

THE BEDOUIN OF THE SINAITIC PENINSULA.

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*(Continued from Q.S., 1909, p. 258.)*XXIII. *The Suez—Kadēsh Road.*

ON leaving Suez, the Pilgrim Road at once enters the Wādy Tih. The road, although passing over undulating ground, is in no way difficult, and after some four hours of gradual ascent, enters the Wādy Gebab, which leads directly to the Wādy Haidan. Our guide, however, missed the road: we therefore took a direct course for the Gebel el-Menhalieh, a headland to be seen from Suez, at the entrance of the Wādy Haidan. Being off the general road, our passage was by no means smooth, but the dunes are small, in only a very few places did they necessitate our changing the course. Their direction like those of the Western Desert is 20° from N.E. to S.W. The dips between the dunes are overgrown with slight vegetation—from under several bushes we put up the desert hare. This little animal is hardly as big as the English rabbit and lies very close on the form, springing up almost under one's feet. The Dorcas gazelle is also common in the wādy.

The entrance to the Wādy Gebab is steep. The sides of the wādy are sandy, very steep, and, seemingly, held up principally by small bushes which grow sparsely on all sides.

The bottom of the wādy is well grown over by a large bush called "Adds" (taking its name from the lentil which its flower much resembles). "Schicch," a plant with a very strong smell, is the best fodder growing in the wādy. There were two solitary tents, belonging to Terabin Arabs, in a small side valley off the road, with sheep and goats to feed on this last-named plant.

A hemlock was just pushing through the sand, and its fresh greeneries attracted the camels, but the guide never allowed them to feed on it, there being a superstition with them that should

a she-camel when with calf feed from it, she will drop her young long before the proper time.

We camped at the junction of the Wādy el-Gebab and Wādy el-Būm.

On the next day we were close to more hilly ground, and early passed from sand to rock and hard ground.

There having been but a small local rainfall this year, two stone basins in the rocks, known to the guide, were empty. These, called "Machsan," or "Sandūk," by the Arabs are both similar, being at the commencement of wādies, where the water, held in by narrow rocky sides, comes suddenly to the edge and pours down on the rocks below, in time hollowing out a basin. In neither case were these of any size.

At 12 o'clock we came to the wells of et-Towela.

The Towela Wells are many, but only a few had water in them; they were about 20 feet deep, sinking in fact until they met the rock. An old wall crossing the gorge was evidently built to check the water, and is very likely still the mainstay of the wells. It is built for the most part of large dressed blocks. At some little distance up the hill are two flat platforms evidently at some time the site of buildings.

The small path joining these with the principal road in the Wādy Haidan is very steep indeed, and it was necessary to breathe our camels twice while ascending. I was interested to find on a rock here the petrified earthen cells of the ichneumon fly. The unopened cells were hardly recognizable from the rock, but one with its funnel-shaped opening was unmistakable; so hard were they that though I used a large stone to dislodge them with, they withstood every attempt. I managed at last to smash one on the rock and found it to contain a greenish powder: the remains of the buried insect.

A large lily, called by the Arabs *Widden el-homar*—"the ears of the donkey"—owing to its large leaves which somewhat resemble them, was very plentiful, growing in clumps of some ten to fifteen bulbs, with seemingly very little else but the hard rock to feed upon.

The Pilgrim Road in the Wādy Haidan is very marked, and at very close intervals cairns of stones show its course; these, in some places, form an enormous pile, as it is the duty of each Arab when passing to throw his stone on the heap.

As the wādy opens into the plain below, its sides are lined with rough hewn stones. Those were put here in the time of Said Pascha, on the occasion of his mother going on the pilgrimage. The word Haidan in Arabic means "walls," and in these rough stone sides no doubt the origin of its present name is to be found; in two other cases the names of large wādies are to be traced to quite recent events. It is, however, curious that a road so much traversed from earliest times should not retain its old names.

The Bāb el-Haidan has on the south a hill remarkable in its appearance, from the watercourses down its sides. These arrow-shaped excavations in the clay soil, between the thin rocky strata of the hill, are so regular as to give it the resemblance to a large embossed roof of a building.

Gebel Hessen (Hisn), still further to the south, some three-quarters of an hour from the Pilgrim Road is, from its whiteness, a prominent landmark, and is also as regularly furrowed by the rain as Gebel Haidan. There is a legend attached to this hill which all Arabs know:—

A long time ago the pilgrims encamped by the tents of an Arab, near the Wells of eth-Themed. When the pilgrims left he found his sister had been stolen. Mounting his camel he followed the pilgrims from party to party all the way to Mecca, but could not find her. When the time of the pilgrims return came round he searched again, all the way as far as the Gebel Haidan. Then, towards the evening among a party of pilgrims he heard his sister singing, and recognized her voice. During the night he stole the camels of her lover, a Turk. In the morning when the Hadj moved on, the Turk was left behind searching for his beasts. Here the story varies: one version is that the Arab then fell upon him, killed him, and carried back his sister. The other version, and the most popular is, that the Arab drew his sword and cut off the Turk's leg. Upon which the Turk seized his own joint, dealing the Arab such a blow that he fell down and died; the Turk also dying from loss of blood. "Hess," in Arabic, means sound. I do not know whether "Hess'en" comes from the Arab's first hearing his sister's voice here. "Hess el-Arab" is an expression used to denote all sounds connected with an Arab tent, the barking of dogs included.

From the Bāb el-Haidan the Pilgrim Road stretches right across the plain nearly a whole day's journey to the Gebel el-Haneth,

above Nekhl. Two years ago the rain having fallen on the "Bodish," the wādies off the plain afforded pasturage for tribes of Arabs; but here, this year, at least, not one single tent is on the whole expanse.

We saw a small herd of Dorcas gazelles, and just before camping came on a whole covey of sand grouse (Arab name *gattah*); these birds in the desert rely so entirely on the protection given them by their similarity of colour with the ground that they will allow themselves to be knocked down with a stick. It is curious that while running with head crouched, evidently trying to evade detection, they keep up a continual call to each other, which draws notice to them the whole while.

On the third day we passed early in the morning four Arabs with camels carrying charcoal to Suez. This, with wood, is the commonest article of trade with the towns on the other side of the Canal. It is made from the tamarisk bushes of the Wādy el-Arish and Wādies Būka and Maithan. A great difficulty exists in the names of wādies as each Arab has his own version.

The Maithan and an arm of the Būka cross the Pilgrim Road; excepting the Būka tributary there are no deep wādies here: the Maithan is merely a wide expanse of wash with hardly any boundaries, but the Wādy el-Būka has made a channel some 9 feet deep, and here the tamarisk grows. These shrubs only grow in the channels.

We put up a bustard while crossing the plain, and though not very common, we saw several at different times; it is called *hobara* by the Arabs.

The whole plain stretching from the foot of Yelleg is very flat, and is scoured by small water courses.

One hour before reaching the Hameth there is a slight decline. This is more pronounced from the Gebel el-Hameth to the Wādy el-Arish.

Nekhl, with its square fort, is simply a station for the pilgrims to water at; it is on absolutely barren ground. Here lives the governor and ten soldiers; the village by the fort is composed entirely of soldiers or the families of those who were soldiers once. The Peninsula is under the War Office.

All food comes from Suez or Gaza, and those who have any money at all invest it in camels. The years when the Wādy el-Arish is flooded they cultivate small patches of ground round the

town with corn and maize. But sometimes there has not been sufficient scrub even for camels to feed on.

The water is slightly salt and disagreeable to the taste.

The town has one street and from fifteen to twenty mud-brick houses. It may be interesting to note that the Cairo pilgrims took three days to reach Nekhl from Suez. One day to the Haidan, the next they camped in the plains, and early the next day they reached Nekhl. This is easy travelling, but shows the rate at which a big body of men can cross this part. Nekhl is half way between Suez and Akaba.

On leaving Nekhl the road, as far as Ikeram, runs over the open plain, and the undulating ground is uninteresting. The small wādies, marked out by small green bushes, alone relieve the sameness.

The Wādy el-Arish, though it took us over one hour to cross from bank to bank, is rarely full even for a few hours. The central channel, curling about in the wide shallow basin of the wādy, is marked everywhere by the tamarisk bushes that grow in it. The central or general channel is about 15 to 20 feet deep in most places, and from 20 to 30 feet wide. This central wādy was flooded for about four hours, the water reaching about half way up the channel. Some years ago the whole wādy was for a short time flooded. This must mean a continuous and very heavy downfall of rain in the hills that feed the source, for two days of really heavy rain had little effect anywhere. The pools were full but none of the wādies had been really flooded. The Wādy el-Arish is the worst of the wādies at keeping water. Its pools dry up very quickly.

The Wādy Geraia runs parallel to an escarpment of hill which nearly joins the Gebel Ikeram from which they run almost due east. This escarpment is the boundary of very rough ground that joins the Pilgrim Road, this last running through a fairly open space.

The Wādy Geraia is a large wādy, not so grown with shrub as the Wādy el-Arish, the basin is very much cut up, and crossing, except at certain places, on camels is impossible. The Teahā and Barakat sow the wādy in good years, but for two years it has been uncultivable owing to the scarcity of rain. They grow barley and Indian corn (*belladi*) principally.

The Comptellet el-Geraia is a mound of tafel on the bank of the main channel, whose course it slightly deflects. There is a

natural rock strata at the top. This is much broken up at one end. Facing Ikeram are the remains of what, at one time, was a small building destroyed by fire, or the site of watch fires. There was wood, simply branches in no way cut up or carpentered, which looked like tarfe to me and also to the Arabs—not Shittim. In the *débris* of burnt mud-bricks, which had at one time been plaster faced, I found traces of plaster on two or three, although only in chips. In its most prosperous days it cannot have been larger than a sentry box. There is just above Meyen (Mayein), or rather the pass leading to it, a small tower in ruins (but the three bottom courses still intact) of blocks of dressed stone. From its position and size it was evidently a watch tower. The building on the Comptellet was of similar size. The wells near the Comptellet have a good supply of clean water, much better than Nekhl, and I should say a greater supply. I remained two days at the Comptellet and saw no one. The whole district had been vacated by the Arabs on account of the lack of rain.

The road from Comptellet el-Geraia to Bir Meyen is a continuous ascent, and as it gradually approaches the small escarpment which joins el-Naga it becomes more stony. There are many circles scattering the ground in various sheltered spots by the way. I never saw any pottery near these circles, nor were they ever more than one layer deep: that is stones as large and as flat as possible taken and placed lengthwise close to each other to form a circle these; in some cases were floored much in the same way as *balat* are put down in a native house now; the building up, when such was the case with these circles, must have been difficult. It is curious that in many instances the square and the circular house are attached. The only origin of such a form of house that I can think of, presenting as it does so many more difficulties, must have been the absence of beams to close over a large open space. Arabs when travelling in the present day make these circles to shelter themselves, but there is a very recognizable difference between those of to-day and the old ones. Might they have been enclosures in which to put up and shelter a tent of some description? Shelters are often built at the back of the tent. I never discovered a mark scratched on one of these circles, though I must have examined over a hundred.

From the point where the road after ascending, descends abruptly into the Bir el-Meyen Valley, stands a small square tower, built of dressed blocks, 12 feet by 18 feet, and now about 4 feet from the

ground. Unless the stones that it was built of have been carried away, the tower was never of any great height.

The valley of Bir el-Meyen might prove interesting: there is evidence of much cultivation in the steps made for irrigation, and also the ruined sites of much building.

The geological formation of the valley is curious. The shape of the rocks at the crest of the hill gives the appearance of a large wall running along it. We saw, but did not speak to the Barakat Arabs. The road from the Bir el-Meyen to the Wādy Lussan, is very narrow, steep, and rocky. The country between the Wādy Lussan and Wādy Um Radin is really very bad for travelling; in some parts the rocks were so abrupt and the path so narrow that it was necessary to choose one's path with great care and to move very slowly. The country all being hostile to my guide, we had to evade all tents as much as possible. The country was very sparsely populated, and we only now and then came in sight of a *Rie* with his camels.

This country, lying between the Wādy Lussan and the Um Radin Wādy, was, without exception, the worst we had crossed: many times we had to pass along very narrow ledges, which were flanked by steep walls of rock on one side and what was equal to a precipice on the other.

There is water in the Wādy Um Radin, but not in any great quantity, though we passed several dry wells in the bottom soil of the wādy. But these communicate with rock basins, rock being the real bottom of the wādy, covered with washdown. It is very narrow, with precipitous sides. The Wādy Um Zaida is merely crossed in reaching the open ground which, bounded by the hills to the north-west, is scoured by many watercourses running to Wādy el-Arish. To the east of the open ground is the Gebel Helal, at the far north end is the Wādy Kadis.

Sheikh Saad, on whose ground this spring is, belongs to the Teahā Arabs; he is now jealous of his rights to the spring which has lately been bringing in a profit he cannot understand, but which he ascribes to its medicinal properties. The tent of Sheikh Saad is to the north side of the spring, on the high undulating ground, which bears much signs of ancient cultivation. A large wall, which I at first hoped belonged to a city, is undoubtedly built for agricultural purposes. There are many stone circles, and these, in some cases, were faced with long, flat, square-cut stones. These

stone circles have, in many cases, been used by the Arabs, the stone floor having been covered with a layer of soil and cultivated. The inscriptions were generally on red sandstone, with a dark outer coat, this was always chosen to chip the *bedden* or camel on. Many of these inscriptions are, I should judge, old, from the weathered appearance of the stone, but many again showed a very similar colour to the chip exposed by myself. In all cases these animals had been cut with the hammering of some blunt pointed instrument. In all cases of these animal-chipped stones, both on the Sinaitic side and on the west bank of the Nile, the *bedden* (*Capra Sinaitica*) is by far the most popular subject. I think they are more common in this form than in any other, for, though a very ordinary subject of conversation with the Arab, they are not often seen.

Sheikh Saad was very tenacious of his rights over the 'Ain. He said that some years ago a Terabin Sheikh brought some people to his well without asking, or rather paying, for his permission, upon which, he told me, he went out and fought him, cutting him severely on the arm.

I lived for two days with Sheikh Saad in his tent. It is right, when approaching an Arab encampment, to enquire for the *Menzil* or "Tent of Alighting"; here, all strangers are accommodated, and the men in the adjoining tents meet as in a club. It is generally near or attached to the Sheikh's tent. In approaching the tents, you do so from the back and not from the front. In the centre of the tent is the pit of cinders, on which smoulders for ever the *bakrag* or coffee pot, with the iron spoon on which the beans of coffee are roasted. When roasted, the beans are ground by a heavy stick in an earthenware bowl (*mashan*). Coffee, which they drink from morning to night, is a thing of some importance to them. A man, when telling a story, having come to a point which he suspects the listeners may have some trouble in swallowing (there are a good many of these) says, looking round the tent, "*wa hat*," some three or four times—this means something like "By the soul of" in English, or "I swear by,"—and, having found nothing in his surroundings sufficiently impressive, the man hits the coffee-pot and says "*wa hat el-bakrag*."

In the morning we generally began with a cup of coffee. The Arabs never more than half fill the coffee cup: it is supposed to be very bad manners to give more; the guest also should never accept more than two cups, though the third is offered and passed.

At 11 o'clock the Sheikh generally appeared with a bowl of *halib* (sour milk) in the *zwalli* or wooden bowl, for which, by the way, they have here another name that I have forgotten. This is milk poured into a skin, which, from always holding milk and never being cleaned at once turns it. The bowl we were handed held about five pints. It was necessary to swallow a little. Hamed drank the rest by simply pouring it down his throat—it could hardly be called drinking. With this was served a large dish with bread soaked in butter, the bread having been torn in little bits. Between this and the evening meal followed innumerable coffees. In the evening, about sunset, the goats and sheep returned from pasturage. The whole scene became a hubbub, all bleating and running about in a wild and aimless way. The camels took a bee-line through animals, tents and all, to the destruction of anything that came in their way. The very young goats went into the harem-tent, where, in this case, Fatha, and her young son who had just returned on the mare from the cultivated valleys, tied them up. The goats and sheep and well-grown kids fell in at the back of the tent. We, the men, sitting round the fire were loth to leave our place, it being at once taken by a kid—the most impudent of animals—which would often make a successful bolt and put its head into the large bowl of *arsid*. This is a dish of boiled ground barley and mutton fat, of the thickness of mutton broth, which was generally the evening meal. We all sat round this and ate together.

The country round 'Ain Kadis does not give one the idea of being able to support a large town. The well, or rather spring, has not one metre of square surface, and is not more than half a metre deep. Like the whole Peninsula, it depends for its supply of cereals on the more fertile parts of Syria, being, however, in certain years of rainfall, able to support itself.

The red-leg partridge and sand grouse are the commonest birds, and of the former we constantly put up coverts of six and seven.

On returning from 'Ain Kadis, we followed the same road as far as the Wādy Um Zaida. This wādy we followed up for some time. Its well is very impressive giving much more the appearance of the rock that "Moses" struck. This great rock of the side of the valley has fallen back, and under the wedged shaped aperture thus exposed, in the dark, are the wells, or rather, pools. The path again became difficult, passing over steep ascents and descents on rocky country. Hamish was very keen after red partridges. I have noticed that

all Arabs pull the trigger with the second finger and not the first as is general with us. We camped some way beyond the Wady Lussan. Old Sheikh Saad was a little uncomfortable, having a very marked fear of Azazimeh, in whose country we were.

The country from the Wady Lussan to the Gebel Megra is through a series of deep and narrow wadies, which hide the country round, and make one journey on through narrow passages. Trees in the way are most inconvenient, I escaped one, being torn much in the clothes and slightly in the arm, but was lucky to have so slight an injury. A camel saddle is a most inconvenient affair, holding one in a groove to be crushed by low branches.

Just before Megra, we come on the crest of an escarpment, so steep and high that we had some difficulty in finding a path down and in following it when found. We saw only one goatherd, and a woman driving two donkeys during the day. Here, Sheikh Saad returned, being very anxious to take my blanket with him, as a present. I know nothing an Arab appreciates more than a blanket. Cheap ones I should always recommend as worth taking, for special occasions.

During this part of the day we saw only a few remains, but every now and then a stone circle or a place marked out in square shape, but, near there, I saw no pottery, nor were the stones marked. From Megra to Nekhl, we passed over the same ground as before coming, only by keeping up a little north, on the wells called *El Malah*, the "Salt"; these are some twelve in number, about 18 feet deep, the water is bitter to the taste.

(To be continued.)
