Fouling the Sea

(By SIR WILLIAM BEACH THOMAS).

English naturalists have been long distressed at the pollution of the waters, especially in the southern harbors and estuaries, by floating oil. At last, after many bitter protests, the need for reform has been taken seriously by the shippers. Many things combined to show up the scandal. Dover harbor suddenly became an oil bath. The association of an easterly wind with a particular set of currents and, perhaps, an abnormal release of oil refuse filled the harbor with a foul, black substance that resembled tar in appearance, but was oil in nature. Enormous bonfires of it were lit, but to collect the stuff in a close-enough mass to consume it needed a deal of labor, even under the ideal conditions for such treatment provided round and about Dover in the last days of January. It is more than doubtful whether the device of burning oil can be adapted as a general cure, though the worse excesses can be thus checked, and the technique of burning may be improved. It is not at all improbable that a device may be perfected by which the refuse of tankers or naval ships or merchantmen—and they stand in that order as offenders—might be in a large measure consumed at the time when it is ejected.

Naturalists have been protesting, but even their protests have not gone far enough, and the omitted point has been disregarded by the shipowners. Indeed, no one has faced one danger that this casting of troubled oil upon peaceful waters may entail. Doubtless the birds come first. It is a sight pitiful beyond description when a guillemot—to quote a particular memory—swims by accident into a patch of oily waste. The first and most immediate effect is that of birdlime. The bird is unable to fly; and the more it struggles to clean itself, the more the prevading grease fouls the feathers. Birds so affected go through a long period of suffering and of fear, and, for the most part, die in the end either of starvation, or from the attacks of their enemies. The big black-backed gulls, the cruellest of all the birds, find many easy victims, and, as a rule, manage to escape the pollution themselves. Some sufferers are killed by internal trouble, due to swallowing the oil. In all cases where the oil kills—and the victims are to be reckoned by hundreds in each month of the year—it kills painfully and slowly. Cleanliness of their feathers is one of the passions of sea birds, and therefore, we may presume, foulness of their feathers gives them peculiar pain. On the most obvious humanitarian grounds it is a national obligation to find the remedy for this widespread cruelty, tarnishing one of the fairest coasts in the world. The "silver girdle" is no longer silver, nor our seas inviolate.

The birds are the worst sufferers and stir most pity; but the injury does not stop at the surface, nor only affect surface-swimming birds. The harm done by the oil does not cease when at last it "suffers a sea change," or, perhaps, I should say a sun change; and it is of the secondary wrong that no one has spoken.

What happens is that the oil and refuse—at any rate, the crude petroleum, and what is called Diesel oil—is slowly altered by a chemical process not yet completely investigated, and loses the first quality of oil. The pelic material becomes heavier than water and sinks to the bottom. Any one who wishes to test this, and feels sacrificial, has only to bathe, for example, in some of the once charming inlets of the Isle of Wight. Even if he manages to find a place apparently free from oil he will perceive on emerging that the soles of his feet are black. If it is low tide, he will be able to discover rocks of a hue quite unknown to geologists. They are thickly coated with the same black and sepia stuff that has fouled the soles of his feet. It has been sufficiently proved that this is waste oil after it has passed through a chemical, perhaps an oxidising, process. Cruelty to birds matters more than comfort to the bathers; but the second effect of this oil may in the sum of things be more disastrous than the first. The sunk deposit is probably cumulative. It grows thicker and thicker, and will in all likelihood kill both vegetable and animal life in the sea.

A particular enquiry into this has been pursued by that great lover of the sea and ships, as well as of wild life, Mr. de Vere Stacpoole. He has come to the decision that the oil which is supposed to have vanished—to have suffered a sea change, if not into something rich, at any rate into something harmless—is, in fact, a permanent and an increasing cause of trouble to the inhabitants, both temporary and permanent, to bathers and to fish. The bulk of evidence goes to show that some of the coarser fish can stand it, but the tenderer cannot. Probably they are not killed, except now and then, but they desert the place that has suffered the pollution. And this is what we should expect from experience with river fish. Road tar is, quite certainly, fatal to trout, directly as well as indirectly. It injures them and destroys their food. The dace, on the other hand, that bright, vigorous, but incredibly bony fish common to such rivers as the Lea, appears to be quite unaffected. They multiply and grow to rather unusual size in places where every trout has been killed.

The whole question needs scientific study by well-qualified chemists as well as by biologists. How long does the oil last in the form of oil on the surface? What change does it undergo by evaporation, oxidisation, or what not? What happens to the polluted water behind, and what influences does it exert on the bed of the sea and its denizens?

But for all this we must wait awhile; and the first duty is to take immediate action to prevent the most obvious effects. The oil kills and maims the birds and contaminates the seashore. It is unpleasant even to boat on some of the estuaries. The Dart, for example, is sometimes an archipelago or iridescent colonies of islands of foul oil floating down the river and up with the tide—only less disagreeable to those that boat than to the thousands of herring gulls that frequent that lovely coast. But if the order were obeyed, as it certainly is not, it is no defence to compel ships to get rid of their refuse outside the three-mile limit. The oil may still make its way to the coast within twenty-four hours. Even if the currents were not strong, wind would drive this surface stuff quickly, and the prevailing wind, as well as the set of the Channel, steadily narrows from west to east, drives the worst of it on to the south coast.

Some one called the sea "the cement of Empire." It is more than that. It is the cement of civilization. It binds the nations together. To keep the sea clean is, therefore, an international obligation, though the British Empire has stronger reasons than others to take the initiative. But it is not easy. Tanks must be cleaned and rubbish must be shot. The menace of oil is increasing, especially in mercantile and naval ships, it is alleged, though not proved, are on the whole more responsible than mercantile. A complete remedy may take years to discover, but the offence can be at once mitigated at once.

A Committee of the Chamber of Shipping and the Liverpool Steamship Shippers' Association have come to the conclusion that the fouler oil the last ought not to be shot nearer than 150 miles from the coast; and such regulation is an urgent immediate obligation. It should be taken by international co-operation—Q seas.

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