

CHAPTER I

ON THE SINAI ROAD

THE conditions of travelling and of working in Sinai are very different from those of life in a fertile country such as Egypt, and are still further from the ways of any European land. In Egypt most long distances can be traversed on the railway, and to go a few miles from a station means only an hour or two of donkey ride; whereas in Sinai the tedious camel is the only vehicle, and you may well spend six days on a distance which would be crossed in two or three hours in a train. In Egypt there is always water of some quality near at hand, and it only needs boiling before use; in Sinai the water sources are a day's journey apart, and you may be glad to be within such a distance that a camel can go to the water and back in the day. The beginning is the worst of all, for on the road down is the serious bar of three days without water. In Egypt the rich fertility of the land provides an abundance everywhere; excellent birds, fish, good native bread, eggs, milk, and vegetables are almost always to be had. But in Sinai grim nature gives you the stone and the serpent instead of the bread and the fish, and the utmost that can be obtained from the desert valleys is an occasional tough sheep or goat.

And if the conditions are thus different, so also are the people. In Egypt the fellah is one of the pleasantest of good fellows, where yet uncursed by the tourist: always obliging and friendly, and being

generally intelligent within the scope of his ideas, he is capable of being trained to a high degree of care and skill; moreover, his industry is amazing, and can always be had by good treatment and pay. But the poor Bedawy of the desert is a very different man: he has been on short commons for untold generations, and has parted with every ounce of his anatomy, and every thought from his mind, that was not essential in his hard struggle. The simplest reckoning puzzles him; he is incapable of foresight or of working for a given end, and he is physically unfit for any continuous labour except that of slowly wandering on foot all day with his camel. A few more persevering men are found, who drift to the turquoise mines and spend a few hours a day, with many rests between, in rude blasting and breaking up the rock. One or two important chiefs show more capacity; by far the strongest of these is Sheykh Mudakhel, who has developed a good character and power of business in his dealings at Tor. So different are these people from the Egyptians, that our men from Upper Egypt consorted with us far more than with the Bedawyn; and, indeed, they had benefited by some years of training, so that they were much nearer to us mentally than they were to the men around. The natives were incessantly quarrelling over trying to get the better of one another, while a squabble was unknown among our Egyptians.

Without the Egyptians we could have done nothing in excavation, for it was only on their steady work and skill that we could rely. We wrote to our old friends at Quft, in Upper Egypt, selecting about thirty of the strongest among them; and Mr. Currelly headed them across more than three hundred miles of the deserts and the Red Sea, up to our camp in Sinai, as he will describe in due course.

Having a camp of thirty-four persons is a serious responsibility in the midst of such a wilderness. The

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ordinary traveller goes through with perhaps one or two men beside the Bedawyn, and those men are generally his providers, who look after him, instead of his having to think about looking after their needs. Very few, if any, travellers have been through here without having everything arranged for them by a dragoman; and certainly no such party as thirty men staying for some months has ever been here since the old mining expeditions of the Egyptians, which came to an end three thousand years ago. To read most narratives of visitors to Sinai is only to hear of the inevitable fat Mūsa or Suleyman, who was so devoted, yet so domineering; who cheated over the tents, and doled out such versions of the way as he thought would interest the helpless employers who paid him. The negotiations in a grand hotel in Cairo, the days of delay while the retinue was being collected at Suez, the bargains and contracts with official sheykhs, all these form the threshold of most narratives. Here I shall state the steps of a very different way of proceeding, without any of those complications which are useless if you have a small knowledge of Arabic, and give some outline of the management which is required when dealing with a large camp in such a life.

Our stores were a vital question, and we carefully planned them, and had them sent from England to Suez. Such details as may be useful, regarding rations for natives and the food needful for good health, have been stated in the preface. The essential facts are that it is cheaper and better to have everything—even flour—out from England; and that by properly assorting the boxes, and planning their storage until required, everything can be at hand without encumbering the movements of the party to a serious extent.

The dominant factor in every arrangement is the camel—how much it can carry, how long it will take on the road, and how its loads can be arranged. And the

camel-driver is the next factor, as his tariff will determine what is worth while in transport, and how to plan affairs, and his possibilities of speculation will settle how much you will receive of what he brings. Very few camel-men can resist taking toll from food in sacks—sometimes a large proportion, worth nearly as much as their wages; so it is needful to secure all stores in nailed-up boxes, which they have not the tools or the wits to tamper with.

On December 2nd our party assembled at Suez, and preliminary business was settled. At Cairo I had picked up two of my old workmen, one of whom, Erfay, walked with us all the way to Sinai, while the other went down with the store boat. The first lesson to learn was that camels can only be secured through a head man of some sort; the individual camel-man will not (as in Egypt) make agreements with strangers, but only works for superiors of his own kin. Had we but known that Abu Ghanéym, the sheykh of Wady Magháreh, was in Suez at the time, we should have done far better to settle affairs with him at once. But all that I could reach from official sources was the chief grain merchant, contractor, and middleman of Suez, Abu Qudéyl. At first I had intended taking stores down by camel from Suez; but Abu Qudéyl's terms of £2 a camel made this impossible. He then proposed a boat for the stores, but as he demanded £15 for it down to Burdéys, the nearest landing-place on the Red Sea, I left the Consulate with only an agreement for four camels to take our camping stores and stuff.

The next lesson to learn in Suez was that the shipping agents, Messrs. Beyts & Co., were the indispensable basis for affairs. To any one in Sinai it may be said that Beyts is Suez and Suez is Beyts. From the first hour that I went to inquire about our stores, to the end of all our work, the constant kindness and courtesy of Mr. H. B. Bush, who was the partner in Suez at the

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time, was an unfailing help to us. Every week our camel-men went to the office to deposit our antiquities and to get fresh stores; the post office sent all our letters there, and the Consulate deputed making contracts to the same friendly care. So soon as I named Abu Qudéyl's demand of £15 for a boat, Mr. Bush set his staff on the matter; and though the astute old middleman had cornered every likely boat, so as to force our hands, another new man was found to do the trip for £4. This we raised to £5 on condition of the boat waiting any time required, till all our boxes were removed by camel. We could not have succeeded nearly as well without Mr. Bush's help, but not every traveller could hope to find in all these ways so much assistance so readily granted; our work, however, appealed to his old university interests in history, and so our kind friend did everything to make our path easy.

On December 3rd we left Suez (properly Soweys or Sueys) by boat to Esh Shatt, on the other side of the Canal. This is some three miles' run, doubling the promontory of Port Ibrahim at the mouth of the Canal, and turning up the Canal a short way. Here is an elaborate quarantine station, with every facility for isolation and disinfection, and a good water supply from the Nile, which should be taken in here for the three days' journey to Gharándel. We had the offer of quarters in the station, as it was unoccupied; but I thought it more prudent to practise pitching our tents, and make sure that everything was complete. We had some Egyptian army tents and some English army tents, all bought from disused stores; the former were far more comfortable, as the sides were higher, and a thin muslin lining made them warmer.

The agent of Abu Qudéyl here brought up the four camels that were allotted to us, and they were anything but satisfactory. I had been assured that four kantars (400 lb.) was the recognised load for a

camel here ; but none of these were fit for more than three kantars, and one of them was always breaking down under much less, and had to be left after a day, and another camel substituted from another party. There was an hour and more wasted in squabbling about the loads, and I learned that it is best to make up equal loads oneself, and then let the men have the choice of them, for this course at Wady Magháreh saved all disputes.

The camel-men were varied. The best of them was Sálah Abu Risq, who evidently belonged to some old aboriginal race before the Semites. He was short and very dark brown, with a Socratic face and a cheerful, friendly manner. He could not resist joining in a plot to screw us later on, and making up a fabulous item in accounts ; but he was always reasonable and quiet, except when he blazed up if he were being imposed on by the others. His wrath, however, was good-tempered, though fierce, and had none of the wearisome snarl in it of some other men. He was afterwards my wife's camel-man when she came down to join us, and was liked for his good-humoured, childish ways.

The most distinguished of our men was M'teyr, a pure Semite with long face and nose, of a light yellowish complexion and with a greyish beard. He was cousin of a sheykh, and made claim to considerable authority. For heartless unpleasantness there was not his equal ; he could fawn, he could palaver, but once let him feel that he had a real hold on you and his bullying was insufferable. More than once the honest indignation of little Sálah burst out upon him, and reproached his shameless grasping. The other two men were non-entities.

But on the way we were joined by the wily Khallýl Itkheyl. He was a most picturesque rascal, with fine regular features, light brown skin, and a short black beard. He could smile marvellously and show the

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whitest of teeth, could dance to perfection, and look all the time capable of cutting any man's throat, if it were quite safe to do so. For sheer push, insinuation, and wile he had not his equal.

During part of the first day we had with us old Abu Ghanéym, the sheykh of the Wady Magháreh and Serabít el Khádem. Had I known of his position beforehand I should have made a contract with him at once, which would have saved annoyances later. He is an old man for a Bedawy, for he was a small boy in the time of Major Macdonald, about 1862, and so must be about fifty now. He is hardly more than skin and bone, dark brown from exposure, and of a middle height. He has a good, courteous manner, and is more sincere and honest than any of the others we had to deal with, though he naturally follows his ethics and not ours in a bargain. He is intelligent in things that pertain to his life; and has a real care and interest in carrying out his engagements and maintaining his relations with others. We saw a good deal of him later on, when he camped by us in charge of our affairs at Serabít; and even when his loquacity was too much, one could not but feel a real friendship for the old man. His brother, Ra'abíyeh, was much of the same character, rather younger, with a better head, and more command about him; altogether, he is much the best man with whom to do business for anything at Magháreh.

On December 4th at last we were on the way by 10.30, going down the old road that every one has trodden from prehistoric days—turquoise hunters eight thousand years ago, Egyptian conquerors of the 1st dynasty, miners of all ages, the tribes of Israel, and the hosts of pilgrims to Mount Sinai in later ages.

The track (see Map 1 at end) lies along the nearly level plain of raised sea-bed which stretches from the present shore, back over more than ten miles, to the foot of the great limestone plateau of the Tih. The

surface is thickly strewn with flints, washed down from the limestones behind. But a way had been cleared through these flints, much as roads have been cleared on the Egyptian desert from Memphis to the Oasis, or at Tell el Amarna. The flints were swept up to either side into two ridges, and in various parts I measured the clear road as 320 and 310 in. wide, which is 15 cubits of Egyptian measure; the roads to the Oasis and the Fayum were 50 cubits wide (PETRIE, *Season in Egypt*, pp. 34-5). This road could not be traced on descending to the clear marly plain before Ayūn Mūsa; and beyond that no trace of such a road could be seen, even where the track was strictly confined by passing over gaps in the ridges of the plain. It seems, therefore, that this road only led from Arsinoë to Ayūn Mūsa, and no farther.

We walked on to Ayūn Mūsa (the springs of Moses), where we lunched, and watched the reloading of the camels after watering, from 1 to 2.15. The springs here are brackish and dirty pools, which, though good enough for camels, should not be reckoned on instead of the good water at Esh Shatt. The water is now used for considerable-sized gardens; there are four large enclosures, each holding from fifty to a hundred palm-trees, and a great quantity of tamarisk, which is a favourite food for camels. The spring to the south of the plantations is remarkable for the manner in which the dead water-fleas have gradually dammed it round, as described by Fraas, so that, with blown sand and calcareous accretions, a mound has been raised about 20 ft. above the plain, with the spring on the top of it. This implies that the strata are watertight around for a distance of perhaps a mile back towards the plateau, otherwise the water would not thus rise here to overflowing. It was rather below the top when we passed, but had overflowed a day or two before, owing to heavy rain-storms during the past week.

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The road to this place, which has been described, seems to have led to a fort of Roman age. On the north of Ayūn Mūsa is a mound of ruins about 15 ft. high and 120 ft. across. It is nearly all covered with Arab pottery, but there is some of late Roman age on the surface. The large quantity of slag from the burning of lime, which is mixed with this mound, shows that some large limestone building has been destroyed in Arab times. Hence it seems that a Roman station of some consequence existed here; and the cleared road which we had noticed led down to it. But no trace of a road or any fixed stations was met with farther south. There were great quantities of broken shells about, on the ground and in the mound, showing that the people depended much upon fishing for their food.

We walked on from 2.15 to 4.15, and the camels reached us and stopped at 4.30 in a small valley, where we pitched tents, just north of two flat-topped hills. Travelling in mid-winter is hindered by the short days; in the morning the tents are so wet with dew that they cannot be packed very early, and in the evening the early darkness cuts the journey shorter than it need be. Our system was that one of our party took charge of all the canteen and food, one took all the bedding in hand, and one superintended the tents to see that they were properly done up and no stray ropes or pegs were lost. Each morning we rolled up and roped our blankets inside the tents, and put out enough food for breakfast and lunch. Then, while the camel-men and our Egyptian packed the tents, we had breakfast in the open, and stowed our lunch ready to get it at midday without stopping. The rolls of blankets were always wrapped inside the tent to which they belonged, and this kept them from dirt and vermin. By keeping things in our own hands in this way we never had any insect plagues the whole time.

On December 5th we got everything off by 8.50.

At 10 we reached the fork of the roads,—one track going nearer the coast, and at last passing close below the cliffs of Gebel Hammám; the other track passing inland behind the sea cliffs. Our men took the inland road through the midst of the wide plain of old sea-bed. This plain has only been elevated from the sea in very recent geological times, since the pluvial period, and the valleys are not yet pronounced. Large discharges of water pour over it from the storms which pass up to the edge of the great Tih plateau, which bounds it on the east. Yet the plain of twenty miles wide has scarcely anything that can be called a valley across it. The streams pour over wide spaces of half a mile to a mile and a half in width, seldom cutting more than two or three feet deep at any part. This is an interesting sight geologically, as it shows us the nature of a recently elevated land, on which denudation has not yet made any serious impress. Each land that we know has had this character when it was young, and had not long emerged from its formative sea; but the elevation has generally been so long ago that the vague wide sheets of flowing water, wandering over a spacious table-land, have cut out deep and decisive channels.

We rested from 12.30 to 1.40, but the camels went on till 4.45, when they halted in the Wady Werdán. The drivers wanted to stop for the night in the Wady Sudr at 2.15, quite regardless of food and water supply. But I insisted on pushing on, as we had only water for one night in our tanks, owing to the miserably weak water camel, which could not take a full load to start with. If we did not reach the Wady Werdán this night, we could not possibly have pushed on to water at Gharándel the next night; but of all this the camel-men seemed quite heedless, apparently accustomed to run short, and then make forced marches to get out of difficulties. The Wady Werdán is one of the widest of all these so-called valleys. It is only a slightly lower part