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Nature Note

Sirocco

Each spring, with amazing perseverance and regularity, a hot, dry, irritating wind called the sirocco spins out of the Sahara Desert and blows northward for hundreds of miles across northern Africa and the Mediterranean Sea, causing a certain madness in men's minds and bringing an increase in crime and violence in towns it passes through.

This scorching wind originates in the desert sections of north central Africa during the months of February, March and April, bringing heavy clouds of dust and sand as it flows toward the low atmospheric pressure areas that exist in the Mediterranean basin at this time of year.

Sometimes a sirocco can become a full-fledged sandstorm, penetrating tiny cracks and crevices, scouring paint off buildings and vehicles, damaging engines and grounding airplanes. It inflames the eyes, throats and lungs of people, cracking lips and parching skin. Worse, it brings unease and nervous disorders known as ghiblitis in Tripoli, and leaves its victims enervated and demoralized. After a sirocco has passed, police report more quarrels, murders and suicides. During the time of the Ottoman Empire, the law stated that murder was more pardonable if the act were committed during the time of the sirocco.

People dread the wind as it starts to blow over their regions, and have many names for the hated blast. When it is particularly hot and insufferable, it is called the "poison wind," or the simmoom. It is called the khamsin in Egypt, ghibli in Libya, chili in Tunisia, chichili in Algeria and chergui in Morocco. The people of Spain, Italy, Sicily and Greece have a particular grudge, for as it crosses the Mediterranean Sea, it picks up moisture and becomes a humid, sticky, salty mixture that makes breathing difficult.

It also brings another hardship—tons of dust. In 1901 siroccos scattered about two million tons of Sahara dust and sand over Europe, and dropped about the same amount in the sea. The dust has a reddish tint and when mixed with snow or rain, it descends to earth as "red rain," more bitterly described as "showers of blood."

LETTERS

To the Editor

Science, History and Old Wounds

Dear Sir:

A German publication cites "Army Fights Biological Warfare," by Jonathan Eberhart (SN : 10/8/66):

" 'Biological warfare has never been used on any effective scale,' Col. Dirks said, 'although in the French and Indian War, a century before the Civil War, the French tried sending the Indians blankets carrying smallpox crusts. How effective this was is not known. . . .'"

The foregoing quotation was badly rendered in an article entitled "Forschung für den lautlosen Krieg" (Research for The Silent War) published in the Hamburg weekly DIE ZEIT on April 28th accusing the French of having sent blankets infected with the pest (plague) to Indians they were at war with.

I personally do not believe any army those days, and above all a French army, would ever have deliberately tried to spread smallpox among the Indians or any other enemies. That was half a century before Jenner and vaccination. The disease was thus uncontrollable and could act as a boomerang. Then, too, most of the Indians were on the French side, hence the name French and Indian War.

I would very much like to have details of this alleged case and evidence supporting this statement.

It so happens that the French treated the Indians better than anyone else in North America. And as I pointed out, it would have been folly to spread an uncontrollable disease that could very well boomerang.

In those days, and even a century later, one knew very little about the causes and vectors of diseases. Diseases were often spread unintentionally as a result of sheer lack of knowledge.

L. De Branges De Bourcia,
Heidelberg, Germany

Congratulations

Dear Sir:

I would like to congratulate you on the summary of our work on cancer-causing radicals, which I think was admirably written up in your columns (SN:4/15).

W. F. Forbes,
Professor of Chemistry,
University of Waterloo,
Ontario, Canada