A Journey to Inner Africa
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Chapter VIII

The Great Nubian Desert

An unearthly boom was echoing in my ears; I scarcely knew whether I was asleep or awake. A boundless steppe covered with snow stretched before me; a long chain of camels slowly moved along, one after another; there were snow drifts on the sides: a camel would fall and be thrown down into the snow chasm, then another, and another. But lo! The boom has subsided; now savage cries are heard from everywhere... Aha! I am in the mountains. Spuž is nearby; the Turks have made a sortie. With God’s name on our lips, we launch ourselves at them; banging and shouting ensue; I shudder despite myself and wrap my head tighter. Then it all seems to quieten down. An attractive scene unfolds before me. A small village; a dappled, pretty little house seen through an overgrown thicket; a meadow nearby with a playful river running across it; I walk over a bridge, through the thicket and the meadow, approaching the pretty house, already able to hear jolly talk coming from it; someone is waiting for me there, someone is beckoning to me from thence, and here I am, about to step over the familiar threshold; when suddenly, a savage, penetrating roar shakes me to the very core... the jolly little house, the silence, the happiness—all gone; it was all but a dream! The only thing that would not subside upon my
awakening was the roar . . . I came out of the tent. A hundred camels, on their knees, roared so horribly they could rouse the dead. They were being loaded.

What a roar, how the camel-drivers cry! It is worse than in the Kyrgyz steppe, those events having perhaps been forgotten by now, while this noise can be heard here in all its ominous savagery.

“Geh, sheikh Abdel-Kader! Geh, sheikh Abdel-Kader! Ahmet! Bas-Boch! Bas-Boch! Yah, yahwolet! Sheikh Abdel-Kader!” they cried all round. Abdel-Kader is the name of the patron of caravans in these deserts, whom they never cease to summon for help.

The frenzy went on awhile. The Arabs argued amongst themselves about whose camel was more heavily-laden; some men from our party searched for the best dromedary, others did not know which one to mount, yet others did not know how to mount and looked in horror at that tower, which would kneel before a mere child, obsequiously offering its hump. Poor camel! The things people do to it all over the world, wherever it can be found!

“Geh, sheikh Abdel-Kader!” heard for the last time, the caravan commenced to move! It was the 20th of January (the 1st of February new style), 8 A.M., and yet the sun was scorching as it would never be in St. Petersburg, not even at the height of summer, when it is in its zenith—which, as we know, is a rare occasion for Petersburg.

The mountains would crowd together and then part again. Our caravan weaved between them like a ship maneuvering between underwater rocks, not touching a single one of them. As for the strange formations of sandstone in these mountains, which in many places reveal their volcanic origins, I have described that in a separate article.

As we proceeded on our way, at first there were some signs of life: the occasional acacia-tree (but Lord, what a tree! Nothing but half-withered branches and spikes); a raven hovering over the caravan, although even that did not last as the bird turned back toward the evening; a cave with the tracks of a hyena still visible in it, although the hyena did not live in these waterless parts for long. On the morrow,

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1 Likely a local Sufi saint.
2 See also addendum.
the desert presented itself in all the horror of destruction and death. Every 10 paces or fewer, we encountered carcasses of camels and bulls. Not a single worm, not a fly, not a blade of grass: it was as if there had never been any life here. The mountains, low, solitary, scattered, half-buried in the sand, bore a complete, astonishing resemblance to tombs. Situated on a vast sandy plain, they gave it the aspect of a cemetery. Never in my life have I seen anything more terrible! The sky was as empty as the earth—nay, emptier still, owing to the horizon being wider. The sun was scorching, the heat attaining 34 degrees Reaumur,³ and during a 10 days’ journey, we encountered only one watering-place, the water tasting bitter and salty at that, so much so that one drank it entirely out of necessity.

The caravan, which had been noisy and lively just yesterday, proceeded in silence, in depressed spirits, and in bodily exhaustion. Mirages were still only in the minds of those who had not seen them, but on the third day, when we came on to the so-called River of Sand, Bahr-el-Khattab, mirages stood before our eyes constantly, causing us more torture. There were lakes spreading all the way to the edge of the horizon; there were rivers flowing before us, with all the luxury of vegetation reflected in them, which made our thirst even more unbearable; our eyes were fatigued from straining and hurt by the brightness of the sands under the rays of the sun. The Arabs call the mirage a devilish apparition. Once, in a valley, as if in the sea, we saw some peculiar figures quivering in the shape of giants; at first we thought them a mirage, but they would not vanish or disperse at our approach, instead becoming smaller and taking on certain forms. After an hour’s journey, we drew level with them; it was a caravan carrying the harem of the Pasha of the Sudan: wives and children sat on beds attached to the humps of camels, each with a little canopy, swinging as if sitting in a ship’s bunks. A long camel ride is difficult at any time, but now it seemed unbearable. The camels, including dromedaries, are all one-humped here, and the position of a rider is akin to that of an Indian faqir spinning on the end of a sharp-pointed pole. In the course of my caravan journeys, I had never

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³ 42.5°C.
⁴ Fakir (also faqir), a Sufi ascetic.
ridden a camel, always having had a horse, and it was not until now that I was able to fully understand the words of general M., who had been with us on our expedition to Khiva;5 were he to see a camel in a picture, he said, he would gouge its eyes. After a while, I was fortunate to find a donkey in the caravan and proceeded partly on its back and partly on foot, for how strong soever the Egyptian ass being might be, the animal, who was only given water every other day, would grow exhausted carrying me.

I understood the sufferings of Alexander the Great, who had traveled through the Libyan desert to worship Amon-Ra;6 on the third day of his journey, however, the heavens sent him rain; heaven protected Alexander and, later, rewarded him by telling him that he descended from Jupiter; as for myself, all I was promised were the bitter consequences of a similar journey. Now I can see how the army of Cambyses7—on its way to destroy the temples that Hercules, Perseus, and Alexander the Great had worshipped—was buried under the scorching sands of Libya; I can see why caravans and travelers constantly perish in this so-called Great Nubian Desert, one of the most terrible deserts in Africa.

The simoom—or, as the Arabs call it, khamasin, which means “50”—blows for a period of 50 days in the months of April and May (not incessantly, of course, otherwise it would devastate the entire Egypt in 50 days). The khamasin, which can also suddenly swoop down at other times of the year, is almost always accompanied by deaths of travelers in the desert.

It is difficult to foresee the approach of the simoom. True, the air thickens in anticipation of it, assuming a purple color; blood rushes to the traveler’s face; his eyes seem to be about to pop out of his head, and he feels dizzy; yet it all happens so quickly that men and animals, even though they know the signs perfectly well, scarcely have the time to fling themselves prone upon the ground and bury their heads in the sand, as deep as possible. Now the simoom seems to have passed safely, having covered the caravan with but a thin layer of sand. The

5 A campaign by Russian troops in Central Asia in 1839–40, led by V. A. Perovskii.
6 Amon (also Amun), an Egyptian deity, later merged with the sun god Ra.
7 Cambyses II (r. 530–522 BCE), known for his invasion of the Kingdom of Kush in what is today Sudan.
men and the animals rise to their feet; their parched lips are thirsty; everyone rushes to their gherbe—the water-holding skins—and... oh horror! There is not a drop of water left. The simoom dries out skins full of water in the blink of an eye unless they have been put away and covered with rugs or hidden in the ground; but we have already noted how difficult it is to foresee the approach of the simoom. Then the caravan, if it be a long way away from the nearest watering-place, finds itself in most miserable circumstances. Usually, here is what happens to it: the slaves, entire crowds of whom are being led across the desert, sit down on the ground in a circle and silently wait for death to come; the Arab guides calculate very precisely, often from experience, whether or not they can reach a watering-place with their supply of camel blood and thereupon act accordingly: if they can, then each kills his camel and sets forth without delay; otherwise, no-one is going to make a vain effort, and each of them, in a manner that is obedient and fatalistic, dooms himself to death. Thereupon the mysterious desert rings with the kind of songs that are usually sung to mourn the dead and with the kind of cries that accompany those departing for the other world: a scene more frightening than the silence of the negroes. The Turks, however, never die without fighting death—desperately, to the last moment of their lives. Being, for the most part, the owners of the caravan, they find somewhere between the bales a little water or wine while stocking up on camel blood also, then they choose the best dromedary in the caravan and ride toward the Nile; no-one resists them, for the Arab guides, even in their utmost desperation, never lose their respect for the master. During their ride, they mostly perish in great sufferings.

It is not the simoom alone that can cause deaths amongst travelers. Every year, there are several accidents in this desert that have nothing to do with the simoom. Most mountains and other places are named after their victims. Here is where the commander of the Sudan cavalry perished: his guide mistook one mountain for another and lost his way in the desert. And here is where 12 of Mohammed Ali’s kawasses perished: the guide set forth to search for a camel that had fallen behind; the kawasses waited for a long time; the Nile was already near, and anyone

8 Officers in the Ottoman army.
who has ever crossed a desert knows how avidly men and animals thirst for fresh water. The men had already traveled that route, and so they proceeded by themselves. Meanwhile, the guide returned; having found no-one there, he followed their fresh footprints; however, neither the kawasses nor the guide ever came back. They were later found at short distances from each other, the last one four hours' journey from the Nile. Such accidents are too numerous to recall.

Bodies stay uncorrupt for a very long time. There are, as we have noted, no beasts around, neither predators nor any other kind, nor any insects, so there is nothing to devour them. The bodies, desiccated by the sun, lie there as if alive, and one is often mistaken when seeing them from afar.

Here is a mountain called Habesha, or Abyssinian. Once, after a simoom, an Abyssinian slave woman was stranded here, amongst others. Other slaves patiently waited for death, but she, who was young and beautiful and used to enjoy, no doubt, a better life than the rest, was sorry to part with it. She waited for death in great pain and suffering. And then two kawasses, a Turk and a Circassian, happened to ride up on her. Together with their caravan, they, too, had been caught in the simoom but were prompt enough to save one samsamieh, a small waterskin, which they hid from the others, and then fled on their dromedaries. The Abyssinian rushed to them and wept, begging them, imploring them to take her with them. The Turk wavered.

“Listen,” he said to his comrade, “if we carry her to Cairo we can sell her for 10,000 piasters.”

“True,” the Circassian said, “but if we share our water with her, all three of us might die.”

“The Nile is not far,” the Turk went on, “and we are accustomed to hardship . . .”

Upon realizing that the Turk had taken her side, the Abyssinian begged ever more passionately, addressing him alone. Desperation gave her more strength, eloquence, and perhaps, beauty. The Turk was touched and positively insisted on taking her with them.

“Very well,” his companion said, apparently also wavering, “but you shall put her on your dromedary.”
That might have been just what the Turk wanted. So forth they set. The Circassian, who rode behind, took out his pistols, shot the Abyssinian and then the Turk, who was not quick enough to whip out his own, and then, having taken the *samsamieh*, he safely reached Berber. They say that he himself used to tell the story to his people, adding that, even if he had to share the water only with the Turk, still it would not have sufficed and one of them would have had to kill the other; therupon the mad Turk took on another drinker, one who was not used to hardship at all; and at any rate, he did a kind deed by killing both: he shortened the suffering of the Abyssinian whilst also departing the Turk to the other world not alone but in the company of a woman with whom he had fallen so in love that he was willing to die for her.

We traveled for 12 or 13 hours a-day without halting anywhere. The camels remained true to their monotonous, measured pace from daybreak to dawn and from the first halt to the last. As for forage and water, they could only see it from afar and only during mirages at that. They were given a couple of handfuls of *dourra*—a variety of millet—in the evening, and among the Arabs, only those who minded the camels had a handful of *dourra* a-day, even less, and nothing else. During the entire journey, they kept the same monotonous pace as the camels, with the guides walking ahead, never sitting down, never stopping. The heat did not seem to affect them—it was not even hot for them.

“Can it indeed be hotter?” one of our men asked an Arab.

The Bedouin laughed.

“Why, is it hot?” he said. “It is winter now, after all, although it is drawing to an end; it is different in summer.”

“So how is it different?”

“So that we ourselves cannot walk in the desert in the daytime, but have to walk at night.”

“It must be lovely here in summer, then; a pleasure still awaiting us.”

It is during night passages that accidents beset caravans the most often. The Bedouin Arabs are not good at recognizing stars; they are guided by signs that have been placed on mountains, by the very position of some of the mountains, and finally, by the human and animal bones that protrude out of the sand or have not been buried in it yet.
In the darkness of the night, they cannot see their guideposts and oftentimes mistake one place for another, especially amidst the boundless sands. Mistakes are all the easier to make considering that sand hillocks are perpetually being transported from one spot to another, and it is not hard to see what consequences the slightest of errors can have.

I seem to have already happened to note that it is mostly the Arabs of the Ababde tribe who serve as guides. They say that if an Ababde crosses the desert once and drops a pin, then on the way back he will find it; otherwise he is not an Ababde. The Ababde are liars; like all Arabs, they like to boast a little, especially when talking of themselves. The thing is that, employed as caravan guides, they are inferior to the Kyrgyz. To a Kyrgyz, everything in the steppe is a sign: the stars, which he knows well; the incline of grass; the direction of wind; tombs that no-one else can tell apart amongst thousands of similar others, scattered across the steppe; and birds, migrating or stray. Day or night, he will lead you from one end of the steppe to the other, as if following a straight line. But what the Arabs cannot be excelled in is their ability to bear the labors of a journey. Approaching a halting-place, after a 13 hours’ journey, after several such daily passages, the Arabs run ahead, dance, grimace, and play the clown. A Kyrgyz would never do that, even though anyone who has traveled in the steppe knows what hardship, what labor he is capable of enduring.

The Ababde were perpetually at war with other Arab tribes, especially with the Bishari.9 Such is a fate shared by all nomadic peoples (Mohammed Ali having recently subdued them); yet the Arabs of these parts have less courage than some—although, of course, not many—Kyrgyz tribes. There are quite a few similarities between the two, however, as there always are between any nomads. Although both peoples are Mohammedans, they are very weak in their faith, the Arabs, living closer to Mecca, being somewhat more pious. Cattle is their only property. Settlement and agriculture are their horror, their scourge. Wild independence is their idol. Hospitality is conventional for both. Avenging an insult is a matter passed from one generation to another. The Kyrgyz are armed with bows, arrows, and long lances;

9 An ethnic subgroup of the Beja people.
the Arabs have small spears and swords, similar to those possessed by knights in the old days; both rarely have guns, and if they do, their guns mostly have fuses but no matchlocks.

The Bedouin Arabs are rather tall, well-built, and handsome. They differ from the fellah Arabs in all respects. The former are free. Although subjects of Mohammed Ali, they have negligible duties, and even those they easily find ways of evading. Mohammed Ali himself pays a certain sum to some of the Arab tribes for the safety of his frontiers and of Mecca pilgrims, while the Sheikh of the Ababde has the right to levy a tax on any cattle driven through the Great Nubian Desert, whether it be owned by Mohammed Ali or by merchants: three piasters per camel, one and a half per ass. The sheikhs of other tribes do the same in their own deserts. Meanwhile, the fate of the fellahs is such that I have hitherto been reluctant to talk about them in much detail. Upon studying the subject sufficiently closely, I might be likely to see it in a less grim light than at first glance. Travelers who have run across Egypt where it is easily passable have judged the matter and made their conclusions under the first impression or, more often, under someone else's influence, and therefore their opinions are so contradictory, so exaggerated and superficial as to make one, despite oneself, deal with the matter carefully.

Our guide, Ahmet, was a superior guide. A wealthy and noble Ababde, he was employed only on important occasions; nevertheless, he was half-naked; and come summer, it is but a small piece of fabric, hung where it belongs, that makes up his entire costume. His ferdeh, on the other hand, was draped excellently, like the toga of some statue of Nero or Cicero, the Bedouins generally wearing it in a very picturesque fashion. Ahmet was well-built, his hair meticulously waved and besmeared with grease (that being an important part of the toilette of the entire half-naked Arab tribe, men and women without exception), and his body had enough fat on its bones. His features, the glint of his eyes, the liveliness of his speech, his gesticulation, and indeed, his

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10 A garment Kovalevsky describes below as worn by men, draped around the body. Another account mentions ferde, a scarf worn by a woman. See John Petherick, *Egypt, the Soudan, and Central Africa* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1861), 109.
passion for money—all were strongly reminiscent of a descendant of the Jews. I have no space here to describe all the facts, references, and evidence that I gathered in those parts; but I shall find another occasion to state them separately, in order to confirm my theory that the Bedouin Arabs of the Ababde tribe and of the inner part of Africa descend from the Jews, those who stayed behind, fled Palestine, and settled in Egypt.

The guide walked ahead, wistfully humming a song, impromptu, true to the custom of all nomads. The song told, as always, of a woman, a camel, a night—it usually is night—and was, like most of them, very unharmonious.

“Ahmet, what mountain is this?”
“Mount Devil.”
“Why is it called that?”
“One can hear the Devil play music here at night.”
“Have you heard it?”
“Many times!”
“Is it good?”
“It is only pipes, and sometimes drums: a true Sabbath. Let it rot!”
“So why is there music here?”
“Long story.”
“You have enough time to tell it, even if you were to start from Adam.”

It is true that Arabs, whatever they are talking about, always commence from such a distant point that one hardly ever has enough patience to listen to the end, but in the desert you are ever so happy for time—if merely an hour—to pass without your noticing it. Usually you have to live that hour consciously, till the last second, and suffer till the last drop of patience. Every minute that remains ere the next halting-place will let you feel itself, as if wishing to say: you claimed once that you cherished me, you were willing to stop the sun in order to keep me, so there you are, the sun standing still right above your head, you are free to live your life and enjoy me, here I am in my entirety, long as well as dull . . .

And so Ahmet began, but he did so and continued in a much more protracted way than I shall now speak.
Once upon a time, there was a Devil who lived in the Sudan, and his life had been full of jaunty escapades—until he married! Then it took a bad turn. It is said that Mohammedans treat their women as if they were nothing, an object, a piece of rubbish; that is only how things appear to be, whereas in reality a woman is always a woman, and if she wanted to take a man in hand, she could do so with anyone, be he a Turk or Satan. There are numerous examples of that in history; this one has not entered its annals yet. So bad it was for the Devil that one night he left the blessed land of the Sudan and fled, rushing headlong for a place to which his better part would never be able to follow him, the Great Nubian Desert, which in those days had the same name and was just as frightening as it is now. It was not until he got here, to this mountain, that he stopped for a moment to catch his breath and, glad to be far from his wife now, threw a party for himself, which could be heard at the other end of the desert. A scholar from Cairo was passing by just then. He had been walking for a long time and so, out of fatigue and hunger, he resolved to join the noisy party, how suspicious soever it might have seemed to him in the middle of the desert, for hunger gives courage even to scholars. The Devil was glad to have a visitor; he was, you see, a sociable Devil, and loneliness bored him. They began asking one another questions: how, why, and whence?

“I come from Cairo,” the effendi said.

“And I am going to Cairo,” said the Devil. “How is life there?”

“Bad! My wife never gives me a moment of peace. I have left her!”

“There you are! And I have fled the Sudan to leave mine."

Misfortunes are known to bring people close to one another, although it used to be less known that they could bring the Devil close to man. At a jolly supper, the evil one offered the effendi a deal.

“Let us go to Cairo,” said the Devil, “and make our acquaintance with women. I shall possess one after another, choosing the most noble and wealthy ones, depend upon it, so that you could exorcise me with your incantations. I shall obey and leave my dwelling-place, only to move to another, even more exquisite place, and you shall earn money for your art. It shall be a truly gay adventure.”
The scholar was a clever fellow. He hesitated, making as if the deal was not to his liking; he cited complications due to arise from his conscience, his wife, &c.; he went on about all sorts of things that one always says when making a deal with the Devil; and in the end he agreed. The Devil did not even demand the effendi’s soul for himself, either being a kind Devil or not caring for such an acquisition. Indeed, what the Devil would he need an effendi’s soul for? You can buy one for a few pennies in Egypt.

Aided by Satanic powers, our travelers promptly transported themselves to Cairo. The Devil began his debauch. First of all he possessed a vizier’s daughter. The maiden went berserk; the entire household was in turmoil. They went in search of a healer and found our effendi, who cured her completely, as if by magic. The Devil leapt out of her pretty little body—only to transport himself into another, an even better one—more developed, luxurious, full of languor and fire—in which he then lived as if in his element. I forget whose body that was; however, the effendi drove him out of it too without batting an eyelid. In a word, they were making remarkable progress. The effendi was showered in money and lived without a worry in the world.

Finally the Devil, how stupid soever he might have been, realized that he was working for someone else, dutifully and selflessly. He went to the effendi to reason with him, to persuade him that the money earned should be shared fairly. But the learned scholar—who was, true to the Turkish habit, in a hurry to take his pleasures from life, knowing that the morrow would not be his to enjoy and seeing that his partner was of no more use to him, having already visited all the wealthiest families—the learned scholar refused him bluntly.

“Very well,” said the Devil, “I shall be able to destroy you. None of your riches shall help you.”

And so he possessed the Sultan’s favorite wife.

The effendi could see what he was up to and, guessing that this time the Devil would never agree to leave his dwelling-place, fled. But the poor man was caught and told that he would be beaten until he drove the evil spirit out of the Sultan’s wife—or until he died.
The scholar humbly appeared before the Devil, he begged him and implored him, he promised him not half of his riches but all of them, yet he pleaded in vain: the Devil resolved to take his revenge.

“Very well,” said the scholar, “I shall perish, that is true, but you, too, shall be in no less trouble.”

“How so?”

“Upon fleeing Cairo, I encountered your wife, who was seeking you and asked me to tell her your whereabouts. I told her everything; she is not far.”

The Devil jumped out of the Sultan’s wife body and fled, rushing headlong, while the effendi began enjoying life once again, having hired his own wife out to some poor man at a substantial gain in money.

“But why the music on the mountain? And why Mount Devil?” I asked, having already forgotten the beginning of the story.

“Why,” said Ahmet, “the Devil had a bivouac here and feasted with the effendi—and ever since, the music has been echoing around the mountain.”

“Right, right!”

Lord, how hot it is! How thirsty we are! And what we are obliged to drink! Half-way to our destination, at the bitter-salty wells of el-Murat we filled our gherbe with water; but on the third day this water (which was barely drinkable to begin with), having been churned in the skins together with salt (which had melted under sun-rays), took on a disgusting smell, taste, and color. Take a glass of clean water, mix in a couple of teaspoons of mud, add salt and one part of a rotten egg, infuse it all with wormwood, and you shall obtain the kind of water similar in all respects to the kind that we had recently been drinking in the desert.

This drink and the heat, to which we had not yet become accustomed, made the skin of our faces and bodies go blotchy with red spots.

I have not told you the names of our bivouacs: for what use would they be to you, those names you would forget immediately! Besides, you can find them on the map. The route through the desert was determined by me geographically, the elevations measured by means of a barometer, as much as the heat and thirst permitted.

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11 An important source of water on the trade route across the Nubian Desert.
Of course there is scarcely—if I may so express myself without sounding indelicate—in a word, there is scarcely a human being who would conceive the idea of visiting the Great Nubian Desert; yet a traveler might find himself in a situation similar to mine in a different part of the world, and it is to him that I offer the following advice: never use any strong remedies at the beginning, but instead save them for the future; how poorly soever you might feel, bear in mind that it shall be even worse toward the end. For instance, if you feel dizzy with heat, simply raise your hat; the slightest wind, the quivering of the air, inevitable in the desert, should suffice to cool you down to begin with. Later, when it no longer helps, you can use eau-de-cologne for a while, but when that, too, fails, as it is certain to do, then you can sniff spirits, and finally, as a last resort, should you have protracted fainting fits, use blood-letting. Otherwise you shall become accustomed to strong remedies, subsequently rendering them ineffective. You never feel hungry in the desert, for fatigue and thirst kill any appetite, but you would pay any money for an orange, a pomegranate, or a lemon; therefore, lay in a stock of all that in Cairo. A month's journey shall not spoil it, as the extreme dryness of the air seals the peel tight and dries it out like parchment. Tea, the most reliable thing to quench thirst, constitutes the only food and the best drink, how bad soever the water may be. Who has not experienced its wholesome effect! When a traveler, frozen to the bone on a winter journey, enters the room of a station master, the sight of a boiling samovar alone suffices to revive him, its gay burbling awakening pleasant thoughts, and the poor wanderer feels life return as the healthy liquid flows into his blood to warm it up!

My skin was so dry in the Great Nubian Desert that it seemed to come off the body; my head was burning; I had a high fever; yet after a few cups of hot tea I would revive. He who first introduced the consumption of tea was a truly kind-hearted man, and what a pity that his name is not known to grateful posterity. As early as in the 3rd century, the Chinese were drinking tea to their heart’s content. One cannot recall without horror that we were all but deprived of this wholesome drink for a long time: in the 18th century, the Chinese, despite all the signs of displeasure shown by the Russian Embassy in Beijing, forced a
few boxes of tea on them; the Russians were about to throw it away, but some shrewd Muscovites, having tasted the brew properly, were able to give it its due. It was not that long ago, and now Russia receives about 10 million pounds of tea, while another 50 million pounds is sent to Europe, where tea was introduced by the Dutch at approximately the same time, and to America.

So great were our thirst and disgust caused by the liquid kept in the gherbe that, upon our arrival at the last bivouac, we sent a courier to the Nile for water, so that the time when we could drink as much as we wanted would come sooner, if only by a few hours. Just after 9 A.M., as the heat was becoming unbearable, we met the courier carrying water, followed by a vulture. That was the first creature we saw after a 10 days’ journey: birds of prey are always the first to meet man, be it on land or sea, and the last to abandon him, accompanying him to his grave and staying there long after his friends and family are gone. Avarice is always more patient than affection.

Reader, you can imagine our joy when we made it to the water. No, you cannot imagine it unless you have experienced circumstances similar to ours. On the 29th of January (10th of February), at about 2 P.M., we saw a vague blue stripe on the horizon . . . that was the Nile. Soon some little grey houses appeared, as well as copses of palm-trees (Phoenix dactylifera) and doums (Cucifera thebaica), those inseparable companions of the Nile’s banks in Nubia: it was the village of Abu Hammet . . .12 That was not, however, quite the end of our sufferings. True, we were not to leave the wholesome Nile again for long, nor to have any shortage of water; but we still had to travel to Berber—a four day’s journey—on camels or donkeys. In different circumstances, such a journey would be no trouble, but the weak condition in which we all were and the heat, 30 degrees Reaumur,13 did little to facilitate it.

Let us halt for a moment and once again cast our eyes back, how frightening soever what is behind us may be. Now we can observe in a calmer manner that which previously evoked nothing but a painful feeling.

12 A settlement on the Nile at the end of the Nubian Desert trade route.
13 37.5°C.
The Arabs still have a custom that they follow eagerly, for it brings them a few piasters. At the exit from the mountains into the desert, by the so-called Waterless River, they erect tombs for every traveler, mourning his imminent death with howls and chants. The traveler, as if asking for their protection and patronage, throws them a few coins, thereupon they scatter the stones of the tomb and then proceed forward, singing and dancing gaily.

The Nubian Desert is a tomb, a dead tomb, in a manner of speaking, devoid as it is of the slightest elements of life that any other tomb possesses. But has there ever been any life here, and can there ever be any? Those are the questions that inevitably occur to anyone crossing the desert, anyone whose mind is able to produce any question at all.

The ancient Egyptians, who bequeathed us the giant monuments that cause the most fervent of imaginations freeze, brought no life hither. Indeed, had life happened to arise here in some random fashion, they would have destroyed it. They needed the desert, which was a safer stronghold against the incursions of the ancient Ethiopians than the first cataracts at Syena. There are no signs of antiquity anywhere to be seen, and according to everyone I have spoken to, there are indeed none. The only thing that exists, a day’s journey from el-Murat, on the right, toward the Nile, is a cavity hewn from granite, but that belongs to a later epoch, perhaps that of the caliphs’ rule; it was probably made by some pious Mohammedan rather than by the government. Wherever there is water in the desert, one can even now find wells dug out by private persons, either to honor a promise or out of zeal. There are also a few wells, extremely deep, and a few tanks, built at a great expense, which belong to the reign of Mohammed Ali; but alas, all the expense was in vain, for there is not a drop of water in any of them. The seasonal rains come here sometimes, but only once in 10 years or so; there having been none in the last six years. But when they do come, nature advances in all its beauty. Quick-sands, mountains with not a foot of alluvial soil to be seen on them, and plains—everything is covered with vegetation; meadows, tanks, and caves are filled with water to last two or three years. Arabs flock hither in their numbers, bringing their cattle with them, jostling, fighting for land—the same
land that they had previously evaded—beasts and birds arriving even sooner. A new world is created quickly, but it does not last long! . . . The red-hot sun destroys it in two or three months, especially considering that dew is unheard of here; it is only caravans that take advantage of the rainy season for a long time afterward, finding water in hollows and tanks situated in certain places.

So this desert is not doomed to eternal death! If nature is capable of extracting it from the hands of death in such a short time, then man, too, is able to achieve the same by virtue of labor and time.

The reader will remember that the route across the desert, which shortens the distance and goes round the cataracts, is very important to the Sudan, since recently a rich province of the Viceroy. A canal joining one stretch of the Nile with the other, from Korosko to Abu Hammet, would make a safe route for uninterrupted communication by water, as well as opening up the space for the population and enabling agriculture. It is a colossal enterprise, albeit not an impossible one, as my barometric measurements have shown. I will not try the reader’s patience with any detailed considerations of this project. The canal must be more than 300 versts\(^{14}\) in length, but in many places, there is a bed ready for it (for instance, the dried bed of the Korosko). Finally, the effort it would require could hardly be greater than what has gone into the building of the famous dam designed to raise the Nile, which has already been continuing for several years, costing so many millions, and God only knows if it can ever be achieved on the anticipated scale. The canal would join the provinces of Egypt that are presently separated by the waterless Nubian Desert, so much so that a bull that costs 60 rubles in Cairo is sold in the Sudan for 10 rubles in paper money.

Upon leaving the naked sandstone mountains, we found crystalline rocks, developed in a large formation. Three or four hours’ journey from el-Murat, nearly half-way across the desert, we took some alluvial deposits from a ravine and, having washed them at the wells, obtained traces of gold; further, we found separate pieces of rock, broken off from their deposits, which were tinted with copper-green. There seems to be no reason to doubt that mining would soon facilitate the enrichment

\(^{14}\) Approximately 200 miles.
of this country, which would be joined to the Nile and therefore to Egypt much more closely than are the numerous separate oases scattered across the Libyan desert. When all is done, the latter do hold out against every effort—the advance of the moving sands and the ignorance of the Arabs.

On our left, to the east of our route, there is another one that crosses the desert directly from Aswan; it is five or so days longer; nevertheless, in the past, when the tax on slave caravans used to be collected at Korosko, many would evade it; but now that Mohammed Ali has established a toll in Aswan, that route has been all but abandoned. Further east, mountains become significantly higher, and one can often encounter water there; there may not be grass everywhere, but at least bush is omnipresent, serving as forage for cattle. The nomadic Arabs travel across the area all the way to the Sea of Reeds, where the lack of rain gives way to abundant dew.