Chapter VI

Jebel Doul and Its Entertainments

Sheikh Ibrahim took us to one mountain after another, going round and round the same spot as much as he could, eager to show off our detachment to the negroes and to present himself to them as a very important figure with an army to command at his will, while at the same time doing his dubious business through the *meleks*. My patience finally exhausted by the dealings of this Arab Jew, I ordered the men to put him under arrest. You should have seen the way the other Arab guides stood up for his honor; but I did not relent and hired a negro as a guide, a native, who conducted us to our destination as if along a straight line.

Soon we descended to Doul, a wide *khor*. It flows west prior to merging with the Sobbat, which in its turn flows into the White Nile. Further on the left, Mount Doul rose 3,500 feet above the ground, on the right was Kurmuk-ue-Zerab, and straight ahead, directly before us, stretched a range of less elevated mountains.

Among these mountains, on a raised plateau, the fortress of Doul, the only one in these parts, had been indicated to us, but we had not seen anything yet. Soon a crowd of riders appeared from behind a mountain, all in lavish Albanian dress, followed by several negro outrunners and led by two gallant riders upon excellent Arab horses. They
were Osman Bey, the governor of the fortress, and Omar Aga, the commander of the Arnaut soldiers who made up the garrison there. Good Lord, how many memories stirred up in me at the sight of these people! Not long ago, it seemed, in some other mountains, crowning their tops, there had been people dressed and armed exactly the same as these, and those people had been waiting for me, glad of my arrival, and had followed me at my beck and call . . . It was not so long ago . . . and yet how far away it was . . . and how different. And now these people rode out to meet me; but they gazed at us in surprise, having become unaccustomed to seeing white people in their confinement; they had grown heavy and stooped low in their idleness! It takes six months for one-half of the garrison to die, and in two years there is no-one left alive. The old Albanians were almost all gone, which seemed to have been the aim of the government that had sent them here. They had often pestered it with their not too delicate demands that their salary be increased. There were new recruits from everywhere; that was down to the commander of the Arnauts: should he run out of men, they would take away his power and with it his salary. On the other hand, Omar Aga did not hesitate in his choice of men nor in his use of means. Here he had a Tartar who had deserted from the Prut, a Bosnian, a Dalmatian; there was a Serb, a Montenegrin, a Turk, and a Greek, most of them having fled from various persecutions in their homelands or escaped the gallows.

But Omar Aga—the very same Omar Aga who, according to Schelcher, shot the Governor-General of the Sudan at a dinner, in the presence of guests, on the Viceroy’s orders; Omar Aga, born on the frontier of Montenegro and Albania, the perfect type of those lands, which are related to one another not only in the dress of their inhabitants; Omar Aga, resolute, courageous, always gay despite his miserable position in this political exile, with his habit of drinking a bottle of vodka at lunch and another at dinner—vividly reminded me of my old comrades, many of whom he had known personally and of whom he spoke with fascination . . . He talked of alliance1 and of sworn brotherhood; of the bare cliffs of his country; of Scutari, which he called

1 The word used in the Russian text is *cheta*, which in South Slavic languages means a group, a band, a commune.
Skadar,² as we all once used to call it; of the Prince-Bishop;³ of our expeditions . . . Oh, what a happy time that was! We shall never see the similar of it now. I was 25 then, and the Prince-Bishop of Montenegro was 21; back then we were brave in our endeavors to further our ends, armed with our blind faith in Slavonic chance, and that chance was our blind ally . . . Now we walk timidly and cautiously, feeling and observing each step . . . but how far can one get in this manner? Certainly it was not our ancestors who invented the saying “more haste, less speed”; rather, it was borrowed from the Germans (“Eile mit Weile”⁴).

What a fortress Doul is! Around it is a shallow moat, a prickly wicker fence, and two little cannons by the gates—that is the entire citadel, impenetrable for the negroes. Inside the fortification everything is clean. Among numerous tukkels stand several little clay houses, white-washed to perfection and thatched with straw, which reminded me of our Ukrainian huts . . . Serbian overcoats flashed before me; Osman Bey plied us with rakia; everything was familiar, close to the Slavonic heart, and I found it all enormously pleasing. Laugh, reader, laugh! Yet I should like to transport you to Inner Africa and show you anything or anyone that would remind you of the past so strongly, assuming that the past has left you with at least one memory, assuming that you do have a homeland—and thereupon I should like to see your expression and hear your words. Now that you are peacefully smoking your cigar at home, you will, of course, find my effusions ridiculous.

Doul was built about six years ago, with the same object that prevails here, the only one that forces people to resort to every kind of expense and to make most imprudent suppositions. The object is gold, the demon that has tortured the Viceroy and never left in peace the rulers of the Sudan over the past 20 years. As usual, no gold was ever found, or if it was then the amount was such that would not pay for one-twentieth part of the costs incurred to maintain the garrison. They could not

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² The city of Shkodër in today’s Albania, near Montenegro.
³ The Metropolitan of Cetinje, de facto theocratic ruler of Montenegro under Ottoman overlordship. Kovalevsky refers to Petr II Petrovich (1813–51), at whose invitation he stayed in Montenegro in 1837 to explore for gold. While there, Kovalevsky took part in military action against the Austrians on the Montenegrin side.
⁴ “Slow and steady wins the race.”
commence their work, having no knowledge at all, and so they were left with nothing but vain efforts, hopes, and fruitless expenses. In the meantime, the garrison, surrounded by unfriendly negroes and situated far from the realm of Mohammed Ali, was enduring much hardship in its life provisions. Scurvy and fevers were fast wiping it off. Mohammed Ali continued to send new men and, despite all the submissions made by the Governor-General, remained adamant and strict in his orders for them to stay in Doul and search for gold. The thing was that he had read in some old Arabic manuscript, preserved in one of Cairo's mosques, that the pharaohs had once obtained several barrels of gold, which, in his view, must have come from nowhere else but Doul. He told me about that himself. If Mohammed Ali does get some idea into his head, he will never abandon it but will pursue it with remarkable persistence and patience, the proof of which can be found in the important monuments to his rule: the barrage of the Nile, the discovery of gold deposits, the digging of the Mahmoud-iya Canal, the conquest of the Sudan, &c. Whatever price he had to pay for those enterprises, considered impossible to accomplish, still he overcame all the obstacles and achieved his goals. One can no longer doubt the success of the Nile dam or the expansion of the gold industry; the gold-washing factory operates very well even under the management of Arabs, gold being produced daily, which cannot be concealed nor created by imagination alone. The barrage is nearing its completion under the guidance of Mujul Bey; we shall describe this immense enterprise in due course. It is only complete ignorance or political upheavals that can destroy the glorious deeds of Mohammed Ali's rule.

Traces of civilization had penetrated Doul itself: in Osman Bey's vegetable patch, we saw a plough which vividly reminded us of the ploughing of fields in both ancient and present-day Egypt: first a camel and a buffalo, then a buffalo and a cow dragging this wooden cutting tool, which scarcely scratched the soil, unable to dig a single inch into it.

5 Author's note: Unfortunately, the death of Ibrahim Pasha and the miserable condition of Mohammed Ali raise serious doubts with regard to the continuation of the great enterprises established by the reformer of Egypt.
приятія, считавшіся невыполнными; но онь превозмогъ всѣ препятствія и достигъ своей цѣли. Теперь уже нельзя сомнѣваться въ успѣхъ запруды Нила и распространеній золотаго производства 3); золотопромышленная фабрика действуетъ даже подъ руководствомъ арабовъ очень хорошо, золото получается ежедневно, его не скроишь, не созданъ однимъ воображеніемъ. Баражъ приводится въ конце подъ руководствомъ Мужуль-бея; мы опишемъ это гигантское предприятіе въ своемъ мѣстѣ. Только одно совершенное невѣдомство или политическій переворотъ мочь скрушить славныя дѣла правленія Мегеметъ-Али.

II въ самый Дуль проникли слѣды цивилизаціи: на огородѣ Османъ-бея, мы видѣли плуговую упряжку, живо напоминавшую распашку земель древняго и нынѣшняго

*) Къ несчастью, смерть Ибрагимъ-паши и бедственное положеніе Мегеметъ-Али заставляютъ сильно сомнѣваться въ поддержкѣ огромныхъ предприятій преобразователя Египта.

Соч. Ковалевскаго. Т. 5. 14

Egyptian plough
The Viceroy instructed me to explore the locality of Jebel Doul and, should there be no gold there, to withdraw the garrison. Hence they were expecting me there as a liberator. Having set to work on the very day of my arrival, I was glad I did, too, for on the third day, in the evening, it began to rain, and in the course of the night it got worse, the rain turning into a downpour; the thunder roared incessantly, rolling from one mountain to another or breaking out as if right over our heads, shaking our poor little huts like some reeds, the lightning crossing the sky without pause; the thunderstorm did not subside until the afternoon of the following day. That was only the rashash; I can imagine what the real kharif must be like in these parts! Dol, a khor in which we could see not a single drop of water on the eve of the rain, turned into a wide, fast-flowing river, similar to our second-rate rivers; reader, you must be familiar with our second-rate rivers! There were streams in the streets; currents rolled down the mountains, waterfalls cascaded; hollows turned into lakes. It was no time to do business; but the sun rose, even hotter than usual, and over a single day, everything went back to the previously established order, except the khor, along which a narrow turbid stream of rain water was still rolling.

The authorities of Doul gave dinners in our honor. Dinners in Doul, with music and various entertainments! The repast itself was not distinguished in any regard; it was prepared by our cooks and partly from our own supplies; for what could one possibly procure in Doul, despite our hosts’ every intention to give us a feast? The music was Albanian rather than Turkish, but it hissed, banged, and made noise just as much as Turkish music would: good music! After dinner, they made a little negro boy—there being no monkeys in Doul—drunk, and he fooled around and grimaced no worse than a monkey; after that they summoned two negroes, gave each a cue to hold, and told them to fight; when the negroes bloodied each other’s heads, they were calmed down, not without difficulty, for having commenced a fight on their masters’ orders, they carried on in eagerness. Then, at our host’s beck, 15 or so shackled slaves appeared; the poor things could hardly move their feet, and yet they danced, clicking their fingers, moving in step with the clinking of their shackles, and singing along, which must
have been extremely amusing, for the audience took hearty pleasure in it. “Did they shackle them deliberately, so that they could dance with more agility?” I asked, thinking whether it might not be a Doul substitute for the garlands of ballet dancers or something of that nature. “No,” the host replied, “these are negroes from the nearby mountains; they are shackled all the time, lest they escape.” “Is it their traditional dance, then?” “Not at all!” Omar Aga replied with disdain. “I had an educated boy, so I told him to teach these animals; being a docile lot, they learned it soon.” Indeed, all their movements, all their tricks were imbued with cynicism of the harshest kind; they had clearly been put through the schooling by a very educated boy.

“So, do you indulge in this kind of entertainment often?” I asked Omar Aga.

“Yes, almost daily. If it were not for this, imagine what we would have done to ourselves! There is no work whatsoever; the garrison duties are no duties at all; the only occasions for the soldiers to go out used to be the funerals of their comrades and officers, but I prohibited that—it does nothing but bring on gloom. Our families are far away, and God only knows what might become of them! We never receive any news. A whole convoy detachment is required to reach us here safely. About twice in six months, a jellab might chance upon us, or a caravan with grain and cattle, but even then the passers-by sometimes cannot tell you anything . . . What would we do if we did not amuse ourselves in this fashion?”

“What is it over there?”

“The dead! As you can see, they are going quietly, with no-one but the carriers. Never mind. Leave them be!” he went on, noticing that I could not take my eyes off them and taking me aside. “Let them go on their own way.”

“But there seem to be quite a few of them!”

“Indeed. There are as many as this every night. Do tell the Effendi to please withdraw us from this place, lest we all die to the last man.”

Osman Bey was right: never mind the dead! Let us leave them be while we shuffle along, proceeding on our own way, until the eternal bed-time comes for us, too. Yet what amusements! What a life! And
there are so many, especially in our land, in boundless Russia, who are doomed to such a life. One does require great will-power, strength of character, and patience to be able to bear this torture—a prolonged, extremely prolonged torture, for one has to take every day by storm and live through it, minute by minute and hour by hour, and every minute and every hour shall be acutely felt, for here time does not fly on the wings of distraction and pleasure but rather draws slowly, in the manner of a funeral procession.

Neither Osman Bey nor any of his officers have their families with them. Turks are generally quite magnanimous in this regard, never subjecting their wives and children to the dangers of climate or the inconveniences of hardship in remote garrisons. Yet anyone can have several negress slaves and boys. It is so easy to obtain both here: a single successful hunt provides the garrison with these goods. The rich even keep Abyssinian women—who, it must be said, are still cheaper here than in Cairo: a good one can be bought for 200 rubles in paper money, a beauty for 350 rubles, while a plain one costs between 100 and 150 rubles.