

Travels
OF
AN ARAB MERCHANT
IN SOUDAN
(THE BLACK KINGDOMS OF CENTRAL AFRICA).

I.—DARFUR.

II.—WADAI.

ABRIDGED FROM THE FRENCH.

BY

BAYLE ST. JOHN,

AUTHOR OF "VILLAGE LIFE IN EGYPT," "PURPLE TENTS OF PARIS,"
ETC. ETC.

LONDON:
CHAPMAN AND HALL, 193 PICCADILLY.

1854.

CHAPTER III.

The Sultan of Bagirmeh—A Court of Birds of Prey—Saboun determines to make a War—March over the Desert—Encounter with a Rhinoceros—Punishment of Cowardice—Veneration for Sultans—A White Beard—The Crown purifies—Sultan Arous—Anecdote—Attack on the Birny of Bagirmeh—Victory—Act of Cruelty—A Bedawin Traveller—A new Route to the Mediterranean—Schmed-el-Fari—The Sheikh's Father at Fezzan—Caravans—Want of Water—Price in the Desert—An obdurate Sheikh—Death of Saboun.

WHEN Sultan Saboun had fixed himself firmly on the throne he repressed all evil actions, and did all the good he could. I shall notice how he punished the culpable conduct of Haj-Ahmed, sultan of Bagirmeh. This prince had excessively tyrannised over his subjects, so that at length the Ulemas were excited to present themselves before him and utter the complaints of the nation. He received them graciously, and asked what was their business. An old man replied, that they came to beg him to cause his servants to cease from their excesses, and told a parable of a great tree which grew in the midst of a field, and harboured birds of prey that devoured the harvest. "Thy subjects," he said, "are the harvest, thou art the great tree, and thy officers the birds

of prey. We fear lest the tree be cut down ; for the master of the harvest is God, who hateth tyranny." The good old man further quoted some wise saws and some verses from the poets, and also the words of the Prophet, to the effect that an hour of justice is worth seventy years of prayer.

When the sermon was concluded the Sultan burst out laughing, and said, "Do you think that my birds, as you call them, can live without eating or drinking ? I tell you what. My subjects are my subjects, my soldiers are my soldiers, and what they do is no business of yours. It is your duty to teach law and religion to those who are in want of these things. If it were not for your sacred character I would put you all to death." Then Ahmed called his emirs, and said to one of them, "Thou art a hawk;" to another, "Thou art a falcon;" to another, "Thou art a kite;" to another, "Thou art a vulture." In this way he applied to each of them the name of a bird of prey in presence of the Ulemas, who were stupefied by this decision. They went away lamenting the perversity of the Sultan, and the only result of their step was an increase of oppression and iniquity. The people revolted in several places, but were put down with fire and sword. The Ulemas again presented themselves, and quoted a long list of sentences from the Koran ; but with as little success as before.

The Sultan of Bagirmeh, not content with these excesses, became enamoured of his sister, who was married to one of his viziers. He caused her to be

divorced, and took her to wife, in spite of the opposition of the priests and the disgust of his people. Still greater turpitudes were imputed to him.

About this time Ahmed authorised one of his great viziers to make a wanton incursion on the territories of Wadaï, for the sake of collecting booty. This incursion being reported to Saboun, induced him to write a letter of remonstrance to Ahmed, which remained without any answer, except that a fresh attack was made. Saboun wrote once more, and received at length a despatch containing these words : "We received thy first letter, and afterwards thy second, and we understood their contents. Salutations." This derisive answer induced Saboun to determine to make war upon Bagirmeh. He consulted my father, who gave it as his opinion that war under such circumstances would be justifiable. The preparations were made with the greatest secrecy, and Saboun left Warah, under pretence of making an excursion through his provinces. Some of the great men made opposition to this expedition, thus suddenly planned; but a well-timed severity repressed discontent, and a considerable army was rapidly collected on the confines of Wadaï.

When everything was ready, the Sultan gave orders to commence the march through the wilderness that separates the boundaries of Wadaï and Bagirmeh. It is covered with lofty trees and vast expanses of shrubs. In these savannahs are the repairs of lions and elephants, and of the abou-kern,

or unicorn, called in Egypt khartit, that is to say, rhinoceros.* Saboun had sent people ahead to cut down trees, and open for his troops a practicable road. Six Aguids, each with four thousand slaves, formed the body of pioneers, which preceded the main army by at least an hour. These slaves were armed with hatchets, to cut down the trees and clear the way. Whilst they were breaking through a thickset wood an enormous abou-kern suddenly rushed upon the workmen, killed several whom he first met, and then broke through the mass, slaying people right and left. Every one fled, and the whole body of pioneers fell back upon the army, which, soon being seized with a panic, took flight in all directions. The Sultan soon found himself almost alone, and beheld the abou-kern coming straight towards him. "What!" cried he, "is there no one here that has the courage to fight this ignoble animal?" Now it happened that there was a slave, named Ajmain, tall, well-built, and vigorous, armed with buckler and javelins. He threw aside his javelins, and stepped towards the animal with his shield and a long knife. The Sultan looked on with anxiety. Ajmain waited until the beast was near him, and then suddenly fell and allowed it to pass

* M. Fresnel, French consul at Jeddah, has published a memoir on the abou-kern, which he considers to be the unicorn, and not the rhinoceros.—*Perron*. In this case, however, the Sheikh clearly marks that he means the khartit; and in no part of his work makes allusion to the unicorn.

over him. With a dexterous stroke of his knife, however, he succeeded in ham-stringing the abou-kern, which rolled upon the ground. He then fetched his javelin, and before the soldiers could come up he had rendered their assistance unnecessary. Saboun ordered the corpse to be dragged to an open place, and then calling together his men, pronounced an angry speech against those who had been most distinguished by cowardice. He ordered several of them to be seized and executed on the spot. Among these was the governor of the Jataneh Arabs, in whose place he named the slave Ajmain. After this bloody scene, Saboun said to his viziers and officers : "Whoever of you flies at the time of combat, whatever may be the danger, shall be put to death." All humbly promised obedience. During the whole war, indeed, the effect of these words was manifest ; for in the eyes of the Wadaïans obedience to the Sultan is a duty as sacred as obedience to God and the Prophet. Indeed these people often neglect their duties of piety, but never that which they think they owe to the Sultan.

I shall relate an anecdote of the extreme veneration in which the Sultan is held. It happened under the reign of Gaudeh. The wife of one of his officers saw the sovereign pass, surrounded by his courtiers, and in imperial dress. Age had whitened the beard of the prince. In the evening, having returned home, the woman relating to her husband what she had seen, said : "The procession was fine,