccessible country.

It appears to be established that the basic mixture of what is now the Tigrean and Amharic peoples is developed from a Semitic invasion out of Yemen in Arabia imposed upon a primitive Hamitic stock. This, in turn, was linked by race and language with the Danakil and Somali peoples of the desert plain.

The name Habesh, from which the word Abyssinia is derived, seems to originate with an invading tribe, the Habashat. It is said that Geez, the classic language of the country which is still the liturgical expression of its church, is named from another element in this invasion. The first polity from which the Ethiopian world can be considered as deriving in any sense is the Aksumite kingdom founded by these Semitised Hamitic peoples. In area it seems to have covered the extreme northern portion of the plateau, the region known as Tigray and now politically divided between the northern provinces of Ethiopia and the southern region of Eritrea.

Meroe, with which the name of Queen Candace is associated, was on the other hand a Nubian kingdom lying to the north in the plains eastward from the Nile valley. The Aksumite civilisation has this importance in the development of Ethiopian tradition; it provided the spiritual capital which, from the acceptance of Christianity, was always fixed at Aksum and it bequeathed those great monuments which have for so long dominated the Amharic mind.

The famous granite monoliths at Aksum are taller than any in Egypt. Through many centuries, since before the time when St. Frumentius came to Ethiopia as bishop, they have dominated the stone houses and the wattle huts and the great sycamores of the old capital. From a low pediment the tallest of these pillars rises nearly seventy feet from the billowing floor of the wide gritty plain south-west of Adowa. In the strength of the incised carving there is a quality both of permanence and of that massive and open mystery which has done so much to feed a sense of mission and a pride which are inseparable from the traditions of old Ethiopia.

The Aksumite kingdom maintained links with Egypt through the port of Adulis, which appears to have risen on the site of Berenice the Golden, founded under the Ptolemaic kings. It was this traffic coming down from Egypt which led to the foundation of Christian communities in this Red Sea port. St. Frumentius appears to have converted the Aksumite king in the second quarter of the fourth century. Our knowledge of the regime of Aksum is fragmentary; there was in time a Hellenistic veneer and a Greek coinage. There is little that can be predicated with any certainty.

The next factor in Ethiopian history was the rise of Islam, which, in time, almost cut off the Amharic world from Egypt through the submergence of the Christian Nubian kingdom by the tide of this new military faith. It seems that the port of Massawah, a name which appears thus early, was in the possession of Arabs by 634. It was, however, only during the eighth century that the definite possession of the coast passed to the Moslems. In the palace of Quseir Amra the representation of the Abyssinian king is found among those of the sovereigns whom the Caliph vanquished. The port of Adulis was finally destroyed about this time.

Towards the end of the tenth century the Abyssinian kings, whose links with the Aksumite monarchy are uncertain, suffered a further setback, apparently at the hands of pagan tribes from Damot in the bend of the Abai river. At this period, too, an independent Moslem dynasty had come to rule in the Dahlak Archipelago and at Massawah.

Viewed from one angle the next six centuries witness the gradual Christianisation of the plateau and also its defence against invading Moslems. Any survey, however rapid, requires numerous qualifications, and this is the point at which to draw attention to the fact that the Abyssinian plateau, while it has clearly marked boundaries to the north and east and in the west at least a zone of demarcation, is without any frontier towards the south.

The Aksumite kingdom had not extended beyond Tigray and the coastal lands which lay adjacent. During the Middle Ages it was the work of the Abyssinian kings to push southwards, to Christianise and settle the provinces of Gojjam, Lasta, Amhara, Beghemeder and Shoa. There on the southern frontiers of Shoa expansion and conversion ceased altogether. Enarya, a conquest of the late sixteenth century, was the last province gained. Until within living memory there was neither temporal rule nor spiritual

ascendancy over the inhabitants of the plateau country which stretches southward from the present capital towards Lake Rudolf and Lake Stephanie. During the whole period that we shall consider, these wide territories were the home of pastoral tribes usually pagan, but sometimes, as round Gimma, Mahomedan; they did not form a part of Abyssinia.

In a sense important dates are rare in a history of which we have such sketchy knowledge, but attention may be called to the supersession in 1270 of the Zagwé dynasty, which had created the rock churches of Lalibela, by that royal house which was in one line or another to endure for some six centuries. This was the dynasty which was to be known in late mediæval Europe by that oblique reflection which enshined the ideas of Prester John. The sovereigns of this line of kings would be visited by every European traveller from the coming of Pedro de Covilham, the first Portuguese Ambassador, in 1488, to the arrival of James Bruce in the reign of George III. Under these rulers the concept of the Solomonic Throne received its final form. The *Kebra Nagast*, dating from the early fourteenth century, gives the descent of the imperial line from Menelik, son of King Solomon and the Queen of Sheba; the same document reveals that the Ark of the Covenant was by this time venerated in Aksum. There is reason to suppose that both propositions were already made explicit some three hundred years earlier.

The first Portuguese travellers, with whom this study begins, came at the high water mark of this Solomonic dynasty; they found its practice at the late maturity of its development. A style, which had been growing for two centuries, was exposed before them in all its calculated and archaic dignity; we do not see it at its prime. At the same time the arrival of the Portuguese was succeeded by a second great disaster in Ethiopian history, the irruption of the Moslems under Mohommed Granye.

This invasion was intimately associated with the movement of the Gallas, who only now enter the scene in Ethiopia. It is supposed that the Gallas are racially akin to the Somalis and that they came up from the borders of what is now Somaliland away across the desert to the south-east. They have always been in great part pagan and they never lost their high repute as warriors. They early gained the respect of the Arabs; they might be the accomplices of the slave traders, they were never their victims.

From the sixteenth century the Gallas began that pressure upon the plateau which would never altogether cease until numbers were no longer the decisive factor in victorious invasion. In time they would penetrate into the highland country, and the Wollo Gallas came to place themselves between the armed but shifting power of Shoa and Amhara. On this first occasion they were urged forward by the new Islamic influence which had arisen in the wake of the victory of the Ottoman sultans at Constantinople. In 1516 Sultan Selim I conquered Egypt; he received the submission of the Hedjaz and was thus placed across the narrow straits of the Red Sea. Two elements were of consequence in this change. The Turks now briefly re-awakened the spirit of a Holy War and, more lastingly, they introduced firearms. The Emir Mohammed Granye with two hundred matchlockmen and all the surge of the Galla tribes advanced on Ethiopia.

From 1530 he harried the whole of the country. The viceroy of Goa's decision to respond to an appeal for help by sending four hundred men to Massawah was singularly opportune. Their leader, Custovão da Gama, was killed after rallying the Ethiopian forces, but the Emir Granye in his turn was shot by a Portuguese musketeer. There was now an era of wars which did much to modify the royal institution and also left its mark on the area and nature of the power of the Ethiopian king of kings, by then for long known as the negus. Still the Moslem danger was broken with Granye's death in 1542, and some fifty years later the Negro-Hamitic peoples of Enarya and Kaffa, to the west and south-west of Shoa, were conquered and brought to submission to the Holy Throne.

With the coming of the Portuguese, whose descendants remained in the country, Catholicism had now penetrated to Ethiopia. It is time to examine the strong mutual links and authority of the negus and his church.

The Christian community derived from and always remained remotely subject to the patriarchate of Alexandria. It came from the womb of Egypt and seems always to have followed the main, that is the Coptic stream of Egyptian Christian life. The link with Alexandria was maintained through the metropolitan of the Ethiopian Church known as the *abuna*. This prelate was invariably an Egyptian chosen from among the monks of the great Coptic monastery of St. Antonios. He was consecrated to what would

prove a life-long exile ; he always remained in thought and speech a foreigner. Although there were sometimes other bishops, suffragan in quality, the *abuna* alone possessed the right to ordain priests and to consecrate. There were intervals, occasionally as long as twenty years, between the death of a metropolitan and the arrival of his successor from Egypt. At the period of his greatest influence the *abuna* was an object of reverence, anxiety and an unfatigued suspicion.

In the nomadic court of the late Middle Ages in Ethiopia the *abuna* followed the emperor's movements, nor did he settle to his own quarters until the advent of a static capital. A principal feature of Ethiopian religious life was the great monasteries. The oldest of these are traced to the arrival of the Nine Saints, which is supposed to have taken place towards the close of the fifth century. These monks are claimed as coming from Rum, that is to say Byzantium, and their names resemble those of famous Syrian monasteries. It is to the epoch of their work that the translation of the Gospels into Geez is attributed. The monastic life is primitive and sometimes eremitical. It bears a far-off resemblance to that of the hermits and cœnobites in Syria and Irak.

These early Christian tendencies are reflected throughout each aspect of church life. The whole cast of religious expression in Ethiopia is in fact antique and ceremonial and imbued with an undercurrent of Judaic practice. This last matter is linked with the presence of the Falashas, a people Jewish by religion, but belonging to an indigenous race and speaking an Hamitic tongue. How far this remote tribe, dwelling in the Semien mountains to the south of Tigrāi, is responsible for the widespread Judaic elements found in the church life throughout Ethiopia is a moot point. The Falashas were ignorant of Hebrew and used the Geez version of the Old Testament. In this question the Jewish influence in the Hedjaz and Yemen in the period of the first Christian advance in Abyssinia cannot be discounted. In the event the religion, with its Mosaic infiltrations, proved a strong support to Ethiopian sovereigns who included the title of king of Sion in their high style.

It is as yet hardly possible to discover the attitude of Abyssinians towards Christian traditions other than their own in the period before the coming of the Catholic missionaries in the sixteenth century. The Ethiopian Church remained strongly attached to the

Monophysite doctrine, the belief in there being one Person and one Nature in Christ, which while it linked them with the Egyptian Copts, served to separate them not only from Rome but from those other patriarchates which had accepted the definition of the Council of Chalcedon. The doctrine of the two Natures in Christ was henceforward reprobated in Ethiopia and the foreign traveller was liable to be accused as a Nestorian heretic. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there was much theological discussion on the Monophysite doctrine, which was interpreted, elaborated and refined. The temper of this monastic disputation provides one of the strange echoes of Byzantium.

Whatever the nature of the earlier relationship it is evident that the impact of Rome, which took place in the sixteenth century with the soldiers from Portugal, produced an effect that was in time profound and lasting. The result became appreciable during the reign of the Emperor Susenyos which lasted from 1605 until 1632. Thus a plan formed by the members of the Society of Jesus, which aimed at converting the emperor and replacing the *abuna* by a Catholic prelate, in effect roused the maximum hostility. It was considered as a manoeuvre of supersession not as a work of conversion. From the date of the failure of this endeavour, an event which can be placed about 1630, the authorities of the Ethiopian Church have tended to regard the papal power with an aversion not unmixed with fear. The hard difficult labour of the Catholic missionaries, first in the Tigray and Hamasien and then at Harar, is only linked in a tenuous fashion to the earlier effort. Like the work of the Swiss and Swedish Lutheran missions it did not become a serious factor till the nineteenth century. On the whole missionaries came in the wake of European commercial exploitation.

To return to the survey of the political scene in the late sixteenth century, the attacks of Mohammed Granye and the presence of Portuguese artificers combined to give an impuls to the central idea of the creation of a static capital, an idea that was enshrined in the building of the castles of Gondar as a permanent residence for the court. In all these politico-social questions the evidence is notably insufficient; the regnal chronicles were the work of court scribes or of monastic writers closely linked with high court patronage. In consequence it is a very partial glimpse that is provided of the strange creaking polity. A study of the nature of the kingship



itself is reserved for the next chapter. A few notes will here indicate the trend of the main stream of the political history of Abyssinia.

The broad lines of the development of the Ethiopian kingdom during the next three centuries can be conceived as emerging from the concept of a static capital. It is in the construction of this palace court at Gondar that we find on this African plateau improbable suggestions of Istanbul and Byzantium. The concentration on this imperial residence soon led to the weakening of a polity whose organs of government had been kept hitherto in constant motion. The ultimate consequence was the captivity and later the final destruction of the power of the royal house; feudal chiefs tending to oligarchy and leaning on military levies were the heirs to the influence of the old kingship. In time they would take up the fragments that remained of a once-great authority.

Throughout this period the current of xenophobia runs very strongly. The reaction against the Portuguese and against any form of religious or political interference from outside the kingdom is seen as both conscious and persistent. That pride, which was cultivated as a virtue of Ethiopian kingship, would lead to a desire to maintain the foreigner as a *servant*. This attitude produced several effects. As one consequence during a century and a half contact with the outside world tended to be confined to the Arab trader and to the Cairene Greek or Smyrniote artificer.

The same period was one of increasing lassitude at the seat of power, a weakness which led to internecine feuds; the great palace inevitably bred its own pretorians. This could be foreseen. As the sovereigns tended to lose their control over the provinces, a decrepitude set in which could only result in their destruction. The sequence of events would run as follows, the control, nomination and finally murder of the ruler by his palace guards. This came to pass in the early eighteenth century in the capital at Gondar.

There swiftly followed the development of the power of the great governors, ever present at the court, who would assume the authority of a mayor of the palace. Such was Ras Michael Schul<sup>1</sup> from 1754 onwards. But, in the accustomed cycle, a fragmentation of power leads to the victory of a true autocrat. Thus in Abyssinia

<sup>1</sup> In regard to the spelling of proper names the system used by Sir E. Wallis Budge is followed. In certain cases, where there is much quotation, the form employed by the individual European traveller is utilised.

the period of oligarchic viceroys, which began in 1770, was closed by the victories of Theodoie II, who was crowned emperor in 1855. His rule of thirteen years was the first modern attempt at a unified Ethiopia based upon the old kingdom of the Amharic plateau. This sovereign was deeply religious, ruthless, autocratic, with a crusading zeal and a restless mind forever active with the mechanics of war; the big mortars which accounts of the Crimea had made him envy.

John IV, who succeeded after Theodoie's defeat and death at Magdala, represented a union between the old oligarchic forces and the idea of a dominant but still essentially feudal kingship. His power, too, was centred in the north of the country. It was the next Emperor Menelik II, the head of the House of Shoa in southern Ethiopia, who swung the centre of gravity right down to Addis Ababa. It is curious that such an astute sovereign should have proved such a conqueror. He annexed the Moslem sultanates of Harar and Gimma, and drove forward his frontiers to the west and south for hundreds of miles beyond the limits of the old kingdom. Menelik was the creator of the Ethiopia of the early twentieth century, a vast territory, imperfectly exploited and in consequence not yet developed, lying without an outlet to the sea and with the Great Powers astride its flanks.

## CHAPTER II

### THE SOLOMONIC THRONE

THE COUNTRY lay far beyond the confines of Egypt in all that tangled mountain plateau hundreds of miles to the south of Meroe. Throughout the West it had the prestige of a Christian land, hemmed in and little known behind its shifting frontiers. From time to time the Coptic patriarch would send forth a monk from one of the great Egyptian monasteries as *abuna* or metropolitan of that far country. He went southwards and did not return.

For centuries a fear but half-expressed and operating on a very different series of preoccupations exercised the minds of Egyptian rulers. Might there be some diversion, might there be some checking of the flow of the Nile? That this idea should linger for so long was in keeping with the strange and wayward character of the Gondarine emperors. There is a letter surviving from the early period of the decadence of the Court of Gondar and written in 1706 by Takla Haimanot I. A dispute between Ethiopia and Egypt was then pursuing its slow faint course. "The Nile," wrote the emperor to the pasha of Cairo, "would be sufficient to punish you, since God hath put into power his fountain, his outlet and his increase, and we can dispose of the same to do you harm." In these words one finds that quiet still pride that flowered so improbably in Ethiopia.

For the civilisation of that ancient realm was inextricably bound up with the Solomonic Throne, which was at once its guardian and its exponent. In a land where the representational arts had never flowered and where the stilted tired conventions of the few wall paintings seem seldom marked by elements that were indigenous, the national traditions crystallised in a line of personal or rather of royal conduct. This can be viewed from several angles, but it is worth noting that the Throne was unsupported by any dependent court civilisation. Even at Gondar the emperors drew their courtiers to their way of life; they imposed no cultural pattern on the country lords. It may be hazarded that in Ethiopia the emphasis was placed on a form of inimitable and stylised conduct.

It is naturally impossible to include the course of many centuries within a generalisation of this character, but the Aksumite civilisation and indeed the Lalibela phase were absolutely concluded long before the period with which this study deals. The employment of foreign craftsmen and the immense difficulty of communications have resulted in Ethiopia in the sterile close of many strange beginnings. Thus, while the building of rock churches was fairly widespread, there is no other example to compare with the ten churches at Lalibela, with their sandstone and stucco work and their decoration. The frescoes at Chennetè Mariam, with their Egyptian Coptic inspiration, were yet more isolated; it was a land in which so many cultural factors were unique and barren.

The manuscripts indeed provide a link between the whole range of mediæval and modern phases always beneath the aegis of the Church. The detail of their high clear characters and to a lesser extent the manner of the illuminations both manifest a sustained development of school on school. The pride of spiritual ancestry is nowhere seen more plainly than in these products of monastic workmanship. Nevertheless the influence of the manuscripts was limited since they remained for the most part sealed within each guarded treasure house. It may be suggested that in Ethiopia none of the elements which make up a culture were *public* save only one, the Throne. The monastic life was inward-turning. The Ark of Sion at Aksum, locked within seven caskets, is a symbol. The imagination seems to have run faintly; all education was theological. There was no rending of the veil.

The beginning of the first three centuries of direct European impact can be placed at the opening of the sixteenth century. The early travellers discovered the Solomonic Throne in full possession of its high tradition. Apart from the monastic illumination, there was at that time no art form which could be held to be traditional in Ethiopia.

It is not impossible that the influence of Islam, under this aspect not conscious and at second remove, may have induced a negligent attitude towards all portraiture. There is something weak and unconvincing, almost uninterested, in the portrayal of the Empress Mentuab del Quaià at the Bath on the wall of the church of Addebabai Jesus at Gondar. From the same period, the mid-eighteenth century, there dates the feeble vague anatomy of the elephant on a bas relief in the abbey of Cusquam which Mentuab

founded. In contrast to such manifestations was that manner, custom, bearing which upheld the Solomonic Throne. It was a bearing which through the centuries took many forms, but by custom showed a quality both static and immemorial. In that royal manner, which was sometimes severe and always tranquil, there lay mirrored the conception of a providential order and of a kingship that was God-inspired.

The effect produced and surely intended was of a celestial throne not necessarily maintained by force of arms. This was clearly felt by Francisco Alvarez, who was the first to bring a European mind to bear upon that phenomenon of the Ethiopian kingship which was in essence as unyielding as a diamond. The actual extent of the empire dependent on the Amharas at any given time was a question quite divorced from the authority which tradition and religion gave to the high throne.

At this point it is worth observing that every holy empire runs the risk of the development of a Shogunate. In Ethiopian history the record of the emperors at Gondar exemplifies this truth as the later sovereigns of that house sank through a decreasingly gilded idleness beneath the rule of governors. At the core of the imperial conduct there lay an impenetrable dignity which was, in so far as such a quality can be, the mainstay of the kingdom and the cause of reverence in the Christian subjects. Beyond this stylised conception the roles of individual emperors became discernible, the sage, the Maccenas and the saint, and attaching in a measure to each one that of the supreme Christian justiciar. In Major Cornwallis Harris' interesting account of a visit made in 1841 to the Court of Ankober there are two revealing references to Sahle Selassie, king of Shoa. In giving judgment this sovereign's most frequent expression was: "I have before mine eyes the fear of God." We are told<sup>1</sup> that even the Danakil compared him to "a fine balance of gold."

This concept of justice was of course essentially eastern in its character. It dealt at times in mercy but not in kindness; it was far too antique to be humane. There is always peace about an eastern throne; far out beyond the gates the torturers stand. The Moslem emirates, gathered about the frontiers to north and west, had powerfully modified certain externals of the Ethiopian

<sup>1</sup> W. Cornwallis Harris, *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, i, p. 400

kingship, but they could never attain to that strange personal expression of intangibility.

In this connection the imperial attitude towards war appears at first sight to be contradictory. The chronicles give full details of the wars which characterised the different regnal years. At the same time it would seem, especially in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, that it was principally requisite for the sovereign to be a warrior in a hieratic sense in order to fulfil the perfect attributes of his high state. There was always a great officer to whom it fell "to represent the king in battle." Later, as the boundary of effective power contracted, this warrior-element would still remain, although the warfare might be confined to a ceremonial elephant hunt or to the killing of some men of a slave tribe as they hid without defence in the waterless country.

Primarily it was as a repository of wisdom made sacred through a descent of blood that the *negus negusti* stood before his people. It was in this that he was unique and there were none who could or would approach him. The sovereign was at many epochs without a royal family and likewise without a graded circle of high courtiers. At different times the younger members of the imperial house were removed and retained in close confinement. There were offices relating to the imperial person rather than a series of office holders. These came and went; there was an element of shadow; the light fell only on the emperor.

This generalisation once made, it is necessary to define and to limit it. In the first place the four subordinate kingdoms, and especially Shoa in whose line the empire would one day be vested, possessed a clear reflection of the royal insignia and manner. There took place, indeed, during the early nineteenth century, when the emperors were reduced to extreme feebleness, a form of fragmentation of the Solomonic attributes which under Menelik were re-assembled. In addition the long feudal tradition found expression in a landed aristocracy necessarily Christian and locally most powerful. It was, however, a nexus of ancient stocks which surrounded and at times imprisoned but never really touched the Solomonic Throne. These series of families, subject as in all societies to change, had their ancestral customs, sense of relationship and obligation, all that could mark a warrior caste throughout the centuries. Moreover they maintained many customs of honour and respect and a clear separation from their inferiors which

reflected the sovereign's actions. What they could never share was that quality remote and sacrosanct, the whole veiled cloistered wisdom which was the essence of the imperial *décor*.

This was a *décor* turning on seclusion and leading to a certain stylised bearing and address. There was nothing that could be defined as taste, nothing either so laboured or elaborate but only a quiet resolved accumulation. Elements had drifted in unnoticed from the neighbouring Arab states; there were divans and Mecca velvets, Turkish robes. The whole was within the framework of a court life which depended on the many shifting tents and, later at Gondar, on the series of small palaces. There was the eastern sense of the pavilion, Iyasu II constructing his reception hall set out in cane and ivory. At moments there would seem to be a touch of the arrangements of the Osmanlis, a breath out of due time of Yıldız Kiosk.

The conception was not in any too strict sense dynastic, and when the emperors at Gondar had lost all power there was a search for some other line which might be assumed to possess a strain of the blood of Solomon. In this sense the supreme position in Ethiopia was one that man could compass. It was thus that the Solomonic Throne appeared to Kassa in his hot youth before he became the Emperor Theodore. Each line stretched back towards the "generous and illustrious Queen of Sheba" as Alvarez describes that royal lady. Still an essential figure in the empire that Theodore attained was the *abūma*. It was in the presence of this prelate that he made the celebrated declaration at Gondar in 1854. "Know well," declared the Emperor Theodore, "that I am the new Constantine of the holy empire of Abyssinia, of the ancient Ethiopia, the elect of God for your salvation." These phrases are the raw assertion of recognised inherent doctrine for with the negus went the Church as guarantor of inviolable consecrated faith and wisdom. Such was the theory.

The relations between the altar and the throne in Ethiopia were inextricable, intimate and difficult to define. They do not appear to have varied greatly across the centuries. Under one aspect the Church gave the support to the hieratic quality in the emperor's position. There was a good deal to be said for the late mediæval misconception of the negus as Prester John, as a priest-king. Even after his long stay in Ethiopia, Alvarez retained this title in his published writings. Nevertheless the religious

functions of the "Elect of God" were purely passive. The monasteries lay grouped around the sovereign; the priests and monks pressed on him. In an intricate relationship the sovereign's life became in time inseparable from that of the monastic order on which the throne reposed.

Until the seventeenth century the court was nomadic. The royal encampment slowly moved about the high plateau of the Amharas. The monasteries on the other hand were among the few fixed points in the pastoral kingdom. Their buildings were broken and then renewed with their wooden walls and the wild straw roofing. The monastic site, however, was quite permanent, settled once and for all upon the spot that generations had rendered holy upon a mountain crest or at the opening of a valley or sheltered within a cypress grove.

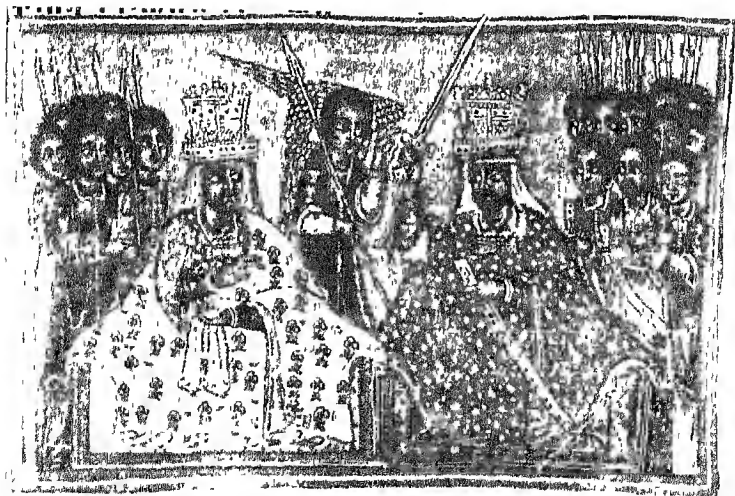
The general mould of the religious life had come from Egypt in an archaic form, isolated, and in a sense Judaised. A filtered Byzantinism would seem to have entered later. Speaking metaphorically the anointing never seemed to dry upon the head of the "Elect of God." His reign was a perpetual coronation. The emperor never moved without his thirteen consecrated tents and all the priest attendants.

At a later stage, when the seat of the empire was fixed at Gondar, we find the consecrated tents replaced by churches. There were forty-four around the small imperial city. Perhaps the Cairene travellers had brought some faint late rumour of Byzantium. These many churches served no purpose save to minister to the emperor's religious splendour. Yet with all this there was nothing more robust than the attachment of the Amharic population to their religion. Ethiopian history is full of such contrasts between a faint and decorative *motif* existing side by side with violent and primitive religious customs which are the shrine of patriotism.

For the rest the secular dignity of the imperial throne had a character which was at least in part sacred. The sovereign had withdrawn from the eyes of men; a canopy with closed curtains would surround the imperial mule on any journey, while the veil of taffeta was held before the emperor's face when he gave audience in his own pavilion. It would not have been surprising had this system produced a succession of *rois faubants*. It is remarkable that, except at intervals, it did not do so. The scene, at once so anchored and so statuesque, called into play the force of that high



dignity which was a factor strengthening to its possessor the while it separated him from all other men. It is, perhaps, not fanciful to trace across such differences of circumstance a vague haunting resemblance to the world of ancient Egypt. Very fleetingly in these accounts of Ethiopia one comes upon a pale reflection of that spiritualised and patriarchal dignity which marks the great statues of the Old Kingdom. The negus remains impassive while the thin air of the plateau stirs his tent. The stately questions fall from him at long and decorous intervals for he carries the burden of a tradition which none share. Outside his subjects frolic at their bloody pastimes.



*Plate 3* Scenes from Court life From an unpublished XVII century MS  
at the Abbey of Cusquam



## CHAPTER III

### THE ROAD TO ETHIOPIA

THE SOLOMONIC THRONE was very far away from the northern world and even more impervious and remote than a hazy cosmography would suggest. Something may here be said of the roads to Ethiopia and of those who from the fifteenth century onwards made the immense journey. In the first place, with the exception of the Portuguese who came by sea, all travellers were compelled to pass the filter of the Moslem lands. To go by Damietta and through Cairo would provide a disillusioning experience and at the same time leave the traveller most ill-prepared. Whether passing in disguise or with safe conduct, the Christian would be oppressed by his exclusion from the Moslem life. These dreary months would buoy him with the sense that once he came to Christian soil again he would be welcomed. How could he know the strange and complex world which lay before him?

Two seaways led to Ethiopia and one land route. The earliest record of a journey from Europe to that country is the account left by Francisco Alvarez, chaplain to two successive Portuguese ambassadors in the first quarter of the sixteenth century. He came in by the long sea route round the Cape of Good Hope to Goa and thence back again across the Indian Ocean to Massawah and Dahlak. Those who travelled from Egypt, *abunas* and the rare Cauene merchants, seem most frequently to have sailed down the length of the Red Sea to these same ports. There was also the caravan track through the Sudan which entered the Abyssinian highlands through the kingdom of Sennaar. The envoys appear to have used this route and certain European travellers in the seventeenth century. At a later date the voyage down the Red Sea was much more common.

It was certainly by the road that led through Cairo that the Christian voyager became acclimatised to that African Moslem world in which the Ethiopian realm lay almost hidden. There was in Egypt so much that was alien to the whole western experience that it is no wonder that the high fields of the Amhara country,

with the earth warm beneath a banked grey sky, should bring back to the traveller's memory the wide and open lands in France and Portugal. After the desert heat men could but savour the thin exhausting Ethiopian air as the light winds on the great plateau stirred the tamarisks and the wild olive trees in the late spring before the little rains. To the north the caravans toiled on interminably; here was an European mirage caught at last.

The Moslem mind would not attune itself to the Christian traveller, and Cairo was a city closed against the Frankish merchants and their alien faith. Yet it was here that the road to Ethiopia really started, for occasional ambassadors would come to the Mameluk sultans. At least once in a generation, and sometimes more often, envoys from Abyssinia would come up from the south. It was the only capital to which they reached. At Cairo men might learn something of the titles and the regnal years of those who held the Solomonic Throne. Within the network of that world of Islam news would come, perhaps from Aden or from the Arab emirates that lay within the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb.

Meanwhile Cairo was a strange unfriendly town for those who travelled southwards on the caravans from Damietta. Certain signs, often forbidding in themselves, recalled to the traveller the lands which he had left. Past the city of the dead the sand-washed walls would stretch away like the ramparts at Auges-Mortes. The sharp light only added to the effect at once of grimness and exclusion as the traveller rode up beneath the steps of that great doorway with the grey stone stalactites in its roof entrance which opened in the heavy high dull walls which masked the tomb of Sultan Hassan. In the old gateway to the Fatimid town one came upon an indentation which recalled St. Vaast-en-Boulonnais.

Within the gates the narrow streets were lined with booths, while upper stories leaned inwards on their carved wooden buttresses.

Over the roadways, where the donkeys jostled, these overhanging house fronts were joined by wooden canopies made of sycamore. Through gaps between this simple careless roofing the sunlight streamed down on the open stalls and glinted from the easy gilding of the hanging bracelets and all the chains and sticks of fragile jewellery.

Much that would remind men of the West was hidden, the floor of Kalaoun with the circular blocks of dusty porphyry, the marbles

from Cyprus and from the islands of the Ægean, the fountains with the marble steps and clear white channels which stood in courts within the high stone walls. Only at the entrance to Kalaoun would the traveller pass the gothic doorway built into that mosque and taken from the sacked cathedral of St. Jean d'Acie. And this would bring with it the same sense of the West in fee that was conveyed by the rare sight of Christian captives toiling.

The country had that sense of strangeness which would increase until at the end of all that journey men could recapture the familiar. Passing southwards out of Cairo the land heaved gently up from the Nile valley to where the sand cliffs of the Mokattam hills encroached towards the Citadel. The road would lead across the dusty channelled plain which covered Memphis, past dhows moving on the river with the thick off-white of their lateen sails against the water. In the soft light of an Egyptian winter the outline of the hills was undefined with cloud shadows lying on the etched escarpment. In the late afternoon there was at once an absence of clearness and a light air both fresh and tranquil. The pyramid with the steps at Sakkara was the sole monument to show above the drifting sand and that easy soil. The hills and the cloud shadows mingled, near-pearl and faint yellow, beneath a still and milky sky. The Nile had here something of the quietness of a great French river, but unimaginably broad. The palm trees in the green miles beckoned the traveller south to Upper Egypt.

If this was the way, who were the travellers? They were of many nations; merchants, soldiers, priests, but principally adventurers. There was no security of welcome and no promise of return. Ethiopia was a goal which, particularly in the later centuries, was apt to appeal to men of broken fortune. Except for the leaders of the Portuguese, there were few foreigners reaching the far country before the reign of Theodore who were possessed of established position and repute. It is this factor, perhaps, that makes Mr. Bruce of Kinnaird stand out so sharply.

The priests are in a category by themselves as are the later Lutheran missionaries. In general there was something broken-down about the energetic tarnished men who searched so far afield for their subsistence. This is especially true of the Gondarine epoch. A study has not yet been made of that xenophobia which is the inevitable outcome of undue but frustrated foreign influence. Once the control of the European missionaries over the

of Van Eyck with its grave and miniature-like detail, at once calculatingly picturesque, chivalric in its intention, religious in its emphasis. There lies across these pages the light that shone upon the Court of Burgundy. The colours are in juxtaposition, a feudal relation is assumed and each detail in turn ministers to the sovereign's glory. The atmosphere is *preux chevalier*, the Bayard touch with its high military fidelity. It is worth noting that this excludes the idea of religious strife.

Viewed from another angle Alvarez's description is a guide to royal and monastic customs which are placed in the setting of a wide and sumptuous bestiality. Castanhoso's *History* is not dissimilar. In one way both books bridged the generations; they ministered to that lust for information which the Renaissance took over from still earlier times. They were written for a world which prized costume and was attracted by those riches of the Indies which were made to adorn the dress of princes. A haze envelopes much of the contemporary writing which deals with the Portuguese in India. One can hardly penetrate beyond the diamond dust and the sewn-pearls.

This particular edition of Alvarez was derived from the Italian version by Ramusio and was preceded by the first Castilian translation made by Thomas de Padilla and likewise printed at Antwerp in the Spanish Netherlands. The impact upon the courtly gentlemen of fashion, who formed the reading public for this class of literature, was roughly simultaneous in France, Italy and Spain. The letters which precede the narrative are certainly a strange *mélange* of wonders, pageantry, fashion-plates and jewellers' advertisements.

The account opens with the amber and the ivory, the silver, cloves and ginger which are to be found by Mozambique. "All this country," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "from Cape Vert until the Red Sea is full of gold which is carried for sale to the mine of Cesalla, a territory subject to the King of Portugal." It is all careful, exact, inaccurate, foreshortened. There were lemons, oranges and cedars. There was much honey, saffron, sugar; but they do not know how to use it. The people on the coast are very savage, while the ports are held by Moors. One gets an impression of the waving canes.

On approaching Goa the sea was white like milk because of the white sand. The snakes showed that they had reached the Indian

coasts. Behind Goa were tigers and serpents of a size that would seem incredible as well as crocodiles that were nourished on the harmless beasts that ventured to the river bank. The Isle of Goa is described as a great harbour where horses are brought for sale in Arab vessels coming from Ormuz and the Persian Sea. A tax of forty ducats on each horse is mentioned. Cochin and Cannanor in the Malabar country were ports for loading spices; there were storehouses where pepper, cloves and ginger lay awaiting shipment to Venice or to Portugal.

It is at this point that we meet the first preoccupation with Ethiopia. The Malabar Lords are gentiles, the greater part of the people Moors with some Jews and some Christians of St. Thomas whose churches are served by Armenians come to India. The largest of these churches is Coromandel, where the tomb of St. Thomas stands and also another tomb of a Christian from Ethiopia. And then we are treated to one of those catalogues of which that age would never tire. In Coromandel and in another town called Paleacate there was a wondrous quantity of precious stones, Pigou rubies and excellent Zeilan rubies and balas rubies, sapphires, topaz, jacinth, chrysolite and garnets, which the Moors much favoured. The diamonds were of a yellow water and not so fine as those from Narsinga. It is remarked that emeralds were not found there. Cornelians and chalcedony from Cambay were beautiful when set in dagger hilts.

The gradual approach to Ethiopia is then made. The reader is transported to the very strong fortress built in Ormuz, where all the merchants come from Persia, Turkey, Arabia and Armenia to trade horses against spices. This town is described as situated on the western coast of Arabia Felix by the Straits of Baharem near the pearl fisheries. Inland, beyond the river Tigrus, lies the lands of the Lord and Master Siéeh Ismael, known as the Sophi, whose territories border those of the king of Samarkand, the region of the Parthians and those Persian lands where one finds turquoises and lapis lazuli. Towards the rising sun is the province of Carmania deserta, now called Rasigut, which is full of Arab corsairs. Thus did they indicate the Pirate Coast.

Ormuz would strike the western imagination, a sea fortress set in a desert land beneath high mountains where great stones of salt are found, some gleaming crystal and some vermilion. It is curious that *punkabs* are described, "a certain engine shaped like



the mouth of a funnel by which the air is drawn into the house to refresh them a little"<sup>1</sup> It is all written down, the *maisons de plaisance* with their fountains and the men with white turbans in that burning sun. The king of Otmuz came down from his palace to receive the visitors on the sea shore. He was dressed *à la Persienne* with a long Turkish robe of black velvet trimmed with gold lace. On his head was a golden bonnet shaped like half a melon with a silken turban set around it.

There is one final Arab picture before the coast of Africa is reached again. In the port of Aden, where the great walls and towers upon the rock faced out across the strangely level sands of that section of Arabia the Happy, four vessels lay at anchor. The details of their cargo have that touch of half-improbability, *eau rosé*, *raisins de Damas*, almonds, an Indian drug called Amsian, also known as *Opium Thebaicum*. On the feast of St. Lawrence, 1516, Coisal and his companions sailed from Aden intending to call at Barbar and to water at Cape Guardafui.

The first account of Prester John's dominions deals<sup>2</sup> with the island of Socotra, "which lies thirty leagues eastwards from Cape Guardafui the last land of Ethiopia at the opening of the Arabian Sea." The resin gum from the trees is mentioned, the *ambracan* upon the beaches, the houses built with date boughs and the flowering aloes. Cameleons lingered there. The people were Christian shepherds feeding on milk and butter, dates and rice in place of bread. They were Ethiopians and Christians of King David, with long, black, crisp, frizzed hair.

The ship touched also at the island of Suakim, where the Christians of Ethiopia embark to go to Jerusalem, and also at Dahlak. This place is described as at the foot of a great mountain called Bisan or Vision surmounted by a hermitage and a church dedicated to Abraam, where dwells a bishop of holy life called Abuna Gebbre Cristos together with other Observantine Religious. The voyagers were welcomed with processions. There were camels and dromedaries and light Arabian horses and men chanting with their strange instruments. The king of Dahlak was dressed in the Moorish fashion with a robe of gold and silk of different colours and above that a folded cloth *à travers à l'apostolique*. The colour of his skin was a dark tawny colour like that of most of the

<sup>1</sup> *The Voyage of Andrea Coisal*, Alvarez, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

Moors of Arabia Felix as far as Mecca. There was also a pearl fishery belonging to the king.

It was here that Andrea Corsal collected such information as he ever gained on Ethiopia. We learned, he is found explaining to his patron, that the kingdom of King David whom we call Prester John includes almost the whole of interior Ethiopia and *la basse Egypte*. Others are of opinion that his domains extend as far as Manicongo, that land adjoining Guinea which belongs to the king of Portugal. Prester John lodges under pavilions and in silken tents being accompanied by a retinue almost innumerable so that he can never dwell more than four months in one place because of the exhaustion of the livestock and provisions. He is now at Aksum. They say that this Lord is eighteen years of age and handsome with olive coloured skin, but one can only see his countenance once a year, all the rest of the time the face is covered. Some say that there is a ring of Solomon with a crown and throne of David held in great reverence. And this is the sum of Corsal's information. He sailed away to India and returned no more.

Francisco Alvarez, chaplain to Dom Duarte Galvao, ambassador from Emmanuel I of Portugal to Ethiopia, went forward into the strange country. He was not the first to enter the kingdom; he was the first man to return and set down what he had seen. Dom Pedro de Covilham had been sent earlier, but he had settled down in Ethiopia. Matthew, apparently an Armenian, sent as Ethiopian ambassador to Portugal had been the fruit of this earlier journey. Now Matthew was returning with them to Ethiopia. Dom Duarte Galvao died on Kamaran Island in the Red Sea. There was another return to India and in April, 1520, Francisco Alvarez and his companions at last began the long overland journey to the Court of Ethiopia.

They found Massawah, a little bay sheltered from every wind, with a small island close by on which they saw a cluster of stone houses and a mosque. On the mainland was the village of Arkiko with straw houses fenced with thorns. There was some shipping for the Arab vessels after passing through the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb would call first at Dahlak and then at Massawah, where they bartered Indian produce for gold, ivory, butter, wax and Abyssinian slaves captured inland by the Moslems. The party set out up the Asmara road.

The first description is of the monastery of St. Michael at Bisan,

which they called Vision. The tone is set by a comment of Alvarez.<sup>1</sup> "By God's Grace we found monasteries and places where we could adore and celebrate His holy name in these far regions." This monastery rose from a rock which is described as being of the colour of the walls of the city of Oporto. Below stretched the wild olive woods, the land around these rocks was all covered with great forests with high grass between them in which there was much basil. In valleys belonging to the monastery were oranges, lemons and peaches and beautiful vine tielluses and figs. Bisan still stands on its high ledge on those vaulting and improbable hills.

The account of the house is given in close detail. The roof of the church and cloisters were of wild straw which would last a man's lifetime. The monks could walk beneath two porticoes whose walls were covered with painted figures of Old Testament patriarchs; there was here a St. George on horseback, a figure reproduced in many churches. A crucifix and images of Our Lady and the prophets were found worked on great pieces of silk resembling banners. Alvarez notes that the titles in Latin showed that these had been brought from abroad. Two other points throw light upon traditional monasticism. In a sacristy there were found ancient statues wrapped up with and mixed among old books and papers. In the refectory stood wide shallow wooden plates, one to three monks.

On great feasts such as Christmas, Easter and Our Lady of August there were processions. Thus on Sunday before Ascension the monks made a procession and all went chanting into the millet fields. More than three hundred religious took part, the leaders clad in cloth of gold with velvet from Mecca. They carried fifty little silver crosses of a heavy make and as many bronze thuribles. The final comment is in line with what we know of Athos and the Syrian monasteries. In all these monastic houses nothing of the female sex could enter, neither women, hens, nor cows. The cemeteries were built with a strong wall to prevent the savage beasts from coming to disturb the dead. Among the mountains roamed the herds of apes.

As the travellers moved into the interior Alvarez noted details of the churches which have their own interest. The big new church at Barra dedicated to Our Lady was hung with brocades and crimson silks and Mecca velvets and red camlets. "At Abafazem," we are

told, "is a very good church, well built, with the middle nave raised on two sides or walls, with its windows very well constructed, and all the church vaulted. We had not seen any of this fashion in this country: in Portugal, in *Entre Douro and Minho*, there are monasteries of this fashion."

They were coming to Aksum where men still spoke of the generous and illustrious Queen of Sheba. The church of St. Mary of Syon there had been built by Queen Candace; the altar stone had been sent from Mount Sion by the Apostles. Before the gate of the enclosure was a large court and in it Pharaoh's fig tree. The house of the captive lions was in ruins. Along the outside walls around the court were ancient figures of lions, dogs and birds, all made in stone.

Soon they struck on through the forests and past the tamarind trees of Ethiopia. They saw lions, tigers, elephants and a great quantity of deer; there were no bears, but partridges, wildfowl and turtle doves. They saw royal eagles, falcons, hawks, blue herons, river cranes. There was always this ecclesiastical preoccupation. Alvarez spoke of the tall cypresses about the monastery of the Paracletos and of the church, a day's journey from Lalibela, called *Imbra Christos*, which means the path of Christ. He noted that all men dismounted from their mules when passing church or churchyard. In the uplands Alvarez found cultivated fields and others lying fallow as in Portugal. At length they came to the emperor in his white and purple camp.

The account which follows is the classic description of the Court of Prester John. It is this that was so soon engraved upon the western memory. "On Tuesday,"<sup>1</sup> so runs the account in the English translation in the Hakluyt series, "we were all summoned; we went and remained before the first gate or entrance a good three hours, it was cold and quite night. We entered through the enclosures as before on the two occasions that we had entered. There were many more people assembled than on either of the other times, and many with arms, and more lighted candles before the doors; and they did not detain us long, but soon bade us enter beyond the curtains. Beyond the curtains we found others of still richer texture, and they bade us pass these also. Having passed these last we found a large and rich dais of very splendid carpets. In front of this dais were other curtains of much greater splendour,

<sup>1</sup> Alvarez, *Voyage*, pp. 202-3.

## CHAPTER IV

### THE INFLUENCE OF PORTUGAL

IT IS PROBABLY NOT POSSIBLE to trace the stages by which the nomadic empire became accustomed to the idea of a static capital. Certain factors can be postulated. A decision here and there is still on record ; an embroidery of legend filtered out through Europeans. Perhaps it was the notion of the castle that first anchored them, that concept of the walled machicolated palace which the imperial mind first pondered and then during two centuries assimilated and then outgrew.

The legend of the angel who appeared to the emperor and declared that the capital of the realm would be constructed in a place whose name began with G is always attributed to the reign of Lebna Dengel. It seems likely that this is a story that was developed after the great castles of Gondar had succeeded to the palaces at Gurzara and Gorgora. At the same time it is not impossible that it was the Portuguese ambassadors to Lebna Dengel who sowed the seed of the idea of a static court.

There was little chance for this notion to fructify during those wars against the Moslems which filled the reign of Galawdewos, Lebna Dengel's son. Still, in those nineteen years, between his accession in 1540 and his death in battle in 1559, Galawdewos had much contact with the Portuguese. The Ethiopians would always remember the coming of Cristovão da Gama and his soldiers at a time when the Emir Granyc had overrun all Amhara and the greater part of Tigray, the young and gallant figure of da Gama standing in his black French cloak which was thrown back to reveal the deep purple doublet faced with gold embroidery. In his cap was set a gold medallion, and a page stood beside him holding the white damask banner which was sewn with a crimson cross. This detail printed itself on a swift and visual memory.

Cristovão da Gama was such a short time in Ethiopia, not much more than a year. In March, 1542, he defeated the Emir Granyc at Ainaba, near Aschiangi, and five months later he himself was captured and beheaded. In the following February his squire,

Pedro Leon, killed the Emir Gianyc with a musket shot. Da Gama died, but he had left his followers. One hundred Portuguese families settled near Adowa in the walled town of Fremont around the church of St. George. They placed their little cannon on the walls and towers. It was to this town that the Jesuit Andre de Oviedo, consecrated bishop of Hierapolis, came in 1557. This prelate has left an account of Galawdewos in his last years, a broad black man with large eyes reclining upon a couch on a rich carpet on which was laid a leather cushion. The Moslem influence had entered far, since he was dressed in a tunic over a Moorish shirt and was wearing long trousers of Persian cotton. The circumstances of the reign indicate that the mind of Galawdewos and that of his immediate successors would run on cannon and on fortresses. It was the military aspect of the Portuguese scene which claimed attention, not the monastic, nor the palatial.

It follows, too, that in that widespread tangled empire a static court must be synonymous with peace, with a certain restricted use of power and finally with decadence. As long as the distant frontiers were policed the element of movement was essential. The emperor must go forward with his feudal chieftains, each quarter of the high plateau must witness the setting up of the imperial tents. A static court, and it was in reality a question of a palace and not of a capital crowded with citizens, could therefore only develop in a period of tranquillity. Such peace in a dignified, remote, hieratic world must breed an insouciance, which might spring from religious or æsthetic motives. At that period a static capital could in fact only exist in Ethiopia while the virility departed from the central power.

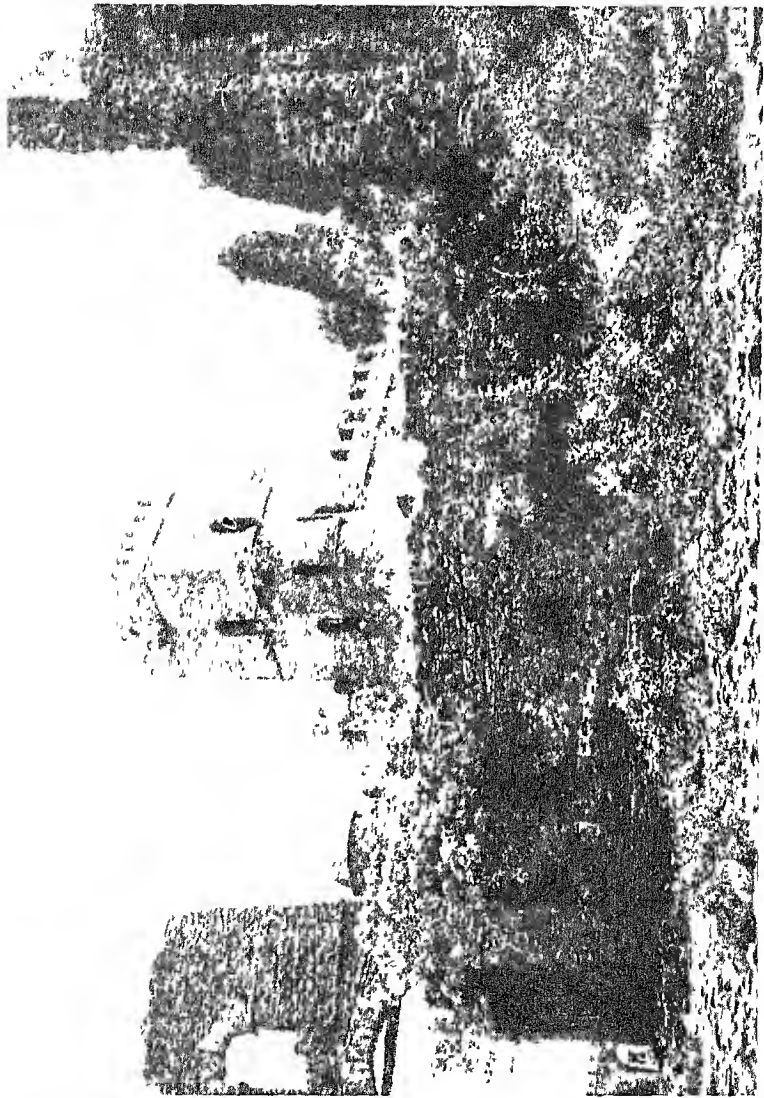
It was for this among other reasons that it was by no means from Portugal that the actual palace-capital would draw its inspiration. Here there must be brought in the diluted reminiscence of Byzantium as in those many churches which lay like nebulae about the throne. Likewise inseparable from the palace life was that court chase of the gazelle which in its order would resemble the staidness of a tapestried hunting scene, the emperor taking up position, the ritual as each gazelle sped swiftly beneath that lovely light. Giving access to the imperial quarter there would rise twelve entrance gates which in themselves resumed so many of the elements of the world in miniature. Above the Gate of the Musicians the pigeons swept. Such was Gondar, a mirror of the

imperial dignity in which the fabric though not the ritual was worked out in terms of craftsmanship. The earlier castles, Gurzara and Gorgoia, were very different.

Gurzara appears as essentially a fortress; it was the stronghold of a warrior king. The last part of the sixteenth century, from 1563 until 1595, was occupied by the reign of Galawdewos' nephew, Sarsa Dengel. It was the final high period of foreign warfare before the internecine strife which ushered in the rule at Gondar. It was the conclusion of the epic struggle against the Moslem, Sarsa Dengel's victory over Mohammed king of Adal. There was also much fighting against the Gallas, the emperor's men advancing, blowing blasts on horns and playing pipes and beating the great war drum Deb 'Anbasa. It was a period of ceremonious gifts. The rebel Yeshak was made keeper of the door and given a crown, a collar and a bracelet all of gold, a blue silk coat, a saddle mule. Such a ritual of martial ceremony, set amid treason and a constant warfare, was found reflected in the castle-hold of Gurzara.

This building stands not far from Lake Tana and is a simple construction whose angles are strengthened by towers with rounded cupolas. Battlements extended between the towers and the external staircase, which was to be a feature of the Gondar palaces, is met with here. The Portuguese from Fieumonat carried out the work whose keynote was simplicity for the emperor was often at the wars. A few miles away across the acacia rides stood the fine new church of Barie Ghemb constructed of basaltic stone with a great cupola and courses of red tufa. Both church and castle reflected a transition mood that would pass quickly. They illustrate the use of western arts for strict utility and not for grandeur.

Gurzara was in fact characteristic of its creator who had written for workmen out of Portugal skilled in the casting of cannon and able to make muskets and gunpowder. There was a mediæval touch in Sarsa Dengel. He had gone to Aksum and priests had borne before him the gold cross and the silver censer. They had come singing in his praise the Hymns of Yared. He had fought against the pagans and the Moslems and used both against each other; he had conquered the Jewish Falashas. "It is better," ran one of this king's sayings, "to fight those who shed the blood of Christ than the Pagan Gallas." At the end of his life a holy man warned Sarsa Dengel not to eat of a certain fish which was to be found in the river of Djiba in the province of Shat. He died for



*Plate 4* Walls of the palace of Gondar





he gave heed to no sorcerer. There is a Semitic element in all this story.

The years that followed were marked by an internecine feudal anarchy, a time of struggle that lay like an evil memory behind the dream-escape of Gondar. The ideal of the Solomonic Throne was to be built up again so carefully just because it had once been so near eclipse. The honoured place of women in relation to the Ethiopian crown was unusual in a sacred dynasty. It was, perhaps, religious in its basis; clearly it was hazardous and ultimately weakening. Time and again it was the chiefs behind the queen who wielded influence and the mayor of the palace would come in by this road.

On the death of Sarsa Dengel the widowed Queen Maryam Sena fell into the hands of Za Selassie, a man of pagan origins from the Guraghe country, whose power was hardly balanced by that of Ras Athanasius. An impression of some facts can be obtained by a swift survey. In the first place Za Selassie procured the elevation to the throne of Yakob, the late king's natural son, but after some years, and while the new sovereign was still a boy, he transferred his support to Za Dengel, who was the late king's nephew. The acceptance of the Catholic Faith by the new emperor, after the arrival of Fr. Paez at his court, led to another change. The *Abuna* Peter excommunicated the sovereign for abandoning the doctrines of the Church of Alexandria and joined the vizier's revolt in Gojjam. Together they defeated Za Dengel on the plain of Baitcho killing him with a spearthrust through the forehead. At this stage Ras Athanasius and Za Selassie parted company, the former championing Susenyos, a natural son of Abato Fasilidas who was a nephew of Lebna Dengel. The vizier brought back Yakob from exile and supported by the *abuna* marched against Susenyos. The battle of Dabr Zayr on the Labat lasted all day and Yakob was killed as was the *abuna*, speared while holding the crucifix by an Arab soldier. Za Selassie escaped but was slain some time later by the Tolema Galla, who were raiding Gojjam. His head was sent to Susenyos who "fastened it on a lance for all to see."

The long reign of Susenyos, which lasted from 1605 to 1632, must be seen against this background. From one angle it can be viewed as an attempt to restore that Solomonic order which had been wounded, a time of ill-planned and tentative initiative; it was also

a period of insecurity in Church and State. This reign was also of crucial significance since it witnessed the development, victory and defeat of the Portuguese influence in its religious aspect, it was then that the seeds were sown of the xenophobia that has proved so lasting. There is a vague and distant parallel between the period of Susenyos and the years of the rule of Charles II and James II. Both were times of some confusion which ushered in a century of prosperous tranquillity. After the death of Susenyos and the expulsion of James II life in Ethiopia as in England set into a new mould which was to possess some enduring features. A series of currents of hostility in certain matters were common to the two so different polities and this is not surprising for there was one element that linked Ethiopia in 1632 and England in 1688, the defeat and elimination of a Catholic sovereign.

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Susenyos was thirty-two before power came to him, a rather battered man, warlike and seilous. He was the son of a prince of the blood by a slave woman and had been brought up, after his father's murder, by the Boran Galla in Gojjam. On Sarsa Dengel's death he had taken refuge on the Galla frontiers and had learned war there among those pagan tribes. He appears never to have had a deep attachment to that Alexandrian Faith which lay at the basis of the conception of the Throne of Solomon. Further the *abuna* had been killed in arms against him. The situation was very ripe for Pedro Paez.

It is necessary to try to isolate the effect of the religious factor from the general lines of cultural contact. For there is good reason to suppose that it was during the life of Fr Paez, and during that period alone, that the western influence in Ethiopia took on a predominantly religious colouring. In a study of the development of the Ethiopian polity it is not necessary to dwell at length upon all the various elements in the Portuguese influence which seeped into Abyssinian life in the course of the sixteenth century. It can be said in general that the impulse behind such influence was chivalrous, warlike and in the last resort commercial. Above all in the period of Alvarez and da Gama it did not seek to mould. The primary idea was an alliance, and it was as the fruits of an alliance that the Portuguese soldiers and craftsmen stayed in

The Portuguese travellers were profoundly Catholic, but their approach to the Ethiopian Faith was both incurious and singularly generous; it is perhaps not unreasonable to describe this as the last flicker of the mediæval world. A comment made by Alvarez will convey the atmosphere of that earlier time. Duarte Galvao was on his way to Ethiopia. "I am far more certain," said the ambassador enquiring after his dead son lost at sea, "that he and all those on his ship are now in Paradise where Our Lord will in His mercy surely take them, since they died in His service and that of the King."

There is in this statement a lapidary and hieratic quality which would appear to accord well with the phrases and the manner of the Solomonic Throne. Royalism in a providential setting was an idea that would seem so sympathetic when filtered through the mind of Africa. On such points it is impossible to be exact and among the Amharas there was probably but little understanding of the nature of the chivalric devotion inspired in their Portuguese subjects by the sovereigns of the House of Aviz. Still an ostentatious rather archaic loyalty, what might be called the old Burgundian element, would seem in a vague way to have been grateful to the whole court world in Ethiopia. Transmuted it could penetrate within the narrow cycle of ideas that proved acceptable. It is worth noting that this brittle and clear doctrinal royalism persisted and would have a share in moulding Gondar long after the harder colder influence of the Counter Reformation passed away.

Meanwhile it was the Counter Reformation which had arrived. Pedro Paez was its artificer, the church of Ghemb Mariam its monument. The effort can be traced back for some fifty years and always centred upon Fremonat, a settlement on a low hill in the good lands which lie between Adowa and Aksum under the shadow of the great horns of the desolate mountains in the northern Tigrat. Beyond their stockades and walls lay the wide manors which had been given to the Jesuit mission by successive emperors. Within the small walled area was the church of St. George, a stone building with a high altar and sacristy and a rude belfry. In a side chapel there lay interred the remains of that prelate who was called in time the Patriarch Oviedo. Within the settlement there was a school or seminary.

Some details of the life at Fremonat can be discovered from

Jesuit sources. Thus an annual report<sup>1</sup> sent in 1591 to Fr. Claudio Acquaviva, then general of the Society, gives the number of Catholics served from the mission as about one thousand, partly consisting of Abyssinian converts but for the most part composed of Portuguese and their descendants, these latter of mixed blood. A note<sup>2</sup> on Fr. Giovanni d'Alessandro S.J., who was killed by Takla Giorgis in 1629, asserts that he was born at Fremonat in 1586 the son of another Alessandro a Spaniard who had escaped from slavery with the Turks and had found refuge with the Portuguese in Ethiopia. It is further stated that Giovanni d'Alessandro's mother was Eldana or Wela Dahna an Abyssinian and that he had been baptised by Fr. Francisco Lopez, one of the original companions of Bishop Oviedo. He was educated in the seminary at Fremonat and in later life was bursar there; these facts give some impression of the small Catholic community.

The number of priests remained very small; two priests and three lay brothers had entered the country with Bishop Oviedo and as late as 1608 a report<sup>3</sup> to the Jesuit provincial of India gives a total of only five fathers in Ethiopia. This was the situation which the most remarkable of the Jesuit missionaries was to work upon and transform. Fr. Paez was a Spaniard already middle-aged at the time that he embarked upon his far adventure which ended when he died at fifty-eight of fever at Susenyos' court. He was of the type trained to serve the needs and the unquietness of eastern kings and sometimes to bend their destinies. Yet he and his suffered from the disadvantages of their practical and pragmatic outlook and from that unhistorical cast of mind which was a part of the Ignatian heritage. With all his power, Pedro Paez was too modern, too contemporary. He cared for each strand of existing affiliations, not for the past. He first converted the chief steward of the palace Takla Selassie and then the sovereign's brother Scla Krestos; he built his spiritual edifice stone on stone; and all the time he was working designing palaces and monasteries and practising and teaching crafts as builder, mason, carpenter and smith. In his early years in Ethiopia he constructed at

<sup>1</sup> Printed by Camillo Beccaru, S.J., in *Notizie e Saggi di opere e documenti inediti riguardanti la Storia di Etiopia durante i secoli XVI, XVII e XVIII*, p. 121.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 123.

Aksum the palace on one floor made of worked stone and cedar wood.<sup>1</sup>

Like other missionaries in eastern lands he opened for his master a vista of fresh technical achievement. Progress tends to its own destruction, and perhaps Paez did too much for his emperor. It was not the world of Bellarmine but something much more archaic that would call to this ancient and unimpeded sovereignty. It was natural to look back to old forms, as to Byzantium. Thus it seems reasonable to suggest that it was the Middle Ages steeped in legend whose spirit could be best absorbed by the ancestral mind of Ethiopian kingship. The mediæval secular hierarchy could be detected as a world given by Providence, improbably and formal. This surely would alone appeal to the Amharic sovereigns, to their detached unworldly dignity and static pose as well as to that swift credulity. Ghemb Mariam is not Ethiopian; it is a piece of Europe beautifully almost absurdly placed in the green forest over the blue lake.

This was not the first of Paez's buildings in the area of Lake Tana for that was Gorgora, the palace built on a promontory above the feverish plain of Dembea. Gorgora was always said to be the first house constructed with two stories within the empire. The practice of wainscoting was introduced and there were state apartments and private apartments for the queen and quarters for the nobles of both sexes. There was accommodation for servants and for guards. Susenyos would come here in the winter after his wars against the Galla or on the western frontier by Sennaar. The fever always left the neighbouring lowlands with the showers that fell in November about the time of Heder Michael. Not enough has survived for us to have a view of Gorgora. If Gurzara was a castle-stronghold, this was an elaborate hunting lodge, a place of repose for a soldier sovereign.

Ghemb Mariam on the other hand is an architectural triumph which will always be remarkable. In the first place it was built entirely by European labour or at least by Spanish foremen. It was a monument to an event which never happened, the conversion of Ethiopia to the Catholic Faith. It was a rectangular church in grey stone with careful line detail along the courses. There were

<sup>1</sup> An unsigned relation on events in 1612-3 contains this note. "The fathers in Narea have constructed a house for the emperor so splendid that it is called by the Abuna finer than *palais de Menfi*." Memphis would be a standard of comparison for an Egyptian.

pilasters and Ionic columns of the same material on the façade and a campanile with an interior staircase which opened out upon a terraced roof. Southwards across the lake there rose the Gojjam mountains and to the eastwards Beghemeder. The church was finished in 1621, the year before Pedro Paéz died and five years before the Emperor Susenyos submitted to the Holy See. As a building it was singularly perfect, a lovely and irrelevant construction. It did not marry with the soil or the traditions of Ethiopia.

This contention requires some explanation. In the seventeenth century the method of attracting neophytes can perhaps best be described as that of conversion by the *coup de théâtre*. Such a formula was favoured by the Jesuits, especially in their dealings with eastern thrones. A rather similar method had been employed when Catholicism had been presented to the Moghul court in India. In the Abyssinian instance Susenyos was suddenly provided with an immense technical and material achievement, while it was suggested that such a manifest advance could be consolidated by the sovereign's acceptance of the high Roman Baroque spiritual hegemony. The emperor would then take his place among the Catholic kings and would benefit by each deliberate development of the matured Mediterranean civilisation. This was an approach, very common in the Counter Reformation period, to the monarch conceived as an unfettered ruler and not to the oligarchic elements in the polity. Salvation was to come through a dedicated king. It was inevitable that there should be a number of factors left out of account in every such imagining.

It is worth noting certain points peculiar to the situation in Abyssinia. In the first place there was the personal character and traditional inheritance of the Emperor Susenyos, who was close-bound to the imperial formulæ however anti-clerical he might appear in dealings with the Alexandrian priests. He was of course a church builder like all his line, and was employed in constructing at Coga the new church dedicated to St. Gabriel which he completed in the winter season of 1611. He also built a church to St. Tacla Hamanot in Gondar. It is not perhaps fanciful to suggest that the Alexandrian Faith had a hold upon him which was always more powerful than he knew.

Thus the ritual and immemorial customs lay all about Amharic rulers as is clear from the detail of this emperor's coronation. An example given in some detail will indicate the immense distance that

separated the thought forms of the House of Solomon from the Ignatian world with all its implications. When Susenyos had first presented himself at Aksum the old high ceremonies had been accomplished. He had ridden on his caparisoned great horse wearing a cloak of crimson damask with a gold chain about his neck. He was bareheaded for he claimed his rights. A cord of crimson silk was stretched across his path and those who had that privilege had been assembled to take part in the ritual "Who are you?" "I am your king, the king of Ethiopia." With one voice the answer came. "You shall not pass; you are not our king." Again the question, "Who are you?" "I am your king, the king of Israel." A second time the same reply was made. "You shall not pass; you are not our king." For a third time the cry went up. "Who are you?" "I am your king, the king of Sion." Susenyos cut the silk strands with his sword. They all replied, "It is a truth, you are our king; truly you are the king of Sion."

Such phrases had been preserved or resurrected from the world of the Old Testament. They have a ring of the Bible and Judean echoes. One is brought back as in a fragmentary narrative to the battle of the kings in the valley of the salt pits. The Counter Reformation was too far away.



## CHAPTER V

### THE JESUIT FROM COCHIN

IT NEED HARDLY BE SAID that at the court of the viceroy of the Indies the situation in Ethiopia was seen under a very different light. To those who had come out with the new viceroy Count Vidigueira, who landed at Cochin in the autumn of 1622, it appeared as hopeful, profitable and glorious. In this convoy from Lisbon was a young Portuguese Jesuit, Fr. Jerome Lobo, who was the most acute observer that the Society of Jesus was to send to Ethiopia. The fleet had made a hazardous passage caused "partly by the currents and storms, and partly by continual apprehensions of the English and Dutch, who were cruising for us in the Indian Seas."

Fr. Lobo's account describes how Ethiopian affairs would look from Goa, where he stayed throughout 1623. "I lived here," he wrote,<sup>1</sup> "about a year, and completed my studies in divinity, in which time some letters were received from the fathers in Aethiopia, with an account that Sultan Segued, Emperor of Abyssinia, was converted to the church of Rome, that many of his subjects had followed his example, and that there was a great want of missionaries to improve these prosperous beginnings." Segued was a variant of Susenyos' regnal name and the letters were accurate in substance for the emperor was determined to accept the religion that was so closely bound with the late Fr. Paez's achievements. "Everybody," continued Lobo, "was very desirous of seconding the zeal of our fathers, and of sending them the assistance they requested; to which we were the more encouraged, because the emperor's letters informed our provincial that we might easily enter his dominions by way of Dancala." The first voyage proved a failure and was in any case complicated by the fact that the imperial secretary wrote Zeila for Dancala, a mistake which cost the lives of two Jesuit priests.

Fr. Lobo's intention was to approach Ethiopia from the south,

<sup>1</sup> *A Portuguese, His Voyage to Abyssinia*, by Fr. Jerome Lobo, printed in Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. xv, p. 4.

a plan which was bound to involve an immense land journey through Islamic territory. He had one *confrère* with him in this attempt. "Having," he explained,<sup>1</sup> "provided everything necessary for our journey such as Arabian habits, and red caps, calicoes and other trifles to make presents to the inhabitants, we left Goa on the 26th day of January in the year 1622, in a Portuguese galliot that was ordered to set us ashore at Paté (in Zanzibar) where we landed without any disaster in eleven days together with a young Abyssin, whom we made use of as our interpreter."

At this point the two priests separated, Fr. Lobo making for Jubo in the area of what is now known as Jubaland and his companion sailing for Mombasa. There was much to commend the former choice. "Jubo," we are told,<sup>2</sup> "(is) a kingdom of considerable extent, situated almost under the line, and tributary to the Portuguese who carry on a valuable trade there for ivory and other commodities." Fr. Lobo hired a little bark in which he placed provisions and his sacerdotal vestments and all that was needed for saying Mass. On landing at Jubo he satisfied himself that the country was impenetrable and returned to Paté where he found his friend awaiting him. The journey across the Indian Ocean to Diu took just on thirty days.

As soon as they reached India they learned that Alfonso Mendes, the newly consecrated patriarch of Ethiopia, and three more priests had reached Goa from Lisbon. The next year was consumed in preparations for the second journey. This time the accustomed route through the Gulf of Aden was carefully followed and the party sailed from Diu in the early morning of 3 April 1624. "We committed however one great error," Fr. Lobo explains,<sup>3</sup> "in setting out for having equipped our ships for privateering, and taken no merchandise on board, we could not touch at any of the ports of the Red Sea."

Like the early Portuguese before them they landed at Socotra and gave Indian calicoes. "We left this island," the narrative continues,<sup>4</sup> "early next morning, and soon came in sight of Cape Guardafui, so celebrated hitherto under the name of the Cape of Spices, either because great quantities were then found there, or

<sup>1</sup> *A Portuguese, His Voyage to Abyssinia*, by Fr. Jerome Lobo, printed in Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. xv, p. 6

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 13.

from its neighbourhood to Arabia the Happy, even at this day famous for its fragrant products." It is curious how over all the Portuguese narratives there lies this golden haze.

"Next morning," we are told, "we landed our baggage (at Baylen) consisting chiefly of the patriarch's library, some ornaments for the church, some images, and some pieces of calico, which were of the same use as money." This was a landing made under a complete misconception as Mendes, that firm and unimaginative man, stood on the beach in the heat-laden spring among the cases which contained the patriarchal library. It was not that the Portuguese prelate knew too little; sheer ignorance was not his weakness. It was rather that he had heard for so long, now for some fifteen years, the burden of the laudatory reports from Ethiopia.

The information at our disposal is too scanty to assess the responsibility for the new religious programme with any degree of accuracy. The mass of written material is from the Tridentine side, the comment first enthusiastic and then embittered of the Jesuit priests. At a rather later date we find the German Lutheran gloss upon these Catholic sources. Nowhere can we obtain a contemporary written statement of the views of the two emperors, Susenyos and his son, or the standpoint of the great monasteries of the Faith of Alexandria.

It appears likely that Ras Sela Krestos supplied the motive power behind religious change for his imperial brother was more affected by the material improvements which the foreign priests had brought with them. Certainly the manner of the change involved the exercise of a rudimentary absolutism by a sovereign who cared little for tradition. It may be hazarded that it was the attempt to overturn the old Amharic semi-feudal concepts that made the Jesuits, and subsequently every Catholic priest, so hateful to the high lords in Abyssinia. Here again they were too *modern* with their minds filled with Bellarmine.

Throughout the following century there is seen from time to time a flickering desire for Catholicism manifested by the Ethiopian sovereigns. This is found, too, but less frequently in certain of their consorts. In this vague quest there would be several factors some of which we are surely too far off to appreciate. On the one hand European sovereignty was crystallised for them in a Catholic guise, the kings of Portugal and their Spanish successors, and at a

later date Louis XIV. Such a concept of royalty might appeal to the negus but never to his feudatories. Withdrawn on the divans of the pavilions and surrounded by their intimates of the court, a faint impression lingered in the minds of several emperors that Catholicism was the religion of kings.

Certainly in the reign of Susenyos the change of faith was effected by the royal authority. The method used was not so much conversion as supersession. There had always been only a single bishop to perform the necessary ordinations in the empire, the *abuna* who was sent out from Egypt. An opportune vacancy had suggested a solution, and Pope Urban VIII had been invited to appoint a patriarch who would enter into all the *abuna*'s powers. The emperor was to make a formal submission to the Holy See on the arrival of this prelate to whom the whole spiritual rule in Ethiopia was entrusted. Now here he stood at Baylen with his church ornaments and all his boxes.

It was a weary journey to his destination, but the Jesuits were prepared for all the difficulties of Moslem lands. On this occasion their progress was relatively uneventful. Their first duty was to visit the sultan of the Danakil. "We arrived at length," writes Lobo,<sup>1</sup> "at the bank of a small river, where the King usually keeps his residence, and found his palace at the foot of a little mountain. It consisted of about six tents and twenty cabins, erected among some thorns and wild trees which afforded a shelter from the heat of the weather. He (the sultan) received us the first time in a cabin furnished out with a throne in the middle built of clay and stones, and covered with tapestry and two velvet cushions. Over against him stood his horse with his saddle and other furniture hanging by him, for in this country the master and his horse make use of the same apartment."

"After we had waited some time," it is explained, "the King came in, attended by his domestics and officers. He held a small lance in his hand, and was dressed in a silk robe with a turban on his head, to which were fastened some rings of very neat workmanship. All kept silence for some time, and the King told us by his interpreter that we were welcome to his dominions, that he had been informed we were to come by the Emperor his father, and that he condoled the hardships we had undergone at sea."

<sup>1</sup> *A Portuguese, His Voyage to Abyssinia*, by Fr. Jerome Lobo, printed in Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. xv, p. 15

In the text it is made very clear that in referring to Susenyos as his father the sultan was merely recognising the Ethiopian emperor's power and overlordship. In spite of an element of verbal courtesy, the priests were kept most strictly segregated. Once the usual delays were over, they obtained provisions and set out again. "After a march of some days," Lobo explains,<sup>1</sup> "we came to an opening between the mountains, the only passage out of Dancali into Abyssinia." This fertile valley led them to the salt plain and they note that the salt caravans were already in operation. The party was well provided with honey and dried fish and at length they came to Christian land. "At the foot of the mountains of Duan," we are told, "our camel drivers left us to go to the feast of St. Michael, which the Aethiopians celebrate the sixteenth of June." Four days later as they struggled down from the escarpment they were met by Father Manuel Baradas and a company of the emperor's friends.

On 21 June the party came to Fremonat, where it was decided to pass the rainy season. In the view of Fr. Lobo and his companions broken bridges made the road down to Gorgora impracticable until the fine weather should return. Fr. Lobo seized the opportunity to make certain notes about the country. "Their trees," he observed of the Ethiopians,<sup>2</sup> "are always green, and it is the fault of the inhabitants that they produce so little fruit, the soil being well adapted to all sorts, especially those that come from the Indies. They have in the greatest plenty raisins, peaches, sour pomegranates, and sugar-canes. Most of them are ripe about Lent." A reference to the unicorn is very pleasing. "In the province of Akaus," we are told, "has been seen the unicorn, that beast so much talked of and so little known. They are so timorous that they never feed but surrounded by other beasts that defend them."

The flowers came out after the Mascall festival and the patriarch's party prepared to move; but at this point Jerome Lobo's racy description suddenly ends. The reason is set out plainly. "Soon after this,"<sup>3</sup> explains the Jesuit, "I had great hopes of accompanying the patriarch to the court; but, when we were almost setting out, received the command of the superior of the mission to stay at Fremonat, with a charge of the house there and of all the Catholics

<sup>1</sup> *A Portuguese, His Voyage to Abyssinia*, by Fr. Jerome Lobo, printed in Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. xv, p. 16

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

that were dispersed over the kingdom of Tigre, an employment very ill-proportioned to my abilities.”

Setting out late in November the patriarch reached the Jesuit mission at Ganeta Jesu on the feast of St. Ambrose, 7 December 1625. After celebrating the Immaculate Conception, when the Marian devotions were deeply sympathetic to the Ethiopians, the party rode in an easy day's journey to Gorgora. The patriarch was accompanied by Juan de Rotha, bishop of Hierapolis, four priests, two lay brothers, five musicians, two masons and two European servants. There they all waited.

The emperor was campaigning against the Falashas and it was not until February that he was ready to receive Mgr. Mendez at Dancaz. This meeting witnessed the beginning of an attempt to erect a Tridentine structure on a soil that was not prepared for it. An account of the occasion is not without its interest. To the sound of kettledrums and pipes the patriarch was conducted across the open spaces to a tent where he put on his bishop's hat and rochet. Mounting a mule covered with silver trappings and red damask, he was brought a little further to another tent where he was robed in cope and mitre. The change in the accoutrements implied a near approach to the imperial presence. Now fully vested he was placed upon a pied horse with gold trappings varied with diamond damask. Above him rose a canopy carried by six prime noblemen. In this fashion the patriarch was led into the little church where the emperor was seated in the chancel on a cushion of cloth of gold with his gold crown on his head.

The whole effort of the Jesuits had led up to this great moment, to the reception and the audience which followed it. The missionaries had used every art they knew to capture the sympathy of the Ethiopian courtiers. Rich curtains had been put up at Ganeta Jesu over the altar of B. Francis Borgia with that saint's portrait limned by Father Paez. A clear impression can be gathered from the annual report for the years 1626 and 1627 sent to Rome by Fr. Emanuel de Almeida and printed in a French translation two years later by Sebastien Cramoisy. Here are set out in admirable detail the lines which the Jesuits pursued, the account of the processions which they organised and the *tableaux* which they presented. They were particularly fond of erecting a scaffold on which was shown the sacrifice of Abraham. We are told<sup>1</sup> that all the principal

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Père Emanuel de Almeida, S. J.*, p. 17.

feasts were ushered in as was the eve of the Blessed Francis Borgia, by *les faux de joye, accompagnés de fusées, les trompettes et autres instrumens.*

This was perhaps a shade mechanical, and it was always easier to arouse curiosity than sympathy; then came the celebrated declamation. "We Sultan Sagad," began Susenyos, using his throne name, "by the Grace of God, Emperor of Ethiopia, believe and confess that St. Peter was constituted Prince of the Apostles, Head of the Universal Church. That moreover the Pope of Rome is the true and legitimate successor of St. Peter, that he has the same power, dignity and primacy over all the Catholic Church throughout the world. Therefore we recognise the Roman Church as the Mother and Mistress of all churches and with her condemn and anathematise all the heresies which she has condemned and anathematised notably those of Dioscurus and Eutyches as they have been especially embedded here, and promise the obedience due to the said Roman Church in the person of our holy Father Pope Urban VIII at present reigning. So help us God and these holy Evangils." Thus swiftly and in the result so imperfectly the great affair was settled.

Few scenes have endured for so short a time as the Catholic domination of Ethiopia which was thus conquered. That Roman care for the traditional and native liturgy, which was to issue in the creation of the Ethiopian Rite, was never manifested by these Jesuit missionaries. The Mass was on the Latin pattern although permitted to be said in Geez; circumcision was abolished; the re-baptism of Christians, the re-ordination of priests and the re-consecration of churches were all enforced. At the same time these measures were not adopted with the co-operation of the local clergy. On the contrary they were imposed on a people whose religious leaders held that the new patriarch was a heretic intruded into the *abuna's* see. It was inevitable that the number of missionaries should be totally inadequate in view of the huge tasks just undertaken. In 1628 there were eleven mission stations opened in Ethiopia manned by fifteen Jesuits, five of whom had come from Europe in that year.

The imperial family, and in particular the empress, were never really gained to the new policy. In the inner circles of the court it seems that the patriarch could only rely upon the driving power of Ras Sela Krestos. Rebellions were linked with a conservative

discontent aroused by the breaches with old custom. It was as a result of these difficulties in his last years that the emperor, discouraged by these troubles, decided in 1632 to recall his recent ordinances. The Crown could not afford the alienation of its strong traditional supporters in the monasteries scattered throughout the empire. "The former priests," so runs Susenyos's proclamation, "may return to their churches, put in their *tabots* and say Masses and do you rejoice."

With this reversal of policy accomplished, the emperor resigned his power into the hands of his son and heir Fasilidas. Another generation would restore the ancient ways. The Emperor Susenyos did not long survive this blow to his prestige, dying on 17 September 1632 in that Catholic Faith which he had adopted. It was obvious that the banishment of the Catholic priests and the re-introduction of an *abuna* from Alexandria would now follow. The memory of this interlude would be expunged. "An Egyptian,"<sup>1</sup> wrote Fr. d'Almeida in describing the emperor's funeral at Ganeta Jesu, "had made him a bier with small steps almost square into which they put the body wrapped in buckram covering it with a large piece of taffety of several colours. Beside this bier or coffin they carried staves with balls of metal gilt. By these went the kettle-drums beating at times a melancholy tune, there were two or three of the best horses he used to ride with their richest furniture; next several pages carrying parts of his imperial robes and ornaments, one his vest, another his sword, a third his crown." The hopes of the Latin missionaries went down into that grave.

<sup>1</sup> *Lettres de Père Emanuel de Almeida, S.J.*, p. 28.



## CHAPTER VI

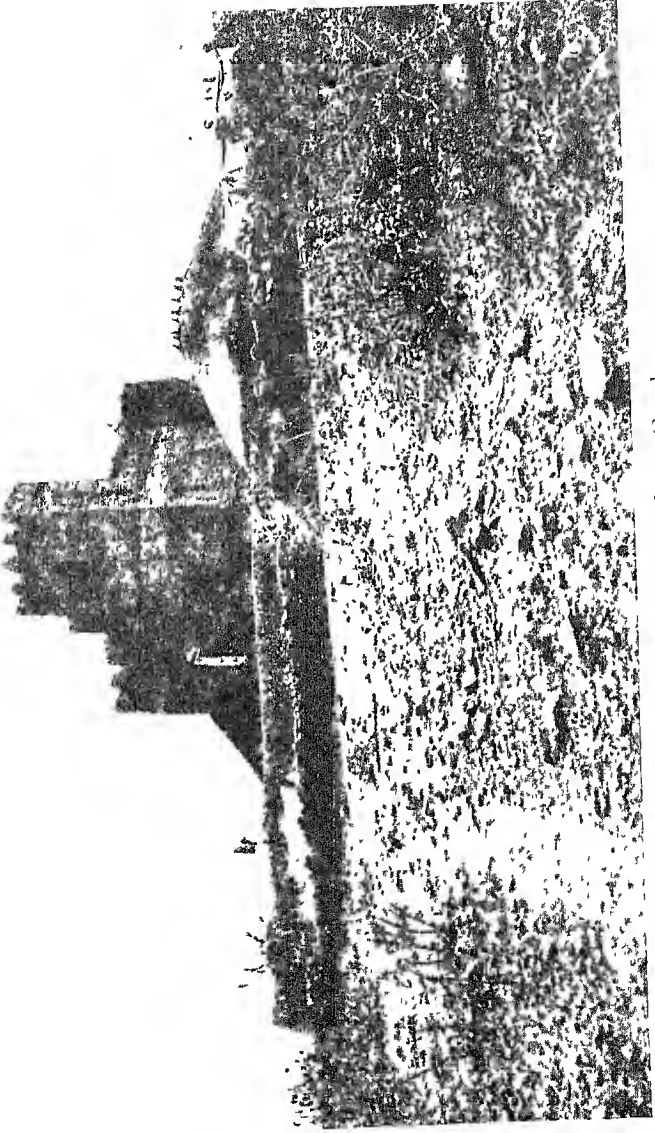
### THE CASTLES OF GONDAR

THE CONTRAST between the old reign and the new, between Susenyos and Fasilidas, appears from such information as we can gain to have been one of the sharpest in the history of Ethiopia. We are plunged after the cumbrous approaches of Tridentine spokesmen into those intricacies which must have marked the Court of Gondar. Susenyos we can see through the letters of those who looked upon him as a semi-barbarous and alien king. His son is known to us through his monuments; there is no European eye-witness account of that sovereign in his maturity.

In examining the scanty evidence the impression remains that there are crucial factors which are still unperceived by us. There is as yet no adequate explanation of the sudden flowering that created the strange stylised world at Gondar. The Portuguese factor can be traced very simply, it is the reminiscences of Byzantium which need some fresh interpretation. In this connection a study of the history and customs of the Alexandrian patriarchate might provide a key to much which still eludes us. Certainly the relationship between the Coptic patriarchal see and the Ethiopian monarchy was never closer than in the reigns of the Emperor Fasilidas and his son and grandson.

In another respect the history of these years is also most obscure. There is as yet no way of tracing the rate or fashion of the decline of the imperial authority in those provinces of northern Ethiopia which represented the inheritance of the House of Solomon. The stages of this change are not yet clear. In this matter it may be hazarded that the sacred and in consequence secluded traditions of the Solomonic kingship needed a constant movement to retain their power in being. Authority must flicker when a king is not only holy and remote but motionless and encased within his own pavilion. These are, however, but tentative suggestions offered as a preliminary to an account of that strange capital which was now achieved.

The wars and the internecine struggles, affected as they were by



*Plate 3* The castle of Fasilides in Gondar



the Portuguese and Jesuit influence, had given rise to a situation which would issue in the creation of the Court of Gondar. The upshot of this wavering conflict was the restoration of the old Church and State relationship freed from external ties. Thus, when Fasilidas succeeded his father, Susenyos, upon the throne, he proclaimed that the empire would return to the old tradition. The Alexandrian Faith now ruled supreme; Ghemb Mariam fell into disuse, and Gorgora was abandoned. At the same time there was no tendency to concentrate the life of the empire around Aksum; the old *ghibbi* there was seen to represent an earlier phase. Portuguese workmen were set to rebuild the church at Aksum; but henceforward the holy city was to be the place of coronation and in no sense a capital.

The succession to the throne was at this time secure and the reigning branch of the Solomonic line was strong and fertile. There had been an admixture, perhaps a strengthening admixture, of non-Amharic blood and the new emperor's mother was a princess from the Galla tribes. The outward power, now concentrated, would require a certain symbol. Here was the opportunity to imagine and later to create a final capital.

The actual building of this new capital would be the work of men who had been nurtured in the Abyssino-Portuguese tradition, but it would seem reasonable to deduce that the concept was at least in great part Ethiopian. It seems that it was the fruit of meditation upon the nature of the Throne. In future the men of northern blood would work neither as masters nor as equals; they would be absorbed into the population, while for some generations the knowledge and then the memory of their craft still lingered. It was a consequence of this great change that the men who penetrated from the North now came to serve. Both Vermeil, the French adventurer who led the emperor's armies, and Heyling, the Dutch doctor, were mere employees of the new proud court. It was a consequence of this alignment that the Jesuits were proscribed and that it was decreed that all missionaries would be killed should they attempt to enter Ethiopia. It was made very clear that those who came from abroad to approach the Throne must come in quietness and humility, and stay as servants.

This view of the outside world, a thought form which was cool and considered and in a curious way inflexible, inevitably conditioned life at Gondar. For nearly two centuries there would

always be a tendency to take the work of artificers. Thus, in the eighteenth century, workmen would come from Smyrna, but not architects. At the centre there was present a stylised imperial domination, theocratic in its emphasis, the slow unfolding flower of the Amharas. Elements of foreign craftsmanship would be gathered from time to time into the Ethiopian honeycomb. The resultant work was exact in detail, often improbable in setting and always carrying with it a sense of isolation. In the end it was apparent that it was impossible to remain so isolated without frustration.

This final consequence was far ahead as Fasilidas began to plan the lines of his court capital. In the beginning it was the planning rather than the achievement which was impressive, but from its inception an idea of grandeur lay upon the dream of Gondar. It is not easy to reconstruct what this place must have been like when Fasilidas first decided to establish there the secular foundations of his throne's high glory.

Gondar stood some fifteen miles along the road running northwards from Lake Tana. It was in one of the central valleys of the Amhara and in the province of that name. The future capital had no administrative importance, nor was it fortified, but the emperor's father had dedicated a church there to St Takla Haimanot and it was already a place of shrines. For some reason churches, very rude and simple in their style, seem to have clustered in this little township. In certain respects their dedications read with a strangely European sound like a list of parishes in Rome, St. Mary of Sion, St. Mary of Sihor, St. Mary of the Gondar people, St. Michael of Aita, St. Michael of Belaggio, St. Simon of Tzaamdi, St. George of Damot, St. George of Uerangheb, St. John of Guarà, the church of the apostles of Deva, the church of the Four Saints. The names seem a corona for a God-protected dynasty.

It is clear that from the early days of Gondar those links with the Church establishment were forged which would prove so enduring. The religious emphasis was now wholly inseparable from the emperor's position. We may here trace a distant echo of Byzantium, the *motif* of an intertwined theocracy. Certain results followed from this situation. Thus, once the court had settled, the religious hierarchy must settle likewise. In the plan of the city that was slowly taking shape quarters were provided for the *abuna* and for the *echbergi*, the latter piate being the arch-abbot of Debia Libanos,

that great and ancient monastery in western Shoa. These quarters would seem first to have been marked out across the juniper shrub and grasses of the empty hillside. They were in the nature of wide spreading compounds with buildings to accommodate attendant monks and servants. They were certainly extensive. Although the subject has not yet been studied, it seems likely that it was from the *Echeggi Biet* and the *Abuna Biet* that the priests and monks came who served the many churches.

The Emperor Fasilidas himself appears to have taken pleasure in displaying an eager and traditional piety. Churches were founded in direct dependence upon the palace and the citadel that were now rising. The dedications are interesting with a ring which suggests both Russia and Byzantium and is in fact archaic; the Treasury of the Virgin, St. Gabriel's, old St. Michael's, and the church of the Saviour of the World. Among this series was the only church whose ruins still display surviving frescoes a kind of palace chapel, the Addebabat Jesus with its strange naming the Jesus of the Imperial Court.

Fasilidas has sometimes been saluted or reproached because he abandoned Catholicism which he had accepted as a young man in his father's time. In fact he appears to have acted as the imperial heir of long tradition accepting the emperor's trend with serious impassivity. Like all his line he knew that he was powerless and a cypher until circumstances brought him to the highest place. It is difficult to penetrate a history in which the monuments speak to us so much more clearly than the written records. Nevertheless, there seems reason to suppose that it was to Fasilidas himself that the drawing together of traditional religious elements into a poised and theocratic framework is mainly due. The fasts were kept, the chant ascended in that sustained thin mode, the processions wound about the ark within the churches. At the still centre rested the Elect of God.

The palace in its secular aspect was composed of two elements, the general lines of the imperial city and the actual Castle of Fasilidas. The former, which has always gone by the name of the Fasil Ghibbi, was a great walled area on the plateau below which the town was growing. During the reign the strong walls were constructed enclosing grassland set with junipers and pepper trees. In time there appeared twelve ceremonial gates by which entrance was given to the site which would eventually be sown with halls and castles.

These gateways were completed at different dates and in certain instances the names were changed, but taken all together they provide an impression of that universal grandeur, that Ethiopian *orbis terrarum* which appears to have been the object of so much striving. A mere enumeration will in a sense convey the atmosphere of high observance, the Gate of GIARIA GRANDE, the Gate of the Judges, the Gate of the Funerary Commemorations, the Gate of the Chamberlain TUCURIE, the Gate of the Spinners, the Gate of the Bistre, the Gate of the Musicians, the Gate of the Secret Chamber, the Gate of the Chiefs, the Gate of the Pigeons, the Gate of the Princess INCOIC, the Gate of the Treasury of the House of MARY. Situated within reach of the south wall and linked to it by a covered way, which opened near the Judges' Gate, there rose the Castle of FASILIDAS.

In essence this castle was a variant on GUIZARA but designed for civilian uses and for peace. It was a tall building in dark grey stone with four towers at the angles and a loggia from which the sovereign could show himself to his people. The wooden external balconies gave an unusual touch; they suggested a primitive rudeness, a certain failure as it were in engineering. The arches of the doors and windows were made of CUSQUAM TUSA, a kind of wine-red sandstone from the neighbouring quarries. The interior alcoves in the castle were treated in the same fashion. There was some stucco work, AἰAB in inspiration. At intervals there was repeated the Solomonic emblem of the six-pointed star.

The building, as in all this work, was slow. It was not yet completed when the emperor died. At one side was placed the barracks for the imperial guard and to the east a fish pond was laid out to introduce a note of elegance. Beyond the castle and within the walls there stretched the groves of pepper trees which would in time be cut down to give space for arcades and pavilions and those great fragile halls which would take the place of palaces.

Bruce, who reached Gondar in 1769, has preserved details of certain measurements. The walls of the *ghibbi* were thirty feet high and more than an English mile in their circumference. The great audience hall of the Castle of Fasilidas was one hundred and twenty feet in length. As for the furnishings an element of Indian luxury now appeared to supplement the carpets and the silks which AἰAB offerings had made traditional. Fasilidas sent gifts to the sultan of Turkey and to the Great Moghul; thus horses and ivory

were despatched to Aurungzeb, who in return sent two thousand rupees to rebuild the mosque at Gondar. It was only Latin piety that the Ethiopian ruler feared. Among the silks and carpets there came one day from the pasha of Suakin the head skins of three Capuchins sent that the emperor might know by their colour that they were Franks and by their tonsure priests. The sovereign had forethought, he is shown as immune from suffering; the pattern formed itself. He died in 1667 when his stone palace was almost ready. The Castle of Fasilidas will always be his monument.

The reign of the next emperor Yohannes I, who survived his father Fasilidas for fifteen years, only served to set into a mould that conception of the court and palace which had received so strong an impress from the previous sovereign. The links with the Coptic patriarchate in Egypt were now strengthened. There began an intermittent correspondence with Alexandria about the termination of the appointment of the *abuna* and other matters. As one result the old Abuna Christodoulos was replaced by Marcos, likewise an Egyptian and coming from the same great monastery of St Anthony. Throughout this reign the monks of Debra Libanos were high in favour; disputes within the framework of Monophysite belief recalled the acrimony of Byzantium. The Throne, though not the State, drew strength from that old Coptic orthodoxy which was native to it. The reverence for the emperor as inevitably orthodox was now reforming. These matters of religion were laid in stillness beneath the feet of the Elect of God.

Yet even this general statement is an impression for in that obscure century in Ethiopian history it is very difficult to be definite. It is a history with certain bones of chronology and an outline barely sketched in. For this reason in relating the developments at Gondar it is simplest to describe the new buildings and the look of the capital as it took shape decade by decade. In the first place throughout this period churches still rose around the palace; those dedicated to St. Anthony and God the Father are the most characteristic of this reign. It is the secular constructions, however, which are more interesting for on the greensward of the palace grounds the scaffolding first hid, and then revealed, a library and a chancery.

These buildings introduce a novel phase for in them we can first trace a tendency which would in time be dominant, a movement towards a Turkish influence. This was destined to bring about a change that would replace the castle by the pavilion. Needless to



say such a change acted only upon the emperor and even then only upon the emperor when resident in his capital. It was part of an insulation from Africa which must lead on to decadence.

In the library, which was the principal of the two constructions finished in this reign, the grey stone of the Castle of Fasilidas was used once more and the arches were again cut from blocks of wine-red tufa. Still, the external walls were faced with yellowish plaster and the *motif* of the stucco in relief in the interior would seem to be derived from Hispano-Moorish models. The chancery had an atrium carried on arches; we find shallow pilasters for the first time.

The records indicate both the increasing contact with the Moslem merchant world and the unyielding hatred of the Franks. Thus in these years a special quarter for the Moslems, the *Islam Bet*, was marked off and built beyond the palace walls. On the other hand three Italian Franciscans were killed when they penetrated to Gondar in 1674. Thus was preserved the *urbs intacta*. In 1682 the emperor passed the rainy season at his summer palace at Aringo whence he returned to Gondar where he sickened and died.

We now enter a period in which the situation becomes a little clearer for an account of the next sovereign written by a European still survives. In fact, Iyasu I, known as the Great, who was some twenty years old when he succeeded his father Yohannes, is one of a series of four emperors who have left a certain impress on Ethiopian history. Two of the others, Iyasu II and Takla Haimanot II, were known personally or by tradition to the traveller Bruce. The fourth figure Bacaffa, whose name means the inexorable, is the favourite protagonist in Amharic folk lore, a strange unlikely mixture of Merlin and King Alfred. With the exception of Bacaffa, who was improbable in another fashion, there is a curious and unreal effect created by these emperors in Gondar. In spite of their prowess, which is so much insisted on, there seems something lackadaisical and inspid, a defect in activity. Their benevolence or their occasional brutality are alike bound within the cerecloths of their high state. Whenever some traveller reveals the scene we come upon the same remote impression. The ritual of question and answer rises and falls; there is an absence of the personal.

This point can perhaps best be made by the recital of an episode from Bruce's travels.<sup>1</sup> The Scottish laird found Takla Haimanot II,

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, II, p. 230

that fragile shadowy king, sitting in an alcove with his mouth covered. He explains that the usual questions were phrased with still formality; it is of interest to note the sequence. "About Jerusalem and the Holy places? Where my country was? Why had I come so far? Whether the moon and the stars were the same in my country as in theirs? Especially whether we saw the same face of the moon?" There is a sense in which it seems that it was never fully light in Gondar Castle. They hunted and they followed their devotions, they had their stiff hieratic recreations as if beneath the moon. This was a situation which would in time require a remedy. It cried out for Pretorians, and they would come.

To return to Iyasu I, that prince has left certain impressions. He had been brought up to make a profound study of the chant and of the scriptures; he was the child of the third generation in a monastic court, careful and praised in his orthodoxy. The priests would sound a tucket on their trumpets for him. His relations with his father had been strained; Bruce speaks pleasantly of "his affection for the high church."<sup>1</sup> He is reputed to have been the most dexterous and graceful horseman of his time. Just after his accession he was wounded in the foot by a buffalo's horns when he was hunting in the country by the Blue Nile. Poncet, the French traveller who saw the emperor in his last years, remarked that he was anxious for war but averse to the shedding of blood. There is some reason to suppose that he had a fondness for the ritual of victory. Jewels he certainly much prized and loved.

The years that followed were, with the exception of the reign of Iyasu II in the mid-eighteenth century, the last period of peace in Gondar. It was in these two tranquil decades that the capital entered on its strange Osmanlı phase. The building known as the Castle of Iyasu the Great, which rose immediately to the north of the Castle of Fasilidas, was, however, a relic of the Portuguese manner and style. There was a clumsy external wooden staircase. One innovation is apparent; the pavement of the second floor was constructed of smooth planed wood laid on stone. Inevitably the Portuguese tradition was growing fainter: this was the last example of a craft which was outmoded.

It may be hazarded that, while the Portuguese could show the emperors at Gondar how to live like warrior nobles, it was the Turkish workmen who could indicate how they might dwell and

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, ii, p. 427.

move like delicate kings. As a consequence the idea now developed of the single audience hall which would occupy a whole pavilion thus representing a marriage between Turkish and Ethiopian traditions.

Rich stuffs still came from Arabia and from the East. The Carrene merchants were more regular in their journeys than at any period before or since. This movement of trade, even though feeble, is linked with the emphasis now placed on elaborate interior decoration. These efforts in a crude faint way can be held to reflect those presence chambers which had made the glory of the high and transient Eastern capitals. The biblical tradition, which was so interwoven with the Throne, would reinforce this emphasis on wood and inlay. When Welde Giorgis finished one portion of the Gondar palace two years after the accession of Iyasu, it was said to be more beautiful than the House of Solomon.

In the palace enclosure there were now built those single pavilions which have not survived. In a sense this change was retrograde, a temporary abandonment of that northern building material, stone, which rose so strangely on the low hills of this highland in central Africa. Nevertheless the external contrast was probably not very striking. Plaster for the external surfaces was now in fashion and there are still fragments of a yellowish wash of excellent quality which had been laid upon the stone walls of the Turkish Bath. In addition there were other buildings in the same material which have not yet been precisely dated but which were probably erected in Iyasu's reign. These include the House of the Commander of the Cavalry, the House of Espousals, which was used for the nuptials of princes of the blood, and the interesting House of the Hens. The naming of this last building, with its small rooms and low ceilings like some Renaissance lodge, has that elegant, faint, effeminate suggestion which in this reign was never far away.

A similar plaster seems to have covered the wooden chambers as they peeped out among the pepper trees. In consequence it was not a contrast between stone and wooden surfaces but rather a huddle of assorted buildings, the older undressed walls of weathered rose and grey rearing themselves above the smaller chambers with their cream plaster. The creepers, the lianas so prevalent in Ethiopia, were never allowed to mar the outlines of the stone castles or their balconies. On the lesser halls the plaster yellowed under that unremitting sun.

Still to return to the use of wood as a material did imply an element of exhaustion. It seems a step back towards those temporary structures and the tents from which the imperial stock had come. Yet the organisation of the court was bound to favour subdivision and these new wooden pavilions were completed in the palace garden. Thus there was the *Anbasa Bet*, the coronation hall, *Zeffan Bet*, the chamber where the sovereign sat at festivals, the Gold House where the treasure lay in stacks and the Brocade House in which the gold stuffs sent to Gondar were laid away. It was here too that the State Wardrobe was maintained. At the slow processional pace that the court favoured, the emperor would move between each fragile chamber in the order that was indicated in his ceremonial.

One danger must be noted; the whole palace could be more easily destroyed by fire. But it was not mere earthly fire, which was to come upon them soon enough in wars and riots, that occupied the minds of courtiers, it was the secret meaning of the fire from heaven. In these calm years there was always present the element of prophecy and divination. In particular a comet or eclipse was held to presage some disaster to the actual sovereign. Thus careful note was made in the Chronicles of the comet that appeared over Gondar two days before St Michael's feast in the ninth year of the reign. In this case the sign was supposed to herald the death of the emperor's mother. To the mind of Iyasu's courtiers and monks the throne placed at Gondar was the pivot of the world, and God would send His wonders to foretell and to do homage. The emperor himself had his own approach to these high spirits of the air. "We must use the comet well, or he will never appear again."<sup>1</sup>

From year to year the religious touch would seem to deepen in the well-set theocracy. In 1692 the Abuna Synnada after a long rule was replaced by the Abuna Marcos as the result of an accord between the emperor and the Coptic patriarch. A synod was held to compose the differences between the two monastic schools about Christ's nature. The dispute went forward with a bitter reverence. A proclamation made on this subject rather later<sup>2</sup> will indicate the standpoint of the adherents of one trend of doctrine. "Perfect

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, II, p. 441

<sup>2</sup> Made at the gate of the palace of Gondar under David III, Bruce, *Travels*, II, p. 589.

God and perfect man, by the union one Christ, whose body is composed of a precious substance, called *Bahery*, not consubstantial with ours, or derived from his mother."

In 1690 the emperor went to Aksum and opened the seven locked caskets within which was enclosed the Ark of Stone. A colloquy took place between the emperor and this great relic. The atmosphere was one of reverence towards the miracles which would attend upon the Solomonic line.

The churches that the emperor built in Gondar were two in number, the church of Takla Haimanot in the Palace and the Debra Berhan Selassie, dedicated to the mountain of the Light of the Trinity. It was an invocation that Iyasu favoured for he gave to the great monastery of Debra Berhan, away in Shoa, the bells that a Dutch governor had sent from India. Meanwhile, not thinking too much about religious matters which would one day cause his death, Iyasu accumulated treasure and maintained his calculated strange magnificence.

## CHAPTER VII

### A FRENCH IMPRESSION

IT IS AT THIS POINT in the history of Gondar that we obtain the assistance of Dr. Charles-Jacques Poncet, one of the very few travellers who were to see the court at this moment of its careful splendour. As a witness he leaves something to be desired since a wish to magnify the importance of his mission seems to have led him to praise uncritically both the Emperor Iyasu and the rare appointments by which he was surrounded.

The party consisted of two Europeans and their servants, Dr. Poncet who was a French chemist living in Egypt being accompanied by Fr. Charles-François-Xavier de Brèvedent. The latter was a Jesuit of about fifty years of age who had worked for the previous ten years in Syria and in the islands of the Greek Archipelago. He came of a well-to-do family from near Rouen and seems to have had an ascetic character allied to a scientific turn of mind. It is curious how consistently this last quality appealed to the superiors of the Society of Jesus as valuable for those sent out to deal with eastern kings. In this connection Fr. Charles Le Gobien describes Brèvedent as a man whose scheme for a new machine for finding the perpetual motion was engraved in the journals of that time.

The purpose of the expedition was to develop both French and Catholic influence, but it received only slender encouragement from the French consul in Alexandria. It is clear that Poncet felt always the need to justify. He is insistent on his skill as a chemist through which he proposed to cure the Emperor Iyasu, who was suffering in the summer of 1698 from a scrofulous affection of the skin which he feared might turn to leprosy. The journey took rather over a year for Poncet and Brèvedent set out from Cairo on 10 June 1698, leaving Dongola on 6 January 1699 and entering the kingdom of Sennaar some four days later; here they halted.

Their reception was marked by a courtesy which members of this expedition would always note. "The Governor (of Guerry),"

it is explained,<sup>1</sup> "paid us great civilities out of respect for the throne of Ethiopia. Everything is vastly cheap in Sennaar." Poncet commented<sup>2</sup> on the market for slaves in the open square before the palace. "These sit on the ground cross-legged, the men and boys on one side, and the women and girls on the other. A very strong, robust slave is purchased for ten crowns, for which reason the Egyptian merchants carry off great numbers of them annually." The Frenchmen, however, went forward unmolested. It was a six weeks' journey on camel back to the mountain bastions of Ethiopia.

Just before the frontier they reached Serka, "a neat city,<sup>3</sup> consisting of five or six hundred houses, which are very pretty, though built only of Indian canes or reeds." A lion carried off one of their camels in a thicket where the ebony trees pushed up from out of the cane brakes. The whole journey has in Poncet's recollections a certain touch of fantasy. Thus we are told<sup>4</sup> that "the camels are sold at Geasim on account of the mountains they must cross, which produce herbs which poison these beasts." They went forward in the month before the Rains through the pomegranate groves which lay disposed on the rising park-like slopes in the hot provinces and came to a place which other travellers have hardly noted, a village called Girana. Here they found themselves<sup>5</sup> "on the top of a mountain, whence we have a prospect of the finest country in the world." It is, perhaps, just this note of easy and unlikely praise which always makes one hesitate.

"The 3rd day of July we arrived at Barko,<sup>6</sup> a small but very pretty city, standing in the midst of a most agreeable plain, and a half day's journey from the capital of Ethiopia." It is here that a disaster occurred which renders Poncet's account so much less valuable for he lost his companion. "Fr. Brévedent," we are told,<sup>7</sup> "was in a few days brought near his end, occasioned by his taking a violent purge of *ricinus Americanus*, called catapucia, which had been prescribed for him, very improperly, at Tripoli in Syria." He died on July 17 at three o'clock in the afternoon in the presence of several of the local clergy described by Poncet as Ethiopian friars. On the day after the funeral the party set out for Gondar

<sup>1</sup> A translation of Poncet entitled *A Journey to Abyssinia* is printed in John Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. xv. This description is given on p. 68

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 70.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 74.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 75.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 76.

arriving the same evening. The doctor, who was ill, was placed in a pavilion within the palace enclosure. There the emperor would come to him by a private gallery and seek his remedies. The account of Poncet's first public audience, which took place on 10 August at about ten in the morning, is justly famous. It is worth noting that he was obliged to wait three weeks.

"Some persons," it is explained,<sup>1</sup> "came then to my room, and after making me cross upwards of twenty apartments, I found myself in a hall, where the emperor was seated on his throne; it was a kind of sofa, covered with a carpet of red damask, enriched with gold flowers: around which were placed large cushions worked in gold. This throne, the feet of which are solid gold, was placed at the upper end of the hall, in an alcove covered with a dome all shining with gold and blue. The emperor was in a silken vest, embroidered with gold, with very long sleeves; and the sash which went round him was embroidered in the same taste. He was bare-headed, and his hair was disposed very agreeably in tresses; a large emerald glittered above his forehead, and diffused an air of majesty. He was alone in his alcove, seated on his couch and cross-legged after the manner of the easterns."

Poncet describes<sup>2</sup> the way in which the imperial court was disposed about the sovereign. "The chief noblemen stood in a line on either side of him, their hands crossed, and they observed a respectful silence." The traveller's account of the subjects touched upon during this audience is a trifle jejune. The emperor asked him certain questions relating to the person of His Majesty the King of France and Navarre, enquired concerning the state of the House of Bourbon and alluded to the French forces and grandeur. It is said that the Emperor Iyasu spoke of Louis XIV as the greatest and most powerful prince in his own continent. He graciously accepted the presents consisting of looking glasses and pictures and vases of crystal.

Throughout the fairly short narrative there are only occasional comments on this sovereign's character. "The emperor's name," we are told,<sup>3</sup> "is Jesus. Though he is but forty-one, he has many children. The emperor is possessed of great qualities; he being

<sup>1</sup> A translation of Poncet entitled *A Journey to Abyssinia* is printed in John Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol xv. This description is given on p 77

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 86



of a lively and sagacious genius, of an affable and sweet temper, and a hero in stature. His favourite passion is war, but he is averse to bloodshed. He delights in the polite arts and the sciences." More illuminating than such conventional praise are the glimpses afforded of the court life, the emperor watching<sup>1</sup> "his pages ride according to the rules of their *manège*, at which they are very expert," the courtiers being rowed to the island on Lake Tana in boats made of bulrush mats. There is one curious note, a comment on the high value of the skin of the hippopotamus because it can be made into shields certain to be proof against a lance or musket ball.

Poncet's narrative contains an account of the ceremonies in which the emperor took part on the day of the Assumption of the Virgin, the feast called by the Portuguese in Abyssinia Our Lady of August. It has the most exact detail of Gondarine magnificence. "I saw," so runs this description,<sup>2</sup> "about twelve thousand men drawn up in battle array in the great court of the palace. The emperor's head was covered with a piece of muslin streaked with gold threads, which formed a kind of crown after the manner of the ancients, and he wore a vest of blue velvet adorned with gold. His shoes were after the Indian fashion, wrought with pearls in flowers. Two princes of the blood in splendid dresses waited for him at the gate of the palace, holding a magnificent canopy under which the emperor walked, preceded by his trumpets, kettle-drums, fifes, harps, hautboys, and other instruments." Behind marched the musketeers and archers followed by the emperor's led horses covered with tiger skins and rich gold stuffs that reached the ground.

The party then proceeded to the church, presumably the Addebabai Jesus. "The ceremonies of the Mass were beautiful and majestic. The emperor's desk was covered with a rich carpet and very like the desks of the Italian prelates." The day concluded with a large state dinner. Before receiving petitions the emperor returned to a very high throne in the great hall of the palace and took a gold cup containing mead and orange peel. The courses at the banquet were served to the emperor singly and in China dishes. He drank a little brandy from a crystal vessel and then

<sup>1</sup> A translation of Poncet entitled *A Journey to Abyssinia* is printed in John Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. xv. This description is given on p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 78.

turned again to mead. With that deliberate effort which was always to signalise the Throne of Solomon, he spoke of the character which one of his ambassadors returned from India had given of King Louis.

A note which is included at this point has its own interest for it throws light on the position which the Portuguese still held at the beginning of the eighteenth century.<sup>1</sup> "After the entertainment, the empress came and paid a visit to the emperor. She was covered with jewels, and her whole dress was magnificent. This princess is of a white complexion." This should be read in connection with a further comment. "However," we are told,<sup>2</sup> "some (Portuguese) staid in the country; and from these families sprung the white Ethiopians who are still seen there; and from whom the present emperor is descended." There seems here an element of legend. It is not easy to control either the descent of the Empress Malakotawit or her husband's maternal line, but already the aura of prestige surrounded the earlier knights from Portugal. This is seen again in the story of the Empress Mentuab. To the Solomonic Throne everything that was unusual or rare or fine came to pay homage. All that was valuable was to be found among the emperor's attributes.

Some sentences<sup>3</sup> on the capital will round off this French impression. "The palace is large and spacious; it is about a league around. The walls are of free-stone, flanked with towers, on which are raised great stone crosses. . . . Although the city of Gondar is three or four leagues in circumference it yet has not the beautiful air of our cities, nor can ever have it, because the houses are but of one story, and there are no shops, notwithstanding which a great trade is carried on here."

Dr Poncet's stay in Gondar was relatively brief and he took part in none of the martial exercises of later travellers. It seems that his treatment of the emperor's skin disease had proved effective. He was certainly zealous in his profession. "I carried with me into Ethiopia," he is found noting,<sup>4</sup> "a chest of chemical medicines the making of which took up six or seven years. (These included) a kind of bezoar stone, which I had always employed very successfully in curing intermitting fevers of every kind."

<sup>1</sup> A translation of Poncet entitled *A Journey to Abyssinia* is printed in John Pinkerton's *Collection of Voyages and Travels*, vol. xv. This description is given on p. 79

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 80.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 86

Carrying his chest, the French chemist returned in peace to Grand Cairo.

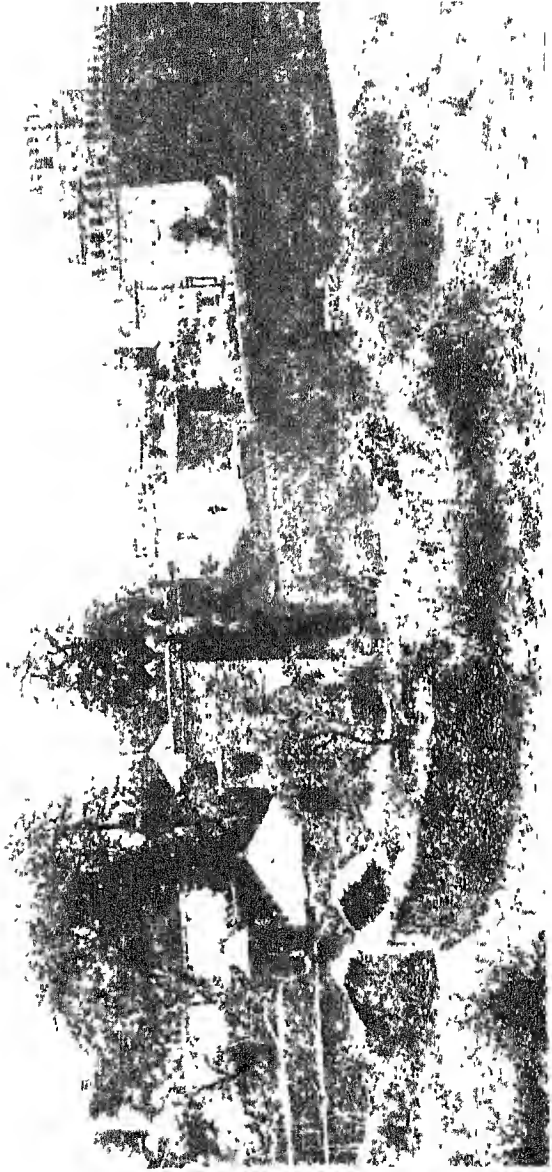
\* \* \*

The journey was well timed for the turn of the century witnessed the last years of unimpeded quiet in Gondar. The different accounts build up the picture of Iyasu I as a gentle, amorous prince, perhaps worn by the cares that his wives brought him. There seems a quality of make-believe in those wars against the kings of Galla and Shankalla, which are always so dutifully recorded. What had been a pleasure for his ancestors had now become a clear hieratic duty, and we know that the Emperor Iyasu was averse to bloodshed. The account of the elephant that he killed when he was twenty-nine forms the last record of a ceremonial hunting in his reign. Stuffs absorbed him, the purple which he seems to have adopted from the emperors of Byzantium. In his square summer palace at Gesenna he sat beneath a ceiling set with mirrors and soldered in with porcelain inlay. It was this last material that set the note, thus and the China dishes. The gifts that he made to Poncet on his departure mark the new spirit. The iron cross and the elephant were grandiose and traditional; it was the twenty porcelain coffee cups that were quite novel.

In this final period of the emperor's reign there were misfortunes in the capital. A fire, started in a prostitute's house, burned down the churches of St. George of Damot and old St. Takla Haimanot, and then in 1704 came the earthquake. The great tower of the palace called Djan Takal fell and crushed many. This was the first of the Gondar ruins none of which would ever be repaired. Iyasu retired to his summer palace on Lake Tana where he met his end.

The circumstances of the emperor's death, which ushered in a period of fifteen years of bloodshed, have a significance in the break-up of the Gondarine conception. There seems reason to accept the view of Sir Ernest Wallis Budge that Iyasu died through a defect in orthodoxy. The Solomonic Throne could not shift from its Coptic bases.

This key episode was not unconnected with the Poncet mission which appears to have served to rouse the old unslumbering passions against the Franks. It was as subordinates, almost as slaves, that the white men were welcomed; the great Amharic lords about



*Plate 6* General view of the palaces at Gondlat



A HISTORY OF ETHIOPIA

the court were always angered against Frankish kings. Further, the xenophobia of the Ethiopian priests and high nobles was at its sharpest when confronted by the emissaries of Rome. The visit to Gondar of Fr. Joseph, a Franciscan, was linked up with the Poncet mission and it was believed that on his departure in January 1702 the emperor had entrusted this friar with a letter to Pope Innocent XI. It is certainly clear that he had permitted seven young Abyssinians to go to Italy to be instructed in the Catholic Faith. The other reasons alleged for the *coup d'état* appear subsidiary.

While the emperor was still away from Gondar in the year after the earthquake, his eldest son Takla Haيمانot was brought into the capital and proclaimed from the balcony of the Castle of Fasilidas. Iyasu was recommended to abdicate and the precedent of Kaleb, a thirteenth century emperor who gave himself to the monastic life, was quoted to him. At first he hesitated, then appeared to yield and temporised. The situation within his household was very difficult for his relations with Queen Malakotawit had long been formal, while he was devoted to Ozoro Kedeste who had almost the standing of a secondary wife. In this crisis Malakotawit supported his son's cause. As the rains of that summer of 1706 ended Iyasu I was murdered; he was stabbed by the queen's officers and finally shot with muskets by two Mohammedan soldiers. He fell dead on the diwan in his summer palace, his broken body mirrored in the ceiling of glass and porcelain.

## CHAPTER VIII

### THE MOUNTAIN

IT IS AT THIS POINT in the study of the Court of Gondar that a painfully melodramatic element in the situation must be discussed, the presence of the mountain. It is true that the mountain under one form or another figures in every European book on Abyssinia, but among all the wonders related it is the one which a modern reader, sceptical of the improbable, is most likely to dismiss as a traveller's tale. As a preparation for an examination of this subject it is perhaps simplest to begin with a discussion of what for want of a more exact description may be called the internal relations of the Solomonic family.

In the first place the descendants of Susenyos, to go no farther back, did not in any sense constitute a family and still less, in the European meaning of that term, a dynasty. The numerous marriages, betrothals, hand-fastings and secondary unions had dissipated the solidarity which is essential to the western concept of a family, nor did they possess, for a reason which will soon become clear, that patriarchal sense of *stock* which the dominance of the father always gives within the Moslem world.

What was alone significant was the line of blood. And beside this line of blood there was nothing of consequence, certainly not primogeniture and not, in any western sense, legitimacy. All male children, who were accorded a certain recognition, shared in the privileges of this high descent. Such were those who were born to the sovereign as the fruit of a union temporary or permanent with "a lady of quality" to use Bruce's careful term. These were all potential emperors and on their father's death, if not before, they were all exiled. Surrounded by guards they passed their lives on the mountain of Wachni.

It is for this reason that we find in the history of the Throne no rivals but only pretenders. In the early days of Susenyos' reign there had been a series of false Yakobs and there would be a false Bacaffa. There was thus a danger that men might simulate a dead emperor, as for the living princes they were in hold.

At one time there were as many as fifty princes within the mountain for they married and passed their lives within the fortress. Thus on the death of Iyasu the Great his three sons by his beloved mistress, Ozoro Kedeste, were taken to Wachni. David, Jonathan and John (or Yohannes) were still small children and two of them would emerge again as emperors as would an older stronger boy, Asma Giorgis, the son of Iyasu by a princess of Nageb.

It was during the years of confusion which now ensued that recourse was first made to the mountain to find a sovereign. But such a step would only be taken by a great man who hoped to develop into a mayor of the palace, some one who could guide the new ruler. In the event Yostos was not only the first mayor of the palace but also furnished the solitary example of an usurper. There is no other instance of the seizure of the throne by one who did not claim to represent the Solomonic stock. This episode is crucial in the study of the royal doctrine.

After a reign of two years, during which he showed himself a faithful disciple of the Alexandrian Church, the young Emperor Takla Haimanot I was murdered. He was stabbed, as he was riding his mule, away on a buffalo hunt in the low country. It was at this point that a provincial governor, Yostos, who was through his mother a grandson of Yohannes I, went to the mountain to find a sovereign. He brought back his own uncle, Theophilos, a brother of Iyasu the Great, a man approaching fifty who had lived at Wachni since his father's death.

We are now launched upon a tedious era of palace revolutions, made all the more difficult to follow by the impossibility of visualising the successive figures. An impression of the sovereigns themselves can just be gained, but it is not possible to focus the great lords. At present we can barely penetrate to the sovereign and perhaps to some hieratic figure from the church life. It is a court without a background, with courtiers whose lineaments are still invisible.

It would appear that on the return of Yostos his nominee, Theophilos, was at once accepted since Takla Haimanot's son was still an infant and the children of Iyasu not fully grown. It is probably fanciful to trace a resemblance to the Osmanli custom of enthroning the senior male of the imperial house. Two points are worth noting in regard to the justice which the new emperor



proceeded to execute on the murderers of his brother and nephew. There was a ritual quality, panel by panel. Queen Malakotawit and one of her brothers were hanged; those who had stabbed Iyasu were put to the sword; the musketeers who attacked him were shot. Again the whole episode seems to be perhaps consciously envisaged in biblical terms. Thus, the bodies of the queen and her accomplices were hewn in pieces and placed outside the palace gates at Gondar. The several portions did not make the approach to the *ghibbi* noisome, for at nightfall the hyænas swept in, sidling along in packs with their swift timorous hunger. There were also the dogs. The whole affair recalls a scriptural scene, there is surely a reminiscence of the fate of Jezebel.

After three years of rule Theophilus died of a fever in Gondar in the autumn of 1711 and Yostos established himself upon the throne. It is remarkable that none of these sovereigns, with the exception of Takla Haimanot I, failed to add a new church to the capital. Yostos founded Lidetá, dedicated to the Nativity, while Theophilus built the church of the Three Hundred, Selestù Mit. An episode recorded from this next brief reign throws a rare and welcome light on social custom. It is explained that the Emperor Yostos was taken ill while superintending building operations at the church of St. Antonius at Gondar. Suspecting some unwholesomeness or witchcraft in his palace, he ordered the imperial tent to be pitched outside the town and his apartments to be smoked with gun powder. We come swiftly to this reversion to the tent; the magnates were very ready to go back to that way of life which they practised as they progressed across their own wide provinces. In one way Gondar was singularly solid, a series of stone palaces unparalleled for thousands of miles. Viewed from another angle it must have seemed the cardboard capital of an unreal empire.

It is said that the rule of Yostos was successful and he is remarkable as the last emperor who had a clear tendency towards the Catholic Faith. A skein of ritual is thrown across his abdication. After five years upon the throne Yostos again fell ill and the soldiers of his palace guard fetched from the mountain Iyasu's son, David, who was at that time a lad of twenty. In the spring of 1716 during the days before the opening of Lent the young prince was proclaimed as the lawful sovereign by the sounding of the kettle drum at the palace gates. The soldiers killed seven great officers who

went to pay their respects to Yostos in his illness. The *abuna* and the *echeggi* then recognised the Emperor David and paid a ritual call on the abandoned ruler. They asked two questions of the man whom they had served and supported, "Who are you?" and "What brought you here?"

There are here three elements: the ritual of a Church and State relationship which was specifically Amharic; the eastern love of numbers, the two questions, the seven killed; the drums that unite Africa. The reply of the doomed emperor throws light upon a world of thought and custom. "True it is,"<sup>1</sup> declared Yostos, "that I have made myself king as much as one can do that is not of the royal family; for I am but a private man, son of a subject. All I beg of the king (the new young sovereign) is to give me a little time and let me die with sickness without putting me to torment or pain." This request thus made was granted. Yostos died four days later and was buried in the church of the Nativity with all the honours and public ceremonies due to his rank as a nobleman and a subject who had been guilty of no crime.

There is little known of the brief reign that followed. David III is described as a rigid adherent of the Alexandrian Church, having been brought up in the tenets of the monks of St. Eustathios whom his mother, Kedeste, strongly favoured. There was naturally a difficulty in persuading the many princes, who had been released from the mountain on Yostos's deposition, to go back to their fortress. The new emperor's half-brother, Bacaffa, had a very small portion of the tip of his nose cut off on refusing to go back to Wachnu, while his brother of the whole blood, Yohannes, lost a hand for the same reason. At this time there was another attempt made by Catholic missionaries to penetrate to Ethiopia; three Capuchins reached Gondar and were stoned to death. In the spring of 1719 the emperor died of poison procured by Ras Giorgis and administered by the keeper of the palace and a Mohammedan slave. The assassins were hewn to pieces and their bodies distributed to the dogs before the *ghibbi*. David III founded the church of St. Michael the Gracious and also built the attractive Pavilion of Gladness.

The Pretorian element waxed on all these misfortunes; its leaders had recourse once more to the mountain. After such a series of disasters the court life reformed again but weaker and

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, ii, p. 573.

weaker. A strange and unlikely peace lay over the coming years. Away in the tangled country to the north a young landowner, Ras Michael Sehul, was reaching manhood. He would bear the lion's share in liquidating this fragile world. The palace withdrew into itself and contact with the farther continents grew very faint. During the reign of Iyasu II in particular the court re-orientated itself in following the vaguest shadowy impulses. It was sunset in Gondar.

On the death of David III, his half-brother, Asma Giorgis, came to the throne. He had passed nearly all his life on the mountain and was exceedingly fond of divinations and prophecies and dreams. The Galla had given him the name by which he is always known Bacaffa, the inexorable. His travels in disguise have long been legendary. On one occasion while riding in the province of Quarà towards Sennaar, he saw and determined to marry the girl who would in time be famous as the Empress Mentuab. She had been christened Welleta Giorgis, a name bound up with prophecy, and was known when the emperor found her as Berhan Magass, Glory of Grace. Bruce would know the empress in her old age and it is from this point that his evidence acquires the value of a recital that he has heard from eye witnesses. Within a year after her marriage the empress gave birth to a son who would become Iyasu II. The picture of the imperial family is now complete.

The reign began with the traditional hunting scene in the Kolla where elephants and rhinoceros lay in the low country near the water pools below great shady trees. "The king,"<sup>1</sup> so runs Bruce's account of this high ceremony, "unless very young, sits on horseback on a rising ground surrounded by the graver sort, who point out to him the names of those of the nobility that are happy enough to distinguish themselves in his sight. The merit of others is known by report. Each young man brings before the king's tent, as a trophy, a part of the beast he had slain. The head of a boar is stuck up on a lance; but is not touched, as being unclean. The elephants teeth are the king's perquisites." It was noted that these teeth were turned as ivory rings for bracelets.

Bacaffa was a great builder. The ruins dating from his time increase in scale. The wall beside the great trapezoidal courtyard for the use of the imperial horses and mules is part of what is known

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, ii, p. 541.

as the Castle of Bacaffa. A round tower flanks on its west side the Gate of the Pigeons. It is said that it was from a circular upper chamber in this building that Bacaffa called up the devil and explored the stairs. This emperor founded the church at Gondar dedicated to St. Eustathius and the church of the Terms of Mercy. There is not a great deal recorded about this reign. Berhan Magass had been created *Iteghe* under the name of Mentuab and this carried the right to exercise the regency in any minority that might occur. It was a means of ensuring the succession to a young child, and in 1730 Bacaffa died.

Bruce has preserved a description of the new regent. He begins by pointing out that she possessed a remote descent from the Solomonic line and also from the Portuguese. "The Queen,"<sup>1</sup> he explains, "was reputed the handsomest woman of her time . . . and inherited the colour of her European ancestors, indeed was whiter than most Portuguese. She was very vain of this her descent, and had a warm attachment to the Catholic Religion in her heart, as far as she could ever learn it. She was known as *Iteghe Mentuab* or the beautiful queen." As a commentary on her Catholic sympathies that painful episode is worth recalling when the *abuna*, standing in the great square of Gondar, excommunicated the young king and his mother and all their supporters declaring that they would burn with Korah, Dathan and Abiram. It was eventually proved to the satisfaction of the Coptic clergy that the two strangers who had reached the city were Greek merchants and not priests.

Inevitably during the minority there were rebellions, one centring round a false Bacaffa. In a riot the Gold House and the chamber where the sovereign sat at festivals were both burned down, as was the church of St. Raphael. The total eclipse of the sun in 1736 gave rise to many prophecies of the death of the king and great misfortunes for it was clear that this phenomenon was sent by God to warn the royal house of its near doom. The following year, which was the seventh of the reign, a general hunt was proclaimed to indicate that the sovereign was approaching manhood. The emperor killed two young elephants and a hippopotamus with his own hands. Later it was the hunting of the giraffe that would appeal to him, "the only animal<sup>2</sup> that in swiftness will beat a horse in the fair field."

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, ii, p. 611.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, ii, p. 631.

Iyasu II would develop a great taste for decoration. Many of the royal buildings in the capital were now in ruins and in particular the Castle of Fasilidas was only habitable on its lower floors. It was the enrichment of halls which took the sovereign's fancy. "He was,"<sup>1</sup> explains Bruce in noting these operations, "deeply engaged in ornamenting his palace at Gondar. A rebellion, massacre, or some such misfortune, had happened among the Christians of Smyrna; who, coming to Cairo and finding that city in a still less peaceable state than the one which they had left, repaired to Jidda on their way to India." It is then recounted how, missing the monsoon and destitute of money, they had turned up at Gondar. "They were twelve of them silversmiths, very excellent in that fine work called filligrane, who were all received very readily by the king and employed in his palace as their own taste directed them.

By the hands of these, and several Abyssinians whom they had taught, sons of Greek artists whose fathers were dead, he finished his presence chamber in a manner truly admirable. The skirting, which in our country is generally of wood, was finished with ivory four feet from the ground. Over this there were three rows of mirrors from Venice, all joined together, and fixed in frames of copper, or cornices gilt with gold. The roof, in gaiety and taste, corresponded perfectly with the magnificent finishing of the room; it was the work of the Falasha, and consisted of painted cane, slit and disposed in Mosaic figures, which produces a gayer effect than it is possible to conceive. This chamber, indeed, was never perfectly finished from a want of mirrors. The king had another chamber of equal expense, consisting of plates of ivory, with stars of all colours stained, in each plate at proper distances."

In the picture thus conveyed there are several elements worth noting. A certain quality of fatigue is manifest in the phrase that the Greeks were employed "as their own taste directed them." It was in a sense a fortuitous assembly of riches. At the same time the desire for a withdrawn interior splendour, for cane and ivory, consorted well with a declining material power. "These people," as Bruce was to remark,<sup>2</sup> "have always had a great taste for magnificence and expense. All around them was silver, gold and brocade."

Another element is now apparent, a feeling for the pleasancess

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, ii, p. 635.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, ii, p. 623.

and groves and running water. The emperor would now concentrate upon the amenities of a tiny neighbourhood. It was a consequence of such preoccupations that the power of the nobles grew stronger and stronger across the miles of the wide ploughlands; they were very far in spirit from the little sanctuary. "He (Iyasu II)," we are told in a passage which makes this point crystal clear, "had begun a very large and expensive villa at Azaza, with extensive groves or gardens, planted thick with orange and lemon trees, upon the banks of a beautiful and clear river which divides the palace from the church of Tecla Haimanot." It is as if the holder of the throne which was based upon dignity, now sought repose.

Towards the end of this period three Franciscans arrived from Europe. They were received with courtesy and permitted to return to their own land without encouragement. The construction of new shrines as a ritual observance still continued; the church of St. John the Baptist at Gondar dates from Iyasu's reign. But perhaps the most characteristic work of these two decades was the little palace of the Empress Mentuab, which can be considered as the final effort in the series of the buildings in imperial Gondar. There still lingers in the detail of this small house a faint touch of the Manueline style, a reminiscence of old Portugal. We find once more the large external staircase and the same wooden balconies. Indoors there were many cypress cupboards and strong pier tables also made of wood; these last, it seems, were built in preparation for the great pier-glasses which never came.

The emperor was small and slender, he was fond of singing. He cultivated apricot and pomegranate. He loved to watch the progress of his works and as a recreation hunted in the low country or among the "shepherds" between the Atbara and the Blue Nile. Iyasu found the money and the labour for the building of his mother's abbey and castle of Cusquam, an hour's ride out of Gondar in a wood of jumpers. Here there was a chapel carried on twelve arches for the emperor was taken by every such experiment. Iyasu II sat on his throne in the alcove of the hall of festival beneath the stars within their plates of ivory. These he relished and they held his gaze. The life of the once-great empire ebbed away.

## CHAPTER IX

### THE COMING OF JAMES BRUCE

THE COMPANIONSHIP of Smyrniote craftsmen did little to prepare the imperial family for the experience of the friendship of Mr James Bruce of Kinnaird. This gentleman arrived in Gondar in the autumn of 1769. At the beginning of his Abyssinian journey Mr. Bruce was thirty-eight years of age. He was by inheritance a Scottish laird, by profession a wine merchant and by choice a traveller and *dilettante*. These latter tastes had kept him in foreign parts for the last seven years. Mr. Bruce held, through the influence of the Earl of Halifax, the post of His Britannic Majesty's agent and consul general in Algiers. His appearance was calculated to produce an admirable impression in distant lands. "Mr. Bruce's stature," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "was six feet four inches; his person was large and well-proportioned, and his strength correspondent to size and stature. In his youth he possessed much activity; but, in the latter part of his life, he became corpulent. The colour of his hair was a kind of dark red; his complexion was sanguine, and the features elegantly formed. His walk was stately; his air noble and commanding." One minor peculiarity was not calculated to lessen the respect in which he would be held in Ethiopia. "When he<sup>2</sup> attempted to speak, his whole stomach suddenly seemed to heave like an organ bellows."

His advantages, certainly, were very many. "He was<sup>3</sup> attentive to his dress, and was particularly successful in wearing that of the nations through which he passed in an easy and graceful manner. His long residence among the Barbary Arabs, the best horsemen in the world, had enabled him to excel in the management of the horse, and in the exercise of the lance and javelin. His skill in the use of firearms was uncommonly great. His memory was excellent." At this point a note on the traveller's general outlook

<sup>1</sup> *Account of the Life and Writings of James Bruce of Kinnaird*, by Alexander Murray, p. 129.

<sup>2</sup> *The Early Diary of Frances Burney*, ed. A. Raine Ellis, II, p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> Alexander Murray, *op. cit.*, pp. 130-1.

would be in order. "His religious principles," we are told<sup>1</sup> by his biographer, Alexander Murray, "were founded on the best basis, the Scriptures and a firm belief in an over-ruling Providence. He was not attached to any sect; he detested fanaticism; and frequently took occasion to expose it. His mind, accustomed to dangerous situations, had contracted a slight and amiable tinge of superstition."

He had other qualities which would stand him in good stead. "His friendships were sincere, and, in general, permanent, though sometimes interrupted by suspicion. His love of ancestry and practice of telling his own exploits . . . were certainly prominent features in his character." His views were conservative and well-founded; he had that cool appraisal which his century loved. Years later he incorporated in his *Travels* this revealing note.<sup>2</sup> "I would not, by any means, have my readers so far to mistake what I have said as to think it contains censure upon, or disapprobation of, the slave-trade."

Mr. Bruce's knowledge of languages was of much value. All the same, this can hardly have been so extensive as his biographer's naive recital would indicate. "He spoke and wrote,"<sup>3</sup> we are told, "French and Italian, understood Spanish and Portuguese, knew Hebrew, Chaldee and Syriac. He read and spoke with ease Arabic, Ethiopic and Amharic." To conclude it may be noted that Mr. Bruce was at this time a widower. He had a certain experience in medical remedies, and a cheerful interest in sexual phenomena. Above all he had great pride.

His tastes were scientific in the Georgian conception of that term, and it was through science that he approached the arts. "He had applied<sup>4</sup> himself during the greater part of his life to the study of astronomy, and other practical branches of mathematical learning." From Tunis on one of his earlier journeys he wrote that he had collected three hundred medals of all kinds, some large medallion vases and statues of bronze, all in good taste. On the Abyssinian expedition he was accompanied by Signor Luigi Balugani, a young Bolognese of gentlemanly manners who would make out the clear drawings for him and also trace them on metal. Mr. Bruce made a copy of Strange's *St. Cecilia* in water colours. At the same time he was thoroughly insular. He held in particular

<sup>1</sup> Alexander Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> *Life*, p. 131.

<sup>3</sup> *Travels*, ii, p. 557.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 131.



a poor opinion of the French. "We have certainly," Bruce wrote to an English friend,<sup>1</sup> "a greater elevation of genius than that light unsettled nation."

He was the fortunate possessor of a realistic and detached sense of business. His ventures in the port and claret trade had been successful, and he held an interest in the Carron Company whose ironworks had been established near his Scottish home. He had those catholic preferences which the trend of his time would always foster. Even before he went to Abyssinia, he was accustomed to make drawings of "the rarest animals,<sup>2</sup> insects, birds and plants, all in their natural colours."

The solid eighteenth century courtly manner, somewhat exaggerated by his years of travel, well became him. "From principles of honour," we are told,<sup>3</sup> "he (Bruce) abstained from describing Palmyra and Balbec, of the ruins of which he took magnificent drawings, sufficient to have established the reputation of any traveller." He did not forget that his acquaintance Mr. Wood had a prior claim upon this subject. George III had graciously acceded to Mr. Bruce's request that the drawings made in Africa should be added to the royal collection. This was a cause of gratification to the traveller, but it is also necessary to indicate the presence of a proud well-nourished sense of grievance which even now tended to haunt him. "But the greatest discouragement<sup>4</sup> of all is the little countenance given by government to such undertakings. Greece has been wore threadbare by late publications."

Paestum had at one time appealed to him, but now his mind was ranging further. We learn that in 1769 Mr. Bruce proposed to travel into Armenia to view the transit of Venus across the sun. This project came to nothing, but in that year he first set foot in Abyssinia.

A final point should be made about the traveller's attitude. He carried himself with a robustness of conviction and expression which was destined to exacerbate Horace Walpole.<sup>5</sup> That delicate and irritated *savant* would in fact declare that Bruce's drawing of the Abyssinian Lyre should be more accurately entitled the Abyssinian Liar. It was the same buoyant certitude in his opinions

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, p. 198.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 189

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>5</sup> For a discussion on the attitude of Horace Walpole and Dr. Johnson, c.f., *The Early Diary of Francis Burney*, ii, pp. 15 and 35

which would lead Dr. Johnson to observe that Mr. Bruce was "not a distinct relater" and that he "did not perceive in him any superiority of understanding." This high carriage had, however, a very different effect on Ras Michael Sehul and his wife Queen Esther and on the latter's mother the Empress Mentuab. It was precisely the curvetting strong pride of his haughty manner that would entrance them.

Meanwhile, in the twenty years between the building of Iyasu's palaces and the coming of James Bruce, there had been many changes, the whole train dominated by a single figure Ras Michael Sehul. This great chief was now seventy years of age, lame and going blind; he had been governor of Tigrāi for most of his lifetime. When Iyasu II had died in 1755, he had been succeeded by his son Ioas under the regency of his grandmother the Empress Mentuab. The mother of the young sovereign was a princess of the Tolema Gallas, and gradually the Court was dominated by his Galla uncles. Ras Michael married Esther the daughter of Mentuab by her second husband. Bruce has a comment<sup>1</sup> on this alliance. "Rustic and cruel as that old tyrant was, bred up in blood and delighting in it, she governed him despotically." Michael Sehul erected the building within the palace enclosure at Gondar which has always been in use and still goes by his name. Throughout the nominal reign of Ioas his power grew and grew.

A series of violent changes took place in the months before James Bruce arrived. Each step contributed to the strengthening of the grand vizier. The beginning may be placed in March 1769. One evening during that month, while Ras Michael was sitting in the balcony of his new house, a shot was fired from a window in the palace. This missed the minister but killed his dwarf, who was standing before him fanning flies from his face. Ioas' page confessed that the shot had been fired by an Armenian on his master's orders. That night the emperor was murdered alone in his palace at Gondar and buried in the church of St. Raphael. The next step was by this time almost traditional. Two months later Yohannes, the youngest son of Iyasu I, was brought by Ras Michael from the fortress of Wachni. Yohannes II was over seventy years of age and had passed all his life in the mountain; his hand had been cut off by his brother Bacaffa. There was no prospect of his establishing any personal rule. In the early autumn the new emperor died and

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, II, p. 612.

was succeeded by his son Takla Haimanot II, who entered into the views of Ras Michael entirely.

Nevertheless it was necessary to impart a religious sanction into these changes. An aura was therefore found for Ras Michael. The chronicler has a phrase describing how the minister chose his young sovereign. "Ras Mika'el, Master of Law," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "said to them (who made question) 'Not that I had heard that the Father had so ordained in his favour; O why subtly search for a thing? Know ye not that the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit are those that grant a Kingdom?'" We can pause for a moment to consider the fashion in which the new regime was presented.

Here we come to the idea of the wise minister whose sagacity must be construed as a pillar to the old sacrosanct dynasty. The chronicle of Takla Haimanot II bears out this contention. "Also," we read,<sup>2</sup> "the Negus held audience and the monks of Debia Tsabay came to the Negus, who said to them however, 'Go first to my father and my chief, who has made me King, Mika'el, lamp of my kingdom, and sing canticles before his face.'" There follows an expression of the universal contentment. "These monks sang before him a joyful song, saying, 'The high General Mika'el who rolls up lead in balls for a gun, and hurls them on the face of the enemy.'" This concept of wisdom is set out very elaborately again and again. "And by this Will of the Holy Spirit, the Royal Secretary begins to write the History of his Lord Mika'el Chief of the Dignitaries and Power of the Negus, in the following tenor. Have you observed the acuteness of the intelligence and subtlety of mind of Mika'el, prince of the wise men?"<sup>3</sup>

This quality was called in to aid the princes who were both imperial and sacred. It is symbolised characteristically by the chess board. The reference to the victory at Fagta gives the scene in its setting. "Thus," we are told,<sup>4</sup> "did these valiant men on Fagitta cause the water of the river to turn to blood, by the power of Ras Mika'el the Angel of Earth. The earth too was tinged with blood and their clothes were raiment of Basor which is red as blood. And thus was fulfilled the words of the Sacred Book, which says, 'Blood came up to the bits of the horses, and the chariots were steeped to their middles.' For this the land of Fagta

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, ed., H. Weld-Blundell, p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 213.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 207.

was called Armageddon, for that blood was poured freely of Pagan and Christian, and while this terrible slaughter was being enacted Ras Mika'el played at chess, according to his custom. Oh, custom! that burnt like fire the hearts of the enemy." The postscript is decisive; "for the soul of Ras Mika'el was not moved in the moment of great slaughter."

Wisdom as in a mirror brooded over each heated, dignified, uneasy scene. "They moved," it is explained<sup>1</sup> in an account of the great minister's progress, "the next day and halted at Axum, the second Jerusalem. On the twenty fifth of Sane, the Sabbath, they reached Adua, and there was held high festival in the honour of the rich Prince of rich men, Mika'el. . . . But the Chief of the Captains Mika'el was greater in wisdom and knowledge than Solomon the King, in doing what was pleasing to the heart of the Negus." It is swiftly apparent that there was much that had to be covered by the smoothed and glistening words of the annalist.

The polished phrases were used to conceal the straining, breaking spread of anarchy. It was, indeed, only the wreck of an empire that the Scottish traveller was now approaching. "We were," he wrote,<sup>2</sup> "gratified at last by the sight of Gondar, according to my computation about ten miles distant. The King's palace (at least the tower of it) is distinctly seen, but none of the other houses, which are covered by the multitude of wanzey-trees." Mr. Bruce was accompanied by personages of distinction. He explained how the Arabs used their fire-arms on horseback demonstrating with the aid of a double-barrelled gun. The wanzey-trees hid Gondar like a black wood.

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, ed., H. Weld-Blundell, p. 221

<sup>2</sup> Bruce, *op. cit.*, iii, p. 194.

## CHAPTER X

### BRUCE IN ABYSSINIA

JAMES BRUCE and his party rode on past the brook of St. Raphael and, coming within sight of the palace of Cusquam, uncovered their heads and moved more slowly. This is the point to consider the traveller's accuracy and his value as a narrator for these in time unfortunately were much aspersed. It was certainly disadvantageous for his contemporary reputation that he held his material for so long before he launched his five great volumes. A note of the dates will make this point quite clear. In 1772 Bruce reached Cairo on his homeward journey suffering from "the disease called the Guinea Worm."<sup>1</sup> He arrived in England in 1774; the narrative of his travels, together with his reflections on the Indian trade and his survey of the ancient history of Abyssinia, was in great part finished in 1788; the *Travels* were published in 1790. Few will be disposed to quarrel with the statement<sup>2</sup> of Mr. Bruce's biographer that "he allowed his mind an interval of repose between the toils of travelling, and the vexations of appearing before the public as a candidate for literary fame."

The consequent attacks upon him took two forms. In the first place, His Abyssinian Majesty, as Fanny Burney called him, was not only haughty but long-winded. Some of his best recitals were printed by others and, out of their context, were not believed. His biographer puts it<sup>3</sup> in this fashion. "Mr. Bruce's manner of conversing in private companies, was open, free, and animated. On occasions when he thought proper to amuse his friends with an account of his adventures, he generally fixed upon such of them as differed most from common occurrences. A description of the savage manners of the Galla, of the bloody feasts of the Abyssinians, of the negro court of Sennaar . . . was calculated to amuse men of sense and judgment; but persons of a different character judged it incredible."

Still, there was worse to come; "When," we read,<sup>4</sup> "he (Bruce)

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, p. 112.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 116

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.



*Plate 7.* James Bruce



observed other men deficient in moral conduct, he usually expressed his contempt of them in the most unqualified manner. This procured him many enemies." How this enmity was shown is soon made clear.<sup>1</sup> "Some of his enemies, not content with questioning his veracity in particular instances, asserted that he had never been in Abyssinia; and this palpable falsehood was afterwards believed by many, on the authority of Mr. Wortley Montague, and the Baron de Tott."

All this has long since cleared away, although a cloud remained for many years on Bruce's memory. At the time his snatches of recorded conversation offended somewhat against the classical severity of the late eighteenth century manner, and succeeding generations would observe that he gave no authorities for his excursions into the remote history of Abyssinia. It is true that the whole work suffers from the fact that it was for the most part dictated by Bruce to his clerk at a stage when, as the biographer puts it,<sup>2</sup> "his mind had begun to suffer from the indolence natural to his time of life." On the other hand he had kept sketches of significant transactions made on his travels. Each chapter which records his own personal experience is lit with a vividness not too far from nostalgia. The impression is left upon the mind that here is a book into which the author has poured all of himself.

He would march up and down the library at Kinnaird while the rain of his native county fell thundering on the gravel or the mists wreathed the distant Menteith hills. The essence of the great adventure came before him, so sharp and clear; the cattle waiting patient for the feast; the archaic armour and the rose-water; the scent of the euphorbia in blossom; the little winds that stirred the high thin air; the freshness of the morning and its lovely light; decrepit Gondar. Above all the characters were unforgettable; Ras Michael, Ozoro Esther, Mentuab.

He was lonely again, a second time a widower, as he set down these happenings. The days of his Merlin harpsichord were over, back in the faint memories with Dr. Russell playing English country dances in that courtyard at Aleppo. His relations with the lairds in Stirlingshire are well described by Mr. Murray. "Like most men of high spirit and superior knowledge," he writes<sup>3</sup> of Mr. Bruce

<sup>1</sup> *Life*, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 127.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.



in this connection, "he was a jealous neighbour to such as assumed to themselves claims of pre-eminence in the country to which he did not consider them as entitled; to others, who pursued a different conduct, he was friendly, affable and attentive."

For a heavy choleric man approaching sixty, there is little satisfaction to be gained in being "affable and attentive." He was back in spirit in Ras Michael's camp on the eve of the three battles of Sarbakusa.

Bruce had spent rather under two years in Abyssinia, the greater part of that time in Gondar or accompanying Ras Michael Sehul and the young emperor on their expeditions. In a way the real weakness of the empire and the collapse of the imperial authority were hidden from him for Takla Haimanot II made no attempt to fashion a political existence which should be separate from that of the old king-maker. With a detachment from his controller that was truly royal, the emperor took no action apart from Ras Michael, and then, when the great warrior was defeated, passively and tranquilly let him go. Bruce's description<sup>1</sup> of this sovereign certainly seems to present him fairly "He (Takla Haimanot II) was a prince of a most graceful figure, tall for his age, rather thin, and of the whitest shade of Abyssinian colour, such as are all those princes that are born in the mountain. He had a remarkably fine forehead, large black eyes, but which had something very stern in them, a straight nose, rather of the largest, thin lips, and small mouth, very white teeth and long hair. He was particularly careful of his hair which he dressed in a hundred different ways." One can almost see again the young, pale, thin and careful emperor.

The regal manner had survived the blows of fortune. It is interesting to consider how the imperial palace struck the Scottish traveller. Briefly it may be stated that the Osmanli elements had peeled away, while the Byzantine dream had long since vanished. What remained was the strong fortress. "The King's house in Gondar," we are told,<sup>2</sup> "stands in the middle of a square court. In the midst of it is a square tower, in which there are many noble apartments. A strong double wall surrounds it, and this is joined by a platform roof; loop-holes, and conveniences for discharging missile weapons, are disposed all around it. The whole tower and

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, II, pp. 709-10.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pp. 622-23.

wall is built of stone and lime ; but part of the tower being demolished and laid in ruins, and part of it let fall for want of repair, small apartments, or houses of one storey, have been built in different parts of the area, or square. These houses are composed of the frail materials of the country, wood and clay, thatched with straw, though, in the inside, they are all magnificently lined, or furnished. They have likewise magnificent names."

In these circumstances the imperial tent, the great silken pavilion was coming back into its own. Takla Haïmanot II would sit in state on a crimson cushion set on the ivory chair salvaged from the alcove in Iyasu's cane and ivory audience chamber. The account<sup>1</sup> of the reception of Amha Iyasu by the sovereign will mark the practices of these last days. "While the king was at Kahha, keeping the festival of the Epiphany, he received a very extraordinary visit from Amha Yasous, son of the governor of Shoa, offering his personal service and assistance to the king and bringing as a present five hundred ounces of gold, and a thousand excellent horsemen ready equipt at all points. The king was seated upon the throne, very richly dressed in brocade, a very fine muslin web wrapt loosely about him, so as to hang in plaits, and in some parts to show, and in others to conceal, the flowers of the cloth of gold of which his waistcoat was composed. His hair was loose, combed out at full length, and a fork, made of rhinoceros horn, with a gold head upon it, stuck through his hair ; he was all perfumed with rose water, and two people stood on the opposite sides of the tent, each of them with a silver bottle full of it."

Amha Iyasu<sup>2</sup> attempted to prostrate and was not permitted, tried to speak standing and was not suffered, and was then constrained by two noblemen to sit down on a small stool covered with a Persian carpet. "They then deluged him with rose water. After some general questions the tent was cleared." So much for the detail and now for the significance. The Shoan prince was sister's son to Ras Gusho of Amhara, a great lord at whose hands Takla Haïmanot would one day die. As between Ras Gusho and Ras Michael the dynasty of Shoa claimed an arrogant neutrality. The visit of homage had been made, but in effect the Shoans would

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, II, pp. 93-4.

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the accuracy of this whole account has been questioned by Salt. The name of the Shoan prince may have been confused by Bruce, but there seems no reason to doubt the story's substantial truth.

offer the emperor no real assistance as long as he was with Ras Michael Sehul, and this fate he could not escape.

Bruce had an interchange with Amha Iyasu which has its interest. "One evening,"<sup>1</sup> recounts the traveller, "I enquired of him concerning the story which the Portuguese heard, at the discovery of Benin, that the blacks of that country had intercourse with a Christian inland state. . . . He said they knew nothing of Benin in Shoa; he knew of no Christian state to the southward, excepting Narea, a great part of which was conquered by the Galla." Ethiopia was closing in upon herself.

The old religion, too, was growing strong about them, gaining strength, perhaps, as the imperial power was slowly foundering. At Cusquam Bruce found the Iteghe Mentuab. The aged empress was steeped in melancholy for she was not at ease with the new power since Ras Michael Sehul had killed her grandson, Ioas. She began by attempting to dissuade her guest from searching for the source of the Nile. "You," she said,<sup>2</sup> "are come from Jerusalem, through vile Turkish governments, and hot, unwholesome climates to see a river and a bog. I, on the other hand, the mother of kings who have sat upon the throne of this country more than thirty years, have for my only wish, night and day, that, after giving up everything in the world, I could be conveyed to the church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, and beg alms for my subsistence all my life after, if I could only be buried in the street within sight of the gate of that temple where our blessed Saviour once lay." She sat in her abbey palace; behind were the heavy hangings; in front were the priests. She decided that she must advance a new pretender.

These cameos will indicate the quality of James Bruce's work. It is worth listing the external events that this historian now witnessed; they certainly occurred in quick succession. Ras Michael and the emperor were compelled to abandon Gondar, and the Empress Mentuab and other leaders set up a rival candidate, Susenyos. This character was defeated and Ras Michael and the emperor returned. The account of the weeks of victory is very vivid. Then fresh troubles gathered and Ras Michael went out to his last conflict.

Mr. Bruce sat at Kinnaird in the house which he had recon-

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, iv, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, iii, p. 378.

structed. His second wife, Miss Dundas, of Fingask, "an amiable and accomplished woman," was three years dead. The lawsuits coiled along, while the affairs of the estate unwound themselves at length and tedium. The rain fell ceaselessly, and he was back again in Gondar in that strange night air, picking his way across the uneven surface by a lanthorn's light past all the bodies.

## CHAPTER XI

### THE BATTLES OF SARBAKUSA

THERE IS A QUALITY which is at once precise and clear-cut in Bruce's detail. Thus he describes how after Ras Michael and the emperor had left the capital he went to call on the rival potentate Ras Gusho and the latter's colleague. "I saw them," he explains,<sup>1</sup> "in the same room where Ras Michael used to sit. They were both lying on the floor playing at draughts, with the figure of a draught-table drawn with chalk upon the carpet." How well the phrase suggests the lassitude that had come upon ramshackle Gondar.

Again, there is a description of a council of war with the armies in the field at which the old leader had retailed his spirit guidance. In the general loosening there was nothing now to check a riot of prophecy and divination. "Ras Michael," we are told,<sup>2</sup> "had always pretended that, before he undertook an expedition, a person, or spirit, appeared to him, who told him the issue and consequences of the measures he was taking; this he imagined to be St. Michael the archangel, and he presumed very much upon this intercourse." This familiar had ordered him to surprise the mountain of Wachni and carry with him to Tigray the princes sequestered there. "The next advice which the Ras said this angel gave him was, that they should set fire to the town of Gondar, and burn it to the ground, otherwise his good fortune was to leave him for ever." The matter was argued the ras leaning, particularly in the second instances, to the angel's standpoint. It was the emperor who persuaded his ageing mentor that the time to burn his capital was not yet come.

This was a period in which trouble threatened and receded like thunder clouds piling and not breaking. Both sides would seem to suffer from a mortal weakness. Thus Susenyos, an unacknowledged son of Iyasu II, was a phantom king opposed by an ill-led insubstantial army. It was a time in which all plots miscarried.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, iii, p. 482.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, iii, p. 478

Susenyos vanished after the *abuna* had excommunicated Takla Hai-manot, the Iteghe Mentuab retired in a litter to Gojjam. After her there trailed her carts of treasure. Ras Michael and the emperor retired to Gondar.

Two episodes which followed this return stand out as if lit up by summer lightning. Together they reveal so much of the spirit of those days in which the ritual ceremony foundered and a rustic brutality would succeed the end of pleasure "There was," writes Bruce,<sup>1</sup> "at Gondar a sort of mummers, being a mixture of buffoons and ballad singers and posture-masters. These people, upon all public occasions, run about the streets, and on private ones, such as marriages, come to the court-yards before the houses, where they dance and sing songs of their own composing in honour of the day. Many a time, on his return from the field with victory, they had met Ras Michael, and had received his bounty for singing his praises and welcoming him upon his return home," When he was out of the capital they had, however, sold their services to the other side.

"The day the *Abuna* excommunicated the king, this set of vagrants made part of the solemnity; they abused, ridiculed and traduced Michael in lampoon and scurrilous rhymes, calling him crooked, lame, old and impotent. Particularly in a song they ridiculed the horse of Sire, who had run away at the battle of Lamjour." The sequel is soon told. As the army re-entered Gondar the postur-masters were found celebrating Michael's return. The high venal phrases in that thin almost screeching tone availed them nothing; they were all cut to pieces. Henceforward there were no more strollers.

The next episode is the trial of the Abba Salama, the adviser to the *abuna* in the latter's opposition to Ras Michael. Sir E. Wallis Budge mistakenly describes this priest as the *abuna*. The interchange and *décor* have many points of interest. "The Ras," we are told,<sup>2</sup> "went immediately to the palace with the king, who retired, as usual, to a kind of cage, or lattice-window, where he always sits unseen when in council.

The Abba Salama was brought to the foot of the table without irons. The accuser for the king . . . stated, one by one, the crimes committed by him at different periods, the sum of which amounted

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, iv, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, iv, pp. 73-5.

to prove Salama to be the greatest monster upon earth ; among these were various kinds of murder, especially by poison ; incest, with every degree of collateral and descendant. He concluded this black horrid list, with the charge of high treason, or cursing the king, and absolving his subjects from their allegiance

The Abba Salama . . . laughed and made extremely light of the charges in the article on women ; he said the Abyssinians were *Beni Israel*, as indeed they call themselves, that is, Children of Israel ; and that in every age the patriarchs had acted as he did, and were not less beloved of God. He went roundly into the murder of Ioas, and of his two brothers, Adigo and Aylo, on the mountain of Wachni, and charged Michael directly with it, as also with the poisoning of Hatze Hannes, father of the present king.

Abba Salama said the *Itegbe*, with her brothers, and Ayto Aylo, had all turned Franks, so had Gusho of Amhara : and that, in order to make the country Catholic, they had sent for priests, who lived with them in confidence as that Frank did." At these words the abba pointed to Bruce, declared that he was accursed and said that he should be stoned to death as an enemy to the Virgin Mary. The speech for the defence ended on this note, and the Emperor Takla Hamanot intervened from his closed balcony.

"There is," explained Bruce,<sup>1</sup> "an officer who stands always upon steps at the side of the lattice-window, where there is a hole covered in the inside with a curtain of green taffeta ; behind this curtain the king sits. The officer came and said the king requires of you (Salama) to answer directly why you persuaded the *Abuna* to excommunicate him ? The *Abuna* is a slave of the Turks and has no king ; you are born under a monarchy." It is an interesting glimpse of the age-old feeling against the metropolitans come out of Egypt. Abba Salama died in his vestments. "In going to the tree he said he had four hundred cows, which he bequeathed to some priests to say prayers for his soul ; but the Ras ordered them to be brought to Gondar, and distributed among his soldiers. It was not quite eleven o'clock when all was over, but Ras Michael had sworn he would not taste bread till Abba Salama was hanged, and on such occasions he never broke his word."

This was the beginning of a long series of executions. Bruce found his way home at night time blocked by hyenas. The emperor's reply to his complaint is much in character. "As for

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, IV, p. 77.

the hyæna,"<sup>1</sup> declared Takla Haimanot, "he never meddles with living people, he seeks carrion, and will soon clear the streets of those encumbrances that so much offend you; people say that they are the Falasha of the mountains, who take that shape of the hyæna, and come down into the town to eat Christian flesh in the night" It was this audience, perhaps, that led Mr. Bruce to animadvert upon the sovereign's weakness, "that accursed indifference, or rather propensity, to shed human blood, this then young king had imbibed in the school of Michael." But the days of triumph were to be short-lived. Rebels closed in once again. "The king ascended<sup>2</sup> to the top of the tower of his palace, the only one to which there remains a stair, and there contemplated with the greatest displeasure, the burning of his rich villages"

The army marched out once again to the hillsides a few miles south of Gondar just beyond the burial place of the kings, where Yohannes I lay, and the little church of St. George in the deep country. Cypress and cedar trees grew thick around both shrines. The place was known as Sarbakusa, and called by Bruce Serbraxos. It is here that the name of Theodore first enters the history of Ethiopia. There was a prophecy that a ras of Beghemeder would defeat and slay a king at Sarbakusa. A new king would arise called Theodore, and he would destroy all the Moslems, the Galla and the Shankalla, and the empire of Abyssinia was to extend as far as Jerusalem. There was to be peace and plenty for a thousand years. This was the rumour which was to lie over the next eighty years of waning loyalty until young Kassa would attain the strength to embody it.

Now Michael was most attentive to such dreams and sayings. Bruce tells us that each night a lamp was kept burning in his tent "for he was afraid of spirits."<sup>3</sup> He had, however, received a counter-indication and one that warranted success. The position was explained to Bruce by Ras Michael's wife. "Why, says she,"<sup>4</sup> according to this author, "all the hermits and holy men on our side, that can prophecy, have assured him he is to beat the rebels this month at Serbraxos; and a very holy man, a hermit from Waldubba, came to him at Gondar, and obliged him to march out against his will, by telling him this prophecy (of victory)."

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, iv, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, iv, p. 147.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, iv, p. 112.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, iv, pp. 129-30



It is the next sentence that is revealing. "He," said Esther of the great old warrior, "knows this to be true, as the man is not like common prophets, but one who never ate anything but roots, or drank other liquor than water, since the day of his nativity."

Thus the army came out in May 1771 to fight the three battles of Sarbakusa. The country was steaming from the little rains. In fact as they prepared for combat the rain pouted down on the acacias and the men cupped the lighted matches in their hands. The levies of Ras Michael and the emperor numbered some forty thousand men, including seven thousand musketeers and twenty-five thousand foot armed with lances and shields. The remainder were the much-prized cavalry. Bruce has given a description of the household troops with coats of mail and iron bridles and plates of brass to save the horses. They used the high Moorish saddle and the stirrups were made after the Turkish form into which the whole foot entered. He notes that the Shoa horse were armed with lances and two light javelins with shafts of cane. The household cavalry carried a fourteen-foot pike made of very light wood from the banks of the Nile. Each horseman's head was covered with a helmet of copper or block tin, much like those of Hanoverian light horse, with large crests of black horse tail. "The officers were distinguished from the soldiers by locks of hair dyed yellow, interspersed with the black. Upon the front of each helmet was a silver star, or at least a white-metal one, and before the face, a flap of iron chain, which served as a vizier."<sup>1</sup> Bruce always used a black silk net "which<sup>2</sup> concealed my colour better."

The account of the three battles is confused, but the first two were indecisive while the last ended in Ras Michael's defeat. There are glimpses of Guebra Mascal's musketeers lying down at the brink of the hill next the plain among bent grass and thin tall shrubs like Spanish broom. There was much half-hearted fighting and some treason. When all was over Michael's troops and their conquerors marched back to Gondai. Bruce was sent to Ras Michael's rival Ras Gusho of Amhara. The latter expressed his reverence for the emperor and on hearing how his sovereign's life had been saved in combat remarked that the preservation of kings was a gift of Providence particularly reserved for the people of Amhara.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, iv, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, iv, p. 128.

There is a scene of Ras Michael in his house at Gondar before he was sent to his last exile to his own province of Tigrat. "He played no more<sup>1</sup> at drafts, by which game formerly he had pretended to divine the issue of every affair of consequence" The emperor was of course acknowledged, the murderers of Ioas killed, the *Iteghe* returned from Gojjam

One day when Takla Haimanot was sitting solitary in his alcove, a body of Galla broke down the great Venice mirrors of the Presence Chamber. Some had already gone when the palace was set on fire in Ioas' time, upon Michael's coming from the campaign of Beghemeder. Now the rest of the glass lay powdered on the floor beneath the strokes of the Galla lances. Just before his own departure Bruce made a comment<sup>2</sup> on the character of this sovereign. "The king had as much fortitude and as little fear as ever fell to the share of any man; his misfortune, however, was that he had no resources in which he could trust." In this connection a speech of Takla Haimanot is surely unforgettable. "Tell Kasmato Fasil from me,"<sup>3</sup> said the emperor to those who now surrounded him, "that what I am obliged to do by the rules of justice is not to be measured either by his inclination or power to do wrong. Men have crucified their Saviour: and many kings in this country (better men than I am) have been, in various manners, slain by their deluded subjects. The race of Solomon, however, God has preserved till this day upon the throne, while the memory of those who oppressed them remains loaded with the curses of mankind." It was in 1779 that Ras Gushe killed him.

<sup>1</sup> Bruce, *Travels*, IV, p. 234.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, IV, p. 259.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, IV, p. 260.

## CHAPTER XII

### THE ANGEL OF THE LAST ANTI-CHRIST

“**I**N THE NAME OF the Father, Son, and the Holy Ghost, One God.” So begins<sup>1</sup> the chronicle of the reign of Takla Giorgis, Takla Haيمانot’s brother and successor. “Let us write,” declaims Alaqa Gabru, secretary to the new young sovereign, “with the help of God the Highest, and the intercession of Mary the Virgin, and by the intercession of Michael and Gabre’el and the intercession of St. George the Athlete, the story of the reign of the honoured Anointed, whose eyes are as the morning star, and whose countenance is shining and beneficent, whose stature is like an exalted angel, and his valour like the terrible Samson, his mind pure as the mind of the Creator, his wisdom great as the wisdom of Solomon, his dominion extensive like that of Alexander, King of Kings Takla Giyorgis, whose throne name was Feqr Sagad. And I believe in my mind and declare that he was the glorious Theodore who it was said would come in the latter days.” A little time is needed for the mind to give its value to such precise and almost serene magniloquence. Its relevance to the harassed battered life of some great ras’s youthful nominee is not apparent.

“When Ras Kenfu Adyam,” the recital continues,<sup>2</sup> “saw the excitement of the people he gave the kingdom to our King Takla Giyorgis in the country of Yebaba on the day of the feast of the Glorious Angel St. Mika’el and there was great rejoicing from one end of the country to the other, for all loved him from his childhood upwards and hoped that he would come to reign, as the sower hopes for rain.” Here is a brave clear statement and then we reach to a recital of the sovereign’s victories. “And after this,” we are told,<sup>3</sup> “we will relate the history of the campaign in Wallo and Wechale of the King of Kings, Takla Giyorgis, the new Alexander, who showed his prowess by land and sea, whom the Holy Ghost has blest, like Jeremias in the womb, Priest as well as King.” A

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, ed., H. Weld Blundell, p. 230.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 269

symbolic reverence is never far away from such a narrative. "And he made him," it is explained<sup>1</sup> in a recital of a royal donation, "many gifts of guns and shields of silver and cups of gold beside. And he gave a bird that came and spoke (like a man) with a human voice, that bird, too, was endowed with reason to come to the King to help him, the Dove of Noah and of Our Blessed Lady, Mary the Mother of God."

After this the scribe turns again to his great phrases of a high dominion.<sup>2</sup> This time it is Mangasho, a pagan Galla, speaking. "Whither shall I fly from thy jurisdiction, whether I climb the distant mountains thy guns will reach me, or I descend to the hungry plains thy horses will overtake me there." The pæan reaches to its own conclusion.<sup>3</sup> "This is in sooth the Mighty King of Israel foretold of yore."

In reality during the five years, which was all the length of his first nominal reign, Talka Giorgis would seem to have been a hard, inexperienced, brave child. His world had contracted fast about him. It is on record that he gave to his secretary Alaqa Gabru a robe of gold and a robe of cotton. The chronicle, which was then produced, resembles on the one hand a liturgical exercise and on the other an opium dream, so much had foundered except religion. This on the contrary had strengthened. The Portuguese had vanished and then the Greeks, as the Smyrnotes and Levantines were called by courtesy. Orthodoxy in fact emerged the stronger as the smoke wreathed slowly from the wooden halls of burning Gondar.

The court was freed from its long striving and scribes would concentrate more freely than before upon the allegorical. Texts could be moulded to all occasions, each fitted to the ritual place of Solomonic dignity concerned solely with a celestial order. An example will make the practice clear. A white camel was sent by some Arabian chief to 'Takla Giorgis.' The chronicler's note on this event illuminates an attitude which was remote and purposeful. "As David said," we read,<sup>4</sup> "The King of Saba and the Arabs shall offer gifts and the boundaries of the earth shall adore him." This may have had a ritual exactitude; it had no correspondence with mere fact.

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, ed. H. Weld Blundell, p. 277

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 282

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 291

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 247

There was throughout a long unstrained religious presentation as if the power that still remained depended on the theocratic element in the Throne. The sovereign is several times described<sup>1</sup> as "the King of Kings Takla Giyorgis, treasure house of clemency and patience." It seems as if in these last days the strife was stilled. "On the 11th," we read in the same chronicle,<sup>2</sup> "the men of Debra Libanos stayed with the men of the house of Ewostatewos singing hymns of love in the church of the Holy Fasilidas, for previously they sang the music of discord." In a period which was filled with civil conflict there was a single *abuna* who ruled in peace for over thirty years, the Abuna Joseph who came out of Egypt in 1770 and died in Gondar in 1803.

During this time there can be traced a last and embalmed memory of Constantinople, a memory which was purged of any ties with a court life or with hieratic values. "And he had," we read of Takla Giyorgis,<sup>3</sup> "a wonderful cross in the likeness of the Holy Trinity, as on that day (of prayer) every work done was with the sign of the cross, and they made of their shields of iron a sign of the cross as was done in the time of the just King of Constantinople"

So do the high names march freed from both time and place as in a mediæval tapestry, nor were the great men who controlled the sovereign deprived of their measure of religious glory. The reference in another chronicle to the conversion to the Christian Faith of Ras Ali of Beghemeder has the same self-deluding power. "Behold," begins the chronicler<sup>4</sup> so literary and venal, "we will commence to write a pleasant account of him, which will be a history of the new Constantinos, Ras 'Ali, chief of the commanders and leaders, who was after the likeness of the first Constantinos King of Kings of Constantenya. Truly an Israelite was Ras 'Ali that he had no guile in his heart, full of wisdom: and many are the churches that were built by his hand." There is a scriptural ring in the next sentence. "Then the <sup>5</sup>King of Kings Takla Giyorgis and the prince of power Ras 'Ali departed and came to Bandi Gabsa."

Takla Giyorgis himself soon collapsed and in 1784, while still very young, was driven into exile at Ambasal. Thenceforward he merely took his place among a number of puppet emperors and

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, ed. H. Weld Blundell, p. 236.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 302.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 358.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 384.

had altogether five periods as a nominal sovereign between 1789 and 1800, he died in 1818.

The scene shifts and the virtues are transferred to the great lords who could manœuvre the powerless and broken candidates. In the chronicle of Ras Ali there is an account of how this leader and Ras Khaylu brought back the fallen emperor from his first exile. "And that day," we read,<sup>1</sup> "Ras Khaylu received the King of Kings Takla Giyorgis with lowly heart and great humility. As the Bible says, 'Blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall inherit the kingdom of heaven.'" When this has been studied carefully, one senses that remote strange world in which the writers and their hearers lived, a world of praise divided from the actual.

Still through these chronicles a glimpse can be obtained of the material conditions as the old court world with its surprising and occasional magnificence was left behind. Building in stone and brick was by this time a memory. The trees of the forest came back into their own, and in the work undertaken on the church at Debra Metmaq the emperor himself would as a pious exercise carry wood for its construction. The great tent of scarlet cloth now marked the royal presence. Within this pavilion the drawing back of the curtain would reveal the sovereign and behind him "the picture of Abuna Takla Haimanot painted on a silver tablet."<sup>2</sup> The horns blew and the curtain slid back into its place again. Outside the tent there stood a silver mast "that gave a light like a morning star;"<sup>3</sup> it is likely to have been a tiny brazier. On the ground within the circle of the sentries lay the goods of such local enemies and raiding tribesmen as Takla Giyorgis and his protectors had dispersed. "Here were found,"<sup>4</sup> we read in a description of the camp at Adi Kokab, "the goods of the rebels: many elephant tusks and rhinoceros horns, cushions, cooking pots and iron braziers, and carpets and iron basins, tents, war drums, honey, butter, wine." Surely this is the old Abyssinia closing over the wreck of Gondar.

Over all this final phase there lingered the guardianship of angels. They went out with the century; they vanished before Theodore. There was not only the spirit which guided and inspired the Emperor Takla Giyorgis, the Dove of Noah, Ras Michael had also had his

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1804*, ed. H. Weld Blundell, p. 359

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 276.

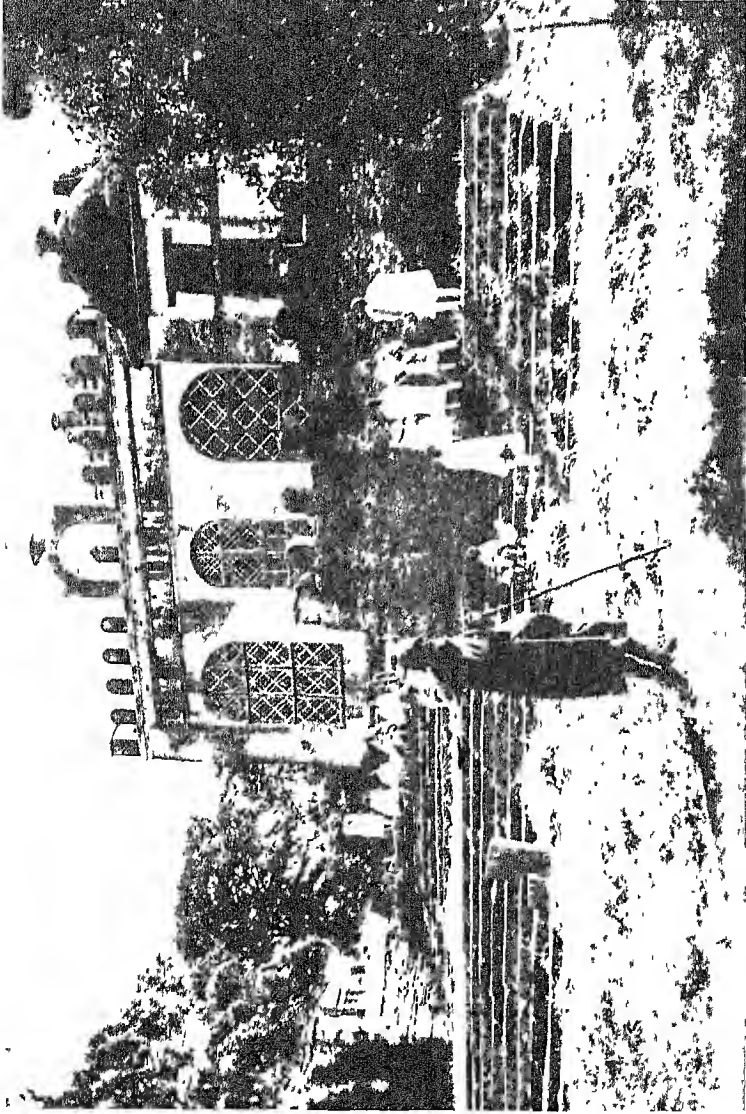
<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 272.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 238.

vision. "An angel," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "descending from heaven said, 'This is the guardian angel of Ras Mika'el the Guardian Angel of the kingdom; the ill fortune of Begameder has gone to Lolma.'" The Throne might now be feeble, but the Church was still arrayed. There was a sense of conflict and of providential victory. A single phrase well serves to give the setting of the final combat. "The angel<sup>2</sup> that goes before the last Anti-Christ."

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia*, 1769-1840, ed., H. Weld Blundell, p. 218.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 233



*Plate 8* The Cathedral of St. Mary of Ston at Aksum





## CHAPTER XIII

### THE BEGINNING OF EXPLOITATION

IT IS ESSENTIAL TO attempt to trace the guiding lines in Ethiopian history in the confused period lasting almost seventy years between the abdication of Takla Giorgis in 1800 and that day when, in the House of Commons, Disraeli gloried in "the standard of St. George hoisted on the mountains of Rasselas." These rather exuberant words were uttered after nine million pounds had been expended on the expedition to Abyssinia which resulted in the defeat and suicide of the Emperor Theodore. This great figure, who gives meaning to the mid-nineteenth century renaissance of imperial power, only emerged upon the scene in 1852; it is the previous fifty years that are so dark to us.

The title of Dr Johnson's rapidly executed fantasy can serve to introduce one aspect of the situation, the degree to which the European view of Abyssinia was now secular. The interest in the idea of Prester John was by this time exhausted and it is interesting to examine what had come to take its place. In the eighteenth century, when Christian institutions appeared jejune, the European mind was concentrated on natural wonders. This is exemplified in the points made in Dr. Johnson's *History of Rasselas, Prince of Abissinia*, which was written and published in 1759. This book was composed with great facility in the lodgings in Gough Square and seems to have incorporated just so much detail about Abyssinia as was general knowledge. The name of Rasselas comes from Rassela Christos, the variant of the name of Ras Sela Krestos (brother to the Emperor Susenyos), which is found in Johnson's translation of Lobo's *Voyage to Abyssinia* made in 1733 from a French version in Pembroke College Library. We have Boswell's authority for the statement that Johnson did not read *Rasselas* after its publication until he found himself on a carriage journey to Luton Hoe in 1781. In consequence it is extremely likely that he never turned again to the hack translation which he had made for five guineas at twenty-one. This point is brought out to suggest that

the knowledge of Abyssinia displayed in *Rasselas* is probably an indication of the contemporary English information on that far land.

"Rasselas," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "was the fourth son of the mighty emperor, in whose dominions the Father of waters begins his course; whose bounty pours down the streams of plenty, and scatters over half the world the harvests of Egypt." At a later point in the story it is explained that Imlac was born in the kingdom of Gojama,<sup>2</sup> "at no great distance from the fountain of the Nile." His father is introduced as a wealthy merchant "who traded between the inland countries of Africk and the ports of the red sea." Gojjam has thus been indicated; the next passage brings in Amhara and the mountain solitude of Wachni. These few factors appear to be in keeping with the eighteenth-century interest in curious natural and political phenomena. This final quotation will complete the picture. "According,"<sup>3</sup> we are told, "to the custom which has descended from age to age among the monarchs of that torrid zone, Rasselas was confined in a private palace, with the other sons and daughters of Abyssinian royalty, till the order of succession should call him to the throne. The place which the wisdom or policy of antiquity had destined for the residence of the Abyssinian princes, was a spacious valley in the kingdom of Amhara."

In these years a picture was built up of Ethiopia as a land containing the source of the Nile; carrying on a trade in ivory and slaves; possessing a Christian ruling house conceived as absolute. These were the ideas reinforced towards the end of the eighteenth century by the writings of James Bruce. It is also worth noting that owing to Bruce's efforts a body of information had been gathered in regard to Ethiopia; no other part of equatorial Africa had been the subject of such enquiry.

It is interesting to try to examine the reasons that had led the vague mountains of Rasselas to be focused at last to actuality. The reasons for this change appear to be of a threefold character, the French invasion of Egypt, the general question of commercial opportunity and the changed attitude towards the slave trade. Some dates may usefully be mentioned. Napoleon invaded Egypt in 1798 and the slave trade was abolished by Act of

<sup>1</sup> *The History of Rasselas*, chapter i.    <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, chapter viii.    <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, chapter i.

Parliament in 1807. As far as any commercial programme was concerned Ethiopia and the adjoining coasts would be a market for Indian goods. These were affected by the cancellation of the East India Company's monopoly in 1813. The final and most important date was the cession of Aden to the British Crown in 1837.

In varying degrees all the English travellers, who came to Ethiopia in the first half of the nineteenth century, were influenced by or at least aware of these three interests, the strategic, the humanitarian and the commercial. In the case of the first motive and the last India would be for long the pivot; it was a route to India that was threatened by a hostile power controlling Egypt and it was from that country that goods of a certain character passed to the East India Company's factory at Mocha on the Red Sea. The government of Bombay made a treaty with the emirate of Aden in 1802.

All this is very plain, it is the state of Ethiopia herself which is obscure to us. In the first place it was very rare for European visitors to penetrate to Gondar, only Coffin and Gobat have left records of journeys made between 1810 and 1830. In consequence it was not realised how completely the political organisation described by Bruce had suffered transformation. The utter helplessness that had now come upon the emperors was the crucial factor. The matter has not yet been really studied, but it seems possible that after 1800 any recovery of power on the part of puppet sovereigns could be discounted. That year saw the closing of the last of the six periods of rule of Takla Giorgis, the younger brother of Takla Haimanot II. After this there seems even to be a doubt of the relationship of the shadowy kings to one another. They are presented as of the Solomonic line; they are toothless and dim; they come from no man knows where; they disappear. Thus, Gigar, who was nominal emperor for two brief periods between 1821 and 1831, is described as a brother of the Emperor Ioas and as a son of Iyasu II, who had died so long ago. He is said to have been seventy-six years of age when he was first heard of; this really hardly seems credible.

Meanwhile the great lords begin to receive something of that praise which had once been reserved for their true superiors. There is a natural coarsening of the touch now that the praise must turn upon power and not on a line of sacrosanct royalty. It is only necessary to consider the elegy on Ras Ali in the royal chronicle.

"Ras Ali," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "died who settled the whole world. Ras Ali was a man who ordered the whole world, from one day to another, but today is dust that is driven hither and thither, so that perhaps no man is trusted as Ras Ali inspired trust. And no courage will be found like (to that of) Ras Ali, who ruled from one end of the world to the other. And after that Ras Aligaz, the brother of Ras Ali was appointed, and governed the whole world in his place, for he was appointed by the voice of God. . . . Then Dajazmach Khaylu finished at Gondar, and when he heard of the death of Ras Ali he wept and mourned greatly. For the death of Ras Ali was to Dajazmach Khaylu like cutting off his hand or knocking out his eye." This is not very elegant.

Another passage of the chronicle, written in 1800, is a lament for the desolation. It should be explained that Ras Gugsu, as the English travellers would write, Ras Guxo, was a lord who controlled the Gondar province, while Gualu was the shadow king whom he maintained. These sentences also will serve to introduce Welde Selassie, the viceroi of Tigräi. "Before Ras Walda Sellase arrived," it is explained,<sup>2</sup> "King of Kings Takla Giyorgis sent a message over to Dajazmach Gugsu to say 'I will make friends, I am coming, receive me.' And Dajazmach Gugsu replied, 'Agreed,' but he (Gugsu) was lying. He took his oath to and made king Abeto Gualu, son of Atse Hezeqeyas, by the hand of his underling; and there was no one to say, 'How is it that the kingdom has become contemptible to striplings and slaves?' How is it that the kingdom is the image of a worthless flower that children pluck in the autumn rains?' I indeed lament as I ponder over the Kingdom, for I was present in that day, in its trial and tribulation. And I weep always without ceasing, as Rachel wept because of her children."

One point stands out clearly. As the weakness of the Ethiopian polity increased, the religious element did not diminish. Chronicles, like that of Alaqa Gabru, which was examined in the last chapter, were continued at Gondar as late as 1840 and the monasteries even increased in power and influence. The effect of religious continuity was seldom stronger than in these years in which lassitude had come upon the secular authority. As a result there was nothing of the unexpected in that invocation of religious sanctions with

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, ed., H. Weld Blundell, p. 391.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 470.

which the Emperor Theodore would seek to strengthen the high throne at which he grasped. The effect of the monastery of Debra Libanos was possibly never greater than in these decades. The falling tide of material strength had now exposed the strong rock of the Alexandrian Faith.

For generations the *abuna* had presented a certain element of continuity and this was noticeable in the beginning of this new imperial "captivity" which coincided with the beneficent long primacy of Joseph III. That *abuna* died in 1803, and for some thirteen years his place was vacant. At this epoch the whole imperial idea was at its weakest, both the concept of the crown and of the primate's office. But locally religion, at least, was never stronger whether protected by viceroys in the Tigrai or by the House of Shoa, which was so sedulously orthodox. In the same way military power had become localised so that the frontier marches were well guarded. The passes down to Moslem land were policed by levies depending on the Tigrean chief at Antalo; the soldiers of the emirates along the coast were unable to force their way on to the Christian table land.

The religious element in Ethiopia was a factor which successive travellers would for some decades fail to consider. It was in accordance with the spirit of the age that Bruce's easy carelessness should now give place to a profound exacerbation. In England the movements against slavery brought in their wake the missionary societies with their bibles. These missionaries, and the laymen moulded by the same Evangelical approach, were deeply impatient of tradition and influenced by a penetrating disapproval of the complex and archaic symbolism through which the Ethiopians expressed their ancient creed.

Seen from a political angle, the approach of the European Powers to Abyssinia in the first half of the nineteenth century passed through two phases. In the beginning there was a vague and fumbling approach to Gondar in search of a kingship which had in fact sunk so low that it was now meaningless to the western world. This was succeeded by a determination to use for politico-commercial purposes such centres of power as still existed. The English travellers had come to the vicerealty of Tigrai without appreciating the degree to which actual authority was vested in the rulers of that northern march. At a later date the French would attempt to build up the power of Tigrai, while the English

concentrated on Beghemeder and both would, in turn, work upon the Shoan kings. Yet this developing and very casual rivalry was absolutely checked by the rise of Theodote. As a young military commander Kassa, as he was first called, destroyed in battle after battle the power of Tigrai, Shoa and Beghemeder and took the title of the worn old emperor who existed on the suffiance of the lord of the last-named province. Kassa, now the Emperor Theodote, was, in turn, son-in-law of the ras of Beghemeder and of the viceroy of Tigrai; he was father-in-law to the prince of Shoa who would in time be Menelik II. These princes would be lions beneath his imperial throne. All this was in the future; the first traveller to come upon the scene in the new century was Lord Valentia.

## CHAPTER XIV

### LORD VALENTIA'S ENTERPRISE

THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR GEORGE ANNESLEY, second Earl of Mountnorris, Viscount Valentia in the County of Kerry, Baron Mountnorris, of Mountnorris Castle, and Baron Altham, of Altham, all in the peerage of Ireland, premier Baronet of that kingdom and a Vice-President of the Literary Fund, was accustomed to dress and paint himself like a Cherokee. He was an earnest, obscure and eccentric nobleman. Annesley Bay on the coast of Eritrea is his monument, and that desert sandy rock Valentia Island near the Dahlak Archipelago. An extravagance never very far from improbable pomposities impaired his fortune; in consequence he lost his disreputable intimates and declined upon the middle classes.

At the time when Lord Valentia (for he was known by this title until his father died of an apoplexy in Paris in 1816) began the travels which led him to the coasts of Ethiopia, he was thirty-two. His marriage had foundered six years previously when Lady Valentia had eloped with Mr. Gawler of the Foot Guards; an attempt to secure a divorce by private Act of Parliament had failed in consequence of Her Ladyship's cross-petition. His two sons were in Hans Place with Mr. Gawler; his creditors made residence at Arley Hall impossible; he fell back upon the society of his tutor's family. It is from this source in fact that we can obtain the clearest picture of a young Irish peer who was equally well known and friendless.

Martha Mary Butt, afterwards Mrs. Henry Sherwood, the author of *The Fairchild Family*, was his tutor's daughter and has left an account of Lord Valentia in the years before he went to Ethiopia. He is seen as a tall, solemn, elegant young man with an ill-balanced mind, the last of these qualities being inherited, together with Arley Hall and his position as an English squire, from his mother's family, the mad branch of the Lytteltons. Arley had come to him



as a minor, a happy compensation for the wasted Irish properties. He was never gay in his eccentricities marching about the streets of Kidderminster in his Highland plaid and bonnet. His formal education had been spasmodic, two years at Rugby, a spell at Brasenose when just turned sixteen and then a commission in the army and a period of leave to visit France. "His Lordship,"<sup>1</sup> we are told in the obituary notice in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, "fixed his residence at Strasbourg with a view of facilitating his acquirement of the German and French languages." There was always a maladjusted air of seriousness and loneliness. It seems that he was really most at home in the wide square hall of Stanford rectory, his tutor's house.

He quitted the army on his marriage, which took place when he was nineteen years of age; the bride was an elegant child, one of the nine orphaned daughters of Lord Couitenay, of Powderham.<sup>2</sup> Martha Butt describes the young Lady Valentia who was at this time sixteen. "She had dark hair and a marble-white complexion, a most lovely brow and splendid dark eyes. Her physiognomy always reminded me of a dormouse."

In the next years the seeds were sown of a desire for travel. It was his wife who obliged Valentia to tear up the pavements at Arley Hall and thrust new chimney stacks through the old tiles. The rough quick jokes were hers and the dressing up as ghosts to frighten guests in the state bedrooms. Her trivial six thousand pounds of dowry were quickly spent. "They set out,"<sup>3</sup> writes Mrs. Sherwood, graphically, "with a chariot and four, a complete set of servants and hot-houses, and everything of that sort which is luxurious and burdensome." Very soon the curious and slightly deranged tedium of her husband's character told on Lady Valentia. The scene was prepared for the elopement. There was no harshness on the bride's part. "Poor Nanny,"<sup>4</sup> she said of Lord Valentia, "he means no harm."

It is worth pausing to consider the society in which Valentia now found himself, for it was within this circle that he discovered Henry Salt, whose name is always linked with his in Abyssinia. In a condescending fashion he would place considerable reliance

<sup>1</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine*, New Series, vol. xxii, p. 421.

<sup>2</sup> *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood*, ed. F. J. Harvey Darton, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 136.

on the brothers Butt, clerical pluralists of assured position in their own world, who had taken some share in his education. The elder, Dr. George Butt, had been his tutor, while he had presented the younger, Mr. Thomas Simon Butt, to the living of Arley. One point about the latter is worth recording. "When a boy<sup>1</sup> a cart had gone over him, which had stopped his growth, and given him a peculiarity of form." He had, however, a certain interest in art and was happy to accompany His Lordship on his scientific expeditions. It was on a journey of this character to Fuseli's Gallery in London that Mr Butt presented his nephew, Henry Salt, to his one patron. This young man was the son of a Lichfield surgeon and already slightly connected with the Annesley family through his friendship for the Rev. Charles Cameron, who had married Lucy Lyttelton Butt,<sup>2</sup> "daughter of Dr. George Butt and godchild to His Lordship's mother."

Henry Salt was at this time twenty-two, exactly ten years younger than his future patron. "He was,"<sup>3</sup> wrote his friend and biographer, Mr. J. J. Halls, "a tall, thin and somewhat ungain-looking young man of insinuating address and of frank manners." He was delicate, adventurous and most courageous; he had suffered in childhood from a disease of the spleen. In the year 1802 his ambition had not yet grown upon him and he was over-impressed by the consideration and importance of Lord Valentia.

Salt had hoped to become a portrait painter, but he had been articled to Joseph Farington whose work lay in a very different field. He had been a student at the Royal Academy. "I believe,"<sup>4</sup> wrote his biographer, "Salt made no very great improvement (there)." He was later for a time with Mr. Hoppner, whom he did not find particularly congenial. "By the time I have licked him into shape,"<sup>5</sup> explained this painter, "he will be *as great a bear as any of us.*"

Now he was at a loose end living<sup>6</sup> "in very humble rooms in Panton Square, Haymarket." Halls leaves the reader in no doubt as to his opinion that there was no livelihood for the young man as a painter. He refers, without specifying further, to the romantic attachments which occupied so much of Salt's attention. The

<sup>1</sup> *The Life of Mrs. Sherwood*, ed., F. J. Harvey Darton, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, by J. J. Halls, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, p. 43.

biographer also makes a further point.<sup>1</sup> "Though fond of the pleasures of the table, he (Salt) was never habitually intemperate." The honest sketch ends upon this note. It is not surprising that Henry Salt respectfully implored Viscount Valentia to take him as a secretary and draughtsman on the extensive travels that he had in view.

On 3 June, 1802, the party left London to take passage in the *Minerva*, East Indiaman, commanded by Captain Weldten, and bound for Diamond Harbour in Bengal. Lord Valentia was attended by Mr. Salt and waited on by Coffin, his English servant. The case of wines, the trunks of finery, the medicine chest and new thermometer, the good array of silver-stoppered bottles were carefully stowed on board. His Lordship settled to his cartographical investigations. "Arrowsmith," he is found narrating in regard to the position of the Madeiras,<sup>2</sup> "stands pre-eminent here as in every other point of geographical accuracy." At St. Helena he remarked that Colonel Patton was anxious to introduce the larch into the island; he had no doubt it would thrive well. "We sailed over the spot,"<sup>3</sup> he observed tartly, "where Messrs. Lauri and Whittle have been pleased to place the island of Annabon. The manner in which charts are published in England is a disgrace to a mercantile nation." His thoughts, very easily deflected, now ran on trade conceived along the lines of Britain's policy. In these days Salt was contented. "His (Lord Valentia's) abilities,"<sup>4</sup> he wrote to Halls from the Cape of Good Hope, "I always thought very considerable, but did not give him credit for such uncommon attention in gaining information as I now find."

In the diary, carefully constructed for publication, there is an elaborate piece to mark the arrival of the travellers in what Lord Valentia always calls the Indian Empire. "At seven in the morning,"<sup>5</sup> explains the diarist, "attended by Mr Salt, I took my leave of the *Minerva*. I must make a parting tribute to Captain Weldten, by declaring that I believe it is impossible for anyone in his situation to surpass him in abilities, information, manners, or good nature." It is clear that the writer gave some thought to the way in which inferiors approached him. The passage that now follows is

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, by J. J. Halls, p. 47.

<sup>2</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, vol. 1, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>4</sup> *Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, p. 81.

<sup>5</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, 1, p. 60.

valuable since it sets the key for later ceremonial occasions. "The state barge," this paragraph begins, "in which we embarked, reminded me of the fairy tales. It was very long in proportion to its width, richly ornamented with green and gold; its head, a spread eagle gilt; its stem, a tiger's head and body. Forward were seated twenty natives dressed in scarlet habits, with rose-coloured turbans, who paddled away with great velocity.

"As we advanced the river became clearer, and the scenery was much improved by the country seats of the English, which covered each bank: they were in themselves picturesque, being white with extensive porticoes to the south, and the windows closed by Venetian blinds painted green. Every house was surrounded by a plantation of mangos, jacks, and other oriental fruit trees. After a dinner, with several friends of Mr. Graham, we all proceeded to Government House. The row of chunam pillars, which supported each side, were of a shining white, that gave a contrast to the different dresses of the company. Lord Wellesley wore the orders of St. Patrick and the Crescent in diamonds." Such was the setting for Lord Valentia's approach to Ethiopia.

It has been seen that he had long been addicted to exact, vast and meticulous conceptions before he came to his Red Sea project. That admirable commentator, William Hickey, was now entering on the later stretches of his long journal. He indicates this Irish peer's final intervening preoccupation. "About this period," he notes,<sup>1</sup> "Lord Valentia being then on a tour through Asia for the purpose of making his own observations upon the face of the country, Sir Henry Russell showed him the most polite attention. I consequently was frequently in the noble traveller's company. Botany seemed to be the principal object of his studies, at which the learned men of that quarter (Calcutta) were somewhat surprised, because it was an established notorious fact that there was not a plant nor a shrub between Point Palmiras and Cabool, but was as well known as the whole vegetable production of Great Britain."

After a somewhat extensive survey, Lord Valentia returned to the governor-general's residence at Barrackpore. All the way he made his comments, praising the claret, condoning the opium cultivation, condemning, and this time very reasonably, the new great houses in the Grecian style. "The more confined<sup>2</sup> Hindoo

<sup>1</sup> *Memoirs of William Hickey*, ed., Alfred Spencer, iv, p. 269.

<sup>2</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, i, p. 240.

or Gothic architecture would surely be preferable." Two sentences are most revealing.<sup>1</sup> "As the morning was cool we preferred riding but ordered the elephants to follow." And on a different occasion.<sup>2</sup> "As a sufficient number of bearers were not to be procured, Mr. Salt was obliged to remain behind."

It was in these circumstances that the idea of a journey to the coast of the Red Sea was first mooted as part of a grand conception. "The crescent of Mahommed," Lord Valentia explained<sup>3</sup> in his published writings, "no longer, indeed, forebodes danger to Christianity, but the equally terrible eagles of regenerated France threaten universal destruction to ancient establishments." It was the prospect of unexplored and distant ports, threatened by the temporary French occupation of Egypt, which rose before him. This found an echo in the mind of the governor-general of Bengal. "We are now,"<sup>4</sup> wrote Lord Wellesley, while Valentia was already in the ante-room of Barrackpore, "approaching rapidly to peace upon terms which I trust will bar the portals of the East against the fraud and force of the Consuls of France." He was, therefore, ready to lend assistance in this new project.

The Marquess Wellesley was at this time meditating his return to England from a post which offered him but little satisfaction. He was a statesman whose mercurial charm was overlaid by a mask of dignity. Small and slender and conscious of a certain quality of attraction, he conceived it to be his duty to maintain an atmosphere of splendour. "My household," he once wrote,<sup>5</sup> "is magnificent and my table open to every respectable person in the settlement, and to all newcomers." He was a lonely, fretting man in his middle 'forties, anxious for a Garter, desirous of a marquessate of Great Britain, despising all the sequence of his Irish dignities. "I understand,"<sup>6</sup> Lord Wellesley once exclaimed in reference to his predecessor, "that I have been sacrificed to Lord Cornwallis' reputation or rather to the weak jealousy of his friends." Each attitude possessed its Ciceronian emphasis. A phrase, light and yet oratorical, will indicate the outlook<sup>7</sup> of a viceroy who was ever capable of self-raillery. "This magnificent solitude where I stalk, but like a Royal Tiger without ever a friendly jackall to soothe the

<sup>1</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, I, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, I, p. 92.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 263.

<sup>4</sup> Cal. Fortescue MSS, VII, p. 382.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, IV, p. 382.

<sup>6</sup> *ibid.*, VII, p. 337.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, IV, p. 474.

severity of my thoughts." The governor-general's devotion was concentrated upon his natural son, Richard Wellesley, at school at Eton. Towards Richard's mother his plebeian French mistress, whom he had married and whom Queen Charlotte would not receive, he was somewhat cold for he had other passions. His life seems to have been embittered in his love for the children who could not inherit the honours he desired. There was no one to stand by his side at Barrackpore.

Lord Wellesley was subject to malaria and to the ague. Gone were the days when he had sent back menageries of birds or a crate containing a baby rhinoceros. The interest in recipes, like the "Neapolitan bergamot<sup>1</sup> called *Mela Rosa* for mixing with lemon ice," was over as were the brisk and jovial references to Sir Sodom Thompson. The sardonic touch was with him still as in his description of the servants of the French *émigrés* on the Rhine as "a herd of Valetaille."<sup>2</sup> His tastes were scholarly; he still read the Latin and Greek classics and the Italians, Tasso and Dante. His mind was early nourished on the concept of a *Pax Romana*; this was reflected in his despatches with their great phrases and their simple style. The East Indiamen would bring him, together with the Port and the Madeira "to ripen in the Asiatic sun," his two large Homers. He had a pretty taste in mountains conceived in the Romantic mode and a feeling for the grand in architecture. Such a man was well qualified to appraise poor Lord Valentia.

Especially in this grey period of his life the Marquess Wellesley's valuation was both shrewd and cool. He had led the phalanx of the Wellesley brothers of whom Arthur would one day be the Duke of Wellington. His long struggle with the East India Company's directors was going badly for he could never enter into costing or detailed commercial problems. Thus the arrival of this travelled peer brought back to him the world he knew so well, the assessment of a man's value (or sometimes price) in Anglo-Irish politics. Valentia was connected by blood, but not by friendship for there was the merest acquaintance, with Wellesley's lifelong friends and patrons the Grenville family. His father, Lord Mountnorris, controlled a rickety interest in the Wexford boroughs, which was of some concern to Government. Facts such as these were a relief from all the contests about dyes and indigo; he had every reason for being friendly.

<sup>1</sup> Cal. Fortescue MSS, II, p. 118.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, II, p. 118.

Besides, there was always the marquess' permanent attitude towards the society at Fort William and Fort St. George. "In the evening," he had written<sup>1</sup> once to Glenville, "I have no alternative but the society of my subjects, or solitude. The former is so vulgar, crude, familiar and stupid as to be disgusting and intolerable. The greatest inconvenience, however, arises from the ill-bred familiarity of the general manners. This evil is principally to be attributed to . . . Sir John Shore. His low birth, vulgar manners and Eastern habits, as well as his education in the Company's service, contributed to relax every spring of the government." These words express a definite and considered standpoint. The Marquess Wellesley would welcome the company of an equal, even a rather mad one.

Lord Valentia had come down from Cawnpore with his running footman and his six servants with their silver staves. One sentence will serve to crystallise the purport of his conversations with the tired governor-general. "I proposed to His Excellency,"<sup>2</sup> explained Valentia, "that he should order one of the Bombay cruisers to be prepared for a voyage to the Red Sea; and I offered my gratuitous services to remove our disgraceful ignorance by embarking in her, for the purpose of investigating the eastern shores of Africa, and making the necessary enquiries into the present state of Abyssinia." His laden changing interests were now once more concentrated. A cruiser was ordered to embark the nobleman and his party at Mangalore.

<sup>1</sup> Cal. Fortescue MSS, IV, p. 383

<sup>2</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, II, p. 5

## CHAPTER XV

### WELDE SELASSIE

THE TERMS OF REFERENCE of this new expedition were set down in Lord Valentia's notes as he waited for his vessel at Mangalore. These sentences bear the mark of all his projects which were at once vaunting and insubstantial. "It had always," he declared,<sup>1</sup> "appeared to me an extraordinary circumstance that if the western coast of the Red Sea were really as dangerous as the moderns have uniformly represented it, the ancients should invariably have navigated it in preference to the eastern coast; nor could my suspicions that a western passage existed be removed by the silence of the British officers after a long continuance of our fleet in that sea."

That imagination, which no one had ever pruned, went coiling on. "The commercial advantages,"<sup>2</sup> we are told, "which might attend the opening of a communication with Abyssinia appeared also worthy of attention; and a more favourable time could never be expected than immediately after the British naval power had been so fully displayed on the shores of Arabia and Egypt." And then there came an historical excursus on the consequences of the temporary French occupation of Egypt at the time of the battle of the Nile. "The trade with the interior of Africa had been interrupted in its usual channel first by the conquest of the French, and afterwards by the civil war between the Porte and the (Egyptian) Beys." Such were the objects which Lord Valentia proposed for investigation as he paced with Mr. Salt in attendance while the heat of the spring days crept up on Mangalore.

It was on 8 March 1805 that he met the commander of the ship which had come south from Bombay to embark him. The first impressions were very cordial. "With Captain Keyes of the *Antelope*, who called on me, I was much pleased,"<sup>3</sup> noted the traveller, "as his manner was perfectly gentlemanly; and the

<sup>1</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, II, p. 3

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6



concern he expressed at the smallness of his vessel induced me to suppose that I should find him inclined to do everything in his power to make my voyage comfortable." The real difficulty, however, was to turn on the respective responsibilities of the captain and his guest for it was always Lord Valentia's contention that the governor-general had ordered Captain Keyes to take him where he wished.

"I determined," Lord Valentia's narrative continues,<sup>1</sup> "to go on board the *Antelope* the next morning: I found her to be a brig, quite as large as I expected, about one hundred and fifty tons, mounting twelve eighteen-pound carronades, and having on board forty-one Europeans, including officers, sixteen mariners and thirty lascars and servants. For these they had on board six months rice and salt meat, with forty days' water. The cabin was of a tolerable size: rather more than one third had been partitioned off for me; the remainder served as a dining room in which the Captain and Mr. Salt were obliged to swing their cots."

The voyage to the Red Sea was uneventful, but here Valentia found opposition from Captain Keyes when he broached his project of sounding northwards along the coast. In effect he refused to take the *Antelope* further than Massawah and gave it as his view that his passenger was a guest who was in no way able to relieve him of his responsibilities as commander of the ship. He pointed out that Lord Valentia was a civilian, a comment which was much resented. A note in the *Travels* gives the nobleman's opinion of the impertinence of an officer of the Bombay Marine.

Meanwhile a Christian preoccupation was now manifest. There is some reason to suppose that this derived from Lord Wellesley's Erastian conception of the role of the Church of England in India. It was also reinforced by Lord Valentia's anti-Islamic standpoint. "The Mohamedans,"<sup>2</sup> he had written in a discussion of the Indian situation, "of course detest us." On the other hand he held fast to the view that the deference with which the English treated the prejudices of the Hindus was reconciling this latter element to the Christian government. Now he considered the same question as he saw the mosques in each of the small ports from Massawah right down to Bab-el-Mandeb. "I cannot but flatter myself," he is found writing<sup>3</sup> of the Eritreans, "that Christianity in its more

<sup>1</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, II, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, I, p. 107.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 262.

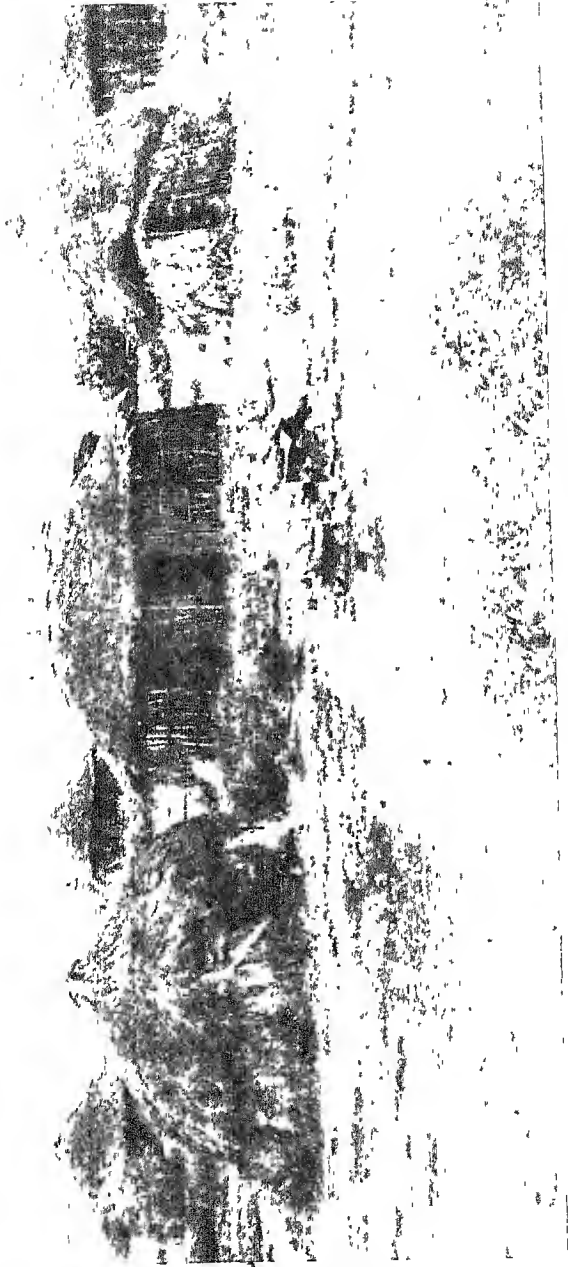


Plate 9 Village scene in the low country.



pure forms, if offered to their acceptance with caution and moderation, would meet with a favourable reception." Fortunately for himself Lord Valentia was not accustomed to pursue his ideas to a conclusion.

He had transferred from the *Antelope* to the *Fox*, a naval vessel under the command of Captain Vashon, and for a second voyage the Honourable Company's cruiser *Panther* had been placed at his disposal. Fresh projects played like fountains in his unco-ordinated mind as he sat in the state cabin of the *Panther* with the Chili vinegar on the table and his indignation seething against Captain Keyes. They were lying off the English factory at Mocha, a port on the Arabian coast a day's sailing westward from Aden. Coffin, His Lordship's English servant, had just encountered in the streets of Mocha a hearty young fellow called Nathaniel Pearce who had turned Moslem. Pearce had tackled him and asked for a bible; Lord Valentia's mind ran on this subject of the fate of such English sailors. "The system,"<sup>1</sup> he noted, "of decoying away scamen in a Mussulman port, which is so very serious an inconvenience to all Christian ships, is not done from any religious motive, but from an idea that all Christians understand the working of great guns, and to this office they are all destined." He then added this further detail. "The captain of the Renegadoes is an Italian who, thirty years ago, came here in command of a native vessel from India. He turned Mussulman, sold the vessel and cargo, and shared the profits of his villainy with the Dola (governor of Mocha) at that time."

This stay at Mocha was to prove important for two interpreters, named respectively Hamed Chamun and Andrew, were added to the party as was Pearce, who received the status of Lord Valentia's second English servant. This last addition was to have significance in the history of the European penetration in Abyssinia.

It was at Massawah that Valentia made his first study of conditions in the Ethiopian hinterland. He visited the governor of the port and province whom he calls the Nayib, a Moslem whose race is not indicated. He was received on the verandah of the governor's house in that Moslem town where Turkish influence still lingered. "I produced," we are told<sup>2</sup> in a passage which is much in character, "my present, prefacing it by saying that I was

<sup>1</sup> Lord Valentia's *Truel*, II, p. 77.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 54

not a merchant, but a man of rank in my own country, travelling for amusement, and returning thither after a long absence." He particularly noted the armed levies from the interior then under the command of the Nayib's brother. "He," it is explained,<sup>1</sup> "is Sirdar of Janissaries, whom they now call Ascarri, having completely lost the former name. The Ascarri are completely under the influence of the Nayib, who pays them out of the dues which ought to be remitted to Constantinople. They still recognise the Sultan as their master, but it is a mere form. The Nayib pays nothing to the King of Abyssinia, but they are, I understand, on very good terms." This picture, if not accurate, is at least coherent.

The information then provided is of a commercial character. "Sequins,"<sup>2</sup> we are told, "do not pass current; dollars and Venetian glass beads are the only money in use. The most desirable article to the natives is cutlery. They asked for some pencils and paper, and every kind of nick-nack. The Nayib's son asked for powder and ball, to kill me an elephant."

The general lines of trade are indicated.<sup>3</sup> "From Habesh they send gee, hides, gold dust, civet, sheep and slaves. Of the latter the number is lately much lessened: a very satisfactory circumstance. In return they send up British broad cloth, arms, ammunition, and the different manufactures of India." A tentative comment follows referring to a port on the Sudan coast of the Red Sea, a point which Lord Valentia did not reach. "The Suakin trade in slaves is, they say, proportionately increasing." It is interesting to contrast the point of view upon this traffic with that which was held in Bruce's day.

There were certain honorific compensations. The gulf on what is now the coast of Eritrea, and at the bottom of which Zulla lies, was named Annesley Bay in compliment to His Lordship's family. The name appears in all the charts and it was on this shore that Sir Robert Napier landed in his campaign against the Emperor Theodore in 1868. An area of sand and rock was called Valentia Island.

The problem which now presented itself was that of the organization of an expedition to the interior. It was decided that Mr. Salt should be the leader since Lord Valentia was not himself minded

<sup>1</sup> Lord Valentia's *Travels*, II, pp. 54 and 57. <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 59 and 71. <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 56-7

to make the journey. The expedition was, however, to carry presents from him, to work under his auspices and at his cost. On 20 July, 1805, the party consisting of ten persons went ashore with the object of making for Antalo, the capital of Tigrāi, and possibly of pressing on to Gondar. Mr. Salt was accompanied by Captain Rudland of the Bombay Marine, Mr. Carter, the two interpreters from Mocha, Pearce, two Arabian servants, a boy from Massawah who spoke the language of the country and Arabic, and an old man who carried their pedometer. They were also attended by ten camel drivers, a guide and twenty-five of the Nayib's Askari. A study of this list reveals one point of interest. It seems that the interpreters from Mocha could speak neither Tigrāian nor Amharic; it was characteristic of such expeditions to be ill-provided on the linguistic side.

When Salt at length returned to England he visited his former master Mr. Farington and the following comment is set down by that industrious diarist. "Lord Wellesley," it is noted,<sup>1</sup> "provided every accommodation to enable Lord Valentia to accomplish the object of his voyage to the Red Sea. His Lordship did not go to visit Abyssinia. Salt said His Lordship had too great a stake in life and was of too much importance to have his life risked by it, but for himself it was comparatively of no consequence." There was something very pleasant about Henry Salt. He was young and adventurous, and had a naively generous belief in his queer patron's consequence.

The journey up from the coast to Antalo was fairly rapid. The laden camels carried the goods they would exchange; it was in all respects a well-found expedition. A note written at a halting place will make this clear. "White cloths," it is explained,<sup>2</sup> "are preferred at Dixan before any other colour. Tobacco, black pepper, looking-glasses, snuff, spirits, and large beads, are good articles for barter: green beads are at present in fashion." As they went upwards from the coastal lowlands Salt made a search for botanical specimens for his patrons. A plant called a *Muse* was brought back by the party and finally set to grow in Lord Valentia's conservatory at Atley Hall.

They had left the Moslem territories and had now come up into Christian land. "Most of the Christians here," Salt is<sup>3</sup> found

<sup>1</sup> *Farington Diary*, iv, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> Salt's narrative printed in Lord Valentia's *Travels*, II, p. 507.    <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 507

noting during his stay at Dixan, "have a cross marked upon their breast or their right arm, or forehead, which, with a blue silk string round their necks, they seem to think indispensable badges of their religion." It was clear that trade was used to secure religious splendour. There is an inventory of a portion<sup>1</sup> of the contents of the royal store room at Chelicut: "Eleven mitres of pure silver inlaid with gold, two dresses of black velvet studded with silver, a large silver drum hooped with gold, besides a rich Venetian cloth very handsomely embroidered." Towards the end of August during the heaviest weeks of the rainy season the party came to Antalo.

They were now in the capital of the prince who wielded the chief power in northern Ethiopia. The authority of these viceroys had originated with Ras Michael Schul. It would continue from hand to hand until the final defeat of Ubié of Tigray by the Emperor Theodore. It was from this stock, considered rather as a centre of power than as an hereditary entity, that there would come the Emperor John IV, who held the throne from 1872 until 1889. Only then would the independence of Tigray go down before the dominance of Menelik II and the House of Shoa.

Any traveller from England was affected by the accounts published by James Bruce and these were written before the degradation that had come upon the emperors at Gondar. In consequence there was still a great desire to reach the imperial capital, and Henry Salt's second mission would be expressly directed to that end. The ruler of Tigray on the other hand was naturally unalterably opposed to any foreign traveller crossing his provinces with a view to making contact with his nominal overlord. This was manifest, but neither Salt nor Valentia could appreciate that the real seat of Ethiopian power lay in Tigray. It was only sixteen years since Bruce's *Travels* had been published and in that work all the emphasis was placed on the throne in Gondar. Salt without ever fully realising this fact penetrated to the true capital; the empire lying to the south was but a dream, Gondar was dead.

For these reasons it is appropriate at this point to consider Tigray and the Tigreans. In the first place it is perhaps only in this generation that these provinces emerge, at least politically, as an entity. Throughout the eighteenth century the power built up by Ras Michael Schul was gaining in solidity and taking shape; but no European traveller had come who was able to prepare a

<sup>1</sup> Salt's narrative printed in Lord Valentia's *Travels*, III, p. 34.

calm assessment. Thus Bruce had seen Ras Michael as king maker in Gondar and not as the leader in a military oligarchy based on the feudal levies of his own northern lands. The account that follows is in fact the first examination of that feudal power which had replaced imperial authority and would grow unchecked until the rise of Theodore II. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century the preponderance of influence would pass to Ras Ali of Beghemeder who would in his turn be succeeded by his son-in-law and supplanter the Emperor Theodore. Meanwhile the decades between 1800 and 1831 were the fat years of military rule from Antalo and Adowa. The two most powerful lords in contemporary Ethiopia were Welde Selassie, whom Salt now visited, and his successor Sabagaudis of Agamè.

Some details may be given of the land which Henry Salt would now explore. The Tigray was in some sense an island province hemmed in on the north by those great southward-facing cliffs which drop to that land of stunted forest to the north of the Mareb river. Beyond the old track, which leads from Adiglat across the *stony downs to Senafe, the empty mountains lie fold on fold.* The interior of Tigray has also areas of mountainous and tangled country, but these only enclose the dun bare plains so often bounded by the bald unlikely hills whose shapes are unforgettable.

In these northern territories snow falls in winter on the heights of the Simen mountains. At the same time the climate has a harsh quality in contrast to the mildness of autumn and spring in Shoa for the hot winds blow across Tigray coming up from the westward from the limitless desert. From the geographical position there was a greater contact with the outside world than in the fastnesses of inner Abyssinia. Both the Nilotic princes in Sennaar and the Arab merchants on the Red Sea coast were within reach. As a consequence the nature of the surrounding lands was understood and there was what one may call a sense of Sudanese realities.

This aspect of the question is reflected in the Tigrean approach to the matter of religion. These provinces had been Christian since the days of St. Flumentius and moreover contained the ancient spiritual capital Aksum. Nevertheless there was a humdrum quality in the people's acceptance of the Christian Faith. One does not find among the Tigrean rulers that politico-religious emphasis which always seems to mark the House of Shoa. The



great Shoan monasteries were far away and the special favour of the Court of Gondar was not susceptible of transplantation. Here in the north there was a sturdy atmosphere, a little bleak, a kind of peasant concentration.

In Tigrai they knew the Moslems as traders rather than as enemies. Communications with the coast were so much simpler for the Tigrean viceroys than for the princes placed in Gondar or in the Shoan capital at Ankober. There was a greater flow of goods and services, and these perhaps served to emphasise the matter of fact Tigrean outlook. Certainly, for whatever reason, that sustained element of the picturesque, which was so marked a feature of court life in Ethiopia, was lacking in the viceroyalty of the Tigrai. The old Amharic fantasy, whether in the Gondarine or the Shoan mode, was absent here. These viceroys were without a sense of dynasty, armed chief had followed chief. When old Ras Michael Sehul had died at Adowa in 1780 in the eighty-eighth year of his age, he was succeeded by his young son Welde Gabriel. The latter was killed in battle by the elder Ras Ali of Beghemeder, and it was on the defeat of Gabie Meschal, whom Ras Ali had installed, that Welde Selassie had emerged as viceroy. There could be nothing withdrawn or sacred in such a feudal history. It followed almost as a consequence that there was a soldierly air in the construction of the different capitals of the Tigrai.

This quality is perhaps particularly clearly seen at Adigrat dominated by the fortress of Sabagaudis, which was built within a few years of Salt's first journey. The Portuguese style of the castle of Fasilidas was not without its influence on the flanking curtain walls and the great wood ironbound gates of the *ghibbi* enclosure. There is a curious unfinished competence about the work which is remote alike from Europe and from Africa. The castle, with its single squat rough tower, rises very grey and sudden from a hillock set in a flowing plain which just faintly resembles the *conca* of Sulmona. The cloud banks pile above the regular and austere Tigrean hills.

With this introduction we can describe the reception of Mr. Salt and his party by the viceroy of Tigrai. It is worth noting that the traveller always calls this chief, who is elsewhere named as Wolde, Welde or Welled, Welleta Selassie. "We were not allowed," the narrative explains,<sup>1</sup> "to dismount from our mules until we had got

<sup>1</sup> Salt's narrative printed in Lord Valentia's *Travels*, III, p. 36.

into the entrance of the great hall, at the farther end of which was seated the Ras, on a couch with two large pillows upon it covered in a rich satin." After some ritual courtesies had been exchanged, the following characteristic instructions were conveyed to the Englishmen. "We were given to understand that nothing more was to be said at this visit."

The next stage came in this instance swiftly. "In the evening the Ras sent for our fire-arms, and treated Peaice and Ibrahim, who took them to him, with great attention, seating them on his couch and giving them plenty of maize. He was highly delighted with the guns, and in return sent us a fishing net, acquainting us at the same time, that he seldom staid at home in the night but took his pleasure in fishing and hunting. He sent us also a dish of stewed fish, about twelve o'clock he sent us some clouted cream, and at four I was called to receive the compliments of the morning"

The scene was set for the reception. "About six o'clock," the narrative goes on<sup>1</sup> "I was sent for, and found the Ras alone, in his hall; I then delivered to him in the name of Lord Valentia, the presents sent by His Lordship, which consisted of two entire pieces of broadcloth, one blue and the other red, a handsome watch, a telescope, some pieces of kincaub and satin, a dress of gold tissue, a gold ring and brocade, and several pieces of muslin." Salt noted that the ras was remarkably small in person and delicately formed. He was quick in his manner notwithstanding his age which was said to be seventy-two; he had a shrewd expression on his countenance. After some time he delivered his reply.

Welde Selassie said that "his only regret arose from the impossibility of communicating in our own language the friendship he felt for us, who, strangers as we were, had come so far from our own country to visit him, while those who were near to him and ought to be his friends thought only of making war upon him." The reply, which this ritual phrase called forth, is crucial to the history of European relations with Ethiopia. Mr. Salt indicated that<sup>2</sup> "an intercourse with the English, who are uncontrolled masters of the sea, would enable the Ras to supply himself at once with whatever commodities he might want, and of a quality far superior to any that had hitherto found their way into his country."

The ideas, which had germinated at Barrackpore in that casual exchange between Lord Wellesley and Lord Valentia, here found

<sup>1</sup> Salt's narrative printed in Lord Valentia's *Travels*, p. 38.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 39.

expression. There is a proconsulat an about the sentence and it has that happy ring of pride on pride which was long found useful in British dealings with despotic eastern rulers and their viceroys. In the daughtly halls at Antalo there must have been a noble sound in the high claim to be "uncontrolled masters of the sea."

Further this was the first occasion on which a European nation had made a claim which could be crystallised. More than a century had passed since the last French ambassador had ridden out of Gondar. In this new exchange there was fore-shadowed the ensuing century of European contact with Ethiopia. The phase thus opened may then be defined as that of the promotion of commerce based upon imperialism; it involved the making of immense claims directed to commercial ends which were for a variety of reasons only negligently pursued.

In this unconsidered first approach there was also a double difficulty. The idea of peaceful commerce as an activity fostered by the ruler was both novel and unattractive to the Tigrean viceroy for he lived off the tolls of the salt caravan. It was his role to tax trade, not to promote it. At the same time, both sides, and the ras's most understandably, doubted the credentials of those with whom they were transacting business. Mr. Salt was concerned with the king in Gondar, whom he could not reach; this was a preoccupation which inevitably caused a justified annoyance to Welde Selassie. The viceroy on the other hand does not appear to have conceded that Salt had any credentials at all. His standing therefore could only be judged by a closer inspection of the gifts that he had brought.

Even in the first conversation it was obvious that, while Salt was speaking of commerce and its advantages, the viceroy was thinking only in terms of fire-arms and war. Thus it was in order to secure munitions that Welde Selassie explained that the port of Buriç, four days' journey from Antalo, was within his dominions and well supplied with fresh water and cattle. For other reasons the position of the English travellers deteriorated very rapidly. A further examination of Lord Valentia's presents did not increase the estimate of their worth and all communication between the visitors and the people of Tigrā was soon forbidden.

The days lengthened out as Salt and his companions sat to all intents and purposes prisoners in their room within the *ghibbi* over the heavy entrance door. The traveller describes their occupation

when at last the summons came to them. "I," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "was engaged in penning some of my sketches and Captain Rudland in teaching one of the Ras's principal men how to make a white-wash for the walls of the house from a chalk stone that we found on the hill of Antalow."

The details of the interview are then set out. One comment is required, it should be explained that Aknum Chund is Salt's variant of the name of the official through whom the journey had been first arranged. The conversation is of interest as showing to how deep an extent the Arab courtesy was by now native to Tigrean lords. "The Ras was gloomy for some time . . . On this he began to relax a little; and said that there had been a mistake made by Aknum Chund in inviting us, but that, as we were here, it was well; that it was his anxiety for our persons which made him wish we should have no communication with the inhabitants, who were little to be depended upon, and that he would rather lose two thousand of his own subjects than that any of our people should come to harm."

After this, certain journeys were permitted and the Englishmen took part in the prince's sport hunting spotted deer in the early morning after sunrise. Welde Selassie had a great fear of ghosts and had deserted the *ghibbi* at Adowa for that reason. Owls screeched now in the empty rooms among the broken tapestries. The viceroy's activities were concentrated on the early daylight and the evening. A note brings his parties before us. "He has," we are told,<sup>2</sup> "about fifty dogs of an inferior cast, not unlike the English lurcher, and at least five hundred men. These are disposed among the thickets of acacia in order to rouse the deer, hares, grouse, partridges, and guinea fowl."

There was a *siesta* lasting four hours in the afternoon and the prince gave over his evenings to chess and supper. On one occasion after a fast when it was not permitted to eat till midnight, he called Salt down at that hour. A small round table was placed before the fire for Welde Selassie and his Fit Aurari and two other chiefs. Fowl curry and grilled mutton were set out, and *tedj* in the thick Bruhl glasses. Outside the September rains came beating down.

There were days when they had boiled cow-heel and when the prince was in a high good humour. These were the occasions when he brought forward an old woman who was accustomed to

<sup>1</sup> Salt's narrative printed in Lord Valentia's *Travels*, III, p. 53      <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

stand behind his chair. He would explain that she was a proper person for the Englishmen to become acquainted with as she had young ladies under her care. A comment on one evening brings a scene before us vividly. "We went," it is explained,<sup>1</sup> "into the hall, and found the Ras at chess in the midst of his chiefs. The chessmen, which are coarsely made of ivory, are very large and clumsy. I observed that their game differs much from ours. Bishops jump over the heads of knights and are only allowed to move three squares." The torch bearers stood against the wall, and the chill of the rains at night in the high valley fell on Welde Selassie's English guests. There the old prince sat, winning and winning.

In spite of this new cordiality it was made plain that the road to Gondar was impassable owing to the bad relationship existing between the viceroy and Gusmeta Guxo, who controlled the puppet emperor. It seems that as the months went by an idea occurred to the ruler which showed how he could profit from the rather useless journey of these English travellers. Pearce was young and strong; if he was induced to stay behind he might still prove of value in the viceroy's wars. The actual circumstances of Pearce's entry into this service will be examined later, but there is a pleasant detail of his interview with his new master that may be set down here. "He (Pearce)<sup>2</sup> told him that being an Englishman he did not know what fear was; with which the Ras was much gratified; and answered that, though very old, his feelings were the same." Just before the English party left the prince demanded and in fact exacted the gift of a blunderbuss with a spring bayonet that caught his fancy. He was less warm about the box of medicines which Salt left for Pearce to serve out at his discretion. The reader is left with the impression that, as he sat over his chess-men, Welde Selassie was burdened by suspicions as to the true reasons that had led these Englishmen to visit him. "A singular request,"<sup>3</sup> notes Henry Salt, "was made to us which we found him (the Ras) earnestly bent upon. That was to swear, that whatever physic we left with him, should not poison him." The rains were over and the party set off in the fine weather down all the miles of those rough tracks set with dried hard euphorbias to where the *Panther* lay at anchor and *Valentia* paced.

<sup>1</sup> Salt's narrative printed in Lord Valentia's *Travels*, II, p. 51

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 145

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 147.

## CHAPTER XVI

### THE ABYSSINIAN TRADE

AS SALT AND HIS patron moved northwards on their way to England, the latter set his notions down in careful sequence. Lord Valentia was never to return, but for more than thirty years he would remain the curious disordered inspiration of each English enterprise in Abyssinia. It was his intention to come into Parliament for a Wexford seat and, even as he sat in Cairo waiting for his passage, his father was planning for this in Downing Street in the ante-chambers. It is worth pausing at this point to attempt to *place* Valentia more exactly. His significance derives from the circumstance that he was the only English nobleman (even if a rather mad one) who could pose as an authority on the kingdom of the negus. Certainly Salt's second journey with its official gifts sent to the emperor by George III would never have materialised without his patron's unremitting efforts. For this reason a digression is necessary to explain Lord Mountnorris's affairs.

Luckily, the Fortescue MSS provide a means of gauging accurately the standing in official circles enjoyed by that strange pair, Valentia and his eccentric father. A letter dated 18 April, 1797, before the commencement of the travels and written by the first Marquess Camden, then lord lieutenant of Ireland, to Mountnorris's cousin, Lord Grenville, defines with acid perfection the view held by the Government in regard to the Annesley family. "I am,"<sup>1</sup> he wrote, "much obliged to you for giving me notice of your correspondence with Lord Mountnorris, and for not having deviated from your rule in this instance. Allow me to say, if I may venture thus far, that it would have been a very pressing application of yours that would have made it very satisfactory to me to load that noble earl, your cousin, with any very *essential marks* of His Majesty's favour." It was into this chilled atmosphere that Valentia returned to make his way.

The idea of both father and son was to place the latter in an Irish seat as a pledged supporter of the Government in return for

<sup>1</sup> Cal Fortescue MSS, III, p. 314.

the grant of favours useful to the family. An occasion was provided by the death of the first Marquess of Ely, which rendered vacant the governorship of Wexford and threw into question the patronage of several boroughs at the next election. The first essential was to set out plainly the nature of the influence that the Annesleys had at their disposal. "I have just seen,"<sup>1</sup> wrote Lord Grenville now prime minister to the secretary in Ireland in April, 1806, "Lord Mountnorris who makes two requests. 1st to be *Custos Rotularum* of Wexford in the room of Lord Ely; and 2nd to be considered as sharing the patronage of that county with Coldclough supposing the latter to succeed." Here, however, the petitioner met with a double setback. His claim to nominate for the borough of Ross was discounted and it was categorically stated<sup>2</sup> that the earl was not "held in that estimation in the county which would have rendered it respectable for the Government to have put him at the head of the magistrates." The axiom propounded by<sup>3</sup> the secretary at Dublin Castle still held good. "No one is to be more carefully dealt with than Lord Mountnorris."

A little later it was made plain that he would not obtain the English peerage for which he asked. The preparatory dispositions made while Lord Valentia was beating homewards were likewise unsuccessful. His father's efforts went awry as the traveller sat in the captain's cabin of the *Diana* coming into Soundings from his long voyage. It was by this time manifest that the administration was not in fact prepared to make Mountnorris any offer; in consequence Valentia did not come into Parliament. At a later stage he sat for just under two years for the close borough of Yarmouth in the Isle of Wight.

While Salt was busy preparing the journal of the *Travels* and arranging illustrations for the press, Lord Valentia determined to put forward to the authorities at India House the considerable advantages to be gained for Great Britain through the opening of a trade with the Red Sea. This approach had the oblique effect which often attended on this peer's representations. Thus, while he failed to impress the principals, he attracted the attention of an independent trader who became responsible for the next move. "His Lordship," we are told,<sup>4</sup> "waited upon the Court of Directors

<sup>1</sup> Col. Forster MSS, viii, p. 76      <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 136      <sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 81

<sup>4</sup> Halls, *op. cit.*, 1, p. 141.

of the East India Company, and laid before them a memorial stating his notions on the subject." This was the genesis of Salt's second journey "The proposition," it is explained, "does not appear to have met the views of that Court; but the President and Board of Trade listened with great attention to the application of Messrs. Jacob, who felt, from his lordship's report, anxious to send a vessel to the Red Sea." Since the chairman of the East India Company and his colleagues considered any such plan chimerical, the Court of Directors could not refuse a licence to this merchant to endeavour to open up a trade direct with Abyssinia.

The immediate consequence of this decision was the fitting out of an expedition with Henry Salt as its leader, he would take passage in the *Marian*, a vessel which Messrs. Jacob had chartered for the voyage that attracted them. It was decided to set out in the first weeks of 1809, taking advantage of the protection of the East India Fleet as far as the approaches to Mozambique.

The voyage had also a semi-political and a scientific side. Canning announced to Lord Valentia that the Government were advancing £500 for Mr. Salt's outfit and a like sum for the expenses of his mission. The African Association, acting through the medium of Sir Joseph Banks, entrusted Mr. Salt with £500 to be used in making discoveries. The College of Surgeons solicited him to form a collection of Red Sea productions.

The politico-commercial instructions are worth recording for these were the first beginnings of a relation between Great Britain and the sovereign state in Ethiopia. "Mr. Salt,"<sup>1</sup> so runs the memorandum prepared for him by the Foreign Office, "will use his own discretion in making choice of the most eligible place to land for the purpose of proceeding to the Court of Abyssinia. Mr. Salt will use his utmost exertion to reach the Court of Gondar and deliver His Majesty's letters and presents to the Emperor of Abyssinia in person. Mr. Salt will use his utmost endeavour to ascertain the present state of the Abyssinian trade, the quantity, quality and value of the Emperor's goods imported, either by way of India or Mocha; the quantity, quality, and value of the goods imported from India; the different articles exported from Abyssinia by sea; as also the present state of the trade carried on by means of caravans between Abyssinia and the interior of Africa." With these preliminaries thus completed they were ready

<sup>1</sup> Memorandum printed in Hills, *op cit*, pp 144-5.



to depart. It should be noted that Mr. Salt was compelled to return in the same vessel, the *Marian*, Captain Thomas Weatherhead, in which he sailed. The duration of his visit was affected by the expense of keeping this ship upon the coast.

The importance of the voyage now beginning was due to this traveller's zest and capacity. His work stands out from that of his companions, Pearce and Coffin, who were also led to Abyssinia through Valentia's impulse. Salt was the only one of the four men capable of a serious commercial analysis, Lord Valentia being debilitated by lack of training and both Pearce and Coffin being free from any serious formal education. For this reason it is with the coming of Henry Salt and from his appreciations and despatches that we can trace the first falling of the shadow of European commercial exploitation on Abyssinia.

The note is struck as the *Marian* put into the port of Mozambique on that great stretch of East African coast which was part of the queen of Portugal's possessions. "By the advice of one of the principal merchants," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "Captain Weatherhead opened a store soon after he arrived, and landed samples of his goods, consisting of iron bars, gun powder, pistols, blunderbusses, hardware, broad cloths, muslins, Cape wine and brandy." This was the accustomed cargo for dealing with the robust savages and it was obvious that goods of an European style would find a market. Before they put out once more into the Mozambique Channel, a note was entered in the ship's journal as to the type of goods which might find favour with the Portuguese: "iron hoops, cutlery, stationery, prints, and framed pictures, a small quantity of household furniture, printed cottons for sofas, silk and cotton stockings for ladies and gentlemen, waistcoat pieces of different patterns." In this part of the voyage there was no hurry. The *Marian* had sailed from Portsmouth on 23 January, 1809, and it was not until the early autumn that she came into those latitudes which Salt had traversed with Lord Valentia. On 27 September, after nightfall, they passed the headland of Cape Guardafui. Salt noted with a careful accuracy that the horn of land stood up dark and bulky with the surf showing white on the line of beaches and the barred moonlight lying on the sea.

On reaching Mocha, Coffin, who had accompanied Salt on the second journey, reported that Captain Rudland was stationed in

<sup>1</sup> Salt's *Travels in Abyssinia*, p. 81.

that post as agent for the Honourable Company. The harbour was fairly active and among the representatives established at this key point was an agent of the Harari sultan. The new arrival found an atmosphere of warm co-operation. "Captain Rudland,"<sup>1</sup> he noted, "was obliging enough to disclose his orders from the Bombay Government, for opening a commercial intercourse with Abyssinia, the plans which he had adopted for this purpose, and the correspondence and transactions which had consequently taken place. Immediately on his arrival in the Red Sea he had, in May, 1809, despatched letters to Ras Welde Selassie, in which he informed him of his arrival at Mocha, as agent of the East India Company, and expressed the desire of the Indian Government to keep up a regular communication with Abyssinia." It is clear that the Bombay Government had a rather more lively interest in this project than the Court of Directors was prepared to show. The intermediary chosen was Nathaniel Pearce, to whom Captain Rudland had written the same summer; he had remained throughout these years at the court of Welde Selassie.

It is simplest to consider Pearce's career separately and later, for he stayed in Abyssinia long after Salt had finished his second journey. At the moment it is only necessary to state that his position was all along precarious and that he had explained that he could not come down to the coast owing to the blood feuds which lay between his protectors and himself and the Arab leaders. After receiving this discouraging information Salt put shore at Massawah, a plan to land at Amphila having miscarried.

The situation on the coast seems to have been more difficult than at the time of Lord Valentia's visit in 1805. In proportion, as the East India Company showed interest, so did the determination of the Arab lords increase. They favoured excessive harbour dues and local taxes. By such means they would retain in their own hands the fairly small volume of trade which drifted through from Abyssinia. A clearer picture of Massawah emerges from the notes made on this second journey. Thus, Captain Weatherhead remarks on the reliability of the wind which begins to blow from the eastward at this harbour at about ten o'clock in the forenoon. The mosques were at this date four in number and there were a few stone houses. The great mass of the population, which numbered altogether about two thousand, lived in huts built of

<sup>1</sup> Salt's *Travels in Abyssinia*, p. 121.

ceeds with dined glass roofing. Some cotton goods from Muscat and Bombay passed through to the interior. Dhows were built in the port and ships careened to make repairs upon the sandy beaches of Massawah Island. There is here for the first time an emphasis on sea power upon that littoral; it was a subject to which Salt would recur.

The *Marian* returned to Mocha leaving Salt at Massawah; he was again accompanied by Mr. Coffin. They were met by Pearce in the interior and together made their way to Chelicut, which lay just outside Antalo and was used as a county palace. Welde Selassie was staying there. As on the previous occasion Salt was persuaded that it was impossible to press on to Gondar. He therefore gave to his host with much solemnity the presents which had been prepared in London for the emperor. These consisted of a painted glass window, a picture of the Virgin Mary and a handsome marble table.<sup>1</sup> "Mr. Pearce, at the Ras' desire, played on a hand organ which had been given by Captain Rudland."

It must be admitted that the printed Travels of this period have a certain sameness and it is a question of discovering the truly revealing strands of information. Past the archæological detail, the account of Aksum for instance, we come to the penetrating glimpse of that old-fashioned commerce which was so much the object of Salt's journey. With this commerce there went the old-style *entrepreneur* or trader. Such a Levantine, or sometimes European merchant was to be an abiding feature in the politico-commercial landscape in Abyssinia. An example of this type was a Greek resident in Adowa who sent to Salt a great provision of viands on his arrival. "Apostoli," the traveller explains,<sup>2</sup> "was a man of considerable wealth and consequence who had chiefly resided at Adowa for the last forty years, though during the time of the former visit (in 1805) he had been absent on a journey to Constantinople." It is pointed out that it was the practice at this epoch for Turks doing business in Abyssinia to make occasional visits for trading purposes to their own capital.

We have now an impression of an element that was crucial to the vague half-seen machinery of commerce which antedated the arrival of the representatives of the Western Powers. The Christian affiliation had its significance. The keen Arab merchants, the

<sup>1</sup> Salt, *Travels in Abyssinia*, p. 266.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 419.

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Plate 10 Study of a tullei, from an unpublished XVII century MS at Cusquam



men who penetrated for slaves and ivory, would not move in to the high plateau country. Besides, the whole Levantine world and the traders from the Greek mainland had the prestige, if not still the protection of Turkish subjects. Thus the greater trade was concentrated in the hands of the Christian "Turk". There is even some indication that the feeling against Islam was stronger now in Ethiopia than it had been during the previous century. Two factors emerge with clearness in the slow irregular pulsation of the economic life of the Amharas. In a vague haphazard fashion the mantle of the Ottoman power was still extended to these regions through its Christian subjects. At the same time a currency of Maria Theresa *thalers*, silver dollar pieces of 1780, was not only in general use but also held in a high peculiar esteem. In both these matters there is a line back to Europe through Cairo, Alexandria and Constantinople. At the same time there was another and a strange condition which impeded aspects of trading. The religious concept dominated the proud, intolerant and inefficient rulers. The plateau was now, as it would still prove under Theodore, a fiercely-guarded sanctuary of Christian land.

Salt's notes on the commercial situation in the interior turn mainly upon the trade which came through Adowa, a town fulfilling both the functions of a centre for Tigras and those of a main stage on the road to Gondar and the old imperial province. Adowa was at this time a place of some eight thousand inhabitants set in an undulating plain to the south-west of the great horn-shaped mountains. It had grown up centuries earlier around the running water, three streams, a northern touch, ran through the carefully spaced gardens and the clustering wanzey trees. The houses with their dried mud walls and wild straw roofing, were set out in what Salt calls "planted allies." Perhaps this was some echo of the *allées* and the *mallees*, the planted trees and waterside of some French city.

The town was the centre of a manufactory.<sup>1</sup> "The chief production of Adowa," Salt explains, "consists in a manufactory of coarse and fine cloths. The quality of cloth made at Adowa occasions a great demand for cotton, a considerable portion of which is procured from the low countries bordering on the Tacazze. . . . The other imports," he continues, "which pass through Adowa for the Gondar market are lead (in small quantities),

<sup>1</sup> Salt, *Travels in Abyssinia*, p. 425

block tin, copper, and gold foil; small Persian carpets of a shewy pattern and of low price, raw silks from China, a few velvets, French broad cloths, and different coloured skins from Egypt, glass ware and beads which find their way from Venice." It is a comprehensive catalogue of such trade as was desired and was allowed to percolate.

A list of exported goods is set out for comparison. "The exports which are carried down to the coast in return, most of which pass," it is explained,<sup>1</sup> "though the hands of the traders at Adowa, consist of ivory, gold and slaves." In regard to this immemorial traffic, Salt stated that about a thousand slaves went through Tigray annually, a part bound for Massawah and the rest going to the small ports to the northward. One interesting note is added.<sup>2</sup> "The working of iron and brass is general throughout the country."<sup>3</sup> Salt gives the prices that the traders gained for each commodity. "Brass foil, or silver foil," we are told, "fetches two and a half dollars per ounce; wrought silk one and a half per waka; red kid skins sell at one and a half dollar each. Tobacco at from three to four dollars per fasil."

These last notes were made at Massawah on the homeward journey. Salt had to return rapidly for the *Marian* was waiting for him; he sailed in June, 1810, from Mocha and landed at Penzance on 11 January, 1811. It is in keeping with the way in which the enterprises which Lord Valentia inspired were bound together that the foreign secretary to whom Salt reported on reaching England should have been the Marquess Wellesley.

The traveller's considerations on the general prospects of trade and indeed on the whole political position in Abyssinia were set in order as the *Marian* crept down the coast of Africa or picked up the Trades in the Atlantic on her long voyage. "At present," noted Salt,<sup>4</sup> "the possession of the ports of Massowa and Suakin by the deputies of the rulers of Jidda, form a decided obstacle to all effectual intercourse with Abyssinia. Possessing several armed ships of four and five hundred tons burthen, with a fleet of dhows, carrying each from six to eight guns (they have) complete command over both sides of the Gulf." Then there follow recommendations. "I may further observe," the writer goes on to contend,<sup>5</sup> "that if some such general plan as the one I have ventured to suggest

<sup>1</sup> Salt, *Travels in Abyssinia*, p. 425

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 426.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 498.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 456.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 497-8.

were carried into effect, and any one point on the Abyssinian coast taken under the protection of the British flag, there is no doubt that a considerable demand would shortly arise for both English and Indian commodities, which, though not in the first instance of any great importance, might still form a valuable appendage to the trade of Mocha." It is interesting to note the suggestion that the British flag should be hoisted for trade protection, this was the mode in which Imperialism operated in the nineteenth century on the coast of Africa

Salt does not omit practical detail useful to Messrs. Jacob pending political developments. Any ship employed for this service to the Red Sea should manage to arrive before the end of May.<sup>1</sup> "Cloth of two colours on the different sides would sell well, either here or in Arabia." The list of possible imports is then examined. The final note is much in character. "Besides these articles, a few low-priced velvets and coarse muslins might answer, together with cheap looking-glasses."

<sup>1</sup> Salt, *Travels in Abyssinia*, p. 498



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE SHADOW KINGS

THE ENGLISH JOURNEY, just described, has added to our knowledge of the rudimentary trade in Ethiopia and the next account is principally of value for the light that it throws upon the shadowy kings who were nominally ruling or had once ruled in Gondar. The figure of Takla Giorgis, who had reigned as an independent sovereign in the eighteenth century, here reappears. He was by this time something less than a symbol. Still it seems that there remained an element of the reverence which had once surrounded him. Takla Giorgis's reappearance in 1815 was a consequence of the marriage of the viceroy Welde Selassie with his daughter, a child of just thirteen. This was a ceremonial alliance for the old chieftain, who dominates this epoch, was over seventy years of age at the time of his marriage feasting.

At first sight there is a marked contrast between the life history and character of Nathaniel Pearce, who is the eye witness of these scenes, and the withdrawn enfeebled life to which it was his lot to penetrate. It may, however, be suggested that it was just Pearce's lack of status that enabled him to witness episodes of Abyssinian custom that were not revealed to more portentuous travellers. He was a sworn-man and in fact a servant to Welde Selassie; he was prepared for adventures and he came upon this strange faint world.

Only a relatively detailed survey can indicate the full flavour of Pearce's approach. The importance of his narrative lies in the fact that he has left the only detailed account of Abyssinia that we possess which has been written by an Englishman who made his living in that country. He was one of the very first specimens of a new type that of the English servants of a lord in Africa. It is clear from all his writings that he was deeply attached to Henry Salt and in fact he ended his life in his service. Both men possessed great courage, and Pearce reveals himself as self-reliant and ingenuous and perfectly unembarrassed. His character leaves the

impression of an uninhibited truthfulness. "I send you,"<sup>1</sup> he wrote to Mr. Salt in the long letter that prefaces his narrative, "every particular of my life that I can possibly recollect previously to my becoming acquainted with you; scandalous as it is, the truth of it will shame the devil."

The following pages are required to illustrate the quality of the sturdy traveller. "I was born," he continues after this striking opening, "at East Acton, Middlesex, on the 14th day of February 1779, and before I was seven years of age I had learned to read and write a little, at a day-school in Acton. My father . . . sent me to the Rev Daniel Adderson's academy at Thirsk in Yorkshire, where I remained exactly six years. The only improvement I made in my scholarship was, that I got through the French Grammar, and in summing into vulgar fractions." This is perhaps a slightly roseate account of what really happened, but Mr. Peaice's education was his stock in trade.

"My father,"<sup>2</sup> he goes on in a passage which carries more exact conviction, "at last determined, if possible, to break me in. He accordingly sent me apprentice to a stubborn and unmerciful carpenter and joiner in Duke Street, Grosvenor Square, London, of the name of Thatcher. Being unable to bear his sulky look and heavy fist, I soon found my way to Wapping, where, at New Crane Stairs, I met with a waterman to whom I told my mind. Glad of his prize, he put me into the stern-sheets of his boat, like a gentleman, and pulled me on board of a bark called the *Commerce of London*. I made one voyage to Petersburg, and on my return, went to see my sister (in the Minorities) who kept me until she sent to my father." It is the number of chances which this youth had that is remarkable.

"As we rode home in a chaise-cart,"<sup>3</sup> we are told with a sudden fashionable detail, "the poor affectionate old man asked me, if I had had enough of the sea and promised me he would do many things, if I would be dutiful. My father once more put me apprentice in London, and sent me to a wholesale and retail leatherseller's in Duke Street, West Smithfield. My master, whose name was

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated at Adow, July, 1817, printed in the *Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Peaice written by himself during a residence in Abyssinia from the years 1810 to 1819*, ed., J. J. Falls, 1, pp 1-2

<sup>2</sup> *Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Peaice*, 1, pp. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 1, p. 6

Martin, liked me very much. However my mistress, Mrs. Martin, and I did not agree, so I packed up my kit of clothing and set out for Deptford, where I found a boat's crew of young lads, like myself. We soon got acquainted, they belonged to a new sloop of war, called the *Alert*; then just fitting out. One of them fetched me a dress of his own from the ship, and I sold my fore-and-afters, or long clothes, to a slopman. When we had spent the whole of the money, I went on board with my new companions, and entered." This was Pearce's decisive act, enlistment in the Royal Navy. He did not on the first occasion stay there long.

"We went," he relates after saying that he had been<sup>1</sup> placed in the maintop, "two cruises in the North Sea, accompanied by the *Albion*, after which we were ordered to Sheerness; to fit out and take in provisions for six months. On the 14th day of May 1794 we were chased by *L'Unité*, French frigate of 44 guns." The *Alert* surrendered after a stiff action and as a consequence Pearce was present at the battle of the Glorious first of June in the main hold of a French line-of-battleship taking him and his companions to their Breton prison. A few months later he escaped and succeeded in reaching the *Pomona*, Commodore Sir John Warren, then lying off the coast of Brittany. On arrival at Portsmouth he was placed on the books of the *Bellerophon*. "I was not on board the *Bellerophon*," we are told, "more than six months, during which time we only went two cruises, when I deserted at Portsmouth, and worked my passage to South Shields, in a small brig which had (just) delivered her cargo of coals"

The hopeful young deserter was not yet tired of the sea. Having worked his passage south to Gravesend in another vessel, his patent fitted him out for the third time. "My poor old father," he explains,<sup>2</sup> "seeing me still wild was advised to send me as far from home as possible and accordingly . . . being acquainted with some gentlemen in the India House, he got me on board the *Thames* East Indiaman, Captain Williams, bound for China."

Pearce was not destined to return to England from that long voyage. It is worth noting how in his story he builds up his own unruly disposition. At Amboyna during the eastward journey Pearce and two others got into trouble with the natives and were brought down to the jetty by a Sepoy guard. "As soon as the

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce*, 1, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 1, pp. 19-20.

ship was under weigh," it is explained in an account<sup>1</sup> of this escapade, "we were brought on the quarter-deck, and the captain said, 'Mr. Clark' (when I deserted from the *Bellerophon* I changed my name to my mother's) 'you are the leader.' Accordingly I was tied up and received two dozen lashes."

A rather more severe punishment followed an attempt to desert at Canton when Pearce proposed to join a caravan of American merchants bound for Russia. On the homeward passage he left the *Thames* at the Cape of Good Hope and gave himself up as a naval deserter to Captain Valentine Edwards, then commanding the *Sceptre* 64.

The next episode possesses a clear significance in the development of Pearce's story. Experienced naval ratings were in short supply. There was an element of merit in taking service in an East Indianan, but now he deserted once again. With six other seamen he left the *Sceptre* at Butcher's Island close to Bombay and, landing near Elephanta, made his way to Poona being joined on the road by a deserter from the Madras Artillery who had been in Holkar's army. On reaching Poona the men were much discouraged by the miserable situation of the European officers in the employment of Indian rulers. In consequence they decided to make their way to Goa to join some Portuguese ships which had come in to the port of the *Estado da India*. On the road they were captured by the guards of the English Resident and returned to the *Sceptre*. Pearce refused the suggestion of a deserter from the *Suffolk* 74, who was being sent back with him, that he should stage an escape on the way. He always expressed his gratitude to Captain Williams, who saved him from being hanged, and dated the new series of his misfortunes from the disaster which took place when the *Sceptre* was lost off Table Bay with nearly three hundred of her ship's company. The captain perished.

Pearce was now drafted into the *Lancaster* 64, wearing the flag of Rear Admiral Sir Roger Curtis, and took part in a cutting out expedition at Port Louis in the Isle de France where he was wounded by a splinter in the groin. Pearce *alias* Clark deserted from the Navy for the last time at Bombay and joined the *Antelope* of the Honourable Company's Mainie under the name of François Duvalot. Thus again was a comparatively venial offence and the situation would never have become intolerable had he been able to remain with his

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Adventures of Nathaniel Pearce*, 3, p. 21

new masters. It will be remembered that the *Antelope* went down to embark Lord Valentia at Mangalore.

On board the vessel the pecc was not alone in hating Captain Keyes. At Mocha Pearce deserted, gave himself up to the governor of the place and turned Mohammedan. This crucial episode is not underlined in the narrative, but it was nevertheless the action that made his return impossible. Pearce was indeed taken on board the *Panther*, but it was necessary for him to leave her before she sailed for India. There was every inducement for him to go inland with Henry Salt and to stay in Ethiopia once he reached the capital of Tigrai.

Without stressing the matter unduly, the step described places his determination to remain with Ras Welde Selassie in a new light. Pearce was easy to deal with once he had gained authority, he was fond of women and spoke a little Arabic. His English companions for their part determined to build him up. He was given two muskets from the *Panther*, some powder, flints and ball. "He was," wrote<sup>1</sup> Lord Valentia, "the best armed man in Habash." Welde Selassie promised him the command of a district when he should have obtained six matchlocks, and these his patrons promised to procure for him. Such were Nathaniel Pearce's antecedents.

He stayed in Abyssinia for thirteen years; he was faithful to his oath to his new master and only went north to Cairo after the death of Welde Selassie. Pearce married the daughter of a Levantine merchant at Adowa whose name is given as Syder Paulus. During the later portion of his stay he had with him another Englishman, Mr. Coffin, who came as Salt's servant on his second journey and remained till 1827 when Welde Selassie's successor Sabagaudis sent him on a mission to Great Britain. With these preliminaries completed, we can see how Ethiopia appeared to the new observers.

In the first place the political chaos was increasing and the empire at Gondar had advanced a further stage towards its dissolution. The order, which was perceptible in the Tigrai, did not extend to the southern province. There old forms remained without even a slight reality of power to give them substance. It is a merit in Pearce that he is so unsurprised and so completely uninquiring. Thus he provides without appearing to regard it as in any way remarkable a list of no less than six kings who had once ruled in

<sup>1</sup> *Travels*, II, p. 437

Gondar and were living in the empire in 1813, Takla Giorgis in Waldubba, Ischias in Gondar, Guarlu on the throne in that city, Yonas in Gojjam, Yoas in Gondar, Bede Mariam in Samen.

"They are all," it is explained,<sup>1</sup> "related to each other and, as they boast, are descended from the true race; but the kings of Abyssinia have so many wives from far and near that it makes it difficult to decide to whom the Crown ought to descend." In the autumn of the same year Pearce has an entry which describes<sup>2</sup> the semblance of authority of those who still held the bare imperial name. "The death of the deposed king, Ischias, father of Guarlu, the present king, was announced about this time. He died on September 13th, 1813; the Ras kept only one day's cry for him; though he was his father-in-law through his late wife Ozoro Mantwaub."

Gradually the mosaic can be pieced together. We are told of Bede Mariam, the former king, coming to Antalo to beg Ras Welde Selassie to forgive everything that had happened on the part of Ras Guebra since the latter acknowledged that he had done wrong. Ras Guebra was a rival chieftain to Welde Selassie. It is explained that Bede Mariam had been placed upon the throne by Gabriel, Ras Michael Schul's son, the latter being killed by the elder Ras Ali. Once this protector was dead, Bede Mariam was dethroned after a reign of only seven months. Then comes a piece of information that is quite unexpected. "Since (this)<sup>3</sup> time he (Bede Mariam) remained with Ras Guebra and sometimes with Ras Welde Selassie, but being a Roman Catholic he agrees best with Ras Guebra, who is a follower of that religion." This is rather a disconcerting statement as one strives to penetrate to those last dim kings. Influences lingered for a long time in Ethiopia. And then we come to yet one more reminder of the poverty of these ex-sovereigns. In the early summer of 1813 Pearce had accompanied Welde Selassie to Lama on the frontiers of the Galla country whither he had gone to thatch a church, which had been built by his orders against the coming rains. While thus engaged, news came of the death of two of the deposed rulers. "We repaired," explains Pearce,<sup>4</sup> "with all speed to Antalo where we found the Ras and the country-people assembled at the cry in the market place. Yoas died in Gondar

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, p. 112

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 110.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 125.

and Yonas died a few days before him in Gojjam, both very poor without leaving sufficient even to purchase a coffin to receive their remains or money enough for *sellant* or *tesar*." It was their protectors, and the latter's rivals who had deposed them, who were thus obliged to pay for the keening and the ritual lamentation of the dead kings.

These years must mark the nadir of the imperial idea in Ethiopia. The old emperor Takla Giorgis was still alive, and there were from time to time proposals to reinstate him; but no such plan came to maturity. The viceroy Welde Selassie had himself attained to a great age. The machinery of government was running down.

A note on the religious affiliation may find place here. It is also of interest as showing the persistence with which the Ethiopian churchmen sought to prove that every traveller from the western countries was a Roman agent. One differentiation stands out clearly. Throughout this period the princes and viceroys hoped that each newcomer might bring fire-arms; the churchmen on the other hand sharply feared that they brought the Christism and the Western Faith. The following exchange well illustrates the situation. "One day," relates Pearce,<sup>1</sup> "the Abuna sent for me to show me Feringee books, as he termed them; these books were a great number of bibles in Latin and Arabic, some in Latin and Ethiopic, and some in the Italian language." At this point the accustomed ritual question and answer finds expression. "'See,' exclaimed the Abuna, 'we have found your secret place.' I told him I did not know what he meant; he said 'Read your country books.' I told him they were not of my country, he persisted that I was a liar."

The *abuna* then showed Pearce a large chest full of pictures and of books which had never been used since they were printed. It seems that they had all been found in the monastery at Debra Dámo; some bore a Viennese imprint with the date 1785. In the sequel certain of the books were burned and the remainder thrown into the river. The *abuna* remarked that they were the devil's works. Pearce states that some of the monks seemed to regret these fine volumes with their warmly-coloured religious pictures. "By what I could learn from the monks of Debra Damo," the traveller explains, "these books were brought into the country by a Roman Catholic priest of Gondar of the name of Abba Tobia, who had been sent

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, p. 149.

to Rome by those of that religion to bring a bishop." The prelate never arrived in Abyssinia, but the *cache* is described as his new library.

The whole tale sounds very strange. Still other circumstances lend support to the impression of a casual infiltration of variegated influences. All that can be said of these matters is that their course is sometimes unpredictable and in each case unexplored. A reference to the last years of Takla Giorgis bears on this same point. Pearce described how in 1817 the *abuna* had reprimanded the deposed sovereign at the church gate at Aksum. "The king," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "took an oath to follow the Coptic religion before which he had been of the Greek." Were there then Orthodox priests as well as Greek travellers in Abyssinia?

It is against this background that we must place the account of the memories of Gondar which comes down to us from Mt. Coffin and is enshrined in Pearce's travel. Ras Welde Selassie had organised an expedition down to the old capital and this move was associated with a plan to replace the nominal ruler Guarlu by Takla Giorgis, who was now his own *protégé*. "The news of our approach," it is explained,<sup>2</sup> "had many days past been in Gondar, and before we left Indert Kaub, the king, Itse Guarlu, had taken all his property and gone to the *giddam* island in the Lake Tsana; indeed all great people in office under Guxo had done the same, fearing the tyranny of Takla Giorgis, and supposing that he would be again placed upon the throne." There then follows a comment on the Portuguese Bridge over the Abai which shows the accuracy of tradition. "Next morning," it is recounted, "we marched to the Ungarran and about twelve o'clock encamped close by an old bridge formerly built by the Portuguese in the reign of King Fasil for the purpose of crossing the river in the rainy season."

Very soon Coffin is describing the ancient city. "I could only see," he writes<sup>3</sup> "a part of the east side of the town, where I was stationed, but from a hill about a quarter of a mile from our camp I could survey the whole. The King's house, called Itsa Gamb (the King's tower) stood in the middle upon a height, and looked more like a Portuguese church than a royal palace. The king does not live in it at present, nor has he for many years past; the doors are all broken down, and the whole is very much out of

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 333.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 234.



repair, though within the walls Ise Guailu had built several decent apartments besides the one he lived in." The next phrases are most revealing<sup>1</sup> "If Gondar was built in a regular manner after the mode of building in Europe, one eighth of the ground would be sufficient for its population. The houses are all thatched, but, on account of the badness of the clay, they are obliged to thatch their walls likewise, to prevent them being washed down by the rain. The whole town is lined with *wanzatra* trees" These were the wazey trees, which James Bruce noted, they were more enduring than the buildings.

"In the day," continues Coffin, "our camp was full of the Amhara women who used to join in gangs, the girls in one and the grown women in another, singing to the sound of a drum, which a woman beat at both ends, and carried slung with a string about her neck." It is not surprising that they sang of Welde Selassie, the fine new conqueror, giving him that name of Badinsah which he had received at the taking of Gabri Mascall. Badinsah was the horse which had borne him to that victory. "Give," the women sang,<sup>2</sup> "the Badinsah breeches, and he is a lion: where is the man that will dare to hold his shield to him?"

After the scene of revelry we return to an examination of the capital. "The Jews," Coffin notes,<sup>3</sup> "at present are not numerous in Gondar as scarcely four hundred can be found in that place." It was still the holy capital. "The priests are of opinion that their city is very grand and they call it . . . the city of forty four churches. Cusquam is at present the mother-church; it is well thatched, and the blue silk with which it is lined, and the large mirrors, with which it was adorned by the Queen Mantwaub, are still in a perfect state." The legends of the empress's riches are recited. In making golden crowns, crosses and cups for the holy service and in providing silk carpets, cushions and hangings to furnish Cusquam this princess is stated to have expended fifty *wakeas* of pure gold. "The edifice," it is explained,<sup>4</sup> "is of no better material than other buildings in the city." A note is added on the methods of building and decoration. "This church is built with clay, rough stones, wood, canes and straw, which are the principal materials for the first buildings in Abyssinia." No mortar was in use. No colours were made in the country except a fine red used

<sup>1</sup> Peacock, *op cit.*, pp. 235-6

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 236.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 241.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 242.

for dyeing ivory, other paints were obtained dry from Arabia.

As a pendant to these details Pearce provides a sketch of the Emperor Takla Giorgis in his old age which assists us in assessing that last phase of the House of Fasilidas. "In his personal appearance," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "he is tall and stout in proportion, always wears his hair long and plaited; has large eyes, a Roman nose, not much beard, and a very manly and expressive countenance, though he is a great coward. He has a dark shining skin, which is very singular, as the king Itsa Yohannes and his wife Ozoro Sancheviyer, Tacla's father and mother, were very fair for Abyssinians, and Tacla Haimanot, his brother, was also very fair, while he, the youngest son, is as dark as mahogany.

He always wears a silver or gold bodkin upon his forehead; and round the instep, and below the ankle, a string of oval silver or gold beads. He is by all accounts sixty-six years of age." In conclusion, it is stated that this king was believed to be most learned in the Scriptures. "He has," it is asserted,<sup>2</sup> "a number of children in all parts of the country, some by women of the lowest class, many of whom are grown up and are great vagabonds."

A specimen is given of the old ruler's conversation. The exchange is best set down in the words of the English traveller. "You *Feringees* are cunning dogs,"<sup>3</sup> exclaimed Takla Giorgis, "'Brave and true,' replied I. The organ, which Mr. Coffin had just begun to turn, next took his attention. 'I hear it breathes,' said he several times, and, as upon putting his ear close, he could hear a hiss now and then, occasioned by there being a small hole in the leather on one side of the bellows, he cried out 'By St. Michael, there is a snake in it. I hear it plainly.'" The *dénouement* is not unexpected. "'Such a thing,' declared the king, "'which contains a devil cannot be fit for a church.'"

It was not long after these exchanges that Takla Giorgis died in the winter of 1817. "He was buried in the church-yard of Mariam Sean at Aksum on the 12th of December being a great holy-day." A note by Pearce has here a curious echo of the entries made in sixteenth century Ireland in the Annals of the Four Masters "Guarlu, king of Gondar died. . . .<sup>1</sup> He was son to Ischias, his brother Yasous and sister Mantwaub, died at Chelicut in 1812 of

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, *op cit.*, pp. 272-3

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 277

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 267.

the small-pox, and there is only one living brother called Yoas. Ever since the death of his brother and sister Yoas had lived with the monks of Waldubba through grief. Ito Zatobabel, younger son of the late king Tecla Giorgis is trying to get Girulu's situation." This marks the last decline of the old kingship.

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, pp. 246 and 257.

## CHAPTER XVIII

### TRANSITION

THE YEARS BETWEEN 1818 AND 1840 present a series of kaleidoscopic changes in Ethiopia which are particularly hard to study. Welde Selassie died in the earlier year and had no true successor. Sources of information are very meagre. With the exception of the journal of Dr. Gobat, there is no contemporary European record of the decades which preceded the occupation of Aden by the East India Company's forces in 1837. Certain changes must be indicated.

The period opens in the accustomed fashion. Pearce has a swift description of the old viceroy of Tigrāi in the months before his death. It is in line with the account left by Salt of his first meeting thirteen years earlier; we receive in this second case the same impression of the patriarchal quality of a great unquestioned oligarchic lord. The traveller had just been considering some examples of meanness. "This," wrote Pearce,<sup>1</sup> "was not the case with the old Ras; he had never been extravagant, but liked to see his money laid out to good purpose, and was always ready to help those in distress; but he was very particular in investigating their cases to guard against imposition, though he was often cheated by the artfulness of religionists of both sexes, who swarm and lurk, like hyænas, in all the secret holds of Abyssinia." Death was now closing in on the aged chieftain and Pearce recalls,<sup>2</sup> almost in notebook form, some other traits. "He (Welde Selassie) drank very freely of wine and maize, but never drank brandy. He never ate goat's flesh, or guinea fowl, or the flesh of an antelope, called *madoqua*. He was fond of hunting till within a few months before his death."

There follow details of the viceroy's riches worked into an account of his funeral rites. "Abba Gebre Mariam,<sup>3</sup> the head treasurer, reported that he (Welde Selassie) had seventy-five

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, p. 87

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 91-2.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 95.

thousand dollars and fifty *wakebs* of gold, and a number of gold and silver ornaments, such as crowns, crosses, books with golden and silver covers, and part of the Jewels presented to the Ras by His Britannic Majesty. . . . In a monastery in the wilderness of Tembien he had five thousand dollars and a number of glass ornaments Household goods, such as drinking glasses, horns, etc., were given to the poor” The immediate consequence of Welde Selassie’s death was Nathaniel Pearce’s departure He went north to Cairo where his friend, Mr. Salt, had recently been appointed consul general.

This is the point at which to consider the shift of emphasis that gave a new trend to the faint British interest in Abyssinia. There had been a gradual change in the years preceding Salt’s return to the Middle East In the first place Lord Valentia had developed a different series of concerns In regard to this matter a letter from George Rose, then treasurer of the Navy, to Lord Bathurst will put the situation in perspective. “Lord Valentia,” he wrote at a time when Salt was sailing homeward from his second voyage,<sup>1</sup> “has announced very formally at the Alfred that he has an appointment to revolutionise the Greek islands and that Mr. Lecky is his secretary of which he speaks largely and publicly.” Abyssinia would not again possess the first place in that rather crazy mind.

On the other hand the brief career of Alexander Murray had illustrated the beginnings of that European concern for Ethiopian linguistic origins which Mr. Bruce’s manuscripts had first called forth In this study it is unnecessary either to attempt to estimate the knowledge or to reconstruct the role of Dr. Murray. A paragraph will suffice to indicate the general impetus that he provided. While parish minister of Urr in Kirkcudbrightshire, Murray revealed himself as a scholar with that bias towards universal genius which the discipline of nineteenth century studies had not yet come to quell. He had only seven years of recognition and retained through his short life the questing unrelenting effort of the youth who is self-taught. He was primarily the student and investigator of those manuscripts which Mr. Bruce had brought back to Scotland with him. He had edited for Constable a new edition of Bruce’s travels, which had been published in 1805, and had issued three years later his capable and discriminating *Life of Bruce*. Dr. Murray had set himself up as the interpreter, apologist

<sup>1</sup> Letter dated 29th August, 1810, Cal. Bathurst MSS, p. 148



*Plate 11* Amhaic types

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and champion of the old explorer. It was to this divine that Henry Salt turned for a translation of the letter in Amharic that he brought back to King George III from Welde Selassie.

The two preoccupations that now emerge are those of the explorer and the missionary. Salt had by this time been taken into the service of the Turkish department of the Foreign Office and Murray began to enquire of Pearce and Coffin. "I will first give you,"<sup>1</sup> wrote Salt in this connection, "a little of the latest news from Abyssinia. On Saturday last I received letters from the two Englishmen I left there, and a short Ethiopic letter from the Ras. They . . . give two distinct accounts, received by the Shoa Cafilas, of some white man approaching Efat from the interior, whom they suppose to be Mungo Park. It is more likely to be Horneman, or Mr. Cowie, who left the Cape some five or six years ago." The same concern was manifested by his correspondent. "I greatly wish," he wrote,<sup>2</sup> "that (you two friends) may conduct the white traveller from the south into Tigie. Park is, I believe, gone: and Horneman, if alive, must have emerged from the heart of Africa." This exchange is recorded to indicate how a Turkish merchant, bound for Shoa and coming from Zeila through Efat, was mistaken for the great explorer, Park, who in fact perished on the Niger. Henceforward, Abyssinia would lie within the pattern of that network of scientific exploitation which increasingly would mark the new rich century.

The next concern to become manifest was a missionary zeal, biblical in its character. Very soon the interest of the Biblical Society, in which body Lord Valentia is found as president of the Abyssinian Sub-Committee, came to the fore. An effort was made by that Society to obtain possession of the Kinnaird MSS which remained in the hands of the traveller's widow. "I apprehend," wrote Murray in this connection,<sup>3</sup> "if application were made to Mrs. Bruce by some of the noble patrons of the Biblical Society, that she might be disposed to promote its views, either by way of a favour, or for some genteel consideration suited to her rank in life." An idea, part linguistic and part missionary, seized upon Dr. Murray and he gave full rein to his tumbling conceptions. These were characteristic of his era in Britain, however little

<sup>1</sup> J. J. Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, 1, p. 305.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, 1, p. 317.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, 1, p. 326.



congenial in Ethiopia. "Might it," he wrote to Salt,<sup>1</sup> "not be proper to attempt giving the Abyssinians some idea of the plenty and cheapness of books among us, and of the art of multiplying copies? Some of our books might be introduced to their notice. Surely Abyssinia, a Christian country; not remote from India, and extending considerably into Africa, is a good station for getting information respecting the interior, and for doing benefit to ourselves and others in the way of commerce and intercourse." He then elaborated his thesis that such intercourse could be established in a very profitable and solid manner. "Trade finds its way through the Galla to Ifat and Adel, and through the desert from Cairo to Timbucto; would it not find its way from Britain and from India to Gondar?"

This was written in May, 1812; two months later Dr. Murray was appointed to the chair of Oriental Languages at Edinburgh and within a year he was dead. He was only thirty-seven and he seems never to have left his native country. At the same time he had indicated the angle from which Britain would approach Abyssinia and had set certain agencies in action. There would in time develop the export, and perhaps more often the attempt to export, the new cheap mass-produced goods and bibles. But what save fire-arms would interest Amharic lords?

In the year that Welde Selassie died, a move was made in Cairo which would foreshadow another permanent element in the foreign relations of nineteenth century Ethiopia, that is to say, the territorial ambitions of the House of Mehemet Ali. That great ruler had been recognised by the Sultan Selim III as pasha of Egypt in 1805. Now in 1818 he was named by the Sublime Porte as *wali* of the province of Abyssinia, an office which conferred the right to appoint the local governors at Suakin and Massawah and to collect the tolls of caravans carrying slaves and ivory for sale to the Gujarati traders in the Red Sea ports. This appointment was the prelude to those expeditions up the Nile which would link the fortunes of the Sudan with those of Egypt. Thus, in 1820, the lure of Sudanese and Abyssinian gold mines (real or assumed) led Mehemet Ali to embark on the campaign which resulted in the annexation of the kingdom of Sennaar.

A comment made by Salt in this connection has come down to us. "The Pasha here,"<sup>2</sup> he wrote to Pearce from Cairo, "talks of

<sup>1</sup> J. J. Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, 1, p. 336.   <sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, II, p. 68.

conquering Abyssinia some day or other, but that *will never do*; for though bad Christians that is better than Mussulmans." This was almost his last intervention. In June, 1820, Pearce died at Alexandria of a raging fever "greatly aggravated<sup>1</sup> by the mistaken and somewhat intemperate use of brandy." In October, 1827, Mr. Salt followed him. Coffin's New Testament, given to him at Mocha by Captain Rudland long before, was in use at that death bed. The Reverend Mr. Christian Kuegler, who himself would die in Abyssinia, assisted at the funeral in Alexandria. The explorer's biographer notes an occurrence in connection with his friend's passing. On the morning of Salt's death, Halls, in London, awoke to find him standing by his bedside. They had made a pact that the first to die would attempt to return. "I felt,"<sup>2</sup> explains Halls, "awed, but not alarmed, and exclaimed, 'Salt, you are not among the living?' He shook his head mournfully. I then asked, 'How is it with you?' He answered, 'Better than might have been expected.'"

\* \* \*

It is interesting to examine at this point the view which the royal chronicle reflects of the first Egyptian attack on the country. It will be seen that the Ethiopians were accustomed to describe the Egyptians as Turks. The sentences occur in a passage praising one of the new military leaders. "Dajazmach Kenfu," we are told,<sup>3</sup> "preserved the country in peace against oppressors and robbers. He cut off the hands and feet of brigands and thieves. So the country he ruled could rest quiet from the violence of the soldiery; rich and poor rejoiced in his rule. In his day was abundance and famine ceased. In his day it was heard that the Turks had come and encamped at Matemma. When he heard of this, the whole country was alarmed and grieved and all made supplications (for help) with loud lamentation. Said Dajazmach Kenfu, 'Have no fear; be not afraid. So long as I am not dead, you shall not die.' This said, he departed and betook himself to Matemma to make war on the Turks, who had come to take tribute from the Arab tribes who inhabited Matemma. The numbers of the Turks were four hundred. He gave battle to them and slaughtered them." The principal interest of this statement is as a

<sup>1</sup> Pearce, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

<sup>2</sup> Halls, *op. cit.*, p. 152.

<sup>3</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia*, ed., H. Weld-Blundell, p. 490.

straightforward account, but the next point is unusual<sup>1</sup> "Dajazmach Kenfu returned in peace to his province. Having heard of this, the Franks said to Muhammad Ali, 'If the Christians are molested, we shall no longer be friends with you.' With such language they forced the Turks to abandon war against the city of Gondar." Here, through the stiff phrasing, we can detect a hope that the Western Powers might come to the assistance of Ethiopia. After all the xenophobia it was a new illusion.

Through these decades there is manifest a strengthening of the great viceroys in their prestige. Honours formerly reserved to the crown are paid to new leaders. Thus the royal chronicle has a lament for the death of Ras Gugsa. "And the third year," it is explained, "that of the Evangelist Matewos after he had ruled over the whole world except Shoa and Tigre, Ras Gugsa died at Debre Tabor and was buried 11th of (the month) of Genbot (25 May, 1825) on a Monday, and the period of his dominion was twenty-seven years." Similarly we find elegies of Sabagaudis of Agamé, who ruled as undisputed viceroy of Tigray in the years that now followed. Pearce has left us an account of him. "He was five feet ten inches high, broad-shouldered and with a vigorous frame. His complexion was very fair, with dark grey eyes, an aquiline nose and a profusion of black hair." His favourite residence was at Adigrat; the north was barricaded away by its ridges of mountains.

Sabagaudis was killed in 1831 by the followers of Ras Maru or Maryé, Ras Gugsa's son. "And the third year Maru<sup>2</sup> came out of his village of Debra Tabor and went to Tigre, while Dajazmach Oubié was chief, and fought with Sabe Gadis, Dajazmach of Tigre, and Ras Maru was killed by a gunshot and buried at Mount Abay, and Dajazmach Sabe Gadis was taken and remained one day and was put to death with spears before sentence (had been given). . . Both were buried at Debra Abay. Whilst the battle was raging there the heat was terrific and many men perished of thirst. The Lord had pity on them and caused an abundant rain to fall; a great stream of water burst forth and mingled with their blood."

This picture has an unforced simplicity. In fact there seems to have been a pastoral quality in the life of the people in the long Tigrean valleys. It is not fanciful at times to catch a passing and

<sup>1</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia*, ed., H. Weld-Blundell, p. 484.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 486-7.

swift resemblance to the civilisation of the Celtic world. In particular the following lines<sup>1</sup> might have been composed in the mists of Gwynedd in the fifteenth century as an elegy for some high Welsh lord. They relate, as do the entries in the chronicle, to the death of Sabagaudis after capture at Mai-Islami.

Alas, Sabagaudis! the pillar of the poor  
 Has fallen at Daga Shaha, weltering in his blood  
 The people of this county will they find it a good thing  
 To eat ears of corn which have grown in the blood?<sup>2</sup>  
 Who will remember St. Michael of November?<sup>3</sup>  
 Maiyé, with five thousand Gallas, has slain him who gave alms,  
 For the half of a loaf, for a cup of wine,  
 The friend of the Christians has fallen at Daga Shaha

This digne, which was sung when the people were gathered from their work at evening in Tigrai and the Amhara county, underlines another contemporary element, the intense dislike felt for the Galla lords whether these were pagan or nominally Christian.

In Tigrai the religious emphasis was never far from the surface. As an example the men of that province held with a touch of rigorism to a third opinion in the disputes that had vexed Gondar on the question of the attributes of Christ's humanity. The Tigreans had attached themselves to the doctrine known as *karroc*, meaning the knife, which was a more severe interpretation of that of the *gabatoe* long held in the monasteries in Gojjam. The *karroc* held a rigidly monophysite theory according to which all the properties of the flesh of the Redeemer were destroyed by the act of Incarnation and the humanity of Christ became immortal and impassible. They would brood on these points in their high farms.

Nevertheless, the Tigreans were without that antagonism against strangers which marked their Amharic neighbours. They even gave a welcome at this time to the new generation of Catholic missionaries. Thus Mgr. Justin de Jacobis and the other Lazarists priests who came with him would plant their congregations in the plain of Adigrat and the gorge of Alitiena about 1842 and rather later through that northern province of the Hamasien which then was ruled from Tigrai and is now a part of Eritrea.

On the other hand the Protestant missionaries received a less sympathetic reception. The Rev. Christian Kuegler, who had officiated at Salt's funeral, came to Adowa in company with

<sup>1</sup> Translation printed in Rev. Samuel Gobat's *Journal*, p. 304.

Mr. Gobat, who was later bishop in Jerusalem. Their stay in Ethiopia was not a prolonged one, and Kuegler died in the country. It appears that Gobat, at any rate, could speak some Amharic; but in other respects their training was defective. "The Rev. Samuel Gobat and the Rev. Christian Kuegler," it is explained<sup>1</sup> in the introduction to the former's travels, "had received their missionary education, first at Basel and subsequently at the Society's Institution at Islington." This was hardly sufficient.

The deeply religious spirit of the Amharic world was concentrated under one aspect in a filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin. This piety was affronted by these ignorant visitors. "This afternoon," we are told by Dr. Gobat<sup>2</sup> in an account of his religious discussions, "Habeta Selassie came to express to me the pain which he felt yesterday at hearing me say that Mary was a sinner." Two quotations will indicate the quality of the reverence which was thus attacked. The first is found in the chronicle of Takla Giorgis. "At that time<sup>3</sup> there was great straits at Makh dara Maryam from the terror of Amadé the (Muhammedan) preacher, but our Lady Maryam, as she had delivered it before from the hand of the kalifa destroying her house, so she preserved the Makh dar (convent) from the hand of the Muslim; and he was driven back to his land by the power of Christ our Lord, and the powerful aid of our Lady Maryam Mother of God." The next passage is a statement of fact in the chronicle of Ras Michael. "They halted in the land of Fagta:<sup>4</sup> on Thursday, the feast of our Lady Maryam, on which (day) she received from her beloved son, the merciful and compassionate, the covenant of mercy."

It may, perhaps, be hazarded that with the entry of Protestant missionaries the position of Catholic priests became rather less difficult. De Jacobis, for instance was revered by the Coptic population for his sensitive ardent devotion to the Mother of God. There grew to be mutual respect and indeed sympathy between those who followed the two ancient faiths.

Dr. Gobat, still very raw, penetrated in 1830 to Gondar and has left a record of the monarchy at its most pitiful. "From thence," he wrote of a visit to the Echeggi Philippos,<sup>5</sup> "I went to

<sup>1</sup> Rev. Samuel Gobat, *Journal*, p. viii.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup> *The Royal Chronicle of Abyssinia, 1769-1840*, ed., H. Weld-Blundell, p. 443.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 206

<sup>5</sup> Gobat's *Journal*, p. 50.

see the king, Guigai ; who truly has only the name of king. He was formerly a monk. He lives in a little circular house built by Joas on the ruins of a part of the palace built by the Portuguese." The king was offered a copy of the bible, but refused it saying that he possessed many books and would have preferred a piece of cloth or silk. "He then," explains Gobat, "gave me a servant to show me the palace ; which, although in ruins, is still superior to anything that I should have expected in Abyssinia. There are still three large rooms, and some small ones, in good condition ; but full of dust and filth. The king occupies only one room . . . divided into two compartments by a white curtain. He asked me if I had ever seen a mansion like it. 'Yes,' I said to him, 'I have seen some in my country which resemble it a little.'" The reply is, indeed, an epitaph of the old line. " 'What,' said King Gıgar, 'do there still exist men able to build a house its equal ?' "

## CHAPTER XIX

### THE END OF THE FRANKS

**D**URING THIS PERIOD of the decline of Gondar, a change came about in the control of the African coast line which was in its ultimate consequences to have a profound effect on Abyssinia. Until the time of James Bruce the hostility to what was called Frank influence was concentrated upon the Portuguese in the political and the Catholics in the religious sphere. It was an enmity that was as traditional as it proved enduring.

There were several reasons for the concentration of this long established hatred upon a single enemy. It was always Portugal, and that country alone, which had concerned herself with Ethiopia. The Spanish influence had only filtered through in the years in which the kings of Spain had ruled in Lisbon. Holland had never entered into this field. The Dutch were found in West Africa and in Ceylon and above all at the Cape of Good Hope; they never cared to penetrate to the lonely torrid coasts which in a vague way came within the sphere of Portuguese ambition.

The extinction of the last remnants of Portuguese influence in Ethiopia and the definite isolation of the Portuguese settlements in Africa were almost simultaneous events. References to Portugal in Bruce's *Travels* are found in connection with the Empress Mentuab. A note of pride in Portuguese descent does not seem to be mentioned in regard to any later character. The last remnants of the artisans whose ancestors had come over with da Gama were now absorbed into the local Tigrean population. Travellers do not report surviving Portuguese traditions.

On the other hand it is a surprise to find how long the Portuguese dominion in its aggressive phase lingered on the coast of Africa. The transfer of Bombay from Portuguese to English control took place in 1662 on the occasion of the marriage of Charles II with Catherine of Braganza. Still nearly a century later the administrations at Lisbon and Goa were endeavouring to regain or maintain their power on the equatorial coast that stretched northwards to Jubaland. Professor Coupland gives it as his opinion that it was

only from 1740 onwards that the Portuguese abandoned hope of reconquering the north.<sup>1</sup>

It is true that as early as 1698 the Portuguese stronghold of Mombasa surrendered after a thirty-three months' siege; but repeated efforts were made to re-take this fortress. The fourth of these expeditions proved successful and Mombasa was subject to the Crown of Portugal for the two years following its capture in 1728. This, however, was a last flicker. By 1740 all Portuguese influence had vanished in the territory to the northwards of Cape Delgado and the mouth of the Rovuma river; this line has ever since remained the boundary of the Portuguese colony of Mozambique.

The interesting point is the nature of the succession to the overlordship of this shore. There came a century of the revived power of the Oman Arabs operating under the imam of Muscat. An appreciation of the nature of this Arab rule is essential to an understanding of the relations which the English would in time develop with Ethiopia. The type of this European approach was essentially distinct from the old formula of contact with the Portuguese. This was largely due to the shift of Arab domination. Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries the Moslem emirates at Massawah and Dahlak had been in some sense under the influence of the emperor of Ethiopia. When the imperial power was strong, they were in fact almost outposts of the Solomonic kingdom. Now the position was quite reversed; the Arab emirates in the nineteenth century provided an authority behind whose veils the English from India operated. Eventually such strong places as Berbera and Aden would become not only in fact but also in name outposts of Britain.

It is the great difficulty of historical judgments that so many qualifying statements are always needed. Thus no discussion of the place of the new Arab policy in Muscat has any value unless the mixed character of the coastal populations is borne in mind. Changes of political dominion were of minor significance when compared with the broad outline of the social scene. The life of the whole area was determined by certain ancient and persistent factors, the Moslem composite slave-holding character of all the settlements upon the coast line down the Red Sea, past Bab-el-Mandeb, along the southern shore of the Somalis, away as far south

<sup>1</sup> *East Africa and its Invaders*, by R. Coupland, p. 73.



as Mozambique. It was a scene then dominated by the white-washed minarets. There stood the mosques, with sometimes the Persian decoration, the gardens, courts and fountains, the whole Islamic pattern. This was a society served by Indian middlemen and based upon the labour of slaves from the interior.

For the same length of time, apparently at least since the tenth century, a parallel Moslem culture based on these Arab-African components had flourished at Muscat. The amalgam was singularly enduring; in the sultanate of Oman the African slaves amounted to one third of the total population of the state.

There was an order that was Islamic and slave-holding along both the northern and western shores of the Indian Ocean. This had of course persisted throughout the generations of Portuguese overlordship, it seemed a permanent condition. It was perhaps this identity of structure that made the resumption of the control of Mombasa and Zanzibar by the Omani Arabs so simple an operation.

This control grew more real after the close of the eighteenth century and was at its most perfect during the long reign of Seyyid Said, who was imam of Muscat from 1806 till 1856. To the Abyssinians all these developments meant very little; they had always had Arab princes round them, now pressing in and now receding. They understood the careful and elaborate Islamic courtesy which had left so deep a mark on their own forms. Beyond this they did not penetrate and no man could as yet understand the extent to which the different forms of Arab power were porous. The state of the Oman Arabs on the coast to the southwards of Mogadishu and the Egyptian viceroyalty to the north would both in time be undermined by their inherent weakness. In the end both would be superseded by the power of western arms.

Although it was impossible to foresee the day when English power would occupy both Khartoum and Mombasa, the Abyssinian lords were up to a point forearmed by their intense capacity for suspicion. It is evident that they were influenced by Arab states and not at all by Pagan tribes. There reached out to them from that old culture to the east and north an atmosphere in which courtesy and suspiciousness went hand in hand. They were accustomed to that simple chain of dangerous events which characterised these neighbouring polities, a procession of over-powerful generals and viziers and champions of orthodoxy each followed by

conspiracies and sullen calm and treacheries and murder. On this analogy the Puritan efforts of the Wahabi king, whose advent dates from the eighteenth century, were always comprehensible. Aims could be understood, but not pure commerce.

Inevitably Abyssinians were slow to perceive where Europeans now began to operate behind the veil of Arab sovereignty. Further the methods favoured by the East India Company in slowly building up their influence from within would distract attention from the growth of power. Very gradually the Company's influence would seep into each honeycomb. The development at Mocha is a case in point. This port had been for many years the seat of a British factory, but it was not until 1821 that it passed into the Company's administration. Again, Aden had been described in 1808 as the Gibraltar of the East and it had been asserted that it could be rendered impregnable at trifling cost. Still it was close on thirty years before the Company acted on this implied advice.

At this time threats to the independence of Abyssinia crystallised and then were dissipated. Thus it soon became clear that Mehemet Ali had little wish to penetrate to non-Islamic territory. Professor Dodwell indicates the policies that then swayed the great pasha's entourage. "His idea," he writes,<sup>1</sup> "was not to create an Arab unit within the circle of Islam, but to become, and be acclaimed by all, the foremost leader of Islam." Consideration of this point will show that there was no threat to the Amharic bastion here. In fact, regarded from this angle, the Sudan was as valuable to the Cairo administration as Abyssinia would prove valueless. This throws light on the promise made in 1820 by Mehemet Ali that he would not prosecute the conquest of Abyssinia "although the country was full of gold and jewels." A similar lack of interest settled down upon the various frontier posts which had been established by this time. The guiding powers were very far away, the East India House, the Sublime Porte and Cairo; Bombay Castle was fairly close at hand but occupied with other problems.

Into this situation there came a new factor which drew the attention of strangers once more to the Red Sea. The development of steam made the Mediterranean route to India, so long dreamed of by the East India Company, a present actuality. Overland transit across the isthmus of Suez, as part of a regular traffic route between London and Bombay, was established by Queen Victoria's

<sup>1</sup> Professor H. Dodwell, *The Founder of Modern Egypt*, p. 128.

accession. Hitherto unknown needs came into play ; the first of these was a coal depot.

In 1829 Aden was leased as a coal depot, but in the following year the steamship *Hugh Lindsay* could not take in more than thirty tons of coal on account of the lack of local labour. Socotia was then surveyed and was in fact occupied as a coaling station from Bombay in 1834-5. This experiment was in turn abandoned since the island proved malarial and the high surf made landing difficult. In 1833 an incident led to the development with which we are familiar. In that year a Madras vessel sailing under the British flag and conveying the annual donation sent to Mecca by the nawab of Arcot went ashore and was plundered by the subjects of the sultan of Aden. In consequence Aden was annexed in 1837.

This change had only a very gradual effect on the situation in the hinterland of Abyssinia. The first development was concerned with the trade on the Somali coast to which the dhows based on Aden had stretched across for centuries. It was in keeping with this element in the situation that the sultan of Harar, who lived immediately behind the Somali coast, should have kept a representative at Mocha. There was of course close contact with Massawah. All the same news of this change would only drift slowly through to Gondar or Debia Taboi, nor would it seem significant. Nevertheless the alignment of the European Powers was now beginning along the coast of Africa. The first fruit of the capture of Aden was the sending of a mission to the Court of Shoa.

## CHAPTER XX

### THE HOUSE OF SHOA

FOR A GENERATION THE coastal emirates of the northern part of the Somali country had possessed a certain interest for the officials in Bombay Castle. Moreover, with the new British control of the entrance to the straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, the matter of trade with Abyssinia aroused a well-defined if languid interest. The ruler of Aden was in a sense responsible for such trade as passed through the Somali ports to the southward of the gulf. Already a mass of English-sponsored material was beginning to flood the old slave markets. Thus the caravans would go down three times a year to Zeila and Berbera from the Harar country laden with coffee and other produce. A list is given<sup>1</sup> of the goods that they would find there, "blue and white calico, Indian piece goods, English prints, silks and shawls, red cotton yarn, copper wire, zinc, silk threads and beads" Such is the background of the decision to despatch an English mission under the command of Captain W. Cornwallis Harris of the Bombay Engineers to the Court of Shoa whose ruler controlled the western end of one of the great caravan routes to the Somali coast.

The mission sailed in April 1841 from Bombay in the Honourable East India Company's steam frigate *Auckland* bound for Aden *en route* for Tajura. According to the letter of instructions Ankober, the seat of the Court of Shoa, was computed to lie some four hundred miles inland from this port. The account written by the leader of the expedition is voluminous, self-conscious, very detailed and revealing. A proper, almost a cautious, sense of dignity illumines each page of the three volumes of *The Highlands of Ethiopia*. The whole succeeds in building up a picture of a fragmentary Solomonic tradition as seen through the eyes of an officer to whom this spectacle was entirely uncongenial. Given the motive that inspired the English mission and the period at which it was undertaken, the effect produced is very striking.

They came in one of the hottest months of the year, in early

<sup>1</sup> *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, by Major W. Cornwallis Harris, 1, p. 383

May, to the port of Tajura steaming south-west from Aden across that blue and glass-like sea. A fleet of fishing catamarans lay off the harbour. There was no haze and the foreshore stood out clear, the dwarf mimosas and the terraced mosque of white-washed madreporic and, behind the *tukals* in the palm trees, the great grey mountain of coral limestone. In that still hot late afternoon red clouds had gathered on the mountain's summit.

There were always the mother-of-pearl fisheries, but it was the dull season at Tajura. The tribes of the interior would not come down to the sea coast until the appearance of the new moon in September. This was the signal for the opening of Tajura's great annual fair. Slaves were the main commodity. There were also honey, gold-dust, ivory, ostrich feathers, senna, madder, civet, gums, myrrh, frankincense, grains and hides, the old traditional litany. There was besides a great supply of cattle. Arab traders from Yemen assembled there.

German crowns of Maria Theresa, 1780, the currency of the thaler, formed the numerals and strips of raw hide the integrals in the exchange at the sea port. The profit on the annual sale of three thousand human beings kidnapped in the interior came out at some thirty thousand German crowns. In this connection Captain Harris states with point that a share in this large sum rendered every native of Tajura a man of competent independence.

After the usual dealings with the native chiefs, in which the Englishman's comparative familiarity with the Moslem mind becomes apparent, the party struck out inland along the desert caravan route which led to Shoa. Following this long grim track they would pass far to the north of Harar, the one celebrated city beyond the Somali hinterland. It was at this time difficult to force an entry and for that reason it would be visited some fifteen years later by Richard Burton. Naturally Harris gathers certain details. The Jama el Musjid at Harar was believed to be the abode of guardian angels. "How could Hurrar have triumphed thus long over the unbelievers had Allah not extended his right arm to succour the followers of his Prophet?" At this time the frontiers of the Christian Shoa state were very far away; there was no war between them. A picture is left upon the mind of the city on the slopes above the Erer facing those dun ranges which lead out to Ogaden; the low crowding houses within long small crumbling walls; the gateways with their shallow pent-like roofs;

the houses of consideration and their wooden balconies framed out of rice-bunks lashed together; the two old rough white minarets that rise above that unimpressive sky line. It is not difficult to believe, as HALLIS tells us, that HARAR maintained her independence with the aid of two hundred matchlockmen and a few archers.

Between the days of Mohammed GYANYE'S conquests in the sixteenth century and the capture of the city by MENCLIK II, after the defeat of the last emir in 1886, HARAR lay far outside the stream of Ethiopian history. There were few neighbours capable of attacking the crowded town. It was only the subject of a traveller's tale to the members of the English mission as they pressed forward across the Adal desert to ANKOBEL.

Beyond them lay the Awash and across that river the ascent to that great plateau whose eastern bastions were described by HARRIS as the Abyssinian Alps. To the south of the desert country lay the settlements behind the Chereher range and the villages with their fields of *dhurma*. Between the heaving stony tracts and these first hills lay the empty water courses where tall euphorbias stood like sentinels rising from the bottom of the gullies between the dried earth of those steep low cliffs. From miles away the eye would catch the sudden green of the euphorbias in that dry landscape. Their presence, as that of all green trees, always means water, the worked-out courses or some hidden spring. The tall euphorbias held the grace of the immobile. The later comparison with a candelabra had its own aptness; they rose strong and improbable from that parched soil. It was their caetus origin that gave them stiffness and their branches remained steady in those breezes before nightfall which rustled the feathery tops of the sparse mimosa trees.

To the southwards in the rolling country there was low scrub and, riding the horizon, an umbrella mimosa here and there, as solitary as those stone pines in the Roman Campagna which they resembled. The land stretched away, with the camel tracks but rarely visible, to Khora and Miesso, those Moslem settlements. The resting camels picked their way delicately with careful gingery step in that low scrub. It was an empty world until one reached the foothills of the Cherchers. It had the unreal quality of an imaginary landscape set for the hunting of the gazelle by some vanished court. All colour drained away into the sharp green of the euphorbias. The summits of the mimosas, so feathery and

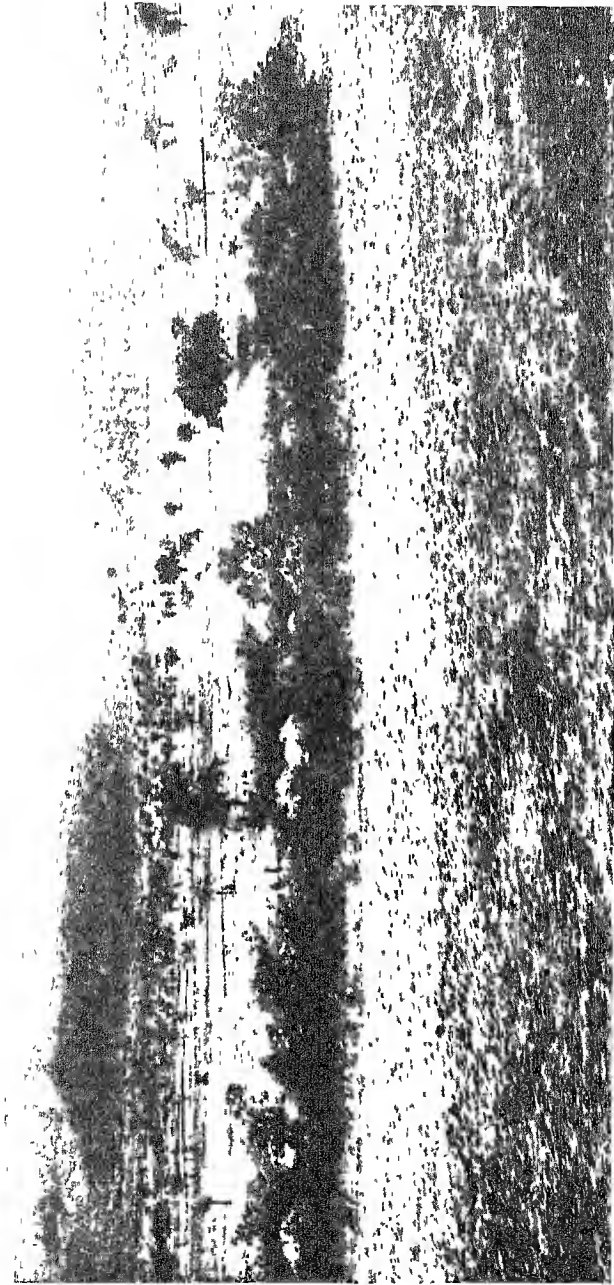
fragile, swayed unconvincingly in the growing heat. All that counted under the great weight of the tropic sky had something of the evanescent charm as well as the unlikelihood of misadventure. To the northward across more desert land ran the caravan tracks to Ankober.

The rain had long been falling in the highlands when the English party came to the rare sycamores which lie deep in the river bed of the Awash. In examining Captain Harris's description it is perhaps but fair to remark that the party were ill-prepared to enter the confines of the Shoan kingdom. They had set out from India in those high days of the Englishman's prestige which went before the tragedy of the great Mutiny. In addition Harris himself was particularly impatient, a serious facetious pompous man with a staid relish for the role of military ambassador. Those were the happy years when English visitors to an Indian State were met outside each capital by the royal painted elephants. In the account that follows allowance must be made for the effect that delay produced on the narrator.

The travellers mounted to the high plateau and found those pastures which reminded their leader of the Alpine fields. Daisies and buttercups were in flower and they came at length to Aho Amba which was only two hours distant from the place of residence of the Shoan Court. It was here that they were met by Ato Kalama Worq, the governor of the little town, and found the first of those delays which proved so galling. Great interest had been aroused as to the nature of the presents for the king which they had brought. A zealous Shoan officer opened one of the boxes of royal presents expecting to find gold ingots and, perhaps, precious stones. The townsmen crowded round the open lid beneath which they could see leathern buckets, lynch-stocks and tough ash-staves. That these were parts of a galloper gun, which would prove valuable, was not apparent. "Words of derision,"<sup>1</sup> explains Harris, "burst from the lips of every disappointed spectator." A cry went up which the interpreter made haste to translate. "These be but a poor people. What is their nation when compared with the Amharas; for behold, in this trash, specimens of the offerings brought from their boasted land." A certain coldness in their reception was attributed to this misunderstanding.

They were only kept a fortnight in the quarters prepared for

<sup>1</sup> *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, by Major W. Cornwallis Harris, 1, p. 361.



*Plate 12* Village scene in Harai province.



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them at Alto Amba and then a message came from the king of Shoa. "Tarry not by day, neither stay ye by night for the heart of the Father longeth to see his children."<sup>1</sup> At this point a further difficulty arose in connection with the salute of seventeen guns which the captain of Bombay Engineers was determined to fire in honour of the foreign sovereign.

This problem also was solved in time and eventually the party set out for their first audience riding along the track across the fields which led to the stockaded summer palace at Machal-wans. "Its conical white roofs,"<sup>2</sup> explains Harris, using that style which he believed would render his work attractive, "were embosomed in a grove of juniper and cypress, which crested a beautifully wooded tumulus. A bright green meadow, spangled with flowers, lay stretched at its foot, the rose, the eglantine and the violet grew around in all the grace of native wildness." It was the lovely season about Maschal after the rains.

The actual scene of the reception is described with care.<sup>3</sup> "The massive and lofty clay walls of the reception chamber glittered with a profusion of silver ornaments, emblazoned shields, matchlocks and double-barrelled guns. Persian carpets and rugs of all sizes, colours and patterns, covered the floor. In a wide alcove on a flowered satin ottoman, surrounded by withered eunuchs and juvenile pages of honour reclined His Majesty Sahela Selassie."

The account of the sovereign's person is as unusual as it is detailed. "The King was attired in a silken Arab vest of green brocade, partially concealed under the ample folds of a white cotton robe of Abyssinian manufacture adorned with broad crimson stripes and borders. Forty summers had slightly furrowed his dark brow and somewhat grizzled a full bushy head of hair, arranged in elaborate curls after the fashion of George the First, and although considerably disfigured by the loss of the left eye, the expression on his manly features did not belie the character for impartial justice."

The gifts from the Government of India were then set out and included a rich Brussels carpet which covered the whole of the floor space of the audience hall. There were Cashmir shawls and Delhi scarves and ornamented chiming clocks. The musical boxes were brought in and set to play *God Save the Queen*. Three hundred muskets with fixed bayonets were carried forward and

<sup>1</sup> *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, by Major W. Cornwallis Harris, 1, p. 387.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, 1, p. 395.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, 1, p. 399.

piled immediately in front of the royal footstool. "God will reward you,"<sup>1</sup> exclaimed the sovereign, "for I cannot." At a later date the king suggested that the British mission should proceed to winter quarters in his capital Ankober. "My children," declared His Majesty,<sup>2</sup> "all my gun-people shall accompany you; may you enter into safety. Whatsoever your hearts think or wish, that send word unto me. Saving myself, ye have no relative in this distant land."

The most successful of the military displays was provided by the once-despised galloper gun. A white cloth was fixed in a field across the valley and artillery practice was carried out with round shot, canister and grape. "Forty years have passed," declared the king's confessor in this connection,<sup>3</sup> "since Asfa Woosen, on whose memory be peace, saw in a dream that red men were bringing into his kingdom curious and beautiful commodities. During the reign over Shoa of seven successive kings, no such wonders as these have been wrought in Aethiopia."

It was at this stage in his stay that Harris gained the somewhat sketchy knowledge of recent Shoaan history which he imparted. It is simplest to keep the names in his own spelling merely noting as a control that Amha Iyasu died in 1774. Emmaha Yasoos, we are told, succeeded to his father Abiyē when the latter died at Aramba in the lands which he had wrested from the Aīeo Galla. He reigned thirty-two years, introduced several matchlocks from Gondar and conquered Ankober, which he made his capital in place of Dokaket. At the time of his accession wise men predicted that his realm would be doubled if Arkarais could be appointed minister. After search the only individual of this name who could be found was a beggar who was duly inducted. This last legend has an Indian pattern as it slides into position among the happenings of the old Semitic scheme of regnal years.

The next sovereign, Asfa Woosen reigned for thirty-three and a half years. He slew three hundred pagans with his own hand from the back of his favourite war steed Amadoo. This king was succeeded by Woosen Suggud<sup>4</sup> whose reign lasted for four years and a half. He was killed with the sword by a Shankalla slave in his palace at Kondia. His subjects often spoke of the burning of

<sup>1</sup> *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, by Major W. Cornwallis Harris, i, p. 401.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, ii, p. 5.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid*, i, p. 403.

<sup>4</sup> These sovereigns are more usually styled Asfaha Wasan II and Wasan Sagad

that palace when the wealth amassed in many earthen jars melted into a liquid stream of gold and silver. Sahela Selassie, "the clemency of the Trinity," was a child of twelve when his father's murder made him the seventh king of Shoa. He was the great grandson of Amha Iyasu.

The religious background of the life of the court was noted by the English but without sympathy. A description of the Easter Eve ceremonies shows how little these had changed. "Eighty turbanned priests,"<sup>1</sup> it is explained, "in solemn procession, next entered the court, clad in their vestments. Preceded by the great embroidered umbrellas of the church dedicated to St. George, they filed slowly into the space vacated by the warriors, the holy ark being supported by antique Egyptian figures, robed in long musty-looking habiliments of chequered hues, crowned with heavy mitres, and bearing in their hands rods of green rushes, bronze bells, crosses, and censers of burning incense." In this connection Captain Harris makes a comment.<sup>2</sup> "Whilst hating the Papists with all their hearts, the Abyssinians nevertheless cherish many of the superstitions and buffoneries of the Church of Rome."

In fact, as these accounts make clear, life at the Court of Shoa was profoundly and indeed carefully traditional. The title of *negus negusti* was in use, respect was shown to Debra Libanos; the emperor at Gondar still received a faint obeisance. Nevertheless the sap was running and Menelik II would be born of the Shoan line. Each military possibility was envisaged in the small kingdom which only measured one hundred miles in length by ninety-five. There was a strong concern as to future happenings and Sahela Selassie with his wise men would make attempt to penetrate the veils.

In this connection the eclipse of the moon, which took place that winter at Ankober, has its own interest. The people thronged the streets all shouting "Saviour of the world take pity on us—to screen us from the wrath of God—and to cover us with a veil of mercy, for the sake of Mary, the mother of our Lord." Up in the palace the sovereign expressed himself. "Eclipses are bad omens," said the king.<sup>3</sup> "Was Subagadis not slain on the appearance of one, and did not another bring defeat to Ras Ali?" The beginning and end of this eclipse had been predicted by the English

<sup>1</sup> *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, by Major W Cornwallis Harris, iii, p. 275

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, iii, p. 275

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, ii, p. 263.

mission. In consequence Sahela Selassie presented a silver sword in a fluted tulip scabbard to Captain Harris. "You bring the stars upon earth and foretell coming events."

It was by such sleight of hand that Harris's mission was accomplished. Next he demonstrated how to shoot an elephant behind the ear. Permission was asked for such a hunt. "My children," the king returned deliberately,<sup>1</sup> "how can this be? Elephants are not to be shot with rifle balls. They will demolish you; and what answer then am I to give? The gun is the medicine for the Galla in the tree, but it has no effect upon the *zihoon*." The expedition against the *zihoon* was nevertheless a great success. "You have slain," declared the king<sup>2</sup> in a lapidary phrase to the returned adventurers, "elephants and buffaloes and are powerful in arms against the wild beasts of which my people are afraid. You have overwhelmed me with rifles and other delightful inventions from the countries beyond the great sea."

Meanwhile Captain Graham, the second member of the mission, was preparing models and plans of palaces for the king of Shoa. The latter finally came to the resolution of expending the necessary timber for the erection of what Harris described as a chaste Gothic edifice. The king was astonished and delighted by the cross-cut saw. "You English are indeed a strange people," quoth the monarch,<sup>3</sup> "I do not understand your stonies of the road in your country that is dug below the waters of a river, nor of the carriages that gallop without horses." The king's ideas wandered perpetually to the ruins of a certain palace on the banks of the Nile which he had visited whilst hunting the wild buffalo. "It is overgrown with trees and bushes, and it had two hundred windows and four hundred pillars of stone, and none can tell whence it came." Large coloured engravings of a tiger chase and of chariots drawn by elephants were hung up in the Gothic hall. The latter picture moved the king especially. "I will have a number caught on the Robi that you may tame them, and that I too may ride upon an elephant before I die." A governor from a frontier province stared in wonder. "This place," he exclaimed,<sup>4</sup> "is not suited for the occupation of man. This is a palace designed only for the residence of the Deity and of Sahela Selassie."

<sup>1</sup> *The Highlands of Ethiopia*, by Major W. Cornwallis Harris, II, p. 298.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 273.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 346.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, III, p. 350.

## CHAPTER XXI

### DEBRA LIBANOS

THE POLICY OF THE KINGDOM of Shoa was to a great extent conditioned by the fact that within its boundaries there stood the great monastery of Debra Libanos. For it was upon that side of the life of Sahela Selassie which was most inaccessible to the members of the English mission, the high sense of religious obligation, that Debra Libanos made its appeal. There was always about the House of Shoa the aura of a guarded and a separating orthodoxy. It is no accident that the chief buildings of this historic shrine are the votive churches offered by the Emperor Menelik.

In some respects it is difficult to reconstruct the appearance of Debra Libanos even as recently as a century ago. Here there is nothing ancient except the mule track leading round the bends above the gorge, the juniper groves and the wild olive trees. In Ethiopia it is the places and not the buildings that are holy. So little has been constructed in durable material since the hewing out of the rock churches at Lalibela.

At Debra Libanos the monks have lived for centuries in the thatch-roofed, mud-built *tukals* which in themselves are quickly perishable. In some cases the novices construct their own small cells. Such *tukals* are broken by the years or by neglect in the great rains. They fall to pieces and are re-erected. They cluster along the last uneven half mile of that grass-grown shelf below the cliff face. The little crosses above each monk's hut push up among the junipers. The thin bell rings at night from the new church with its pavilion form in the *style Menelik* as it did from the old church with the wild straw roofing.

The whole monastic complex of Debra Libanos has always connoted a seat of teaching and a holy place, the burial ground of St. Takla Haimanot and the site of the great relic of the Cross. It is hardly in the western sense a place of pilgrimage. Men have come to give themselves to the religious life and children have been sent to study the liturgical language and the chant. It has always

been an inviolable sanctuary. Further an element of power has never been long absent from the history of Debra Libanos.

The position of the *echeggi* has been described and the part that the monastery had taken in the policy of the emperors at Gondar. As that throne failed, it was inevitable that Debra Libanos should assume a capital importance for the kings of Shoa.

There had always been the pilgrimages of honour when the great lords came to pay their homage. The trains would make their way across that high plateau, tilted slightly to the northwards, which was bounded by the Salale Mountains. The mule track led very straight, but at times faint or indiscernible, across the heavy land, windy and bare. Far to the eastwards lay the dim range which guarded the entrance to Ankober. The approach itself to the great monastery had all the solitude of Subiaco but with more grandeur. The edge of the plateau led to the deep gorge with two rows of cliffs above an empty river. The hillsides were scarred by dry terraces and in the distance in the clear light rose the mountains of Gojjam.

The path led down along the cliff face to the rough meadow ground between the olives which would serve as a camping ground for the great retinue of princes upon pilgrimage. In the fields towards the monastery stood the guest chamber where visitors of honour were received. Night fell swiftly within the gorges. The *echeggi*, when in residence, or the superior, sat with his guests upon a divan while oriental carpets of small value were cast upon the thick new straw. The confined high chamber was lit by rush lights held by monastic servants each standing with averted face against the tall severe walls. Outside a light wind played among the junipers, but the window space was barred with wooden shutters and doors were bolted to keep out the unhealthy night air. The binding straw stood out just faintly and the walls changed colour passing from mouse grey to sepia with the varying light. The superior's bare feet rested on the dry floor, while a black cloak with double silver clasp was thrown about him. The great white turban pressed down heavily upon the eyelashes of that dark face. Upon a table stood a small collation, peaches from the monastery, some coarse bananas and beakers filled with unfermented *tedj*. As the guests sipped, this tasted like tired liquid honey.

It is, perhaps, simplest to introduce a study of Debra Libanos at this point because its modern significance in particular was

inseparable from the House of Shoa. In fact the emergence of this monastery as the greatest of the empire's holy shrines was closely linked with the decline of Gondar whose sovereigns had once held a form of balance between the *echeggi* and his monks and the Eustathians. The old controversies seem to have faded or it might be more accurate to say that their protagonists were not now brought into conflict. It was a consequence of the falling of Gondar that there was no longer a focus for disputes.

Thus the monasteries of Gojjam had lost their former power. Two currents of theological opinion were now only prevalent in remote districts. That rigorous Monophysite doctrine, which had been supported by the *qebator*, was confined to parts of Gojjam and the Lasta district. A more severe interpretation of the *qebator*, known as the *karro* meaning the knife, was found in the Tigrai. In the distant parts they still continued those controversies on the question of the attributes of Christ's humanity that had vexed Gondar.

A geographical element entered into these changes for, with the dominance and eventual dominance of the House of Shoa, the centre of power in Ethiopia swung to the south. As a result Debra Bisan, the monastery founded by Ewostatewos who gave his name to the Eustathians, ceased to effect the Ethiopian life with Gondar vanished. It was set above the track which led from Massawah into the Hamastien and was in the centre of that district which within half a century would be known as Eritrea. The house of Ewostatewos was thus placed beyond the limits of the exercise of Solomonic sovereignty. As Shoa grew in significance, so did the concentration of spiritual power at Debra Libanos.

It may be hazarded that certain consequences were to flow from the dominance of what in time became a static orthodoxy. The Byzantine element which never really left Gondar, the disputes, the obscure religious feuds, the nice distinctions, all these were now about to fade. The alliance between the Throne and Altar began to take on a prosaic shape. A feudal character in the monastic land-holding is seen to be the most important single factor.

To the Gondarine conception of the empire as the withdrawn arbitrator there seems to have succeeded the more practical Shoaan interpretation. On this showing the emperor emerges as a man of piety in the eastern sense rather than as himself a theologian. He makes his pilgrimages and is a great church builder. In time he comes to fight the feudal nobles while granting to the Church



her high immunity, her lights, her land. As a result the strength of the alliance between the monastics and the Throne increases with each access of imperial power. Any simile must be remote and all parallels with Europe very faint. Still there are aspects of the Christian world in Abyssinia which seem to suggest not so much Byzantium as the late Middle Ages.

At the same time the changes discussed were very gradual and only came to their fulfilment in the reign of Menelik II. They passed unnoticed in the years immediately ahead which saw Theodore's unbalanced experiment in theocracy. Yet these factors were assembling throughout the nineteenth century. An examination of Debra Libanos will provide an impression of the quiet background. It is a simple way to study the church life in Ethiopia. A comment on the literature is perhaps the best approach.

The monks would read in their great books with each miracle and holy deed depicted sharply in the bright fast colours. The large manuscript volumes of the *Life and Miracles of Takla Haymanot* preserved at Debra Libanos and edited through the good offices of Ras Makonnen by Sir Ernest Wallis Budge, is just such a work. From a study of these books a singularly coherent picture of one aspect of the life and thought of Debra Libanos can be built up.

The details of religious history described were so convincing as to seem almost self-evident. "The Abba Salama," the disciples of the monastery would read or hear,<sup>1</sup> "went forth to the 'Country of the Free,' that is to say, to our country of Ethiopia, in the days of the kings, 'Abrahe and 'Asbeha, in the year three hundred and fifteen after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ." The next stage is set forth with the same clarity.<sup>2</sup> "And up to that time of the people of Ethiopia some there were who (lived) according to the Laws of the Book of Moses, and others there were who were in the habit of bowing down and worshipping the Serpent. Now their conversion to the Faith dateth from the year three hundred and forty after the birth of our Lord Jesus Christ, and 'Abrahe and 'Asbeha builded Aksum." It only needs to concentrate upon the holy people.<sup>3</sup> "The spirit of prophecy prophesieth in the mouth of the men of Amhara, and the word which they speak cometh to pass in due season."

This was in the nature of an introduction as the monks and those

<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Miracles of Takla Haymanot*, ed. L. A. Wallis Budge, p. 8.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 9.

they taught would meditate upon the life of their founder, St. Takla Haimanot. A word should be said about the editing by Wallis Budge. That scholar is as unsympathetic to the menology of the Ethiopian Church as he is in other places favourable to the work of the Society of Jesus. Nevertheless the standpoint of these Amharic wittics is set within the traditional frame of Christian hagiography, there is a tendency to attribute to the saint variants of the miracles of Christ and the use of Old Testament locutions is very frequent. There is in particular a liking for the phrase "as sands of the sea shore innumerable." At the same time it is doubtful whether the mathematical element which proved so repellent to the English editor, was ever intended to be taken literally. The herculean labours performed when grinding corn for Basolata Michael of Gesha are, perhaps, indications of intensity as is the record of the five thousand prostrations which Takla Haimanot made daily. In support of this suggestion we read at one point in the manuscript of a palace with forty thousand pillars of fire and forty thousand pillars of gold. May this not be another way of saying as sands of the sea shore without number?

Some further detail is of value as indicating facets of religious exposition which nourished the Ethiopian mind. They would ponder over these stories of the life of their forefathers which was so ascetic and perfect. The Amharic and Tigrean Christians were in no sense predestinarian. On the other hand they lived under a profoundly Jewish sense of election. They had a sense of uncleanness and almost it would seem of the *Goyim*. The severity of their approach to Islam was in temper rather Jewish than Christian. The deserts and the coast lands to the east and north were seen as the ill-omened haunt of Moslems. By contrast, the Ethiopian Christians were a separated people dwelling on their plateau, solitary and proud. Mile after mile and linking each Christian village stretched their high inviolate fields.

It is against this background that one sees the life of Takla Haimanot. Thus, the story opens with the entry of Mataloné, the pagan governor of Damot, and his first contentings with the saint followed by his conversion. There then came the proclamation which the governor ordered his herald to make throughout his country. "Every man in my kingdom," so this statement<sup>1</sup> runs, "who hath worshipped idols shall be condemned in judgment and

<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Miracles of Takla Haymanot*, ed., E. A. Wallis Budge, p. 132.

(my servants) shall haul him down into the abyss of Toma Getai where he shall die an evil death and every man shall believe in the God of my father, Takla Haimanot." Other episodes are in tune with the same tradition. "Then Mataloué said unto our holy father, Takla Haimanot, 'Rise up and baptize me in the Name of thy God.' And our father the holy man Takla Haimanot rose up and consecrated the water, and he baptized him in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost."

It is all set out like the priorities in Genesis. There came the need to consecrate the *tabot*, the sacramental tabernacle on which the liturgy was offered. "And," we are now told,<sup>1</sup> "a voice came to him from heaven which said, 'Weep not, O my beloved one Takla Haimanot. Have not I sent thee to root up idols, and to consecrate the *tabot* and to appoint priests and deacons. And now consecrate the *tabot* and fear not, for I have set thee a light to the world like unto Myself, in this dark country. Thou art not like the other Bishops whom Archbishops appoint because I Myself have appointed thee with Mine own mouth.'" It is described how he was later consecrated by the bishop at Alexandria. These passages are, however, transcribed here to indicate how his disciples in their huts on the grass ledges would give thanks for his holy power.

The next sentences will indicate the labour and the travels which his monks at Debra Libanos would always hold so sanctified the land of Ethiopia. "And again our Lord Jesus said unto him,<sup>2</sup> 'Henceforward go thou to the land of Amhara, to the shrine of Michael of Gesha, and dwell there. . . ' Now our father, Basolate Michael of Gesha, was himself fervent in spirit, and he toiled in his contentings and he was a traveller on the road of the holy fathers." After ten years in Amhara Takla Haimanot went to Abba Iyasus Moa who ruled the monastery of Hayik in the lake east of Magdala. After a further decade, for there seems a symbolism in these parallels, he went to the country of Tigrat to the Hallelujah monastery at Debra Damo, founded by Abba Aragawi, formerly called Michael, "one of the nine holy and devoted men who came from Romya."<sup>3</sup> Following a description of his life it is recorded that Takla Haimanot dwelt "in this manner on Mount Damo for twelve years."

The sense of consecration deepens as the heavy pages turn

<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Miracles of Takla Haymanot*, ed., E. A. Wallis Budge, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 144 and 154.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 177.

while the wooden bindings rest on the metal lecterns. At the monastery of Mount Hawzen the saint sought for the blessing of the monks. "We do not wish to bless thee," they replied,<sup>1</sup> "a blessed man whom God hath blessed, but do thou bless us with thy holy hand, which is full of grace." A companion panel is that of his meeting with Michael of Alexandria in the Holy Land as they journeyed to the grave of Our Lord. "And the Archbishop said,<sup>2</sup> "May God bless thee with the blessings of my fathers the Apostles, and with the blessings of the Archbishops who have sat upon the throne of Maik."

The miracles of his life were then recorded and folio after folio dealt with those at his great shrine. Men felt that the life of Christ was very near and the Blessed Virgin's power was all about them, protecting and most merciful. It was a foreshortened and, therefore, not complex history. The line of saints was brief; Takla Haimanot would lead directly back to the patriarchs Macarius and Antony; the Flight of the Child Jesus into Egypt must seem near to them praying in their *lukals* in August in the cold nights between the storms of rain.

The closing scene of the vision in the cell was always with the monks of Debra Libanos. "And Our Redeemer said unto him,"<sup>3</sup> they would read of the death of Takla Haimanot, "'Thy body shall be buried here for fifty-seven years, and after fifty-seven years have passed, this cell of thine shall be destroyed, and thy sons shall build a great monastery in the open space of the desert in thy name.' And our father the holy man Takla Haimanot said unto Him, 'Command me, O my Lord, to enter in the arena of martyrdom, and let me be killed for Thy Name's sake.' And the Redeemer said unto him, 'Thou hast finished thy contentings, and there is nothing left to do except to die.'" The concluding sentences resume so much of the religious spirit of Ethiopia. "And," we are told,<sup>4</sup> "the Redeemer gave him seven crowns of light, and he said unto him, 'Of these crowns the first is given thee for thy orthodox faith, and the second because thou didst go about teaching it, and the third because thou didst shed thy blood, and the fourth because thou didst destroy the wicked, and the fifth because thou didst make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and the sixth

<sup>1</sup> *The Life and Miracles of Takla Haymanot*, ed., E. A. Wallis Budge, p. 182

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 226

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 233.

because thy thigh bone broke from standing (upon it overmuch), and the seventh for thy fasting and thy right mind.' ”

A Judaic sense of numbers intertwined with an endemic symbolism. A series of simple and noteworthy legends served to lighten the long hours of psalmody. The monks seem to have felt themselves the heirs of the Temple at Jerusalem and also the inheritors of the Cross. The faith enshrined in the person of its earthly sovereign the highest titles ; Lion of the tribe of Juda, Elect of God. Sahela Selassie sat on his throne at Ankober, while Sahela Dengel existed on sufferance at Gondar. Their names betokened the Clemencies respectively of the Most Holy Trinity and of the Virgin. In the capital of the empire lived a young man very ardent and religious and intrepid, Kassa, who would be Theodore. The wind soughed through the junipers at Debra Libanos.

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE EMPEROR THEODORE

THE YEARS FOLLOWING Cornwallis Harris' mission to Ankober form a period of transition. Harris received a knighthood from Queen Victoria for the work he had accomplished; he disappeared from Abyssinian history and died in India when still quite young in 1848. Sahela Selassie had ended his long reign in the previous year and his son, Haile Malakot, ruled in his stead.

It is only at this time that the powers which had grown from the wreck of Gondar seem sufficiently strong to enter into open rivalry with one another. Thus, the viceroyalty of Tigray, now held by Ubié who had wrested that province from the sons of Sabagaudis of Agamè, was in a sense a counterpart to Shoa; it was the focus of a French policy developed in the reign of Louis Philippe which ran parallel to that adopted by the Government of India at Ankober.

The third power in Amharic Ethiopia was that of Ras Ali of Beghemeder, who never really seems to have possessed the authority which European travellers were inclined to attribute to him. Historically, Ras Ali II was the inheritor of the influence of that group of families coming from the old-established lords of the semi-Christianised Galla tribes, a group which had supplied first the ministers and then the guardians for the nominal rulers of the House of Solomon. Their rivalry with the Tigrean inheritors went back for more than seventy years for Ras Michael and each succeeding viceroy had pivoted their more than local influence on opposition to those who suffered from the taint of Galla blood. With that traditional view of history they would not forget that the Emperor Ioas had been ruled by his Galla uncles.

We are conscious in these years before the rise of Kassa of an absence of straightforward conflict. The fact appears to be that the effective confines of the influence of these rulers seldom touched. The power radiating from each capital, from Gondar, Debra Tabor, Adigrat or Ankober grew less and less as the tracks disappeared in the far mountains. There cannot be frontier disputes without a frontier. It has been pointed out how Shoa was cushioned in this

way from the Moslem emirates. At the same time there seems to have been some peculiar lack which vitiated the strength of the Galla grouping whether it is a question of Ras Gusho and Ras Ali or Ras Guksa and Ras Matyé. Perhaps it is fair to say that they drew at any rate a part of their authority from the fact that they were guarding a throne that was not there, for the imperial line at Gondar had sunk past all recovery.

At the period of the Cornwallis mission, Ras Matyé was dead and the headship of his house had passed to his nephew, the second Ras Ali. It was with this lord that the British authorities planned that they would now do business. There were certain elements in this decision for the interest in Beghmeder came from Cairo and that in Shoa from Bombay. Other factors add to the obscurity of the situation which was further complicated by the extinction of the House of Ras Ali. It would not be to the interest of successive rulers to preserve the memory of the Galla princes. On this matter Theodore and John IV and Menelik would be agreed.

A note as to the nominal emperor should be inserted. At Ras Ali's accession to power in 1830 the Emperor Iyasu IV, son of Solomon III, was in occupation of the throne. A certain show of activity led to the deposition of the puppet sovereign and he was succeeded by the last of the emperors of this great house, Sahela Dengel, a man of fifty-four, whose earlier history is not recorded and whose relationship to the *rois faibles* is ill-defined. Already some discontent was stirring and it was necessary to hang a pretender Egwala Anbasa, who claimed to be the "King whose name is Theodore", who according to an old prophecy would bring in peace and plenty for a thousand years.

Such was the situation in 1843 when two Englishmen, who were to play a determining part both with Ras Ali and in the early years of Theodore, reached Ethiopia. Their names were Walter Plowden and John Bell. The latter, who was to be the heart-friend of the great emperor, seems to have been the more interesting character, but Plowden alone has left the records. In any case, the true position is somewhat masked by Sir Trevor Chichele Plowden's defence of his brother. As far as the background is concerned the facts appear to be as follows. Plowden was at this time twenty-three years of age and a member of a well-known Anglo-Indian family. As a boy he was averse to all book learning and had been sent out to Calcutta when aged nineteen with a view to entering the

firm of Carr, Tagore and Co. A dislike for the sedentary life caused him to return home without plans and a chance meeting with John Bell at Suez led him to accompany the elder man to Abyssinia. They made a second journey in 1848 when Plowden was sent out to Abyssinia as consul by Lord Palmerston, then secretary of state for foreign affairs. It is worth noting that this was the first direct intervention by the Foreign Office in matters which had hitherto been considered to lie within the province of the Bombay Government.

A commercial treaty was envisaged and the destination of the travellers was not Gondar but Ras Ali's capital. "Debra Tabor," we find Plowden noting,<sup>1</sup> "is the capital chosen by Ras Gooksa, the first of the present or Galla dynasty, it is cold and healthy, but there is no stone house in it but that of the Ras." This sentence serves to indicate how completely the memory of the nominal emperor had passed away. The portrait of Ras Ali has characteristics which resemble those of the other rulers in the Ethiopian gallery. "The Ras," it is explained,<sup>2</sup> "is a very singular character, and a very difficult one to deal with. He came to power at the early age of twelve years; he is singularly tenacious of his opinion, very conceited, despising all men. He is, though callous, alive to the importance of sometimes pretending a sympathy that he does not feel, for, though not wise, he is cunning to the last degree, he cannot be excited to anger, and is extremely patient; he is never cruel, but more on system than from real compassion, he is just, save where his particular wishes are concerned; he likes intrigue." Throughout this description one finds reflected a formula that has become familiar, it is the consequence of a sense of high and intricate responsibility guided by a belief that it is needful to ponder well and then to act alone.

An account of Ras Ali's appearance then precedes the details<sup>3</sup> of the conversation. "In person he is of middle height, powerful, active, and of a striking countenance; he is veiled in all manly exercises—shooting, riding, throwing the lance, running—and is perhaps one of the best horsemen in Abyssinia. He is careless of dress or personal adornment of any kind, but cleanly in his habits."

<sup>1</sup> From an MS. of Walter Chichele Plowden's printed in *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country*, ed., Trevor Chichele Plowden, p. 400.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 402.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 402-3.



With all this he was not seldom inaccessible. "When Ras Ali wished to enjoy his case in his bath he would see no one."

The intercourse proceeded in a mode to which students of this subject are accustomed. "It is a shame," said Ras Ali<sup>2</sup> when the gifts were presented to him, "for me to take these things, as I am too poor to offer any compensation to your Queen, and you refuse any token of my regard." He then pressed on Plowden the offer of two villages. "Where will you put your horse or your mule? Where will you get grass or a house, if you have not these?"

As to the treaty Ras Ali showed less interest; perhaps he knew that his end was soon coming. He was used to drinking heavily and was exhausted. He was interested only in arms, and there was no mention of these in the commercial clauses. It is recorded that of the two Englishmen it was Plowden that he liked and that he accepted Bell for Plowden's sake. There is an account of the signature of the treaty which shows how much the amenities of court life had declined in two centuries. They were assembled in the prince's inner tent and the document had been read out by his scribe. Ras Ali exhibited a royal caution and would not commit himself beyond the statement that he saw no harm whatever in the document. "After the Abyssinian manner," it was explained,<sup>3</sup> "he kept talking to his favourite *Shoomeree* about a horse that was tied in the tent, and that was nearly treading me (Plowden) underfoot a dozen times." They sat on the carpets strewed on the dry soil and in their midst the bored and tired prince. This was in 1852, the climax of three years negotiation. Some months later Ras Ali was defeated and his power completely overthrown by Kedaref Kassa.

\* \* \*

In the three years that followed, Kassa defeated both the Tigrean and Shoan dynasties. He came then to a spectacular and deceptive supremacy such as has often been the lot of eastern kings. In this case we are fortunate in being able to study each phase in the life of a great leader. Kassa, or to give him his throne name Theodore, is made clear to us with a distinctness which is quite unusual. We cannot attain to the same knowledge in the case of other, even later rulers. His nature was at once ebullient and confiding and

<sup>1</sup> From an MS. of Walter Chichele Plowden's printed in *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country*, ed., Trevor Chichele Plowden, p. 409.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 403.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 420.

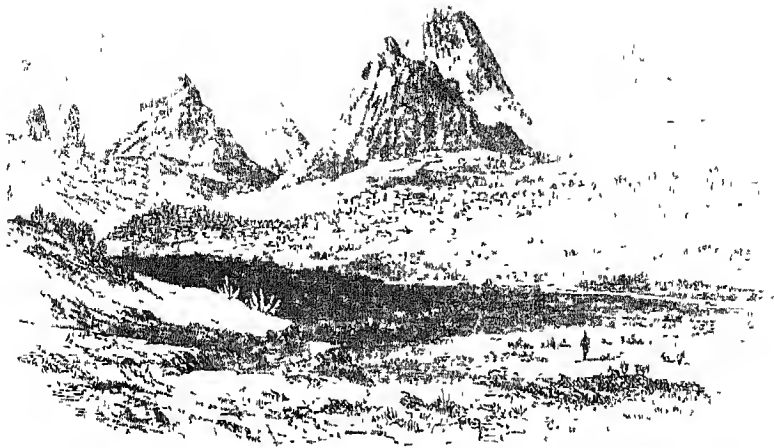


Plate 13    *Above* Adowa, from the road to Aksum    *Below* The Naval



ever lit by a flaming imaginative energy. In consequence he stirred an interest which Kassa of Tigrat, who succeeded him as John IV, would never rouse. On the other hand he had nothing of that oriental character, both veiled and business-like, which made it so difficult to penetrate the true intentions of the Emperor Menelik.

There are naturally no records of Kassa's childhood in Kwara, nor of that monastic training whose marks he never lost. He appears to have been born about 1818 and first emerges as a commander of Ras Ali's forces. From youth his energy burned like a flame. The desire for empire captivated him and he was determined on that martial glory which had for so long been a merely ritual attribute of each weak ruler. The nominal empire with its Christian past gave the direction to his strong ambition. Kassa's capacity was as marked as it was disquieting to his superiors; he early became Ras Ali's son-in-law.

After he had first gained Amhara and Gojjam he drove his forces for great distances in order to break each rival power. Thus, he vanquished Ubié of Tigrat and forced Haile Malakot of Shoa to retire to a monastery, leaving his young son, Menelik, as a vassal prince. In 1855 Sahela Dengel was forced to abdicate and the imperial crown then fell to Kassa. The Egyptian prelate, who had toyed with Ubié's pretensions, now rallied to the victor. The last emperor to be proclaimed in the old capital was crowned at Gondar by the Abuna Salama under the title of Theodore II.

Plowden, attended by several hundred servants, journeyed to pay his respects to the new sovereign. An official report to London gives his first and most favourable impression. "King Theodorus," he begins,<sup>1</sup> "is of a striking countenance, peculiarly polite and engaging when pleased, and mostly displaying great tact and delicacy. He is persuaded that he is destined to restore the glories of the Ethiopian Empire, and to achieve great conquests. When roused his wrath is terrible and all tremble; but at all moments he possesses a perfect self-command. Indefatigable in business, he takes little repose night or day; his ideas and language are clear and precise; hesitation is not known to him, and he has neither counsellors nor go-betweens. He is fond of splendour, and receives in state even on a campaign. He is unsparing in punishment. He is generous to excess and free from all cupidity, regarding

<sup>1</sup> From an MS of Walter Chichele Plowden's printed in *Travels in Abyssinia and the Galla Country*, ed., Trevor Chichele Plowden, pp. 456-7.

nothing with pleasure and desire but munitions of war for his soldiers."

This gives a certain impression, and the last sentence is decisive. He was thirty-seven years of age at this time, but for details of his appearance we must rely on a later observer. He was a man of medium height, broad chest, small waist, the complexion dark for an Abyssinian. Dr. Blanc has left a most telling account. "When," he explains,<sup>1</sup> "I first met Theodore in January, 1866, he must have been about forty-eight years of age. The expression of his dark eyes, slightly depressed, was strange; if he was in a good humour they were soft, with a kind of gazelle-like timidity about them that made one love him; but when angry the fierce and bloodshot eye seemed to shed fire. In moments of violent passion his black visage acquired an ashy hue, his thin compressed lips left but a whitish margin around the mouth, his very hair stood erect."

The same authority gives details of the emperor's life.<sup>2</sup> "He was also very abstemious in his food, and never indulged in excesses of the table. He rarely partook of more than one meal a day; which was composed of injera (the pancake loaves of teff seed), and red pepper, during fast days; of a kind of curry made of fish, fowl or mutton, on ordinary occasions. He sat on a raised platform eating from a special basket. He enjoyed the 'blind' raw beef feasts with his people.

He indulged in sleep but very little. Sometimes at two o'clock, at the latest before four, he would issue from his tent and give judgment on any case brought before him. He might be seen, long before daybreak, sitting solitary on a stone, in deep meditation or in silent prayer."

This brings in two facets of his character, his love for the open air and his religion. "Theodore," Dr. Blanc continues,<sup>3</sup> "had all the dislike of the roving Bedouin for towns and cities. He loved camp life, the free breeze of the plains, the sight of his army gracefully encamped around the hillock he had selected for himself. He did not like the palace the Portuguese had erected at Gondar. On the march he used a small red flannel tent.

Though he could read and write, he never condescended to correspond personally with anyone, but was always accompanied

<sup>1</sup> *A narrative of Captivity in Abyssinia*. By Henry Blanc, M.D., Staff Assistant-Surgeon Her Majesty's Bombay Army, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 17.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 11 and 14.

by several secretaries. He always had with him several astrologers. He hated the priests and laughed at the marvellous stories some of their books contain, but still he never marched without a church tent, a host of priests, *defters* and deacons, and never passed near a church without kissing its threshold."

It is worth hearing Walter Plowden on the same subject. "His faith," he wrote of Theodore,<sup>1</sup> "is signal. 'Without Christ,' he says, 'I am nothing.' Sometimes he is on the point of not caring for human assistance at all, and this is one reason why he will not seek with much avidity for assistance from, or alliance with, any European power." This is possibly a misjudgment of the situation, but he had certainly a sense of mission. Two phrases come to us<sup>2</sup> from the early portion of his reign. Theodore said, "As God has given this throne to me, a beggar, so let Him give me knowledge." And again, "What is glory compared with one's soul." Here is that unyielding pride as regards his kingly rights and the fanatical religious zeal which Plowden reprobates. In his solitary youth the emperor meditated on his greatness and his mission. To accomplish the great work assigned to him he must have unity and he needed cannon. This last factor was, perhaps, the subject of his most unremitting preoccupation. In regard to all these matters it seems likely that Walter Plowden misunderstood the flexible mind and the swift verbiage of the new sovereign.

It is relatively easy to assess the evidence relating to the reign of the Emperor Theodore. In the first place we possess the independent testimony of Dr. Blanc as to the personal relations between the consul and the wayward prince to whom he was accredited. The standing of Walter Plowden and John, or as he was now called Johannes, Bell had been reversed since the years that they had spent with Ras Ali. It seems probable that Theodore never forgot the friendship which his rival had shown to Walter Plowden.

Bell, on the other hand, was devoted to the new emperor. He had married the daughter of a noble family of Beghemedet and had become very nearly an Abyssinian. "He was," we are told,<sup>3</sup> "*liqmaqas* (familiar attendant) to Theodore and almost worshipped him. He slept at his friend's door, dined off the same dish, and narrated all the wonders of civilised life." This was in marked contrast to Plowden, who felt it incumbent upon him not only to

<sup>1</sup> Plowden, *op. cit.*, p. 457.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 460-1.

<sup>3</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

wear European dress but to keep his house in a semi-English style which was very stately. The strength of these two men lay in their alliance.<sup>1</sup> "The brotherly friendship that united them only increased with time." As for the emperor he did not like Plowden, nor the ambitious turn of mind he noted in him. Still, he was restrained by his friendship for Bell and by the fact that he was dealing with the official representative of Great Britain. Theodore therefore contented himself with employing spies in that elaborate household and listening to reports of all the consul's actions. From the imperial lips there fell smooth phrases on the subjects that appeared to have importance for Walter Plowden. "He had begun," we read of the emperor in a report sent home by the British consul,<sup>2</sup> "to reform the dress of Abyssinia, all about his person wearing loose-flowing trousers, and upper and under vests, instead of the half-naked costume introduced by the Gallas. Married himself at the altar and strictly continent, he (Theodore) exacts the greatest decency of manners and conversation. He has suppressed the slave trade in all its phases."

It seems reasonable to suppose that the emperor was waiting all the time for that material aid which never came. Suitable expressions would rise quickly in the untutored mind of the great ruler. "The slaves already bought," he explained,<sup>3</sup> in relation to that traffic which the English appeared to find obnoxious, "may be sold to such Christians as shall buy them for charity." Another sentence on a very different level of reality is drawn up from the wells of ancient thought. "I mistrust much. All men say that Turks and Franks only come to take your country from you. If I did not love you personally,"<sup>4</sup> went on the emperor in addressing Plowden, "I should have sent you away on the first mention of a consulate." Here is the pride that would be overmastering in those last years when Plowden and Bell had both been killed; then he would have no foreigner about him in whom he had a shred of confidence. There would be no one on whom to test the ideas that broke surface in a mind that was at once so resolute and inexperienced. If we need a key to all that happened, it is contained in these three words: I mistrust much.

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>2</sup> Plowden, *op. cit.*, p. 457

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 457.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 461.

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE LAST DAYS OF GONDAR

THE EMPEROR THEODORE was never at home in the old capital which still contained some ten thousand people. In so far as he liked any walled town, his preference was for Debra Tabor. He could not abide Gondar as a city of merchants. Long before the end he was playing with the idea of destroying it and was accustomed to raise money from rich Moslems by threatening to burn down their houses. There must have been a desolate air about the city for it seems that only the Castle of Ras Michael Schul and the three great rooms of the Castle of Fasilidas were still fit for habitation. It appears that Theodore possessed a great desire to purify and build anew on fresh foundations, while at the same time he could not feel that ramshackle Gondar was worthy of the age of the needle gun. A combination of motive that sounds almost incredible is found again and again throughout this reign in Abyssinia.

It would seem that by 1835 Theodore had attained to a combination of that sense of divine mission with a severely pragmatic approach to religious questions which later marked him. It is now that he began to manifest an urge to understand that went with a desire to respect and a determination to be respected. Thus he was courteous in the early days to Justin de Jacobis, the Italian Lazarist missionary whose work was already bearing fruit among the hill populations to the north of Adigiat and the dwellers of the plateau of the southern Hamasien. Yet in this case there were especial barriers in the way of a mutual understanding. In the first place the emperor's interest in Europe was concentrated on the great inventions that were made there. He was not interested in the polity of European states, nor in their institutions whether religious or secular; his soldierly mind was bent upon the forges and the workshops. There was also another consideration which in this issue was more important. The emperor could not forgive de Jacobis for the intermittent support that he received from



Ubié of Tigrai. Further he realised that both his rival and the missionaries were linked by the interest that France displayed in them. As between the French and British, Theodore had never wavered; it was an element in the final tragedy that he had always preferred the latter. The designs of the French consulate could be described as in general pro-Tigrayan and less explicitly pro-Catholic; there was no way forward for Theodore along that road.

The situation of the German Lutheran missionaries was in every respect completely different. Here there was neither mystery nor attraction but immediate and pressing usefulness. The emperor early established a complete ascendancy. He persuaded the newcomers to marry Abyssinians and to occupy themselves in metal work for their new master. He called them playfully his "Gaffat children" from the place in which he had established them. Theodore made their feuds his own, and magnified them. On the occasion of the imprisonment of the Rev. Henry Stern, who had been sent to Ethiopia by the London Mission for the conversion of the Jews, he wrote to his "Gaffat children" in these terms, "I have chained your enemy and mine."

The Lazarist writers speak of the emperor's persecution and instance the imprisonment of Justin de Jacobis and the death of Gebre Michael, an Abyssinian convert monk. These matters appear to be the side effects of Theodore's determined will to unity which was reflected in the Abuna Salama's proclamation of the orthodox Monophysite belief to which it was attempted to compel adherence. Unity was essential for that great task which the emperor conceived that God had laid upon him. It was a consequence of his buoyant temperament that he was both optimistic and suspicious; he had the falsest hopes of what military aid might come from England conceived as a Christian Power. Before his mind there lay spread out that great panorama of crusade which made the tiny preoccupations of the individual missionaries look trivial. It does not seem far-fetched to interpret the emperor's thought by this expression, Why did they come like gadflies to disturb him? He had his own great work which prophecy reserved for him, the destruction of the Pagans and Moslems on his borders, perhaps the conquest of Jerusalem.

By a strange fatality the only department of state which gave even a negligent attention to the affairs of the negus was the Government of India. No sympathy could be expected in such

a quarter for the emperor's dreams, but his plans had in fact more substance than is generally admitted. The opening years of his reign coincided with a period of weakness in the Egyptian state. The force generated by Mehemet Ali now seemed spent; the first viceroys of the Khedivial dynasty were dead and it must have appeared in Debra Tabor that there was little danger to be expected from the Cairene pashas. Moreover it was by this time clear that the sultan of Turkey would never again exercise even a shadowy authority in the Nile countries. There was no great contemporary Arab ruler and the sultanate of Zanzibar was, since 1856, separated from the Muscat imams, who had hitherto exercised the overlordship.

It was evident that should Egypt in fact become inveterate some power must succeed to her authority. The Emperor Theodore's experience did not extend beyond the circle of the neighbour princes; the designs and capacities of France and England were alike beyond his power to calculate. In that twilight of misinformation, which his energy would always seek to pierce, it was natural that he should dream of marching northwards with his Christian troops down the Nile through the rich green valley. Much of his planning, and particularly that concerning the extension of the empire to the south and east, was only a forecast of what Menelik II would achieve before the close of the same century. The Moslem emirates behind the coastal land of the Somalis were clearly destined to destruction in the absence of a strong Islamic power. It was only a question of time before the emirate of Haïar and the sultanate of Gimma would succumb before a neighbour who had resolution and some modern weapons. Theodore sat in his royal tent with his old-fashioned army all about him. The smoke from the camp fire rose up straight in the soft night. What could a sovereign do who had no cannon? .

It was contended by English writers accustomed to the domesticity of the Victorian period that the determining tragedy in the life of the Emperor Theodore was the death of his first wife. This seems a misreading of Ethiopian royal custom for surely the loss of Johannes Bell and Walter Plowden was much more serious. The latter's relationship with Theodore had not improved and he fretted under the emperor's suspiciousness which sought to prevent his return on leave to England. In November 1859 Plowden broke his leg and his health rapidly deteriorated. The

next year he obtained permission to go down to Massawah, but was mortally wounded by a band of robbers on his return and brought in dying to the capital. An expedition to avenge his death was organised, and Bell was shot through the heart while protecting Theodore in an ambush fight. Two thousand men were killed in the avenging of Plowden's murder and full details were sent to the consul's sovereign. The letter had been faintly penned by scribes and the emperor waited to receive maternal tokens of the queen of England's gratitude.

In the same year 1860 the emperor made a second marriage which proved unhappy with Terunish, a daughter of his captive rival Ubié. Shortly afterwards an English consular agent named Cameron came out to Gondar accompanied by Lieutenant Prideaux. It seems that Cameron is the officer qualified by Sir Stafford Northcote as "a headstrong fool." There were as yet no signs of a preparedness to send out munitions of war to Ethiopia. In consequence the emperor for a moment turned to France. It is possible that he magnified the aid that the French had brought to Ubié. In any case the appeal to the Emperor Napoleon III was ill-received and the reply was notably insufficient. When the letter arrived from Paris in September 1863 it was torn up by Theodore. "Who," cried the emperor,<sup>1</sup> "is that Napoleon? Are not my ancestors greater than his? If God made him great, can he not make me also greater?" There was deep feeling in this *cri de coeur*.

It was at this time too that he began to make use of Magdala. There was much that appealed to his nature in that wind-swept stronghold which will always be associated with his name. He began by establishing the queen there with her child Alamayou, his infant son and heir. A craving for drink was deepening on him as his troubles grew. There was no longer any need to paint a picture of Victorian proprieties for Plowden's eyes. An account dating from some three years later shows the emperor as his anxieties closed in about him. It is a description of this sovereign on the march. "To his right," it is explained,<sup>2</sup> "was the church tent; next to his own the queen's or that of the favourite of the day. Then came the one allotted to his former lady friends who travelled with him until a favourable opportunity presented itself of sending them to Magdala, where several hundreds were dwelling

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 15.

in seclusion spinning cotton for their master's *shamas* and for their own clothes. A double line of fences was placed round his camp and guards of musketeers. He (the emperor) never slept without having his pistols under his pillow, and several loaded guns by his hand. He had a great fear of poison, taking no food that had not been prepared by the queen or her *remplaçante*; and then she and several attendants had to taste it first. It was the same with his drink; be it water, tej, or *anack*." The evenings were no longer available for business as they once had been. "Unfortunately," we are told,<sup>1</sup> "Theodore had for several years taken greatly to drink. Up to three or four o'clock he was generally sober and attended to the business of the day; but after his siesta he was invariably more or less intoxicated." As time went by and there was still no reply from the queen, he took the ill-advised step of arresting Consul Cameron. This was followed by placing such missionaries as were British-protected persons in a form of custody.

It was naturally at this point that the affairs of Abyssinia first appear upon the stage of British politics. "The King of Abyssinia,"<sup>2</sup> wrote Lord Russell, then foreign secretary to Queen Victoria, "wished to be invited to come to this country, and to be assisted against the French, and, as these requests could not be complied with, he imprisoned the consul and missionaries. Of course, it would be useless to employ force, but continued efforts will probably procure the release of the consul." It is worth examining the lines of action that it was now decided to pursue.

Mr. Hornumud Rassam, assistant political officer in Aden, was sent to Theodore accompanied by Dr. Henry Blanc to negotiate the release of those imprisoned. The party reached the imperial camp at Damot in January 1866. The description of the encounter is singularly illuminating. "We advanced," explains Dr. Blanc,<sup>3</sup> "towards the beautiful durbar tent of red and yellow silk, between a double row of gunners. The Emperor told us to sit down on the splendid carpets that covered the ground. The Emperor was seated on an *alaga*, wrapped up to the eyes in a *shama*. On his right and left stood four of his principal officers, clad in rich and

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup> Letters from Earl Russell at Pembroke Lodge to Queen Victoria dated 5th February, 1865, *Letters of Queen Victoria*, second series, vol. 1, ed., G. H. Buckle

<sup>3</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

gay silks, and behind him watched one of his trusty familiars, holding a double-barrelled pistol in each hand."

They began by the offering of presents which included a large looking-glass for Queen Terunish. This was received with some hesitation and the Emperor Theodore remarked that he had not been happy in his married life. He was in a friendly mood and spoke in Arabic. "Is the American War over?"<sup>1</sup> he enquired, "and how many were killed?" Then his interest shifted to West African matters. "Why did the King of Dahomey kill so many of his subjects? What is his religion?"

The sovereign became increasingly cordial and said that<sup>2</sup> he regarded Rassam, Blanc and himself as "three brothers." The immediate sequel is not unexpected. A verbal message came asking Dr. Blanc, who was a medical man, whether he knew anything of smelting iron, casting guns or any such matter. Later the emperor gave audience in his hall. "He had before him,"<sup>3</sup> explains Blanc, "quite an arsenal of guns and pistols; he spoke about and showed those we had brought with us, guns that had been made to order by the brother of a gunmaker in his service, a manufacturer of St. Etienne, near Lyons. The Emperor was much put out for Mr. Rassam had not mentioned the objects he had so dear at heart; the artisans and instruments"

It was after this disappointment that Theodore made the disastrous decision to arrest Mr. Rassam and Dr. Blanc. He seems to have thought that this would show his power and his great courage and make the English very quick to treat with him. Further he took his stand upon a point of honour. He made it clear that at the moment of Rassam's arrival he was just about to send the English captives to the coast but had been prevented by the change of route and the conditions which the new envoys wished to impose. "Did I not tell you," he explained to Mr. Rassam,<sup>4</sup> "I wanted to give them (the captives) mules and money. Now, on your account you see them in chains. From the day that you told me that you desired to send them by another road I became suspicious and imagined that you did so in order that you might say in your country that they were released through your cunning and power." It is clear that he was somewhat affronted by the quality of the envoy. His people were not accustomed to

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 150.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 160-1.

esteem the type of Arab in English employment. It seems that he considered a reminder was necessary of the queen's lack of courtesy. After the arrest of Blanc and Rassam an Abyssinian officer appeared and read a lengthy paper giving details of the emperor of Ethiopia's pedigree.

On 17 April 1866 all the European prisoners were brought before Theodore, who upbraided them for attempting to depart from his country without being reconciled with him. He then compelled Mr. Rassam to write a letter to the British Government applying for European workmen and machinery for the manufacture of munitions of war and asking that an instructor of artillery be despatched to Ethiopia. The situation of the emperor was deteriorating and revolts were increasing. The previous year Menelik of Shoa, whom he had married to his daughter Bafana, had escaped from Magdala where he was living as a hostage. And all this came about because the friendship for which the emperor yearned was so long in maturing. In June the European prisoners were transferred to Magdala.

During this year even the capital of Gondar was for some months in the hands of rebels. Theodore had never liked the place and he knew that his dream depended on no earthly habitat. He determined to destroy the remnants of the forty-four churches in order to obtain their treasure and above all the golden haul from Cusquam Abbey. On 2 December 1866 the emperor came in to the city and the welcoming cry of joy, the *elelta*, rose for the last time from every house for the inhabitants desired to appear happy. The churches were plundered in an orderly fashion, the silver from Beta and the treasures from Selassie. The ten thousand people were driven out like cattle. Fire spread from house to house, sweeping across the dry straw roofing with the network of trees blazing. The shrines and palaces were burned, and only four lesser churches remained standing. Gold, silks and dollars were abundant in the royal camp. The flames had consumed Gondar.

## CHAPTER XXIV

### THE FALL OF MAGDALA

IN THE EIGHTEEN MONTHS of life that still remained to him the Emperor Theodore concentrated upon the manufacture of cannon and the strengthening of the fortress of Magdala. He seems to have felt that it was likely that a British force would come to parley with him, but at times it appears that he thought he could make friends with a great English warrior. His hope was always lit by a vague wild magnanimity.

Thrown back on his own resources he established a foundry making Mr. Waldmeier, one of the Gaffat missionaries, his overseer. Here he cast his cannon the "Great Sebastopol." As the name shows the memories of the Crimea were ever present; later he completed a big mortar the "Theodoros." It was about this time that Mr. Flad, another missionary who had been sent to the coast with Rassam's letter, returned with a temporising reply and a telescope offered to the emperor by General Merewether. The mood of suspicion had deepened upon Theodore. "Take it to my tent," he said, "I know it is not a good telescope; I know it is not sent to me for good."

The emperor would soon abandon Debra Tabor and his thoughts had turned to Magdala. This was a plateau fortress of extraordinary strength some seventy miles west of the modern town of Dessie in what was then conquered Galla country. It was tempting to Theodore because it seemed almost impregnable. The level ground upon the summit was less than a mile long by half a mile across. It stood rather over nine thousand feet above the sea and had perpendicular sides of columnar basalt which fell down to the high and rock-strewn land. It was approached from the west by Koket-bir gate and from the east by Kaffir-bir. More than three thousand people lived at Magdala and almost the whole of the grass plateau was covered with well-built circular thatched huts. There was a very large open space in the centre of the flat ground. On one side stood the emperor's house, where Queen Terunish lived, a building of two stories with the ground floor used as a

granary. Across the square stood the treasury, further granaries and the church dedicated to the Saviour of the World, Medhani Alem. In the treasury there was gradually collected much of the portable wealth of the empire, ecclesiastical crowns, chalices, silver and bronze crosses, censers, silks, velvets, carpets, Geez and Amharic manuscripts, spears, swords, gold and silver shields, silver kettle-drums and many thousands of guns and pistols. Outside in the square there stood the imperial tent ready to receive the lord of all this garnered wealth.

The European prisoners were at Magdala already kept in the long prison huts opening on to a verandah overgrown with tomato plants which ripened in the lovely winter weather. In another hut was the Abuna Salama, who had been sent into captivity in 1864 when the emperor tired of him. Theodore had never liked Egyptians, nor could he forget the prelate's long association with Ras Ali. By this time the *abuna* was in a poor condition for he had taken heavily to opium and drank arrack. It is recorded that he communicated with the other prisoners by sending notes in Arabic. Rather pathetically he formed plans of escape and asked for some nitrate of silver to blacken his face so that he could pass out of the gates unrecognised. In October 1867 the Abuna Salama died.

It was in the same autumn that the House of Commons voted a credit of two million pounds for an expedition to Abyssinia. The arguments that had led to this development are well set out in a letter written by the secretary of state for India, Sir Stafford Northcote, to the then viceroy. "I believe," it is explained,<sup>1</sup> "that, if we had nothing but English and European opinion to look to, we might perfectly argue, 'These missionaries are troublesome busybodies; Cameron a headstrong fool;<sup>2</sup> Rassam is certainly to be pitied, but his going there is all the fault of Lord Russell and Layard; we have no business in Abyssinia; Theodore has been horribly mismanaged, and has some ground for complaining of us; the country is difficult, the prospect of success uncertain, the risk of failure and the certainty of great loss considerable: we won't expose our troops, but will go on negotiating and trusting to the chapter of accidents.' We should, I hope, feel

<sup>1</sup> Printed in *Life, Letters and Diaries of Sir Stafford Northcote, first Earl of Iddesleigh*, by Andrew Lang, i, p. 310.

<sup>2</sup> The name is omitted by Mr. Lang but internal evidence suggests that it could only be Captain Cameron.



rather humiliated if we took such a line ; but I believe the country would content itself with grumbling a little, while I do not suppose that France or Germany would think us one whit the less powerful." It is now that he comes to the real argument. "But do you," Northcote continues, "seriously believe that such tameness would fail to produce its effect in India, or in the countries adjoining India? Do you suppose, for instance, that the admission that Indian troops could not penetrate so difficult a country as Abyssinia would be a wise one to make? or that Indian envoys to Muscat or Zanzibar would have found it to their advantage to have it commonly reported that England did not trouble herself to rescue her servants?"

This was the argument which set in motion the expenditure of several million pounds and the collection in Annesley Bay of what was for those times so great a mass of shipping. In December and January the transports hired for the use of Sir Robert Napier's force came sailing from Bombay to that hot gulf and altogether two hundred and ninety vessels not counting tugs, lighters and native craft dropped anchor off Zulla. "Powerful team tugs<sup>1</sup> brought in the sailing ships, while steam transports kept running from Suez to the base with camels, mules and forage; and others to and from Berbera with camels and camp-followers, besides a constant service to and from Bombay with stores and details."

They were 380 miles from Magdala, and sixty-two thousand men were disembarked on that dreary shore. There were seventeen thousand mules and ponies, five thousand seven hundred camels, seven thousand bullocks, two thousand five hundred horses, nearly two thousand asses and forty-four elephants. The future Lord Roberts of Kandahar was transport officer. All drinking water at Zulla was condensed by the steamers in the bay. The cost of the expedition was nine million pounds instead of the four millions estimated. It was the last and greatest contribution made by the Indian administration to Abyssinian history. The Emperor Theodore was justified in the anxiety that now oppressed him.

At first his mood was *exalté* and shot with irrational hope. "The people from whom you brought me a letter," he said<sup>2</sup> to Mr. Flad, "have landed at Zulla. They are coming up by the

<sup>1</sup> Account by Mr. Thomas Bowling, R N., secretary to Captain Tryon, printed in the *Life of Vice-Admiral Sir George Tryon, K.C.B.*, by Admiral Penrose Fitzgerald, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 357.

Salt Plain. Why did they not take a better road? The one by the Salt Plain is very unhealthy." By this time the emperor had burned Debia 'Tabor; the road that he had planned to Gojjam led only to the wilderness, the road to Magdala was pressing forward with all the labour that he could command. "We," exclaimed Theodore in this connection, "are making roads with great difficulty; for them it will be only play to make roads everywhere. It seems to me," he added, "that it is the Will of God that they come. Remember the history of Hezekiah and Sennacherib." His mind still ran on biblical analogies. "I long for the day,"<sup>1</sup> he told his workmen a little later, "I shall have the pleasure of seeing a disciplined European army. I am like Simeon. I am old, too, but I hope God will spare me to see them before I die."

The progress of his thought can now be traced almost continuously. "We have a prophecy in our country,"<sup>2</sup> he told Waldmeier, "that a European king will meet an Abyssinian one, and that afterwards a king will reign in Abyssinia greater than any before him. That prophecy is going to be fulfilled at the present time; but I do not know," he concluded ruefully, "whether I am the king alluded to or if it is some one else." It was about February 17 when the emperor called in Waldmeier, who is reported to have said that he had not a single friend left in the country. "Who,"<sup>3</sup> came Theodore's angry reply, "are you, you dog, but a donkey, a poor man who came from a far country to be my slave, and whom I have paid and fed for years? What does a beggar like you know about my affairs. A King is coming to treat with a King."

All the same there was a reason for disquiet. Those who had revolted or even merely chafed under the yoke now saw their chance, and the English were lavish with their promises. The Tigrean viceroys were the first to offer Napier passive assistance in return for a promise to leave their land speedily. At Adigrat there was a meeting between the parties. Two elephants had been brought up from the coast to impress allies, and on one of these Napier rode into Adigrat. The young Kassai of Tigray, who would be the Emperor John, rode forward to meet him on a white mule with a crimson umbrella carried above him. "Kassai,"<sup>4</sup> so runs an English account of this scene, "was a young man of thirty-

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 352.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 356.

<sup>4</sup> *The British Expedition to Abyssinia*, by Henry M. Hozier, p. 127.

five. His face, of a dark olive colour, was intellectual, but wore a wearied and careworn expression. He wore the Abyssinian costume, a white robe embroidered with crimson and the flowered silk shirt which marks those in high office round the king. His dark black hair was arranged in careful plaits tied by a piece of riband round the back of the neck."

At Adowa the sun lit the bright colours of the soldiers from India as they passed in review, the third Bombay Light Cavalry clad in light blue and silver, the fourth King's Own in scarlet, the gunners of Murray's battery in dark blue and red facings, and a small detachment of the tenth Native Infantry with scarlet coats and white turbans.

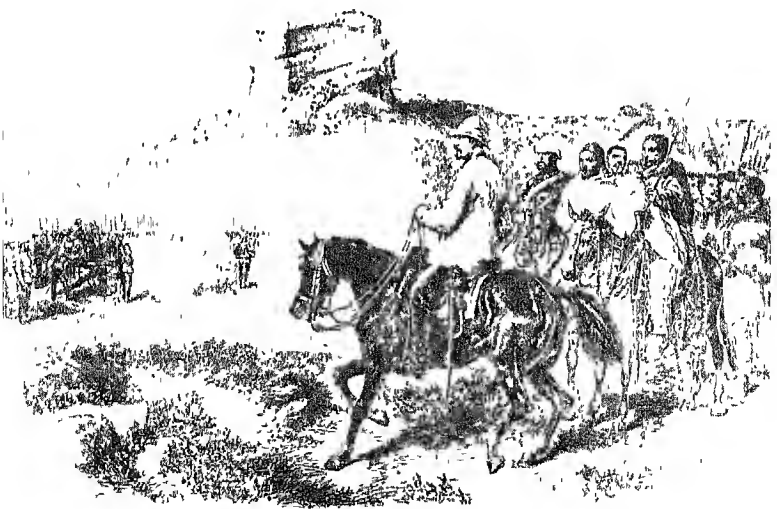
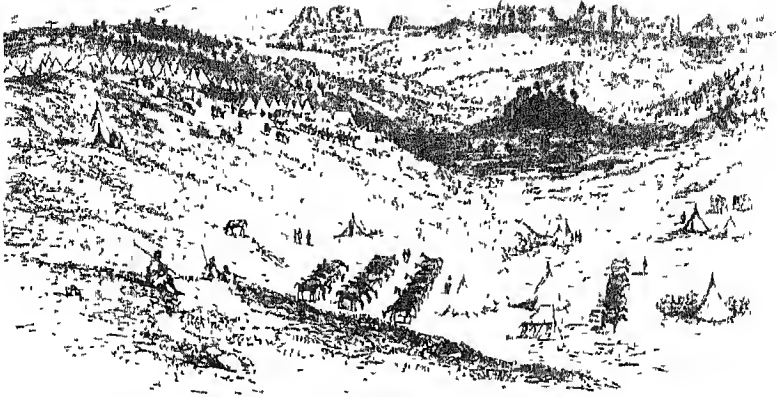
The presents brought for the viceroy were really not very considerable, a double-barrelled rifle and a little Bohemian glass-ware, mainly jugs and goblets. Kassai was still an inexperienced ruler, and it is natural that he should have looked careworn as the *tedj* was poured out at the festival from the huge bullock horns. Meanwhile there was prescience in the emperor's reactions. He was always close to Waldmeier as the chief of his workmen, and in this way his words have come down to us. "With love and friendship,"<sup>1</sup> he exclaimed about March 15 in reference to the English, "they will overcome me; but if they come with other intentions I know they will not spare me, and I will make a great blood-bath and afterwards die."

There is a glimpse of the emperor as he approached to his last fortress. He was seen seated on a heap of stones about twenty yards below Islamgee on the side of the road which had just been completed. Theodore held a spear in his hand and two long pistols were fixed in his belt. Five or six hundred men pulled on the leather ropes dragging 'Sebastopol.'

Meanwhile the European prisoners were in some trepidation as their captor drew near to his stronghold. They were conscious that they had constantly sent messages northwards to the force which had come to relieve them. A comment made by Dr. Blanc is very revealing. "Mr. Rassam," he observes,<sup>2</sup> "is certainly deserving of praise for endeavouring to impress upon his Majesty the fervent friendship he felt for him, and the sincere admiration and deep devotion which time had only strengthened, and that even captivity and chains could not destroy." As a consequence

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 358.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 358.



*Plate 14* - *Above* Camp at Ad-Abaga *Below* Departure of General Napier



of this policy he sent early in March a note of congratulations to the emperor, who replied by giving orders that his fetters should be removed. Theodore further called Mr. Rassam his friend and asked him to accept a gift of a hundred sheep and fifty cows. It was a game of double bluff, but his hope lay in Rassam's superiors.

On March 26 the Ethiopian priests set out from Magdala to meet their sovereign who had now brought his cannon and even his monster mortar to the foot of the mountain. The clergy are described as wearing full canonicals and carrying gaily-tinselled umbrellas and crosses. "Go back, my fathers,"<sup>1</sup> said Theodore, "be of good cheer; if I have money I will share it with you. My clothes will be yours and with my coin I will feed you." At this point an old priest cried out aloud to the emperor. "You do not fast, you observe no more the feasts of the saints. I fear that you will soon follow entirely the religion of the Franks." Theodore turned to some of the Europeans, who stood near him, and said: "Did I ever enquire of you about your religion? Did I ever show any desire to follow your creed?" They all replied, "Certainly not." The monk was led away in chains, and the episode ended.

On reaching the open space in front of the queen's house in Magdala the throne was brought out and decked with gorgeous silks, the state umbrella was unfolded and carpets spread. The prisoners were brought forward and Theodore released them all. "I chained you," he explained,<sup>2</sup> "because people believed that I was not a strong king; now that your masters are coming I release you to show that I am not afraid. Fear not; Christ is my witness." The next day the emperor assembled his people, and said to them:<sup>3</sup> "You hear of white men coming to fight me; it is no rumour, but quite true." A soldier shouted out: "Never mind, my king, we will fight them." Theodore looked at the man and spoke sharply. "You fool, you do not know what you say. These people have long cannons, elephants, guns and muskets without number. We cannot fight against them. You believe that our muskets are good: if they were so they would not sell them to us."

An illuminating conversation took place about this time between the emperor and Mr. Rassam. Preparations were going forward rather feverishly and a party of five men under Mr. Staiger, another missionary, was engaged in explaining that not more than five or

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 361.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 370.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 372.

six thousand soldiers would advance on Magdala and added, "It will only be friendship." To this the emperor replied,<sup>1</sup> "God only knows. Before, when the French came into my country at the time of that robber Agau Negassie, I made a quick march to seize them, but they all ran away." Then his mood changed. "You have seen today my army and there (pointing) is all my country; but I will wait for them here and let God's Will be done."

He next spoke about the war in the Crimea, of the late contest between Austria and Prussia, and of the needle-gun. He asked if the Prussians had made the emperor of Austria a prisoner and seized his country. Later, when he had been drinking, Theodore asked why he had not received any intimation of the landing of the British troops and enquired whether it was not customary for a king to inform his neighbour when about to invade his country. His spirits sank.

Rassam had been roughly correct in his estimate of the number of the troops for only just over four thousand men encamped before Magdala. The Europeans formed rather over half the total and included the sailors belonging to a naval rocket brigade. Some impression of the state of mind of the attackers can be obtained from manuscript correspondence of the late General Sir Edward Francis Chapman, who fought as a captain with the guns of a mountain battery through this campaign. "On the 22nd March,"<sup>2</sup> he notes in a letter dated two days later, "we had a most agreeable change. Leaving camp early we skirted a hill covered with juniper, pine trees and low scrub vegetation, dog roses and a fair imitation of lilac as far as colour is concerned, flowering all along the way we followed." The same nostalgia for England is apparent in a letter written on March 28 from a place that Chapman calls Camp Wandatet. "We occupy,"<sup>3</sup> he explains, "a ridge on the southern slope of this splendid mountain: across a ravine on a still higher point is a native fort or 'amba'—it presents something of the appearance of a Kentish hop-field, a number of high sticks with a certain amount of green about them standing out against the sky. Even at this enormous height (10,600 feet) our view to the south towards Magdala is limited by a wall of mountain." There seems here a curious and very English non-chalance which boded ill for Theodore.

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op cit.*, p 378.

<sup>2</sup> Chapman MSS, letter dated 24th March, 1868.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, letter dated 28th March, 1868.

The next two letters offer a clearer statement. "We are well off," he wrote<sup>1</sup> from what he terms Camp Abdicoon, "with twelve oz. of flour or biscuit and plenty of meat, we miss the little luxuries of rum and sugar. At the Djedda we came up with the King's highway from Debra Tabor to Magdala." An assessment of this achievement follows<sup>2</sup> "Two marches along the 'Royal Road' have raised our opinion of the mighty *Negus*. Weary elephants creeping slowly down the ghat keep back the mules. At nine thirty the lights of the camp seemed close to my feet, but the big fires looked little larger than lanterns at some garden fête. I almost fancy the prisoners may have had a sight of our tents, if they have glasses in their possession." The judgment that follows is an interesting comment on the situation. "Our Roman Catholic priest," writes Captain Chapman, "a nice old fellow who trudges along with us every day in his long loose coat, a Bible under his arm and a big stick in his hand, is warmly greeted by every one. He said this morning when the usual salute had been exchanged: 'Theodore is a great man, Europe should have helped him to regenerate Ethiopia ten years ago and then he never would have become a cruel despot, but restored a nation. Look at his work, do we not all wonder?' It is indeed a work of great energy and no little skill, and he has dragged his heavy guns along it." The time was coming quickly when his heavy guns were to prove of little use to Theodore.

The emperor was preparing to work his cannon; he determined to make ready for the conflict with suitable magnificence. "After his fall became imminent,"<sup>3</sup> we read in Dr. Blanc's account, "he (the emperor) on several occasions clad himself in gorgeous costumes, in shirts and mantles of rich brocade silks or of gold-embroidered velvet. He did so, I believe, to influence his people. They knew that he was poor." On April 8 the emperor gave instructions to his soldiers who were leaving for the advanced post at Arogi. He instructed them to wait until the enemy fired, and then to fall on them with their spears before they could re-load. "Your valour," he promised them,<sup>4</sup> "will meet with its reward, and you will enrich yourselves with spoils, compared to which the rich dress I am wearing is but a mere trifle." He was weary and most unhopeful. The next day he sent a message in to his prisoners.

<sup>1</sup> Chapman MSS, letter dated 3rd April, 1868. <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, letter dated 6th April, 1868.

<sup>3</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 385.



"I am tired," he wrote,<sup>1</sup> "from looking out so long; I am going to rest awhile. Why are your people so slow?" Three days later there took place the battle of Atogi.

In this action the emperor's artillery was served by Abyssinian workmen, under the direction of a Copt, who had been the *abuna's* servant, and of Lij Ingeddah Worq, the son of a converted Bengali Jew. The great mortar 'Theodoros' broke when two cannon balls were rammed in. The Abyssinians were completely defeated. During the night after this disaster the Emperor Theodore sent for Messrs. Waldmeier and Flad. He told them to go back to Mr. Rassam's house with this message.<sup>2</sup> "I thought that the people now coming were women—I find that they are men. I have been conquered by the advance guard alone. All my gunners are dead; reconcile me with your people." Then he turned again to the prisoners. "Do you hear this wailing?" he said.<sup>3</sup> "There is not a soldier who has not lost a friend or a brother. What will it be when the whole army comes? Go back to Magdala and tell Mr. Rassam that I trust in his friendship."

With the coming of daylight he decided to send Lieutenant Prideaux and Mr. Flad and his own son-in-law Dejatch Ali to the enemy's camp with an offer to set free the prisoners. At the same time he asked General Napier to accept from him a personal present of one thousand cows. These were driven down from the fortress. By a mistake Theodore when asking, "Have the cows been accepted?" received the reply,<sup>4</sup> "The English Ras says to you, 'I have accepted your present: may God give it back to you.'" Dr. Blanc, who was present, takes up the story. "Theodore took a deep breath and told the remaining Europeans on Mount Selassie: 'Take your families and go.' To Mr. Waldmeier he said: 'You also want to leave me; well, go: now I have friendship with the English, if I want ten Waldmeiers I have only to ask for them.'"

It was only a few hours previously that Ras Ingeddah had urged that the prisoners should be killed. "You donkey," Theodore had replied,<sup>5</sup> "Have I not killed enough these last two days? Do you want me to kill these white men and cover Abyssinia with blood?" It seemed that he was justified now for all his restraint. There is a note of elation in his letter to Rassam in which he

<sup>1</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 388.

<sup>2</sup> Hozier, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>4</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 406.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 403.

explained that he had offered the cows to mark the Easter festival. The rejoicings of the Paschal season, so deep in Ethiopian custom, were already at hand. "Now that we are friends,"<sup>1</sup> he wrote joyfully to Rassam, "you must not leave me without artisans, as I am a lover of the mechanical arts."

During the evening of the next day he learned that his cows had not been accepted and were still outside the English pickets. Further, Napier sent a message stating that the emperor must submit and come into his camp within forty-eight hours. Dejach Ali returned to say that he had seen the mortars and elephants and had been told that the arms used in the action were but playthings in comparison with these destroying machines. Mr. Waldmeier translated the British general's terms. "I guarantee,"<sup>2</sup> Napier had declared in demanding the safe return of the prisoners, "honourable treatment for yourself and for all the members of your Majesty's family." Theodore still held fast to the one chance of release. "What do they mean," he enquired,<sup>3</sup> "by honourable treatment? Do they mean to treat me honourably as their prisoner, or do they intend to assist me in recovering my country from the rebels?" This was the last flicker before gloom settled down. "Have they taken into account," he went on, "of my numerous family, for I have as many wives and children almost as I have hairs on my head? It would involve an immense expense in England if they should undertake to provide for them all." But General Napier had no discretion to permit Theodore to continue to reign. This was the end.

The emperor had been defeated by those weapons that he prized and envied, the sniders and the rockets and the little steel guns to resume Captain Chapman's catalogue. The mere threat of the use of these new arms had made the lords of the northern provinces willing helpers of the invaders. The emperor had never counted much on cities, and now the country that provided him with corn and maize and men was being stripped from him. From the heights of his *amba* he looked across those desolate lands which were to be the site of his last battlefield. To the westward and the southward there stretched the cliffs, the gorges and that hardy plain which marked the stronghold of the Amharas. The soft tones of that vast landscape, the dull sad green and the brown-

<sup>1</sup> *History of the Abyssinian Expedition*, by Clement R. Markham, p. 338.

<sup>2</sup> Hozer, *op. cit.*, p. 204.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 205

purple, spread out beneath the heavy cloud-banked sky. Eastward he would soon reach to the edge of his dominion to that bald range whose rocky slopes dropped down to the malarial half-dried lake swamps of the Wollo Galla. One could see far in that even light away beyond the Christian frontiers to the hills which stood before the Awash and Moslem land. Down, below the sharp slopes, the *waaha* birds stood wise upon the branches and the solitary monkeys slipped among the matted undergrowth. The valleys were filled with the mimosa trees, which stood so crowded and improbable and park-like, in the high grass. The heavy vegetation rose from marshy shallows. It was very silent in the hollow ground.

Away beyond the Pass of the Gazelles the umbrella mimosas, row on row, stood in their lines and no wind came to stir the feathery tops. The steep cliffs, with the sun behind them, were like the eastward-facing hills in Thessaly rising grim in the warm weather. North and south the bastion of King Theodore stretched away for mile on empty mile. It was hot with the thin exhausted air of the days before the little rains had broken. The clouds piled round the sweep of that horizon until they were dispelled by the late sunlight. The cattle were within the great wood gates where there lay piled the guns and spears and pistols. The cannon 'Sebastopol' stood in the square. The brass work of the trunnions now reflected the rays of the last day's sun which shone upon the fortress town of Magdala.

The emperor went into his tent and there dictated to his secretary the final manifesto. He thought bitterly of the destruction of his high ambition. "Believing myself," he dictated,<sup>1</sup> "to be a great lord, I gave you battle; but, by reason of the worthlessness of my artillery all my pains were as nought. I had intended, if God had so decreed, to conquer the whole world; and it was my desire to die if my purpose could not be fulfilled. Since the day of my birth till now no man has dared to lay hands on me. Whenever my soldiers began to waver in battle, it was mine to arise and rally them. Last night the darkness hindered me from doing so. You people who have passed the night in joy, may God do unto you as He has done unto me. I had hoped, after subduing all my enemies in Abyssinia to lead my army against Jerusalem."

The next day the British troops stormed Magdala. The morning was occupied with the ascent and in the early afternoon they

<sup>1</sup> Proclamation printed in Maikham, *op. cit.*, p. 331.

reached Theodore's park of guns outside the fortress. About half past three o'clock firing began against the Koket-bir gate. The men at this entrance refused to yield, but the soldiers of the thirty-third regiment crossed the low walls by scaling ladders. A steep and winding path led to the inner gate where Theodore stood with his armour bearer Welde Gabir, who had been in the service of Baironi, the vice consul at Massawah. He had already dismissed his other followers. "Fly," he had said.<sup>1</sup> "I release you from your allegiance. As for me, I shall never fall into the hands of the enemy." He was exhausted and emaciated for he had fasted for four days supporting himself on *tedj* and drams of arrack. His three long plaits of hair were left unbuttered "to show his grief for<sup>2</sup> the badness of his people." At ten minutes past four he put a pistol into his mouth and fired it and fell dead.

When the English reached him, his body was resting on a stone and they recognised it by a mark that they had been told to look for, a finger broken by a gunshot wound got long ago in Gojjam when a young man. The Abyssinians came out from their *tukals*. The crowd cried out "Theoderos."

The expedition returned to Zulla and re-embarked almost without casualties. There was question of making Napier a peer, and Disraeli quoted the precedent of the reward granted to General Keane for taking Ghuznee. Before the troops left Magdala there was an auction of what was described as "the most wretched collection of booty one could well conceive." Chapman secured a brass processional cross. The body of the Abuna Salama was found dressed in full canonicals in a box. The opinion of society was described as favourable to the general's promotion; he became in consequence Lord Napier of Magdala. With summer the queen went to Balmoral. "Dinner as yesterday," we read in *More leaves from a journal in the Highlands*, "Jane Churchill finished reading *Pride and Prejudice* to us after dinner. A very clear starlight night." In Ethiopia torrential rains beat down upon the three burned capitals. In the church of Medhani Alem in the ruined fortress Theodore lay buried with all his hopes.

<sup>1</sup> Proclamation printed in Markham, *op. cit.*, p. 353

<sup>2</sup> Blanc, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

## CHAPTER XXV

### GORDON AT DEBRA TABOR

AN ASSESSMENT OF THE SIGNIFICANCE of Theodore's reign is rendered difficult by the fact that the emperor is normally seen through the eyes either of his victims or of his conquerors. The details of his last years are given by those who were placed in chains by him; it is only Plowden's reports that are free from this bias. Nevertheless, his period of rule is crucial; he was the first of the three emperors, Theodore, John IV and Menelik II, through whose efforts the empire, in its modern form, came into being.

There are certain elements which are plainly due to him. In the first place he revived the conception of the union of imperial right and power after the decadence of the preceding emperors at Gondar. The vigour of his impact dissipated, although it did not destroy, the force of that old oligarchy whose authority could not but grow under the *rois fainéants*. He was the first ruler for three centuries to emphasise in a practical way the need for unity, the conception of a government which should be both organised and strong. In so doing the Emperor Theodore broke away from what had been the Gondarine ideal even in the period of that empire's strength, a power that was remote, instinct with dignity, spiritual in the widest sense, religious, sacrosanct. Theodore had himself quite worked free from the filtered Byzantine influence that for so long lay about the court of Gondar. He introduced two notes which had not been present for many generations in Ethiopian history, he was an emperor who was both aggressive and iconoclast.

At the same time he freed the Amharic tradition from the idea that the Solomonic line tended to involve descent from that stream of blood that led back through Fasilidas. Sahela Dengel represented what was almost become a forgotten imperial fiction, something more debilitated than any legend. Before the new ruler's dynamic power each lingering Merovingian cobweb fell away. It would seem accurate to state that the Emperor Theodore made the descent from Solomon, which was always crucial, something personal and not dynastic. A resemblance may, perhaps, be traced

between the line of Solomon and those who, in earlier ages, were accorded a descent from the House of David. Ethiopian thought was impregnated with Judæan echoes. The scribes who furnished Theodore with the details of his Solomonic pedigree could also later work for other lords. As a practical consequence, this greatly enlarged the field of choice of successive emperors.

The iconoclastic element in the reign was due to causes which would not endure. The sense of a crusading mission was personal to the Emperor Theodore as was his curious unbridled zeal. He had nothing of the long-sighted, subtle patience which marked the approach of the House of Shoa to the whole complex of the Church. His period of rule was in fact an interval between the disappearance of that stylised theocratic world which centred upon Gondar and the emergence of that inter-relation between the Church and the new Empire which was established by Menelik II.

Both his foreign policy and the conditions which alone made it possible, died with the Emperor Theodore. His ideas of expansion were conditioned by the fact that the European powers possessed at most an indirect interest in East Africa. Under such circumstances the limits to territorial increase were only set by the weak Egyptian provinces and the little Moslem emirates; but by the time of his death the situation had changed completely. It was a period of colonial expansion. While Napier's forces toiled towards Magdala, Basutoland was proclaimed British territory, and in the same autumn the Russian forces entered Samarcand. The diamond fields of Kimberley were now seen as a British sphere of interest. These were the first beginnings of a policy that would be dominant for seventy years. Still the power which first affected Ethiopian interests in this fashion was not Britain but France. An adventurous tendency had been inherited by the governments of Napoleon III from the foreign ministers of Louis Philippe. In 1862 the French had annexed Indo-China and made the treaty of Saigon with the empire of Annam. In the same year they had purchased a small port on what was to be the *Côte Française des Somalis* called Obock, which would be of use as a coaling station for French merchant and naval vessels on their way to these new possessions on the South China Sea.

Obock was a trivial beginning and was acquired light-heartedly, but it was the predecessor of a whole group of infertile colonies, French, British and Italian Somaliland and Eritrea. This shifting

of interests was linked with the opening of the Suez Canal in October, 1869. Henceforward Aden and even in a measure Djibouti, the new French port which took the place of Obock, acquired a fresh significance. The P. & O. Lines sailing from Tilbury to India, and later also to China and Japan, called as inevitably at Aden as did the *Messageries Maritimes* vessels at Djibouti on their way to Saigon. All communications with India now passed through the narrow Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, although it must be admitted that the significance of the ports on the Red Sea for British sea power was only realised very gradually. Nevertheless the new situation was slowly developing. The change can be best expressed by introducing this consideration; Ethiopia would not again be free from the physical neighbourhood of the Great Powers.

Still, before this position was established Ethiopia was affected by a temporary recrudescence of Egyptian strength or rather of Egyptian ambition which developed under a form of quasi-private English tutelage. The opening of this phase can be dated from 1866 when the Khedive Ismail purchased Massawah from the Turks, the exchange of a purely nominal overlordship for one which it was hoped to make effective. Four years later the coast of what is now British Somaliland between the adjacent towns of Bulhar and Berbera was acquired in the same fashion and garrisons were placed in both these ports. In 1874 there occurred an occupation of Harar by an Egyptian force under Raof Pasha, who remained as governor of that province.

It is worth noting that, however much these conquests might vex the House of Shoa, they would hardly have affected Theodore whose headquarters oscillated between Gondar and Debra Tabor, and they were still further from the concerns of his successor, John IV. A brief impression can be given of this sovereign's reign. There is no reason to suppose that Kassai of the Tigrai, who obtained the imperial title under the style of John IV in 1872, possessed either the energy of Theodore or the strong and cautious character of Menelik II. His period of rule is, perhaps, chiefly significant as that in which continuous dealings with European Powers first became normal. He was accessible to advice and had a notion of those foreign commercial projects which were to become a commonplace in the succeeding century. He belonged to the earliest generation to understand the meaning of the word "penetra-

tion." From other angles his reign was conservative for he represented the old, aristocratic and religious Ethiopia. Those high feudal lords, who had held aloof from Gondar and had merely sufficed Theodoic's spendthrift energy, found in the Emperor John their proto-type. He was the inheritor of all Tigrean viceroys.

It is for these reasons that this emperor seems curiously both less modern and more out of focus with his time than does Theodoic II. A profound change in Africa had come about through the development of European exploration. Hitherto only the northern frontiers of Abyssinia had been examined and the north-eastern seaboard charted. No track entering the country to the southward of the route through Sennaar had been traced out; nothing was known of the wide lands that lay to the east and south of the Shoan kingdom.

Within twenty years a number of factors changed the scene completely. The great age of East African exploration found Abyssinia as the farthest bulwark of the known country. It is hardly too much to say that at the end of this transformation the Amharic world was left as a lost plateau around which curved the new-found trade routes. Some dates are needed here. In 1856 David Livingstone reached Quilimane after his two years journey made across the breadth of Africa; in 1858 Burton and Speke pressed on to glimpse that great water which they christened Lake Victoria Nyanza. Four years later Speke, this time accompanied by Grant, reached King Mtcsa's capital at Banda in Uganda. The discovery of the course of the White Nile from Lake Victoria northwards to Gondokoro linked up with the camel routes through the Sudan.

For the first time there were practicable lines for traffic opened up by the European Powers, both from Uganda to Mombasa and the other ports upon the Indian Ocean and northwards from the Great Lakes to Khartoum. Arab traders acting in recent times under a vague protection from the coastal sultanate of Zanzibar blazed these trails in search of slaves and ivory. The explorers, however, initiated a survey that was scientific and commercial in its intention and backed by free capital; it was also humanitarian in its impulse. Quite suddenly the whole late nineteenth century set-up of Europe in East Africa becomes apparent. It is not surprising that in the light of the situation thus developed Abyssinia took on the character of an ill-mapped feudal hinterland.



To the optimistic missionary-commercial dawn, which marked the "seventies," her age-old problems seemed suddenly irrelevant.

This last point will indicate another cause of deep misunderstanding. A moral urgency, unknown to Bell and Plowden's generation, had now been imported into the English view of Africa. There was nothing new in the English attack upon the slave trade, but this old motive received more specifically Christian reinforcement. Neither the legitimate trader, nor the missionary were regarded as congenial types in Abyssinia. This moral and social concern for the Bantus was incomprehensible to the Coptic lords. It was apparent to the Ethiopian churchmen and to those to whom they ministered that they were the only true Christians whom God had planted. Had they not been faithful for one thousand and five hundred years? The relationship between the next generation of Englishmen and the Ethiopians was surely conditioned by the fact that the latter were in no sense "improvers." After these general comments we can turn to the singularly uncomprehending contact between the Emperor John IV and General Gordon.

\*     \*     \*

Charles George Gordon was born in 1833 and was thus exactly the same age as the Abyssinian Emperor. He was first brought into relation with the old empire on his appointment by the Khedive Ismail to the governorship of the Equatorial provinces in 1874. He was consequently involved to some extent in the expansionist policy of the Egyptian ruler, a policy which for a time appeared to aim at direct conquest. Shortly before Gordon's arrival, Khedivial forces, under the command of Werner Munzinger Bey, had occupied the province of Bogos and Keren, its capital. In a further advance made two years later into the neighbouring province of the Harpasion, the Egyptians, moving up from Massawah, were defeated by the Emperor John at Guia and compelled to withdraw. The situation remained in this uneasy state when Gordon came in 1877 to occupy the greater charge of governor general of the Sudan.

Some detail in regard to Gordon's outlook is required to indicate his hard approach to Ethiopia. In the first place nothing was more repugnant to his lonely life and impetuous spirit than the prospect of a Christian slave-owner. He had no patience with an immemorial tenure. His positive cast of mind was in the altruistic sense imperialist; from the first he was predisposed to dislike the

ancient country. Away back in 1868 he had felt defrauded of a command in the expedition against Theodore; it was to him both a humanitarian and a military exploit to defeat and kill that king.

On another side of his nature in that religious thought that crystallised as he moved forward on his lonely camel rides, Gordon was very far removed from the old Amhaïic hatred for the Moslem. He, who was coming to a land of ritual, was nothing of a ritualist. "As far as life goes,"<sup>1</sup> he is found noting after one of his solitary journeys, "you would think the Mussulman as good as the Christian. I am sure you see no difference except in rites and ceremonies, between the two religions—both worship golden images."

His mind would oscillate between an angry quietism and a Victorian concentration on good works. "I am delighted," he declared,<sup>2</sup> "to find I have reached a resting stage, where the world's storms, or its smiles, do not affect me . . . Why should I, at every mile, be stared at by the grinning skulls of those who are at rest?" At a stopping place on the way inland from the white desert city of Suakin it is seen that his ideas had come full circle. "I think," he wrote,<sup>3</sup> "that this life is only one of a series of lives, which our incarnated part has lived. I have little doubt of our having pre-existed; and that also in the time of our pre-existence we were actively employed." Active employment, destruction of the slave trade, that was the key to all his exacerbated mastering energy.

The climate wore Gordon down. He liked the Chinese so much better than the Egyptians; he was fatigued and very lonely. In the palace grounds at Khartoum in the winter of 1878 he would watch the quarrels between his gazelles and his tortoise. In the yard he kept four little hippopotami. "They are loveable animals<sup>4</sup> . . . they are so plump and soft and cool-skinned." Three entries in Gordon's diary<sup>5</sup> at this time are most revealing: "*November 6.* I have been working for the last ten days at a big map of the Soudan; but now it is finished I am utterly at a loss how to employ my time. You see, one lacks books, and I scarcely see anyone except on business, for I have no associates here. *November 12.* Pulled another clock to pieces and put it together again, which is more difficult. *November 13.* A cuckoo clock has beaten me today. I cannot make it go."

<sup>1</sup> *Colonel Gordon in Central Africa, 1874-1879*, ed., G. Birkbeck Hill, p. 296.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 366.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 306.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 318-9.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, p. 323.

In the spring his mind turned to Ismail, whom he served. "I admire," he noted,<sup>1</sup> "the Khedive immensely; he is the perfect type of his people, thoroughly consistent to all their principles—a splendid leopard." Gordon realised his isolation between the pashas who hated and the khedive who feared him. That summer Ismail was forced to abdicate and the governor general's last work was undertaken for Tewfik, his successor. In September, 1879, he went down to Abyssinia to endeavour to make peace on behalf of Egypt.

He came in ten days from Massawah to Ras Aloula's palisade at Gura suffering severely from the prickly heat. Gordon was wearing his uniform as an Egyptian field marshal; a pack mule carried the Sudan throne. He was received in a long shed of bianches at the end of which the commander-in-chief, Ras Aloula, sat on a couch, "wrapped up in white even to his face, nose alone appearing." In his notes Gordon described the scene.<sup>2</sup> "He just saluted me, and motioned me to a very low seat, covered with silk, at his side. I got up and gave Aloula the (new) Khedive's letter announcing his accession and my mission. He did not seem the least impressed, but slightly put the gold-tasselled green silk bag on the pistol which lay by him. Dead silence again." Among the bystanders in the tent was a German in Abyssinian clothes and a native of Syria. There were two interpreters, one for French and one for English, both Abyssinians. The emperor's interpreter asked that the *Weekly Times*, *Pall Mall Budget*, and either the *Graphic* or *Illustrated Sunday News* should be sent to his master. Three days later Gordon set out again for Debra Tabor. Near Adowa he heard priests chanting in the night the Psalms of David.

On his arrival on 27 October he was admitted to the king, who sat upon a raised dais, with the *echeggs* and Ras Arya, John IV's uncle, on the ground on his left. It is now that we come to the unfavourable description. "The king," records Gordon,<sup>3</sup> "is a man of some forty-five years, a sour, ill-favoured looking being. He never looks you in the face, but when you look away he glares at you like a tiger. He never smiles; his look, always changing, is one of thorough suspicion. He carries with him all his great prisoners." A little later this personal estimate is resumed.<sup>4</sup> "The king," wrote Gordon, "has taken (from the Egyptians)

<sup>1</sup> *Colonel Gordon in Central Africa, 1874-1879*, ed., G. Birkbeck Hill, p. 352.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 404.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 422.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid.*, p. 424.

some nine thousand Remingtons and twenty-five cannon, but he is getting short of ammunition. I have seen many peoples, but I never met with a more fierce, savage set than these. The peasantry are good enough. The king says he can beat united Europe, except Russia. All the great men do not want a war with Europe and the king fears it when sober, but he drinks to excess at night. He talks like the Old Testament. He is of the strictest sect of the Phariisees—drunk over night, at dawn he is up reading the Psalms. He never would miss a prayer-meeting, and would have a bible as big as a portmanteau if he were in England. No women are allowed within three hundred yards of his palace ”

The account of the principal audience shows a certain development from Theodore's technique. Among the foreigners, discovered by Gordon at Debra Tabor, were the Greek consul from Suez, and three Italians, one of whom, Naretti, had been with the emperor for eight years and a half. The military adventurer of Theodore's period was now replaced by the European commercial *entrepreneur*. Hopes of much money, enormous glittering sums, were now held out to the negus by the rather shady characters who had submitted to his way of life.

It was dawn on 28 October when Gordon was called to audience in the large conical-roofed, thatched house that the ruler used as his reception chamber. On his entry in his field marshal's uniform the emperor turned to Ras Arya. "My father," he exclaimed,<sup>1</sup> "do you not see Gordon has come? Have I not told you I wish to see him alone? Please retire and see after your business." According to his visitor's notes, John IV recounted his griefs against Egypt at a tedious length, asked why Gordon had come and denied having read the khedive's letter. "You want peace," he declared,<sup>2</sup> plunging immediately into the terms, "well, I want retrocession of Metemma, Changallas and Bogos, cession of the ports of Zeila and Amphilla, an Abouna and a sum of money from one to two million pounds."

After some stiff comments as to the decision resting with the khedive, Gordon asked,<sup>3</sup> "If these demands are not granted what will your Majesty do?" The reply came quickly, "I shall then know that you hate me, and I shall fight you" Immediately afterwards he asked his visitor to come with him on a progress that he

<sup>1</sup> *Colonel Gordon in Central Africa, 1874-1879*, ed., G. Burkbeck Hill, p. 411. 2

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 412.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 413.

was making to the hot baths. These were springs coming up through the bamboo flooring of a royal hut some two days travel into the hills.

Gordon refused and the atmosphere again grew chilly. A note expresses the view that the Greek consul had framed the demands which the emperor made. On 8 November a final audience was accorded and a letter given. "How are you Mohammed Tewfik," it began.<sup>1</sup> "I and my soldiers are well. Your letter sent me by *that man* I have received. You fought me before like a robber. I will not make a secret peace with you. If you want peace ask the Sultans of Europe. What you say and what I say eight Kings must take cognizance of." The titles of the eight sultans are then set out; they were the sovereigns of England, France, Germany, Austria, Prussia, Italy, Turkey, Greece. On an earlier occasion John IV had stated<sup>2</sup>: "The whole world knows the ancient frontier of Abyssinia."

On his way back to Egypt Gordon was detained for some time at Chas Amba. His comments on the emperor are very bitter; he draws attention to the mutilations. It was Christmas before he reached Massawah. At this time there was living at Dongola on the Nile, a little way to the south of the third cataract, a carpenter and boat builder who would influence the future of these negotiations and, indeed, the subsequent history of Ethiopia. Within two years this man would be proclaimed in Kordofan as the Mahdi. General Gordon and the Emperor John IV would both be killed by the Mahdi's followers, while this revolt would lead to the conquest of Harar by Menelik of Shoa and the occupation of Massawah by Italian forces.

<sup>1</sup> *Colonel Gordon in Central Africa, 1874-1879*, ed., G. Bukbeck Hill, p. 208.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 416 and 420.



*Plat 15* Above European sketch of Menelik's army before Adowa  
Below Abyssinian painting of the battle of Adowa



## CHAPTER XXVI

### THE CREATION OF ERITREA

IN REGARD to the northern frontier provinces of the Tigrā the Mahdi's revolt led the British Government to adopt successively two policies, the first was pro-Abyssinian and the second was favourable to the claims of Italy. Gordon was back at Khartoum again, sent out from England, and neither line of action was calculated to bring reassurance to his harassed mind. On deciding to withdraw Egyptian garrisons from Keren and Massawah and from Haiar, the British Government had sent a mission to the Emperor John under Rear Admiral Sir William Nathan Hewett, who was then commander-in-chief in the East Indies.

We can trace Gordon's reaction to this move as he sat in the palace at Khartoum throughout the heat of his last autumn. It seems that the first news was conveyed in a letter from Monsieur Mitzakis that Greek consul who had caused some suspicion on the earlier journey to Debra Tabor. "I arrived in Abyssinia,"<sup>1</sup> wrote the consul, "on the 14/24 May, sent by the Hellenic Government to aid the mission of Admiral Hewett to the Court of His Majesty the Emperor John. Thanks to the intelligence and good feeling of His Majesty, aided by my counsels, the mission of the Admiral has completely succeeded."

The actual details of the arrangement were contained in a second letter,<sup>2</sup> sent to Khartoum by the Greek consul at Adowa and addressed to his colleague in that town. The Egyptian forces were to withdraw from Kassala, Galabat, Ketarif and Bogos and the emperor was to receive the right to use Massawah for the import and export of arms and merchandise. In return, so runs the courteous and honeyed phrase, "the Most Christian Emperor John has promised to take the field with a great army."

"What an action,"<sup>3</sup> noted Gordon in his journal on 21 October, 1884. "These lands (except Bogos) are entirely Mussulman, have

<sup>1</sup> *The Journals of Major General G. C. Gordon at Khartoum*, ed., A. Egmont Hake, p. 517

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 518.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 214, 219.



held their own, and are in no way threatened, and we go and send a wild *so-called* Christian people (who have nothing to do with the quarrel) against these peoples, who have held their own against the Mahdi. The only place the king could possibly occupy is Senheit (Keren). He will drive out the Roman Catholic mission at once (a part of his missionary movement), the occupation of Senheit just cuts off the safe road from Massawah to Kassala."

Entries made the next day continue on the same theme.<sup>1</sup> "I feel sure King John gave Admiral Hewett a spear and shield and the Order of Solomon—vanity of vanities—for the treaty, and I feel sure we shall see no Abyssinian army in the Soudan. King John and the Mahdi both force men to change their religion; both cut off lips of smokers and noses of *smiffers*; both are fanatics and robbers."

There is no record of King John's reactions. He may have remembered that Gordon had said at Debra Tabor that he could only be looked on as the envoy of the khedive and as a Mussulman for the time being. It was clear that the general was learning something of Islam. The emperor cautiously occupied his new possessions. As the winter deepened Gordon's attention was solely fixed on Wolseley's relieving force now making its way southwards up the Nile Valley. On 26 January, 1885, General Gordon was killed on the steps of his Khartoum palace.

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Any objective assessment of the chain of events that now ensued in Ethiopia must reckon with the decline in British military prestige in Africa between Gordon's death and Sir Herbert Kitchener's victory at Omdurman in 1898. During this interval the whole Sudan was ruled first by the Mahdi and then by his successor, the Khalifa, whose power was overthrown by Kitchener. This was a decade of great consequence in Ethiopian history for it witnessed the first victory gained by the negus's forces over those of an European state. To obtain a clear view of the situation it is necessary to enter into some detail in describing the rather complicated fashion in which Italian rule was gradually extended in the provinces that would be Eritrea.

The first Italian commercial development along the coast of the Red Sea can be dated from the acquisition of the port of Assab by

<sup>1</sup> *The Journals of Major General G. C. Gordon at Khartoum*, ed., A. Egmont Hake, p. 217

the Società di Navigazione Rubattino, a firm operating passenger-carrying cargo vessels. This took place in 1869 at a time when the Suez Canal was nearing completion, and a harbour some two hundred miles to the south-east of Massawah, but well within the Straits of Bab-el-Mandeb, seemed likely to prove an asset in view of the inevitable increase in trade. The place had already been prospected and the Lazarists had opened a small mission on the water front. The area leased for commercial purposes extended gradually, but there was no further change until 1882 when the Italian Government bought out the steamship company. It should be noted that the supersession of trading associations by government establishments was a formula favoured at this time by all the powers.

The new legal status thus created in Assab coincided almost exactly with the Mahdi's revolt. The question of the maintenance of the Egyptian garrison at Massawah became acute. It was in these circumstances that the British Government began to eye with tolerant goodwill the expansionist projects of the weaker members of the Concert of Europe. Viewed from this angle, it was fortunate that the Germans were at this time fully occupied with the acquisition of Dar-es-Salaam and the establishment of their influence in that great territory which would soon become known as German East Africa. In a much sharper fashion French development would have proved exceptionally ungrateful to the British official mind. The French Government was becoming difficult in regard to the special position which Great Britain had just assumed in Egypt, and Franco-British relations were moreover running into those ten years of intermittent strain which would culminate in 1898 in Major Marchand's journey to Fashoda.

The Italian kingdom was the only European state with interests in the development of the Red Sea littoral. As far as Massawah was concerned, the tiny Italian colonial establishment was already relatively close at hand. Towards Italy the British authorities still displayed the easy-going and careless goodwill, natural from a recognised benefactor. A further point is now worth making. Since 1882 the British consul general in Cairo, Sir Evelyn Baring, had wielded *de facto* power in Egypt. The Italian representative was the only one among his colleagues who gave Baring a support that was at once constant and unconditional. It is probable that all these factors entered into the decision of the Foreign Office to

acquiesce in the occupation of Massawah by Italian forces ; a mixed brigade under the command of Admiral Cairni, entered that port on 5 February, 1885.

Sir Gerald Portal, writing in 1891, gives an account which seems to represent fairly accurately the British view. "It is enough to say,"<sup>1</sup> he explains, "that the Egyptians wished to evacuate the place ; the Sultan of Turkey, to whom it would naturally revert, was not prepared to take over the charge of it ; the English did not want it ; and the Italians stepped in."

Two consequences followed from this action. The Emperor John IV denied persistently the right of any foreign government to establish itself in Massawah on any terms and the British authorities gave to the Italians a constant and quiet support. At an early stage the emperor pointed out that, according to the provisions of Admiral Hewett's treaty, no taxes could be levied on any goods coming from or destined for Abyssinia during their passage through Massawah port

The next move was the result of the determination of the Italians to protect the caravan route from Massawah ; this led them to occupy Saati, a place about a dozen miles inland from the coast whose only value depended upon its water wells. In January, 1887, a small reinforcement of four hundred and sixty men, which was being sent from Massawah to relieve this new garrison, was attacked and destroyed by ten thousand Abyssinians under the command of Ras Aloula, who has already figured in the account of Gordon's journey.

This action, which was in reality a massacre for there were less than a dozen survivors, is known as the battle of Dogali and was the immediate occasion of the next British mission to John IV, that of Mr. Gerald Portal. When the news of the disaster was brought to Italy, the Roman Government at once began to gather a large force at Massawah. From a study of Portal's instructions it is difficult to resist the conclusion that he was intended to act in support of the Italians. It was still the policy of London to attempt to flatter, browbeat and cajole those whom the queen's government looked on as half-savage rulers. An outline of the Portal instructions, if given at this point, should serve to make the subsequent negotiations clear.

The queen began by expressing her deep regret for the massacre

<sup>1</sup> *My Mission to Abyssinia*, by Gerald H. Portal, p. 5.

of four hundred and fifty Italians committed by Ras Aloula and then voiced her regret that her friend, His Majesty King John, should be in a state of war with the king of Italy. Her Majesty then communicated the conditions upon which King Humbert was prepared to refrain from undertaking hostile action. These included the provisions that Saati and a zone one day's march in extent should be accepted as Italian territory, that Ghinda, which is now the midway station on the railway line from Massawah to Asmaia, should become the Abyssinian frontier town and that the boundary between the Italian colony and Abyssinia should be marked out by pillars set up at stated intervals, the demarcation line to be settled between King John and the Italian governor, Great Britain proffering her good offices. Given the fact that the emperor did not accept any Italian right to occupy Massawah, this part of the proposals should not have caused undue alarm to John IV and his advisers.

A comment might be made as to the harshness of the general approach. This quality was characteristic of the period in which it was felt necessary to present an united front in face of the sovereigns of Africa and Asia. It was only eight years since Sir Louis Cavagnari had been killed in Kabul, an attack which had formed the prelude to the second Afghan war. It was still considered essential to restore the prestige of Europeans when this had been damaged, as at Dogali. In this respect the battle of Adowa was to have a significance that would be crucial.

As to the terms already considered, there are some points that should be made. It seems reasonable to suppose that once the Italians held Massawah it was inevitable that they should move forward in an endeavour to control the coastal plain. At the same time the proposed arrangement left the bastions of the high country, and even the approaches to the plateau where the monastery of Bisan rises on the mountain above Nefasit, in the hands of the Abyssinians. There were other reasons for this relative forbearance since beyond the mountains, in that high plain where the capital of Eritrea was to rise, lay the permanent great encampment of Ras Aloula at Asmara. During this summer he had under his command some sixteen thousand, mainly Tigrean troops, nearly all armed with Remingtons or carbines.

All this is plain enough. It is, however, the final clause of Portal's instructions which throws so sharp a light upon the

situation. The sentences run as follows, "Senheit will be occupied by Italy." Senheit or Keien was the capital of the Bogos province and the headquarters of an Egyptian garrison. It will be remembered that it was the proposed cession of this place to John IV and the withdrawal of its Egyptian garrison which had so angered General Gordon. It was a natural fortress and the key to the whole country, lying almost due west from Massawah some hundred and twenty miles along the track through Filfil, which has since been superseded by the magnificent road system radiating from new Asmara. The same track stretching westward passed through Agordat to Kassala in the Sudan.

Should this proposition as to Keren find acceptance, a friendly European garrison would be placed near the eastern border of the Sudan, which was still in the Mahdi's hands. It was technically possible to draw a line which gave Massawah and Keren to the Italians and left Asmara to Ras Aloula, but it is hardly fair to claim that this could ever have proved a practicable frontier. It is no wonder that Mr. Portal, Veterinary Surgeon Beech and their English servant, Hutchisson, were received with small enthusiasm as they rode south to meet the Abyssinian emperor.

Portal and his companions left Massawah on 2 November, 1887, and the first difficulty confronting them was that of passing Ras Aloula, whose forces barred the way southwards to King John's capital. The ras's headquarters were in two large huts rising from an earthen pyramid in Asmara plain. A minute account of the setting has been preserved. The audience chamber is described<sup>1</sup> as "a circular hut, perhaps forty-five feet in diameter, its lofty dome-shaped roof supported by numerous poles, its walls composed of the split trunks of young trees, and its earthen floor covered partly with skins and partly with rushes." From this point the narrative becomes personal. "About two feet from the wall," it is explained, "immediately opposite the door by which we entered, was a large divan covered with crimson cotton-cloth; on this sat, in Turkish fashion, with his feet drawn up and crossed under him, a striking looking man whom we had no difficulty in recognising as the dreaded chief. He was dressed in a long dark robe of purple silk, with, I think, some gold embroidery work on it." Mr. Portal draws attention<sup>2</sup> to a striking peculiarity of Ras Aloula's, "a pair

<sup>1</sup> *My Mission to Abyssinia*, by Gerald H. Portal, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 77.

of gleaming tawny eyes of a much lighter colour than the skin of the face." "I have seen," he comments, "such eyes in the head of a tiger and of a leopard, but never in that of a human being. On one side of Ras Aloula, on the divan, lay his curved sword, and within reach of his other hand was a Martini-Henry carbine."

After a formal interview the commander-in-chief called the Englishmen back and gave full rein to his indignation. "The Ras said,"<sup>1</sup> explains Portal, "that he knew I had come because of the Italians, and proceeded to speak with great excitement about the whole situation, saying that the Italians should come to Saati only if he could go as Governor to Rome; and that he had beaten them once, and if they advanced he would beat them again; that the sea was the natural frontier of Abyssinia." He concluded by asserting that England, while pretending friendship for King John, had given Massawah to the Italians.

Ras Aloula's request for permission to execute the travellers was refused by his sovereign and they were sent forward under escort towards Sokota, twelve long days' march south of Asmaia. It seems that it was expected that they would find the royal camp by Lake Ashangi. At nine o'clock on the morning of 4 December the Englishmen rode into the camp of the king of the kings of Ethiopia. "As far,"<sup>2</sup> writes Portal, "as the eye could reach the plain was thickly dotted with small black tents and with little grass huts; tens of thousands of horses, mules, and cows were grazing on every side, while the whole district seemed to be alive with moving swarms of armed men, and of women and slaves. In the centre of the plain were two large circular white tents, standing in an open space, enclosed by a paling covered with red cotton cloth; these were the headquarters of the great King Johannes."

Two days later Mt. Portal was received by the Ethiopian sovereign. "We found,"<sup>3</sup> so runs the narrative, "this august personage sitting on a dais in a large hut, surrounded by about fifty or sixty Abyssinian chiefs. He was dressed in a white cotton *shamma*, a fold of which entirely concealed the lower part of his face, nothing but a pair of shrewd-looking black eyes being visible; on his head was a small gold diadem or coronet, and by his side, on his dais, were his sword and a carbine." The first interview was consumed in the presentation of those unlikely gifts which had now

<sup>1</sup> *My Mission to Abyssinia*, by Gerald H. Portal, p. 143.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 147.

for half a century been brought from Europe into Abyssinia. There were two swords of honour, a Winchester rifle and an elaborate new-fangled telescope in a heavy mahogany case. Mr. Portal explained that the telescope would not only reveal objects at a great distance over the ground but would show His Majesty the mountains in the moon and other wonders. The emperor asked simply whether he could pick out men clearly with this telescope before they came within rifle shot. To the ritual gift was interposed a ritual answer.

The serious audience took place on the next day. After the documents had been translated, John IV gave his reply. "I can,"<sup>1</sup> he explained, "do nothing of all this. By the treaty made by Admiral Hewett, all the country evacuated by the Egyptians on my frontier was ceded to me at the instigation of England, and now you come to ask me to give it up again." For his part Portal contended that the Hewett Treaty made no mention of Saati and that His Majesty had already accepted the occupation by the Italians of Massawah and its neighbour, Monkullo. "I did not," the king replied, "give them Massawah; England gave it to the Italians, but I will not give them an inch of land. If they cannot live there without Saati, let them go." This standpoint is made more emphatic in the letter which Portal was instructed to take back to Queen Victoria.

The following sentences<sup>2</sup> hold the core of the matter. "As for the complaints they (the Italians) made that they were badly treated, the fault was on their side, and they began the quarrel by stopping the Abyssinian merchants, and by occupying Saati and Wia. On that account they fought with Ras Alula, and many were killed on both sides, though we had in no way injured them. How can you say that I shall hand over to them the country which Jesus Christ gave to me? That would be as a command to me unjust on your part. If your wish were to make peace between us, it should be when they are in their country and I in mine. But now on both sides the horses are bridled and the swords are drawn; my soldiers, in numbers like the sand, are ready with their spears." It is difficult to deny that this was a powerful statement.

On the way back Portal stayed for the night at Macalle to see the emperor's new palace, a building which gave a foretaste of Menelik's

<sup>1</sup> *My Mission to Abyssinia*, by Gerald H. Portal, p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid*, pp. 173-4.

would. Together with the church of Enda Chidané Merèt in the same place, it had been built by Giuseppe Naretto, an Italian from Ivrea who acted as foreman. The palace was a construction in yellow or reddish stone in what Portal describes as a spurious Gothic style with battlements and many turrets. It was built on two floors but without glass in the windows; John IV only used the ground level bringing with him his curtains and divans.

By the end of the year Portal was back in Massawah, but the threatened Italian attack did not develop. In the spring the emperor's only legitimate son, Ras Araya Selassie, died and then the Mahdist forces began to move eastward. A large Abyssinian army marched to repel them and John IV was mortally wounded in an encounter close to Metemneh. His troops abandoned the field and the Mahdists captured his crown, which they took to Omdurman. Theodor's crown was in London since Napier's victory. Freed from this opposition, the Italians advanced to Keren and in 1890 they declared these provinces a crown colony under their present name of Eritrea.

In 1891 Portal, now consul general at Zanzibar, published an account of his journey. He was not, perhaps, a man of much imagination or prevision. Few prophecies have been falsified more rapidly than that with which he closes this slight survey. "Thus," he wrote,<sup>1</sup> "has ended the independence of Abyssinia. With the death of King Johannis died also that autonomy which had been the pride of his race for many centuries. It is I confess, with a feeling almost of sadness that I reflect that since I said farewell to Johannis at Afgol, on December 16, 1887, no other European can ever grasp the hands of an independent Emperor of Ethiopia."

<sup>1</sup> *My Mission to Abyssinia*, by Gerald H. Portal, p. 261.



## CHAPTER XXVII

### ADOWA

IN THE NEXT CHAPTER a survey will be attempted of the contribution made to the development of Ethiopia by Menelik of Shoa, who became the Emperor Menelik II. At this point it is simplest to carry forward the record of the dealings of the Italians with Ethiopia during the six years that elapsed between the naming of Eritrea and the unexpected military defeat at Adowa on 1 March, 1896.

It is curious that Portal appears to neglect the king of Shoa completely and Lord Edward Gleichen, using that Anglo-French amalgam so favoured by the upper classes at the close of the nineteenth century, insists that both Menelik and his forces were regarded as a *quantité négligeable*. The Italians were not guilty of this error; on the contrary it was their policy to purchase Menelik's support. The Italian mistake was a profound miscalculation of the geographical factor; they thought that the king of Shoa was too far away to affect their consolidation in Eritrea and northern Tigrail. As a minor point their representatives were filled with the spirit of the *Risorgimento* and in consequence not well qualified to understand those elements in the Ethiopian kingship which were hieratic and antique and yet so binding.

At the same time there were reasons which would tend to mask the increasing influence of Shoa from the eyes of the representatives of France and Britain. When Theodore committed suicide, Shoa was still that little kingdom which had been visited by Cornwallis Harris and Rocher d'Héricourt about 1840. There was for a long period no reason to suppose that the Shoan power would either be capable of defeating the northern Abyssinian lords or of maintaining control, actual or even nominal, in the north country. Further, apart from a conquest of the Wollo Galla, the first expansion of Shoa had been in the opposite direction towards Harar hundreds of miles away to the south-west. In consequence it seemed reasonable to suppose that the power of John IV's Tigrean house would

be confined between the limits of the new Italian colony and the area of Menelik's effective rule.

There was here a failure to appreciate either the kaleidoscopic elements in Ethiopian dynastic history or the stability of the Throne. The king of Shoa had acknowledged the overlordship of John IV and his rights as emperor and there was a provision for Menelik to succeed as negus; but in 1889 both potentates were vigorous and in good health. It was not reasonable to anticipate the immediate dissolution of the Tigrean dynasty. This was the situation when the Italian envoy began his *ruse* dealings with Menelik.

The events that now followed are a commonplace of diplomatic history and might have occurred in any region in the years that lay between the activities of Clive and Duplex and the close of the first German war. It is a story of the relatively skilled manipulation of the tried formula for dealing with rulers of the smaller non-European powers, a method of action hammered out year after year in India. There went with the first, not too elaborate, courtesies a certain offer of protection, a lively trade in arms and ammunition, the establishment of a permanent resident and finally treaty negotiations. It was, perhaps, a rather old-fashioned mode. The Ethiopian variant began with Count Antonelli's first visit to the king of Shoa in his new temporary capital at Entotto in 1882 and reached its apparent conclusion with the signature of the Treaty of Ucciali seven years later. According to the Italian interpretation of this instrument (for the Amharic text gave Menelik the option) the king consented to avail himself of the services of the Italian Government for any negotiations that he might enter into with other powers. King Humbert gave Menelik a present of twenty-eight cannon and thirty-eight thousand rifles. Except in so far as it dealt with the old Ethiopian throne there was nothing new in this picture of the slow establishing of a protectorate by blandishment and purchase. It was not the peace but the war that was to be novel.

The death of John IV may be held to be the beginning of the series of events. As the emperor lay dying in the evening after his victory, he called Ras Aloula and the other chiefs to his tent. In their presence he solemnly recognised Ras Mangasha as his natural son born to the wife of his own brother. A few hours later, when the sovereign died, no agreement had yet been concluded

and no oath of allegiance sworn. Ras Mangasha was twenty-five and of no particular character. The question of the rights of the king of Shoa still remained unresolved. It was not clear whether Mangasha would have strength to hold his father's Tigrean inheritance; it was evident that King Menelik would assume the imperial title. This in itself would involve the shifting of the centre of gravity in Ethiopia southwards from Debra Tabor and Macalle to the uplands of Shoa two hundred miles distant. A major change appeared somewhat unlikely. In fact there was to take place the battle of Adowa with all its fateful results.

There was a sense in which this startling military victory was the most significant event in the modern history of Ethiopia. The scale of the action was very much greater than that of other defeats which the European Powers had met as they developed their forward policy in Africa and Asia. The question of scale, however, is a matter of quite minor importance. It was another element in this campaign which caused the destruction of the old formula and the breaking of a mould. Adowa was not avenged. Every other European setback had led automatically to punitive expeditions, which if sometimes costly were always successful. In this case the defeat of the Italians was followed by peace.

This result had two effects: it gave to the Abyssinians a new legend and a pride, which was to impede even military modernisation, while on the other hand it left to the Italians a humiliating memory. The defeat and its acceptance formed together a disaster which was not consistent with the record of Italy as a great power, and D'Annunzio must have spoken for many of his countrymen when he wrote in 1935 that he could still feel on his shoulder "the scar, yes, the shameful scar of Adowa."<sup>1</sup>

During the forty years that followed, the Ethiopian rulers were never able to believe that the Italians would not one day attempt to avenge Adowa. There was no chance for any really easy phase in Italo-Abyssinian relations. As the races thought with pride of their high victory they must have wondered, when the *tedj* lay thick and dusky in the great horns, whether these Italian foreigners would not try conclusions once again. A few of the very wise and learned lords had been to Europe; they were aware that the Italians had accepted what no other European had ever endured. It is

<sup>1</sup> This point is admirably made in the survey by A. H. M. Jones and A. Monroe in their *History of Ethiopia*, p. 145

clear that this was a knowledge that was not hidden from Menelik. Now we can come to an account of the battle.

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Along the pale-wash walls of the corridors in the near-Moorish palace of the governors general at Asmara one picks out from the gallery of portraits the interesting face of General Oreste Baratieri. Past the sharp crude colouring, the clotted white of the collars and the splashing violet cloaks, there is still perceptible something of that vigour which did so much to create the colony of Eritrea.

With the death of John IV, the Italians took over the campaigning against the Mahdists. Pressing westwards from Keien, Colonel Arimondi established himself at Adorgat and in 1894 the energetic new commander Baratieri won the victory of Kassala. Southwards, along the track towards Aksum, the occupation reached to the Mareb river. It was then that the Italians began the forward movement which proved disastrous. There had been too long maintained a policy of supporting Menelik of Shoa. This was part of the concept of a general protectorate over the whole shoulder of Africa, which Count Antonelli had always urged his government to pursue. The rival policy, that of supporting Ras Mangasha in Tigray against Menelik, would have done nothing to build up a wide dominion; it would merely have strengthened and increased the colony of Eritrea.

On the political side Antonelli's policy was essential if Italy was to build up an empire on the model of the other powers. At this time the British, French and German Governments were consenting to occupy immense tracts across Africa. What France had done with the bey of Tunis and Britain and Germany with the sultan of Zanzibar's dominions could surely be repeated by Italy in Abyssinia.

By 1894 the situation of the Italians had, however, deteriorated. Menelik had refused and Antonelli had asserted the position of the king of Italy as the necessary intermediary between Ethiopia and other nations. This difference had led to the denunciation of the Treaty of Ucciali. Menelik and Mangasha had become reconciled, and the latter had just begun to foment a small rebellion in Eritrea. Even in the south of Hamasien a song against the Europeans had spread coming up from Shoa. "From a black snake's bite,"<sup>1</sup> so ran the refrain, "you may be cured, but from the bite of a white snake you cannot recover."

<sup>1</sup> *The Campaign of Adowa and the rise of Menelik*, by G. F. H. Berkeley, p. 61.

From this point forward the train of events will make it clear how the Italians became involved in those military advances and half alliances which in the end led to disaster. The advances stirred up in time the national fervour against them; the alliances broke. On 15 December, 1894, a rebellion against their authority developed in the rich champaign district of Saganeiti some forty miles to the south-east of the then Italian headquarters in the stockaded camp at Asmara. This was a settled peaceful countryside with junipers standing in the deep lush grassland. One factor was unusual, the point of religion. Those tall red Catholic churches had not yet been built to dominate the easy hills, but the majority of the people had already held for two generations to the Catholic Faith: Justin de Jacobis had been buried at Hebo in this country,

The chief of Saganeiti, Bathos Agos, himself a Catholic, came out as an ally of Mangasha and "avenger of rights trampled<sup>1</sup> on by the Italians." He was at once defeated and killed, and Baratieri occupied Adowa. Another column attacked the Tigrean position at Coatit on the road leading southwards from Saganeiti through Senafe to Adigrat. An account survives of the ransacking of the Tigrean camp by the Italians. The moonlight lay on the abandoned headquarters. Seventeen war drums were found scattered amid a mass of small arms, bugles, lances, shields. The prince's tent showed the marks of cannon shot, but within stood a casket containing Mangasha's correspondence with Batha Agos.

On Baratieri's return to Massawah the decision was taken to carry through an Italian occupation of Tigray; this move proved fatal. At the same time Ras Michael, who would reappear in Ethiopian history as the father of the Emperor Lij Iyasu, entered into negotiations with the Italians. These negotiations were doomed to prove abortive. Nevertheless they may be held to mark the beginnings of the Italian pro-Islamic policy for Ras Michael, the<sup>6</sup> chief of the Wollo Gallas, was of Mohammedan origin. So much of the political alignment of the next half century can be traced to these months before the battle of Adowa. At the same time Mangasha sued for peace. His letter to the king of Italy should be set out in full.<sup>2</sup> "To the great, respected, supreme King Humbert I. Sent by Ras Mangasha, son of John, King of Sion. King of the Kings of Ethiopia. How are you? Thank

<sup>1</sup> *The Campaign of Adowa and the rise of Menelik*, by G. F. H. Berkeley, p. 64.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 90-1.

God I am well. I grieve because they have done me a wrong, and General Baratieri complains that I have done him harm. At this time the Devil interfered in the matter and Christian people exterminated one another. What has been done in the past was the work of the Devil. Now I seek for peace. I desire that you send a just man to decide between my wrong and that of the General. I ask this in order to establish our friendship as it was at first."

During the spring the Italians occupied Adigrat, but the government in Italy insisted that Adowa should remain under the Italian hand but from a distance. That summer Baratieri went back for a few months to Rome and was received in triumph. He declared that Menelik was preparing for war in October.

At the end of September the general landed once more at Massawah, his mind filled with the fatal miscalculation that Menelik could only put into the field some thirty thousand men. In the event the Abyssinians were able to bring four times that number. The Italian forces and their Askari levies amounted to twenty thousand first-line troops.

With an entirely false view of the enemy's resources the Italians decided on the forward movement which proved disastrous to them. They advanced by the tracks south from Adigrat using the remains of the English road constructed by Lord Napier. They went down into the heart of Ethiopia; it was a line of march that they would follow once again in 1935. They occupied Macalle and used for a brief time King John's new palace. The architect Naretti had died there at his post in 1890. In the palace the senior Italian officer Major Toselli received the local chiefs in that high seat which Naretti had warranted to be an authentic copy of the throne of Solomon. From Macalle the Italian forces moved south to hold Alagi Pass, which has always barred the entrance to Tigrai from the south. Had they consolidated their hold they would have separated Tigrai from Ethiopia.

It is true that the Italians had now reached a natural frontier for the province of Hamasien, in which Asmara lies, is united to the Tigrai by racial and linguistic traditions and in religion. Their first conquests after landing in Africa had covered territory that was predominantly Islamic. Thus the province of Bogos around Keren was in great part Mahomedan and the coast lands about Massawah had held for now over eleven centuries to Islam. It was only after the death of John IV that the Italian territory had

extended to the Mareb, thus taking in all the wide plateau lands of a Christian province.

There were thus three stages : the occupation of Islamic territory : the conquest of the Hamasien and the lands down to the Mareb : finally the full scale attack against the whole of the Tigrai. It is true that one movement overlapped into another and that there was no stage, once the first troops marched inland from Massawah, at which it was simple to call a halt. Still, in this third phase the foreigners had now launched themselves against the inner bastions of the Tigrean-Amharic polity. Their wedge drove very deep into the plateau and the old Coptic land. It was thus the foreign advance to Macalle that gave a religious, almost a crusading quality to the defence that was to culminate in the victory at Adowa.

The Askari batallions at Amba Alagi, a small force under Major Toselli, were now confronted by the vast hordes crowding along northwards with Menelik. On 7 December the defending force was attacked and, out of a total of two thousand men, lost twenty Italian officers and thirteen hundred African soldiers. The defence was remembered by the Askari. The following refrain of a song enshrines their view of the action :

Thou was occupying a height which could not be taken except by God himself.

The hilt of thy sword was shining like the star of the morning.

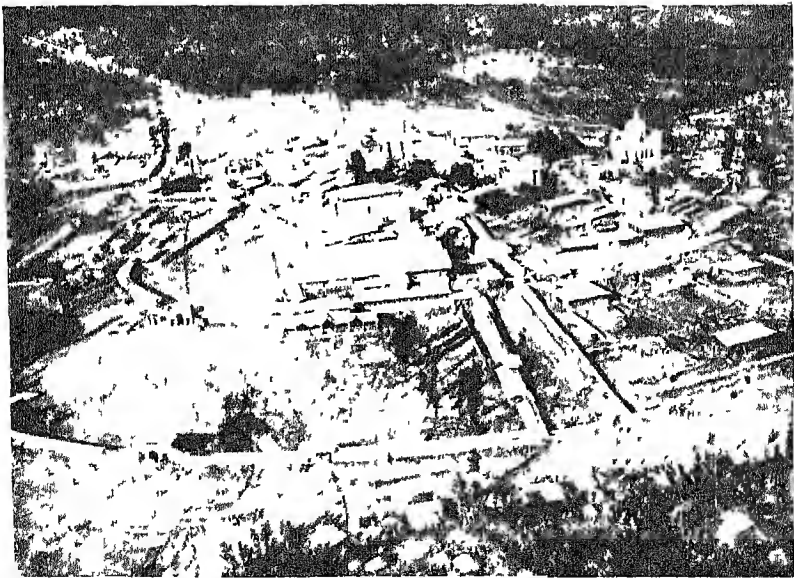
Save thyself, thou dost not deserve such a death.

But he draws his glittering sword and says I will never abandon my young men.

Toselli, himself, was killed on the road to Macalle by the little native church of Bet Mariam.

The last act of the tragedy was now approaching. The loss of prestige occasioned by the disaster at Amba Alagi led the government in Rome to demand a clear swift revenge. Until after Adowa there would echo the cries of *Rivincita*. This forced the Italians in Africa to work against time. We can picture them toiling away at Massawah by the light of torches and Wells lamps and the new electric reflectors, loading the railway and the Decauville wagons. Mules were shod at the rate of one hundred a day. There was no special kit devised for the Europeans who worked in this tropical climate. Everything must be made ready to secure an unforgettable vengeance.

Meanwhile the Abyssinian forces pressed northward and Macalle, thirty-five miles closer than Amba Alagi, was soon completely



*Plat. 16*   *Above*   The Palacc of John IV at Macalle   *Below*   The old  
Ghibbi at Addis Ababa





surrounded. During the forty-five days of the siege the hopes of the Italians wavered until the garrison surrendered on 19 January. It was now only six weeks from the final disaster.

After the surrender Menelik promised to allow the garrison at Macalle to go north in safety, and he now began the strange march, with these Italians on his right flank, across the Tigrean uplands to Adowa. The Italians were of course surrounded by a strong escort. It was a curious way of advance with the Abyssinian masses protected "by a thick band<sup>1</sup> of Ras Makonnen's men marching under a flag of truce." One is conscious that the final battle might so well have been avoided, and with what consequences?

There is a sense in which the Italians were confused and even deceived. Contempt creeps into the tone of Balambaras Wolde Emmanuel in his words to an Italian captain.<sup>2</sup> "It is many years that you are now in Tigray, but little have you learnt." The great army rolled northwards and yet Menelik still spoke of peace. His letter on the release of the men in the fort of Enda Jesus at Macalle is interesting, careful and complex.<sup>3</sup> "From the Conqueror of the Lion of the tribe of Judah, Menelik II, named by God King of the Kings of Ethiopia, this comes to his most respected and honoured Majesty Humbert I, King of Italy. The Peace of God be with your Majesty. You desire peace and friendship, and General Baratieri has informed me of this, and I am much pleased. In order to give proof of our Christian faith, as was our desire, we have sent out, with all their belongings, escorted by Ras Maconnen and in good health, those who were in the fort of Enda Jesus, though they were worn out by thirst, hard-pressed, surrounded, and almost trampled under our feet." There is a sense in which the emperor seems anxious to stress his good fortune without perhaps wholly believing in it.

Meanwhile the Italian advance guard at Adagamus, south of Adigrat and the other troops coming up from Massawah had been collected at Saulla sixteen miles north-east of Adowa. The armies were by this time too close to avoid action. Besides, the government in Rome was pressing Baratieri. "This," runs one telegram sent on 20 February to the Italian commander, "is a military phthisis not a war; small skirmishes in which we are

<sup>1</sup> *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik*, by G. F. H. Berkeley, p. 222.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 224.

<sup>3</sup> *ibid.*, p. 217.

always facing the enemy with inferior numbers, a waste of heroism without any corresponding success." Two days later Baratieri was secretly superseded by General Baldissera.

Meanwhile the position of the Emperor Menelik was not without its anxieties. His great force was very loosely knit and included the soldiery of his rival Mangasha as well as the troops of Takla Hairmanot, king of Gojjam, who was also at best a lukewarm ally. Each high lord, excepting only his cousin Ras Makonnen, was jealous of Shoa. Even Ras Michael was with him. It was a problem as to how long this huge body of men could be held together. Certainly they would not move beyond the limits of Tigrāi. The memories of Theodore's defeat were present to all of them: what might the foreign devils now have in store? Except for Makonnen, who had once been to Rome, neither Menelik nor any other high chief had left Ethiopia. What might not be hidden at Massawah among the strange iron wagons and the cranes.

The real hope for the Abyssinians lay in the chance that Baratieri might attack and be found to possess no special weapons. In fact the Sicilian and African batteries would be overwhelmed and their supply of ammunition was limited. Certainly the emperor's agents were able to befog the white men. Even in October an almost mediæval rumour had been set going that Menelik himself had been struck by lightning. In this connection it is worth giving the testimony of an eyewitness Captain Menarini as to the degree to which the Italians were the recipients of falsified data. "Having," he writes,<sup>1</sup> "no maps or sketches we based our calculations solely on the information obtained from an ill-organised service of natives, who in the opinion of most people were merely Abyssinian spies munificently paid by us."

Both sides were encamped remote from their bases, but Menelik of the two was much further: supplies in both armies were running short. On 28 February at an informal council of war the junior Italian generals Albertone and Dabormida favoured an attack on the enemy. There is something ominous in the words with which Baratieri closed the discussion.<sup>2</sup> "I am expecting further information from spies, who ought soon to arrive from the enemy's camp; when I have it I will come to a decision." On the following

<sup>1</sup> *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik*, by G. F. H. Berkeley, p. 254.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 259.

afternoon he decided to advance. His intention was to deploy on the front slopes of buttressing hills. Even to the end he did not know how many men faced him; he hoped that with this display of force the enemy might retire behind Adowa. During that night through the freshness of the spring on the high plateau his men marched forward. Menelik, who had a strong vein of piety, was actually at the time praying that the foreigners might thus deliver themselves into his hands.

About one half of the Italian force was made up of African troops. Lieutenant Melli has a description of the ground that they covered.<sup>1</sup> "Passes half closed, steep and very difficult, and granite summits that rear themselves to the sky in the most strange forms and dimensions. The surface seems like a stormy sea moved by the anger of God. Few villages, but many huts are met at the moderate altitudes; here and there cultivated and green pastures in the declivities and on the low land; thick bushes and trees in the forests; while scattered everywhere are many euphorbias, mimosas, wild olives, junipers, and some giant sycamores."

From the moment that they set off through the night nothing could avert their destruction. Their situation was, however, rendered more inextricable as the result of a mistake in the orders. As the morning mists cleared away it was seen that Albertone's native brigade was some four miles away from the main body due to an error in the location of the site Khidane Meret, which had been assigned to them as their objective. Later Dabormida's brigade, which endeavoured to link up with Albertone's, also found itself separated. Against them the Abyssinian army of one hundred and twenty thousand men moved out across the plain of Adowa. As the sun caught the bright cloaks of the Galla horsemen, Menelik entered the church of St. George to pray for the success of his arms. On 1 March, 1896, the Italian and Askari brigades were overwhelmed in the course of a heavy morning's fighting. In the afternoon General Baratini managed to retire to the northward. He was not pursued.

Dabormida's brigade in the valley of Mariam Shavitu offered a most gallant resistance. Captain Menarini gives a description of the last scene. "I seem," he writes,<sup>2</sup> "still to see our General walking up and down near the sycamore tree where the artillery

<sup>1</sup> *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik*, by G. F. H. Beckley, pp. 270-1.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, p. 335.

had taken up their position in the morning; 'It is a serious thing, a serious thing,' he murmurs to himself,<sup>1</sup> 'no message, no order, no reinforcement.' " He seems to have died on the slopes of Adi Shun Cohena. An old woman said that she saw him; "a chief, a great chief, with the spectacles and the watch and the gold stars; he asked me for water and said he was the General."

After the battle there were terrible sufferings. Over four hundred of the Askari were condemned by their captors to the loss of the right hand and left foot. They are growing old now as one passes them on the roadside, the victims of Adowa. Nearly two thousand Italian prisoners were left on the field. During the evening after the battle the rain broke and came down in sheets as the fugitives toiled north towards those cliffs that mark the boundaries of Eritrea.

From the camp behind there rose the Amhara chant of triumph, "Mow, mow down the tender grass, Ebalgumè, Ebalgumè." They made a song of Menelik riding his horse Dagno; Abba Dagno he was called in the old tradition. The horned mountains looked down on that rich plain which saw the glory of the House of Shoa. The thunderstorm was over and the shouts rose as the great horns of tedj were held in the strong hands. The vein of poetry and the theme of honour were as old as the ancient twisted hills. "The corn of Italy, that was sown in Tigre, has been reaped by Abba Dagno, and he has given it to the birds."

<sup>1</sup> *The Campaign of Adowa and the Rise of Menelik*, by G. F. H. Berkeley, p. 335.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### ADDIS ABABA

THE CITY OF ADDIS ABABA, a name meaning the new flower, is inextricably associated with the late nineteenth century in Ethiopia and the reign of Menelik. It had first attracted the attention of Menelik's wife the Empress Taitu in 1887 and the *ghibbi* of the kings of Shoa had been transferred to Addis Ababa from Entotto two years later. That stockaded palace, close to the shrine of Entotto Mariam a few miles above Addis Ababa, had been the Shoan capital since 1880 when Menelik had abandoned Ankober.

A plethora of early inventions found their way to Addis Ababa; they were the pledges of the novelty which the new site represented. There was also something eminently civilian about the fresh great settlement. It was a period of flock-coated expansionism and of commercial interests which flourished in their full dubiety. The most characteristic figure was the Swiss engineer, Monsieur Ilg. In the wake of the Compagnie Franco-Africaine there spread the telephone, the electric telegraph, the electric light, and that symbol of what the late Victorian world held as progress, the railway to the sea.

At the same time the old customs died hard and a feudal patriarchal rule still lingered in the north as the new *ghibbi* rose at Addis Ababa. Above all, there was no hurry for the victory of Adowa had ushered in almost forty years of peace. Besides, Menelik II was singularly cautious in gathering in the fruits of his success; he knew that once the Italians were defeated the dynastic question would solve itself in time. Meanwhile Ras Mangasha, as a representative of the old order, still ruled in Macalle. Northern Tigray was devastated in the summer after the great battle, but Ras Mangasha retained that ancient pomp which was never without its faint and lingering Osmanli flavour. Behind the throne in the great hall of the palace, one hundred and fifty feet in length, were placed the three apartments where the prince transacted private business. Across the lawn there stood a small pavilion or summer

house where guests would be received and the mid day meal taken with the favourite followers. Later the prince would repose himself on a seat among grape hyacinths beneath the peach trees, here his court dwarf Balambaras Marou was at hand to amuse his vague attention. The princely manor in this last high state was furnished with divans and bright Levantine cushions and Persian rugs, the latter seldom good. There was one relic of Ras Ali's practice, the riding horses would be stabled within the house to mark their close service to the lord.

On state occasions Ras Mangasha at Macalle would wear the decorated silk and embroidered Indian damask which now came in from Bombay. Across these would be thrown the long loose satin cloak with silver brooches. The lion's mane was disposed about the shoulders; beneath there could be seen the fine shirts made in Manchester. The feet were bare in the silver stirrups. The pages bore the silver shields and great gold-mounted swords.

This was a brief and ordered pageant. The merchandise could now come in freely, but almost immediately the old customs would vanish. The whole way of life depended upon trophies and the sword. The display itself was based on the power of horsemen. The merchant would corrode and the cannon shatter all the graded martial glory. The Remingtons were piled in the great barns; French officers were ready to instruct the younger warriors in the proper way of using the Hotchkiss gun. A single generation would sweep this world away.

The end perhaps came quicker because Menelik II never fought a needless battle. In 1901 Takla Haimanot, king of Gojjam died suddenly, and his territories came under direct imperial rule. In 1899 half-hearted war between Ras Mangasha and Ras Makonnen had ended in the former's discomfiture. The son of the Emperor John, was compelled to appear before Menelik with a stone upon his head; his life was spared. This brings us to the personality of the great emperor.

It is remarkable how insufficient is the material for a detailed and objective study of Menelik II. In the first place the evidence dealing with the years of rule in Shoa is very scanty, he was already forty-five, settled in his habits and married for the fourth time, when he was proclaimed as emperor on the death of John IV. His outlook and his ways of thought were formed in those lonely decades when he was visited by few Europeans and certainly not

courted yet by the Great Powers. In that period Antonelli was almost alone in his approach to him, but one man was already at the king's side. Alfred Ilg had come out to the Court of Ankober from the Zurich polytechnic in 1878. One gathers, when both men emerge into the day, that Monsieur Ilg had benefited by a long association. Most observers comment upon the slow ripening of Menelik's confidence; a note of caution, a readiness to receive, a determination not to be tied down to a benefactor. Yet these men only saw him in his later years when he had at length matured his hard-won wisdom.

Menelik II seems to have been under certain aspects a traditionalist. He was a great defender of the Ethiopian Church and a builder of churches; he was a devoted pilgrim to Debra Libanos. The Church and State relationship which crystallised in his reign is not without some European features. In the realm of contemporary political ideas the emperor was both accessible and sensitive. On the other hand he was quite without æsthetic feelings. He appears to have liked the insignia of European grandeur, the *plaque* of the Legion of Honour, the grand cross of the Order of St. Michael and St. George. Yet he showed little taste for splendour and perhaps regarded the old ceremonial as antiquated in a modern age. He usually wore on all occasions of semi-state a large black Quaker hat or as it has been described "his two and six penny wideawake."

The photographs of the period can give a clear impression of Menelik II, the stout tall figure (he was about six feet in height), the very dark skin pitted by smallpox, the keen eyes brooding in that heavy face. The short curly beard was by this time grizzled, and his smile was open and contented. All visitors remarked on his excellent teeth. The emperor's voice was surprisingly even and gentle. There were certain touches that recalled the Emperor Theodoie. An exchange with Prince Henri of Orleans, who visited Addis Ababa in 1897, bears on this point. The prince had been speaking of his journey in the Far East. "What progress," asked Menelik,<sup>1</sup> "does industrial development make in China? Do they make guns?"

One gains the impression that the emperor felt at home with the French. They were polite and serious; they were actuated by a clear realism. A tradition of friendship for France had lingered

<sup>1</sup> *Une Visite a l'Empereur Ménélik*, by Prince Henri d'Orleans, p. 127.



in the House of Shoa since the days of Rocher d'Iléticout. Menelik could understand the projects of Monsieur Chefneux for a railway and for the establishment of posts and telegraphs. Especially since his accession to the empire, he had been aided by arms which had poured in through the new French port of Djibouti. He had confidence in the French minister Léonce Lagarde.

This matter may be studied from another angle. In the barren field of nineteenth century Ethiopian history there is one narrow subject on which considerable research is concentrated. Thus some light is thrown on one aspect of Menelik's interests by the examination given to Arthur Rimbaud's life in Abyssinia. Coming to Harar in 1880 and staying for some years during the Egyptian occupation, the poet first reached Entotto early in 1887 in the capacity of a gun-runner. He does not seem to have made much impression and at Harar, where he lived for a second spell from 1888 till 1891, he was outside the emperor's orbit. As a general trader Rimbaud was uninspired, trying to sell French rosaries to Copts and writing pads to the illiterate; Monsieur Ilg in vain begged him for shoe horns in an attempt to popularise footwear. Rimbaud had little direct contact with the emperor; but his dealings leave the impression that Menelik was a skilful manager of his own commerce.

It was the Frenchmen most remote from Rimbaud who could perhaps best appreciate and respond to the emperor's shrewd bargaining, to his calculated vigilant delays and to that unremitting courtesy. They were never discomposed by the royal manner. Menelik raised Monsieur Lagarde to the dukedom of Entotto; he gave to France the site for the fine long low Legation with its bougainvillea. In return the French brought with them the eucalyptus trees. These were the years of Fashoda and of the French colonial conception of an empire stretching eastwards from Ubanghi-Shari across the Bahr-Ghazel to the borders of Abyssinia. This particular plan was defeated by Kitchener's victory at Omdurman and the occupation by Anglo-Egyptian forces of all these wide provinces of the Sudan. In such matters Menelik appears to have stayed skilful and passive.

His presents were massed in the great store houses. The emperor appreciated the phonograph that the French brought him and Prince Henri's gift of Sèvres China. He seems to have placed

a definite value upon objects that were in use by their donors. It may be malicious of Wilfred Blunt to remark that<sup>1</sup> at this time Sir Herbert Kitchener was purchasing a musical box to be sent to Abyssinia, but at any rate it indicates a fundamental lack of perception. The French never moved very far from the profit motive. Ultimately the French influence waned through its very realism. This quality may be said to have over-reached itself in the line of policy pursued by Monsieur Laval in 1935.

It seems that in his own fashion the emperor loved trimming and equipoise. He used with some familiarity and to their mutual benefit the two successive French Capuchin vicars apostolic in Harar, Mgr. Tauin and Mgr. Jarosseau. Nevertheless it was left for the Emperor Haile Selassie to permit the Catholics a free entry into Addis Ababa. Menelik had always his reservations; there were those whom he would consult in Harar but exclude from the Shoan provinces. Into this world of balance there came the Russians, who in these years acted as some support for the French, their new allies. The *Entente Cordiale* lay in the future and England was suspect to both these powers. Colonel Leontieff now brought a great diamond and the Order of Catherine of Russia in brilliants, gifts from the Tsar Nicholas. They adorned the ring finger and the breast of the Emperor Menelik.

The pageantry of the Ethiopian Church went forward. Servants preceded the *abuna* and *echeggi* carrying armed chairs with gold embroidery on violet velvet. Other servants bore the thick gold crosses. An air of peacefulness and of unhampered profit lay over the new *ghibbi* in Addis Ababa. The English came and were perhaps a trifle operatic, Captain Bingham and Lord Edward Cecil, both over six foot three, wearing the full dress of the first Life Guards and the *levée* dress of the Grenadiers. They did not see very far beneath the surface as may be gathered from Lord Edward Gleichen's account of the road into Addis Ababa.<sup>2</sup> "We soon arrived in very pretty hilly country, parts of which were exactly like the wilder parts of the Surrey Hills. English bushes, ferns, grasses, and wild flowers were growing in profusion, and if it had not been for the sun being immediately overhead, one might have fancied oneself back on a summer's day in the woods between

<sup>1</sup> *Diaries, 1888-1914*, by Wilfred Scawen Blunt, p. 223.

<sup>2</sup> *With the Mission to Menelik, 1897*, by Captain Count Gleichen, pp. 72-3.

Guildford and Leatherhead." This is a perfect example of selective description.

Meanwhile British policy was only gradually centring upon the question of the rights to the exits from Lake Tana, which would remain a permanent concern of the country primarily interested in the development of Egypt and the Sudan. The idea of a barrage to control the flow of the Blue Nile, so essential to the prosperity of these lands, was mooted at this time and by the Anglo-Ethiopian Treaty of 1902 the rights of Great Britain in the head waters of the Nile were recognised. During the thirty years that followed, the other European nations were perhaps inclined to regard this matter as the predominant and indeed only considerable British interest in Ethiopia.

In the decade after Adowa an immense expansion of the Emperor Menelik's dominions was taking place. This appeared as in some sense a counterpart to the gradual "opening up" of East and Central Africa by the British, French and Germans. It was hardly less easy for the Abyssinians to make headway than for the European forces since the emperor's troops were armed with modern weapons and his generals were assisted by French and Russian officers. As early as 1897 they had penetrated to the west and conquered the country overlooking the valley of the White Nile. They subdued the king of Kaffa and occupied the wide lands which stretch southwards to Lake Rudolf and the Kenya border. This immense area had been separated from the Amharas by the Galla country, although to the southwards there was no well-defined boundary to the plateau such as existed to the north and east and even to the west. It was the curtain of the pagan tribes which had hitherto marked the southern frontiers of Abyssinia.

The areas now loosely occupied were pagan in character with the exception of certain pockets like the sultanate of Gimma whose people had embraced Islam. These conquests brought into prominence two main problems, one external and the other internal in its character. The external problem concerned the attitude adopted to these conquests by the European Powers. It would seem that their representatives were impressed by the force and energy of Menelik's rule but remained sceptical as to its stability. The *Entente Cordiale* was signed in 1904 and the traditions of Anglo-Italian friendship were still unbroken. There was an impression among informed observers that the empire was without

lasting strength. Neither Theodore, nor John IV had bequeathed his power to a successor of his own house, and this belief in the instability of the imperial fabric was reinforced in 1906 when Ras Makonnen died. He was by far the ablest of Menelik's assistants and apparently his destined successor.

By this time, too, the magical effect of Adowa was wearing off. The development of the railway from the coast was interrupted; the line had not yet progressed beyond Direedawa, the French-built railway town which had sprung up at the nearest point to Harar. Some doubt was thrown upon the continuance of Addis Ababa as the imperial capital; Menelik himself had shown a preference for Addis Alem, the new felicity, a small place some forty miles west of Addis Ababa on the road to Lekemti and the Sudan. In 1900 he had begun to build a *ghibbi* there, but the project was abandoned some years later owing to the lack of the running water which would be needed for a new large city.

Meanwhile his hard life was telling on the Emperor Menelik and, although only sixty-two, there were signs of the onset of the paralysis to which he would succumb. In the same year, 1906, there was signed the tripartite treaty between Great Britain, France and Italy. The core of this document was a concentration upon spheres of influence, although these were defined without precision. Tribute was paid by the signatories to their desire for the continued independence of Ethiopia. By this treaty, against whose provisions the Emperor Menelik lodged a formal protest, three spheres of influence were recognised which between them covered the whole empire. The British area was pivoted on Lake Tana and the great loop of the Blue Nile valley; the French led along the railway (including both the completed and projected sections) from the coast to Addis Ababa; the Italians were assigned a wide crescent with a cusp to the west of Addis Ababa and horns that ran from Eritrea to their new colony in Somaliland. The attitude of the powers to Ethiopia was illumined rather than governed by the treaty whose provisions never came into force. At the same time such an instrument might never have been envisaged had Ras Makonnen lived. It was the death of this prince that contributed to the confused situation that existed between the illness of the Emperor Menelik and the accession of his surviving daughter the Empress Zaoditu in 1916.

Still it was not only an external problem that was created by the

expansion of the empire, there was also a problem in internal administration, the relations between the Amharas and their new subject tribes. This matter must again be subdivided into the attitude to the Gallas, to the pagan tribes away towards Kenya and the Sudan, and to the large Moslem populations. A general comment on the Gallas seems appropriate at this point. This nation was said to come from "beyond the Great Water," which has sometimes been construed as Lake Victoria Nyanza. The Boian and Bartuma Gallas were already invading Ethiopia in the sixteenth century and they remain a constant factor, filling great areas beyond the Christian line and spilling over into the court life itself with Galla warriors and ministers. For centuries they aroused repugnance in the Amharic mind; there was a nightmare touch about these Galla warriors with their shields of bull's hide as high as themselves. There was early infiltration into the plateau country, especially on the part of the Wollo Gallas who remained Mohammedan. For a long time the various tribes of this race pressed in constituting a permanent menace. In this connection an Amharic manuscript gives a vivid impression. It is explained that the Gallas used disgraceful words. "We," their warriors are described as saying,<sup>1</sup> "have no longer any need to shave our heads if we kill the inhabitants of Shoa and Amhara; for they are only oxen who can speak and are not capable of making war."

The Gallas had a curious rudimentary political system. As pagans they worshipped the wanzey tree and the new moon and stars when in certain positions. They had rain-makers and sorcerers. It should be noted that it was these tribes which introduced the custom of castrating prisoners and the dead. For centuries the Amharas looked on them with aversion. The curtain of Gallas to the south of Shoa was a boundary as clearly marked as the precipices which elsewhere divided the Amharic plateau from Moslem land. It fell to Menelik to consider the welding of Amharas and Gallas into one nation.

The problem of the Nilotic tribes was somewhat different, while the question of the future of the Somalis was also implicit in the extension of Menelik's dominions to the east and south. There had been a great area brought under Ethiopian suzerainty in all that Somali country which had become towards the end of the nineteenth century the joint concern of Ethiopia, Great Britain and Italy and

<sup>1</sup> Printed in Budge, *op. cit.*, II, p. 613.

also of France in so far as she possessed the hinterland to Djibouti which was called the *Côte Française des Somalis*. The colony of Italian Somaliland, although envisaged as early as 1889, had only really taken shape in 1905, when the Benadir coast had passed definitively to Italy and Mogadiscio had been established as the administrative capital. The older colony of British Somaliland had developed rather earlier, but the frontier between Ethiopia and Italian Somaliland was never the subject of any official demarcation. A chief consequence of these changes was the large Mohammedan population in the Ogaden and among the Aussa and Danakils which was brought in some sense within the jurisdiction of Addis Ababa. This Mohammedan element in the amalgam of the empire of Menelik II was of crucial significance for an understanding of the reign of his grandson Lij Jasu.

In 1909 after the first of his paralytic seizures the Emperor Menelik II had named as heir to the throne his grandson Lij Jasu or Lij Iyasu, the only son of Ras Michael by the emperor's younger daughter Choa Rega. The Emperor Lij Jasu was born in 1897, succeeded on his grandfather's death in 1913 and was deposed in 1916. No adequate account exists of his brief rule.

Although he matured early, the extreme youth of this sovereign is worth noting. On his father's side he was of Islamic origin; Ras Michael was still living as governor of Dessie at his son's accession. The young emperor's temperament and sympathies appear to have drawn him towards Islam and to a Moslem way of life. He seems to have disliked the Solomonic basis on which his ancient throne reposed; his purpose appears to have been to draw together the Moslem and to a lesser extent the Galla elements throughout his realm. On the political side this involved a support for and religious dependence upon Turkey. Since the war of 1914-8 was already in progress, the opposition of the British, French and Italian legations to this turn of policy was clear-cut. The strong feeling for Turkey was allied to a measure of sympathy for Germany and the hope of consolidating a new orientation of Ethiopian life after the victory of the Central Powers.

In fact a much more immediately serious opposition was then forming. The Shoan rases and the leaders of the Ethiopian Church combined to prevent this treason to the national concepts and to the religion of the Amharas. The great chiefs, acting with the *abuna* who excommunicated the sovereign, marched into Addis

Ababa. Lij Jasu took refuge with the Danakils; he was taken prisoner in 1921 and died in captivity before the Italian invasion. In his place Menelik's surviving daughter Zaoditu was proclaimed as empress. She was a woman of over forty, married to and separated from Ras Gugsa, childless, intensely devout. She had seen much Ethiopian history for she had been the child bride of Ras Area Selassie, the son of John IV who had died during his father's reign. With the orthodoxy of her royal house and a devotion to the memory of the Emperor Menelik, the new sovereign was a symbol of old Amharic mastery.

At the time of her accession Ras Tafari, who had succeeded his father Ras Makonnen in the governorship of Haïar, was proclaimed regent and heir presumptive to the throne. Together with his cousin Ras Kassa, the new regent represented the Shoan house. The accession of the new empress and the appointment of the regent thus ensured the maintenance of that long tradition of the Throne of Solomon, which for a brief space had been endangered. The Empress Zaoditu built the present new *ghibbi* at Addis Ababa; the railway at last reached the capital in 1918; ministries rose; the city spread, took on an air of permanence; the lines of modern Ethiopia were falling into shape. In April 1930 the empress died and the regent succeeded to the empire under the title of Haile Selassie I.

## EPILOGUE

THE ADMINISTRATION AT ADDIS ABABA in the first period of the rule of the Emperor Haile Selassie reflected many of the ideas that were current in England and the United States in the years between the German wars. The concentration on foreign-sponsored commercial development, which was characteristic of the reign of Menelik, was now exhausted. This was replaced by an insistence on the fabric of medical services and a well-graded system of education. In so far as there was similarity with foreign nations, there was a faint discernible resemblance between the spirit of the *Jeunesse d'Ethiopie* and that of the school from which the Young Turks sprang.

There was a determined effort to break down the power of the oligarchic ruling chiefs and to replace them by the slow development of a bureaucratic class, which would be predominantly Amharic. Menelik II had used and cajoled the local chieftains; it remained for the new regime to lay them quite aside. This well accorded with those doctrines of 1789 and the spirit of modern, laicised, humanitarian political endeavour which was so grateful to the more travelled members of the new *intelligentsia*. It is interesting to observe how these conceptions were grafted on to that profound respect which the Solomonic Throne aroused in all its servants. The administration of justice, the financial provisions and the civil code were in the last resort dependent on a graded, well-spaced and varied system of education. There was thus in Addis Ababa the beginnings of an unity between all those who vaguely saw the Ethiopian future in terms of a Wilsonian idealism. With this there went in varying degrees a very genuine and fervent national sentiment, predominantly Amharic in its emphasis. By 1935 the beginnings of a bureaucratic *cadre* could be traced among those sent from Addis Ababa to all the developing branches of the different provincial administrations. There was within this circle a sense of progress, pride and optimism enlivened by new hope. Under one aspect such a mood might be crystallized in a single word, President Wilson's legacy, Geneva.

It is not the purpose of this study to enquire as to the development



of ideas among the pastoral and farming peoples of the scattered provinces; but within the middle class in Addis Ababa there was a tendency to rely upon the League of Nations. It seems that the emperor himself was attracted to the conception of this League as a world order with something of the character of a super-state, a body in which Ethiopia possessed her share of sovereignty. The journey to Geneva after the occupation of the empire by the Italians in 1936 was under one aspect a pilgrimage of juridical idealism. For over all this reign there lay the manace of an attack by Italy. This is a matter which requires a brief clear statement.

The reign of the Emperor Haile Selassie I falls into two parts divided by the five years of the Italian occupation of Ethiopia which followed the war of 1935. External affairs were dominated by the unsolved problem of Italo-Ethiopian relations which cannot really be said to have been normalised at any point in the forty years between the battle of Adowa and the outbreak of the second conflict. The annexation of Libya and Cyrenaica in 1912 was a landmark in Italian colonial development. In Eritrea the creation of the modern city of Asmara and the building of the great network of roads throughout the colony constituted in Italian eyes a mute claim to the reversionary right to the control of Ethiopia. The advent of the Fascist government in 1922 only accentuated a mood which was already present.

The Italians were convinced that they were destined to rule in Africa. The methods by which the French had gained Madagascar and had dispossessed that island's dynasty seemed worthy of imitation. Under Fascism the desire grew stronger that Italy should take her place among the European conquerors; the policy that the British had adopted in Matabeleland and Ashanti was remembered with deep satisfaction. The recent history of Morocco provided an example of the policy of lavish friendship for a royal house which some great nation would one day "protect." The Italians had already embarked on their relationship with the king of Albania. The formula was now brought into use at Addis Ababa.

The Italian policy was thus based in a new emphatic form upon a nineteenth-century pattern and was totally regardless of the rights of African peoples. The reigns of Menelik II and Haile Selassie I had done much to focus that ancient national spirit. The former isolation had broken down and for a generation the

Ethiopians had looked upon themselves as belonging to the comity of a world-wide network of sovereign states. When the Italian attack developed there was nothing lacking in the old strong patriotism. Throughout the occupation of the country, which followed on the military defeat, there was a determination to reject the status of a subject people. The stoic endurance of the emperor and his consciousness of his unaltered destiny had its counterpart in Ras Kassa's magnanimity. In the guerrilla warfare there was a reminiscence of the Spanish people's revolt against their own French conquerors. The cruelties of Marshal Graziani, both in the capital and throughout the country, had a stiffening effect on a proud race. It has always been contended in Addis Ababa that the war of 1939-45 began in Ethiopia. The return of the emperor to his palace in 1941 is thus seen as a phase in a long struggle.

After so many centuries the Throne of Solomon and the lands which are now ruled by its imperial inheritor have come out into the light of a contemporary appraisal. The Ethiopian delegates now sit at each general conference board. It need hardly be said that this by itself is insufficient. Before them and their companions there stretches out under a leaden sky a wide grey prospect.