A Journey to Inner Africa
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Chapter IX

From the Great Nubian Desert to the Confluence of the White Nile and the Blue Nile

Abu Hammet is a small village, very much enlivened by the arrival and departure of caravans. It appeared especially picturesque to us, although perhaps in consequence of our having come out of the desert. Traveling in Egypt and Nubia, one is struck by rich vegetation: one can see, at one and the same time, bright greenery, flowers, and fruits all year round.

In the month of January, they sow pulses here: beans, peas, &c. Oranges, lemons, and pomegranates are in blossom; the fields are green with wheat; in some places they cut sugar cane and senneh, as well as clover, which they sometimes let cattle graze on. In February most of the fields are covered with vegetation; watermelons, melons, and cucumbers ripening; rice sown and barley reaped. In the month of March, thick-trunked trees and shrubs are in blossom; they harvest a crop of wheat sown in December. April is the time for picking rose flowers; again they sow wheat; clover is cut for a second time. In May a crop of winter-sown wheat is harvested; acacias and
henna-trees\(^1\) blossoming; fruits such as early season grapes, figs and annona ripening. In the month of June, they sow *dourra* and, in some places, cut sugar cane. In the Sudan they pick grapes, of which, however, there is little. Come July they sow rice and maize, pick cotton and flax; in Cairo, this verily is the time of grapes. In August sown grass is cut again for a third time; water lilies and jasmine blossom everywhere; date-trees bear rich fruit. September is the season for picking oranges, lemons, tamarind, plums, and once again, rice. By October grasses have grown to the full; fragrant acacias and thorny shrubs blossom. They hasten to harvest every crop. The Nile is inundated. In November, once the waters of the Nile have subsided, wheat is sown; the fields are full of violets and daffodils; figs are picked. In the month of December some trees shed or, more precisely, renew their leaves, but there are a variety of grains and flowers springing up from the earth; this is the true spring.

I have described for you a full year of vegetation, blossoming and ripening in Egypt. Although I did on this occasion enquire of local people as well as resort to Champollion Sr., having also seen much with my own eyes, nevertheless I must have missed something. Even as I write, things keep coming to my mind, such as lupines, turnips, and corn (this last, however, not being cultivated in large quantities).

Our camels had to admire that rich vegetation from afar, being only allowed to come close to mimosa bushes covered with nothing but thorns—and even those were so big that you could not bring your hand close to them without fear—yet the hungry camels devoured them voraciously. How their mouths were not torn by that harsh food, I know not; palm leaves, somewhat less thorny, were offered to them as a delicacy.

A scholar named Ritter\(^2\) has recently written an entire treatise arguing that the camel lives only in those lands where there is the palm-tree, while the latter cannot exist without the former, and that the two are life-long companions; a touching yet completely wrong argument. Mongolia, the Kyrgyz steppe, and the Crimea have no palm-trees

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1 Also Hina tree (*Lawsonia inermis*), a plant native to semiarid and tropical zones; a source of dye henna used to color hair, fabrics, and so on.
2 Carl Ritter (1779–1859), German geographer.
whatsoever, and yet the camel is no less widespread there than in Af-
rica. Carried away by his idea, Ritter has forgotten about them. It would
be fairer to say that wherever there are nomads, there are also camels or
deer to serve them; without them there would be no nomadic life; and
if the camel is called, with such expression and eloquence, the ship of
the sands, then the deer can be called the frigate of the forest.

In the course of my life I have become quite familiar with the camel;
having acquainted myself with it well in Africa and Asia, I can say
truthfully enough that the northern camel is stronger and more resil-
ient than its southern relative. The Kyrgyz camel can carry 16 pooods,3 14
being its ordinary burden, while in these parts, camels cannot be loaded
with more than 12 pooods. There now, I notice that I frequently get car-
rried away from my narrative when I talk of camels, but what can I pos-
sibly do if the subject is so close to my heart! You have already seen that
from my previous travels if you are cognizant with them. So close the
subject is to me that I shall, it seems, even end my days on camelback.

How exhausted and ill soever we might have been, nevertheless,
on the morrow we set forth from Abu Hammet. The haste with which
we proceeded very much surprised the Turks and Egyptians around
us, especially those who had to equip us and see us off on our onward
journey. When I said to the ruler of Korosko, upon our arrival at the
place, that we set forth the day following and therefore the camels and
skins must be ready by the morning, he could not see, try as he might,
how it would be possible to prepare as many as 100 camels for an ardu-
ous passage like ours in less than a day. However, we also had important
levers given to us by the Viceroy and intended to spur the activity of
the Egyptian authorities, and so the ruler of Korosko, having worked
all night together with all his men, equipped us by the evening of the
day following. He later said that he had never in his life been in such a
desperate situation, and after our departure, he spent a month in revel-
ries. We had our reasons to hasten. At the end of May, the rainy season
commences in Fazoglu, from which even Arabs flee, and we wished
to spare as much time as we could for our work. Therefore, upon our

3 An obsolete Russian measure of weight, about 36 pounds. Sixteen pooods is approximately
580 pounds.
departure from Abu Hammet, we covered the same daily distances as we had in the desert, even though we were no longer worried about the lack of water.

At 5 A.M. the caravan would leave its bivouac, halting for the night at 5 or 6 P.M. The Nile would appear before us in all its majestic silence, and then it would be concealed again behind copses of palm-trees and mimosas. Vegetation is more varied here, the cultivated strip of land wider. One can notice the approach of the belt of tropical rains, which occasionally, if rarely, touch these parts.

The huts of the poorest in these parts sometimes have furniture of the kind previously unseen; a wooden bed—albeit, of course, with no sheets—being not a luxury but a bare necessity. One cannot sleep on the ground for numerous crawling insects, amongst which scorpions, serpents, tarantulas, and other venomous creatures are entirely common and frightening even for the careless natives. The bite of a serpent or a scorpion usually leads to death, although it rarely occurs here, as the natives know many remedies. A traveler must always have ammoniac with him, which he must immediately apply to the sore spot and in addition take 10 drops a couple of times. The bite of a scorpion or a serpent is much more dangerous to a foreigner than to a native.

On the morrow we halted for the night in Bagher, a very picturesque village. We never stayed in houses, not even in cities, but rather put up our traveling-tents in a field, and when sailing on the Nile, we spent nights on the barque.

Thence Wadi Khamar begins, the largest and most dangerous cataract after Wadi Halfa.¹ The Nile is full of islands, sedge-bushes (which seem to grow out of the water), and rows of granite boulders. The noise of water, crashing against them and churning, can be heard from afar, and yet it does not deafen an approaching traveler, as the ancients wrote of the first cataract at Aswan, which is much weaker than this one. The falling of water at any rapid is insignificant, the real danger being the rocks.

What bliss it is to be drinking sweet water whenever you like, and the Nile's water at that!

¹ The cataracts (shallow, rocky parts) of the Nile.
Having walked 180 versts in four days, overcome with fatigue, exhausted, still not quite recovered from the weary passage through the desert, we barely shuffled into Berber, and there our journey on camel-back ended—alas, only temporarily!

Berber is a town similar to those of which we have encountered so many in Egypt and of which there is so little good to be said. It has its own characteristic feature, however: *tukkels*, or round wicker huts, welcoming in outward appearance and, most importantly, roofed. Conical roofs commence thence, heralding the rainy season. They present a lovely picture amongst grey clay houses. Another distinguishing feature of Berber: there is depravity in full view of everyone. We have not encountered that hitherto. In Egypt it is persecuted, and even in Esneh it is veiled by a certain mystery. In Nubia we only visited villages whose inhabitants, for the most part, would flee at our approach, as well as the desert. Berber is the first town in the Sudan!

The Sheikh of the Ababde Arabs and the *Mamur*, who in his turn obeys the *Mudir* of Dongola, live here. To explain all these titles, I shall presently tell you about the government of the East Sudan.

The Sudan is ruled by a governor-general (*Hakumdar*), whose power is substantial. The material wealth of the province and its location, far from Mohammed Ali and beyond the reach of his soldiery, gave Ahmet Pasha Aboudan (the Father of Ears, the Long-Eared One) a bold idea: to separate the province from the Viceroy and, assisted by the patronage of the Turkish Sultan, to gain independence. The example of Mohammed Ali is tempting. Ahmet Pasha acted rather cautiously and indirectly; using money and endearment, he charmed the army troops stationed in the Sudan, strengthened them with slaves, and entered into a secret liaison with the Pasha who ruled Arabia, with whom he could easily communicate via Souakim. Yet one unlucky day, a messenger from Cairo came to the disobedient Pasha and, in

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5 Approximately 120 miles.
6 A town in Sudan at the confluence of the Atbara River and the Nile.
7 An administrative officer or local governor in Sudan.
8 A provincial governor.
9 Ahmad Pasha Abu Widan (d. 1843?), governor of Sudan in 1838–43.
10 Suakin, a port city in Eastern Sudan on the Red Sea; at the time, the main communication hub for the Arabian Peninsula.
the name of the Viceroy, summoned him to Cairo. Ahmet Pasha declined, pleading preparations for the taking of Darfour, which was one of Mohammed Ali’s favorite ideas. The Viceroy promised to send an army detachment on the pretext of the planned campaign, but his real intention was, needless to say, to surround the Pasha with his own men and to watch him closely. However, it was not easy to deceive Aboudan, who replied that he did not need any soldiers, that one could recruit up to 14,000 slaves in the Sudan, and therefore he asked the Viceroy to send him only experienced officers, mentioning some men who were loyal to him. Further, he enticed the Viceroy with high hopes for the discovery of gold; in a word, he tried to remain in the ruler’s confidence for as long as possible until such a time when he would receive the affirmative answer from the Porte. The Viceroy did send him some officers, albeit not the ones he requested, and then, having received new evidence about his criminal designs, he positively demanded that the Pasha come. Ahmet Pasha did not go for a long time, feigning illness, until finally he girded himself for departure. Forty of the best dromedaries were ready for a journey, but it was not Cairo that the Pasha wanted to travel to; realizing that his plans had been discovered before time, he resolved to flee Berber and go to Souakim and thence to Arabia, the Turkish realm. On the eve of the agreed departure, he was visited by one Omar Aga, who brought him a letter with but a few words in it: Mohammed Ali demanded an immediate reply as to whether or not he was coming to Cairo. The Pasha told Omar Aga that he was ready for departure and together they went to the barque, on which all his things had already been loaded. On his approach to the shore, however, he saw 400 Arnaut soldiers on the opposite bank of the Nile. Escape was impossible. Pretending to have been struck by a bout of illness, the Pasha postponed his departure till the day following and returned home. There he ordered his eunuch to bring the medicine box, took out some powder, dissolved it in a cup of water with some sugar, drank it, and an hour later died with truly Turkish composure. The Turks know not how to live, but they are good at dying.

11 Also Arnavut (pl. Arnavutlar), the Ottoman term for Albanians.
After that accident, the Viceroy did not appoint a governor-general in the Sudan for two years or so. Mohammed Pasha Melikhli\textsuperscript{12} governed the province as a controller, a plenipotentiary of Mohammed Ali. Finally, about three years ago, Khalid Pasha\textsuperscript{13} was appointed Governor-General, and he continues to rule the Sudan to this day. Schöelcher\textsuperscript{14} is mistaken when he claims that Ahmet Pasha was shot in the presence of many (namely, Mohammed Ali’s men sent by Omar Aga) merely for provoking a suspicion—not quite justified—in the mind of the Viceroy. It is difficult to conclude to what extent Ahmet Pasha was guilty; we all judge by the rumors that we believe to be the most plausible of all. Yet his death is too public an affair, and I did hear the story from Omar Aga himself in the Sudan rather than in Cairo, 2,000 versts\textsuperscript{15} from Khartoum, where Schöelcher heard it.

The Sudan consists of six mudirlyks, or provinces. Here they are, beginning from the North: Dongola, Khartoum, Kordofan, Sennaar, Fazoglu, and Taka, which stretches to the Sea of Reeds. The provinces are governed by mudirs, who, following the accident with Ahmet Pasha, were at first given much power by the Viceroy and thus set against the Governor-General, which only led to interminable arguments amongst them, and so in the end, the Pasha of the Sudan remained the sole ruler. The provinces are divided into boroughs that are governed by mamurs; which are further divided into districts, governed by nazars; and finally, into villages, which are in the charge of their own sheikhs: the administrative system is almost the same as in Egypt.

The Mudir came to me accompanied by a Copt, who was his secretary; that small engine propelling all things great and thus all things evil. The Copt, like all his kin, strutted ceremoniously in his long dress; his elongated lips, his head, inclined to one side, a copper ink-well under his belt, a turban on the head, and a quill behind one ear all made him appear significant in the eyes of fellahs. Usual greetings exchanged, Yousuf Effendi told the Mudir to prepare barques for us, the Mudir

\textsuperscript{12} Ahmad Pasha Manikli (also Manlikli, c. 1795–1862), governor of Sudan in 1843–45.
\textsuperscript{13} Khalid Pasha Khusraw, governor of Sudan in 1845–50.
\textsuperscript{15} Approximately 1,325 miles.
addressed the same demand to his secretary, and the secretary replied that at present there were no spare barques in Berber, according to the papers. Thereupon Yousuf flew at the Copt with all the might of his power and wrath: he called him disobedient and rebellious, he cursed him, he threatened him with the gallows and the *kibosh*; the Mudir repeated Yousuf’s words. The Copt’s face soon lost its significant aspect and assumed utmost humility. He assured us that he himself was willing to turn into a barque so as to carry us, and should that prove impossible, he would still carry us all on his own shoulders. The implacable Yousuf demanded a barque, advising him to spare his shoulders for the rods that awaited him.

In consequence of these energetic measures, the barque of the Governor-General, the best in the Sudan, appeared by the pier, followed by another, intended for our men. In this country you should never despair upon hearing an initial refusal; on the contrary, you should be prepared for it and still pursue your demand.

Whether it has been said ere or not, everyone must have noticed that in Egypt one either beats or gets beaten. In your dealings with the natives, and especially with the authorities, you should always appear cold and imperious, not demanding the impossible from them yet always insisting on your demands. A familiar tone shall be fatal for their opinion of you, for they do not think of themselves highly, so anyone who condescends to them is bound to be shown even less appreciation.

On the following day, the 3rd (15th) of February, we set off from Berber.

Once again, the Nile with its crocodiles and hippopotamuses; once again, the Nile hemmed by the narrow ribbons of its green banks, with its mysterious silence! Soon we passed the mouth of the Atbarah. On the way back, I determined its location and found a slight difference between my measurements and the maps, perhaps due to some changes the bed of the river had undergone some time ago.

The Nile is the only river in the world that lets in precisely one other river, the Atbarah, over a space of more than 2,000 versts—that is,

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16 A long whip.
17 Approximately 1,325 miles.
between the confluence of the Blue Nile and the White Nile, that being the point where the Nile proper begins, and the Mediterranean Sea. From its very origin to the separation into the branches that create the Delta, it is almost the same in width throughout its course. It is somewhat deeper by the Atbarah and generally more abundant with water in its upper reaches than in the middle or near its mouths, its waters being lost in the sands and in evaporation, as well as taken away into fields and canals, the only influx coming from the rains that occur in its upper reaches.

The surroundings of the Nile, as noted, changed somewhat; palm-trees were becoming rare, giving way to acacias that thickly covered the banks and picturesque islands, the latter occurring frequently and hindering our progress, for the Nile, shallow as it is, at this time grew even more shallow, divided into several branches by the islands. The cultivated strip went deeper into the country, albeit still timidly and indecisively; the inhabitants were even more fearful here than elsewhere, being Berbers and, partly, nomadic Arabs who came here with their herds.

We progressed slowly, towed in the absence of any wind by three or four dozen men: naked mankind of divers colors, a chaush with a kibosh following them. Someone like Schelcher is bound to say, “Lord Almighty! How can you possibly speak of it so calmly as you look upon such a heart-rending scene?” Enough of your momentous words and florid phrases, M. Schelcher! I shall in due course write what I think of this mankind, but it is still too early to do so now: my imaginary fellow travelers must acquaint themselves with it properly to be able to make their own judgement.

On the third day, a favorable wind picked up and soon brought us in our three-masted dahabia to Shendi.20

Upon learning that the Mudir of Khartoum was here, we went ashore. Soliman Pasha, like most Egyptian governors, was a Turk; he, too, had the inevitable figure of a Copt at his side. Leaving the Copt to

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18 Author’s note: Like everyone else, I used to think so, but as we shall see below, I have found in the Great Nubian Desert another river, which flows into the Nile from the left.
19 Also chaus, a low military rank in the Ottoman army—in this case, an overseer.
20 A town in Sudan on the eastern bank of the Nile.
write all the necessary instructions for our arrival at Khartoum, we set to smoking pipes, drinking coffee, and talking. The Pasha asked our doctor, who had until recently worked in Khartoum and was his family doctor, about the health of his son, who remained in Cairo with his mother. The doctor regaled him with propitious news.

“What about your wife? Would you not like to hear about her?” he said in jest.

“What is a wife! It is but soil that can always be replaced, whereas my son is my seed, flower, and fruit. Should he perish, God knows if I am ever to have another.”

The woman in the East only assumes significance once she has borne a child; consequently, children are always the subject of perpetual arguments in a harem, at times paying with their lives for other wives’ jealousy toward their mother. Just recently, in one of the noblest harems, one wife stabbed another, who was pregnant, with a knife solely to ensure the woman would not gain any advantage over her. Such examples are common.

The town of Shendi was once great, but upon suffering a horrible catastrophe in 1822, it has not recovered still. At present it has as many as 4,000 inhabitants. We visited the spot where the favorite son of Mohammed Ali—Ismail Pasha, the brave conqueror of Sennaar—was burnt alive; a sad story in itself and terrible in its consequences. I shall recount it later.

Having spent three or four hours in Shendi, we obtained the necessary papers and bid farewell to Soliman Pasha. Our dahabias speedily sailed toward Khartoum before a favorable wind.

We still had about three hours to travel to the confluence of Bahr-el-Abiad and Bahr-el-Azrak, the White Nile and the Blue Nile, when we noticed that the waters were divided into two streams, which grew more defined, little by little, until finally they took on clear outlines: the waters flowing along the right bank were white, whilst those on the left were light-blue-green. The two rivers still hesitated to merge into one. People living nearby much prefer the water of the Blue Nile to the silty water of the White Nile; those living on the left bank bring water from the other one. I was vividly reminded of two Siberian rivers, the
Biya and the Katun, which upon joining together into the Ob River, flow separately for a long distance, one turbid and white, the other light and transparent.

Having passed the town of Halfay,\textsuperscript{21} the headquarters of the Vice-roy’s cavalry, on the 8\textsuperscript{th} (20\textsuperscript{th}) of February, we arrived at Khartoum, the capital of Sennaar and the entire East Sudan.

\textsuperscript{21} Wādī Halfa, a city in northern Sudan.