Chapter IX

The Lesser Nubian Desert and Meroë with Its Pyramids

Dongola

My efforts to sail down the Nile through its rapids were all in vain. The water was still low, rocks protruding from the surface like a stockade. We had to go round by land. The thought of the Great Nubian Desert filling me with horror, I was inclined to agree to a longer march rather than to travel on the same road of torture again; besides, I was keen to see the deserts of the left bank of the Nile and to visit one of the most curious provinces ruled by the Viceroy, Dongola. Having decided to cross the so-called Bayuda Desert1 between Meteme and Meroë, and not yet fully recovered from my illness, I set off on the 8th of June.

During the first three days of our journey, the Bayuda Desert appeared no different from the Great Nubian Desert: the same cliffs of black sandstone, scattered, scorched, and naked, rising above drifts of white quick-sands; the same round-shaped deposits of ironstone on the surface; two wells we encountered on the first day and a few thin

1 The eastern part of the Sahara desert.
trees, devoid of foliage and life, being the only features bringing variety to this somber land.

Further on from the Jak Doul well, granite rises from among cliffs of sandstone, a sight similar to that found in the Great Desert, but here it soon disappears, and nature returns to its former monotony. Henceforth, there are more wells along the way; trees grow somewhat larger, although still without foliage; and one often encounters nomadic Arabs; it must also be noted that the seasonal rains, which are sometimes even heavy, come here every year.

The Jak Doul well was built by nature itself in a cliff which one cannot easily reach on camels; the water in it is pure like tears, and despite there having been no rain for nine months, there is still a sufficient amount of it—so much that, should there be no rain at all this summer, it may still last into the next year. Below the cliff there is more water, muddy and unpleasant; this is a watering-hole for camels.

On the fourth day, I could barely stay upright on my horse, but we could not halt, for there was no water to be found along the way. We made it with great difficulty to the Moutouen well. There I lay for six days under a dry acacia bush, suffering from the heat, both outside and inside, tortured by thirst and anguish, that invariable companion of yellow bile fever. Not a single cloud passed over my head during those six days. The sun would scatter its rays over me immediately at dawn; thereupon it would rise high and the Reaumur thermometer would show 43 degrees,\(^2\) even at sunset, until the sun completely disappeared beyond the horizon; it burned as if enjoying my sufferings. All round me was a desert; the *khamasin*, a strong and burning wind, blew the sand around. There was no salvation from the heat anywhere; I lay there under the open skies stretched over an infinite expanse of space, under the dense scattering of the rays, which blinded my eyes, with my head stuck into the thickness of the prickly bush, searching for shade in vain.

Finally, I heard that our supplies were growing scarce and that the water in the well had been scooped out. Something had to be done. I decided to proceed on a stretcher. The Arab porters were only too glad

\(^2\) 53.75°C.
of such a suggestion: firstly, for money they were willing to carry the Devil to their village with all ceremony and make him their sheikh; secondly, they were in dire circumstances themselves, making do alongside us somehow, their own supplies having been exhausted ere ours.

So they carried me.

I was carried for three days. Toward the end of the third day, the desert was the scene of a most desperate struggle against death. Then suddenly, rows of some colossal objects rose in the west, brightly lit by the setting sun: the pyramids! . . . As we approached them, the portico of a temple appeared in a picturesque cliff. There was a pillar, then another, and a number of Sphinxes. The farther my eyes could lead my excited imagination, the farther it ran. Lord Almighty, if these colossi, these live signs of magnificence and civilization, are here, then they certainly must be furnished with suitable accessories, there certainly must be palaces and theaters nearby, as well as comfortable hotels—all that immediately at the edge of the desert! The consolatory hope of repose and pleasure, neither of which I had known for such a long time, flitted before me in all its splendor. Now the strip of the Nile flashed in a distance and soon grew wide, cut between the green banks in the half-shade of the sunset. Beyond it was a thicket of palm-trees! Everything sustained and nurtured my expectations. I was carried onward and onward. Some half-naked people and several men wearing tarbooshes huddled together round a single mud-hut . . . There they put me on the ground . . . What had it been, then, a dream? Had I seen it in my sleep, in feverish delirium, or while under some spell? No! Not far from me there indeed rose the pyramids, the pillars, and the temples, and yet they were touched with devastation—death was all round! . . . The village or, as they call it, the town of Meroë continued to live its miserable life, while these remnants of enlightenment and luxury decayed in their magnificent death. In a word, here was Meroë, and there were the pyramids and temples, and never the twain would meet.

However, prior to leaving the Meteme Desert, reader, allow me to draw your attention to one important fact. Ritter, Humboldt, and many others before them note with surprise that the Nile, along its entire vast span, has no tributaries except the Atbarah River; a unique
тельных для глаз, лежал я, сунув голову въ чашу иглистаго куста, тщетно ища тьмы.
Наконец я услышал, что панихи припасы истощаются, что вода въ колодцѣ выберипана. Надо было что-нибудь предпринять. Я рѣшился отправиться на носилках. Арабы—возчики вдвоѣ были рады такому предложение: во-первых, за деньги они готовы были торжественно принести въ себѣ въ деревню чорта и сдѣлать его шейхомъ; во-вторых, сами они были въ плохомъ положеніи, потому что ихъ запасы истоцились прежде нашихъ и они пробивались кое-какъ около насъ.
И понесли меня.
Три дня несли. Къ концу третьаго, пустыня представлала видъ самой отчаянной борьбы со смертью. Вдругъ, на западѣ возстали, ярко освѣщеніе заходящимъ солнцемъ, ряды какихъ-то громадъ: это были пи-
рамиды!... Ближе въ живописной скалѣ показался портикъ храма. Тамъ колонна, другая, рядъ сфинксовъ. Разгоряченное воображеніе уносилось дальше, дальше чьмъ Sphinx, near Meroë
phenomenon in the world. The so-called Meroë Peninsula and the Meteme Desert have many *khors*, which are filled during the rainy season, their waters rolling noisily, yet not a single one of them reaches the Nile, losing themselves instead in quick-sands—not one except the Abou Dom *khor*, thus far mentioned by no-one. During the rains it turns into a wide river which carries an abundant tribute of water to the Nile, its mouth being situated somewhat below Meroë. What especially gives me the right to call the Abou Dom a river is the fact that in the driest season it, like the Toumat and other large rivers of Inner Africa, flows under a layer of sand, half an arshin\(^3\) thick or less: it is mostly there that the above-mentioned wells have been dug. Some may remark that the Abou Dom cannot be called a river since its bed does not have water on its surface all year round; but if that be the only property to give us the right to name something a river, then nearly all the rivers of Inner Africa should be erased from geographical maps.

Compared with other towns of the Sudan, Meroë is no better than them; it might even be worse. There we boarded our *dahabias*, which had long been waiting for us; propelled by the current of the fast-rising Nile and impatient to leave the Sudan, we traveled for two days to arrive at New Dongola, the capital city of the province, or *mudirlyk*, of Dongola.

The place had been the stronghold of the last of the Mamluks; then people began settling near them and under their patronage, and the city was named a horde, which word is still used among the Arabs, New Dongola being its official name only. The location of the city is good. It is being much eroded by white ants, that scourge of the Sudan—which, coming after various *kaimakams*, *effendis*, and other *kiboshes*\(^4\) of Egypt, threatens it the most. The ants destroy houses in their entirety, leaving them to stand in the middle of the city like skeletons; no-one dares settle near them, afraid of their dangerous proximity, and so vast wastelands occupy a large part of the city, giving it a peculiar character. On the other side, the Nile washes it away, and there are more half-ruined

\(^3\) An obsolete Russian measure of length, about 2.33 feet.

\(^4\) A *kaimakam* (also *qaim makam* or *keymakam*) is the title of a provincial governor in the Ottoman Empire. Kovalevsky uses *kiboshes* (whips) sarcastically along with the Ottoman titles.
walls, as well as trees hanging roots-up; if you add to all that several
gardens filled with lemon-trees, pomegranates, annona-trees, and jas-
mines, you shall see clearly that New Dongola differs not only from the
old town, but also from many other Egyptian cities. Beware of putting
anything on the ground—it would be the same as putting money before
*a fellah*. the *fellaḥ* will steal it from under your eyes, while the white ant
will gnaw it away from under your feet, whether it be wood, leather, or
dress. Stones are placed underneath chests, bags, and everything else;
when ants find their way over the stones, the latter are replaced; yet it
takes time, for they need to pave the slippery stone path with loose soil
and sand, upon which they then crawl to reach their destination.

A day’s journey from Dongola and all the way to the most famous
cataract, Wadi Halfa, the Nile is spotted with cataracts, across which
the *reis* 5 would not ferry us, the Nile having not risen sufficiently yet,
while I could not travel by land, on horseback. Negotiations and per-
suasion commenced. At last, the honorable governor, who served
under the *Mudir*, arranged things so that we could travel in the *da-
habias* for as long as possible; upon reaching a cataract, the barques
would be unloaded and lowered on ropes; for which purpose 30 cam-
els would follow us, and up to 40 men with ropes would wait at each
cataract.

And so we set off.

The Nile is wide in these parts—twice wider than the Neva by the
Isaac Bridge—as well as being picturesque and spotted with isles. Argo
Island, one of the largest along the entire Nile, famous in the ancient
times, had been independent and in alliance with Dongola until the
recent conquest of it by Mohammed Ali. An old fortified castle that
belonged to the rulers of the island is still there, the title of the *melek* still
preserved, but now he barely differs from the *kaimakam*. However, the
inhabitants of Argo retain some of their rights and constitute the regular
cavalry, as do some Arab tribes, being somewhat akin to the Cossacks in
Russia. In the evening, we arrived at the Dal Cataract and, having
unloaded our *dahabia*, commenced our crossing in the morning. I
alone remained on the *dahabia*, together with the crew. The cataract

5 The captain of a boat.
takes about three hours to cross, and the reis decided to row across it; had they lowered the barque on ropes, we would have lost a whole day.

The view was beautiful! An entire range of rocks, cutting into the Nile, completely obstructed the way. There seemed to be nowhere to pass, yet as we turned, a strip of water revealed itself, making noise and churning as it fell from quite a significant height, beset by the rocks; the barque would slide off it like a sledge slides off an icy hill, and then it would quietly sail onto a wide reach; but here is another range of rocks, and beyond it a second, and a third; the same fears, the same speed of sailing: one cannot help moving from one sensation to another. I was extremely pleased with the crossing. When we cleared it and found ourselves on the wide Nile, the triumphant reis spoke to me: not everyone would be able to navigate the Dal so successfully in this season, he noted . . . and indeed, there is hardly anyone capable of doing that!

On the day following there was another cataract; to clear this one, the barque—empty, of course—was lowered on a rope. The rope was attached to a cliff, for 40 people would not be able to hold it when the dahabia flew across the rapids. The crossing, about a verst\(^6\) long, took up all morning; the same happened on the third day and again on the fourth; this last crossing commenced in the evening and occupied a whole day. Henceforth, all the way to Wadi Halfa, cataracts are even more frequent. It was clear that even 10 days would not suffice to pass through them; meanwhile, I was already able to ride, and so we proceeded by land.

Not only is Dongola one of the most picturesque provinces of Egypt, but it is also one of the richest: it is a garden, a forest of palm-trees, with the exception of Dar-el-Ghajar (the land of stones), where there is nothing but stones all round. Sokot, in the borough of Dongola, and Ibrim, in the borough of Derah, alone provide Cairo with 850,000 poods\(^7\) of dates. Sokot dates are distinguished by their size, Ibrim dates by their taste.

How beautiful are the islands of the Nile, overgrown with palm-trees, how picturesque the cliffs, protruding from the water so high or else surrounding the Nile, crowned with the ruins of fortifications.

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\(^6\) About 0.66 mile.

\(^7\) About 15,350 tons.
There are ruins everywhere in Dongola. Until recently, peoples used to replace one another at a surprising rate here, each leaving traces of tireless defense, which clearly shows how dear this land must have been to them. The ancient Egyptians left the ruins of their giant temples and speoses, which remain untouched by anyone but time, the reason being, of course, not respect, but the difficulty of handling immense stones; Christians left their churches and monasteries, standing fortified on unassailable mountains and fenced with thick walls of raw brick, which have arrow-slits. The Arabs turned the churches into mosques and repaired the fortifications, some of which are still quite intact. Bosnians, Albanians, Mamluks, and Turks destroyed them and rebuilt them. There is now almost no trace of the churches or the mosques, the fortresses being the only ones that remain; what the latest inhabitants of Dongola required was not a tool of peace and placability but strongholds of defense, a tool of oppression with which to terrorize the natives, upon whom these foreigners, coming from distant countries, swooped like eagles from their nests. There are also caves remaining in the impregnable, hanging cliffs where Christians used to conceal themselves from persecution. One can barely see a black spot on red sandstone, so high it is; impossible to reach from anywhere, it has rapids swirling 200 feet below it and a rock half as tall rising above it. No man, it seems, can ever reach it again; but look narrowly: here is a door! A hermit would climb down a rope into this place, as if into a tomb, turning away from earthly matters. Sometimes an entire parish would hide themselves in these caves, but the persecutors of Christian faith would find them even here, and the hermits would die martyrs, their deaths crowning their sufferings. How changed is everything! There is another faith here, which also had its own martyrs once, whereas now one cannot even recognize this faith, nor see any mosques (except in towns), nor see anyone praying, even though a Mohammedan must perform his prayers five times daily. Yet the number of holy men multiplies by the day; things have changed so much that these days one has to but go naked and eat hay to be known as a holy man; men and women wear numerous amulets; it is always so: once faith weakens, superstition comes along.
Among the magnificent temples of the ancient Egyptians, below the picturesque ruins of Christian monasteries and mountain fortresses, there huddle—barely visible above the ground, made from clay and silt—the huts of the Barbars, a half-naked and poor people. There is hardly any trace of Mamluks, Albanians, or Bosnians left: some of them have mixed with the Barbars, while the majority have become quite extinct; it is only by a certain degree of noble aspect and hospitality that one can recognize a descendant of the Mamluks, who reigned here merely 45 years ago. It is a proven fact that Europeans can live in Egypt, but their children become weak and die: hardly 5 out of 100 survive beyond childhood.

The Barbars are the native inhabitants of Nubia; they are proud of their supremacy over the Egyptians, while the latter mock their simplicity; both hate each other. Which of the two peoples is the better? God only knows! Each seems to be worse than the other. Yet there has hardly ever been a people to equal the Barbars, as well as certain Arab tribes, in the cruelty and disgusting cynicism of their depravity. The production of eunuchs—which Egypt is finally willing to abolish, instead procuring expensive eunuchs in Abyssinia, where it is Christians and even Catholic priests who, to the shame of mankind, deal in this trade—this business is less cruel than the torturing of women intended to satisfy the Barbars’ overindulged passions. Elsewhere such examples are few and exceptional, whereas here all women are subjected to the operation. Our public language is not so nimble as to allow one to relate an account of it without blushing. The operation is usually performed at the age of 8 or 9 years, when the woman is already maturing in these lands. Its object is to preserve virginity and, later, to avoid adultery, for the husband repeats it every time he leaves home, despite it being accompanied by great pain, lasting 10 days. Yet the pain is negligible compared to what the woman endures during childbirth. In her childhood, pieces of live flesh were cut out of her body; and now it is being ripped this way and that, as if it were a patch of shoe-sole or cheap fabric—whereupon her tyrant of a husband still has the cruelty to subject the unfortunate mother to another torture, so as to return her to the state of virginity for his own pleasures. Let me say to the credit of the
Egyptians, to whose credit so little can be said, that they look upon this disgusting custom with disdain; however, quite a few nomadic Arabs have already adopted it. The circumcision of women is in itself abominable, but it is at least sanctified by local religious beliefs, and moreover, far from everyone undergoes it, while the above-described custom is based on utmost depravity, which suggests a deep moral decline, a fall from a great height—this being one of the many proofs that the Barbars are the remnants of the ancient people of Egypt.

The psychologist and the moralist would find this land edifying. You can see how mankind has declined, step by step, physically and morally, until finally descending to the most miserable state, which the Gourneh tribe is currently in.

Hitherto no-one seems to have paid any attention to this last. Being in the midst of the Barbars, it speaks a distinct language and has certain customs of its own. Its women are better than its men, which is an exception here; the Gourneh are generally dull, short, weak, and poor; their language is polyphonic, like the language of the Gypsies, their women somewhat resembling Gypsy women.

While keeping away from Egyptians and Copts, Barbars enter blood relationships and friendly liaisons with nomadic Arabs—or Bedouin Arabs, as many call them, lending some poetic meaning to the word, which, in essence, is not unlike the term for skillful thief.

Here is an odd and also rather cruel custom, either learned by the negroes from the Barbars or, much more plausibly, by them from the negroes, for while it has some meaning for the latter, it has none for the Arabs or the Barbars, who do not know themselves why they follow it. I am talking about cuts which they cover their bodies and most of their faces with, and which are somewhat akin to tattoos. The operation is quite easy to perform: they use a knife to cut various patterns in one another, or simply make lengthwise wounds, or sometimes burn skin with iron; the sufferer is bleeding, yet he never shows his pain with a single word or gesture; afterward the wounds are rubbed with a stiff rope made of palm leaves, so as to ensure that the scars remain for a long time; and should they begin to lessen, they are reproduced anew. Among the negroes, the enviable right to cut one’s body in patterns is
enjoyed only by those who have already killed at least one enemy in war, and it is done with solemn ceremony. For them it is a distinguishing feature, an award for bravery, whereas for the Arabs and the Barbars, it is just an ordinary custom—a fancy, as they say here.

The origins of some customs are difficult to explain, especially in a people with no written language and no regard for legends. Tell me, reader, where the following shameful custom could have come from—one that contradicts the laws of Mohammedan faith, is alien to the Arab people, and exists in one tribe only, the Hassanyeh, which wanders from Khartoum up the White Nile, as far as four days' journey or so. Every married woman in the tribe can enjoy her freedom from all observation of her matrimonial obligations on the fourth day of each week; the husband, at any other time being as jealous as any Arab, looks with indifference upon his wife selling herself in public. The land of the Hassanyeh is the Capua of jellabs and merchants of all hues, who trade with the negroes. Upon one's arrival here, one only has to enquire whether anyone has free days, and men will themselves bring their wives to him. This custom probably comes from avariciousness, the prevailing passion among the Arabs, who have bestowed the force of tradition upon it, seeking any excuse to justify it in the eyes of their brothers in faith.