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Aden: A British Port.

By Arthur Stanley Riggs, F. R. G. S.,
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On the road to Mandalay, Where the flyin' fishes play," there is a grim, fire-warped rock towering above the sparkling sapphire of the Arabian Sea—a nollow rock within which, where the fires of Sheol once flickered and the demons of the underworld belched forth their sticky streams of molten stone, live a handful of puny humans. And at the foot of the peak that was a volcano is a little islet called Sira, where was once the entrance to Sheol the terrible, according to tradition whereof the memory of mankind runneth not to the contrary.

It is Aden, the age-old city of traders who once again populated the spot where before the fall, man-made fable places the Garden of Eden. But Adam sinned; the angel with the flaming sword descended upon the spot; the Creator withdrew his bounty; and the Devil was granted permission to smite the earthly paradise with the red fury of his wrath. Floral beauty turned to the desolation of lava; life and happiness turned to sullen, silent ruin, devoid of life and beauty alike. How long ago that was no one knows, nor how long it remained so. Who saw it first as the meeting-point of East and West? Who first dared encamp upon the red floor of that mighty crater and play go-between with white and black?

Ezekiel tells of "the men of Dedan" who traded to Tyre in the days of her glory, and many another ancient historian has found in its marvellous desolate grandeur an inspiration, while the first Roman Emperor to embrace Christianity, Constantine the Good, found it a city large and important enough to make it worth his while to send in 342 A.D. to establish Christian mission churches among the benighted heathen who formed its purely commercial population. Later, in the Eleventh, Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries, Aden was still carrying on a trade of vast proportions with Egypt, India and China. Naturally this character made it the coveted prize of every trading nation of the world of that day, and the struggle to hold it involved one after the other—Turk, Arab, Egyptian, Persian, Abyssinian and Portuguese. Indeed, not until England, in 1839, exerted her mighty arm, did the conflict cease, and peace came once more to the peninsula so long troubled. To-day the city is still the point where East meets West, a vast coaling port, a center of cable communication, a mighty fortress for peace.

Aden lies at the extreme end of Arabia, just to the southeast of the Red Sea, and is the most important city of Yemen Province, numbering nearly 20,000 population now. Ancient fortifications, which probably date from about 600 B. C., zig-zag up and down over the foothills of the volcanic crater in the most utterly impossible fashion, guarding the two towns of Aden still to a considerable degree, and bearing upon their scarred faces the marks of many a desperate battle fought in other days between the citizens and the covetous aggressors.

The city itself is double. One part—the one the casual traveller sees—lies on the shore of the harbor at what is called Steamer Point, shadowed by the towering mass of Jeb el Shum-Shum. This settlement is as nondescript as any to be found anywhere in the world—a conglomeration of white men, Somalis with their crinkly black hair artistically done up with mud curls, shorter, more intelligent looking Arabs, villainous half-breeds of unknown seas and occupations, and the merchant population, busy about its coal yards and trading stations, cable offices and soldiering. Italian salt-makers flank the shimmering harbor with their glittering piles of snowy crystals. Arab boat-builders chip away along the shore at their clumsy-looking buggaloos, or sail lazily to and fro without apparent interest or destination. Tommy Atkins in British red wanders forlornly about, pipe in mouth and swagger-stick in hand, not knowing exactly what to do with himself off duty, and the tourists come ashore for two or three hours from a visiting steamer in for coal, race to the curiosity shops, marvel at the camel and donkey trains of forage and brushwood, chatter about the "awful hole" they find it all to be, and tumble back

on board the leviathan again, satisfied that they have seen Aden.

But they have seen the least of it only. Leaving the straggling settlement along Steamer Point, and driving in a very rickety barouche pulled by a stocky little Arab, we wind up the snaky road along the outer side of the volcano, past Quarantine Island, on through Hedjuff Pass, and so down into the glaring bottom of the crater where the old white, yellow and faded blue city of Aden radiates waves of heat. Imagine if you can, you who have never been far from a parlor car or a vegetable garden, a spot so desolate that not a green thing grows for even animal food, where there is no rain except at long intervals of years, where the temperature rises almost daily to 130 degrees Fahrenheit in the afternoon, and where the very chickens you eat—when you can get them at all—come from far up in Arabia, or across from Africa, where your grain comes from India, your flour from Trieste, your oranges from Egypt, and your limes from distant Zanzibar! So Aden still carries on an enormous trade. In fact, it is the one city I know of into which every commodity except ostrich feathers must be imported.

The Adenites, however, do not much mind the importations of food. Their greatest difficulty and most precious thing is water—the blessed water that cools the throat parched with the toil of the hands in the blazing, scorching, stupefying sun; the water that alleviates the misery of fever; the water that is necessary for sanitary and domestic uses. When I was in Aden in 1904, there had been no rain for seven years! The barren rock was literally as dry as dust—the hot siroccos swept it up in eddying tumults of pulverized stone that bit the eyes and nostrils. Water there is, of course, supplied by the Government condensers, at so much the gallon.

It is only in comparatively recent times, however, that distilled water has been supplied to the thirsty citizens. Before England took possession of the city in 1839, at the cannon's mouth, the Adenites were hard put for water, as that which flows in ten miles from the Arabian hills through the ancient and now almost ruinous aqueduct, is very brackish and really unfit for drinking, though usable for other purposes. Only seventy miles away, and clearly visible from the top of Mt. Shum-Shum in clear weather, are the highlands of Yemen Province, 6,000 feet above sea level, but so far no means had been found to utilize their abundant water supply for the desiccated town by the sea.

Long ago, in those dim ages of which tradition is our only historical record, and when the rainfall was presumably greater than it is now, some engineer worthy of this Twentieth Century, devised a system for providing the city with water which still endures, and is still used when enough rain falls to make it worth while.

Passing rapidly by the camel market, where a hundred complaining beasts are chewing their mournful cud and waiting for buyers or loads, we ignore the clamorous peddlers of ostrich feathers and boas, and go straight on to the farther edge of the town. There before us lie the marvellous Tanks, or artificial reservoirs, built in a cleft in the side of the crater. Aside from the Pyramids themselves, nothing on the long journey from the Gate of the West at Gibraltar, to the very end of the East, is so purely a work of wonder as these reservoirs, of which originally there were fifty or more. Tradition has it that they are the work of a Persian engineer, and date from the second Persian invasion of Arabia, about 600 B. C.

With a skill wonderful even now, the engineer took advantage of every irregularity in the schistose rock of lava, throwing out a salient angle-wall here, a re-entrant one there, utilizing every jutting spur or wave of the rock until he had constructed an elaborate and ingenious system of wholly irregular cisterns, so arranged that the uppermost filled first, overflowed into the one next below, and so on in regular course, until all the Tanks were full. As there is no soil on the sides of the crater, the slightest rainfall sends down a torrent which, meeting the low walls of these masonry dykes and angles, is turned by them and deflected into the reservoirs. Nothing soaks into the rock and is lost;

few, if any, impurities are swept down into the tiny lakes below, for where there is a bare rock uninhabited by either vegetable or animal life, what impurities can exist?

However, it is not nearly so much the ingenuity displayed in constructing the Tanks and walls that is remarkable, as it is the marvellous enamel-like cement with which they are faced, and lined. Soft enough to be easily scratched with a lead-pencil—as the names of enumerable thousands of visiting barbarians of every nationality attest—it is durable enough to have withstood the action of centuries of rains and floods, and burial for other centuries under debris of the roughest sort. And withal, its color is so soft a tone, so delicate a shade of old ivory, veined with amber where it has been cracked, that it shimmers in the glaring sunlight in gentle relief against the red and brown and gray-green of the rocks surrounding. No one has ever discovered the secret process of its composition. The British engineers submitted samples, so I was informed, to various analysts all over the world—in vain. Like the pottery secret of the Robbias of Florence, the cement of the old Persians died with them, and the world is distinctly poorer for the loss.

The first English account we have of the Tanks, written in 1809, by a British army officer, speaks of them as "fine remains of ancient splendor which serve to cast a deeper desolation over the scene." With neglect and conquest, they were long uncared for, and when the British captured Aden, they had practically disappeared. Twenty years later, however, the Government recognized their exceedingly practical value and interest to the world, and undertook their restoration. Hundreds of tons of the accretions of the centuries had to be removed, and the ravages of the Arabs repaired. For years, whenever a stone coping appeared above the level of the surrounding waste, the ingenious and lazy Arabs pried it to pieces and built their houses of the carefully-hewn stones; and to-day many a squalid, filthy native den in Aden is built entirely of the massive blocks which formed part of either Tanks or curb-walls that originally conserved the city's precarious water supply.

Notwithstanding the enormous difficulties and expense, England persevered, and after spending eighteen years, and more than \$180,000, thirteen of the most picturesque of the Tanks were restored to usable condition, capable of containing about thirty million imperial, or thirty-six million American, gallons. Three of these Tanks measure each more than eighty feet in width, and a hundred in depth. These thirteen are the ones highest up in the cleft side of the crater, at the rim of which stands a grim Parsee Temple of Silence, always with an expectant vulture or two poised upon it, hungrily waiting.

But though the Tanks are beautiful by day, they are ethereally lovely by moonlight—a great pallid silver vein up the ugly black side of the burnt-out chimney of Sheol, crowned by the ghastly, appropriate Temple of Silence and its foul birds. The great unwinking Asiatic moon, expressionless as the Sphinx herself, fills the empty reservoirs with the memory of their tragic days. For in the years when Aden drank the Tank-water, the authorities sold it to the highest bidder, who retailed it to his fellow townsmen. Every drop was his—until the next shower fell, when the contract was ended, and a new bidder came forward.

Standing here at gaze centuries later, the story unfolds itself again in the time-banishing spell of the moonlight—the first drops of rain spatter heavily down upon the everlasting bare rocks; the torrent gushes down the wild steep, filling Tank after Tank to overflowing; the lucky contractor is joyful, as the rain ceases and moon and sun alternately beam upon his treasure trove; the citizens come with their skins and buckets to buy the precious fluid. We see it all in this magic moonshine.

And then the tragedy. Once more the skies darken and the winds blow and the rain descends—before the contractor can realize upon his investment. And black ruin creeps up out of the frothing waters in these Tanks above Sheol to stare him maddeningly in the face!

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