

An account of drug running in the desert by the former Governor of Sinai.

Hashish Smuggling *in* Egypt

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EVERY nomad Arab of the Egyptian deserts is a potential smuggler of hashish and most of them possess exceedingly fast-trotting *nagas*, or she-camels, that can outstrip the Government animals; and it goes without saying that every member of the tribes is lock, stock and barrel with the contrabandists and not particularly helpful to the police. The commodity is light and easily transported, and a ten-pound load is all the Arab need carry to make a handsome profit.

The hashish which the inhabitants of the Nile Valley use is a product of hemp, and when manufactured provides a narcotic that, smoked in a pipe or drunk mixed with coffee, has both a stimulating and soporific effect. That is to say, the consumer experiences a feeling of well-being and all his cares and fatigue slip away, while the world for the time being seems a much brighter and more satisfactory place in which to live. The following morning there is, of course, the resulting 'hangover,' and the hashish head is of

a very much fatter and more painful variety than that provided by whisky or champagne, or even a mixture of the two.

Hashish in moderation did very little permanent harm, but heavy smokers became affected in time, the drug causing dullness and in extreme cases insanity, and so the Egyptian Government prohibited its import and use. One of the results was that in the years immediately after the War the 'white drugs,' cocaine, heroin, etc., were introduced into the country and immediately became most popular, so that an alarming proportion of the population became addicts. Every available device was employed by the smugglers, from the simple method of dropping a package from a ship's side into a waiting boat, to concealing the drug in ordinary merchandise and passing it through Customs. A particularly disgraceful episode was the arrest of a senior Consular official of a Great Power attempting to land at Alexandria with a despatch-case, nor-

mally immune from Customs inspection, which was found to be filled not with State papers but with packages of drugs.

The trade was finally stopped or reduced to quite reasonable proportions by the Commandant of the Cairo Police who, being charged with the task of dealing with the situation, did what no man had ever done before—he got up on his feet at Geneva and told the League of Nations the stark and lamentable truth. He said very plainly that certain countries, not addicted to white drugs themselves, were producing enormous quantities of heroin and cocaine and shipping them to smaller States regardless of the fact that they were utterly ruining the people of those States. He not only named those countries responsible, but he produced documentary and irrefutable evidence. It was all very painful and regrettable, for this Police Officer did not understand the correct technique to be observed at Geneva, where the rule is that the truth shall be so discreetly veiled and distorted that no one can recognize it. He was, however, quite unrepentant and irconcilable, and finally the delegates concerned at the League took such steps that further deplorable episodes were unnecessary, and the white drug traffic to all intents and purposes ceased.

II

There remained, however, the smuggling of hashish, and attempts to stop this are very much like amateurish efforts at damming a stream with earth—immediately one has stopped up one weak spot, the water breaks through in another place. It is quite impossible for Egypt with her lengthy

frontiers to maintain an entirely effective system of patrols on every length of coast or mile of desert where hashish might be run, and so there is a constant game of chess between the contrabandists and anti-contrabandists, the smugglers moving their knights and pawns to any open spaces on the Government's chess-board of defense, and the Police and Coast guards countering the moves by redistributing of their pieces.

When hashish is carried by sea it is usually placed in waterproof or rubber bags and each parcel is made fast to a small sack of salt. The reason for this is that if the boat carrying the drug should be chased by a coast guard cruiser or launch, the cargo is dropped overboard. The weight of the bag of salt will cause it to sink at once, but in two days' time, when the salt has dissolved in the water, the bags will rise to the surface again, to be picked up by the smugglers or their friends.

The most exciting smuggling episodes, however, occur in Sinai, where the contrabandists have to run the drug by camel across a hundred and fifty miles of desert, most of which is broken gravel and limestone plateau with thirty miles of sand dunes immediately bordering on the Suez Canal. The drug comes from Syria and is transported to Southern Palestine either by boat, motor-car or on camels or donkeys. The Palestinians as a race are not addicted to hashish and therefore the trade does not concern Palestine to any great extent. As the Egyptian Government is too shortsighted to pay the same rewards to the Palestine Police as it does to its own forces, there is really no reason why the authorities should exert

themselves very much over a contraband trade that does not actively harm their own country.

The organization concerned with hashish smuggling consists of three parties: the Big Men, or 'Drug Barons,' who provide the funds and reap most of the profits; the middlemen who organize the runs and engage the Arabs; and the ordinary Arab camel-men. The only people likely to be caught are the Arab smugglers, who may possibly be able to identify the middlemen later but who know nothing of the big financial powers at the head of affairs.

Some ten years ago the smugglers were in the habit of running the hashish across Sinai with armed parties of from ten to fifteen men. If a police patrol was met, it seldom consisted of more than three privates with a corporal in charge, and so eight smugglers would remain behind and keep up a sustained fire with rifles on the patrol while the remainder of the party hurried on toward the Canal, where the drug was buried till arrangements could be made to swim it across. One could hardly expect four men perched on camels and moving at a jog-trot across the open to advance very energetically through a hail of bullets fired at them by marksmen hiding behind rocks. The police were paid only £2 10s. a month and the reward for the capture of hashish was a miserable four shillings a kilo, the real value of which was in the neighborhood of £25.

III

Then the police force was reorganized and the majority of the men in the Peninsula were stationed so that when the alarm was rung up on the

telephone upward of eighty men could converge on the smugglers. The latter's secret service must have been at fault, or long immunity from serious attack had made them contemptuous of the police, for a run of sixteen camels with ten men started out from the Palestine frontier shortly after the new dispositions had been completed.

If the smugglers' contempt of the new grouping of the police was justified, their omission to acquaint themselves with another and more human factor affecting the *élan* of the anti-contrabandist forces showed a very surprising ignorance of human nature on their part. There happened to be several vacancies for non-commissioned officers and word went out that in making promotions the zeal shown in action against the smugglers would be taken into consideration. Moreover, the reward for hashish had been trebled and there was, in addition, a special grant of £10 for every man captured and £5 for his camel. This put an entirely different complexion on affairs and a policeman felt fully entitled to risk his life for three stripes and some £20 in cash.

The smugglers, all unconscious of the change in the situation, were met by a small patrol some twenty miles north of Kosseima and received the shock of their lives when four men charged their firing-line on racing camels, capturing two of their party and three heavily laden camels after a hand-to-hand fight. The remainder made off posthaste to the broken country north of Hellal Mountain, but word had gone forth by telephone that smugglers were on the move and their way to the Canal was barred. Wherever they emerged from the cover of the mountain gorges they saw

moving in the low desert either the black head-ropes and white shawls of the police or the khaki turbans of the Camel Corps, and the Camel Corps were Sudanese—not a match for the Arabs in brain or cunning, perhaps, but very redoubtable fighters armed with rifle and, unlike the police, with the bayonet, showing always a most regrettable desire to get to close quarters and use that bayonet.

All the members of this party of Arabs, with their load of hashish, were captured and brought into El Arish, where they were sentenced to long terms of imprisonment, manslaughter figuring on the charges as well as smuggling, and this put an effective end to all attempts to get hashish across Sinai by force of arms.

For some time after this the Sinai desert was singularly free from hashish running. It was partly due to the fact that Royalty was being entertained in the Province. Visits of the 'Great' in the special trains offer great opportunities, as on these occasions prying officials are usually so excited about the propinquity of Royalty that the customary close inspection of trains from Palestine is not carried out at Kantara, the Canal terminus. Though the officials of King Fuad's special train got away with a vast quantity of the smuggled drug, those of the Princess Royal of England and Lord Lloyd, the High Commissioner of Egypt, were not so lucky and their consignments were captured!

There was what one might call a dead silence in the smuggling world, and when there is a dead silence, one may be very certain that a new and easy route has been discovered. Information came of cars running from Amman in Transjordan to the village

of Aqaba on the gulf of that name, for no apparent reason, and it transpired that hashish was being shipped from Aqaba in boats and landed on the deserted shores on the Sinai side, where it was run through the deep gorges of the granite mountains to the Gulf of Suez, to be handed over to fishermen who transferred it to the western side. Here another party of Arabs ran it through the Red Sea mountains to the Nile Valley in the vicinity of Helouan.

The trade must have been very extensive, for as soon as the patrolling system was altered, a large capture was made by the Camel Corps in the desert east of Cairo and the Sinai police had a very exciting little fight on the Gulf of Suez.

IV

Later it was found that the Sinai Arabs were becoming what one might call 'dressy.' As a race they normally go barefoot except when trekking over rough granite or limestone mountains, when they wear homemade sandals of goatskin—precisely the footwear worn by the Patriarchs of the Old Testament. The Arabs of Northern Sinai, however, very seldom wear anything on their feet, as practically the whole of the area in which they move is soft sand or clay. When it was noticed that a large number of very innocent-looking nomads were crossing the ferry at Kantara on the Canal wearing smart Damascus-made sandals, people began to wonder. Examination disclosed that the soles of these sandals were not made of leather but of specially shaped slabs of hashish weighing about three quarters of a pound, which meant that for some time nearly every

Arab wearing shoes had been passing the Customs barrier with one and one-half pounds of the drug on his feet.

There was another period of ominous silence on the Sinai front, accompanied by a big drop in the price of the drug in Cairo. Then one day a highly delighted patrol of Sinai Police came into El Arish with a large drove of camels and tethered to each mounted patrolman were three Arabs with ropes around their necks. It appeared that a big drove of 'meat' camels consigned to the butchers of Cairo had passed the frontier as all correct, but at Sheikh Zowaid, twelve miles farther on, had met the police patrol which had ridden among the drove of camels to make certain there were no parcels of hashish hidden in their loads. One policeman, struck by the fine wool of one of the camels, had gripped a handful of hair by the hump and there had come away in his hand a slab of hashish! A hole in the thick wool had been carefully removed by hair clippers, on to the bare skin of the camel a slab of hashish had been affixed with glue, and on the outer side of the slab the hair had been attached by the same method, the patch being carefully combed over so that no outward signs were visible. Each camel in the drove was carrying six half-kilo slabs.

Nowadays the smuggling fraternity, until they discover some new and cunning device, are running the hashish by means of fast-trotting camels at night. By day the smuggler turns his camel loose to graze, while he himself, with his saddle and consignment of hashish, is hidden under a bush. As there are grazing camels over the greater part of Central Sinai, the idea is that the smuggler's animal will pass as one of the herd. Against this is the

fact that the Sinai Police all have an 'eye for a camel' and can detect the breedy blood-stock type used by the smugglers at a distance of a mile. If one of these animals is noticed, it is closely examined. If there are recent saddle-marks on the hump, a search of the surrounding bushes will disclose the presence of a very innocent and plausible gentleman sitting on a consignment of the drug.

At the local Agricultural Show which is held at El Arish every year I complained about the quality of the camels in the *Hageen* or fast-trotting class and said they were not up to the standard I expected. I was assured by a warrant officer of the police that if I would give my word to 'play the game,' all the leading smugglers of Sinai would be delighted to come in and show their camels in this class. In due course a foxy-looking Arab, who had served five years in the local prison for smuggling, was produced and, after being assured that no tricks would be played, he arranged for a marvelous entry of camels. It was most interesting to see the beautiful animals that were produced and still more interesting to meet their owners, many of whom were old friends, as they had 'done time' in the prison and probably would do so again in the near future. It struck me as distinctly Gilbertian at the prize-giving that many of the leading smugglers of Egypt came up and received a monetary reward for possessing animals used exclusively for law-breaking!

V

The only occasion on which a 'drug baron' was convicted for smuggling in Sinai was when a middleman was

arrested on the strength of his foot-prints being detected among those of a group of Arab smugglers. In due course the Effendi in question was arrested, and proved to be a well-to-do resident of El Arish who always seemed to be in funds although he had no visible means of existence. A senior Egyptian officer of the police ultimately obtained a full confession and also a promise to assist in the conviction of the real owners of the drug.

A letter was written by the middleman to his employer in Cairo stating—untruthfully—that although the majority of the hashish had been captured by the police, the smugglers had managed to bury about a hundred kilos, and asked for instructions as to how this was to be disposed of. This letter was smuggled out of prison in the ordinary way and was in due course delivered to the 'drug baron' in Cairo. He was a member of the Al Azhar mosque, a man of unblemished character and great sanctity, but he was also as artful as a fox and seldom if ever wrote a letter himself. Luckily for the anti-contrabandist forces, however, this scribbled note from El Arish prison appeared to be so absolutely genuine that he allowed his avarice to get the better of his caution. He wrote a reply upbraiding his henchman for losing so much of his hashish and gave minute instructions as to the disposal of the remainder. Three days later, as he sat in his accustomed seat at his favorite café, holding forth on religious observances, he was tapped on the shoulder and immediately surrounded by half a dozen armed police officers who hustled him into a waiting motor-car.

The incriminating letter was quite sufficient to obtain a conviction and he was given three years' imprisonment and a fine of £3,000. One had very little sympathy for the fat, oily creature, for though loyalty is the keynote of the smuggling fraternity and unhappy, impoverished Arabs who earn but a pound or two for a successful run will go to prison cheerfully for three years rather than turn King's evidence and earn a remission of their sentences, this wealthy drug merchant, who had been living on the trade for twenty years, willingly gave away the remainder of the gang on the promise of a slight reduction of his sentence. By this means six more leading lights of Cairo and Alexandria were arrested and sentenced to long terms of imprisonment and heavy fines, and for some time there was a definite shortage on the hashish market in the capital.

The trade in the drug, which started immediately the law prohibited its import some fifty years ago, will probably continue for all time unless the League of Nations can bring pressure to bear on the hashish-producing countries. It costs little or nothing to grow and will sell at from £30 to £60 a kilo in Cairo; so that with profits such as these obtainable there will always be contrabandists prepared to run a very small risk for a large sum, and the deserts will always provide the Arabs who will run a much greater risk for little more than a day's wage. They possess no property to be sold to pay a fine, and as to them time means nothing, a sentence of penal servitude holds no terrors and no sense of irremediable waste of life's short span.

Unusual glimpses of Soviet Russia, Provincial France and Nazi Germany make up this album of brief pieces.

Miscellany

I. LENIN TODAY

By A. T. CHOLERTON

From the *Daily Telegraph and Morning Post*, London Independent Conservative Daily

SINCE its great founder, Lenin, died in 1924, the Soviet régime has changed beyond belief. His International is now dead or dying. And yet in his polychrome granite tomb in the Red Square, Moscow, Lenin's mummy still 'lives' and quickens Stalinism.

In the last 13 years, 11,500,000 pilgrims have been checked through that vault, and their number ever grows. Day in, day out, during the past six months an average of 12,000 persons have queued for hours in all weathers to catch a glimpse of that tiny impressive body.

The police run them through fast, two abreast. Nobody spends more than 45 seconds walking around the glass-canopied bier. Lenin's Russian visitors are subjected—now that their rulers have convinced themselves that they have become the object of a permanent terrorist plot—to a scrutiny which would probably offend an English crowd: their wooden attaché-cases

are taken from them, their softer parcels squeezed for bombs. But, so far as I know, there has only been one outrage and that was ten years ago, when a mad mechanic attacked the corpse with a hammer.

Under the grimly beautiful Kremlin wall, the squat, massive mausoleum, built of immense polished blocks of dull-red granite and black and gray Labrador, dragged thousands of miles from the Urals and Karelia, speaks that language of State power which means so much to the Russian with his long history of semi-Asiatic despotism.

Crossing a small garden, you pass between expressionless Red Guards, watching there night and day: somehow you cannot imagine they are ever changed. Over the door the one word, Lenin; facing you, inside, the arms of the Soviet Union finely carved in black and gray.

The vault below, with its dark