

CHAPTER XI

A NUBIAN HIGHWAY

OPPOSITE the town of Aswân, a short distance below the First Cataract of the Nile, there rises an island known to travellers by its Greek name of Elephantine. The river sweeps down from the cataract to east and west ; southwards one may watch it flowing around a dozen dark clumps of granite rocks, which thrust themselves as it were breathless above the water ; and northwards almost without hindrance it passes between the hills and palm-trees of the mainland. Nowadays should one stand upon the mounds which mark the site of the ancient city of Elephantine, and look east and north, one would feel that modern civilisation had hidden for ever the scenes of the past, and had prevented the imagination from re-picturing the place as it was in the older days. The huge Cataract Hotel overshadows the ruined city, and stares down from its pinnacle of granite on to the tumbled stones of ancient temples. On the island itself, opposite this hotel, the elaborate and ultra-modern rest-house of the Ministry of Public Works rises amidst its terraced gardens ; and farther to the north stands the imposing Savoy Hotel, surrounded by luxuriant trees and flowers unknown to the ancient Egyptians. Eastwards the long, neat promenade of Aswân edges the river, backed by the Grand Hotel, the Government offices, and other large buildings ; and at one end the noisy railway station tells the insistent tale of the Present. During the winter one may watch the busy launches and small craft plying to and fro, and may see the quality and fashion of Europe amusing itself at either end of the passage ; while at night the brilliant lights blaze into the waters of the Nile from

a thousand electric lamps, and the sounds of the latest tune drift out through open windows. The place is modern: one sips one's whisky-and-soda above the crushed-down remains of Pharaonic splendours, plays tennis in a garden laid out above the libraries of the Ptolemies, and reads the *Daily Mail* where, maybe, melancholy Juvenal wrote his *Fifteenth Satire*.

But should one turn now to the west and south a different impression might be obtained. On the island still stands the imposing gateway of the rich temple destroyed for the sake of its building-stone in the days of Mohammed Ali; and near it, not many years ago, an archæologist uncovered the intact burial vault of the sacred rams of the Nile-god Khnum. The rocky hills of the western mainland tower above the island, great drifts of golden sand carrying the eye from the summit to the water's edge; and here, cut into the rocks, are the tombs of the ancient princes of Elephantine. In this direction there is hardly anything that is more modern than the ruined monastery of St. Simeon, built at the head of a sandy valley in the early days of Christianity, and destroyed by the fierce brother of Saladin in 1173 A.D. With one's back to the hotels, and one's face to the changeless hills, the history of the old city is able to be traced with something of the feeling of reality to aid the thoughts.

One period of that history stands out clearly and distinctly amidst the dim course of far-off events. From being a stronghold of a savage tribe the south end of the island had become covered by the houses and streets of a fine city, named *Abu* or "Elephant-city" (and hence Elephantine), no doubt after the elephant symbol of its chieftain. The feudal tendencies of the Vth and VIth Dynasties—about B.C. 2750 to 2475—had brought power and wealth to the local princes in many parts of Egypt; and here the family of the chieftains of the island had begun to rise to a degree of some importance. This was largely due to the fact that to them was entrusted the

office of " Keeper of the Door of the South ", and the protecting of the Egyptian frontier at the first Cataract from invasion by the negro tribes beyond.

The city rose amidst its trees and rocks at the foot of the cataract, at a point where in those days the river still ran swift, and where the distant roar of waters continuously drummed upon the ears. On the eastern mainland opposite the island stood the huts and hovels of the great *Swanu*, or market, which gave its name to the later town of Aswân ; and here the negroes, coming from the upper reaches of the river by the valley road which avoids the rocks of the cataract, met and traded with the inhabitants of Elephantine. At the far end of this road the barren islands of Philae, Bigeh, and others were regarded as neutral ground, and the rocks of the mainland were not yet forbidden territory to the Egyptians for some miles up-stream. But beyond this the country was little known, and those who penetrated into it took their lives in their hands.

First there came the land of the Kau tribes ; and then, farther to the south, the Wawat on the east bank and the Sethu on the west dwelt in barbaric independence. Still farther to the south lived the warlike Mazoi, who might sometimes be seen at the market, ostrich feathers in their hair and bows and clubs in their hands. The land of Arthet lay to the south again ; and lastly, not much below the Second Cataract and the modern Wady Hâlfâ, there lived the almost unknown people of Aam.

Who dwelt to the south of this the Egyptians did not know. That territory was " The Land of the Ghosts " : the perilous borders of the world, and the misty ocean into which no man had penetrated, were there to be encountered. To the inhabitants of the brilliant little metropolis the peoples of the upper river appeared to be a hazy folk ; and the farther south their land the more mysterious were their surroundings and the ghostlier their ways. The negroes who came to the market no doubt told stories then, as they did in later times, of the

great stature and the marvellous longevity of those distant races ; and though but a couple of hundred miles of winding river separated the Egyptian frontier from that of the land of Aam, that distance sufficed to twist the thoughts of the market-gossiper from the mortal to the immortal.

In archaic times an unknown Egyptian king had penetrated some sixty miles up the river, and had left a record on one of the rocks ;¹ and King Sneferu of the IIIrd Dynasty had devastated a part of the country. But from that time until the beginning of the Vth Dynasty the land and its people, left unmolested, had drifted once more into the pale regions of mystery. As the nobles of Elephantine grew in wealth and power, however, their attention began to be turned with some degree of fixidity towards the south ; and when the energetic King Sahura came to the throne, it was felt that the time had arrived for the probing of the mystery.

The roads which led to the south along the eastern bank of the river, and which were used by the negroes near the frontier when coming to the market, were not practicable for caravans bound for distant goals ; and the Egyptians turned their eyes, therefore, to the western hills, behind which the sorrowful lands of the Dead were somewhere situated. Almost exactly opposite the city lay a sand-covered valley, in which now stands the ruined monastery mentioned above. From the island a boat carried one across to the little reedy bay, from whence a trudge of half a mile or so over the soft sand brought one to the upper levels of the desert. Looking towards the north, the road which led eventually to Lower Egypt was to be seen ; to the west the eye wandered over the undulating wilderness to the far horizon, made awful by the presence

¹ The various rock-inscriptions of Lower Nubia mentioned in this chapter were found during a tour which I made in that country in the autumn of 1906, and are recorded in my *Antiquities of Lower Nubia and their Condition in 1906-7*, published for the Egyptian Government by the University Press, Oxford. The evidence for the locating of the various tribes is also given there.

of the Dead ; and to the south the sand-drifts and the rocky hillocks hid the untravelled paths to Aam and the Land of the Ghosts. Keeping the river on the left hand, it seemed to the Egyptians that they might here pass over the upper desert as far as the gods permitted man to penetrate ; and a descent to the Nile at any convenient point would bring them, like a bolt from heaven, upon the tribes there settled.

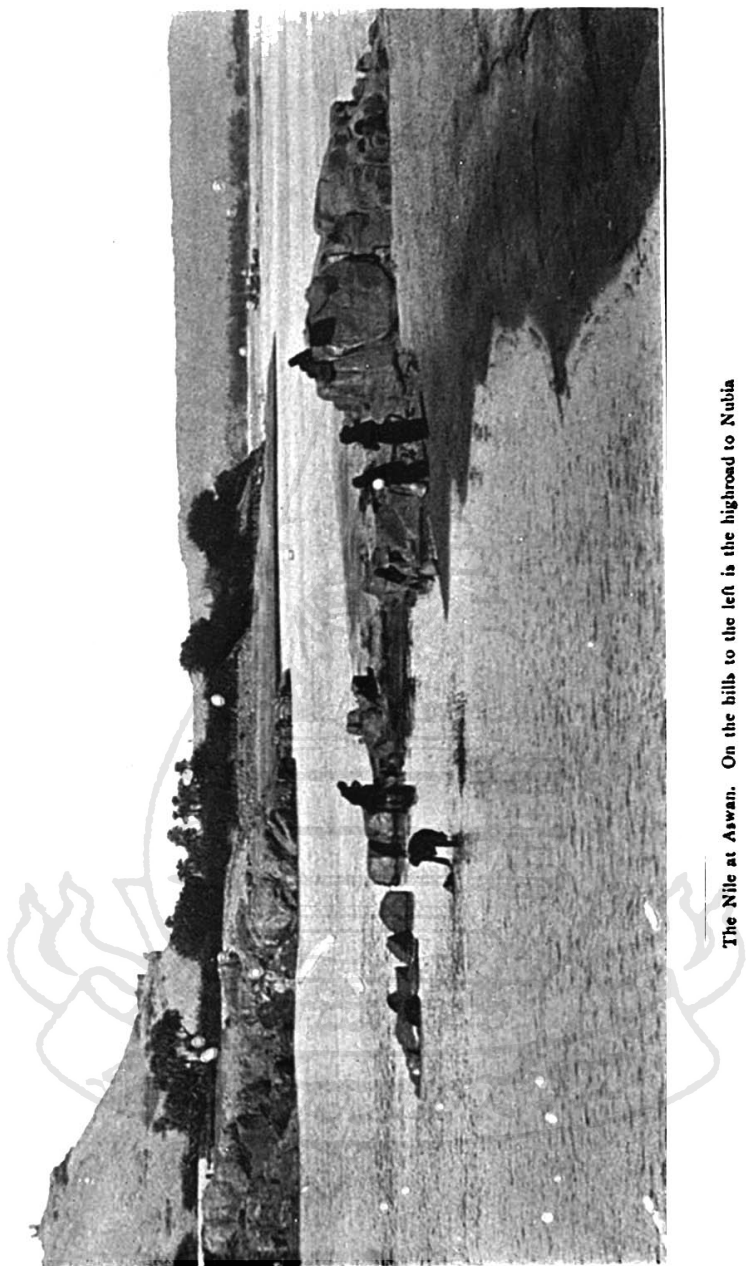
The army of Sahura—perhaps a thousand men with numerous baggage-donkeys—set out along this road, and after a march of a few days, as nearly straight ahead as possible, struck the river (which bends towards the west) at a point in the land of Arthet, now known as Tomâs. A tribute was no doubt collected from the rich fields which there border the Nile ; an inscription recording the name of one of the captains was cut upon a convenient face of rock ; and the army returned to Egypt to publish its heroism in the streets of Elephantine. Another expedition in the reign of King Asesa followed after a few years, the event being again recorded on the rocks. Farther than Arthet, however, these armed forces did not venture to go ; nor was this Nubian highroad used with great frequency during the following years.

About the year 2500 B.C. a prince of Elephantine named Herkhuf made up his mind to penetrate farther towards the mysterious lands of the south. It is forty-four centuries since he set out over the desert, with the wind whistling past his ears and a powerful sun warming his bones and his heart within him ; yet the story of his adventures may still be read, the path by which he travelled may still be discerned, and the names of his captains may still be seen on the rocks of the land of Arthet. Herkhuf, having obtained the necessary order from the Pharaoh, set out with his father Ata, " in order ", as he says, " to explore a road to the country of Aam." The road which he explored and opened up was probably a continuation of the route from Elephantine to Arthet,

passing not far back from the river, and descending to the water between Abu Simbel and Wady Hâlfâ in the heart of the land of Aam. The expedition was entirely successful, and Herkhuf states that he was, "very greatly praised for it". Emboldened by the fame which his enterprise had brought him, he made a second expedition to Aam, and was gone from Egypt eight months. A third excursion was more adventurous. Herkhuf set out upon the "Oasis-road", which runs from a point north of Aswan to Kurkur Oasis, and thence branches to Tomâs or Arthet and to the Oasis of Khârgeh which lies westward, and which in those days was inhabited by Libyan tribes. At the Kurkur junction Herkhuf met with an army, under the leadership of the Prince of Aam, which was on its way to chastise these Libyans; but how the wily Egyptian contrived to use it instead as an escort to his own men back to Aam, and how he returned to Egypt through the hostile territory of Sethu, Arthet, and Wawat, with 300 asses laden with the presents of his host, are tales too long to narrate here.

One story only may be recorded in this chapter. During a fourth expedition to Aam, Herkhuf had managed to obtain one of the dwarfs or pigmies who inhabited a region of the Land of the Ghosts. He at once informed the king, now the boy Pepy II; and in reply he received the following letter, which is, perhaps, the earliest example in the world's history of a private communication:—

"I have noted," writes the King, "the matter of your letter which you have sent to me, in order that I might know that you have returned in safety from Aam, with the army which was with you You say in your letter that you have brought a dancing pigmy of the god of the Land of the Ghosts, like the pigmy which the Treasurer Baurded brought from the Land of Pourt in the time of Asefa. You say to my majesty, 'Never before has one like him been brought by anyone who has visited Aam' Come northward, therefore, to the court immediately, and bring this pigmy with you, which you must bring living, prosperous, and healthy, from the Land of the Ghosts, to dance for the King and to rejoice and gladden the heart of the King. When he goes down with you into the vessel,



The Nile at Aswan. On the hills to the left is the highroad to Nubia

appoint trustworthy people to be beside him at either side of the vessel : take care that he does not fall into the water. When he sleeps at night, appoint trustworthy people who shall sleep beside him in his cabin ; and make an inspection ten times each night. My majesty desires to see this pigmy more than the gifts of Sinai and of Pount. If you arrive in court, the pigmy being with you, alive, prosperous, and healthy, my majesty will do for you a greater thing than that which was done for the Treasurer Baurded in the time of Asesa, according to the heart's desire of my majesty to see this pigmy. Orders have been sent to the chief of the New Towns to arrange that food shall be taken from every store-city and every temple (on the road) without stinting."

How easy it is to picture the excited boy awaiting the arrival of this wonder from the south, or to watch in the imagination the long caravan as it winds its way over the western hills from Aam to Elephantine, where Herkhuf and his prize will take ship to Memphis.

Later in the reign of Pepy II, the tribes of Arthet and Wawat revolted, and the Nubian highroad echoed with the songs of Egyptian soldiers. The commander of the expedition, named Pepynakht, slew a large number of the unfortunate negroes, took many prisoners, and collected a great quantity of plunder. It was perhaps during this disturbance that a certain prince of Elephantine, named Mekhu, was murdered in Arthet. News of his death was brought to his son Sabna by a ship's captain who had himself escaped. Sabna immediately collected a few soldiers and a hundred baggage-donkeys, bearing presents of honey, oil, ointment, and fine linen, and set out upon the same highroad towards Arthet. By judicious gifts of this oil and honey he was able to discover the body of his father ; and, loading it upon a donkey, he commenced the return journey. Before he was clear of Arthet, however, he found it necessary to avert an attack by presenting a southern negro chieftain with an elephant tusk three cubits in length, at the same time hinting that his best tusk was six cubits in length. But how the expedition arrived safely at Elephantine, and how Sabna buried his father there in the western hills behind the modern Savoy Hotel, and how he was rewarded

by the king for his really plucky undertaking, cannot here be related at length.

There was now no more mystery about the country on this side of the Second Cataract, and by the perseverance of these princes of Elephantine the way was made ready for the conquest of the Sudâr, which the Egyptians commenced in the XIIth Dynasty and completed in the XVIIIth. We of the present day cannot, perhaps, appreciate how much pluck and obstinacy these nobles required in the undertaking of these expeditions. Not only were they penetrating into lands which were inhabited by the most savage tribes, but they believed these tribes to be endowed with superhuman powers. From childhood they had heard stories of their magical powers; while in pushing their way into the distant land of Aam they assuredly expected to encounter those ghosts who hovered at the edge of the world. Their caravan routes over the western hills ran dangerously near the terrible territory of the Dead; and, to their superstitious minds, their daily marches and their nightly camps were beset by monsters and by bogies compared to which the fierce Mazoi were as naught.

The reader who finds interest in the picture of Herkhuf exploring the roads of Aam, and of Sabna searching for his father's body in hostile Arthet, will ask whether any definite traces of the highroad still remain. One would have thought that after four thousand four hundred years it would have utterly disappeared; but this is not the case. Let the visitor to Aswân step out some afternoon from the hall of his hotel, where the string band throbs in his ears and the latest Parisian gowns shimmer before his eyes, and let him take boat to the little western bay behind the ruins of Elephantine. Here in the late afternoon the long blue shadows fall, and he may walk in coolness over the sand towards the monastery which stands on the higher ground before him. At the top of the hill to his left he will presently see, some distance away, a large isolated boulder near the tomb of some old

Moslim saint ; and making his way up the hillside towards this boulder, he will suddenly come upon a paved causeway¹ which sweeps up over the sand to the rocky summit. Rough flat blocks of sandstone form the paving, and these are only here and there overwhelmed by the drifting sand, though it is evident that the road has been entirely buried at the point where it approaches the water.

Mounting to the hill-top, the causeway is seen to pass within a few yards of the great boulder, which one now finds to have been surrounded by a rough wall, as though to form a kind of sanctuary or chapel. On the sides of the rock there are several inscriptions recording the coming of various officials of the empire—tax-collectors, superintendents of the Nubian gold mines, and so on. It is evident from this that the road was used for many a long year after Herkhuf and Sabna had done with it ; though it now possessed for the travellers no terrors, nor did it lead any more to the Land of the Ghosts.

At the point where the causeway passes the boulder the hard surface of the upper desert literally bristles with countless little heaps of stones, each consisting of a small upright slab of rock held in place by two or three others. Fragments of pottery indicate that a bowl, perhaps containing water, had been placed beside each pile. Here, then, are the memorials of the travellers who set out for distant Arthet from the fair city on the island, which may from this point be seen floating in the blue waters of the Nile below. These stones are the prayers of those who asked a prosperous journey from the gods of their city : from the old ram-headed Khnum who lived in the dark caverns below the Nile ; from Satet, the horned goddess whose bow and arrows were the terror of her enemies ; and from Anuket with the crown of lofty feathers. For a short distance one may follow the paved road, now, as it passes southwards and westwards amidst the blackened

¹ I can hardly suppose that I was the first to observe this road, and yet I can find no reference to it in any publication.

rocks and golden sand-drifts of this lifeless land ; but presently it tops a deeply shadowed ridge of rock and sand, and so descends into, and is lost amidst, the wide, undulating desert, ablaze with the light of the setting sun.

There are not many persons who will find themselves able to follow the road by camel, as I did, or to take ship up the Nile, to Arthet, in order to see the terminus of the first part of the highway. The road descends to the river behind the rich fields of the straggling village of Tomâs, near Derr, the present capital of Lower Nubia. The scenery here is beautiful in the extreme. A short distance down-stream a bluff of rock, projecting to the water's edge, and half covered with drift-sand, marks the probable boundary between Arthet and Sethu. One might slide here from the top of the bluff down the golden slopes to the verdant thorn-bushes which dip towards the river, and from either side of the track one's figure would be seen sharply against the deep blue of the sky. Sliding, one would see on the left the rocks and the sand of Sethu, and distantly the superb array of the mountains of Wawat ; while on the right the green bay into which the road descended would lie spread as a feast to the eye. Farther up-stream a wooded island rests upon the mirror of the Nile, whither the inhabitants must often have fled at the approach of the Egyptians from the desert.

On the low cliffs which form the backing of this bay many a captain of an expedition or master of a caravan has written his name, and sometimes a date has been added. "The Superintendent of all the caravan-conductors of the Land of the South : Sabna" ; "the Captain of the Soldiers : Akab" ; "the Captain of the ships of Asefa : Khnumhotep" ; "the sixth year : written by the Captain of the soldiers . . ." : these are examples of the inscriptions which were here cut into the surface of the rock, and which to the archæologist are of the first importance. A caravan-conductor named Ara, who is probably to be identified with the father of Herkhuf, has left his name here ; and more than once

Sabna occurs. But perhaps the most interesting of these records are three short inscriptions which tell of an expedition to Arthet under the almost unknown Pharaoh Hornefersa, who probably reigned about B.C. 2400. It is in one of these inscriptions that the name of this country—Arthet—is given, thereby making it possible definitely to locate the territory of these people, and to identify this highway without any further question with the "Elephantine road" referred to in the inscriptions as leading from Elephantine to Arthet.

Above these rocks one steps on to the hard surface of the desert, and the eye may travel over the broken ground to the north for many a mile, and may follow the road by which Herkhuf carried home his pigmy, and Sabna his father's body, until the brown rocks meet the blue sky. To the south-west the second portion of the highway, leading on to Aam, may be followed; but the point at which it descends again to the river has not been identified, though one may safely say that the terminus lay between Abu Simbel and the Second Cataract. Here the country has a different aspect. On the west bank of the Nile the sand lies thickly, and humps itself into low hillocks covered with scrub. Between these one may walk in the cool shade of groves of *sunt* and tamarisk, where flocks of goats stand dreaming on the pathway and birds sing overhead. On the east bank isolated hills of sandstone rise suddenly from the plain, and are reflected in the river as in a flawless mirror. The land of Aam is as beautiful as that of Arthet, though altogether different in character.

The later history of the highway cannot be traced in much detail. From the VIIth to the XIIth Dynasties the Egyptian Government was seldom strong enough at home to attempt to look after affairs abroad, and Lower Nubia relapsed into a state of independence. Amenemhat, the founder of the XIIth Dynasty, about 2000 B.C., was thus obliged to reconquer the country; but his expedition seems to have travelled up the Nile and not across the desert. A few reigns later a fortress was built

at the modern Anâybeh, in the land of Arthet, some miles above the terminus of the highway from Elephantine; and the road must now have been used continuously as the express route from the city to the fortress. This stronghold is so much ruined and sand-covered that it has escaped observation until now, although its position has been ascertained from inscriptions. Mention is made of a fortress named Taray, and its distance from a certain known place is given, which exactly locates it at Anâybeh. At about the same date a large fortress was built on the west bank of the Second Cataract, and at the extreme north end of the highroad the walls of Elephantine were now strengthened.

Above the Second Cataract lay the land of Kush, and as civilisation advanced southwards the territory of the Ghosts had perforce to retreat before it. The Egyptians now knew that very human negroes inhabited the country beyond Aam; but they could still ask themselves in whispers what manner of bogies dwelt to the south of Kush. While the immortals were falling back, however, the mortals from above the second Cataract were surely pushing forward. The people of Aam were slowly being displaced by them, and in consequence were hustling the tribes of Arthet. During the reign of Senusert III (1887 B.C.) the incursions of the negroes of Kush assumed the proportions of an invasion and the Egyptians were obliged to wage an expensive and lengthy war upon them. When at last they were driven back beyond the Second Cataract, the Pharaoh set up a boundary-stone; and the words which he ordered to be inscribed upon it show plainly enough what a surprise it was to him to find that his enemies had possessed none of those superhuman powers which his subjects had attributed to them.

"Why," he says, "they are not a mighty people after all; they are poor and broken in heart. My majesty has seen them; it is not an untruth. I captured their women, I carried off their subjects; went forth to their wells, smote their bulls. I reaped their grain, and set fire thereto. I swear as my father lived for me I speak in truth, without a lie therein coming out of my mouth."

The last sentence tells of the king's fear lest tradition should conquer proven fact, and his soldiers should endow the negroes of Kush with those mysterious powers of which their close proximity to the Land of Ghosts and the end of the world gave them the use.

During the XVIIIth Dynasty (1580-1350 B.C.) the highroad was used continuously both by the troops which were being launched against the Sudân, and by the officials who came to collect the taxes or to administer the laws. Great changes had taken place since the old days. The Land of the Ghosts had disappeared almost entirely from the geography, though still it might exist somewhere above Khartûm. The people of Aam, now more correctly called Emaam, had entirely absorbed Arthet, and Sethu had fallen to the share of Wawat. Persons travelling by the highroad, and descending to the river at Tomâs or near the Second Cataract, found themselves in the sphere of influence of Emaam at either place. One obtains some idea of the inhabitants of this once mysterious land from a painting in the tomb of Huy, the viceroy of the south, at Thebes. Here one sees a procession of negro princes who have come to do homage to the Pharaoh's representatives. They have evidently travelled by the highroad, for the Prince of Emaam rides in a heavy chariot drawn by two bulls, while his retinue walk behind him. A prince of Wawat is also shown; while the chieftains of Kush are there in numbers, bringing with them the produce of their country. Their clothes are more or less Egyptian in style, and their wealth in gold is such as an Egyptian's eyes might stare at. In this sober, prosperous company, one looks in vain for a sign of that savage ferocity which made them the terror of Elephantine.

In the XIXth Dynasty (1350-1205 B.C.), when the armies of Rameses the Great and his successors passed up to the wars in the Sudân, the Elephantine road must have been one of the main routes of communication. The name of Rameses the Great is writ large upon the

rocks of Tomâs, in contrast to the modest little records of those infinitely greater men of the early days. Not so long afterwards it was the people of the Sudân who were using the road to march on Egypt, and soon the Egyptians were obliged to bow the knee to a negro Pharaoh. Later when they were once more the masters of their own affairs, the tax-gatherers returned to Emaam, and the names of some have been left on the road.

At this time Elephantine had become a city of considerable wealth and importance. Splendid temples rose amidst the houses and the trees, and fortified walls around the south end of the island frowned down upon the swift river. Priests, soldiers, and nobles walked the streets amongst the throng of the townspeople, or sailed to and fro over the broken waters. At the foot of the western hills, the bay from which the Nubian highway ran must have often been the scene of the busy loading and unloading of pack-donkeys; and at this time there may have been a masonry landing-stage at the river's edge to terminate worthily the paved causeway.

Then came the Greeks and the Romans, and one may picture perspiring legionaries hastening along the highroad to join Petronius in his chase of the one-eyed queen Kandake and her flying Ethiopians. One may see the agents of Shems-ed-Dulah, the brother of Saladin, passing along to rout out Christianity from Nubia; and presently come the barbaric Mamelukes, driven before the armies of Ibrahim Pasha. The last great scene in the long history of this most ancient highroad was enacted not so many years ago. The Dervishes—the modern inhabitants of the Land of the Ghosts—marching on Egypt from the Sudân, picked up the road at the Second Cataract, at its earliest terminus, and headed toward Tomâs. An English and Egyptian force, travelling southwards, met and utterly defeated them some seven miles back from the river, behind the village of Tôshkeh, not far from Abu Simbel. And if one journeys direct from the ancient land of Arthet to the land of Aam, the

bones of the dead and the *débris* of their camp will be found strewn to right and left over the surface of the highway, as recorded in the last chapter.

Travelling in Egypt one sees so many remains of the solemn ceremonies of the ancient Egyptians, and reading at home one meets with so many representations of the sacred rites, that it is a real relief to come across some relic, such as this highroad, of human energy and toil. In the courts of the temples one has pictured the processions of the priests and the kneeling throng of the people. One has heard in the imagination the rhythmic chants, has smelt the heavy incense, and has seen the smoke of the sacrifice rising to the roof. Glum Pharaohs have stalked across the picture, raising their stiff hands to the dull gods, and rows of bedraggled prisoners have been led to the sanctuary, roped in impossible contortions. One has visited, or has read of a thousand tombs; and the slow funerais have passed in depressing array. But here on this highroad over the western hills, where the north wind blows free and the kites circle and call, where there comes vigour into the limbs and ambition into the heart, these relics of old adventures appeal with wonderful force. Here there are no mysteries except the mystery of the land to the south, and there are no prayers save the asking of a successful journey, and the piling of four stones to the honour of the gods. One does not pace through holy places whispering "How weird!" but stick in hand, and whistling a tune down the wind, one follows in the footsteps of the bold caravan-masters of the past; and one thanks them from the bottom of the heart for having played a man's part on their page of the world's history to serve for all time as an example. When the amusements of the luxurious hotels has given out, and the solemnity of the ancient ruins has begun to pall, the spirits of Herkhuf and of Sabna, of the captains and the caravan-conductors, are always to be found waiting on the breezy hill-tops behind the island of Elephantine, at the head of the Nubian highway.