
TRAVEL

A Day On the Jebel

By Suzanne St Albans



THERE IS a clanking of rifles as the tribesmen who have hitched a lift in the Civil Aid helicopter scramble out (no nonsense about ladies first in these parts) and promptly disappear into a cloud of red dust, flying twigs and dead leaves whipped up by the beating of the great pulsating blades.

We have reached our first port of call on the Qara mountain range, on the easternmost part of the Arabian peninsula, overlooking the Indian Ocean. "Ophir" of the Bible, the land of frankincense, is now Dhofar, a province of the Sultanate of Oman; and the Qara mountain range,

shaped like a vast boomerang, forms a kind of barrier, sealing off the coastal plain from the interior desert, and creating a micro-climate unique in Arabia. The vacuum caused by hot air rising out of the scorching Nejd desert behind the Qara range sucks in the moisture-bearing winds which blow off the East coast of Africa. When these swirling, soggy mists hit the Jebel, they condense and fall as a continuous drizzle lasting for the whole of the monsoon season, from June to September.

During this period, visibility is reduced to nil, as a permanent fog envelops the plain of Salalah, shrouding the uplands in heaving rolling clouds. These raging East African winds churn up the Indian Ocean, which can be heard pounding away invisibly on the beach like rumbling thunder. When the monsoon clouds disperse, a marvellous change

has taken place, and the whole province is covered with lush, tender, emerald-green grass. Likewise, the usual bleak desert aspect of the Jebel has also turned to a green carpet spreading beneath the fig trees, the camel thorn, and other scrub of the hills. Deep down in the mountain wadis, entire ravines become luxuriant oases with gushing brooks, and pools and waterfalls, exuberant tropical vegetation, a tangle of soaring lianas and hanging orchids, fleshy ferns, and thick spongy mosses. Among all this, humming birds hover beside huge purple banana flowers, dragonflies dart over the pools, fat yellow wasps swing from side to side like wound-up watch springs, and clouds of butterflies arise from the water's edge at the slightest disturbance.

This little paradise was a battlefield for eleven long and tedious years, during which time many British soldiers lost their lives in a war which hardly anybody has ever heard about—the Dhofar War. This started three months after the then Mr Harold Wilson had decided to withdraw the British Army from Aden. The vacuum was immediately filled by Chinese, then Russian terrorists, and became a fertile anarchists' breeding ground. Oil, of course, was the villain of the piece. The large rich wells of Iran were the objective. The plan was to disaffect the Jebel tribes, and set them up against the Sultan's Armed Forces, destroy morale, wreck the economy, then swarm through the country right up to the Straits of Hormuz, at the entrance of the Gulf, then punch their way through the soft, unsuspecting underbelly of Iran.

The long and dreary war has now been over for more than a year, and to mark its end, the last National Day Parade was held in Salalah, the capital of Dhofar. As a celebration of victory, it was a great triumph, unspoilt by any acts of terrorism, a sure sign that all that side of the affair was well and truly over.

AS SOON AS the guerrillas had surrendered in one area of the Jebel, the government of Oman moved in at once with supplies and medical aid. The idea, in order to discourage the rebels for good and all, was to install an official centre with all possible

speed, which included a clinic, a shop, a school, and the drilling of a well. By now there are 13 such centres in operation on the Jebel. In order to drive home the advantages of liberation, whole pre-fabricated units were flown in and clamped together on the spot; and school benches, beds, cooking pots and other domestic gear came swinging through the sky in the great helicopter net. Although Oman is not one of the very rich oil states, there are enough revenues for a robust policy of reform. The new Ruler, Sultan Qaboos, who came to power in 1970, was determined from the start to wrench his country right out of the Middle Ages, and bring it into the 20th century as soon as could be tactfully and practically done. And the end of the Dhofar war was a God-given opportunity to move right in with much needed medical aid and education, at a crucial moment, a turning point in the history of these primitive, underdeveloped parts.

As no female doctor could be found at first, a male of the species, who was regularly flown up to the Jebel, would have to crouch behind a portable wattle hide, while a couple of nurses "took" the clinic. As the women of the tribes gradually gained confidence and came along with their ailing infants, one of the nurses would describe the nature of the illness in a loud voice over her shoulder to the doctor behind his screen, who would rapidly compute the symptoms and shout back the relevant treatment and the drugs to be administered.

THEN, IN THE FULLNESS of time, came the appointment of the first woman doctor, who now covers every spot on the Jebel, flying hither and thither in a hired army helicopter all through the week. Things have so far improved, and confidence grown to the extent that she is now openly accompanied by a *male* medical orderly, who is universally accepted by the very women who confined the original doctor behind his screen during the first consultations.

And now, a year later, here we are landing on the Jebel, the same medical orderly carrying the medicine chest, a Civil Aid Employee whose mother came from a local Jebali tribe, and who acts as coordinator between Civil Aid in Salalah and the Jebel tribes, and myself as "observer."

Dr Catherine is busy elsewhere today, and Shaun, her husband, also employed by Civil Aid, is in charge of our party. Having decanted us, he flies off to other parts to sort out pressing problems elsewhere. Later, he will return to pick us up, and ferry us to another spot on the Jebel.

WHEN THE DUST STORM has settled, we find ourselves on a wide plateau backed by a high mountain range. Camel-thorn scrub grows

here and there, and under the only ghaf tree sits the Sheikh. Above his head, stretched among the denuded branches, are mats and brightly coloured rags to give shade to those below.

The Jebali, as the tribes of the Jebel Qara are known, are not Arabs, but a race supposedly of Hamitic origin descended from North Africans. They are among the most primitive tribes of the Middle East, still living in caves and mud huts as they have always done. They speak languages of Semitic origin (Shahari, Mahri, Batahri, Harsusi) all of which are quite incomprehensible to the Arabs. Apart from these main divisions, there are innumerable variations on the main themes, such as sub-tribes, sections, clans, which are themselves divided by various blood-feuds, each one speaking a different dialect.

Of the pre-Islamic Shahara tribe, only about 300 survive, all of them servants of the late-comers, the powerful, domineering Kathiri people from the Hadramaut, who have managed to impose themselves as the leading tribe of the Qara range. Of medium height, they are as tough as mountain mules and as nimble as goats; illiterate, but as sharp and bright as you could wish. And like our own distant ancestors, they frequently paint themselves blue all over. In many quite unconnected parts of the world this colour is used as a protection against the evil eye. In Greece and North Africa, for instance, the windows of peasants' and fishermen's houses are painted blue all round the edges. In Turkey it is a lucky colour. In the Camargue, the *gardiens'* shacks are frequently decorated with chips of blue glass embedded in the plaster above the front door. And in present-day Western countries baby boys are often dressed in blue as a matter of course.

THE CLINIC is about to start. A couple of plastic mats are spread on the ground, and the women, who are beginning to come along, are followed by an earnest little troupe of toddlers all bearing a pink card aloft. This is injection day, and they want to know if they are due for another jab. The mothers, who are small and quick-moving as sparrows, squat on the plastic mats, and the orderly opens his medicine chest.

Collecting together a few empty shell cases (the ground is littered with these relics of past battles) I construct myself a little stool to keep out of reach of the scorpions, red ants, and camel spiders of the Jebel. As a woman scuttles past with one of the local pigmy cows in her arms, I grieve at not being allowed to take photographs. But the night before in Salalah the flying doctor had declared very firmly, "I will not have my women upset by photographs so they don't come to the clinic any more!" And that, alas, is that.

A few yards away on the right is a large wattle

and mud hut shaped like an igloo, with a small round door screened by a sack. Crows, hopping about on the roof, snap up an occasional beetle or lizard. The pointed, whiskery face of a rat suddenly pokes out of the roof twigs.

Sweeping the sackcloth curtain aside with her foot, and bending low, the mini-cow-bearing woman disappears into the hut. I whip round, as someone's hot breath is panting down my ear, to find myself face to face with another of those tiny cows, no bigger than a dog. Intrigued by the visitors, a herd is cantering toward us, skipping and scampering around, trampling the rush mat, leaping over the medicine chest, all as agile as goats; and the noble-looking Sheikh is having his face licked by one of these affectionate creatures. Nobody seems to mind them in the least. These little cows are prestigious possessions. The more of them a man owns, the more respected and highly regarded he is. For this reason, among others, it is difficult for the Civil Aid in Salalah to convince the owners to breed larger animals, the idea being not to have a few big handsome beasts, but a multitude of pigmies, amounting to a large herd. It is very much a question of quantity rather than quality. Experiments in cross-breeding with Anglo-Saxon cows have been tried, with disastrous results. So now new schemes are being hatched, with infinite care and regard for the Jebalis' preferences.

Each much-loved cow has her own name and is milked only by her owner, an honour denied to the women who have to content themselves with milking the goats.

Any fall in the yield is of course due to "the evil eye", and this is often cured by the burning and swinging of frankincense. When this remedy fails, the owner applies his mouth to the cow's vagina and blows into it for all he is worth. Soon the stimulation turns her thoughts to milk, and she obliges.

AS MORE AND MORE PATIENTS gather under the ghaf tree, a woman suddenly appears with a calabash brimming with milk. This is handed round, and all take a swig. Remembering what I have been told in Muscat—"That Jebel milk . . . instant TB", I just wet my lips and pretend to swallow.

With regret I notice that the pernicious bottle-feeding practice has already spread to these parts. With the shortage of water, it is impossible to wash out these plastic bottles between feeds, let alone sterilise them, so that they become lined inside with a lethal green scum, causing diarrhoea and dysentery. It is difficult to make the mothers understand the principle of cause and effect. Having discovered bottle-feeding, which allows them to become pregnant again as soon as they have weaned the last infant, nothing will persuade them back to breast-feeding at the moment. In time

of course, this problem will be sorted out, with many others, by the spread of education on the Jebel.

Gradually more women appear from behind the rocks, with a child on one hip, and several others in tow. Scrutinising the toddlers' pink cards, the orderly pats the bearers on the head and says, "No, next week", and then to me, "Too bad, because next week the card will be lost, or eaten by a goat, and then we won't know where we are."

By the end of the hour, there are about 15 women squatting under the tree. Most of them are wearing black *abbas* (cloaks), their handsome faces are unveiled, and most of them sport a gold ring through the nose.

Their fingers and toes are covered with rings, and they are shy, easily disconcerted by a sharp word from the Sheikh. Children mill around hugging first one woman, then another, and it is impossible to tell who the mother is. The little cows skip around merrily, poking their noses into everybody's business, unchecked.

Suddenly there is a great roar in the sky, and we all look towards the East, where our helicopter appears, slowly floating towards us, trailing a huge beam in its wake, wrapped in the meshes of the chopper net. "Moving building materials", remarks the orderly, handing out a bottle of cough mixture. Children are brought to him with sore eyes and ears, chest colds, skin trouble, festering sores. In each case the diagnosis is swift and sure. The drugs are handed to the little patient in person. And when he has received his tube of ointment, or bottle, or syrup, he toddles off, clutching his prize in his right hand, and disappears behind a rock, leaving mother to gossip with her friends.

SQUATTING on my home-made stool of shell-cases I watch, and hold my peace. As the only female member of our party, and knowing my place (I am probably only the second or third European woman these people have ever seen) I try to be as unobtrusive as possible. But the orderly, who knows my mission, has kindly taken me under his wing, and is bent on helping me. The clinic is over, and he speaks to the Sheikh. "*Kittab*", he informs the old man, pointing to me and writing in mid-air. The Sheikh rises and gravely walks towards his hut, inviting me to follow. Behind him, and feeling rather like Alice, I squeeze through the tiny doorway.

Inside, it is surprisingly spacious. You can even stand up quite comfortably. Solemnly, we face each other. I bow, and he bows; then moves to the far end of the hut, obviously his domain. Here are reed mats and leather cushions on the floor. We sit down and there, enthroned on a goat-skin pillow, his back ramrod straight, his legs crossed and his

camel stick laid out before him, he looks as regal as any king. It is quite awesome. With undiminished dignity he whacks away at the rats which come poking through the wattle wall of the hut. I look around with increasing surprise. Outside, the heat was becoming uncomfortable. Here it is cool, fresh and remarkably unsmelly, although the little cow is happily chewing the cud in a corner and half-a-dozen goats skip around the hut. Water skins hang from the ceiling, rifles are stacked round the central kingpost. The kitchen quarters, which are not divided from the Sheikh's apartments by a curtain, as is the custom with the tribes of the Empty Quarter, are neat and tidy, the tin cauldron and trays are clean and shiny, standing in a row against the mud wall. A goatskin cradle, hanging from a roof post, out of the way of ants and scorpions, contains a sleeping infant. Hanging below the cradle are curious racquet-shaped objects made of cow-fur. Intrigued, I ask my host what they are. He explains that they are held out for licking purposes to the cows who are being milked, so that they will be tricked into believing that they are suckling their calf, and so more readily let down the milk.

The chopper appears again, this time to pick us up. Shrinking into ourselves and crouching low like a lot of mushrooms, we huddle away from the rising dust storm. Then, with eyes half-closed and faces shrouded in scarves and *shemags* (those all-purpose headcloths worn by Omani men, used for everything and anything, from making a tourniquet to straining water), we run for it. The blades don't even slow down as we scramble in.

ONLY A COUPLE of Firqats are getting a lift this time, sitting opposite me stony-faced, their rifles between their knees. These men are the ex-rebels who gave themselves up at the end of the war last year, and who are now being paid by the Oman Government to keep watch over the Jebel, and report any sign of untoward activity. The Firqats are in fact a kind of unofficial police, well looked-after, well paid, and provided with as much ammunition as they wish. There are still about 60 rebels hiding away in caves, who have so far refused to surrender; but nobody worries much about them.

WHEN THESE TRIBESMEN were under the sway of the guerrillas in the Yemen, they were quite brutally treated and kept under control by sheer terrorism. If they didn't spy on the Sultan's forces and report on the movement of his troops, if they didn't provide the rebels with food, milk and ready women, they were beaten up, crucified on trees and submitted to various other refinements of torture. The more promising members of the tribe

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were sent to "school" in China or Russia to be instructed in terrorist methods, then brought back to spread the good news among their own tribes. This was to be the "end of Islam", which is supposedly a method of enslaving human beings. Those who refused to give up their faith were made to regret it; and anyone found praying was burned with red hot coals applied to the soles of the feet, the back, and the genitals, and then often pitched over the edge of a precipice. We are now dropping on to the Jebel again, and once more there is a clanking of musketry as the Firqats shuffle towards the door of the chopper. As soon as it touches down they hop out and are gone.

OUR SECOND PORT-OF-CALL is a wadi-bed full of scorpions and camel spiders. These unattractive creatures inject you with a shot of pain-killer so that they can eat you alive undisturbed. But as they usually go into action at dead of night, we have nothing to fear at the moment.

There seems to be no Sheikh or Chief here. We settle down under a thorn tree, open up the medicine chest and wait. The helicopter disappears behind a rock. Soon a few women begin to trickle along. They are larger here, more deliberate, very assertive, almost arrogant. They demand medicine and treatment as a right, but one good thing in their favour is the absence of the dreaded feeding-bottle. Most of them are very handsome, with enormous kohl-lined eyes and full lips. None is veiled or masked, but some have lines of indigo blue running over the cheekbone from the nose to the ear-lobe. They look like large, exotic, brightly-coloured moths fluttering with orange, purple, emerald-green and buttercup-yellow veils and *abbas*, as they settle in a circle on the ground around us. The nose ring seems to be universally worn. Gold coins tinkle around their necks, and silver bangles filled with seeds jingle on their wrists and ankles. There are rings on their fingers and their toes, and even the left nostril of little girls is encrusted with silver flowers kept in place with a screw inside the nose. The boys have a pathway shaved right through the hair, going over the top of the skull from one ear to the other, with a cropped fringe in front, and a wild tangle hanging down the back.

As the medical orderly delves into his box, a young man comes loping along, holding his rifle by the business end like a walking stick. Dressed in a short skirt, with one end of it slung over his shoulder like a Greek shepherd of classical times, his long oily hair hangs in ringlets round his neck. His face is painted blue in zebra-stripes and a little tuft of wiry hair decorates his chin. Without a word he joins us, and sits cross-legged with his rifle across his knees. Our orderly addresses him with his usual cheerfulness, but the youth hangs his head, nods once or twice in an absent sort of way

and remains obstinately silent.

"Is he drugged?" I ask.

"No, no", says the orderly, "they don't go in for that around here."

"What's the matter with him then?"

"That's just the way he feels. They are not very friendly around here. Whatever you do, don't let them see your camera."

Perched on another hastily gathered stool of shell cases, I sit as still as a lizard fading into the background, but obviously not altogether successfully, as a boy of about ten begins to throw stones at me, watched impassively by his mother. After a while I pick up a stick and bat the stones away, and the thing turns into a game. The mother relaxes and asks if I have any boys. When she hears that I have three she instantly melts and all the women become very friendly. It seems to be as easy as that to make friends in these parts.

The atmosphere having now thawed considerably, the women forget about me and become engrossed in their own problems. Little shirts are lifted, and horrible sores exposed. I note that infant boys are not circumcised. This is done later, some time before the age of ten, by special tribesmen who specialise in the business. These Jebalis, although they are Muslims, are still very much influenced by witch-doctors; and many pre-Islamic rites and cults still survive.

The sores are largely caused by branding, which is still widely practised as a cure for almost any ailment from TB to snakebite. In the hands of a quack, this treatment can cause infinite suffering, turning to septic sores and gangrene. But when done by a true expert, and applied with judicious care, it is said to have the same effect as acupuncture (now so widely popular in London). When used on the correct spot, at the right depth, with proper regard for timing, it is reported by some to be beneficial, and should never turn septic. This is known as "*wasm*", and is common practice among the Bedu of the Empty Quarter as well.

Soon the usual calabash of warm milk is produced and handed round. But before I have time to indulge in my usual deception, the taciturn young man with the fixed stare surprisingly whisks out a glass which he fills to the brim and hands to me with a strict injunction to drink it down. As I comply under his stern gaze, the orderly remarks sympathetically, "It's all right here. They drop red hot stones into their milk, and it is perfectly sterilised. . ."

The young man hasn't finished with me yet, even though I have obediently swallowed his milk. Standing up, he orders me to follow him. I glance at the orderly who says, "Go with him! He wants to show you his house." And so off we go, with me stumbling after him over the rough stony ground of the wadi bed. Brilliant blue roller birds hop around in the camel-thorn bushes dotted about in the dry

stream, and heavy crows flop among them, looking for lizards and beetles. In the hot purple-blue of the sky, a bird of prey cruises in a wide circle on static wings, looking for dying things.

THE BANKS OF THE WADI are smothered in flowering white jasmine. I pick a sprig of the deliciously scented, thick waxy flowers, which is at once snatched away by my companion, who sticks it behind his ear. Still using his rifle as a walking-stick, he hops nimbly from stone to stone. Round a corner, behind an enormous rock, and shrouded in smoke, a cave suddenly opens up before us, with a wide flat ledge jutting out above it. The *adoo* (enemy), as my companion informs me, used to hang over it and shoot at the occupants inside the cave. And in the monsoon season a waterfall cascades over the edge, forming an impenetrable curtain through which nothing and nobody can pass, except for those inside who know the secret ways of their cave. Now it is sealed off by a screen of acrid smoke rising from a barrage of dung fires burning in a semi-circle round the entrance in guise of mosquito net. Behind this pall, on a bed of dung in one corner, lies an enormous Friesian cow, the only one I have seen on the Jebel. Strung along the rockface at various levels, reached by man-made steps cut in the stone, or its own natural formation, huddle a series of mud huts like a colony of large swallows' nests. My guide points out the homes of his brothers and his cousins. This appears to be a bachelors' dormitory. There are no women or children, no cooking pots or any other signs of domesticity of any kind.

He dives into one of the mud nests, through a tiny entrance hole; and I go in after him, followed by a very thin black cat on high stick legs, with a triangular skeleton head at the end of a long stalk of a neck. At first I can't make out at all why it is so light inside the hut. Then I realise that here at least we are out of the smokescreen of the cave, and moreover, the ceiling of the little hut is made of a loosely woven network of twigs through which pours every bit of light available in the cave.

On the floor is a brightly coloured plastic mat (from Bombay, my host informs me proudly). Down on to it we sink, sitting cross-legged side by side. He seems to be out of his trance. In his own home he is a different person.

From the kingpost a goatskin water bottle hangs, with a rifle lying at its foot, festooned with several bandoliers of cartridges. Apart from this there is absolutely nothing around at all. It is existence pared down to absolute essentials—water, and a gun.

Sitting in cosy silence, we beam at each other for I don't know how long. I seem to have sunk into a trance myself. Eventually becoming aware of this, I stir, and begin to crawl towards the doorhole. As he

follows, I pick my way through the prancing goats of the cave, the dung beetles and the smoke, and we scramble back to the clinic tree as the dust begins to rise beneath the approaching helicopter.

IN A GLADE OF young ghaif trees we find our next village. In this mud and twig commune like all others, goats no bigger than terriers, swarming everywhere, definitely predominate. The cows are herded inside a stable, made of sackcloth and branches—a few rice bags are strung between the fronds of an ancient ghaif tree. The communal kitchen is in another tree, from whose branches hang the pots and pans.

Settling down half-way between the two departments, the orderly opens up his box of tricks, which is instantly pillaged by half-a-dozen ravening goats. One of them deftly mouths a tube of Latycin, and before we can take action he has swallowed the whole thing. A large and beautiful butterfly settles on a bottle of aspirin, as a couple of plastic mats are hospitably unrolled for our benefit. Women in black *abbas* begin to arrive, followed by the usual platoon of toddlers. Pills are handed out. Each child bears away his own medicine, one of them chewing his on the spot, carton, wrapping and all. The mothers, who are all conferring together, seem quite unconcerned. A very old man, judging by the raddled state of his skin, exhibits a grey rash on the dark hide of his back. Another ancient warrior with a fearful scar across his chest which appears to have been stitched together with boot-laces, is telling the orderly his business and speaking for the women before they have a chance to utter.

"Any pictures here?" I whisper into the orderly's ear.

"Wait a minute, I will ask", he answers, and then addresses the chief, who is infuriated by the suggestion. He flings his arms about, shouts indignantly, protesting against such unmannerly intrusion. "Do point out that I haven't taken any", I urge the orderly. "I was only asking his permission. Of course I won't if he doesn't like it. . ." At this he simmers down at once, grins at me, and grabs a minute calf out of the stable. Carrying it tenderly, he strokes the little head, padding off to a ghaif tree a few yards away. There, still stroking and murmuring soothingly he slits the calf's throat, then slices the head right off. Blood spurts in a great gush, as I stare, horrified. He works with the right hand only (the left being exclusively consigned to other duties), all the toes of both feet and his powerful white teeth. The chief ties the hind legs together and hangs up the carcass on a branch; then, sinking his teeth into the gory neck stump with blood pouring into his mouth, he expertly pulls the little heifer's robe inside out like the vest off a child. With the carcass now hanging limp from the tree, he nicks choice bits of meat off here and there

which he pops, dripping with blood, into his mouth. Are we all going to have to eat it raw, I wonder with an apprehensive shudder. But no, much to my relief, a fire is being lit by the women.

Abdullah, the member of our party whose mother came from this tribe, strolls over to the butcher's corner to give a hand with the chopping-up. The guts are wrenched out, carefully squeezed of their loose green spinach-like contents, and stowed into a gory plastic bag, which will presumably return to Safalah with us on the chopper.

Meanwhile a cauldron of water has been placed on the fire. "They have to walk three miles for every drop of water", the orderly informs me.

"Why don't they camp nearer the well?" I ask, puzzled.

"The land around it probably belongs to another tribe, and anyway they like it up here. In time, the government will drill them their own well. That is one of the good things about the Jebel. Almost anywhere you dig there is water."

A tin tray is brought over, brimming with gory, tattered bits of veal, and splinters of hacked bone sticking out here and there. The whole lot is tipped into the cauldron, and soon it is all bubbling away, with grey scum milling around the surface. Last of all the chief throws in the choicest morsel, the liver of the beast, which sits on top quivering in the steam, untouched by the boiling water.

"It will be ready in twenty minutes", remarks the orderly. We sit in silent expectation, staring at the boiling pot. Now that I know I won't have to eat it raw, I quite look forward to this *blanquette de veau*, Jebel style. The pangs of hunger are clawing at my middle. We are lucky to have veal on the menu today. The Jebalis have very definite ideas about what can and can't be eaten. Lizard, as well as hyena (whose jaw muscles, like a trout's cheeks for us, are a delicacy) are much appreciated. But they won't touch eggs or chicken flesh, nor the meat of wolf, birds of prey, or fox.

Time is up, and the contents of the stewpot are hooked out with a stick and flicked into the waiting tin tray, still gory and caked with dried blisters of blood.

The chief, coming to squat beside me, skewers the raw liver with a twig and flips it into my hand. Overwhelmed by such generous hospitality, I manage somehow to persuade him to split it and have half himself. Stoically, I gulp down my share. It is like swallowing tepid jellyfish. The women have retired to another tree, and a child comes to collect the bones for them. We chew on, and the Chief continues to press delicate morsels, which he tears off the bone with his teeth, into my hand. It is infinitely touching, but I can swallow no more. In desperation, I suddenly remember my manners, and manage to produce an enormous belch to convince him that I have had enough, and have thoroughly enjoyed the feast. He is delighted, and

his belly quivers with mirth.

At last, a distant roar in the sky announces the chopper's return. We shake all the gory, greasy hands of our hosts, and double up with shrouded faces through the rising dust storm, towards our waiting transport.

OUR LAST CALL of the day is at the new school on the beach of Rakhyut, close to the Yemeni border. There on the white coral sands facing the blue immensity of the Indian Ocean, sits the little pre-fabricated school in which the clinic is now being held. This is one of the latest ventures installed in this deserted area by the Ministry of Education, and run by a dedicated Egyptian teacher.

Hastily, the benches are pushed against the walls, and the mothers, who seem to have been expecting us, troop in and squat on the floor, with their children draped around them.

The orderly kneels beside his medicine chest and begins to dole out his wares. There is such a crowd today that he can't manage to keep up the register; so, using an upturned plastic dustbin as his desk, and sitting on an empty ammunition box, with his revolver sticking out on his hip, Shaun writes down the name, diagnosis, and drugs handed out to each child. However busy the clinic may be, this record is always kept up-to-date.

A chorus of crying babies makes it difficult to hear anything at all. A young man of classical looks and distinction, in a spotless sand-coloured dishdasha, and an elegantly rolled Kashmir turban, is the self-appointed doctor's help. Patiently, he plucks the squalling infants from their mothers' arms, and holds them down with gentle firmness as the needle goes in. Four drops of whatever it takes on a piece of sugar immunises against polio. This is achieved without fuss or trouble, but injections are another story. One small girl aged about five puts up an appalling fight against her jab. The young man tries to grab her this way and that, but she is all teeth and claws, and he can't get a proper grip. The girl is quite hysterical, kicking and screaming, with bulging eyeballs. Any minute now she will begin to foam, and we will have a fit on our hands. Wisely, the men give up. The injection, administered in her present state, probably wouldn't do any good anyway. The mother, seeing they have dropped her, deals her a smart blow on the head. The girl gives another piercing yell, then stops abruptly to look around for the next mug who is going to let himself be stabbed by the doctor's needle.

The orderly is besieged by the mothers, who all know exactly what ails their children and inform him what they need (and it is usually aspirin, for anything from skin disease to TB). With infinite patience and good humour he deals with them all.

LETTERS

Ian Fleming or James Bond?

"I am here to tell you what they need—you are not the doctor", he says over and over again with a chuckle and a wink at the delighted giggling women.

"Diagnosis?" asks Shaun every time, pen poised in mid-air and surveying the bedlam with a mild eye, as the orderly squints at a tongue, feels a pulse, pulls down an eyelid and clamps the stethoscope to a narrow brown chest.

"How do you spell diarrhoea?" suddenly asks Shaun, peering from under his bright red hair and green *shemag* with a frown. As no suggestion is forthcoming, he bends over his dustbin again with a sigh. "Ah well, I guess that will do", he mutters as he scribbles on.

LITTLE BY LITTLE the mothers drift away with their whimpering infants, and suddenly they have all disappeared right out of sight in the bare landscape of sand and sea. Where have they all got to? No sign of Land-Rover or camel or donkey anywhere. They could all have been turned to stone at the wave of a wand. Just as the day's work seems to be over, and the orderly is packing up his box, a man suddenly appears on the scene, leaning on a biblical-looking staff twice as tall as himself. He has come a long way, and his beard is peppered with dust. His four children have all got measles, and his cave neighbour's brood are sure to get it too. He wants medicine for them all. Shaun is worried. The treatment is complicated. Several drugs are involved, and they *must* be administered in the right order. Patiently, the orderly explains the sequence, the dosage, and the nursing involved. The man listens intently as his arms fill up with bottles, powders, ointments. "God", groans Shaun aloud, "how can he ever remember all that?"

"Whatever is going to happen?" I ask, eyeing the awesome armful of drugs which the man is clutching to his chest.

"*Al Hamda' Lillah*, they will get better in spite of it all", he answers hopefully.

"*Insha' Allah*", I intone piously.

The helicopter is beating its wings and churning up the beach into an angry white cloud which engulfs us all. We run for it, and thankfully scramble aboard. The day's work is done.

Twenty minutes away the Holiday Inn is awaiting us with all its 20th-century comforts. It is a matter of straight from the caveman's world to the sophisticated life of Salalah, with its shops and offices, and ultra-modern television centre, its brand-new hospital equipped with all the latest medical equipment, its model experimental farm, and everything that goes with a vigorous, forward-looking, developing country which is fast catching up with all the blessings of education and technology, and all the more doubtful benefits of the modern way of life.

I WAS INTERESTED to see in your September issue a revival in the fascination of Cambridge dons for the serious analysis of the James Bond novels.

The last such offering was in 1972 when David Holbrook, admittedly then seven years on from King's, submitted the public to an 80-page analysis of *Goldfinger* in *The Masks of Hate*. With remarkable zeal he attributed Fleming's success to "the schizoid-paranoid phantasies which relieve the existential anxiety of the modern reader albeit in a false way." He argued forcefully that "Goldfinger is the internalised father's penis" and, somewhat surprisingly, that "Pussy Galore seems to have a penis too."

While continuing to take the Bond novels seriously, David Cannadine ignored the Holbrook theories, possibly through lack of respect or, I suspect, because he had been spared knowledge of them as they were not mentioned in my *Preliminary to a Fleming Bibliography*. For the latter reason he may not have read Fleming's article "How to Write a Thriller" in *Books and Bookmen* in May 1963 in which Fleming stated on successive pages "my opuscula do not aim at changing people or making them go out and do something" and "I take the reader by the throat and stuff him with great gobbets of what I consider *should* interest him." Fleming's analysts, therefore, cannot complain of any lack of room in which to manoeuvre.

In the same article Fleming describes how three strong incidents in *Casino Royale* are extracted from his War-time memories in Naval Intelligence, and adds "I think I could trace most of the central incidents in my books to some such real happenings as I have described. . . ." This is interesting in that Fleming's deep involvement in Intelligence could have continued to a lesser extent after the war. Richard Deacon points out in *A History of the British Secret Service* that Randolph Churchill, in discussing the Commander Crabbe affair, would hint in private at Fleming's involvement by references to "Frogman Ian Fleming." (Richard Deacon, who worked with Fleming at Kemsley Newspapers, states that at that time Fleming could not be traced at the Health Farm at which he alleged he was taking a cure.)

WHEN AN AUTHOR has this type of background it is not surprising that the Cannadine analysis of one aspect of the Bond novels should turn out to be "quite extraordinarily patriotic." The patriotic aspect is put into greater perspective by Lycurgus M. Starkey Jr. in a religious book entitled *James Bond, His World of Values* in which he writes "Fleming's novels may reflect the sentiments of modern man more than we realise. The one remaining 'ism' for which many are willing to fight and die is nationalism." The author goes on to quote Adlai Stevenson's address on being chosen "American Patriot of the Year" in 1963: "Our patriotism, our love of country, has to be a discrimination, not a blind force. All too often voices are raised in the name of some superpatriotism to still all criticism." It thus seems