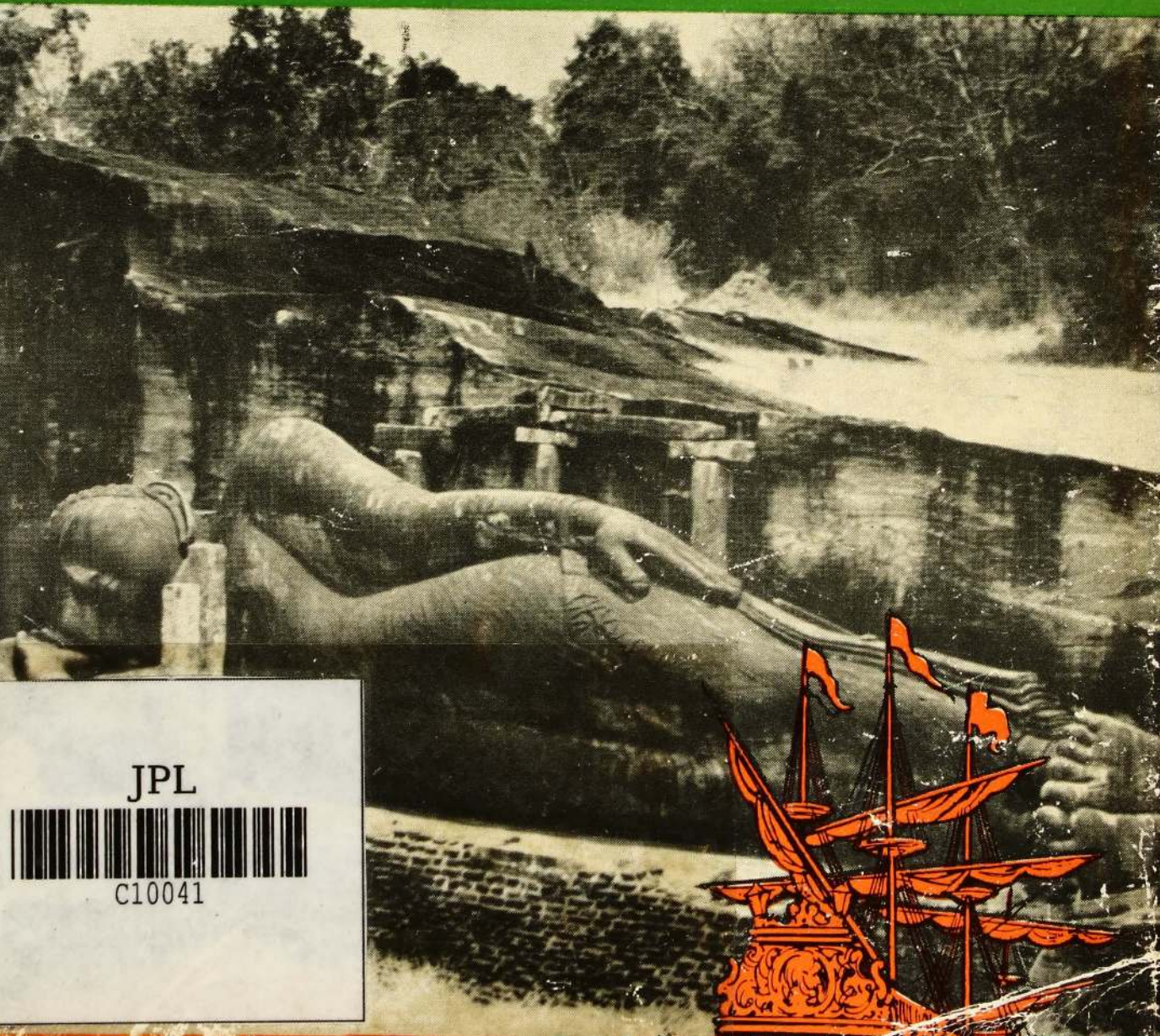


ADVENTURES IN GEOGRAPHY SERIES

With Robert Knox in

CEYLON



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by **HARRY WILLIAMS**

Illustrated with Photographs and Drawings

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WITH ROBERT KNOX IN CEYLON

Robert Knox, who served Daniel Defoe for his hero in *Robinson Crusoe*, was probably the world's most reluctant explorer; yet he revealed to the western world, which in the seventeenth century knew nothing of the mysterious island of Ceylon, almost every geographical and botanical fact and a good deal of the strange history of that beautiful country. He did so over a hundred years before the British finally conquered it.

Captured by the fanatical Sinhalese King, the half-mad Raja Singha, Knox lived for twenty years in the mountain stronghold of that extraordinary monarch. Only along the western borders of Ceylon could white men—first Portugese, and then Dutch—obtain a footing. Raja Singha and his fierce 'highlanders' ambushed and murdered, or made captive, any white men who attempted to find their way into the interior. If captured, they were taken into the terrible stronghold of Kandy from which no man escaped until Robert Knox and his "Man Friday", Stephen Rutland, made their perilous trek through the jungle.

(continued on back flap)

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Death by strangulation, by poison, by the stake, or by being pulled to pieces by elephants was commonplace among the wretched prisoners, but for twenty years Knox avoided it, setting himself up as a merchant, and roaming all over the island. He noted every detail of the island life, and made a map (see p. 19) which remains broadly accurate to this day, although drawn by hand over a century before any official map was made.

This is a terrible and exciting story, perhaps unparalleled in the history of exploration.

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Adventures in Geography Series

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WITH ROBERT KNOX IN
CEYLON

by
HARRY WILLIAMS



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To
JENNIFER MARY

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9/5, 489

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I

The Englishmen's Tree

10041 C.C



THAT Robert Knox was, perhaps, the most reluctant explorer in history may be put down to the fact that he explored from necessity, and not from inclination.

As a boy he longed for a life at sea, and at the age of fourteen he attained his ambition and became a sailor, much against his parents' wishes. His first voyage was uneventful, but on his second, when he was barely nineteen the frigate *Anne* of which his father, also named Robert, was the Captain, was

dismasted in a hurricane while at anchor at Fort St. George, Masulipatam, in southern India. The Agent at the fort instructed the ship to proceed to the bay of Cottiar on the east coast of Ceylon for remasting, because southern India is a treeless land while the forests around Cottiar were known to possess magnificent timber. From this simple misfortune sprang the long captivity and martyrdom of the young Robert Knox.

While ashore in Ceylon, the Captain of the *Anne*, with his son and sixteen of the crew, were captured by the Sinhalese, as the people of Ceylon are called. Two of the men were allowed to return to the ship for reasons which will be apparent later, but the rest were taken away into the unknown interior of the island. Here Captain Knox soon died, but young Robert spent nineteen and a half years in captivity. Most of his companions remained for the rest of their lives in the island, for although it was a prison without confinement and one in which hardly any restrictions were imposed, escape was considered impossible. White men had been captured along these coasts for years and taken to the mountains, and none of them had got away from their Kandyan prison, but Robert Knox never abandoned hope of doing so. When, at last, he made his escape, it seemed to him that the best part of his life had been wasted, yet from the point of view of posterity, he turned his long ordeal to good account. His wanderings through the island provided one of the most exhaustive and astonishing feats of exploration known.

Ceylon is situated at the foot of the sub-peninsula of India, approximately five degrees north of the

equator. There is a shallow stretch of sea, less than forty miles across, known as the Palk Strait, dividing it from its huge northern neighbour. From Point Palmyrah in the extreme north to Dondra Head in the south the island is 271 miles long and 138 miles across its widest part, which is from Colombo in the west to Sagamankande in the east. It is pearl-shaped, fat in the south and tapering away to the north with a mean width of almost exactly one hundred miles, so that no part of it is more than sixty miles from the sea. With a land area of only 25,352 square miles it is not much more than one-quarter the size of the United Kingdom, and that so small a country should have been largely unexplored more than one hundred and fifty years after its discovery by a European power needs explanation.

The Portuguese were the first white people to land in the island. They did so in 1505, but it was not until 1515 that they returned in force with the intention of colonizing it. They began by setting up a trading post at Kalumbu, an ancient settlement at the mouth of the Kelani river. A small harbour had been built there by the Moors, a race of Arab seamen whose origins are obscure, but the settlement itself, and the headland which lends its protection to the old harbour, had been known for centuries before the arrival of the Moors. Ptolemy, the famous Egyptian cartographer, shows it on his map of the world drawn in the first half of the second century A.D.

The name Kalumbu was altered immediately to Colombo by the Portuguese, in honour of Cristoforo Colombo whom the English knew as Christopher Columbus. So it has remained, and its development during the last seventy years has been swift. It is now

famous as the Clapham Junction of the East, and is one of the largest entrepôt, or distributing, ports in the world.

The Portuguese conquered less than a quarter of their new discovery simply because the Sinhalese people were not the ignorant savages they believed them to be. They were at a very low ebb of their national fortunes, but they were not savages. On the contrary, they were a proud race, the survivors of what, at one time, had been the most advanced civilization in the eastern world. Their spirit was too high to be cowed into subjection by brutality, and although some of the Portuguese leaders were educated and civilized men, prepared to treat their new subjects with consideration, the same can not be said of the majority of their sailors and soldiers, most of whom had been recruited from the slums of Lisbon. In their own way they were deeply religious men, but they were often ferociously cruel, and managed to provoke from the Sinhalese, disunited though they were, a resistance which they were never able to overcome.

The so-called maritime provinces of those days consisted of the entire west coast of Ceylon from the Jaffna peninsula in the north to the Point of Galle in the south. They were flat and, particularly in the south-west, well watered, and there the white men, with their disciplined forces armed with muskets and cannon, met with little resistance. The islanders were no match for them in pitched battles. They had no fire-arms, and bows and arrows, spears and swords, were useless in a straight fight. Consequently the whole of that coastal strip running the entire length of Ceylon had been fully explored and mapped in

some detail long before Knox's ship, the *Anne*, dropped anchor in the bay of Cottiar. But guerrilla warfare, particularly from the beautiful, densely forested, precipitous and trackless mountain core of the island was another matter. There the white invaders were at a hopeless disadvantage, and as de Couto, the Portuguese historian, was quick to see, from his country's point of view the struggle there was a running sore, "wasting her (Portuguese) forces and her artillery, and causing a greater outlay of money for the government of that single island than all her other conquests of the East". The Portuguese never succeeded in obtaining even a foothold in the mountains or in the drought-stricken central and eastern lowlands. Three-quarters of the island was completely unknown, and had remained so all through the one hundred and fifty years of Portuguese occupation.

Only two years before the arrival of the *Anne* the Portuguese, bled almost to death by the fierce resistance movement centred on Kandy, had been able to offer little fight when challenged by another white race, the Dutch. They were defeated and thrown out of the island and, in the process, the Sinhalese king of whom Robert Knox was to learn so much in the coming years, did all in his power to help the Hollanders. His name was Raja Singha the Second, a name which means the Lion King, and this terrible, sadistic and half-mad creature was not even of royal birth. But whatever his background there was no doubt of his fiery patriotism, and it is impossible not to sympathize with him, monster though he became, in his efforts to rid his country of the white men.

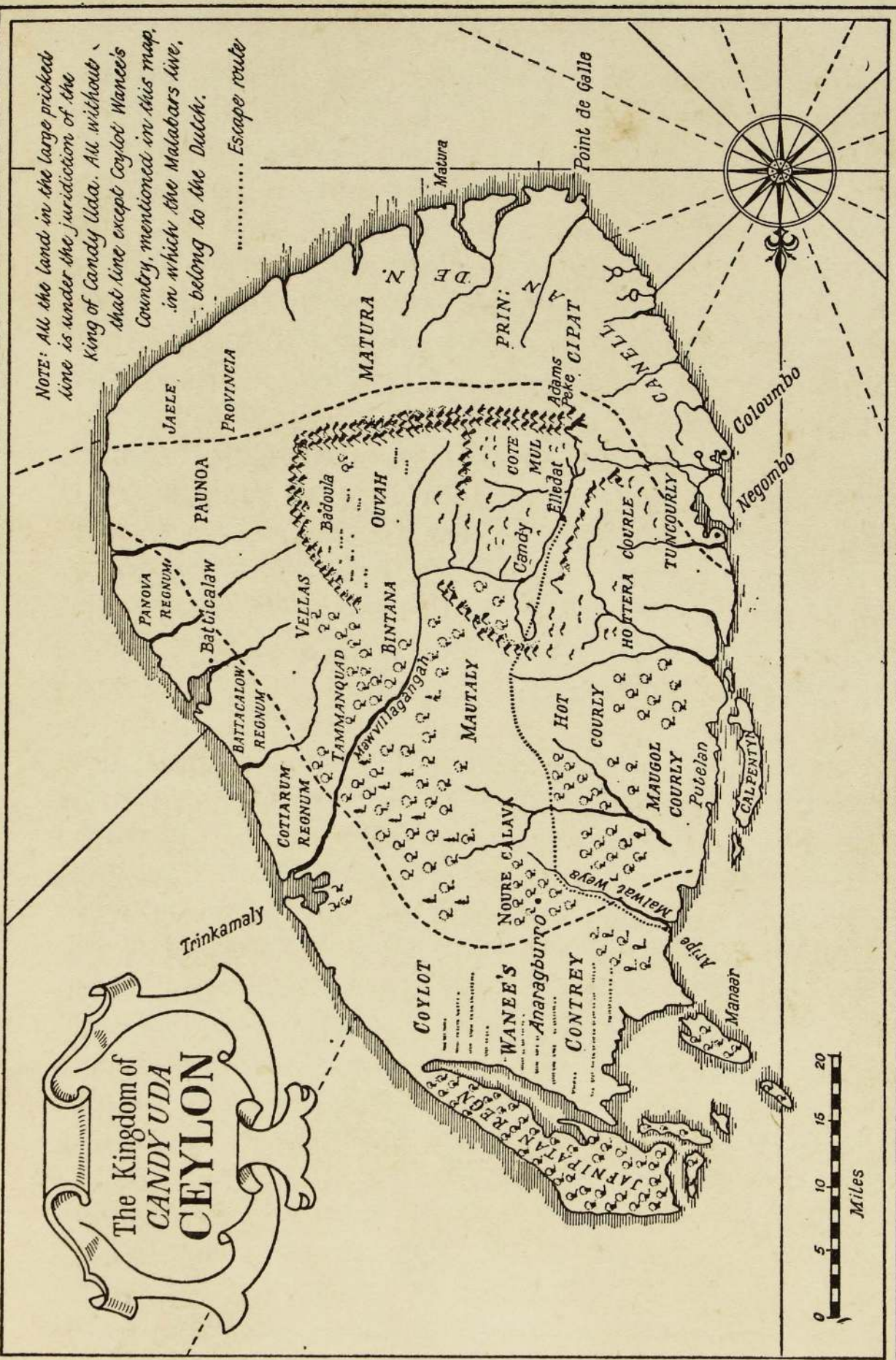
Raja Singha had welcomed the Dutch on the understanding that, when they had defeated the Portuguese, they would establish a few trading posts and then go home. If they ever made such a promise, they broke their word, and the Sinhalese king discovered that the placid Hollanders were as bad, or worse, than the first cruel conquerors of the west coast. Nothing he could do provoked them, for their policy was to "turn the other cheek" to insults, armed attacks, broken treaties and even to the constant capture and imprisonment of their nationals. Though they paid the king false compliments and flattered him at every opportunity, they never gave up an inch of ground unless it was taken from them by force. As Robert Knox wrote in his journal, "They prevail to have the country, and he (Raja Singha) to have the honour", and yet, once again as with the Portuguese, the Sinhalese guerrillas from their impenetrable mountain fastnesses, tied down their new enemies to the western coasts. As far as geographical knowledge of the island was concerned it continued to be confined to small areas round the various west coast forts built by the Dutch, and a somewhat larger area round Colombo. From these bridge-heads the Dutch strayed at their peril, and even within them they were never safe. Of the northern and central plains, the vast horse-shoe of mountains which covers nearly one-fifth of the entire island, and the jungles of the eastern and south-eastern provinces nothing at all was known.

Nothing would have been known of them for yet another hundred and fifty years—when the British solved the problem of the resistance movement by honeycombing the mountains with roads—but for

NOTE: All the land in the large pricked line is under the jurisdiction of the King of Candy Uda. All without that line except Coylot's Wanees's Country, mentioned in this map, in which the Malabars live, belong to the Dutch.

..... Escape route

The Kingdom of
CANDY UDA
CEYLON



Robert Knox's "New Map of Ceylon" circa 1681 (simplified)

Raja Singha's curious hobby, surely unique in history. This was to collect white men and keep them in captivity as white men collect menageries. Whenever he could capture them, no matter what their nationality or rank, he brought them to live in his Kandyan stronghold, and once there, escape was thought to be out of the question—we shall see why later on in this book. Many of these unfortunate captives reached high rank at the infamous Kandyan Court, but they never again saw their native countries and, once out of royal favour—and the king's whims were unpredictable—they seldom survived. Until Robert Knox succeeded in doing so, not one escaped to inform the world of the west—or what is more curious to inform the Dutch forces some of whom were not more than thirty miles away—of what went on in unknown Ceylon.

While she was having her new mast stepped, the *Anne* was anchored in Cottiar Bay about ten miles from the mouth of the Mahavelliganga, Ceylon's longest river. Occasionally a longboat from the ship would enter the river mouth for fresh water, and every day members of the ship's company rowed ashore to trade with the villagers. At first they were very cautious, but the local Sinhalese were kindly people, poor, but happy and good-natured, and the white men's suspicion soon disappeared. Treachery from such artless folk seemed impossible, but what Captain Knox did not realize was that these jungle people were lowlanders, very different from the Kandyans, the men of the mountains. They were completely under the thumb of their more vigorous brothers in the hills, and gave blind obedience to a

king none of them had ever seen, as the Englishmen were soon to discover.

For three weeks the crew of the frigate went ashore at will. To them this sunny, tropical island seemed a paradise after the discomfort of being cooped up in the fo'c'sle of a tiny Cromwellian ship, and who can blame them? They are not the first men to have considered Ceylon an earthly paradise. Writing of the Fall of Man some hundreds of years previously, an anonymous author had said: "Adam, with the assistance of Gabriel, fetched her (Eve) to Ceylon as being, in his opinion, the best substitute for Paradise"; and Paradise Island is one of the many names by which Ceylon has been known during the centuries.

Certainly the beautiful land-locked bay of Cottiar and Tamblegam, with the superb natural harbour of Trincomalee at its northern end, must have seemed to the Knoxes and their men just about the loveliest and most fascinating place they had ever visited. Two hundred and fifty years later a great English explorer, Colonel Fawcett,* acquired his life-long interest in the jungle and its peoples in this very locality, and many modern travellers, who have seen a good deal of the earth's surface, find themselves in agreement with the crew of the *Anne*.

Behind the indented coastline, the jungle crowded down to the beaches, forests filled with magnificent trees and thick with game of all kinds. Pleasant islands stood up here and there from the surface of the bay, and to the north rose the rocky headlands—later known as Dutch Point and Fort Frederick—

* See *With Colonel Fawcett in the Amazon Basin* by Harry Williams, in this series.

which guard the approaches to Trincomalee, one of the world's most perfect natural harbours.

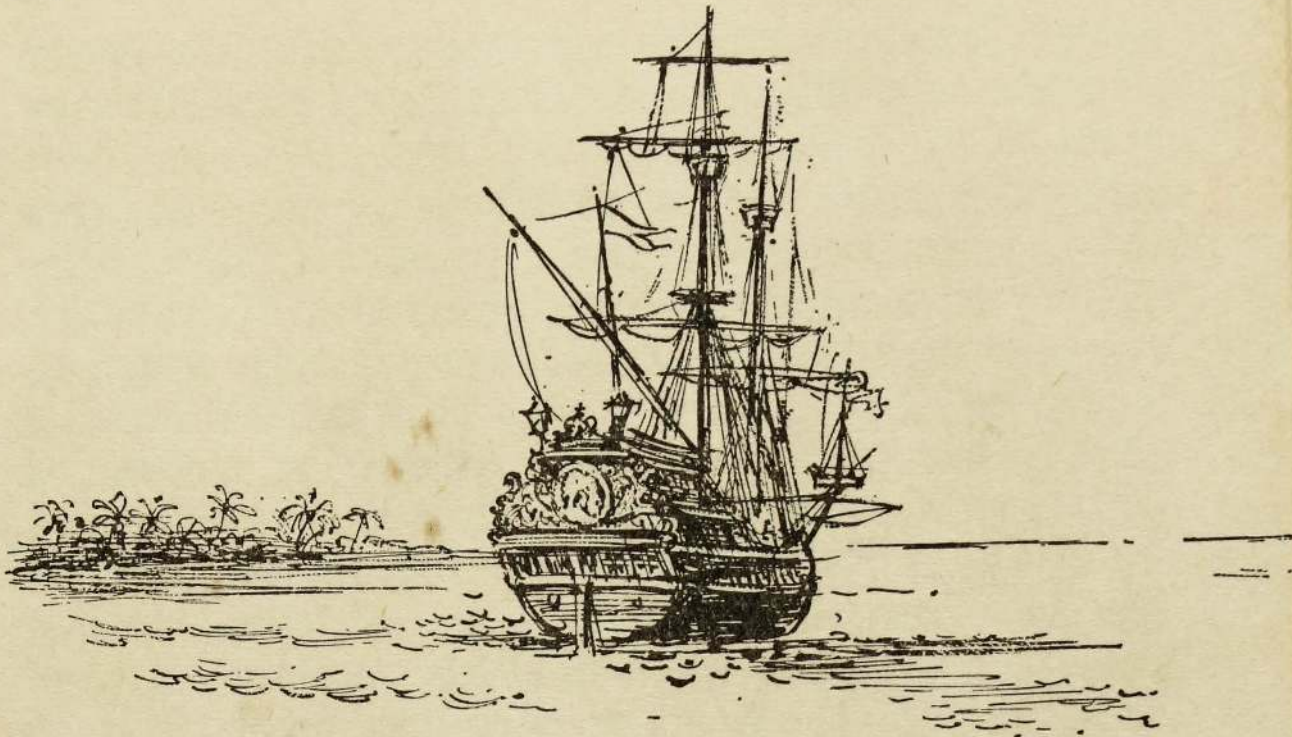
To the *Anne's* crew the days followed one another in a sunny procession. Except at the village of Cottiar, on the southern sweep of the bay, there were no inhabitants in that forgotten Eden, and none of the crew was in a hurry to leave. Far away in the mysterious interior they could see the jagged outline of mountains, perpetually shimmering in the blue heat-haze of distance, and separated from them by eighty miles of trackless forest; but they were not interested in mountains. The only mountaineering they attempted was to climb Swahmi Rock, overlooking Trincomalee harbour. The word "Swahmi" is the Tamil for "god", and this particular cliff is astonishing, a sheer wall of rock rising four hundred feet out of the waters of the Bay of Bengal. The sailors from the *Anne* must have wondered at the abandoned ruins they found on the top which were, in fact, all that the Portuguese had left of a magnificent Hindu place of worship known as the Temple of the Thousand Columns. During one of their sea raids in 1622, the Portuguese had razed it to the ground, and to this day the desecrated site—the temple was built more than two thousand years ago—is visited in pilgrimage by tens of thousands of worshippers from Malaya, India and Ceylon every year.

Captain Knox and his men lived in happy and lazy indifference to the passing of time. What did time matter? When the news of his capture, with fifteen of his men, became known in England, he was severely blamed for those halcyon days. The crew were accused of lotus-eating, which means dreaming away their lives in complete idleness, and of having

found Ceylon "a sailor's paradise or Fiddler's Green after the hard life of the fo'c'sle". And certainly they seemed to have abandoned even common-sense safety measures, for none of them bothered to carry arms. In extenuation of this carelessness, there is the slightly mysterious fact that one member of the ship's company had visited Cottiar on a previous occasion. This was John Burford, who had landed there in 1648 and stayed many days, describing Cottiar as "a Christian town" and saying that he had wandered as many as thirty miles into the forests without trouble. The ship from which he landed is not known, but sailing-ships of many nations, in those days, were in the habit of anchoring in the Bay of Cottiar in preference to the harbour of Trincomalee with its difficult entrance. John Burford's ship had not been molested, but John Knox was to discover that others had not been so fortunate. There were white sailors from ships of many nationalities in Raja Singha's "human menagerie" in the Kandyan hills.

The old king, lurking like some human spider in his mountain web, was sensitive to the arrival of strangers along his coasts, and knew all about the arrival of the *Anne*. His system of spies was unrivalled, and nothing that happened anywhere within his boundaries was unreported. The villagers of Cottiar may have abhorred the cruelty of the old monarch's reign, but they lived in terror of him. It is obvious that one of them slipped away as in duty bound to convey the news of the frigate's arrival to Kandy.

The king took prompt steps to capture it and its company. He sent a Dissave—roughly equivalent, in those days, to an English General—to the coast with



a detachment of troops, and Captain Knox, in all innocence, greeted the king's representative with a royal salute. The *Anne* mounted twenty six-pounder guns, and with this armament, and a crew of forty-eight, she would have been a formidable opponent if a direct assault had been contemplated by the Dissave. That wily man had no such intention. Courteously he invited the Captain and his officers to his camp on the shores of the river Mahavelliganga to receive ceremonial greetings and presents from his master the king which, he said, could be given only on Sinhalese soil. In response to this invitation Captain Knox was cautious enough to remain aboard his ship, but he sent his son to the meeting-place which was twelve miles from the ship's anchorage.

On arrival at the camp, young Robert Knox began to feel suspicious when informed that the king's gifts could only be handed over to the Captain in person. He did not believe it, but he could not refuse the



The *Anne's* longboat came ashore for fresh water

Dissave's request to send this information back to his father, though he added a strong warning of his own. The information was delivered to Captain Knox, but the warning was not, and he arrived the following day to be taken prisoner without a blow being struck. So unsuspecting was he, that he and his men came unarmed.

The tamarind tree under which this act of treachery took place still stands, gnarled and magnificent, with a monument of white stone leaning against it bearing the inscription:

THIS IS THE WHITE MAN'S TREE
UNDER WHICH ROBERT KNOX
WAS CAPTURED A.D. 1659

That was not the full extent of the disaster to the unfortunate Englishmen. The next day the *Anne's* longboat came ashore for fresh water which could be drawn only from the Mahavelliganga. The men were uneasy about the fate of their Captain, but so deeply had the lotus-eating spirit permeated them, that they too came unarmed. This time a few blows were struck when they were ambushed, but fists were of no use against swords and spears, and, hopelessly outnumbered, they were soon captured. They quickly discovered that there was a difference between the treatment given to the officers and to the men. While the Knoxes were honoured guests, entertained with singing and dancing, the hapless crew were bound hand and foot, and cooped up in a village hut.

So far the cunning Dissave had captured two small boats and eighteen men, but his orders were to take the frigate. He assured Captain Knox that he was not to be regarded as a prisoner. He was being kept in the camp only until royal greetings arrived from Raja Singha to be conveyed to the King of England; but this time the old sea Captain was not to be taken in and met cunning with cunning. He might be too late to save himself and the men already captured, but he intended, at all costs, to keep his ship from being taken. He feigned agreement, even pleasure, at the Dissave's remarks, and sent a message to his Chief Mate—that same John Burford who might be regarded as the innocent cause of Knox's misfortunes—not to surrender the *Anne* under any circumstances

but to keep constant watch, night and day, and to open fire on any boat which approached the ship. This time it was the Dissave who was deceived, and he permitted the Captain to send two men to the ship with this message. Somewhat naturally they did not return, and furious, the Dissave then instructed Captain Knox to dispatch his own son to Burford, and order him to tow the ship up into the river.

This was a moment of tragic decision for the old sea Captain, for his own person was to stand as hostage against the return of his son. His courage failed him at the prospect of being left to the mercy of the Sinhalese if the young Robert did not come back. It is easy enough to think that he should have put his son's safety above all other considerations, but he was elderly, and he was frightened. Instead of ordering his son to go back to the *Anne* and stay there, he gave way to panic and implored him, in the words of young Robert's journal, "as I (Robert) should answer it at the great day, not to leave him in this condition, but to return to him again." It is strange to reflect that, but for this somewhat selfish request, English literature would have been robbed of a great book,* and the interior of Ceylon would have remained *terra incognita* for a further one hundred and fifty years.

Once back aboard the *Anne*, young Robert took the precaution of writing an exact account of the events which had led to the capture of so many men, for the benefit of the ship's owners. This was signed by all the men who remained free, and given to Burford for him to deliver to the East India Company as soon as he arrived in England. Robert then said "Good-

* Robert Knox. *An Historical Relation of Ceylon*.



Robert took the precaution of writing an exact account of the events

bye” to his shipmates, and returned resolutely to captivity; an heroic thing to do although he could hardly have realized that he was parting with his own youth. Yet so it turned out. When he arrived in Ceylon in 1659 he was little more than a boy of nineteen, and when he returned to England in 1679 he was a mature and experienced man of nearly forty. For twenty years he lived the life of a Sinhalese countryman, forgetting the ways of his own kind. It is easy to understand why he wrote in his journal of his homecoming, “as a man new borne I came into the world.”

2

Prison Without Bars

IT WAS many weeks before the captives began their weary march into the interior, but, during all that time not a single effort was made to escape. What is perhaps even more curious is that, as far as we know, no rescue attempt came from the men aboard the *Anne*. There were still thirty of them, tough fighting men all of whom had cutlasses and muskets. The ship herself, as we know, had an armament of twenty small guns, of no very great weight, and it should have been a simple matter to manhandle one or two of these ashore. A sharp surprise attack mounted from the *Anne*, backed by the terror value of cannon however small, would almost certainly have succeeded, for the Sinhalese, while brave guerilla fighters as both Dutch and Portuguese invaders could testify, had no stomach for a stand-up fight. Despite all these favourable factors nothing was done, and one can only conclude that the white men shared the simple villagers' abject dread of the Lion King. It is an almost inexplicable part of the story, for there is no evidence that any attempt was made even to communicate between Captain Knox and his ship, or vice versa. As far as is known, the vessel left for home without once establishing contact with the unhappy captives ashore.

When the Dissave discovered that the ship had sailed, he took most of his soldiers and marched off to Kandy, presumably for further instructions. He must have felt that there was no need to mount much of a guard over such spiritless prisoners, and in any case, without their ship they could not get away. In this he might have been wrong, for Captain Knox did show a flicker of spirit when a small Moorish ship was captured by the Sinhalese guards and her crew brought into Cottiar. For a moment he considered putting a party of his men aboard the little ship and sailing her to Fort St. George, but he soon abandoned the scheme. The *Anne's* crew had been billeted over a wide area in the jungle, in ones and twos in villages out of touch with each other, and the effort of breaking out and collecting his men seems to have been beyond the old sea Captain. He did nothing. Nobody did anything, and Robert Knox, in his journal, passes over, without a word, those long weeks of inactivity when they were all left almost unguarded as if the Dissave felt contemptuously certain that they lacked the courage and initiative to attempt a break-out.

The local villagers had received instructions to feed their guests while the Dissave was away in Kandy, and this they did, although with great reluctance. For them it meant feeding sixteen white men for an unknown period without payment. They knew from experience that Raja Singha did not bother to reward his subjects for services rendered, but could be counted upon to mete out mutilation or death or both if his orders were not obeyed.

Sixteen days after his departure, the Dissave returned to take the Knoxes and their men into the

mountains, and any hope of escape had now finally disappeared. Sick at heart, the white men prepared for the march. It is true that Raja Singha had sent them a message that they were to be his guests only until such time as another English ship arrived to take them home, but by this time there was not a man among them who harboured any illusions as to their probable fate.

The march through some of the most interesting jungle country in Ceylon would have drawn from a more experienced Knox a full and detailed account. As it was he was only nineteen years old, knew nothing of the island, and presumably plodded along from day to day without hope and without interest where, a few years later, not a jungle flower, or a snake wriggling through the undergrowth, would have escaped his ready pen. All possibility of escape having vanished, he had obviously sunk into apathy, and his description of the journey is contained in a single paragraph in which he wrote that the way was easy to travel through great woods in which no human beings lived. Their guards, he said, shot deer for food, found honey in plenty, and there was no lack of water. That was all; but from what is now known of the geography and weather conditions of the island even that is a revealing pen picture.

For ten months of the year the sun scorches down on the northern, central and eastern jungles of Ceylon, and for nine of them a hot wind blows ceaselessly from the south-west. The little streams and pools run dry, the steady flow of the great rivers slackens off until, towards the end of the long

drought, a string of shallow pools in the sandy and rocky river-beds is all the water that remains. Most of the water-holes dry out, but in the deep rock crevices of the innumerable clusters of gneiss rocks which are such a feature of Ceylon geology, water remains until, at last, the rains come, and the whole parched forest leaps into unbelievable life again.

This wonderful rebirth comes with a change of the prevailing wind which now blows from the north-west, bringing rain with it for all too short a period. At once the great forest trees and countless varieties of tropical plants and shrubs of the undergrowth flame into brilliantly green and coloured life. Flower and fruit appear as if by magic; wild life, much of which perished during the interminable drought, breeds and flourishes again; grass grows high in the open lands, rivers flow, and pools of water form in every hollow. It is easy then to travel through the jungle, for deer may be shot for food with no trouble at all, honey bees are at their busiest, and there is no lack of water wherever a man may go.

It is obvious, then, that it was during these two months of plenty that the Englishmen and their guards made their leisured way to the foothills. Had it been otherwise, Knox could not have failed to comment on the hardships of marching for close upon a hundred miles in the drought when the hot, dry winds blow all day, and the high trees droop with withered foliage. Then there are heaps of bones by the side of dried-out watercourses, the undergrowth seems dead but for evil spears of cacti, insects become a torment, and the stifling heat a torture. Walking through the jungle, under those conditions, becomes an ordeal and a test of endurance not easily forgotten.

Ceylon has no seasons, only the two prevailing winds mentioned, which are known as monsoons. They blow regularly either from the south-west or from the north-east, with short inter-monsoon periods dividing them when, for a few weeks, the winds die away altogether. These monsoons create two distinct areas known as the wet and dry "zones" respectively, and the districts so divided might be two different countries so widely different are they in their characteristics. For the south-west winds reach Ceylon brim-full of moisture, having crossed thousands of miles of ocean without touching land at all, while the north-east monsoon loses most of its rain over China, Burma, and India before it gets to the island. Neither wind can surmount the high central mountain barrier, with the result that while the hills and the south-west corner of the island—about one-quarter of the total area—receives an average rainfall of over 100 inches, and parts of the mountain core have recorded as much as 250 inches in a single year, the rest of the country has to be content with less than 30 inches. Even this rainfall, which is high by English standards—London receives only about 26 inches annually—is so concentrated, and descends so violently upon the baked, drought-stricken plains, that most of it is wasted. It is not surprising that a high proportion of Ceylon's present population of over ten million people, a population as great as that of Australia, is packed into the fertile south-eastern area hardly larger than Wales, leaving the rest of the island very sparsely populated indeed.

The white men's march to their long captivity was accomplished under pleasant conditions. Their guards were in no hurry, and the speed of the march

was the speed of the slowest walker among them. It might have been an agreeable experience but for the misery of their situation.

They met no human inhabitants of that vast forest, but Knox was to discover later that he was wrong in thinking that there were none. But if men were scarce, game of all kinds swarmed, for at that time no country in the world had so large and varied a fauna per square mile as Ceylon. Elephants teemed, the small Malayan breed which rarely has tusks, and there were leopards, bears, buffaloes, boars, deer of all kinds, jackal, wild cats, mongooses, several kinds of monkeys, and lizards ranging from tiny gekkoes no larger than a human thumbnail to kabragoyas, "land crocodiles" six or seven feet in length. Knox later made a study of the fauna of the island, and gave descriptions of an astonishing range of creatures and insects, many of them peculiar to Ceylon. As for the birds, the miserable white captives must have marvelled at their variety, especially when they passed one of the abandoned "tanks", or reservoirs, built by Sinhalese kings fifteen hundred years before Knox's time. In those distant times, the whole drought area of the island had been made fertile by the most wonderful system of irrigation the world has known, while the mountains were left to the devils and spirits who were believed, by the ancients, to infest them. Knox, at that time, was too dispirited to mention these tanks whose bird life is such a glory, but he noticed them later, as we shall see, and is the first European to realize that they were not natural, but were "ponds", as he called them, created by man.

The little party passed close to two of these "ponds", Minneriya and Kantalai, both huge inland

seas swarming with wild life. Storks, herons, egrets, flamingoes, spoonbills, and all species of water birds filled the evening air with a riot of muted sound, and from the glassy surface of the lakes the snouts of crocodiles emerged from time to time. Although some of these enormous lakes are being developed, in modern times, to do again the work for which originally they were constructed, even now many of them are in the same wild state as when Knox passed that way. Nor has the actual route taken by the prisoners changed beyond recognition. It is true that there is now a main road, flanked by a railway, running along most of their line of march, and somewhat sordid ribbon development lines both sides of the road where, in many places, all signs of the jungle have disappeared; but man's hold on these jungle plains is as yet very precarious. Within a mile or two of road or railway, sometimes within a few hundred yards of either, the wild still reigns, and in places is already regaining lost territory, reaching out stealthily towards villages where newly established small-holders are finding the fight against the forest too much for them.

A week's march took the Englishmen out of the jungle into the foothills of the mountains, and here Sinhalese villages were encountered with increasing frequency as they journeyed towards Kandy. Knox called any human settlement a "town" but, in the Ceylon of his day, there were no towns in the European sense of the word unless Raja Singha's poor capital of Kandy, or the Dutch fort of Colombo could qualify as such. The villages were small, often consisting of a dozen or so mean huts constructed of mud plaster stuck on a framework of bamboo sticks.



... out of the jungle into the foothills

The huts had single doors and no windows, and were roofed with cadjan, the dried leaves of the coconut palm. They stood in their own paddocks, usually fenced with sticks, although sometimes, in places where wild beasts were troublesome, a hedge of cactus had been planted round them, a very effective form of protection. In every garden there was a coconut tree, a halmilla, a mango, a jak-fruit, limes, green oranges and plantains, the delicious small banana of Ceylon. In the middle of the group of huts, usually below the retaining wall, or bund of a small pool, there was the inevitable paddy or rice-field, worked as a communal enterprise by all the men of the village. Although poor in the sense that they had few material possessions and little money, these people of the foothills lived well, and would have been happy and contented but for the black shadow of the Lion King for ever brooding over them.

Wherever the English prisoners stopped they were well fed by the villagers, for the Sinhalese people are among the most hospitable on earth. Knox may have passed over a week's march through the forests in a single paragraph, but he is much more generous with his descriptions of the meals that he received. Rice, herbs of all kinds, fruit, honey, deer meat and dried fish, cooked usually in the form of curries, were his daily fare, and it is doubtful if he did as well aboard the *Anne*. There is little difference today, in most of the country villages of Ceylon, in the way the villagers fare or live.

The white men soon found that they were regarded as a form of public entertainment throughout the countryside, particularly when they took their meals. Very few of the people had ever before seen a

European, and probably none of them had heard of an Englishman. They would crowd around the sailors as the men sat awkwardly on their mats on the ground, using spoons for their rice, and drinking water by raising the pots to their lips. These were disgusting habits to the villagers who squat on their haunches while feeding, raise their rice to their lips with a dainty movement of the fingers, and drink without touching the pot by throwing back their heads and projecting a stream of water straight into their mouths. News of this strange haul of prisoners flashed by bush telegraph from village to village, and crowds followed Knox and his men as they made their way farther into the mountains. In describing these daily scenes he wrote: "Thus in every town where we came they used, both young and old in great companies, to stare upon us."

At last they came to the country close to the Kandyan capital, passing the sharp, high peaks known as the Knuckles, and feeling the impenetrable forests of the hillsides closing in on them with a sense of doom as they walked. In this vast wilderness the only means of communication were a few uncharted paths which wound through the valleys, and these were known only to the Kandyans. During their occupation of the island the Portuguese had, from time to time, in desperation sent whole armies into the labyrinthine mountains to try and smash the resistance movement. All had either failed to make contact with their elusive enemy, or had disappeared without trace. Once ambushed, there was no return for any of them.

The Kandyans, of course, had always appreciated the reason for their immunity against invasion, and

beyond the few tracks for which they themselves were responsible, they did not permit roads of any kind to be made, or maps to be drawn. Along the tracks which they themselves had made, only wide enough to permit men to walk in single file, they maintained a thorough system of watches, which enabled Raja Singha to learn, without delay, not only of the movements of an enemy but those of any of his own people.

Now that they had arrived in this strange, lost, and beautiful mountain fastness, Knox and his men were impatient to know what was going to happen to them. They expected imprisonment, perhaps torture and slavery, but the days passed and none of these things happened. Captain Knox and his son, in particular, had been brought to the outskirts of Kandy itself by the Dissave, in the expectation that the king would immediately ask to see them; but no word came. Beyond an express command that the Englishmen's party was to be split up, and the members kept a long way from each other, no other instructions came except that they were to be well treated. At first they were, both by the Dissave and the villagers upon whom they were billeted, but when the capricious king showed no further interest in them, the Dissave washed his hands of them and left them to the villagers.

The Knoxes were allowed to remain together, but they were sent to Koswatta, thirty miles north of Kandy. There they were given a choice of residence—a hut with walls, or one without. They accepted the latter, for the weather was stifling, but it was with sinking hearts that they first saw it. It was filthy, anything but waterproof, and the only furniture consisted

of one rickety bed and a mat. Their neighbours were the inhabitants of a small village who had orders to feed them. They did so, but after the first curiosity at the sight of curious creatures with white skins, they showed no other interest in the newcomers, who were left to their own devices. Knox had no information at all of the whereabouts of the rest of the ship's company, except that none of them were within a day's march of Koswatta. In their cowed and dispirited condition, father and son appeared ready to believe anything that they were told, and made no effort to explore even the immediate vicinity of the hut.

So began a time of purposeless captivity for them, when no one came for them, nobody guarded them, and nothing whatever happened. Gradually, as the weeks turned into months, even the villagers grew careless and paid them less and less attention. There was nothing for them to do, and realization that he might go where he pleased had not yet dawned on the younger Knox. He and his father had no money, and no longer commanded any respect from their neighbours. They were forgotten outcastes, to be treated with contempt and insolence when they could not be avoided altogether.

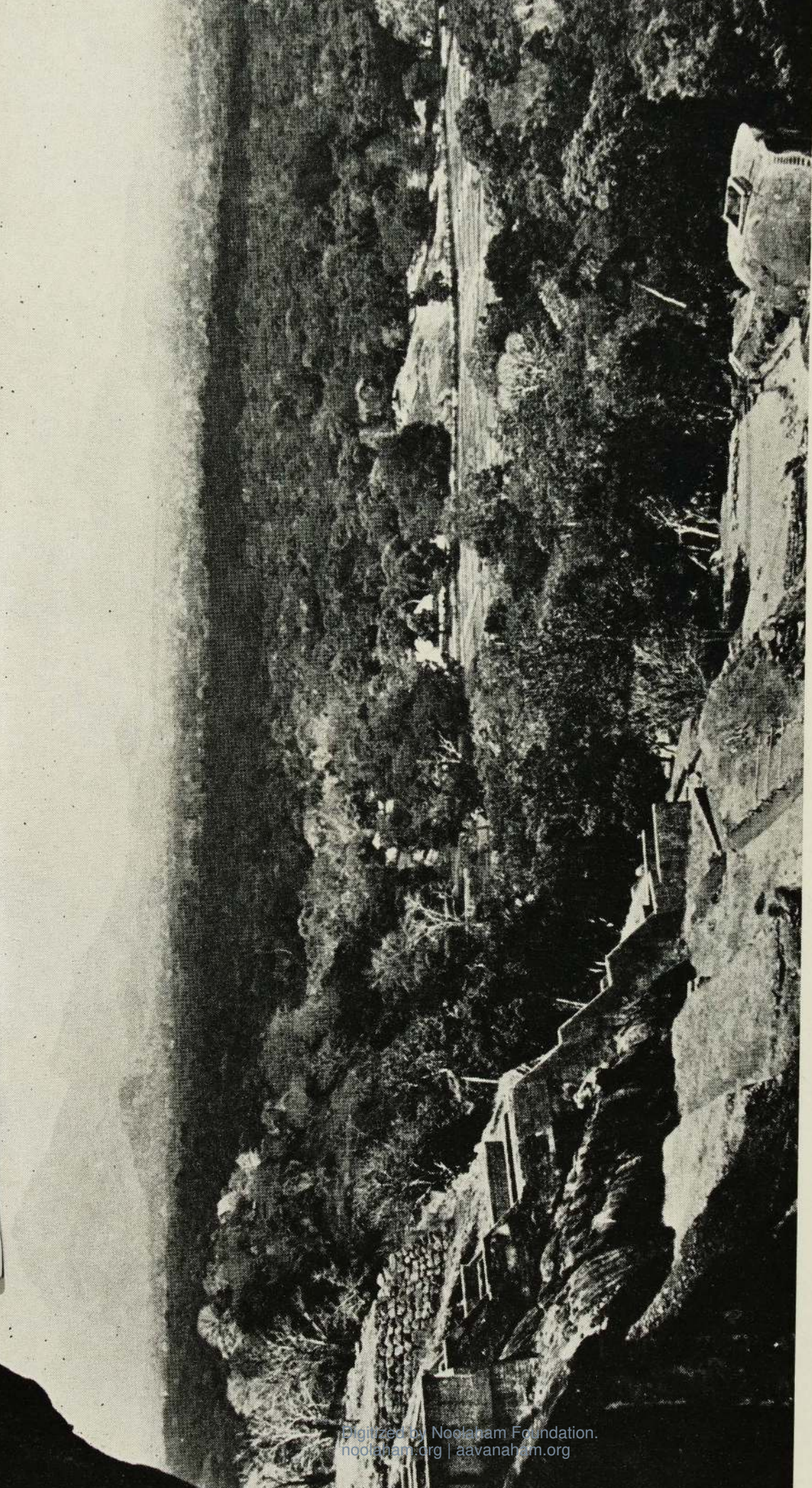
Soon a violent outbreak of malaria swept the district, and many people died. Malaria is caused by the bite of the *anopheles* mosquito, which breeds best in any stagnant pool of water, but in those days nobody could account for the dreaded fever. In times of drought, particularly on the northern slopes of the Ceylon mountains, most of the rivers cease to flow, leaving strings of pools along the river-beds which soon become stagnant, and harbour countless mil-



(Above) Ploughing the land for the paddy (rice) crop as Knox watched it ploughed nearly three centuries ago. (Below) Catamaran fishing canoes at the mouth of a Ceylon river.

(Courtesy The Ceylon Tea Centre)



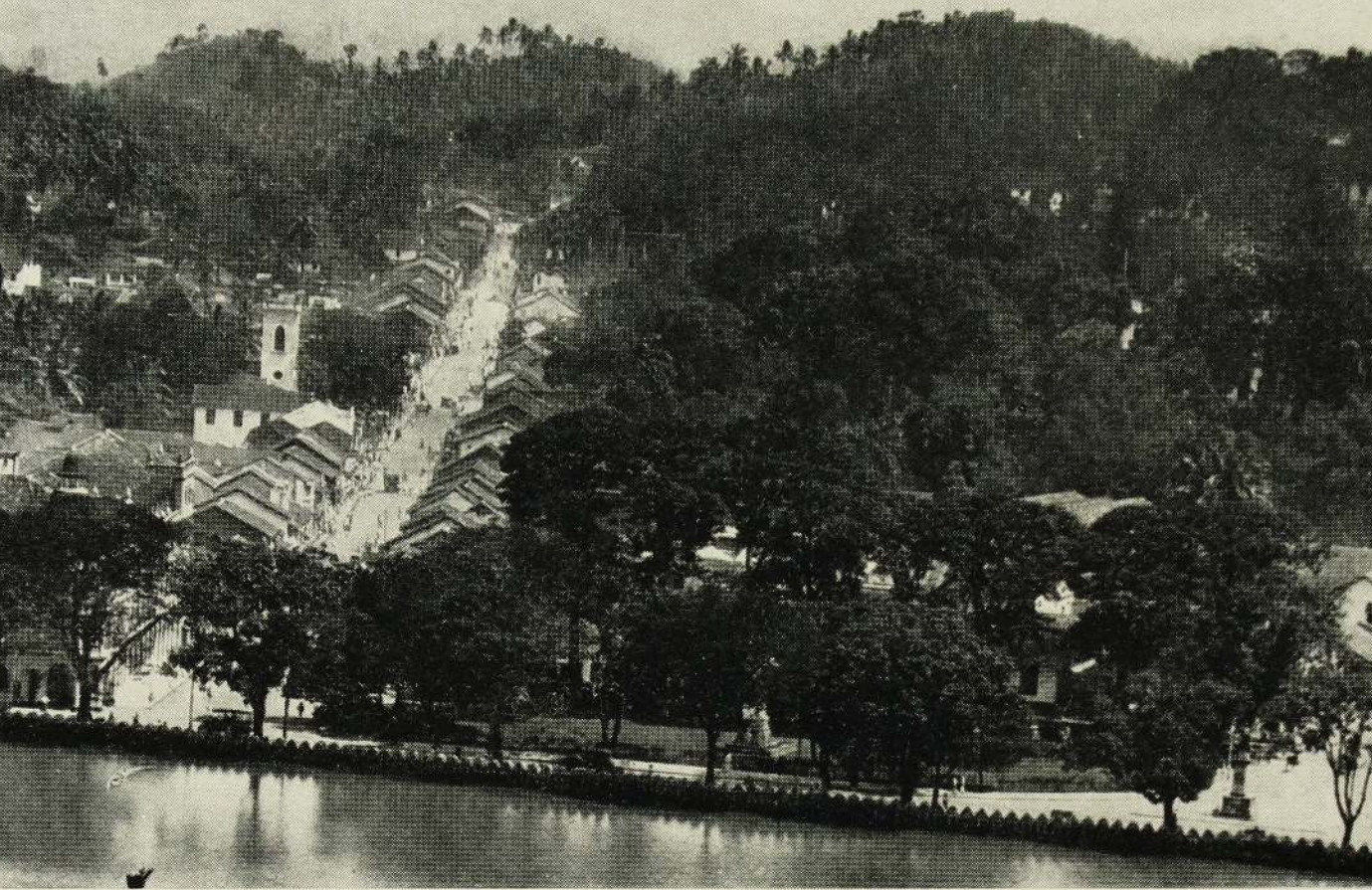


Jungle country through which Knox and his shipmates had to march to the Kandyan mountains shown in the background.
(Courtesy *The Ceylon Tea Centre*)



Rice and coconuts made Knox a wealthy man.

Digitized by Noolaham Foundation (Courtesy The Ceylon Tea Centre)
noolaham.org | aavanaham.org



(Above) The mountain town of Kandy as it is today. (Below) "In the woodes there are wilde men also," wrote Knox. Coast Veddhas, all that are left of Knox's "wilde men".

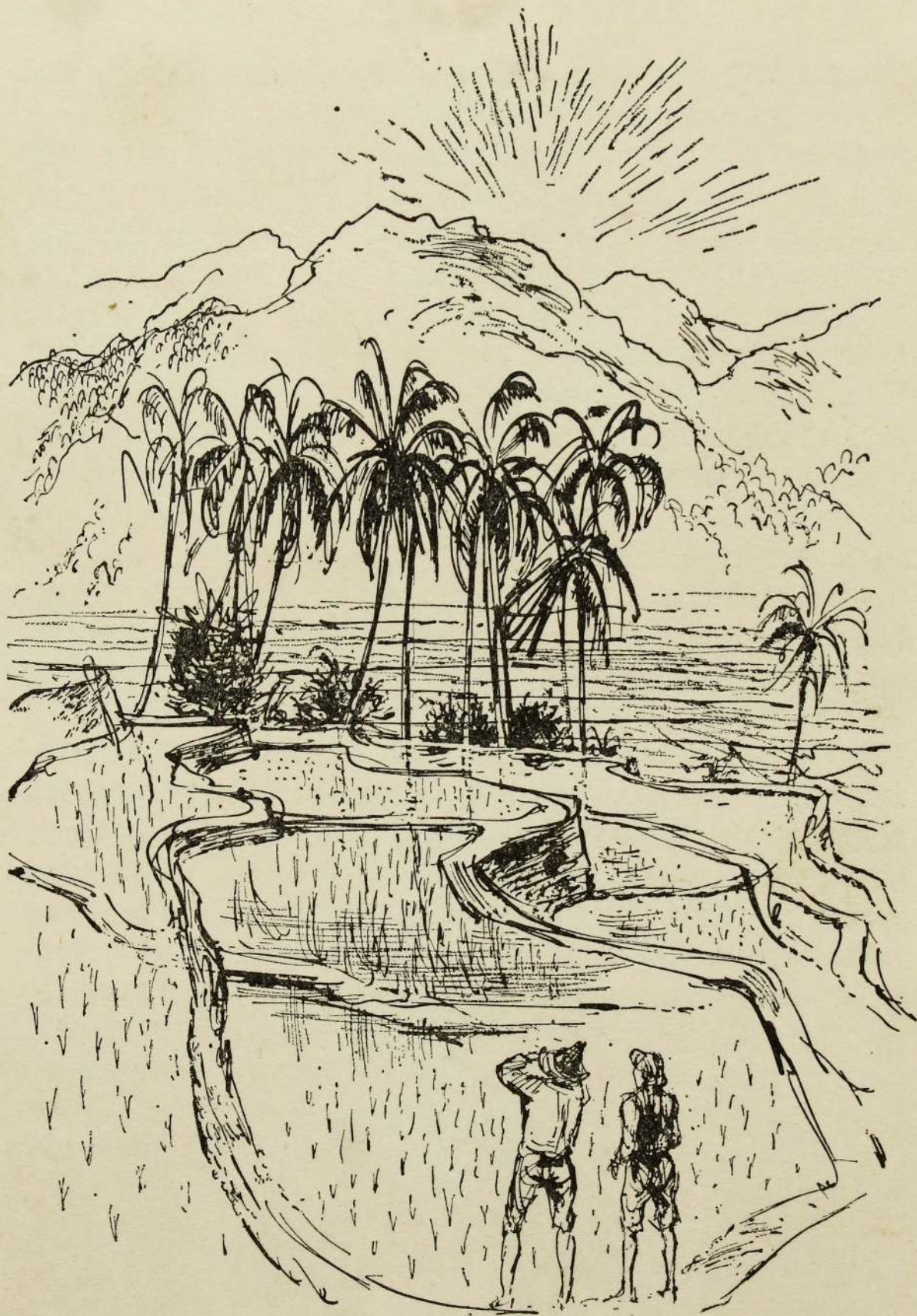
(Courtesy C. N. Skuce)



lions of mosquitoes. In modern times malaria has been practically eradicated in the island by spraying such pools with oil before the larvae of the insects can develop, but in Knox's day the victims of the fever, or ague as it was then known, could depend only upon their own constitutions.

The white men were both infected, and all around them their Sinhalese neighbours were sick and dying. There was no time now for them to prepare food for Raja Singha's captives, and the Knoxes were as near death by starvation as by fever, for they had no food of their own and made little effort to find any. In view of the amazing activity and resource displayed by the younger Knox in later days, his inertia at that time is bewildering, and as for the old sea Captain, he seems to have abandoned all hope and the will to live from the first. The two men spent all day in their dreadful little hut, somnolent in the heat, brooding over their misfortunes. Occasionally they roused themselves sufficiently to read from one of the three small religious books they had with them, which they knew by heart. In the evenings, while the older man could still walk, they would go into the nearby rice-fields and watch the sun set over the mountains in all its marvellous panoply of colours. Soon even that activity was abandoned as the older man took to his bed, refusing food for days on end, bemoaning his fate and cursing himself for having brought his son to this desolate and forgotten hell.

As the months passed, the Captain grew more feeble and fretful. At this stage, and for the first time, his son mentions in his journal that they were attended in their misery by a young negro servant brought with them from the ship. This boy is given



... into the nearby rice-fields and watch the sun set over the mountains

no name in the journal, and was not, apparently, counted as part of the ship's company, for his name is not in the list of captives. He was probably a slave, and must have viewed the reversal of all he had known—white men captive to brown ones—with amazement. When he discovered that his former gods had feet of clay, he became daily more insolent, but he continued to look after them to a certain extent. By a strange chance, the younger Knox was fated to meet him again, many years later, as we shall see.

Despised, spat upon, avoided whenever possible by the villagers, Captain Knox seems to have found their negro servant's contempt the last straw. Heart-broken, fever-ridden, and more than half starved, the old man finally gave way altogether and died, imploring his son to forgive him for making him stay in Ceylon when he might have sailed away to freedom.

Robert was himself so ill that he had hardly the strength to dig a grave for his father. On being appealed to for help, the villagers, to whom death during the malarial scourge had become a commonplace, contemptuously advised him to throw the skin and bone corpse into the woods and leave it to the wild animals. Indignation gave the young man the necessary strength to scratch a grave of sorts, and to give his father a Christian burial before giving way to sorrow and despair.

“Thus was I left desolate, sick, and in captivity, having no earthly comforter but only He who looks down from Heaven to hear the groaning of the prisoners.”

he wrote, and this tame acceptance of disaster is almost impossible to understand. For eighteen

months he and his father had sat day after day bemoaning their fate in a filthy little hut, doing nothing, making no move, accepting the contemptuous charity of the villagers. They did not lift a finger to help themselves, and all the time other members of their own ship's company had been living *within a mile of them*, quite unguarded, free to go where they liked. Certainly, up to this time, Robert Knox had given no sign of the enterprise, curiosity, courage, and persistence of the true explorer.

3

The Lion King

KNOX's bout of malaria, a sort of living death, lasted for sixteen months and then left him completely. Immediately, with improving health, he seems to have realized that he had been stagnating, physically, mentally, and spiritually. He had now been in the island for nearly three years, and was still doing nothing about providing himself with food, while his only form of exercise was to walk daily in the nearby rice-fields. For the rest, he might just as well have been locked in a prison cell, a prisoner without gaolers.

The spark which set alight the fire of the man's true character came from a strange incident, and a still stranger coincidence. The incident was the passing of a Sinhalese gypsy, and the coincidence was that this man had in his possession a Bible for sale. It can be taken as certain that no other man in the length and breadth of Raja Singha's kingdom, at that time possessed a Bible, and the coincidence of the gypsy's arrival at the one hut in over four thousand square miles of wild country where there was a potential customer is extraordinary. Robert Knox, of course, regarded it as a miracle. It is hard not to agree with him.

The Rodiyan gypsies of Ceylon are a fascinating

people. Their name means "rat eaters" and they are what their name suggests, outcastes, for although many jungle people do, in fact, eat rats when on the verge of starvation, only the Rodiyans admit it. Beggars, thieves, crop-watchers, their touch is contamination, and they are aware of it so that, even now, they will step off a path if anyone approaches. In Knox's time killing a Rodiya involved no punishment; yet they are an ancient race, so old that nobody knows their origin. Legend says that five hundred years before the birth of Christ they were the nobles of the king of that day. The king ordered them to go into the forest and kill a stag for the next day's feast, but instead of doing so at once, they spent the night feasting and drinking. In the morning they remembered the royal command, and belatedly sent one of their numbers into the jungle. There were no stags to be found, and the hunter, at his wit's end, came upon a peasant child playing out of sight of its parents' hut. He killed the child and dressed it to look like stag meat for the feast; but the crime was discovered. The king, in terrible anger, outlawed all his courtiers and their descendants for ever, saying that never again should they own land or stand face to face with their fellow men. The curious thing is that, while Rodiyans are considered outcastes to this day, most Sinhalese admit that they are of noble blood.

The gypsy had been in Colombo when the last ragged remnant of the Portuguese forces had surrendered the city to the Dutch. More than probably he had stolen the Bible, but Knox did not bother to ask him how he had obtained it. He bought it at once for "one knitted cap". Deeply religious, for he

had been brought up in the age of Puritanism, this strange purchase awoke the fervour in the man, and it was the turning point of his captivity.

It is perhaps the moment to mention the fact that Robert Knox was by no means a pleasant character. He was intensely mean, bigoted, narrow-minded and humourless, and all religious manifestations were taken by him to have a personal meaning only. He was incapable of relating his own feelings under tyranny and imprisonment to those that other people might experience under the same conditions. His first actions when he arrived home after twenty years were to try and recover debts owed to him by, among other people, his own sister, and he was only too ready to accept the captaincy of a ship known as a "blackbirder" or slave ship, and to hunt down negro slaves.

It was shortly after he had purchased the Bible that John Gregory, a member of the crew of the *Anne*, wandering further afield than usual, chanced upon the hut where Knox had been living for so long as if in chains. In their delight at meeting each other, the two men plucked up courage and began to look around them as they might have done from the day of their arrival. Within the compass of a few square miles they found the rest of their comrades, none of them guarded. After three years of timidity and faint-heartedness they discovered, not only that they had been living almost within a stone's throw of each other, but that they were a favoured community under protection from the king. Raja Singha had given orders that they were to be well looked after, and that none of them should be called upon to work. They were, in fact, highly privileged, and if they had

had the courage to speak up for themselves, the local people would have obeyed them promptly.

Under these circumstances it is no wonder that they had been regarded as chicken-hearted, and that the poor fever-stricken Kandyan country people had nothing but contempt for these queer white men. Matters now changed abruptly, for once they discovered their power, the prisoners "began to domineer over the villagers", to use Knox's own words, and daily became more arrogant and overbearing. It is not a pretty story, and reflects no credit on the Englishmen who had behaved spinelessly from the moment of being ambushed in the Bay of Cottiar until they found that the villagers were so terrified of the very shadow of the Lion King that they were helpless to defend themselves.

Before the spiritless behaviour of the white sailors is altogether condemned, it is only just to consider the reality of the terror inspired, not only in them but in all the Kandyan people, by Raja Singha.

In the seventeenth century there were not, as now, two zones in Ceylon—the wet and the dry—but three; the third being the mountain zone. Even in modern days the Kandyans, or highlanders, look upon themselves as superior to the lowlanders, and at that time they regarded themselves as a separate race. But they, proud as they were, were no less terrified of the king than the more humble people of the plains, and Knox, shrewd and clear-sighted, soon discovered how one man, feared by all, could impose his will upon them. The king's reign of gruesome terror was based upon a policy of divide and rule. Everybody in his kingdom was a potential spy and informer. No man knew by whom he was over-

looked, nor when he would receive the command to enter the king's capital from which hardly anyone returned.

Raja Singha himself did not live in Kandy, but close to it on a steep, conical hill which had been turned into an unassailable fortress. He was guarded by walls, and walls within walls; by a personal body-guard of negro troops, for negroes could have no personal axes to grind; by innumerable sentries, and secrecy of an almost fantastic intricacy. None could say, at any given moment, where he was, or where he would appear, and in that treachery-ridden atmosphere no man knew when his own brother might betray him. And at numerous check-points, or Watches, strategically arranged along all the main paths of the mountain kingdom, night and day sentries were on patrol whose simple duty was to turn back anyone, royal or simple, who could not show the necessary passport for his journey. Force was unnecessary, for once turned back, the traveller could return only to his own home. Actually the king's orders were that all such travellers caught without the proper documents should be taken to Kandy at once by the Captain of the Watch, and at first this had always been done. But after a time it became one of the very few royal orders which did not obtain full obedience, for the simple reason that the Captains who obeyed the order to the letter discovered, when they reached the capital with their prisoners, that they too became prisoners of a sort in that they were not allowed to leave Kandy again. Their successors, warned by the fate of their predecessors, were careful only to turn back would-be fugitives, and not to arrest them.

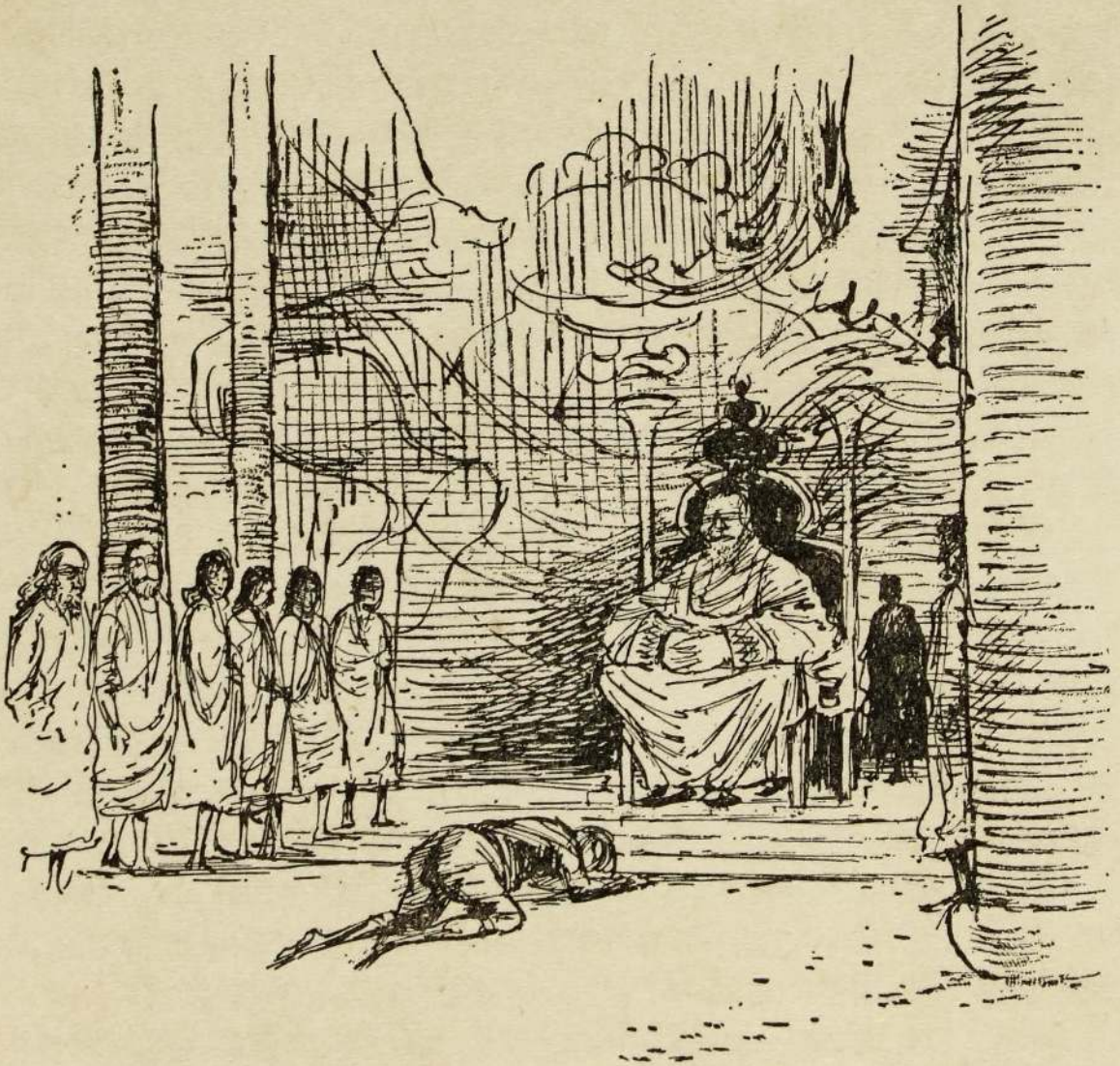
In some degree, then, all who lived in the mountain kingdom were dwelling in a prison without bars, but particularly the white foreigners. Portuguese, Dutch, French, or English; ambassadors, soldiers, sailors, merchants, or travellers; no man who entered Raja Singha's realm without an invitation—and, for that matter, many who did so at the king's request—ever left it again until Robert Knox managed to find a way out.

The taint of insanity shown in the manner of the king's crafty hold over his people is shown, too, in the loathsome cruelties inflicted upon people suspected of disloyalty. To be suspected was sufficient. Proof was not required, for trials were considered a mere waste of time. Torture was first used to extract a confession from the miserable wretch accused of any offence, and then sentence was passed and carried out. Victims were compelled to eat their own flesh; mothers forced to kill and eat their own children; and hideously complicated executions were carried out after the condemned had been paraded round the town as a warning to all of the consequences of displeasing the king. In the whole literature of terror there can be few more graphic accounts than Knox's matter-of-fact pages:

“and so to lead them thro the City in public view was to terrify all unto the place of Execution, the Dogs following to eat them. For they are so accustomed to it, that they seeing a Prisoner led away, follow after. At the place of Execution there are alwayes some sticking upon Poles, others hanging up in quarters upon Trees; besides, what lyes killed by Elephants on the ground, or by other ways.

This place is always in the greatest High-way, that all may see and stand in awe.”

Half mad he might be, but Raja Singha had considerable knowledge of human nature, and knew when and how to create an effect. He was capable of inspired deception. His capital city Kandy, for example, had acquired a reputation for fabulous opulence even among western nations; a reputation based upon simple deception. Only the king's court had any genuine claim to magnificence, encompassed about by all the regal trappings of trumpeters, gorgeously



... permitted to approach him only by crawling over the ground

caparisoned elephants, brilliantly uniformed guards and gay flag and draperies. Foreign ambassadors or generals who entered Kandy and were allowed out again—and they were very few in number—saw the famous court only by night. In the dim light of torches, the Audience Hall—which still survives—appeared a palace of barbaric splendour, and the bearded monarch himself, clothed in his own fantastic but splendid regalia—he was said to resemble a circus clown by daylight—seemed almost godlike in the half-light as he gazed down from his throne of gems. Everyone, nobleman, ambassador, general, or common man, was permitted to approach him only by crawling over the ground on his belly.

This, of course, was excellent stage-management, for any distinguished visitor who saw the Kandyan court under these almost mystic circumstances, and was led away through the dark city in its wonderful mountain setting, the star-brilliant sky showing all the hill crests as if they were limned in velvet, could be forgiven for feeling intoxicated with so much beauty and magnificence. Kandy by night has a quality of fairy-like unreality, the personification of loveliness, possessed by few cities in the world; but by day, in the revealing brilliance of the sunlight, it is not, in fact, very imposing even in modern times. Raja Singha's capital was nothing but a vast conglomeration of filthy huts, grouped along paths of beaten earth which stank of refuse. He permitted no architectural aspirations in any building; no windows, no decorations; no amenities other than the barest necessities. It was a dismal collection of slums.

Men, women, and children under that despotic rule, were thrown into prison on the smallest pretext,

or merely because the king commanded it. They were not necessarily executed at once, and would languish one, five, ten, or even twenty years in hopeless misery before being dragged out, at last, to the place of execution. For boys or girls to be called to the king's service was a sentence of death. Years of service might have to be given, but when apparently highest in the royal favour, the guards would come to drag them away. The father of any such victim was then declared traitor, and all his possessions confiscated.

This reign of terror, of its kind rarely, if ever, equalled, lasted the king's lifetime, which was a long one. The people groaned under it, but Raja Singha maintained his despotism with what can only be termed a genius for intrigue. All his business was transacted at night, and during the daytime even his closest servants were never sure where he was to be found. It is an extraordinary story. There have been many bloodthirsty tyrants in history, but it is rare to find one who maintained it for more than half a century and then, at the last, died peacefully in his bed as did Raja Singha the Second.

Only once was his throne endangered, when the country rose in desperate revolt, and Knox and his companions found themselves, by a freak of chance, on the king's side in the struggle. They had no wish to take sides at all, but if forced to do so would have preferred to aid the rebels. It was purely by accident—a lucky accident—that they were numbered among the royal supporters.

In the year 1664 a comet streaked across the skies, brilliant and awe-inspiring. It served as the omen for which the Sinhalese people, in their superstitious

ignorance, had been waiting. A dangerous rising took place at a time when Raja Singha, for once, had left his fortress home and was holding an audience at Nilambe, some miles south of the capital. The plot was well conceived and well carried out, and the king could offer no resistance to the heavily armed nobles who attacked Nilambe. He fled at once, and his twelve-year-old son was proclaimed king to general acclamation.

Yet the uprising, in some queer way, was ruined by its own complete success which nobody, obviously, had anticipated. Raja Singha ran away, but the man's aura of absolute power, and the superstitious terror in which he was held, saved him. Although his pursuers followed close upon his heels, and could have overtaken him at any time, none of them had the courage to kill him. He escaped to Medamahanuwara—the Middle City—a royal halting place on the pilgrimage route to Alutnuwara in the Bintenne forests. Raja Singha had been born in Alutnuwara, and it was probably purely the instinct of the hunted animal which made him try to reach it again, for there was no possible protection for him there. There was no protection for him anywhere—except the terror which he himself had created. It was sufficient. Though his pursuers hated him, and longed to put him to death as he had killed hundreds of others, they dare not.

His son, terrified by the rebellion, disliked the kingship so rudely thrust upon him so much that he escaped from Kandy, and ran back to his father. It is said that he was promptly poisoned by Raja Singha, surely, if this was true, one of the most horrible of his misdeeds; but another account maintains that the

boy was hidden for many years, and did, in fact, ascend to the throne on the death of his father. Whichever it was, poisoned or hidden, he disappeared. It was a shrewd stroke, for without a king-designate the revolt collapsed, and all sections of the community began fighting among themselves in an orgy of murder and mutual recrimination.

In the confusion Knox and his companions joined a band of soldiers headed by a Sinhalese general whom they understood to have deserted the king's service. They thought that he intended to desert to the Dutch in Colombo, three days' march to the west, and they asked nothing more than to be allowed to go with him. Actually he was almost the only noble who remained loyal to Raja Singha, and in one sense, this was a lucky accident for the white men. It is true that their dream of giving themselves up to the Dutch was frustrated, but on the other hand, when the rebellion collapsed—the whole chaotic incident only lasted five days—they were understood to have shown their loyalty to Raja Singha.

Although actual fighting only lasted for five days, confusion reigned for many weeks after the return of the king to his capital. All organized life had temporarily disappeared. Murder, rape, and looting were uncontrolled, and nobody, in the general disorder, fared worse than the white captives. Their money allowance had come to an end, there was nobody to feed them, and they had no means of obtaining food except, like everyone else, by looting. Most of the inhabitants of Kandy, terrified by the murder let loose on all sides, had abandoned their homes, and the bands of workless and lawless citizens—Knox and his men among them—roaming the



They lined the streets begging for a handful of rice

streets, simply helped themselves to whatever they could find. Before long all of them were reduced to such a pass that they lined the streets begging for a handful of rice to keep body and soul together.

Order of some sort was restored at last, and their accidental adherence to the king's cause stood Knox and his companions in good stead. As Raja Singha took a firm grip of his throne again, he restored the money allowance to the white men, and once more instructed the villagers in whose district they lived, to feed them. Yet, once again, one is faced with the strange enigma of their behaviour. In all that confusion, with nobody to guard them or to take the smallest notice of what a handful of white men did with themselves, why did they not escape?

4

The Wonderful Map

IT IS a curiosity of history that during the civil war which raged in the Kandyan hills, no true report of it seems to have reached the Dutch, one of whose outposts was no more than a few miles from Raja Singha's boundaries. At that time of unrest, a quick thrust with a well-armed commando-type force would have taken Kandy and probably subjugated the turbulent highlanders for good. No such attack was made. On the contrary, the military policy of the Dutch became even more cautious and purely defensive than before. Their maritime provinces were strengthened, and forts were built at Matara, Galle, Colombo, Negombo, Chilaw and Jaffna, a string of forts, all along the west coast from the extreme south to the northernmost tip. During the years that Knox had been inert in his Koswatta hut they had built two forts on the east coast, at Batticoola and Trincomalee, but both were abandoned without a shot being fired at the mere appearance of a French warship. The truth is, of course, that they were in the island purely for what they could get out of it, and the main prize at that time was cinnamon. This valuable spice was coveted more than any other produce, in those days, and when the Dutch found that it would not grow well along the

east coast, they had no further interest in that part of the country. Also, of course, they feared the French, but at this distance in time, their even greater fear of Raja Singha seems inexplicable.

There can be no doubt that they held the Kandyan king in the highest respect. Huge supplies of ammunition and food were stored in each of their forts; warships were brought from Holland to ensure the command of the sea which had never been challenged; and gunboats patrolled the system of canals built by them to link the lagoons of the west coast—known as Gobbs—with each other and Colombo. Rivers such as the Kelaniganga and the Kaluganga were constantly patrolled too, but all these measures were purely defensive. No punitive expedition was ever sent into the mountains to teach Raja Singha respect for the Hollanders, and the only adventurous move made by them was the building of a fort rather too close to Kandy to suit that monarch's comfort.

Before the revolt the Kandyans had made the most of this hesitant policy of appeasement, keeping up a constant guerrilla warfare, particularly against the wretched Challias—the slave labour used by the Dutch to cut cinnamon in the forests—and the Dutch troops guarding them. The highlanders appeared and disappeared at will, and the forts of the Hollanders were useless against such will-o'-the-wisp tactics. The powerful white nation, with its warships, guns, forts, and disciplined troops, was reduced almost to a state of siege by a few thousand undisciplined and poorly armed Kandyans. The result was, as we have seen, that Ceylon grew in mystery as the years went by, and although the Dutch Governor resident in Colombo had only to step on to the veranda of his

bungalow to see the distant spire of Adam's Peak, it was *terra incognita* to him and to his men. There it was, one of the world's most spectacular and lovely landfalls—for sailors, as much as a hundred miles out to sea, had been familiar with the sight for more than two thousand years—barely three days' march away; yet no white man had ever set foot on its slopes!

Up in those same mountains Robert Knox was preparing to explore, not only Adam's Peak, but the whole of the Kandyan territory. It is only right to add that there was no heroic motive behind his decision. He had no conscious idea of exploration, no desire to add to the sum of human knowledge or to unravel a mystery. He had, by this time, become a trader, and finding his way all over Raja Singha's kingdom was all in the way of business.

After the rebellion against the king, the Dutch were left in peace except for a few sporadic raids. Their only aggressive gesture, as previously mentioned, had been to build a fort too close to Kandy for Raja Singha's comfort. This turned out to be a piece of bad luck for Robert Knox, as the fort was erected just beyond the range of hills on which he had built himself a home near the village of Accra-reagalla. He had already begun to trade from his new home, and was an entirely different man from the lethargic, self-pitying young seaman who had watched his father die at Koswatta.

Raja Singha responded to the threat of the new Dutch fort by sending a strong force of soldiers to guard all the paths through the woods and over the mountain ridge which was all that separated that

part of his kingdom from the Hollanders. All the villagers in the valley had fled at the approach of the white men, and the king gave special orders that Knox was to move at once to Legundeniya, some miles to the south of Kandy, so that he might be safe from the Dutch! Nothing could have been more ironic, for the English captives asked nothing better than the opportunity of deserting to the Dutch, who would certainly have allowed them to return to England. Yet, once more, no effort was made to escape. Since the king merely sent them a message ordering them to move, with no soldiers to enforce the order, it is hard to understand why Knox and his men did not take their courage in both hands and cross the ridge to safety. Surely, in the confusion then prevailing, nothing could have stopped them; but instead, tamely, they obeyed orders.

This forced move was a severe blow to Knox. In his new hut on a mountain top at Legundeniya, he was merely a guest, and by no means a welcome guest, of the villagers. The king had ordered them not only to feed Knox, but to supply his pension as well. Though there were four more Englishmen not far away, and it was pleasant for them all to meet and talk of home and freedom, Knox hated the place. To him it was "all uneven land onely hills and dales wett and durty, being full of springs and rivers and besides much infested with horse leeches"; but living there had one significant consequence. Hitherto, although he had been some years on the island, he had not bothered to learn the Sinhalese language with any thoroughness. Now he did so. Slow starter that he proved himself in all things, yet he was systematic once he had undertaken a task. While the

other Englishmen had been content to learn a smattering of the local patois, Knox now became absolutely fluent. It was a very important event, for he must have acquired an extraordinary grasp of the language to have delved into every aspect of the national life as he did, even to the most intimate details of people's domestic arrangements, customs, and religious beliefs. His book is packed with information about the island, its peoples; its customs, festivals, religions; its flora and fauna; its laws, politics, and agriculture. Much of this vast mass of information could have been collected by personal observation, but the greater part could only have come from conversation, and conversation on the very highest level of idiomatic speech. There were no reference books to which he could refer. There were no authorities who could check his work. Every word of that exhaustive journal came from his own knowledge; an astonishing achievement, for within the framework of things which do not change, all remains today exactly as he wrote of it nearly three hundred years ago. The differences are only those which the passing of time has brought about.

It is almost incomprehensible that so much could have been done by a man who, for the first few years spent in Ceylon, hardly bothered to do more than learn a few everyday phrases!

Although he disliked his new home at Legundeniya, with his customary caution he made no effort to get away from it for three years. Then, quietly, he set about buying a piece of land at Eladetta, not far from the first hut he had built for himself at Accra-reagalla. It was quite safe for him to return to that part of the country, for the Dutchmen, in their for-

tress over the intervening ridge of mountains, had grown careless as the years passed and they were not molested. It was not wise to relax vigilance with Raja Singha as an enemy. The wily old king suddenly let loose an overwhelming attack on the fort, and those Dutchmen who were not killed outright were taken prisoner; and Knox noted that they were still in Kandy when he made his escape eleven years later.

Once the fort had been destroyed, the king lost interest in the area, and although Knox had no royal permission to return to the district which he liked so well, he had begun to have some knowledge of Raja Singha's character. He wrote: "As for the king's command I dreaded it not much, having found by observation that the king's orders wear away by time, and neglect of them comes at last to be unregarded."

Eladetta was some ten miles south of Kandy. It was not large, but it was so fertile that Knox persuaded three other white men to share it with him, knowing that it could provide enough for all. His companions had to be bachelors, for Knox would not have women about the place. He had worshipped his mother, but apart from her he was a woman-hater, although his insistence on having bachelors to live with him was not entirely due to this fact. He believed that, however fond of their white husbands Sinhalese wives might be—and nearly all of the white prisoners had taken Sinhalese wives—their fear of Raja Singha was greater than their love for their husbands. The majority of them were spies, part of the web of espionage which held together the king's kingdom of terror. Knox had not lost his determination to escape, and was confident that his opportunity would come, but he refused to discuss this hope with

anybody. He knew that if it were once suspected that he was scheming for his freedom he would be impaled on a stake, or torn apart by elephants. So he confined his partnership with others to bachelors, who had no ties, and for some years the four men lived amicably together at Eladetta. So high a standard of living did they achieve that their home became a social centre. Sinhalese of high degree often visited them and marvelled at the industry shown by their white neighbours whom they began to regard as Sinhalese themselves. None among them suspected that Knox still harboured plans of escape.

When two of his household decided that escape was finally impossible, and that a bachelor existence no longer had any charms for them, Knox promptly made them leave. They married two Sinhalese girls and were no more heard of, but the sole survivor, Stephen Rutland, not only stayed with Knox for the rest of their time in Ceylon, but escaped with him to England, and even accompanied him on a further voyage of adventure later. Without Rutland, shadowy figure though he is in all Knox's accounts of him, it is improbable that Knox would ever have plucked up sufficient courage to take the final step and run away.

During those years at Eladetta the true exploration of the island began, particularly of the mountain range to which, as yet, the two men were confined. "It is of the inland country", wrote Knox, "that I chiefly intend to write of, which is yet hidden island even to the Dutch themselves that inhabit upon the place."

The wild, forest-covered and exquisitely lovely horse-shoe of mountains in the centre of Ceylon

covers 4,212 square miles. The highest mountain is Piduratalagalla, known as Pedro, which is 8,291 feet above sea-level, but it is so obscured by the central massif that its great height is not obvious. Knox thought that Adam's Peak, which is 7,341 feet, was the highest in the island, but in fact it is only the fourth, Kirilgalpota and Totapella both exceeding 7,500 feet. But if Adam's Peak is not the loftiest, it is certainly the most interesting, and has claims to be the most romantic mountain in the world.

It stands at the extreme south-west corner of the massif, and although on what is known as the Maskeliya side to the north, it is attached to the mountain range, from any other viewpoint it seems to stand alone. It is a soaring needle of rock, thickly forested on its lower and middle slopes, and has been called "a landmark in the sea of time" perhaps because of its exceptional holiness. This holiness arises from the fact that on its summit there is a curious indentation in the living rock which looks like the imprint of a giant human foot, a mark held in awe and veneration by hundreds of millions of people. The place is, in fact, a colossal natural cathedral in a setting of almost supernatural beauty.

When the Sinhalese people first landed on the shores of Lanka in 543 B.C., a handful of adventurers under their leader Vijayo—Lanka is the original Sanskrit name for Ceylon—they encountered no opposition. The only inhabitants of the island consisted of three tribes whose legendary past is said to stretch back to 2387 B.C. when a geological cataclysm is supposed to have left them the sole survivors of what had been a great civilization. In that remote past a vast tract of land had subsided into the ocean

—which appears to be a geological fact—leaving only a small island where, formerly, India had continued for some hundreds of miles beyond her southern limits. The capital of this lost civilization, a city of “unimaginable splendour” was Lankapura, a sort of lost Atlantis, firmly fixed in Sinhalese minds as a genuine historical city but one of which no concrete evidence has ever been found. The three poor tribes who alone survived that tremendous convulsion of the earth’s crust reverted to aborigines, living in caves in the forests. Folk-lore insists that all this actually happened, but if so, the only remnants of actual proof remaining are the tribes. A handful of their descendants, known as Veddhas, still exist to this day.

Vijayo and his band were a strange people unlike any other Indian races except for the fact that they were Hindus. Even that soon changed, for in the third century B.C. King Asoka, Emperor of India, sent his son Mahinda to Ceylon to convert the Sinhalese to Buddhism. To cement the conversion a branch of the Bodhi tree, the sacred tree under which the Buddha Gautama found enlightenment, was taken to the island and planted in the sacred city of Anuradhapura 2,251 years ago (1962). It is still there, the oldest tree in the world, and the holiest. Since that time the Sinhalese have remained Buddhist, and they believe that Gautama himself visited their island upon three occasions. On one of them, as he flew homewards towards India, his foot rested for a moment upon the top of Adam’s Peak, leaving its imprint there for ever.

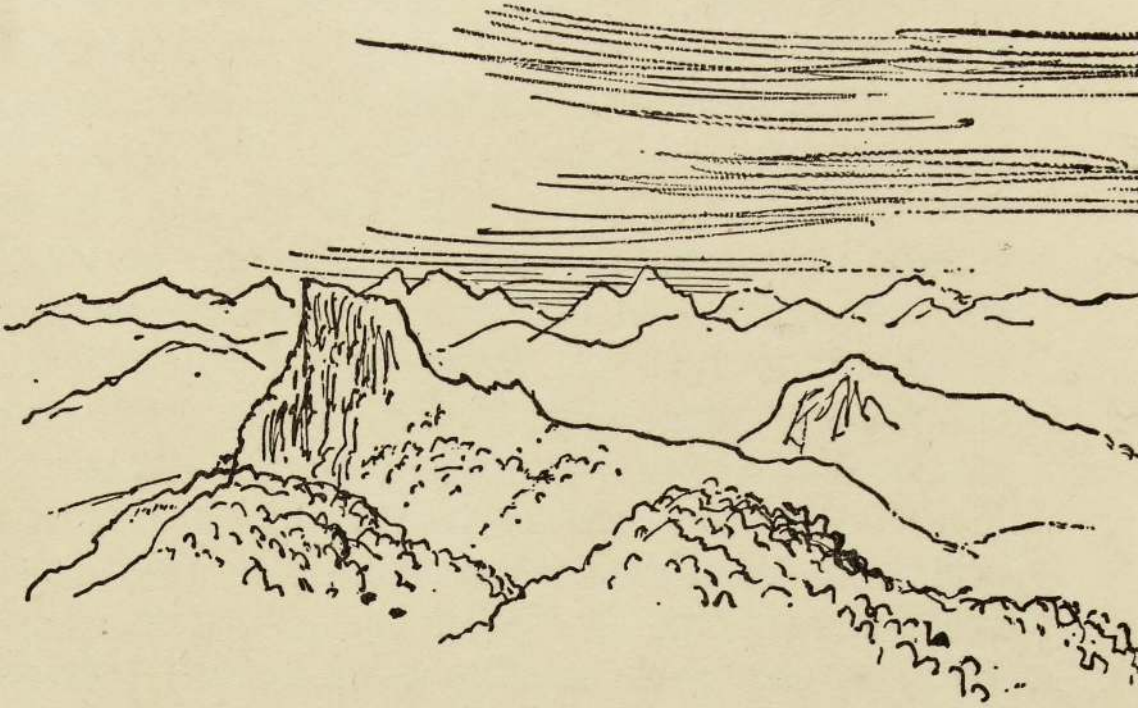
Hindus, on the other hand, say that when their god Saman visited Ceylon, it was he who touched

the Peak with his foot, and to them the mountain is known as Samanakande. Lastly the Mohammedans give yet another explanation of the phenomenon. To them it was caused by Adam, the First Prophet, who was thrown from Paradise for his sin and was compelled to stand, one-footed, on the Peak for a thousand years in expiation of his transgressions.

The fact that the followers of these three great religious groups differ in their belief as to the origin of the Footprint has caused no dissension between them. On the contrary the lovely mountain is common to all, even one small sect of Christians, the followers of St. Thomas, go there, and once a year, at the poya season of the third full moon, a pilgrimage of grace climbs that terrific ascent. Composed of believers of any faith, for all are welcome, the party starts from Ratnapura, the city of Gems, at the bottom of the mountain on the southern side. This is incomparably the hardest aspect of the ascent. They take the hard way to gain grace. From the northern, or Maskeliya, side the climb is little more than a stiff walk, and does not count as a pilgrimage.

The pilgrims climb together in perfect amity so as to arrive on the summit in time for the sunrise, which is an event of such superlative loveliness that no man who has witnessed it can forget it.

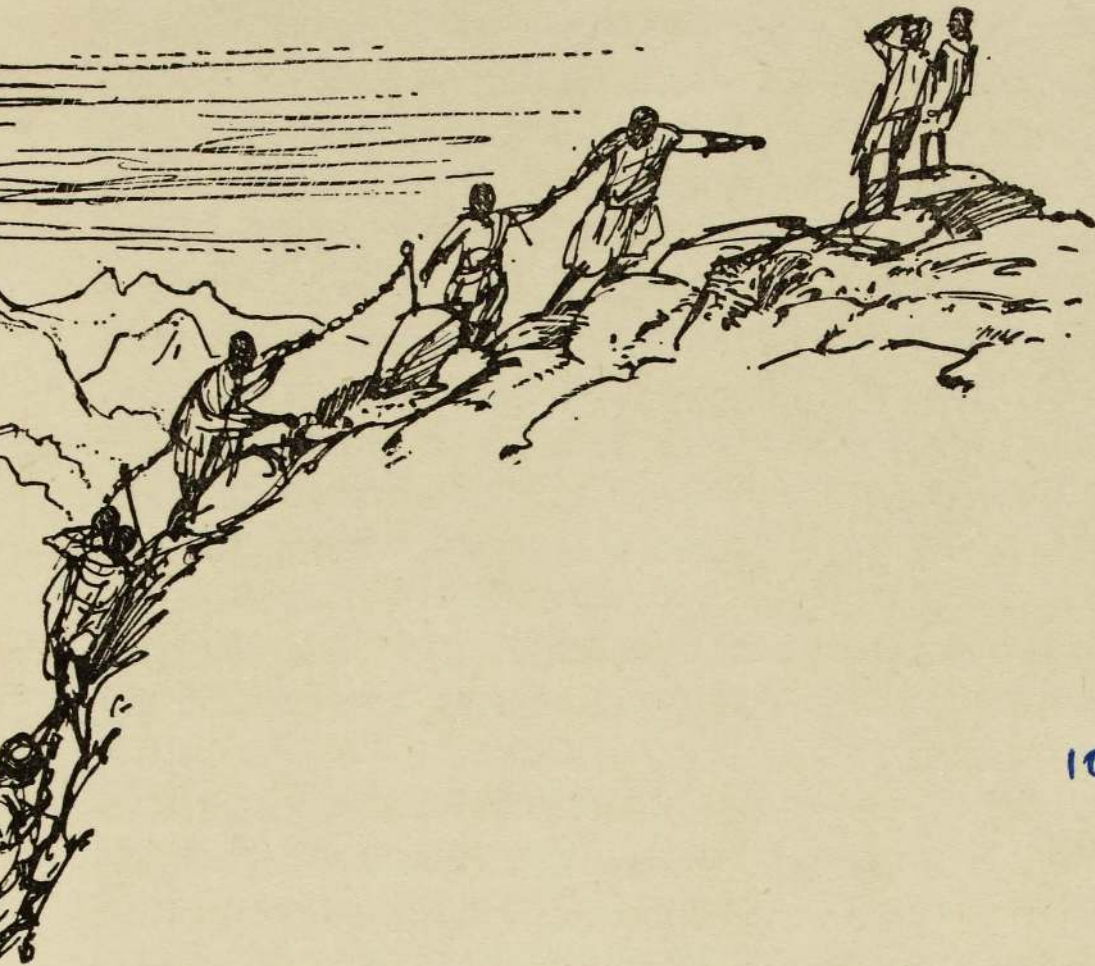
The ascent is through tropical jungle teeming with wild life until the last thousand feet is reached. This is a sheer cliff, and until a few years ago the only way of surmounting the obstacle was to go up the famous "Chains of the faith". These chains are made of metal lengths, each fixed at the top but swinging free at the bottom. The pilgrim had to haul himself up this perilous life-line hand over hand, putting his



feet into the rough little metal stirrups placed at every two feet or so. In the furious winds which swiftly arise, from time to time, in the high mountains, these chains often swung wildly from side to side, with the pilgrims clinging on desperately; so dangerous a proceeding that there are instances of whole families being torn from their holds and hurled to their deaths many hundreds of feet below.

The origin of these "Chains of the faith" remains an unsolved mystery. The famous travellers Marco Polo and Ibn Batuta both mention them with wonder, but nobody knows how they got there. The only attempted explanation of their presence comes from an unknown Persian poet who wrote that Alexander the Great, after his conquest of India, visited the Peak and had them fixed so that he could get to the top. Unfortunately for this theory, there is no evidence of any kind that Alexander ever visited Ceylon.

Whatever their origin, the chains are still there,



10041 C.C

The pilgrims climb together in perfect amity

but they are no longer used. Iron ladders have now been fixed into the rock face making the climb safer, although it remains as hair-raising as ever.

The view from the top of Adam's Peak is not only breath-taking, it is, in some ways, unique. Since the mountain stands almost alone, more or less clear of the central massif, every inch of the thousand-mile-long coastline of Ceylon stands out quite clearly when the sun leaps from the sea; perhaps the most wonderful panorama of its kind in the world.

The little town of Ratnapura from which the poya pilgrimage starts, is still, as it was in Knox's time, the centre of the island's precious stone industry. Sindbad the Sailor, after his voyage through "the

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subterranean river” was dazzled by the beauty of the precious stones worn by the Kandyan kings, and we may remember that Raja Singha, when he met visiting ambassadors by night in the Audience Hall in Kandy, was festooned with jewels. But many centuries before Raja Singha, Taprobane—one of Ceylon’s many names—was considered to be the island of incomparable jewels. Today, although there are approximately seven hundred pits operating during the dry season, the quality of the stones unearthed is not high. Sindbads’ diamonds, if they ever existed, are not found now, but sapphires, moonstones, garnets, amethysts, tourmalines, and many other attractive but fairly common stones are turned up in large quantities.

When Knox stood on the slopes of Pedro he was in sparsely inhabited country. In his capacity of corn-merchant—Ceylon’s corn is, of course, rice—he had begun to wander unhindered all over the wild labyrinth of valleys, forests, cataracts, crags, and precipices of the mountains, searching for customers in lonely villages, and mentally piecing together the map of Ceylon which is one of his most remarkable achievements. And in all that magnificent country he found nothing more beautiful than the long valley lying to the south of Pedro which he marked on his map as Newerellea. As written today it is Nuwara Eliya, and means “The Royal City of Light”, but it was no city when Knox looked down upon it. It was a small building maintained as a sort of hide-out by the Kandyan kings, for certainly it was unlikely ever to be found by anyone unacquainted with the mountains. Raja Singha the First had fled to its protection in 1610 while evading a Portuguese attack. Raja

Singha the Second kept a small staff there, but they were the only inhabitants of that lonely valley which has since become famous.

Some British officers in pursuit of elephants wandered into it in 1826, and liked it so much that they spoke of it wherever they went. It has now developed into one of the most popular hill stations in the East, a place of gentle mountain slopes, of the famous "Moon Plains", of a river flowing through the centre of a valley entering and leaving a fine lake, of forests, of flowers and flowering shrubs, and of some of the most beautiful views to be found anywhere.

It was on these wild central mountain slopes that the tea industry—the mainstay of Ceylon's present prosperity—first began. Conan Doyle describes the birth of this pioneering enterprise as one of the world's most romantic and heroic commercial developments, since it leapt, Phoenix-like, straight from the ruins of the coffee industry; a shattering disaster.

The Chinese philosopher Confucius, writing in the sixth century B.C., mentions tea, but the first reference to it made by an Englishman was in 1635 A.D. This was before Knox's time, but it did not refer to Ceylon where, at that time, tea was unknown. A man named Wickham, writing from Japan, said that he had drunk a delicious hot beverage known as "chaw", and it is a curious fact that tea is still known, in English slang, as "a cup of cha".

In 1869, twenty years after the first British colonists had opened up thousands of acres of coffee plantations, disaster struck the industry. A disease, *hemilia vastatrix*, known as the coffee bug, devastated every bush planted, and in a moment the pioneering

coffee planters were ruined. But they did not accept defeat. By 1875 the first thousand acres of tea had been planted on the ruins of the old estates, and twenty years later there were 300,000 acres in being, a remarkable burst of pioneering enterprise. When the British handed Ceylon over to the Sinhalese people in 1948, there were over half a million acres of some of the finest tea in the world covering the mountains, with twelve hundred estates ranging in size from 150 acres to 4,000 acres. Some of the highest grown tea in the island—and, in general, the higher the tea the finer the quality—is on the very spot where Robert Knox must have stood as he looked out over the hidden valley of Nuwara Eliya.

Those particular slopes of Pedro have an advantage over the view offered by Adam's Peak in that they reveal the mass of the mountains as well as the surrounding plains. It was from here that Knox probably worked out the general shape of his map. He saw Adam's Peak to the south-west; the Great Western range which he marked without naming; the Talakande ridge which, today, separates the two tea-growing districts of Dimbulla and Dickoya; the eastern wing of the horse-shoe which he named Bomregam; the Uva hills dominated by another holy mountain Namunukula; Dolosbage to the west, and, northwards the Kandyan mountains with Hunisgirya Peak beyond. All are shown on his map, and many of them are correctly named, although, oddly enough, he did not realize that Pedro, probably because it rises so gently from the valley of Nuwara Eliya, was itself a peak.

The southern jungle plains, completely unknown both to the Portuguese and Dutch except for a few

prominent landmarks round the coast, he filled in with quite extraordinary detail in view of the fact that the area is largely uninhabited to this day. In some respects he is even more accurate than modern atlases. For example, he marks the once famous city of Maagam with that name where, now, it is called Tissa Maharama.

With no knowledge of cartography, no training in draughtsmanship, no instruments, and no assistance, Knox produced a map which is a miracle of general accuracy, bringing to western knowledge rivers, districts, towns, villages, forests and jungles which no white man had ever before visited, and which none were to see again for another century and a half after Knox's return to England. It is an outstanding achievement—a detailed piece of geographical exploration rarely equalled—which, for some reason, never seems to have been accorded the recognition which it so clearly deserves.

5

Summoned to the King's Court

THE wandering trader-explorer in his Eladetta home had now built up for himself a position of enviable wealth and influence, but he took the utmost care to keep himself away from the court at Kandy and the king's notice. Almost alone among the white captives he had realized that in obscurity lay safety. Not for him the delights of royal patronage and power at court. Somehow, some day, he intended to escape; that was the lamp that he kept for ever burning brightly within his mind. And he knew that unless he could keep out of the limelight of royal favour, escape would be for ever impossible. The rest of his fellow countrymen and the other white men of various nationalities cooped up in the menagerie had abandoned hope, and were making the best of the life of *laissez faire* which Kandy offered. Knox had no opinion of them, and his account of their way of life makes sad reading even allowing for the fact that he was a Puritan. They were indolent, for the most part quite content with their lot, with no thoughts above comfort, their Sinhalese wives, good food and the consolations of drink. All of them, said Knox, drank far too much, probably to keep themselves from thinking.

A few of them were ambitious enough to fight for

power and wealth at the Kandyan court, and since Raja Singha seems to have had a preference for white men about him, they usually achieved both; but not for long. Basking in the king's favour was a dangerous luxury, and even the simplest friendships among themselves could bring disaster. Knox notes the case of a Portuguese who made friends with an Englishman, and sent him a note written in his own language. His friend could not read it, and handed it to another Englishman to be translated. His wife, one of Raja Singha's army of spies, reported the incident, and the king, suspecting a plot, had all three white men arrested and condemned to death without a trial. They were executed by being pulled to pieces by an elephant. As the cautious Knox had realized, the favours of that particular king were apt to end abruptly, and without warning.

The exact number of white victims kept in Raha Singha's menagerie at that time is not known, but Knox says that there were over fifty still alive when he left. Eleven of them were English, as a letter from one William Vassall, who reached high office under the king, revealed. It was sent to the Madras Headquarters of the East India Company in 1690, and was a pitiable appeal for help, ending:

“wee are in a very missarable condition God of his mercy look upon us.”

The East India Company made many attempts to contact Raja Singha, but all were unsuccessful, and no further written word ever came out of Kandy. But Knox's escape showed that it could be done, and, as we shall see, he managed to get a letter back to his old comrades after he had reached England. In this

he described how he had got away, and as an echo of the tragedy of the Kandyan prison, six other escapes subsequently took place. The first of these was in 1706, many years after Knox's break-out, and it was achieved by a seaman named Hubbard. He had escaped from Raja Singha's lair after *fifty years'* captivity. Only two of the other five men who escaped reached England, and, like Hubbard, were so old and broken that they were senile and barely more than half-witted.

Knox, then, had no illusions with regard to life at court, but although he realized the urgent need of keeping out of the way of the king and his nobles, on one occasion he allowed his greed to betray him and come within an ace of destroying him.

His estate at Eladetta was situated in a coconut grove close to rice-fields, some of which he owned. Rice and coconuts were, in fact, the commodities to which he owed his comparative wealth. The first he traded for cash, but the second gave him all those domestic comforts which enabled him to write:

“We (he and Stephen Rutland) had now brought our house and ground to such a state of perfection that few Noblemen's seats in the land did excel us.”

Incidentally, his account of how he first came to be in a position to start as “a corn merchant” is revealing. When his clothes had so worn out that he was left with nothing but a hat and shorts, he sacrificed his last shirt to make large, baggy pockets for his shorts. Just before harvest time, when the villagers' rice was nearly ripe—of course he had no rice-field of his own then—he would walk through

their fields as though taking his evening exercise. As soon as he felt certain that no one could see him he would stop and fill his huge, baggy pockets with rice. This soon gave him a store of grain which, with his rapidly increasing knowledge of the country, he could use to play upon the Sinhalese peasant's inability to look ahead or to make any sort of provision against hard times such as drought or flood. Once he had amassed a little capital from the sale of stolen rice, he set to work as a food merchant. Where rice was plentiful on the wet mountain slopes he bought it cheaply; and where it was in short supply on the north-eastern hills he demanded high prices. Since rice is the staple diet of the islanders, he was always certain to find customers.

Rice, in Ceylon, is of two kinds—wet land and dry land. Both types require water, and in the dry zone, the central and northern forests into which Knox and Rutland now began to probe, there was very little water. The vast reservoirs of an earlier day had mostly been broken down and had reverted to jungle, but there were still enough of them left to provide water, led by "ellas" or channels into the rice-fields of a few scattered villages in those arid plains. But only one crop each year could be harvested in such places. In the wet zone there was plenty of water for two crops annually.

Knox studied all this carefully, and not only did he become, by local standards, a wealthy man but—more important from the point of view of making his escape—his comings and goings were never questioned. Before long the two white men and their loads of rice were known to all the Watches in the mountains.

The coconut tree which contributed so much to Knox's well-being is a graceful palm, often as much as eighty feet high. The villagers have a saying that if a man has half a dozen coconut trees, a jak tree, a cow, and a part share of a rice-field he needs nothing else in life for his material comfort. Like all peasant sayings, there is considerable truth in it, for the uses to which the coconut tree may be put are legion. Knox was utterly astounded at its remarkable properties, and said, "These trees afford so many necessities that I thinke were people to dwell where there were no other sustenance they might live to die of old age."

To begin with, the palm provides both food and drink, for the scraped flesh of the inner kernel is delicious in curry; the unexpanded leaves or cabbage makes preserves; the young nut is turned into medicine or sweets. The mature nut has, within the kernel, a tasty milk known as "curumbu", and the tree sap provides toddy which, when distilled, turns into an alcoholic beverage known as arrack. Wine, vinegar and sugar, all come from the nut, and the oil produces hair oil for the girls and young men; lamp fuel, candles and soap; while what is left over after the oil has been expressed becomes a cattle and poultry food called poonac. The shell can be turned into charcoal, tooth-paste, spoons and cups, while the fibre which encloses it provide coir, string, coarse cloth, rope, nets, bags, cushions, brushes, mats or fuel. The leaves of the tree are woven into kadjan which makes good roofing material—or even complete huts—because it swells in the rainy season, thus keeping out the moisture. Baskets, torches, brooms, fertilizers, fishing-rods, broom handles, and many other domes-

tic requirements spring from the leaves and stem of the tree, and the trunk—called porcupine wood—is used for doors, windows, beams, shelves, or cupboards. Knox, in his journal, listed all these and many more, having proved them by practical experience; the first white man to do so. He is clearly the prototype from whom Defoe drew his hero, Robinson Crusoe.

Rice and coconut trees, therefore, were the basis of Knox's growing wealth. He and Rutland were admired and envied by their neighbours, but it was not enough for Knox. Men who have much usually look for more, and he resented the fact that the people of Legundeniya, that bare mountain top on which, as far as the king knew he himself still lived, had sent him a message. They had heard of his great prosperity, they said, and had decided to stop payment of the allowance due to him from the Kandyans. They paid, somewhat pathetically, according to Knox; that:

“I was better able to live without it than they to give it to me.”

which was, of course, perfectly true. But although he agreed with them he did not see, being a greedy man, why he should give up his allowance despite the fact that he did not need it. Forgetting his caution, he went immediately to the Kandyan court and appealed to the Adigar, the king's Prime Minister, to continue the money “which the king was pleased to allow me”.

It was a foolhardy move, and he regretted it as soon as he had made it. At once he found himself under public notice where, previously, his very existence

seems to have been forgotten by the authorities. The Adigar agreed that he was entitled to his pension, and gave him a pass for a monthly visit to the king's palace to receive it. His first visit was his last, for he realized, in a flash, what he had done; but it was now



... fled back to his estate

too late. One of the nobles at court, a man named Ova Motterel, was one of Knox's near neighbours at Eladetta, and out of good fellowship said that so prosperous a man should stand high in the king's favour. He brought Knox's name to the notice of Raja Singha, the most dangerous thing that could have happened. Knox, terrified, abandoned all

thought of his allowance and fled back to his estate.

He was not allowed to escape so easily. His greed had brought him within an ace of destruction, and although he quickly disappeared from the Kandyan scene, he was not immediately forgotten. An order arrived from the Adigar requesting his presence at the court to meet Raja Singha, and to accept personal service under the king. This was a royal command, and he could not refuse to answer it. On his journey to the capital he was close to panic and railed against his misfortune, appealing to God to help him in his peril. Peril it most certainly was, and the most perilous thing about it was Knox's desperate resolve to refuse his services to Raja Singha. As far as he could see, whatever happened there could be only one end to his predicament—death.

“In the end I must be put to death as happens to all that serve him, and to deny his service can be but death.”

It was a bitter cry, but he had only himself to blame. With all his cleverness and caution, he had been brought into the very Valley of the Shadow of Death by his own greed.

Fortunately luck was with him. His Sinhalese friend, although furious with him for refusing what seemed a wonderful future, did not betray him. In disgust at Knox's ingratitude he handed the white man's case over to the Adigar instead of reporting it direct to Raja Singha as he might so easily have done. Knox suffered torments as a result of his indiscretion, for the Adigar summoned him to Kandy again, and for weeks he had to stay there in hourly dread of the

summons to appear before the king, which would have been a sentence of death and which he felt certain must come. The Adigar did, in fact, inform his master of what Ova Motterel had told him, but he did so without making a case of it and, as could happen with the unpredictable monarch, Knox was forgotten. He did not know this, of course, and for a long time waited, sick with anxiety, in drawn-out suspense. All this time he had to remain in Kandy, which he hated and dreaded. His only friend there was Richard Varnham, formerly one of the *Anne's* company and, at that time, the king's favourite. Varnham, by now, was sadly aware that it was no sinecure being Raja Singha's favourite, and he was frightened for Knox and terrified for himself. He could not betray his Captain's son, but he knew that if Raja Singha were to find out that he had befriended Knox without insisting upon his appearance at court as commanded, his own execution was certain. When at last it became evident that the episode had been forgotten, Knox hurried back to Eladetta almost ill with relief, like a condemned man reprieved at the last moment. Of Richard Varnham nothing more was ever heard but, as we shall see, Knox's Sinhalese friend, Ova Motterel, who had been so anxious that the white man should live the luxurious life of the king's favourite, himself fell from favour in due course, and was torn to pieces by elephants.

This narrow escape not only taught Knox a lesson, it opened his eyes to the fact that dreaming always of getting away from Ceylon—as he and Rutland had been doing now for years—was not enough. An actual attempt would have to be made, for sooner or later one or both of them might again come before the

king's notice, and could hardly expect to escape a second time.

Knox now became almost fanatical about being spied upon. He had never liked women, but he had employed manservants about the house for various domestic tasks. Now he would permit no one even to enter it, and he and Rutland did all their own chores for fear that some chance remark of theirs might be passed on to Kandy, although nobody in the district, as far as they knew, could speak English. Even to stay at Eladetta now seemed dangerous to them, and they began to take longer and longer journeys afield, into all parts of the Kandyan kingdom, partly in pursuit of trade, and partly to evade the notice of prominent men like Ova Motterel who rarely strayed from the neighbourhood of Kandy. The fear that if they did not escape soon, they would inevitably find themselves broken on the wheel took firm hold over them both. At last, with that extreme caution which marked all Knox's actions, a plan of escape was drawn up.

Their first step was to review the geography of the island, of which Knox now had a unique knowledge. Many a man must have stood, as he had done, upon some lofty peak in the central massif and seen Ceylon from north to south, and from east to west, stretching away on all sides to its inevitable marriage with the sea, but no one, up to that time, had done so calculatingly. Knox now did so. He knew where each peak was situated, from the Knuckles to Adam's Peak. He knew every path in that beautiful labyrinth, and every village, and now he searched out each Watch and marked it upon his map. As yet he knew nothing of the country under Dutch rule, or of the

northern kingdom under the sovereignty of a Malabar prince, and in trying to work out an escape route these had to remain as unknown.

The few paths which led to the west led to the Dutch territories, and were so heavily guarded that in Knox's opinion no way of escape was open to them there. Southwards the mountains ended in sheer headlong descent to the jungle, a parched and empty wasteland which might be crossed but which led to no harbour where the ships of white nations might call. Eastwards the mountain tracks which led ultimately to the ports of Batticaloa or Cottiar were heavily guarded where they reached the forests. Only to the north were the Watches few, because it was thought that nobody in their senses would attempt to run away from the Kandyan kingdom by that route, for between the northern foothills and the north-western coast lay one hundred and twenty miles of unknown, in places impenetrable, and mostly waterless jungle. Part of it, too, was ruled over by a Malabar prince whose tough jungle people were no respecters of persons and hated white men. Raja Singha considered that this jungle country could not be traversed except by a single track, fairly well-defined, which enabled his men to keep in touch with the northern limits of his kingdom. Only authorized travellers, his own soldiers, were permitted to use that path. Apart from that, the whole desolate area was a trackless waste and no white man had ever crossed it.

Considering these possible routes, Knox came to the conclusion that only through these central wastelands and the forests of the Wannu was escape open to him, and fifteen years after his capture took the

decision to make the attempt. It took four more years before the escape actually took place! Truly, in those days, time had another meaning for men than it has today.

The two white men now began to travel deeper into



Veddhas, the aboriginal people of Ceylon

the northern areas, venturing into the forest regions, drought-stricken and fever ridden. Occasionally they encountered traces of the Veddhas, the aboriginal people of Ceylon of whose origins nothing is known for certain. Yet, although they came upon caves recently occupied by Veddhas, the aborigines themselves had invariably disappeared, and Knox pieced

together his remarkable knowledge of them from Sinhalese jungle dwellers, not so very far from aborigines themselves, whose language he spoke fluently, and whose confidence he never failed to gain. For Robert Knox, to a remarkable degree, had the ability to live as the countrymen lived. He looked like one himself, wearing only a pair of baggy shorts, and sometimes merely the loin-cloth, his hair hanging down his back almost to his waist to protect his spine from the sun, his face bearded, and tanned as deep a brown as the Sinhalese themselves. It is probable that many of the villagers did not even suspect that he was a white man, and no doubt Stephen Rutland was the same.

Knox's extraordinary memory is nowhere shown to greater advantage than in his description of the Veddhas. The account of this vanishing race is a *tour de force*, based upon his insatiable curiosity, and a selective instinct for truth in sifting the information he received which amounts to genius, for fables and legends about these wild people abounded. Most of them were nonsense, but the seventeenth century was far more credulous than our own day. Knox must have had to listen to stories of the Veddhas' ability to vanish into thin air; of the fact that they possessed tails;* of their supernatural qualities as hunters; and of their terrifying appearance; yet his description of them contains none of these fantasies, and has stood the test of time and of modern intensive research.

Early in the present century the British Government made a grant to enable an expedition to go into

* The Veddhas believe that they once had tails for travel through the tree tops.

the remoter parts of the Ceylon jungle and to produce a scientific report on the Veddhas. The expedition consisted of Professor Seligmann and his wife, who not only found the few remaining families of these pathetic people but lived among them for several months. The book written by the Professor* was a work of scholarship and intense observation, and it covered some hundreds of pages. Knox's description of the Veddhas is on five pages only, yet within that short space he seems to have captured most of the salient points in the lives and habits of these peculiar people, all of them verified by the work of Seligmann.

The forest Veddhas of Ceylon, if any remain alive,† are divided into *varuges*, each *varuge* consisting of a few families who share hunting and fishing rights over areas of jungle which seem to them very clearly marked, although, to the uninitiated there are no signs of demarcation. They may not trespass into the territory of another *varuge*, the one provocation which might lead to fighting even among these essentially peaceful people. They are highly moral in their sex life. The system of marriage is monogamous, and husband and wife seem devoted to each other; and contrary to the beliefs of many primitive races, the female sex is considered in every way the equal, if not superior to, the male.

When the short spring-time of the jungle is at its height, there is a romantic, Garden-of-Eden quality about their lives, but it is of pathetically short duration. The men hunt the deer, the grey ape, and the monitor lizard for meat; fish the streams; and collect

* *The Veddhas*, Professor C. G. S. Seligmann.

† The author encountered a family of true Veddhas near Horaboraveva in 1929.

the honey of the bambara bees. The women bring up their children with love and a good-natured tolerance which amazed the Seligmanns. They also search for yams, truffles, fruits and edible flowers in the forest, and collect the firewood. It is an idyllic existence, while it lasts; but it has to be remembered that for ten months of the year in the drought-stricken plains, natural foods tend to disappear, game dies out or migrates to the hills, there are no bees, and water is hard to find. Although the Veddhas have some idea of storing food during the time of plenty, it is rarely sufficient, and death by starvation and disease is more common than survival. There is nothing romantic about these poor people towards the end of a drought. Listless, apathetic, verminous, disease-ridden and covered with sores, they wait in increasing misery but with extraordinary endurance, for honey time to come round again.

They have many good qualities, being kind, loving to each other, and unwarlike; but in one thing only, probably, are they outstanding—they are the most remarkable trackers in the world. To a Veddha—the word means hunter—the tangled, confused labyrinth of the forest is as simple to understand as is a well-known city, in which every street has its own name, to the European. Every faintly beaten track—and the jungle is full of paths for him who has eyes to see—every damaged leaf or displaced twig tells its own story of the passing of bird, beast, or insect. He can tell by watching the flight of a homing bee where the hive is to be found. Disturbed roots where pigs have rootled, leaves cropped from high branches by feeding elephants, the pock-marked earth where the lordly elk has danced his curious mating dance—all



(Above) The immemorial craft of the potter. (Below) Adam's Peak as Knox first saw it—from the mountains. The Tamil women are plucking tea bushes.

(Courtesy The Ceylon Tea Centre)





Knox studied the peoples of the island with infinite patience. A street market in Ceylon now, as then, a common sight.

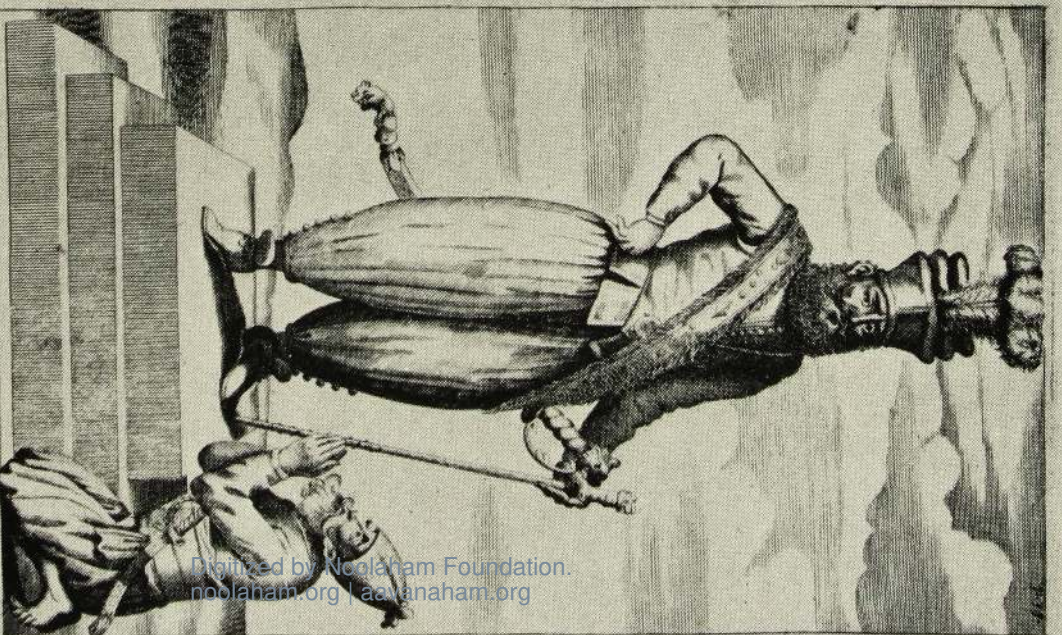
Digitized by Noolaham Foundation
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Their manner of Fishing.



The Manner of treading out their Rice.



Rajah Singah the King of Ceylon.

Illustrations from Robert Knox's own book "An Historical Relation of Ceylon" published in 1681.



Dyaluma Falls, over 600 feet in height, in the Up-country mountains.
(*Courtesy C. N. Skuce*)

are, to the Veddha, the plainly printed pages of the book of the jungle. Any creature of the wild which creeps, walks, trots or runs leaves some part of its story in the sand, the hard earth, the fallen leaves, or the mud of some lonely pool for him to read; and if his ears are no better than those of civilized man, they know, as men who live in cities can never know, how to listen. To interpret correctly the language of the jungle means, to him, life; to mistake it means, too often, death.

Other jungle dwellers have these qualities too, although not, perhaps, to such a marked degree as the Veddhas. As Knox went from village to village, leaving the thickly populated hills and discovering that the forests which he thought uninhabited were not, in fact, quite deserted, he noted down all the characteristics of men and beasts. Nothing seems to have escaped him and gradually, as the months passed and turned into years, his confidence grew. After all, this jungle country which all men seemed to fear was not so bad. With ordinary, common-sense precautions it was possible to live on it and to make one's way through it. Malaria was the worst enemy. Everybody who visited the central forests and spent any time there returned to the hills sick and fever-ridden. At first he and Rutland were no exceptions, but on one of their expeditions they were introduced to a cure for jungle sickness:

“that after the use thereof we had no more Sickness. It is only a dry leaf; they call it in Portuguese Banga, beaten to powder with some of the Country Jaggary; and this we eat morning and evening upon an empty stomach.”

It is doubtful, now, what this concoction could have been, but if it had no genuine healing powers, Knox and Rutland thought that it had and were very little troubled with malaria after its discovery.

They were now trained to jungle ways and found, somewhat to their astonishment, that they did not fear the forests even at night. Yet still Knox hesitated, for he was well aware that if an attempt were made, and failed, the die would have been cast. If they got away they would not be able to return, whatever disaster happened to them in the northern forests; and if they were caught, the thought at the back of both their minds was of that most terrible death, being tied to elephants and pulled to pieces. It was one of Raja Singha's favourite punishments and even men who did not fear death, and there were many brave men imprisoned in Kandy, could not face that awful fate.

Although he feared the king's guards as much now as when he first arrived in the hills, Knox feared the crossing of the unknown northern jungle even more for one reason only—drought. Malaria might be endured, if their *banga* failed them, but absolute drought must be fatal. He and Rutland had calculated that they might be able to cover the distance to the coast in a fortnight if all went well, but that it would be wiser to reckon on a month, and men cannot survive for a month without water. By this time he knew that even in the north-east monsoon, when the central and north-eastern forests received their small allowance of rain, complete drought was not unknown. The jungle villagers spoke of it as almost a certainty, and had no confidence in the monsoon. And for three consecutive years, in fact,

the wind from the north-east brought with it so little rain that Knox wrote:

“Three or four years together the Dry weather prevented us, when the country was almost starved for want of rain.”

Only stillness and heat, and the crumbling of the earth, and the drying up of almost every water-hole so that animals which could not find safety in the foothills perished of thirst, marked those years. There were no springs, and what little water remained in rivers or lakes “wherein the cattel lie and tumble” were stagnant and brackish and covered with mosquitoes. The two comrades dared not make the attempt.

Timid Knox might be, but he was single-minded and patient with a patience one could hardly find today. Once launched upon his plan of making himself so familiar a sight that nobody noticed him, he persisted in his policy. As he said, “The beggar and the merchant is never out of his way,” and the two men went where they pleased until they knew every path into the jungle, and were so well-versed in forest travel that they were more than the equal of the villagers.

By a strange coincidence, while wandering ever deeper into the forest, they chanced upon the home of that same negro slave who had been with them aboard the *Anne* and had shown such insolence at Koswatta when the elder Knox lay dying. He was now married, with a family, and he greeted Knox almost with affection. No man, he said, knew the country better than he did, and he guaranteed to guide his former master to the Dutch fort of Aripa.

That Knox trusted him is probably due to the fact that the boy was in a bad way, half starved, and in desperate want; clearly, too, he knew what he was talking about, and final arrangements were made for the escape.

It was the season of harvest and, as the negro pointed out, the people everywhere would be too busy with their vital work to bother about strangers passing through their villages. Unfortunately, when the day for the start of the march came, Knox woke with such a violent pain in his leg that he could not put it to the ground. For five days he lay, fuming at his helplessness, unable to stand up; but on the night of the sixth day he, Rutland, and another Englishman whose name is not given, started on their adventure. The third Englishman had not been told that this was an attempt at final escape from the island because he was married to a Sinhalese girl, and, as it turned out, this was lucky for Knox and Rutland. For when the little party arrived at the agreed rendezvous where the negro should have been awaiting them, he was no longer there. Strangely enough, Knox seemed quite philosophic about the incident.

“He was gone into another countrey; and we knew not where to find him, and we knew not how to run away without him. Thus we were disappointed that time.”

But Knox realized that he had taken a terrible risk in revealing his intention to escape to the negro. He and Rutland, with the obviously puzzled Englishman whom they “delivered to his wife”, returned home probably terrified that the negro had gone to betray

them to the authorities. Fortunately nothing more was heard of him, and as the weeks passed the two white men must have breathed again. They were safe, even though their first genuine attempt to break out of their prison had ended in humiliating failure.

6

Into the Unknown

ESCAPE, when at last it came, was so simple that it has given rise to the belief that it had been possible from the beginning. On the face of it this appears to be so. Knox and Rutland took their courage in both hands and just walked to the coast, and although, as we shall see, they took endless precautions, hiding, turning, and doubling in their tracks like hunted foxes while suffering agonies of suspense in the process, no one raised a finger to stop them. At no time during their one hundred and twenty miles of martyrdom were they pursued.

Throughout the whole puzzling story this mystery of the apparent simplicity of escape from Kandy remains a point of argument. It will be remembered that, from the very start of their long captivity the *will* to escape appears to have been lacking. Knox and his men had remained for over three weeks within twelve miles of their ship, a ship bristling with guns and men, and although, for a good deal of that time, there was only a token guard to look after them, they made no move to get away. On their march into the mountains not a man slipped into the jungle to take his chance of finding the way back to the coast; and throughout their weary years of enforced stay in a prison without bars nobody made a break for

freedom although they knew that, to the west, the Dutch were in some places barely thirty miles away. Knox's contemporaries all commented on these facts, and over and over again since his day, writers have remarked upon the same thing. What makes the enigma even more mysterious is the fact that when, at last, a serious attempt to escape was made, it was achieved by what must surely be accounted the most difficult route.

10041 C.C.
Knox and Rutland made their truly epic march of one hundred and twenty miles, most of it through drought-stricken jungle, when a three-day march westwards would have found them among Dutch troops. It took them twenty-seven days, and although at no time were they in any apparent peril from the people of the country, the natural hazards they had to overcome would have daunted any but the most determined and courageous of men. Yet these same determined and courageous men had taken almost *twenty years* to arrive at the decision to make the attempt!

At first sight, in view of what happened, the conclusion seems inescapable that they could have walked out of their prison whenever they wished . . . and yet, what of the stark evidence of the statistics? Here we are confronted with blunt facts. In over half a century of Raja Singha's savage reign, hundreds of white prisoners of several nationalities were incarcerated in the Kandyan mountains. In all that time only Knox and Rutland got away. Why? Were all the other men cowards? Or can it be that, after all, Knox was right? Perhaps the king's system of spying, his web of informers, and closely knit system of Watches really did make escape next door to

impossible. Perhaps, too, experience had justified Raja Singha's belief that no man could leave the mountains by the northern route. It is perfectly true that there is no record of any man having reached England, Holland, Portugal or France before Knox, but who is to know how many made the attempt? If, after all, Knox's fears *were* justified, the cunning and ingenuity



The two men started off burdened with rice

by which he hoodwinked his captors, makes his adventure one of the most fascinating in the whole history of escapes.

He and Rutland left Eladetta on 22nd September, 1679, when the moon was nearly at the full so that, when necessary, they could march by night. Knox had announced to his neighbours that they were about to make another journey into the central forests

to increase trade, and the two men started off burdened with rice, knitted caps, and all the nick-knacks which sold so well to jungle customers. To this day solitary Chinamen, laden with silks and the same kind of trifles offered by Knox, may be encountered wandering in the remotest parts of the island in search of business. Nor was Knox the only white man at the time to trade in this way, but he was almost certainly the only one who had not given it up. Malaria and small returns for their efforts had effectively discouraged all others.

An old man was hired, as on previous occasions, to look after things at Eladetta, particularly "to look after my house and goats", and the two friends were off.

Whether Knox regretted leaving his comfortable home in its lovely surroundings is not known. He never again alluded to Eladetta.

The road to Koswatta, where Knox had lived with his father and the negro boy, was quickly covered as he knew every inch of the way. Before reaching Kandy, which they could not altogether avoid, they had to cross the neck of land round which the River Mahavelliganga curves so graciously on which is now situated the Peredeniya Gardens; perhaps the most supremely lovely botanical gardens in the world. Situated at 1,600 feet above sea-level, they cover one hundred and fifty acres of land; acres so crowded with palm avenues, bamboos surrounding the lake, water-plants, hundreds of varieties of tropical plants, grasses, ferns, orchids, trailers, flowering shrubs and trees that they are worth circling the world to visit.

Beyond Peredeniya, the two fugitives crossed the

great river, but Knox made no mention of it, and this is strange, for the Mahavelliganga is an exceptional river for so small an island as Ceylon to contain. It rises on the slopes of Adam's Peak, and runs through 206 miles of country—longer than the Thames—to empty itself, as Knox well knew, into the sea near Cottiar. Apart from its size, and its association with his arrest, one would have expected him to comment on the wild magnificence of its beauty as it runs between the contorted peaks and crests of the mountains on each side of the valley in which he and Rutland were walking. But he made no remark on these things. Perhaps he had been living among superlatively lovely scenes for so long that he had ceased to notice them.

The two men kept as far west of Kandy as they could after they left the river behind them, and then struck east to gain the track which led to the north. This followed the same course as the modern highway, but although it was well marked it was in no sense a road. Two men could not walk abreast and human habitations soon ceased when the capital had been left behind, but it was not difficult to follow as it wound its way through the heavily wooded valleys. By the time the jungle at the bottom of the foothills was reached, all signs of human life had disappeared and the country, to use Knox's description, "was full of wild elephants, tigris, and Bears". Perhaps the capital B for bears is significant, for they are the most feared of all the jungle beasts, but the word "tigris" does not refer to genuine tigers as there are none in Ceylon, and oddly enough, although only twenty miles of almost fordable water divides India and Ceylon, there never have been. Knox's "tigris"



... hidden, until word came to them that the king's men had gone

refers to leopards, panthers, and wild cats, all of which were, and are, found in these woods.

Their first fright was to hear that, just behind them on the narrow path, was a party of king's Revenue Officers on their way to collect money due to Raja Singha from his most northerly outpost, Anuradhapura, the city in the jungle towards which Knox and Rutland were travelling. They had never before penetrated so far north, and their permit to trade certainly did not extend to Anuradhapura, but Knox felt certain that, if once he could bluff his way past the Governor there, he would be safe from pursuit. Beyond lay forty miles of unknown, perhaps trackless jungle, but by now he had no fear of the forests. Animals might kill them, but at least they could not take them back to Kandy and death by long-drawn-out torture, or life imprisonment, bowed down by chains, in a tiny airless cell. The thought of the penalty which would be exacted if they were caught made both white men shiver with terror. They ran into the woods, and lay there, hidden, until word came to them that the king's men had gone.

The fact that Knox received word of their going is highly significant, for it was this ability of his to make friends with villagers that is, perhaps, the crux of the seeming simplicity of his escape. It is probably the true solution of the mystery. It may well be that of all the white prisoners who lived out their hopeless lives in Raja Singha's grim menagerie, none other had Knox's supreme gift of identifying himself with the ordinary people. He was so natural with them, so much a Sinhalese villager himself, that the men and women of the little wayside ouths or huts of that

lonely countryside did not dream of betraying him. Probably some of them guessed that these two white men were not as they seemed but, if so, although knowledge of their coming passed from village to village on the strange grape-vine of the forest people, they were everywhere accepted as friends. It must have been so, for a single word to the Revenue men or to the Captain of the Watches, or to the Governor of Anuradhapura, would have resulted in their arrest. That word was never spoken.

When they knew that the king's men had gone, Knox and Rutland emerged from hiding and pressed forward as fast as possible to make up for lost time. They had counted upon the light of the moon to help them if they had to take to the jungle at night, but they had not foreseen having to go into hiding so early in their adventure. "With the moon spending so fast", as Knox put it, there was no time to lose. They had not wasted their stay in hiding, having brought with them a good supply of knitting yarn with which to make the curious little knitted caps which were so popular with the country folk. They sold these on request, but the rest of their wares they were careful not to dispose of, giving out that they wished to exchange them for dried deer meat when they found a sufficient supply of that commodity.

The choice of dried deer meat as the alleged reason for their journey had been made with care by Knox. He knew that it was in very short supply that year and was, in fact, almost impossible to obtain. The scarceness of this delectable food was his excuse for wandering so far afield, as if he were gambling heavily on finding a delicacy to sell at a very high rate of

profit. Of course he had no wish to find anyone who really had deer meat to sell, and if he or Rutland were told of a possible source of supply by helpful villagers, they took care to avoid it. Their intention was to arrive at Anuradhapura with most of their trade goods intact. We shall see the point of this stratagem later.

With their hearts perpetually in their mouths they kept steadily on until, at a place called Kaluvila, they came upon what Knox considered their severest test. In modern phraseology they had reached the point of no return, for there was a strong Watch at Kaluvila, and a Governor they had not met before. It was a time for nerve and sheer push. If the Governor suspected them, he would be certain to detain them. "For plain reason would tell him," wrote Knox, "that we, being prisoners, were without our bounds."

To pass this point of no return Knox had two alternatives, both unpleasant. If he and Rutland wished to continue their journey in their role as merchants—in which case they could walk along the central path, the only one through the heart of Ceylon, which led to Anuradhapura and the north—they would have to face the Governor. If they wished to avoid facing the Governor, they would have to take to the jungle, which meant fifty miles of trackless, and perhaps waterless, struggling ahead of them. They had no compass and, of course, no map however rough to guide them, only the sun; and in that great world of trees the whereabouts of the sun is often mere guesswork, a slight lightening in the sombre green gloom of the leafy dome overhead.

Fifty miles may not seem far, but in Knox's time

the central forests of Ceylon had few rivals for density, and even today, there are hundreds of square miles of it still untamed. Huge epiphytic climbing plants and trailers make a passage through the undergrowth impossible unless a man hacks his way forward yard by yard. Ferns, convolvuli, vines and rattans choke the faint animal paths, and even elephants give up the unequal struggle in the places where the vicious thorn bushes—appropriately called *acacia tormentosa*—bar their progress. The *kudumirris*—a climbing plant which weaves giant webs of vegetable cable four inches thick from tree to tree, each cable covered with razor-sharp knobs—prohibits movement altogether in certain parts of the jungle. In many areas, too, several acres of forest giants have been brought crashing down by the sheer weight of the tendrils of the colossal parasites which attack them. Where this happens, although the tree trunks soon powder into nothing under the ceaseless attacks of millions of termites, the parasites themselves continue to thrive for years, tangled heaps of growths on the floor of the jungle through which even small animals cannot find a way.

At Kaluvila the magnificence of the surrounding jungle could not be eclipsed anywhere else in Ceylon, except, possibly, in the high mountains. Obviously Knox was daunted by the difficulty of trying to force a way through it armed only with small knives, and condemned to spend many nights and days with the teeming animal population of the wild. It would have to be done eventually, but his information was that the size and density of the forest diminished the further north he travelled. Certainly, at that stage, he did not feel equal to the task of tackling the terrific

obstacles which, only too plainly, lay ahead if he left the only known path to the north.

He decided to brazen it out with the strange Governor, and act as though he and Rutland took it for granted that they would be permitted to go anywhere they liked in the Kandyan kingdom in search of business. The two men made their way to the Governor's house with no attempt at secrecy. In fact they made rather a parade of the fact that they were in no hurry for their money, and would be quite content to collect it when they returned that way. Never hurried, always natural, they sold their knitted caps and acted as though they proposed to do this sort of thing for the rest of their lives; and that any man in his senses would leave behind him a string of uncollected debts unless he meant to return and collect them seemed impossible to the simple villagers. No doubt the Governor knew all about the approaching white traders and their methods of doing business long before he saw them. News travels fast in the jungle.

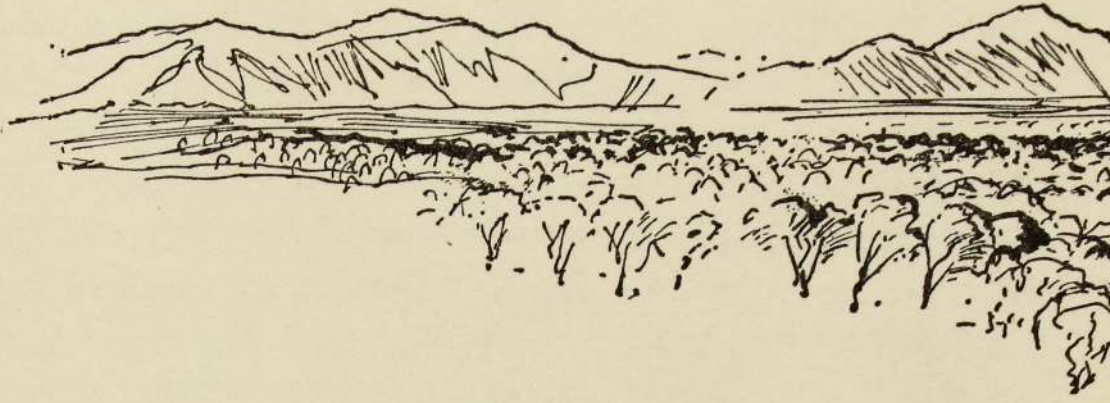
The ruse was successful. The Governor, a pleasant man, took to the white men and was obviously distressed that they should have come so far in search of deer meat. He could not hold out much hope of them finding any, as the drought had been so severe that there were very few deer left in that area. This news delighted Knox, but he took care not to show his pleasure.

For some days they stayed with the Governor to allay any suspicion. They knitted and sold their caps, and quietly went about the task of trying to glean information as to a way northwards other than the central path. In this they were not very successful,

for apart from a few paths linking village with village, the people knew no other way of getting to the north. They were not travel-minded. An occasional visit to a relative a few miles away was the limit of their wanderings. This was not very helpful to Knox who wished to avoid the king's track at all costs after leaving Kaluvila, but at least he and Rutland managed to avert suspicion, and on the whole they were satisfied with their position. And then, all in a moment, a major disaster threatened them. Raja Singha had sent some more troops to Anuradhapura, and they arrived at Kaluvila while the two escaped prisoners were still there.

It appears that, back in the capital the king, suspecting another rebellion, had swooped upon his more prominent nobles, arresting some and executing others. Knox's former neighbour, Ova Motterel, the friend who had tried to establish him at court, was one of the unfortunate victims, and Knox must have mused upon the sudden reversal of their positions. Poor Ova Motterel had been so angry when Knox prudently declined the king's favour, and now he was dead, torn to pieces by the royal elephants. In addition to these arrests, Raja Singha was determined that none of the relatives of the arrested men should escape his net, and had dispatched soldiers to all frontier Watches with urgent orders to the Governors of the posts to make certain that no suspicious person should get past them.

This, it seemed to Knox in black despair, was the end to all their hopes. After nearly twenty years, and having come within a few miles of safety, they were to be hauled back to prison again—a terrible thought. The soldiers were bound to see them, and finding



them so far away from Kandy would know that they were escaping. Fortunately he had reckoned without the literal mind of ordinary Sinhalese people. The men from Kandy had been instructed to order the Watch Governors to stop any man who might be a relative of the traitors in Kandy. That, of course, meant Sinhalese men, and Knox and Rutland were white. They were not given a thought. In the excitement it did not occur to anyone that these prisoners were a very long way from their prison. They were not related to Kandyan nobles, and it was nobody's business to interfere with them.

Knox did not know this, but taking his courage in both hands he mixed with the soldiers, lamenting his bad luck in not yet having secured the dried meat for which he had been seeking. But for that, he said, he would have liked the pleasure of travelling with them back to Kandy. It was a bold move. The soldiers, deceived, hoped that he would soon have better luck, and promised to remember him and Rutland to their fellow countrymen. Then they marched off.

That night the Governor gave a party for his white friends, and they had to sit and watch the antics of



“A vast great plain, the like I never saw in all the land . . .”

the *dombers*, a caste of jugglers, conjurers, acrobats, snake-charmers and clowns who still wander all over Ceylon, welcomed wherever they go. But they were shaken at the narrowness of their escape, and determined not to waste any more time, or the Governor might have second thoughts about Raja Singha's instructions. They thanked him for his kindness and said that they were leaving the next day, requesting permission to hand over all their trade goods to the Governor for safe keeping until they returned. This was a deception which, Knox was certain, could not fail. It was the reason why he had kept almost all of his goods intact, the ace up his sleeve. He had no

intention of coming back to claim his property, but he knew enough of the Sinhalese character to be sure that the Governor would not suspect that it was possible for any man to abandon the wealth that these trade goods represented.

He was right. The Governor did not suspect his wealthy white friends, and was graciously pleased to look after their belongings until they should call for them.

The next day Knox and Rutland, afraid to use the main track, plunged into the jungle with no idea how to get to Anuradhapura. They could not be certain that the Governor might not, on mature consideration, have doubts about them, and every yard of the way they were haunted with fear of pursuit. It was a terror which grew with the passing of the days, and with every mile of progress towards the sanctuary which they knew would be available to them once they reached the Dutch fort of Aripa.

The way through the forest was hard, but luck was with them. They reached what they thought was a clearing in the woods, but it turned out to be the almost dried-out river-bed of the Mulwatu oya. They knew that, as a last resort, they had only to follow it to reach the sea. There was hardly enough water in it to flow, so that most of the river-bed, rocky and pebbly, was exposed and hard on the feet. Unfortunately, too, from the white men's point of view, its course turned and twisted like the wriggings of a snake; yet it was a certain guide to the sea, and the fugitives determined never to lose sight of it altogether.

In time they emerged from the forest to see, in astonishment, "a vast, great plain, the like I never

saw in all the land; in the midst whereof is a lake, which may be a mile over, not natural, but made by art as other Ponds in the country, to serve to water their corn grounds." The two men, without knowing it, were gazing at the site of one of the most astonishing cities ever built by Man; the former capital of the island, Anuradhapura. It was not officially "discovered" until the nineteenth century, but Knox not only walked across it, he marked it, by name, with certainty and absolute accuracy on his map nearly a century and a half before its existence was recognized by the peoples of Europe.

7

Out of the Forest

THE ruins of the cities and monuments of such ancient civilizations as the Egyptians, the Incas, or the Aztecs are known, at least by hearsay, to almost every educated person in the world. The Ceylon cities in the jungle—there are two of major importance—have aroused so little interest among archaeologists that the majority of ordinary people have not heard of them. This lack of interest is strange, for Anuradhapura—only slightly the larger of the two great capitals of the ancient Sinhalese civilization, of which Polonnaruha is the other—covered as much ground as modern London, a truly staggering fact. It was forty miles square. It is true that its population was not in proportion to this huge area, for people spread themselves out more in those days, but at the height of its prosperity it is estimated that two million people must have lived there. Founded in the fifth century B.C. it was only abandoned in the eighth century A.D., and some of its buildings were so colossal that they dwarfed St. Paul's Cathedral in London. Even now archaeological research has revealed only a small proportion of this old metropolis, but the temples, palaces, audience halls, swimming pools, hospitals and libraries exposed, the majority of them unlike the buildings of

any other civilization, make it certain that Anuradhapura has the right to rank among the wonders of the world. It has never been recognized as such.

Ceylon possesses in its historical record called the *Mahavansa*—which means the Great Dynasty—a treasury of the past unequalled by the annals of any other nation. The *Mahavansa* is more than a collection of religious writings, it is history, minute in its attention to detail, and accurate throughout. It was written in Pali, a language which had gone out of use, and for centuries it remained untranslated. An English civil servant, George Turnour, rediscovered this lost language after years of devoted research, and translated the *Mahavansa*. It spoke of so many kings and events, and listed so many “tanks”, canals, towns, cities, and almost fabulous buildings that, for some time, it was thought to be nothing but fiction. Over the centuries it has turned out to be correct in all details, and Turnour wrote in a preface to the *Mahavansa*:

“Cingalese history is authenticated by the concurrence of every evidence that can contribute to verify the annals of any country.”

This great history records the reigns of fifty-four kings of the Great Dynasty, and one hundred and eleven monarchs of the *Sulavansa*, or Lower race, from 543 B.C. to A.D. 1798 in an uninterrupted chronicle. The early kings, we may remember, feared the mountains, thought by them to be the haunt of countless devils. They refused to live in them, but soon realized that if they wished to live and thrive on the plains, so often drought-stricken, they would have to devise means whereby they could arrest and

store the huge quantities of rain which rushed off the mountains into the sea during the south-west monsoon. As the population increased from Vijayo's original band of seven hundred adventurers until it became the ten million people who are estimated to have been alive when Lanka was famous all over the eastern world, a system of irrigation was evolved which expanded until all the central, northern and eastern plains were covered with a network of canals carrying the precious water from the hills first into the great "tanks", and from them to smaller ones, and so on until every tiny hamlet in the lowlands nestled on the banks of a waterway of some sort. It was the most complete system of irrigation ever devised, and even today such "tanks" as the Kalu Veva, Minneriya, or the Giants' Tank are at least twenty miles round.

Unfortunately, as the wealth of the island increased, so did the intensity and size of the raids made upon it by the envious Malabari kings of southern India. Constant invasions by these hardy marauders led, finally, to the sacking of the sacred city of Anuradhapura, which had to be abandoned. But, although defeated, the Sinhalese still had some fight left in them, and retreating across the plain, started to build another capital Polonnaruha. This was almost as large, and fully as beautiful as Anuradhapura, and was the brilliant capital of the greatest of all Sinhalese national heroes, Parakrama Bahu, who not only turned the tables on the Malabaris, but even successfully invaded Siam! It was the last flare-up of the torch of Sinhalese genius, and with Parakrama's death the Malabaris, under their brutal leader Magha, returned and devastated the island,

smashing up the delicate web of irrigation communications in the process.

The result was chaos. The 5,000 tanks and 4,000 canals were wrecked, and spilled their liquid treasure into the parched earth. The tanks reverted to abandoned swamps, the canals became undergrowth-filled ditches. While the Sinhalese retreated south-west to the wet zone, the Malabaritis retreated to the north, colonizing the Jaffna peninsula and a part of the northern province of Ceylon. In between the two races, the vast plains became a prey of the hungry jungle tide, and *anopheles* mosquitoes in their millions bred in the broken-down tanks and canals. Malaria swept the land, and where man had once swarmed in the lowlands, leaving the mountains alone, the position was now reversed. The hills began to open up to man while the plains, in the terrific heat and moist atmosphere of the tropics, reverted swiftly to forests in which the wild animals roamed once more in ever-increasing numbers. With them, a handful of the aboriginal people who had hidden in the mountains since the days of Vijayo, crept from their lairs and returned, once more, to their native jungles.

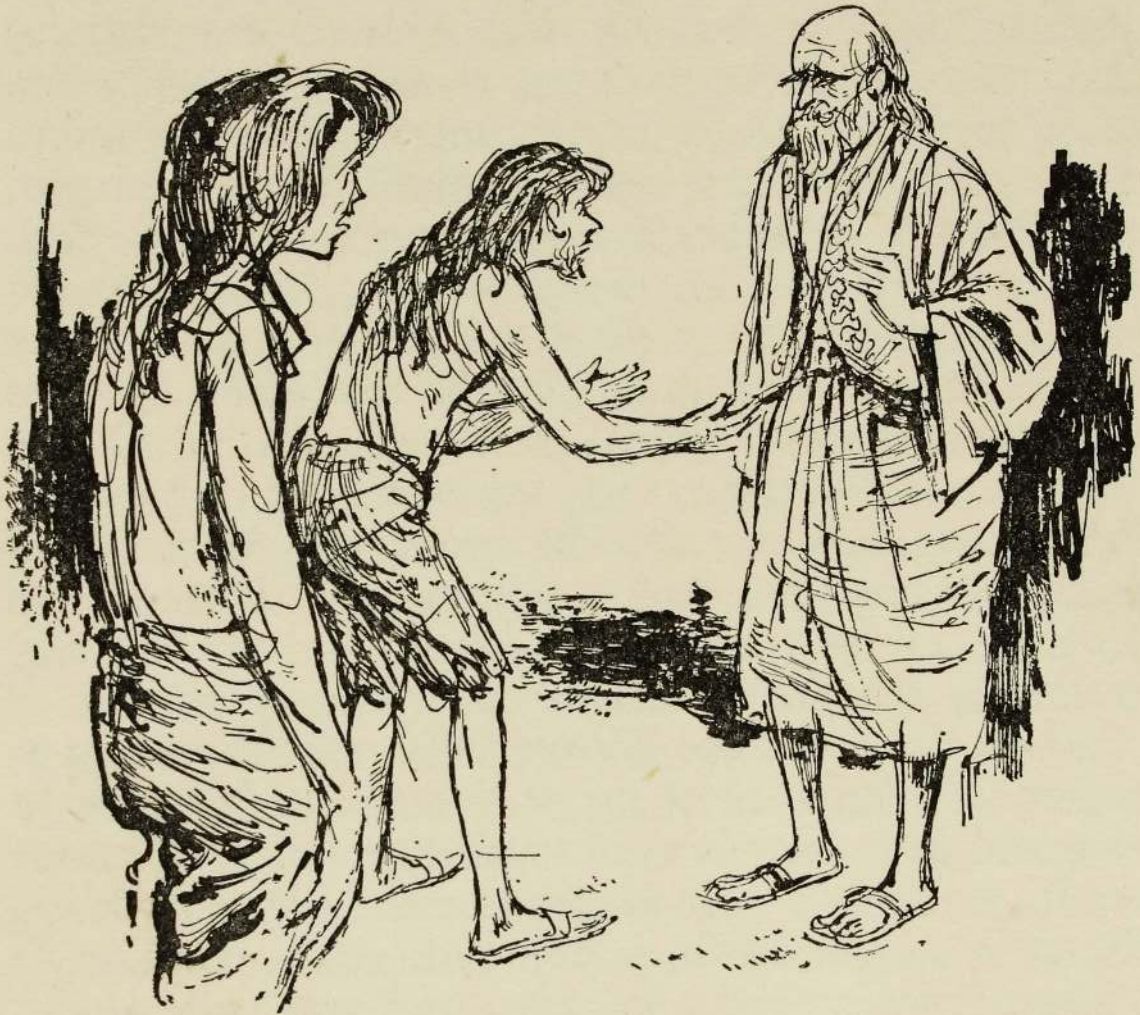
When Robert Knox and Rutland emerged from the forest and gazed on that "vast great plain, the like I never saw in all the land", they were looking on the site of that once mighty capital city, Anuradhapura. There was no discernible city left, but, unseen in the woods, there were many villages, for at least two of the lakes which formerly had been part of the irrigation network still contained water. The inhabitants of these villages were Tamils, direct descendants of those same Malabaritis who had devastated the

country. They were Hindus, darker in colour than Sinhalese, and with an entirely different language, but they owed allegiance to Raja Singha whose name was as much dreaded by them as anywhere else in the Kandyan kingdom.

Although they saw no houses, the two white men heard a cock crow, "which is a sure sign of a town hard by", as Knox wrote. It was a small village, and they entered it, outwardly calm, but inwardly apprehensive of the reception they might receive. A crowd gathered, gesticulating and excited at sight of these strange white creatures. Most of them had never seen a white man, but they knew of the Dutch soldiers in their coastal forts not very far away, and distrusted them as the enemies of their king. Knox, as he spread his wares in front of him for their approval, talked to them in Sinhalese, and although they did not understand it, they recognized it. One of them ran off, and soon returned with a Sinhalese-speaking Tamil who asked them where they came from and obviously did not believe Knox when he answered that they were traders from Kandy. They were at once taken to the Governor, who questioned them thoroughly and very shrewdly. Knox was asked to give the names of famous nobles at the Kandyan court, and of the various Governors of the Watches through which he must have passed to reach Anuradhapura. He was also requested to give his authority for trading so far north, and he knew that this was probably the crucial question, for he had no such authority. He feigned indignation, saying that he had received permission to trade all over the king's realm "full fifteen years since at the palace of Nilambe". How else, he demanded, could he have reached

Anuradhapura through a dozen, or more, Watches?

Satisfied by this plausible answer, the Governor welcomed them to his city, and at once they found themselves very popular with the garrulous happy Tamils. While Rutland stayed there waiting for the



He feigned indignation

mythical supplies of "dried flesh" which both of them knew would not be forthcoming, Knox wandered about making inquiries as to the paths in the area, and quietly buying food and equipment for the last desperate stage of their escape. They did everything in a leisurely way, "so that we had time enough

to fit ourselves, all People thinking that we stayed only to buy Flesh.”

The last problem now confronted Knox—which way to go? The northern path went to Jaffna, but was guarded, a few miles out of the city, by the last of Raja Singha's Watches. There was no chance of passing this, for nobody was allowed out without written orders from the king. It had to be by-passed at all costs, but Knox did not know where it was and dared not ask. Then again, beyond the last outpost stretched the territory known as the Wanni—it is still known as the Wanni today—whose strange people owed allegiance to a Malabari prince whom Knox feared as much as Raja Singha, for while he paid an annual tribute of elephants to the Dutch, he was Raja Singha's friend. Any white men found in the Wanni would be executed at once if they were Dutch stragglers, or sent back under guard if they were thought to be escaped prisoners. It was a pretty problem, but one to which there was no answer.

Then there was the Wanni itself, a difficult proposition. It is an ancient forest, stretching from sea to sea, and even now is very sparsely inhabited. In the south, in Knox's time, there were still some Veddhas living in remote caves, and elsewhere the rare jungle villages were peopled by men of Tamil origin, but unlike any other Tamils, so much so that they went by the name of Wannias. Tamils anywhere else in the world, being Hindus, lived under a strict system of caste, but the Wannias acknowledged no caste, and being rebels by nature, led no sort of organized life. If they met strangers they were apt to strike first, and inquire—if necessary—afterwards. Knox dreaded them more than the last Watch post, more than

drought, and far more than the wild beasts. But the more he thought over these various problems, the more he realized that there was no point in trying to make a plan to evade them. He and Rutland must go on—and put their cause into the hands of God.

They took leave of their friend the Governor, admitting that they had failed in their trade gamble, and that the time had come for them to return home. They left their departure until late in the evening, and set off towards Kaluvila just before darkness set in. In this way they gained a good twelve hours' start over any possible pursuit, for Knox knew that people who live in jungle regions will not travel after darkness for fear of the devils who infest the night. In the opinion of foresters, it is foolish to run the risk of encountering animals by night, but fatal to risk the presence of evil spirits. This remains as true today as on the evening that Knox began his last gamble.

The two white men took provisions for ten days two talypot leaves large enough to sleep under, tobacco, betel nuts to chew, three tinder boxes for making fires, and "Deers skin to make us Schooes to prevent any Thorns running into our feet". This last item was of vital importance, for everything depended upon their feet once they had committed themselves to the jungle. A poisoned foot, a sprain, a breakdown of any sort—and they were unlikely to survive.

The only weapons taken were two small axes which they fastened to the end of long staves, and two sharp knives. They did not feel in need of any other protection, for they had long since lost their fear of wild beasts. Animals do not regard human beings as part

of the pattern of their lives unless and until they grow accustomed to them, as happens in modern game sanctuaries. Unless trapped or provoked, they will rarely attack man; but, of course, in jungle work, reasonable precautions must be observed. Knox and Rutland took all possible precautions, for they were not in the least foolhardy, but they proved, as so many other great explorers have done, that there is little to fear from wild life.

They kept to the Kandy road only as far as the Mulwatu oya, the river they had followed on their way into Anuradhapura. Then they took once more to its seawards course, doubling back to the north-west with the intention of following it to its mouth. With great care they avoided leaving footmarks in the sandy stretches of the river bottom, and where it was impossible to avoid leaving them, walked backwards so that their tracks should point in the wrong direction. Progress was desperately hard. Rain, which had not fallen at any time before during their journey, now beat upon them with sudden violence. The jungle was deluged, the moon disappearing behind massed banks of cloud, and they walked into dense undergrowth through which they could not fight their way. If they tried to fight their way back to the river-bed the trees seemed to grow so closely together that there was no way through them.

In one place, inching their way forwards, they broke unexpectedly into a clearing to find themselves within a few yards of a browsing elephant which refused to move, placidly cropping away at high leaves while keeping an eye on the two puny creatures who shouted at it and hurled stones which made not the slightest impression on it. Since they could not

get past they accepted the situation, and with the enormous beast almost within touching distance made camp, arranged their talypot leaves, lit a fire, and settled down for the rest of the night. In the morning the elephant had gone.

They were satisfied with their progress. In that vast and lonely jungle—lonely in the sense that the amiable elephant was the only living creature encountered although the night was filled with the countless noises of the wild—they seemed to have passed beyond the last habitations of men. They had only to continue as they had been going, however hard the way, to arrive eventually at the sea coast.

A few hours' marching at daybreak caused them, hastily, to revise this opinion. Following the serpentine course of the river, they had unconsciously marched in a half circle and arrived, with unpleasant suddenness, at "a parcel of towns called Tissa Veva". Tissa Veva, the "tank", is actually part of Anuradhapura, and although Knox did not realize it, he and Rutland had spent nearly twenty-four hours walking back to within a few hundred yards of the Governor's house!

Hastily leaving a well-trodden path which they thought must be the main highway to the north, the two men encountered another, and then another, all equally well worn. They were merely tracks connecting village with village, but by now Knox was completely bewildered, and did not know what to do. Panic stricken, the two fugitives decided that they could neither go forward nor back. They found a huge forest giant with a hollow bole, and crept into it, settling down in miserable discomfort on the mud and refuse which the recent downpour of rain had

created. There they stayed during the hours of daylight, frightened at the sound of human voices or any approaching footsteps.

With darkness they crept out and away, making what speed they could along the river-bed, although in a state of permanent terror because of the many human voices they could hear all round them. It seemed certain that their escape must now have been realized, and that the voices came from man-hunters searching for them. It was not until the shouts grew remote, and yet persisted with a sort of mechanical frequency that they remembered, with relief, the crop watchers who sit on small *machans*, or platforms, in trees overlooking rice-fields, shouting their monotonous calls all through the night to scare off marauding animals.

At last they heard no more shouting, but close behind them came comforting noises as a herd of feeding elephants ambled through the jungle. They knew that, however many pursuers there might be, none of them would dare to advance through a family of elephants. Again they were safe, and despite the loud evidence of the presence of the giant beasts so close at hand they lit a fire, cooked a meal, smoked their pipes and went to sleep.

The following evening, as soon as the moon rose they set off again, and now, at last, they felt certain that there was nothing more to fear from what Knox called "the tame inhabitants". What they might now encounter in the way of "the wild men" was another matter, but hope was rising high in them as they breasted their way through the undergrowth, or picked a path through the masses of boulders along the river's course.



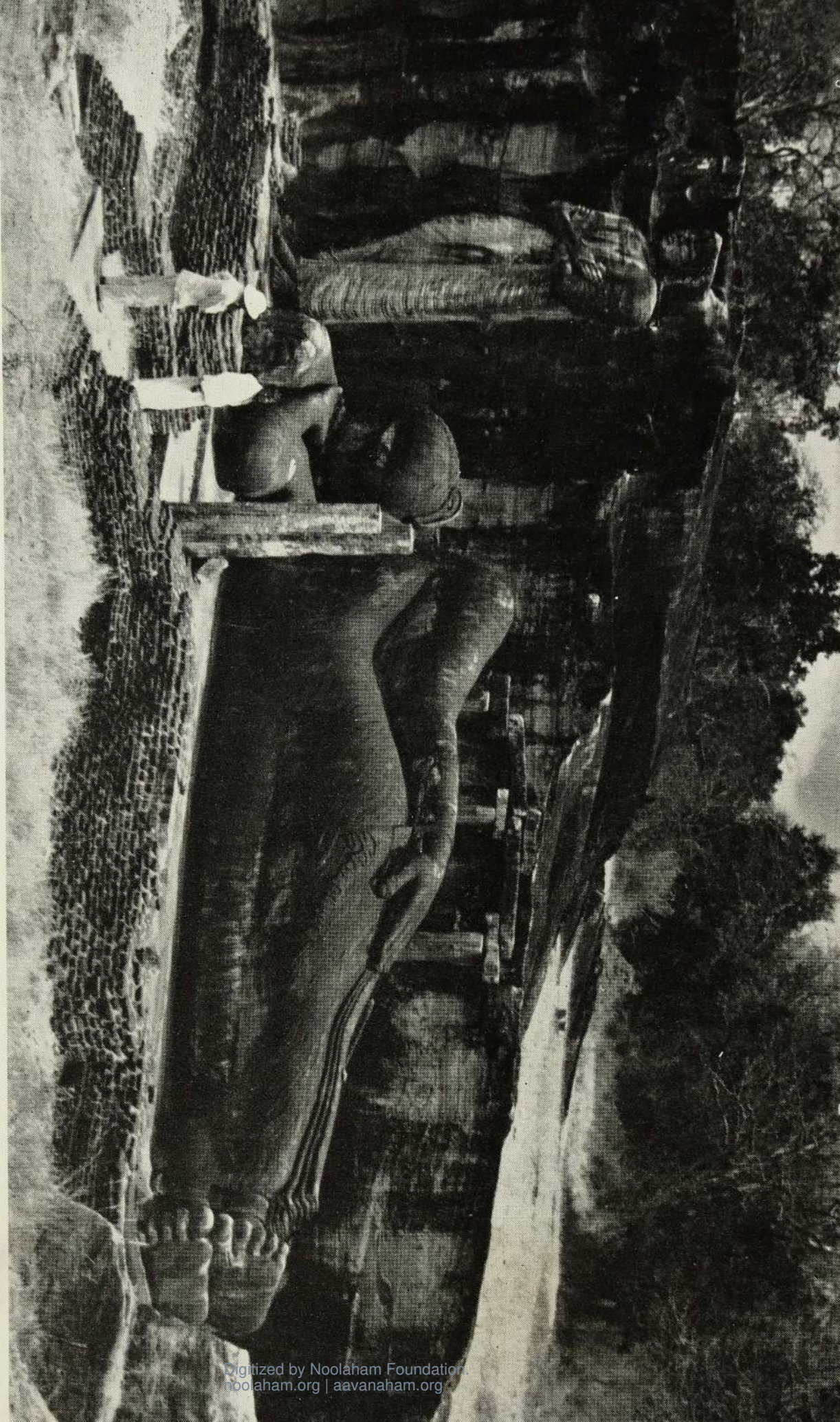
The kind of desolate jungle through which Knox escaped. This is one of the "man made ponds" described by him.
(Courtesy *The Ceylon Tea Centre*)



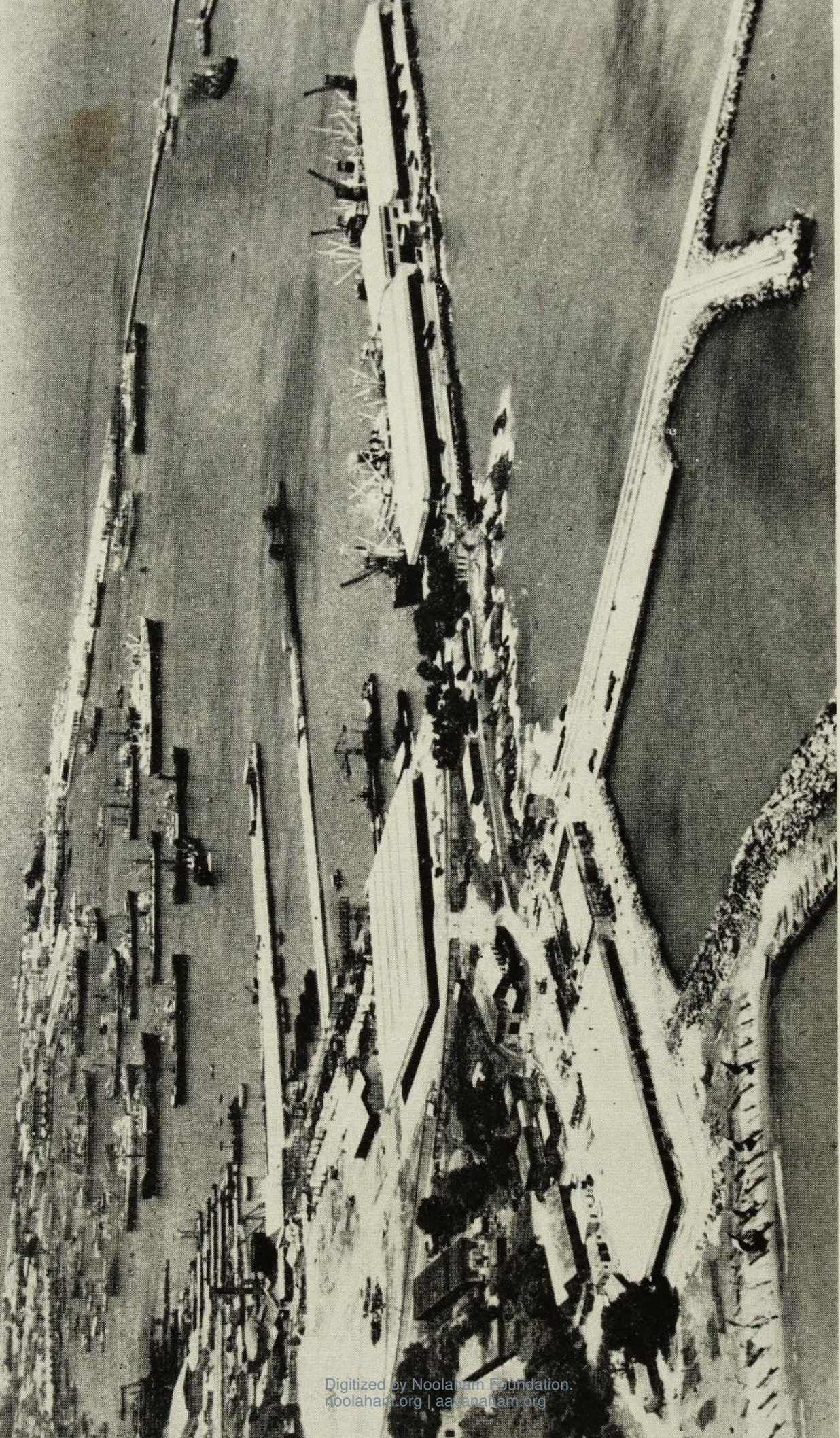
(Above) One of the immense dagobas of Anuradhapura, a city founded over 2,000 years ago. Knox was the first white man to “discover” it.
(Below) The centre of the other famous lost city, Polonnaruwa, founded about the tenth century A.D.

(Courtesy The Ceylon Tea Centre)



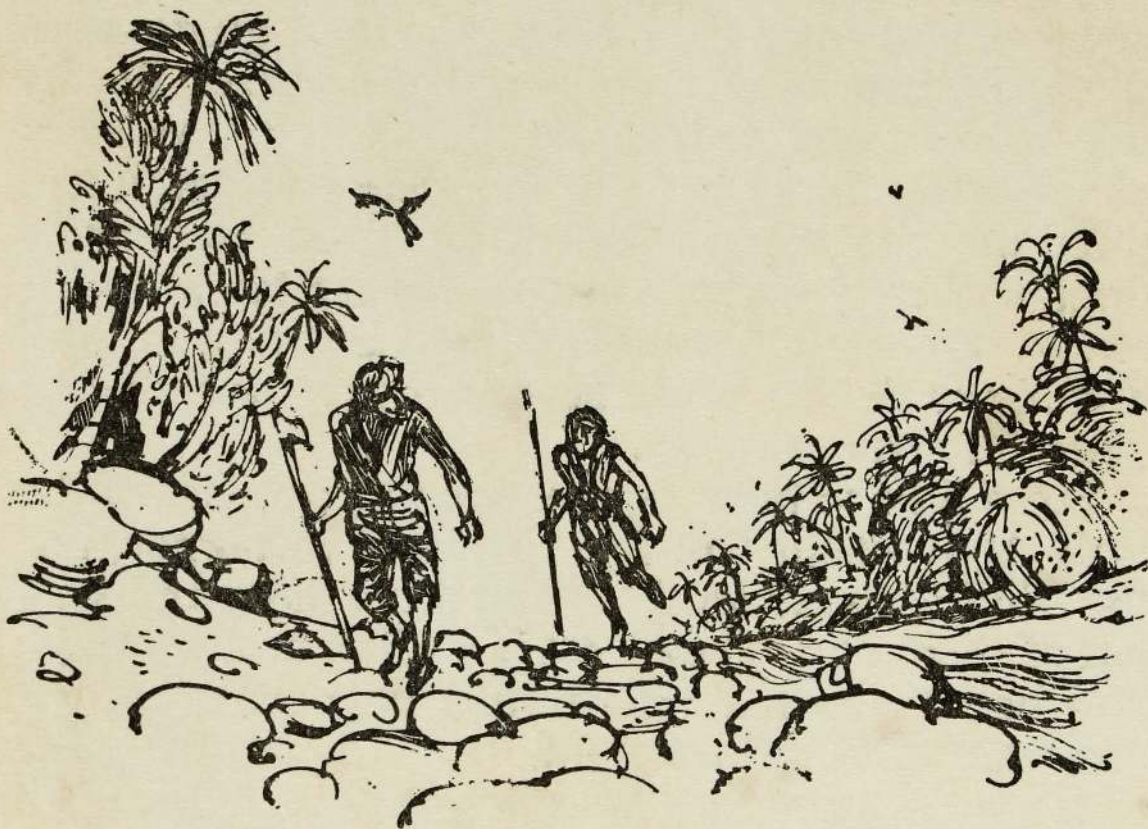


An ancient statue of Buddha Gautama, carved from the living rock, Polonnaruwa.
(*Courtesy The Ceylon Tea Centre*)



An aerial view of the modern port of Colombo, now one of the busiest in the East.
(Courtesy The Ceylon Tea Centre)

“Thus we kept travelling every day from Morning till Night, still along the river side which turned and twisted very crooked. In some places it would be pretty good travelling, and but few Bushes and Thorns, and in others a great many. So that our Shoulders and arms were all of a Gore, being grievously torn and scratched. For we had nothing



Through the masses of boulders along the river's course on us but a Clout about our Middles, and our Victuals on our Shoulders, and in our hands a Tallipat and an Ax.”

Thus Knox's own description, and it is interesting to recall that Daniel Defoe's fascinating adventure story *Robinson Crusoe* was published while Knox was still alive. One discovers, with no surprise, that the two men knew each other well, and it is not hard to

guess where Defoe found his model for Crusoe. Many of that imaginary hero's religious meditations and material troubles on his savage island might have come straight from the pages of Knox's journal. The difference is that Knox was no hero, but actually lived every one of his adventures with his uncomplaining Man Friday always in attendance.

The Mulwatu oya soon began to meet other water-courses, and instead of being a certain guide as to direction, turned into something of a puzzle. For by now it had ceased to flow, and but for some stretches of still water, some large, others mere puddles, it had dried out altogether. When it met other completely dried-out river-beds, Knox no longer knew which one to take, and on some occasions had to wait until evening so that he could be sure, by the setting sun, where the true west lay.

From time to time they came upon evidence of the Wild Men whom Knox so feared to encounter, but the Wild Men obviously feared them more and kept out of their way. They were Veddhas, and we know now how gentle and self-effacing they were, but the two white men did not know that, and at each piece of fresh evidence they were frightened. Apart from these elusive jungle people—Knox never did see one—the travellers were alone in the kingdom of the animals. Very fortunately for them, although their jungle craft was good, it was not good enough to surprise wild animals. Unconsciously they always gave notice of their approach, and beyond growling at them, bears—the most dangerous of forest creatures because the most easily startled—moved out of their way, and so too with boars, sambhur, snakes, leopards, buffaloes and other creatures of the wild.

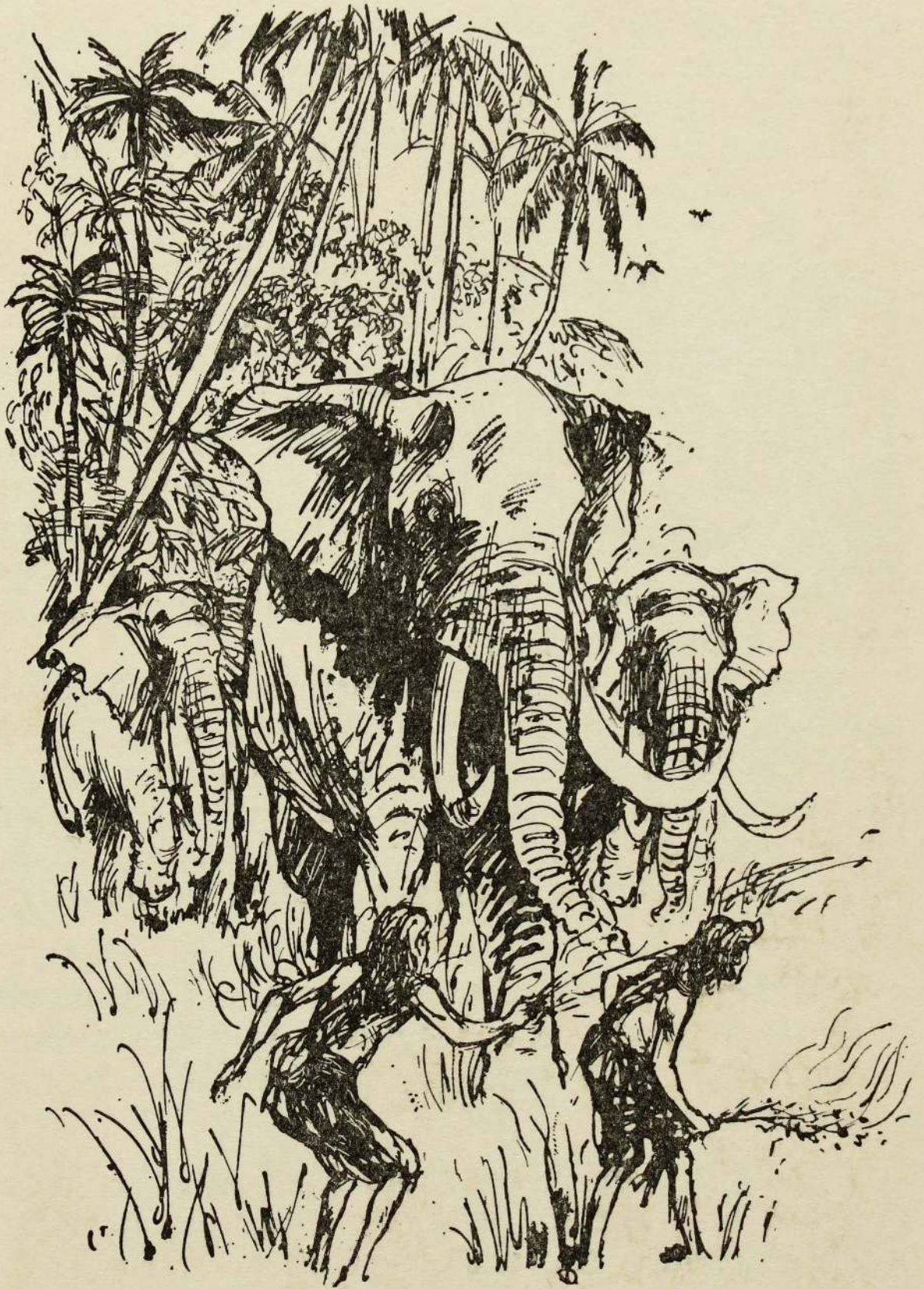
Only the elephants stood their ground, but did not molest them, while in the tree-tops the countless monkeys, although they chattered at the curious white men and occasionally pelted them with fruit, did not attack them.

In the larger pools of the river they saw many crocodiles, stranded in the stagnant water, huddled in their hundreds in the dwindling mud. The birds, too, fascinated them in their flashing brilliance and profusion, and neither man was ever to forget the exotic loveliness of those jungle nights on the march, hearing the calling and the crying of unnumbered creatures, the belling of sambhur and cough of marauding leopard, the muted screaming of cicadas or the unbelievable clamour of bullfrogs along the shores of abandoned tanks.

Imperceptably at first, and then more rapidly, the nature of the terrain altered. The forests of the Wannu grew smaller and more stunted as they approached the coastal belt, but the thorn and scrub grew ever closer until, at last, it became impenetrable. Soon there was no other way to go except along the river-bed itself.

“So down we went into the Sand and put on as fast as we could set our legs to the ground, seeing no People, only buffaloes in abundance in the water.”

They were safe at last from Man, whether wild or tame, but they survived one dangerous moment when elephants, for once, seemed to resent their presence. The great animals advanced upon them somewhat menacingly, and had to be repulsed by throwing flaming branches at them.



The great animals advanced upon them somewhat menacingly

Soon they came upon evidence of other men traveling in the same direction as themselves, and eventually caught up with a villager who showed no surprise at their appearance. Knox guessed from this incident that, since the man was obviously used to white faces, they must be on Dutch territory; and so it proved. Now the rocky bed turned into a well-worn path, and other villagers were met who directed them, first to one village, and then another. With each village visited they had moved further westwards, and their long Odyssey was nearing its end. On October 18th, 1679, they emerged, for the last time, from the forest and saw before them, solid and comfortable against the vivid blue backcloth of the Indian Ocean, Fort Aripa, the home of fellow white men and a sure refuge against the wrath of Raja Singha.

The Sunny Archipelago

KNOX and Rutland received a tumultuous welcome from the people living under the protection of the Dutch at Aripa. The Commander of the fort, the townsfolk and the few Englishmen in the colony could not do enough for them. It was more than a nine days' wonder, for the mysterious stronghold of the Lion of the Mountains was a source of never-ceasing interest to the Dutch. There was hardly a soldier in the garrison who did not know of some wretched fellow-countryman captured by the guerrillas and taken away to rot for the rest of his life in Kandy. Many of them did not even live, for when in the mood Raja Singha would behead captives taken on such raids and line the main street of his capital with their severed heads. Knox had seen this spectacle many times.

There is no doubt that the Dutch had an almost superstitious awe of the grotesque Sinhalese king and his highlanders, and as they had never before met any man who had been a prisoner in the legendary city of Kandy and had escaped to tell the tale, they could not do too much for Knox and Rutland. Their hospitality was so great, in fact, that Rutland, who had never so much as felt unwell while making his great jungle march, succumbed and became seriously

ill. For a time his life was despaired of, but he recovered.

Probably in the back of Knox's mind the decision to write a book about the island had now been taken, for he wasted no opportunity to explore the west coast. If he took notes there is no evidence of the fact, but his memory was one at which to marvel. Every morsel of information which came his way was remembered and afterwards recorded.

At the mouth of the Modergam River, a few miles south of Aripa, he saw the line of curious dunes, composed of thousands of tons of rotted down oyster shells drifted over by sand which marked the site of the curious vanishing city of Maruchchukaddi, the heart of Ceylon's pearl fisheries. When he saw it, it was a deserted river mouth of mud-flats and pools, but when the pearl-bearing oysters, on their mysterious journeys, come to rest on the "paars" or submerged banks which lie a few miles from the shore, this haunt of sea-birds changes, in a moment, to a city of cadjan huts housing a population of fifty thousand people. It is one of the world's curiosities.

These pearl fisheries of Lanka have been famous for three thousand years. It is true that the *Mahavansa* mentions them only as far back as 306 B.C. when King Tissa styled himself "Lord of the Pearl Fishing", but Chinese chroniclers had written a description of them some hundreds of years earlier than that. Obviously, at one time, the pearls were very fine, but of late years their quality seems to have deteriorated. Yet no man can prophesy what sort of pearls may be found if and when the oysters return to the "paars" of Modergam. One thing is certain.

Whenever they do Maruchchukaddi will reappear again as if by magic.

In former years the strange thing about this re-appearance of a city was the grape-vine by which the news of the arrival of the oysters was flashed to all parts of the eastern world. There were no communications of any kind in those days. Now, with telephones, radio, railways, air travel and all other methods of vanquishing time and distance it does not seem strange that pearling luggers from Indonesia, Malaya, Australia, India and a hundred islands of the eastern seas make for Maruchchukaddi when the oysters are in, but that the same thing happened in Knox's day is hard to understand. But it did. Within a few weeks of the good news being made public, gamblers of a score of nationalities began to appear from all over the east to try their luck at this fascinating form of lucky dip.

The "paars" stretch from about four miles west of the mouth of the Modergam River almost to the coast of India. When the oysters arrive on their mysterious migration, Maruchchukaddi leaps into life, filled by an orderly, disciplined, and good-natured crowd of adventurers who, in past times, seemed to know by instinct where to put their huts, find water, and put up their stalls if they were there to sell goods and produce. Of course, in these days, the whole enterprise is organized by the Government of Ceylon, but the evidence is that it was always well controlled by general consent. Tamils, Moors, Arabs and the Sinhalese themselves are the divers who man the motley fleet of luggers which number as many as three hundred. But the actual divers number only a few thousand men. The rest of that polyglot mob

arrive in vessels of every size and shape, and they have no intention of doing any actual fishing for pearls. Merchants, peddlers, acrobats, astrologers, jugglers, snake-charmers, and opportunists by the thousand come for the excitement, and for the chance of making money. The place becomes a Tower of Babel, and the actual pearl-fishers are a small minority in a huge crowd making the most of a joyous occasion which could happen twice in five years or once in twenty-five, for no one can foretell the movement of the oysters. Equally, nobody can hazard a guess as to what proportion of the molluscs will contain pearls.

In Knox's day, the divers took to the water feet first, standing on a heavy stone at the end of a long rope. They had pegs on their noses, and the depth of the water into which they jumped was rarely more than four fathoms. They plummeted to the sandy bottom, where they shovelled the oysters into baskets as long as they could hold their breath. Then they gave the rope a jerk, and the men in the lugger hauled up the basket while the diver sprang from the bottom and shot to the surface. The performance was repeated over and over again all through the day.

In the evening, at a given signal, the fleet of luggers turned and raced for the shore, the winner of the race having the right to auction his oysters first. This was the highlight of the sale, for although one man's catch could not be taken as conclusive evidence as to the number of pearls that were going to be found, it was an obvious pointer. Prices offered for the first haul were usually the highest of the auction.

Once purchased, the oysters were heaped in mounds and allowed to rot, so that when the shells

had fallen apart and the flesh of the oyster had gone, the pearls—if any—would be revealed. For many centuries this process has gone on, and the mounds along the sea-shore close to the mouth of the Moder-gam River are now so high and solid that they are easily mistaken for natural sand-dunes.

The Captain of the fort at Aripa told Knox that he would have to wait there until the Dutch Governor in Ceylon returned from a visit to Jaffna. Knox was in no hurry. The ten days spent in one of the loveliest parts of the world were delightful to both himself and to Rutland. Both of them were dazed with their escape, but although Knox was a Puritan, sober, dour, and bigoted, even he was affected by the feeling of lightness, almost gaiety, that freedom gave them. He would not have been human if he had not revelled in the change in his fortunes.

Manaar itself, close to Aripa, is at the south-eastern end of Adam's Bridge, one of the world's geographical curiosities. The so-called "bridge" which links Ceylon with the mainland of India is composed of shifting sandbanks which have, here and there, a firm backbone of coral. Speaking in terms of geological time, the bridge is of recent formation, a strange growth of sandstone and conglomerate, covered with alluvial deposits brought down by the currents from the Coromandel coast. The clarity of the water here and in the whole area of Palk's Bay is exquisite. Even some of the deeper coral groves, fathoms down, may be seen, their ivory fronds faintly purple at the tips. This delicate tinge of colour disappears the moment the coral leaves the water.

Between the sandbanks there are narrow and shift-

ing channels, so intricate that only small, flat-bottomed boats can navigate them. At their deepest they are rarely more than four feet deep at low tide except for a few treacherous holes which can be very deep indeed. The distance between firm land on either side of the bridge is about twenty miles, and at both ends, in modern times, there are railway termini. The Indian terminus is at Dhanushkodi, and the Ceylon State railway ends at Talamanaar. A ferry links the two railway stations.

On the India side of the bridge there is an island which is almost as much Ceylon as India. Its name is Ramesweram, and on it is a remarkable Hindu temple infamous, in Western eyes, for the countless deaths caused when the car of Juggernaut—the English version of a Sanskrit word which means Master of the World—was hauled across the Paumben causeway which then existed to join Ramesweram with the Indian mainland. Mobs of frenzied worshippers used to drag the great car, and so unbridled was their religious fervour that hundreds of them hurled themselves beneath the ponderous wheels of the vehicle bearing the god. Until the British put a stop to the practice, Juggernaut's passage was marked by a long line of crushed and bloody corpses of worshippers who had thought to gain merit by suicide. That causeway has now gone, replaced by an artificial canal capable of taking boats up to twelve feet draft.

To the Dutch when Knox was there, the whole of this amphibian world from Manaar to Jaffna seemed like home. Their headquarters were in Jaffna itself, a town of the same name as the peninsula which covers seven hundred square miles. Its coastline is

broken by numerous inlets of the sea, and shallow lagoons stretch from ocean to ocean, while Palk's Bay itself is studded by a fascinating archipelago of islands large and small. It is no wonder that the Dutch called it "the Holland of the East", and guarded it strongly at strategic points with impregnable fortresses. Even now, although built three hundred years ago, the Fort at Jaffna is in an almost perfect state of preservation.

All the main islands in Palk's Bay were named after the principal cities of Holland, and Knox marked almost all of them correctly in his wonderful map. Certainly this most beautiful of all archipelagos is a place of phantasy and legend going back many thousands of years. The "tivals", or men of the islands, will tell you that men four times the size of ordinary human beings once inhabited the region, and that a Malabari king ruled a vast empire from one of the islands, as the ruins of his colossal palace will prove. Labeh, King of Persia, fought a battle on Vellenativu, although what he was doing there no one knows. These, and a thousand other legends cling to Palk's Bay, one of the most fascinating geographical areas in the East, but it is rich in real history as well. One of the quaintest of historical facts is that mermaids were first mentioned by Portuguese seamen sailing in the Bay. These "mermaids" may well have been dugong fish which suckle their young and look uncommonly like human females when seen from a distance.

Knox, happy to be back once more close to the sea, led a contented existence awaiting the return of Ricklof Van Gons, the Dutch Governor. On that

officer's return, he was sent for at once and put through a searching examination as to the dispositions of the Kandyans, their habits, and the state of loyalty of the ordinary people to their despotic king. Van Gons found it hard to believe that anyone could have escaped from that savage stronghold, and marvelled at Knox's ingenuity. His most pressing request was for a suggestion as to how the Dutch could help their fellow-countrymen to escape, but Knox could think of none except by the obvious method of an all-out attack, and the Dutch, as we have seen, had too much respect for Raja Singha to make any such attempt. It seems strange that no one thought of treating Raja Singha's people as he treated white men. It would surely have been possible to capture Kandyans by means of a few well-planned raids, and to offer them to Raja Singha on an exchange basis. That it would have been successful is doubtful, but at least it could have been tried. Knox did, in fact, make one attempt to help his fellow prisoners by writing a letter to them in which he set out, in detail, how he himself had escaped and the route he had taken. He informed the Dutch Governor of this, and Van Gons enthusiastically supported the idea. He had Knox's letter transcribed into Dutch to send to his own countrymen, and the two letters were forwarded to Kandy; by what means we are not told. Communications, of a sort, undoubtedly existed, for even a little trade was carried out at times between the two enemies. It was a one-sided affair, for as soon as Raja Singha decided that it must stop, it stopped, and although the Dutch made repeated efforts to come to an understanding with him by sending ambassadors, none of these wretched dignitaries

could be certain of returning to safety again. If they did, they never had anything to report for, as we know, they always entered the king's capital at night. Yet channels of communication there were, and the two letters were probably delivered, although no evidence of the fact was forthcoming.

Knox's letter may have had some effect, for during the twenty years which followed his escape, Raja Singha died, and six more Englishmen escaped from Kandy, whether by Knox's instructions or not is not known. Only three of them reached England. One of them, we may remember William Hubbard, gave an unintelligible account of his wanderings, for he was in his dotage when he reached England. He made no mention of receiving Knox's letter, but he did say that, when he left Ceylon, only one member of the *Anne's* company remained alive in the savage city.

Van Gons took Knox and Rutland to Colombo where they caused a sensation. For some unexplained reason they were reluctant to resume European clothes, though the Dutch were very generous to them and supplied them with plenty of money. But they preferred to wander the streets barefooted, bearded, and half naked, followed by curious crowds who bombarded them with questions and almost overwhelmed them with hospitality. Perhaps there was an element of showmanship in all this, but perhaps it was true, as Knox afterwards explained, that the two men felt that the stigma of their long imprisonment was still with them, and needed some form of atonement. More likely is the possibility that they felt more at home in Sinhalese attire. Whatever the reason, they continued to look like jungle inhabitants until taken to Batavia, in the Dutch East Indies,

to meet the Commander-in-Chief of all the Dutch forces in the East. He, too, was a Van Gons, the father of the Ceylon Governor.

Knox never lacked guides while he was in Colombo, a small, heavily fortified town based upon a central fort similar to those at Jaffna and Galle. While the latter remain today almost exactly as they were in the time of the Dutch, Colombo Fort was destroyed by the British although the site upon which it stood, the busiest section of the huge modern city, is still known as "the Fort".

One of the most beautiful cities in the world, Colombo is a thriving port and business centre with a population of close upon one-third of a million inhabitants of many races. It is the capital and heart of Ceylon, and the only city of any size, for the island is essentially an agricultural society. From Colombo radiates a railway system of nearly one thousand miles of line, weaving through the heart of the mountain system in which Knox spent so much of his life; reaching the far north through that same Wannī which Knox faced on foot; and going to the most southerly spot in Ceylon along the west coast. Few railways in the world follow so beautiful and hazardous a line as the mountain journey from Colombo to Badulla. It is a masterpiece of engineering. At Pattipola it is 6,224 feet above sea-level, and at one point, known as Sensation Rock, it crawls along a ledge cut from the living rock of a precipice with a sheer drop of 2,000 feet on the southern side. Close at hand is another, even more terrifying drop known as the Alagalla Rock. When tired of watching his victims being pulled apart by elephants, Raja Singha would sit on the summit of this peak while his

gaolers pushed condemned prisoners from the brink, and watch them hurtle through space 3,400 feet to their death.

From Colombo, too, radiates as fine a network of roads as in any country in the East with the exception of Japan, and it has its own airport for internal communications, and another, at Negombo, twenty-three miles to the north, for the inter-continental air liners. Its size and importance is due to the British occupation of the island, and to the vast tea industry with its many ramifications brought to the island by the early British pioneers. The new, entirely artificial harbour which makes it one of the busiest of all comparable ports, was built only as recently as 1875, well within living memory.

Knox and Rutland spent some weeks in Colombo almost fêted by their hospitable hosts, but they longed, now, for home. There was still one final journey before them before they headed for England, for the Dutch Governor was anxious that they should tell their story to his father in Batavia. There they encountered an even more overwhelming reception than in Colombo, and once again found themselves heroes in the eyes of the people. And once more they were compelled to face a barrage of questions from the Dutch authorities, to whom Kandy—a mere detail, one would have thought, in the size and complexity of the colonial problems which faced them at that time—was the most mesmeric and mysterious of territories. They marvelled at Knox's prosaic account of the unknown kingdom, and pressed him to go to Holland in order that their home Government should hear all about his adventures. From this

further delay he and Rutland were saved by the arrival of an English merchant who, with the reluctant permission of the Dutch, took them as far as Bantam. From Bantam they were fortunate enough to obtain a passage in the *Caesar*, arriving in England in September 1680.

It would be pleasant to be able to say that Knox and Rutland were given a heroes' reception, but nothing of the sort happened. Almost immediately on his arrival Knox quarrelled with his family, and with almost everybody with whom he came into contact. For a time he kept up his friendship with Stephen Rutland, and when he was appointed Captain of the *Tonquin*, took Rutland with him. The friendship did not survive the voyage, and in his letter to the prisoners in Kandy Knox wrote:

“Stephen Rutland went with me the first voyage, but he followed his Old Course of Drinking that we parted when we came home and since he is dead in Bangall.”

On his second voyage he went to Madagascar to buy slaves, which seems unforgivable, even allowing for the fact that in those days negroes were regarded as cattle to be bought and sold. Knox, who *knew* what it was for a man to be deprived of his liberty, should have known better.

He complained that he arrived home without a penny, and in that same letter to his comrades still in captivity began with the bitter sentence:

“I am sencible that you heard of my safe arrivall with Stephen Rutland to the Dutch whose kind reception boath in Victualls and Clothing of us

was far beyond what we found from our own Nation”,

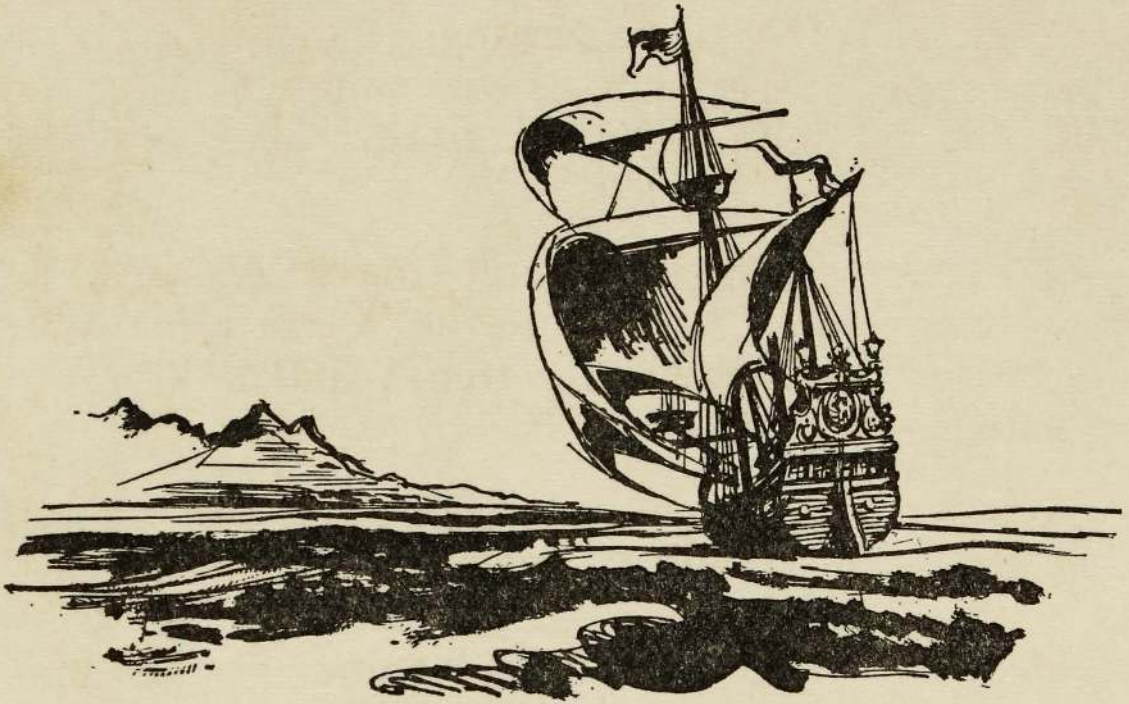
and he added, in effect, that family cares and worries in trying to get a living in England were so great that the prisoners in Kandy should consider themselves well off. In subsequent writings, too, he describes quarrels and legal arguments with shipowners, crews, and officers, only Robert Knox ever being in the right.

“Since my escape [he wrote] I have been toyleing too and froe at Sea aboute the World for a Subsistence, (which, when gotten I find it very uncertain to keepe).”

Poor Knox; and yet, despite the fact that he had to begin his career all over again at forty, he managed to retire at sixty, and when he died at the age of eighty-one, left a considerable fortune. The truth is, of course, that he did extremely well for himself, not only from his voyages, but from the proceeds of his book which, in fact, made him famous. It brought him not only literary success, but made for him many literary friends, prominent amongst them being Robert Hooke, Christopher Wren, and Daniel Defoe.

Men may be great despite themselves. History will remember Robert Knox as the man who spent the sunny days of his voyage home from captivity recording, with that marvellous memory of his, countless incidents and facts which go to make one of the most remarkable books of exploration ever written. The man himself was mean, petty, unctuous and a hypocrite, anything in fact but a hero, yet if to explore, as our dictionary tells us, is “to search and examine

with minute care", it is certain that few men in the history of the opening up of the world to human knowledge have greater claim to the name of explorer than Robert Knox.



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Death by strangulation, by poison, by the stake, or by being pulled to pieces by elephants was commonplace among the wretched prisoners, but for twenty years Knox avoided it, setting himself up as a merchant and roaming all over the island. He noted every detail of the island life, and made a map which remains broadly accurate to this day, although drawn by hand over a century before any official map was made.

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