

## CHAPTER XII

### THE ALABASTER QUARRIES IN THE WADY ASSIOUT

A SHORT expedition into the desert is often successful in dispelling that slack boredom which an Egyptian summer produces in the mind of a lonely man ; and on one occasion, when my work carried me into a friend's district, we decided to try a tonic of this nature. We had come together in the police rest-house at Assiout, and we therefore arranged to visit some alabaster quarries which were said to exist in a desert valley known as the Wady Assiout, some five-and-twenty miles back from the Nile.

The rest-house was connected by telephone with the police outpost on the opposite side of the river ; and one sweltering noon we sent a sudden message across for camels to be saddled and to await us on that bank in an hour's time.

The journey across the swollen river in a rickety native boat took some considerable time ; and as the woodwork was too hot to sit upon, and the garments offered by the sailors in place of cushions too dangerously unclean, we were obliged to stand during the entire voyage, while the sun beat down mercilessly upon our helmets and the glare from the water beat up beneath them. The shade of the palms, therefore, where the camels awaited us, was a pleasant relief, and we were a little inclined to linger over the loading and saddling up.

However, by two o'clock we were trotting through the palm groves and along the rough country roads towards the desert. A smart little Bishari tracker, with his rifle at his side and his cartridge-belt across his shoulder, led

the way on a lightly built camel; and we followed, lumbering along on heavier mounts. One of these, known as *Abu Rasas*, "the Father of the Bullet," was a famous old veteran, so called because he was captured by the Dervishes during the war, escaped, and was shot in the stomach in the ensuing chase. A large growth over the region of the wound was then all that remained to 'ell of the time when he was a "prisoner of the Khalifa". This camel later, and in his old age, developed a marvellous propensity for jumping, and he used to be put over the fences with extraordinary success, to the delight of assembled crowds.

A ride of somewhat over an hour brought us to the edge of the desert, which here lies in an undulating expanse of sand leading back gradually to the low hills. In front of us opened the wide valley known as Wady Assiout, and it was along this that we intended to ride. Our objective was a disused alabaster quarry which lay in a rocky gauge leading off the left or north side of the valley; and to this we directed our way, leaving on our right the little police outpost which here stands baking in the sun on the edge of the desert. We had not ridden far when my camel nearly trod upon a jackal which had evidently been fast asleep in a slight hollow of sand in the open plain. It sprang up, but went off at a very moderate pace, while we galloped our unwieldy camels after it, hallooing as we went. However, it soon outran us, and pulled up tamely to watch us when we turned back to our path.

I think our tracker believed us to be insane; and if either of us broke into a song thereafter, or did any unusual thing as we jogged along, he eyed us suspiciously and perhaps a little pityingly. Mounted upon a trotting camel it is very difficult to refrain from doing eccentric things. The camel requires no attention, the saddle is comfortable; and there is no chance of falling off. Thus, having nothing to do but jolt along contentedly, one is apt (for example) to begin to admire one's feet which are

crossed upon the camel's neck. A rearrangement of the bootlaces may ensue, and the consequent contortions are uncommonly like those of a demented acrobat. Or again, one may take to hitting the flies off the camel with one's stick; and if the slaughter of a certain fly settled upon the camel's nose is determined upon the necessary antics may be truly amazing. It may be discovered suddenly that by opening one's mouth wide the tearing wind will play a tune upon the teeth; or again the natural exuberance of physical motion will set one whistling or singing in the noisiest manner. All such actions, silently watched by the native, give good cause for his inward comments; and when they are considered in relation to the hour of the day at which we are given to moving abroad, the tracker's point of view can be appreciated. After all, two Englishmen who ride out into the hell-hot wilderness at midday in August, and who make wild noises at the sight of a jackal, and whistle extraordinary snatches of song with the perspiration running down their faces, are not easily explicable to foreigners of any nationality or colour.

As we rode over the broad expanse of the desert, the hills ahead formed themselves into groups of islands rising from the wide waters of the mirage. The pathway before us melted into the great lake which stretched out to the horizon, studded with these phantom islands always changing shape as our view-point was altered. It was not until we had ridden for some time, and the afternoon sun was passing down towards the hills behind us, that the mirage disappeared and the rolling desert ahead became entirely clear. Presently the pathway developed into a road of some breadth which had evidently been made for the purpose of the transport of the blocks of alabaster from the quarry to which we were heading our way. The loose stones had been cleared to either side, and the sudden dips had been filled in. This road wound away before us, lost here and there as it descended into an old watercourse, and appearing once more as it climbed

an incline on the further side. It was a long and rather tedious business to set this twisting length of road behind us, but at last, as the sun set, we reached the mouth of a rocky gorge on our left, and riding along it for a short distance, came in sight of our destination.

As we rode between the narrowing rocks the sun set, and we walked our camels slowly that we might the better appreciate the recurrent tragedy of the day and might watch the sky in all the pity of its glory. Before us there clustered the alabaster rocks, and through a break in the wall of the hills the whole expanse of the sunset could be seen. There were some undefined clouds gathered high over the horizon, and these took the last glances of the departed sun and displayed them against the darkening sky. Overhead three crows, black against the heavens, flew home to their nests; and presently a flight of cranes, but now returned from Europe, passed from the north towards the river, and faded into the red dusk of the south, cleaving a path for the thoughts into the heart of the haze. In Egypt the death of the day is a sad business. The red despair of the sky, the untold sorrow of the hills, spreads a tone of melancholy over the mind; and here in this silent valley one's thoughts went away, sober, and even mystical, into the haze, and there was no more whistling of comic songs for awhile.

What man living in sedate Europe, even if he can understand the pathos of sunset, can feel the old peril of night-fall? I sometimes wonder how the Egyptologist in his museum at home can hope, for example, to appreciate the words of the "heretic" Pharaoh's Hymn to the Sun:

"By thee men live, and their eyes look upon thy beauty,  
But when thou settest they die."

Who that has not wandered in such a valley as this to watch an Egyptian sunset can realise what death meant to the old Egyptians? They joined the barque of the sun and passed, like him, through the regions of the night: their death was like his setting. But it is only those who have seen the launching of that barque, as now we saw

it, who can understand the meaning of those forgotten beliefs.

In western cities the sunset is usually unobserved. The light of day fades in a slow process, and the moment when the sun sinks behind the horizon passes unnoticed. But Egypt is dominated by the sun, and the moment of its setting is the affair of every man. It is a pregnant event ; and to us who now watched it here in the desert it was the occasion of the day. To us was made known at that hour much about ancient Egypt that can never be made known to the professor in his western study ; and in this respect the merest tourist in the land is a better scholar than he. In Europe there is a comfortable melancholy in the sunset ; but in Egypt there is a kind of foreboding also, an undefined feeling of anxiety which quite differentiates this time of day from the same hour in Europe. It is as though a man were abandoned to his own resources after being held in the protection of the light ; and it is only when the full darkness has fallen, and the comforting night closes around him that the mind is at peace once more.

Darkness falls rapidly in Egypt, and there was little light left by the time we reached the quarry. The hill of alabaster was outlined against the last-left glow of the western sky, but the valley in which we now stood was blurred and indistinct, and it was necessary to find quickly a sandy place amongst the boulders and gravel on which to lay our blankets. Such a spot was selected after a short search, and from it we scraped away all loose stones and pebbles, so that our rest should not be disturbed, in Nature's bed, by a bad mattress. The camels were then given their evening meal, without water ; and by starlight we fell upon our own frugal repast. That finished, there followed the happiest hour of these expeditions, when one reclines propped against a boulder and burns the evening sacrifice of tobacco to the gods of Contentment. The heat of the day had left the rocks by this time and the valley was fairly cool ; and now a quiet breeze

whispered amongst the boulders and sighed over the hills. Overhead the Milky Way spread like a rainbow from horizon to horizon; and as I dropped into dreams my thoughts were of the old Egyptians who believed that this was the Nile of the Heavens, along which the dead floated in their ghostly boats. It must have been pleasant actually to see the place where one's fathers now amused themselves: the next world must have been made a very great reality thereby. I was thinking how strange it would be at night to glance up at the sky and exclaim "There goes grandpapa!" when I fell asleep.

We were wakened once or twice in the night by the sharp, stinging bites of sandflies—one of the plagues of Egypt; and the efforts of several bats to catch them within a few inches of one's face were met, I fear, with hard words. However, the night soon passed, and with the first light we were up and doing. An exploration of the place revealed much that was of interest, and, indeed, added one very valuable item to our stock of material for ancient Egyptian history.

Upon a face of cliff near the quarry I found a large inscription which showed that the alabaster had been worked in the reign of Queen Nefertari-Ahmosis, a name which means, by the way, "The Beautiful Companion of the Child of the Moon". This queen was the wife of the Pharaoh Ahmosis I, who freed Egypt from the rule of the Hyksos in the sixteenth century B.C. Her monuments are not numerous, but it has been noticed that her name is given great prominence when it occurs beside that of her husband, although he was a popular hero. Here in this quarry no mention is made of the Pharaoh at all, and it would seem that the queen was paramount and that her name was sufficient upon public monuments.

As soon as the Hyksos had been driven from the land the temples were rebuilt, and there must have been a considerable demand for alabaster with which to ornament them. Inscriptions of this period describe the magnificent alabaster shrines which were constructed, and there

are very numerous smaller objects of this material still extant. Most of the stone was procured from the famous Hatnub quarries, a few miles north of Assiout ; and it is an indication of the quantity required that this new quarry was opened.

There appears to be no other ancient inscription in this valley ; but there is abundant evidence that the stone was worked in modern times, perhaps in the days of Mohammed Ali or even later. The hill-side is covered with blocks of alabaster roughly hewn from the rock, and marked with numbers and short directions in Arabic writing. These magnificent white blocks, three or four feet square, abandoned here in the desert as though worthless, remind one very forcibly of the riches of this splendid country between the Nile and the Red Sea which has produced some of the finest ornamental stones ever used, some of the best gold of ancient times, and now is yielding a quantity of petroleum. In like manner one sees Imperial Porphyry lying abandoned at the quarries of Gebel Dukhân and Granito del Foro at those of Um Etgal, as though these materials were of no particular value. The Nile valley is rich enough, but the desert is prodigal.

At the foot of the hill several small huts are clustered, and a few yards away there is a well, now choked up. The large boulders have been rolled to one side in ancient days to form a roadway for the passage of the stone down this gauge and out to the open desert where the smoother road is picked up. In old times the stone was conveyed to the Nile on carts drawn by oxen and slaves, but in the more recent workings mules and horses were probably used ; and it is as well not to think of the cruelties inflicted on either as the carts sank in the soft gravel or jolted over the stones in this valley.

Researches were over in an hour's time, after which we made our breakfast upon the scraps left in the basket overnight. We then went for a stroll up a narrow valley leading off that in which we had camped, and here our

attention was directed for the next quarter of an hour to the pursuit of a ten-inch grey lizard which we had found basking in the early blaze of the sun. Once or twice I have come across the same creature in desert places, and the natives' have on each occasion expressed the greatest terror of it. They say that it will spring from the ground and fasten itself in the throat of a man on a camel or on any other elevation, whereupon he bursts into boils and blains and dies in horrible agonies. On one occasion the natives seized my camel's head when one of these lizards was observed in the distance, and turned us round, while others cautiously hurled stones at the monster. My friend and I were therefore most interested when we saw so terrific a little creature at our feet, and we did not cease the pursuit till we had run him to ground and had tweaked his tail to see what he could do. I have no doubt he is absolutely harmless.

The ride home now commenced, and continued until the blinding heat proclaimed it to be nearly one o'clock. At last, roasted to a turn, we reached the river and crossed the glaring water to Assiout. All the way home we had discussed the iced drinks which, by special arrangement, were to be waiting for us ; and I must admit that when tepid lemonade was brought to us with the remark that no ice was procurable the whole expedition seemed to have been a mistake.

