A Journey to Inner Africa

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Chapter V

The Second Expedition to the Mountains

Another white horse, a bell round its neck; riding upon it is something like a charred log, bent and broken, or a monkey, but whatever it is, it bears little resemblance to a human being; behind it, more bunches of spears and rows of bayonets; more black bodies, black faces, and black feet, with white rags above the knees, owing to which our swarthy detachment can be mistaken from afar, among the trees, for a flock of cranes; another thicket, also impassable, for we decided, in order to shorten the journey, to go straight across, from one mountain to the next, following no road or path, by sight, so to speak, carrying our provisions upon our backs; acacias and blackthorns of every possible variety, brambles of various kinds, designed for no purpose but to tear people’s dress—or, in the absence of any, their skin—bent in the manner of fishing rods and apparently expecting us, attacking with remarkable viciousness and biting bone-deep into our flesh. There was a difference, however, between this and the previous occasions: to our surprise, the sun did not appear in the sky, which was overcast with clouds everywhere, but wherever it was at the time, it must have remembered those living under it, amusing itself at the sight of our sufferings, the air being stifling and heavy.
Yet again the same dear companion, the *samsamieh* by my side, on the pommel of my saddle; yet again the same invariable batman, a loyal negro from the Huli tribe; yet again the same *youzbashis* and *bimbashis*, now changing guard, now joining the vanguard, and the respectable figure of Hassan Effendi, the chief of battalion commanders; yet again the same march, “Marlborough s’en va-t’en guerre,”* calling us to march forth, while the voice of the doctor, who is always fussing and always running late, drowns out the clarion call of the music. However, the soldiers now have a new task to perform at bivouacs: that of erecting *tukkels*, for the *rashash*, the first rainy season, has already commenced. This one is not long, lasting for two or three weeks; it is not until afterward that the *kharif* comes, the season of constant, heavy rains lasting for four months, concluding with another month of intermittent rains.

We came to our first halt quite late and, not wishing to exhaust the soldiers, put up no *tukkels*, but at about 2 A.M. we were awakened by a torrential rain falling on us. Pulling a rug over me and holding its middle aloft from underneath, now with one hand, now with the other, so as to make at least some slope for the water to roll off the top, I contemplated the position of a man suffocating in such a restricted space, and thought, *What is it like? It is like being confined in a coffin alive, lowered into a grave, and buried . . . ? How terrible.* Wishing to free myself from this thought sooner and to convince myself of the opposite, I made to look out from under my confinement: the rain swept over me, and I hastened to hide myself again. The sky, as if caving in under the heavy clouds pressing on it, seemed about to collapse upon the earth . . .

Meanwhile, another catastrophe was about to betide me: the soaked rug was getting ever heavier; I could scarcely hold it above myself, my hands distinctly feeling its moisture from the inside; eventually, several drops percolated through it; having made its way in, an entire stream was now threatening me, and I poked my head outside again: it was dark, there was no rain, and yet I could clearly hear its noise as it splashed in puddles. What was the matter? The soldiers had put up a kind of tent, made from all sorts of rubbish, over me; I was particularly pleased to

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1 “Marlborough went to war,” a popular French song that gained Europe-wide circulation in the wake of the Napoleonic Wars.
receive such attention from black humankind. It was not for the first
time, however, that the soldiers and officers took care of me. They seemed
to understand the difficulties that I, coming as I did from the North,
experienced in the course of this expedition, while themselves bearing
great hardship under the white-hot sky on such arduous marches.

In the morning the rain commenced to subside; having ventured
out from under the tent, I was amazed by our motley encampment,
for even in ordinary times, our men presented a sight that had little
order or harmony to it. The line of sentries stood still, of course, but
the others, naked for the most part, crowded round the fires in various
positions, drying their dress and mocking one another; laughter could
be heard everywhere, as if nothing was the matter. The Arab guides
did the most prudent thing of all. As soon as the rain began, they took
off their ferdehs, which was their only dress, and sat on them, naked,
through the night; when it stopped raining, having dried and warmed
themselves, they put their dress, completely dry, back on, whereas no-
one else, including ourselves, had any dry underwear to change into,
all our things having been soaked through.

It was not until 10 A.M. that we were able to dry ourselves somewhat
and set forth from the bivouac. There were no traces of the rain left on
the ground, however heavy it had been; it being the third rain in the
course of that summer, the earth, exhausted and scorched, swallowed
it like a drop. Only khors, or creeks, still expressed narrow streams; by
the evening, there was no water there either.

We crossed Hassa, the khor where we had spent such an unpleasant
night, and another khor, Belmeh, into which Hassa flows, several times.
The journey was extremely weary; having brought a few donkeys with
us, we still walked for the most part, sometimes descending from a
mountain, sometimes climbing another, walking over rocks and land-
slides. At noon we reached Sodah.

The Sodah Mountains used to be very thickly peopled—solely
by the Berta negroes, who would never let any other tribe, and es-
pecially not the Arabs, come close to their habitation; no-one could
pass their land as long as they could get the better of the passers-by;
their neighbors had tolerated them for a long time, but the previous
year the *Hakumdar* attacked Sodah; he spent three days killing the inhabitants and burning their dwellings, whereupon he retreated, leaving in his wake nothing but ashes and ruins and taking into slavery as many as 1,000 surviving negroes; however, the soldiers also took a beating. The negroes would hide themselves in caves, which are plenty in Sodah, launching sudden attacks from thence on the soldiers, who carelessly engaged in plunder. Besieged in their caves, the negroes would either kill one another so as not to fall into the victor’s hands, or put themselves to death by starving, surrendering only when taken by surprise. Women, while being led away by the soldiers as their own property, would attack them suddenly and, clutching them, would often throw themselves off a cliff, taking the enemy with them, too.

There are few inhabitants left in Sodah now, scarcely 2,000, and those were only able to survive thanks to having fled prior to the arrival of the *Hakumdar*. They pay taxes to the Egyptian government in gold and in slaves. The *melek*, having been warned about the approach of our detachment, came to see us; the negroes gathered in a crowd at the very top of the mountain, bundles of spears upon their shoulders, and waited to see what our meeting would lead to. The *melek* was accompanied by several slaves; it was then that we saw, for the first time, people dyed red from head to toe, their hair and even their eyebrows being red. Poor people! Having no hope of becoming white, they wished to imitate a color that was at least semi-aristocratic. According to a negro legend, they were once white also; but the sun, which the majority of them worship, turned its wrath on them for some reason and burned them; henceforth, they have been as black as charred logs.

The *melek*, or *mek*, and his companions, having halted a few steps prior to reaching us, threw themselves on the ground and kissed it; then, having come close, they stretched their arms upward, as if to protect themselves from the bright sun shining upon them and, lowering their eyes, halted again; their movements and poses were extremely theatrical and gracious. Needless to say, little did our negroes know that what they presented us with was a tableau vivant picturing the worshipping of Ramses and other pharaohs by slaves, a scene whose image we had seen repeated so often on the remaining monuments of ancient Egypt.
The two peaks of Radokah—which we had already seen so many times, both from Benishangul and from the Toumat, sometimes resembling barely visible spots, like fleecy clouds on the horizon, sometimes outlined with a crimson-red line, sometimes pale, sometimes blue, as we variously came closer to or farther from them—these peaks now took ever more defined shapes and stood against the horizon, formidable and magnificent.

We halted for the night at the foot-hills of Fadokah. Fadokah is connected with the mountains of Benishangul; Singe, or Singhe; Radokah; and finally, Doul; together they make up a regular, elevated range between the Blue Nile and the White Nile in the East Sudan, or the so-called Peninsula of Sennaar. The mountain range stretches from south to north-east, ending a long way from Khartoum still. The rivers that flow into the Toumat from one side and into the White Nile from the other take their origin in this range.

The population becomes ever more dense as one leaves the realm of Mohammed Ali far behind, deviating west of the Galla tribe, and as the mountains grow more impassable. Vegetation becomes ever more rich. What plants did we not encounter here in their wild state! Wild bananas attain an incredible size, but their fruit, also enormous, is not so tasty, being full of seeds. By the banks of khors, there are jasmine-trees the height of our apple-trees; the jasmine is always in blossom, for although it sheds leaves, I have never seen it without flowers, and its smell spreads far in the sultry, hot atmosphere. Wild grapes, wild plumes, trees similar to apricot-trees; giant baobabs, or Adansonia digitata; Sterculia setigera, which the Arabs call tertu; sycamores of divers varieties; Euphorbia, Bauhinia, Celastrus decolor (a variety of buckthorn); ebony-trees (Diospyros ebenum); as well as many other fruit-trees, creepers, and lianas, a thicket of which we struggled through. What a remarkable variety, what an immense power of vegetation! Here, by the bye, the wild potato grows in the mountains. Poisonous in its primaeval state, it loses its poisonous quality once replanted, all the inhabitants of the mountains consuming it; it also reaches an extraordinary size, one potato weighing up to 15 pounds. Another variety of the so-called potato, to use the local word, is nothing like the ordinary potato; it sprouts
the same shoots (we have not seen any flowers), but the fruit is different: smaller than our potato, it resembles chestnuts in taste. I brought with me several tubers of both varieties; but will they take root in our cold soil? The asparagus is excellent.

Lord, what nature, what luxuriousness! As we traveled to Doul—in the middle of April—everything along the way had been burnt by the sun, all-destroying and all-creating in these parts; while on our return journey—which was a week later, after heavy rains—everything was changed! . . .

The reader has now seen whom and what we found in those parts; and given all that, Inner Africa is still believed to be deserted; Inner Africa, where man can live off the fruits of the earth, with no need for ploughing or sowing. I have not told you, reader, about the half of the fruits, roots, and leaves that the negroes eat. I brought with me nearly everything I could gather in different seasons. Perhaps some of these plants can also grow in our country, in the South of Russia.

As one approaches the equator, the population does indeed increase noticeably. According to the evidence I have gathered, it decreases in the same manner, diminishing gradually, as one moves away from the equator on the other side of it; within the confines of the seasonal rains, where wonderful vegetation provides all means necessary for the meagre life of the negro, the population cannot be eradicated; people live here without labor or effort, so what could possibly prevent them from living here? One becomes accustomed to the heat and the rays of the burning sun; and one can, of course, become accustomed to them far more readily than to frosts of −30 degrees Reaumur, common in our land. The sultry African atmosphere does at least have some languor and luxury to it, unless you must work, whereas in our parts frosts make one's blood curdle. I suffered greatly in the Sudan in the heat of 40 degrees Reaumur, but as I recall, the weather had been even harder to bear on the march during the Khiva expedition, when the Reaumur thermometer had no longer told the temperature, the mercury having frozen.

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2 −37.5°C.
3 50°C.
I repeat: Why would the negro not live here when he can have more than he requires? By the most negligible amount of labor, working a week or two during the rains, he obtains as much gold as he needs to buy a dozen spears or necklaces and decorations for himself and his naked wife. Two enemies abuse him: civilized neighbors, who chase negroes as if they were beasts, to catch slaves for themselves; and heavy rains lasting for nearly six months, which one cannot hide oneself from in a rickety tukkel. Another concern is where to find water; however, it does not last long, as water remains in khors and caves for about three months after the rainy season. Some negro tribes have built tanks in which water is kept all year round; others make do somehow—that is to say, they either bring it from afar, from the khors that always contain water under the sand, or take it away from their more prudent neighbors, or finally, drink the bitter-salty water that they extract by means of shallow wells.