Chapter XI
Three Varieties of the Palm-Tree and the Baobab

Roseires¹

Until now, at least as far as I am aware, there were two known varieties of the palm-tree in Egypt and the Sudan: the ordinary date-palm, *Phoenix dactylifera*, and the *doum*, *Cucifera thebaica*. The former grows all over the space between Alexandria and Khartoum, gradually becoming less wide-spread toward the south, while the latter, first appearing in Upper Egypt, overtakes it, spreading as far as Roseires and somewhat farther. Finally, there is a third variety of the palm-tree, which can first be seen between Sennaar and Walet Medina²—namely, at Saba Douleb—and henceforth all the way to Fazoglu.

This last variety is called *douleb* here. Its foliage is very similar to *doum* leaves, the only difference being in the way in which they are folded, almost imperceptibly, so that one has to look very carefully to notice that; its fruit is very different, resembling the so-called ananas melon in appearance, size, and especially smell; its flesh inside, filled

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¹ Er Roseires, a city in Sudan, near the border with present-day Ethiopia.
² Perhaps Kovalevsky has in mind Wad Medina.
with fiber, has an astringent taste, which negroes and Arabs still find delicious; like the *doum* fruit, it has a stone in the middle. I do not find either very good to taste. Yet the principal difference between the *douleb* and the *doum* is in their trunks. As we have already noted, the *doum* divides itself into branches, which is why many exclude it from the palm species; as for the *douleb*, it is similar to any palm-tree in that it grows straight, having only one trunk, stock-like; but this is the only variety that widens in the middle, its top and bottom always being thinner than its middle.

The aspect of the date-palm amazed me at first, but those groves, continuously stretching along the monotonous banks of the Nile, cause fatigue, being so regular. I have already said that a palm-tree is better when it stands all alone, amidst the sands of the desert, its sprawling crown vividly outlined against the fading horizon in the evening. Then it is beautiful, and despite having admired it so many times, I can never get enough of this view.

Having grown bored of the uniform appearance of date-palms, one takes to *doums*, with their rich greenery and sprawling branches; yet soon they, too, reveal the regularity of shape characteristic of palm-trees. The *doum* always branches at a certain height, first into two halves, each of those branches, in their turn, also splitting into two identical parts, which grow in perfect accord with one another, like twins; each tree branches in this manner three, sometimes four times, with remarkable regularity. The *douleb* makes a pleasant difference to someone familiar with the *doum*! But then suddenly, one is struck by a giant of vegetation, whose size one’s imagination has never been able to picture: the baobab!

The baobab-tree, *Adansonia digitata* (or *homr*), is one of the most ancient inhabitants of the Earth. Humboldt believes a certain baobab, growing on one of the islands of Cape Verde, to be much older than 5,000 years, the diameter of its trunk being about 30 feet. Having measured many trees, we found none exceeding 25 feet, while their age also proved quite venerable—namely, more than 5,000 years. The baobab is ugly owing to its thickness, being of incongruous height and having branches that are unwieldy and lack in richness and luxury, the
proportions of their parts wrong: it is an enormous mass ending in thin branches; it is an elephant, a mammoth of vegetation. The color of its bark—metallic, steely—is beautiful; but what is especially striking about the baobab is that you can see budding leaves, flowers, and fruit on it all at the same time. The leaves are quite small and scarce; the flowers white and exquisite; each flower doubling in the middle, like the hollyhock; its petals bent back at the edges, like those of the lily; also, it has a fine almond smell; the fruit resembles the cocoa-nut with a thin shell, under which there is a farinaceous substance—pleasant, slightly acidulous, and very refreshing—as well as numerous stones, which Arabs sometimes roast and use instead of coffee.

The baobab's trunk is, for the most part, hollow, easily sheltering several people inside it from sun-rays and from the weather during the rainy season. There are always a number of other trees, creeping plants and parasites being especially common among them, that wrap their trunks round it or even grow into it altogether, thus increasing its shade.

In the Kordofan and Darfour deserts, nomadic Arabs look out for baobabs that are inhabited by bees so as to take out their honey and leave the hollow for the seasonal rains to work on it. In a short time the rains produce destruction in the tree, creating actual wells, in which water is kept in the driest of seasons. Such a tree constitutes the wealth of a nomadic family, which sells the water to travelers at a high price—and even if the traveler were dying of thirst, depend upon it, the Arab would not give him a handful of water without payment.

The first baobab can be found by Arbaji, three days' journey or so from Khartoum, but it really is indigenous to Roseires, there being a great many baobabs in the mountains.

Beyond Sennaar, nature remains unchanged: the same low banks overgrown with thickets; beyond that, in a distance, a small village or an encampment of nomadic Arabs, whom the drought has forced to move to the banks of the Nile. Why, then, do they never step out into God's world to come to the Nile itself, into the view of passers-by? The government is frightening, so much so that they flee their homes at the sight of a tarboosh; but there, beyond the thicket, are lions and hyenas! And yet it must be less frightening there.
The roar of these beasts, reaching us nearly every night, made our crew moor by sandy islands. The precaution also had another advantage for us: the packed mound of a sandbar made an excellent place for a walk. Those were the only hours in the day when we truly lived: breathing freely, voraciously imbibing the coolness of the night, surrounded by the night, with the sky always full of shooting stars, how cloudy soever the day might have been, complete silence engulfing us, disturbed only by the roar of a wild beast or the splash of a hippopotamus. Everything is wild and deserted; your heart tightens in involuntary anguish when you remember where you are and with whom. God only knows how many such nights we have spent on the deserted sandbars of the Nile, how many thoughts have gone through our minds. But on we go, past the deserted islands! Further on and on; yet everything is the same further on. Here, two days’ journey from Sennaar, is Sero, a large place in comparison with others, but it is exactly the same as all the rest, the only exception being, perhaps, more tukkels and some government buildings made of clay.

As we proceeded on our way in a tranquil manner, behind us, on another barque, a horrible scene unfolded.

The weather was dead calm; the Arabs waded through the water that was up to their knees or higher, towing the barque with ropes. Suddenly, one of them disappeared and then came up to the surface again; a minute had not passed when he went down once again, as fast as a plummet. Everyone guessed what had happened; the men made a lot of noise, they began shooting, and then the Arab reappeared on the surface, his bloodied ferdeh dragging behind him; a rope was promptly thrown, and he was able to swim to the barque somehow or other, blood and water dripping from him. It turned out that the crocodile caught him above the knee at first, but then the beast must have got entangled in his ferdeh—a garment which the natives wrap round the lower parts of their bodies several times—and so it let go of its prey, leaving some traces of its teeth on his body; next, the crocodile caught him by the toes of the same foot, but then the shouts and noise must have frightened it; three toes were bitten off clean, as if with a knife. The man was offered medical remedies, but he refused them, saying
that there was a witch-doctor at home; his first concern was his *ferdeh*,
which he looked over, regretting the severe damage done by the croco-
dile; thereupon he asked to be taken home; three Arabs accompanied
him, while the rest went into the water to tow the barque as if nothing
had happened. What a lovely country! One cannot approach the banks
for fear of lions and hyenas; nor can one remain in the water for fear
of crocodiles. We were not, however, to remain cautious for very long!
Instead, we would come ashore alone and bathe with a carelessness
worthy of true Arabs—even at night.

Upon leaving Sero, on the third day we arrived at Roseires. A wild
thicket of *doums*, *doulebs*, and baobab-trees, all growing together and cov-
ered with creeping lianas and parasites, separates the village from the
Nile. One can imagine what the place is like during the rainy season! No
beast would probably be able to pass through the wilderness. Equatorial
nature is spread for everyone to see in all its mighty beauty. The village of
Roseires is situated in a very picturesque place, upon hills, whence some
blue mountains are already visible in the distance. Roseires is the head-
quarters of the *Mudir*, the Governor of the province of Fazoglu; there are
about 3,000 people in the village, among them many negroes.

We left our *dahabia* there, unable to proceed by water, for a cataract
stood in our way. We walked for two days along the Nile without losing
sight of it, the ground rising somewhat; as we proceeded, we encoun-
tered plenty of ebony-trees, *Diospyros ebenum*; then on the third day, we
came to Femaki, a small village, where we saw, situated on a picturesque
spot on the bank of the Nile, the ruins of some building. It was called
“the palace of the Viceroy” for the following reason: the Governor,
unable to withstand insistent demands that he renounce his claims to
Syria and other conquered lands (which were so dear to his heart) in
favor of the Porte, announced that he would retire to the Sudan to be an
independent ruler there rather than accede to such humiliating propos-
als, and he ordered that a palace be built in Femaki—which ended in a
puff of smoke. The Pasha should have accepted the proposals made by
the European governments, for the palace, built of raw brick, not unlike
other official buildings and stores in these parts, had been ruined before
it was completely finished.
A little further upstream from Femaki, where the Nile is not so deep, we waded across with our caravan; poor camels, with the water coming up to their breasts, were hardly able to resist the fast current; no accident happened on the above occasion, although that was rare luck.

From thence we traveled between the Blue Nile and the Toumat, keeping closer to the former. The Toumat flows into the Nile half an hour’s journey or so downstream from Femaki. The terrain rises visibly, the foot-hills being the first outpost of the land of the negroes.