

THE CRADLE
OF
THE BLUE NILE.

A VISIT TO THE COURT OF KING JOHN
OF ETHIOPIA.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

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U, 317

CHAPTER XXX.

BERBER.—DEPARTURE FOR SUAKIN.

June 12th.—Journal continued.—“The sun is rising through a golden mist, against which the mosque and palm trees of Berber stand out quite black. The town is some distance from the shore, as when the Nile rises it overflows its banks. The *Reïs* still suffers: poor Jacko, my monkey, is dead. He fell ill at the same time as the *Reïs*, and like him, I believe, of fever; * it was piteous to see him yesterday; all his love of mischief seemed to have gone. When I caressed him he looked in my face and brightened up for a moment, but the heavy eyes closed again, and the little head drooped lower and lower till it rested on my hand, as the lethargy crept over him, and this morning Mustafa found him lying quite dead beside my couch. He had often declared that Jacko was the torment of his life, but now, as the honest fellow carried the frail little body in

* I remember being told by a learned Russian doctor, who had studied the habits of monkeys, that he believed they are subject to the same epidemic diseases as human beings, and that when rheumatic fever is prevalent in a West African village, it often happens that the monkeys in the surrounding woods become so stiff in the joints, that they cannot run away if you try to catch them.

his arms, I thought I saw a tear glistening on his dark cheek, and he laid Jacko very gently in the grave we had dug under a sweet-scented mimosa on shore. Poor Jacko !

" I have been to the divan, where I found the *Mudir's* chief clerk trying some prisoners ; he has promised to get me camels on the morrow for my desert journey. Presently the *Mudir* arrived in person, and of course gave me spiced coffee ; it was served in rhinoceros horn *finjals*, which gave to the hot coffee a mingled flavour of rhinoceros and burnt horn that was anything but an improvement. As the *Mudir* has not a house to lend me, he has established me in an unoccupied wing of the hareem, with a bath attached to it, and has sent me a sheep, some bread, and a number of large juicy melons, which are a great luxury. The jalousies of the hareem look on a pretty garden, where I can see an unfortunate prisoner, with two enormous iron shackles on his ancles, linked together by a heavy chain, picking away at the earth with a short hoe in the burning sunshine, and looking like the traditional picture of an Algerine captive in the good old piratical days. It is no joke to be a prisoner here.

" In the East you are either a slave yourself, or surrounded by slaves, and it is wonderful with what rapidity a divan will form itself about you if you have anything to do. I sent for my boatmen to pay them, and immediately my room was filled with scribes, whip-bearers, soldiers, attendants, &c., who seemed to come from nowhere in particular, and, as soon as the men

were dismissed, disappeared again as silently and mysteriously as they had appeared.

"And still the wretched prisoner outside is pick, pick, picking away at the hard earth. How different are the fortunes of men!"

Next morning, June 13th, I made preparations to continue my journey, and as we should not be able to procure food on the way, purchased two dozen small boxes of sardines which a Greek merchant happened to have in his store; with these, and two small bags of coffee and flour, I calculated I should be able to reach the shores of the Red Sea.

Berber is an important Nubian town, and has direct camel communication across the desert with Korosko on the Nile, and Suakin on the Red Sea. I decided to follow the latter route, in the hope of catching at Suakin an Egyptian steamer, that was expected to touch there on its way up the Red Sea to Jiddah and Suez. I was told that we might be a fortnight on the desert, and that the wells were nearly dry. So I sent Mustafa to buy water skins. In the telegraph office of Berber I found a Coptic clerk, who could speak a little English; he was a ghastly sight, wasted almost to a skeleton, having been "caught by the fever," as he expressed it. Full often does the black camel kneel before the threshold at Berber, and sooner or later the fever seems to "catch" all who stay there. If they do not take refuge in flight, it ends by carrying them off.

The *Mudir* came and presented me with a rhinoceros horn cup, expressing with Arab courtesy an elaborate

hope that he might thus dwell in the habitation of my thoughts whenever I quenched my thirst. Rhinoceros horn appears to be held in great estimation here.

It was some hours after noon when five camels knelt at my door, one for myself, one for Mustafa, and the other three for the crocodile skin, the baggage, and last, not least, the water skins. I sent for a sixth camel, insisting that my Arab guide should also be mounted. If I remember right I paid three dollars (twelve shillings) apiece for these camels, which were to convey me nearly three hundred miles.

No sooner had we left the town than we entered on the desert, an arid reddish plain of corrugated sand and grit. At sunset, as at sunrise, there was a golden haze over Berber, and—a rare phenomenon in this climate—the sun looked quite opaque, as when seen through a London fog. Though Berber was enveloped in these vapours, we were now past the limit of the tropical rains, and the only supply of water we could look forward to in the future was that which might have filtered its way below the surface of the ground. At nightfall we reached the first well, where we filled the water skins, and made a fire of camels' dung, the only fuel on the desert. When the moon rose we continued the journey, and marched all night.

June 14th.—We were still plodding slowly along when the sun peeped over the horizon, casting a bright roseate glow upon the sky and plain. Not a vestige of vegetation was to be seen, my six camels looked like a

In the evening Alegas related how he once came upon seven lions in a forest, but managed to effect his escape unperceived. We slept for two hours, when Mustafa at last arrived with the tent, after much wandering; and not a little frightened at having missed his way in so wild a country, for, though he trusted implicitly in our power to protect him, he knew that, being an Egyptian, he was looked on as an enemy, and did not love to find himself alone. When all our people were asleep, C. and I strolled down by the lake to look for hippos, as the Wito had told us they usually came on shore at night to eat the grass, but we saw none. Tzana looked lovely as the Larian lake by moonlight, but in the jungle hard-by we could hear at intervals the growling of a leopard, breaking the quiet stillness of the night.

May 6th.—We were up at daybreak, and walked by the shore towards a headland that we saw on our right. The beautiful trees and creepers of the jungle were reflected in the water as in a vast mirror; further on were some great grey rocks, and beyond these we came to a long reach of grass running down to the water's-edge, as smooth and green as an English lawn. Geese, spoonbills, black swans, and every variety of duck abounded here, and paid no heed to our approach, for they were unacquainted with the sound of a gun. C. shot a fine black swan, and I a brace of woodcock, which were also plentiful. Presently the noses of two large hippopotami appeared above the waters of the lake, but out of range from the land; however

a canoe loaded with cotton was rounding the headland, so we hailed it, and after some parley, induced the natives to bring their load to shore, and carry us on their shoulders to the canoe, which, being little more than a large bundle of rushes, floated very low in the water. Alegas was to have accompanied us as interpreter, but, like Bob Acres, his courage was rapidly oozing out at the ends of his fingers, and failed him at the last moment. He said the *Goumarie** were sometimes very bold in their own element, and would take it into their heads to attack a canoe, and crunch it up, men and all, between their enormous jaws; so we left him behind, and took the canoe as near to the hippos as we could get the natives to venture. On our approach, the huge beasts disappeared under the water, but one of them coming up again to breathe about thirty yards off, I fired a shot with my twelve-bore Westley-Richards, which struck him on the neck with a dull thud, and at once sent him down again. The other then rose, on which C. fired with his Devisine, but rather too high. They did not re-appear after this, so we returned to shore, and walked on to the headland, where C. bagged a brace of guinea-fowl, of which there were great numbers among the bushes.

On the way back, we noticed that the ground was deeply indented with the foot-prints of hippopotami and wild pigs. We were examining these, when our gun-bearers were suddenly charged in rear by a trucu-

* *Goumarie*, Abyssinian for hippopotamus.

lent-looking bullock which was grazing on the plains, and which rapidly put them to flight. Shortly afterwards we encountered our friend the Wito, who had come to tell us that he had seen two hippos asleep on a rock in the lake. We therefore dismissed the noisy *naphteñas*, and followed him silently to the spot he indicated. Only the black noses of the hippos were visible, near a reef of rock some distance from the land; but a second Wito had brought his canoe round, and in this I embarked, first taking off my boots, and making all secure for a capsize, as the tiny craft was not more than ten feet long, and could barely hold the Wito and myself. These Wito canoes are of charmingly simple construction. A narrow mat of long rushes is tied together at each end, and distended in the centre with a bundle of reeds. On this bundle kneels the Wito, who paddles his frail bark with a long stick, which has no blade attached to it. When the canoe is dry it floats pretty lightly, but the water soon filters through the rushes, and the canoe sinks lower and lower, till it hardly rises above the surface of the lake; and, being nearly round, of course the least motion is liable to capsize it. Indeed, these boats bear a strong resemblance to the vessel on which the primeval navigator made his first voyage, which tradition tells us was simply a log floating upon the water.

A fresh breeze had sprung up, and the little canoe danced about on the rising wavelets like an egg shell; however, the Wito managed it with great dexterity,