

CHAPTER XIII

A RIDE TO WADY SALAMÛNI

It was at about noon in the month of August when my friend and I, perspiring in a rest-house at Sohag in Upper Egypt, conceived the idea of setting out at once for a sixty-mile ride into the Eastern Desert and back. The weather during the last few days had been unusually hot, and the thermometer had registered with regularity each afternoon its 115 degrees Fahrenheit in the shade. Looking now through the half-closed shutters towards the Nile, one saw the muddy river rushing past in full flood with the sun glaring down upon it from a leaden sky; the parched fields and weakly coloured trees stirring in the baking hot wind; and, in the distance across the water, the hazy hills of the Eastern Desert with no apparent vestige of shade upon them. In the sandy garden around the house the few flowers appeared to be scorched, and the despairing gardener could be seen lying asleep in the single patch of shadow. The sparrows, sitting upon the palings, held their beaks open and kept remarkably still. A dog, with its tongue lolling out of its mouth, crawled dejectedly past the sentry at the gate, who was too hot to kick it.

The morning's work being finished, we were seated in the long chairs, clad in pyjamas, drinking lukewarm lemonade, and talking about Scotch moors, when the idea came.

My friend had told me of a remarkable valley which he had visited some years ago, called the Wady Salamûni, wherein there were the ruins of a Coptic monastery still the object of a pilgrimage on certain occasions to rious Copts, and near by a well, known as Bir el Ain, charmingly situated amongst the rocks. It was to this well that we proposed to ride.

Speedily we arranged for horses to be sent round, and rapidly we filled our saddle-bags with the requirements for twenty-four hours: a small pillow and a blanket apiece, some hard-boiled eggs, cold meat, and biscuits, and two large bottles of water. That done, we dressed and ate a hasty luncheon, setting forth in the blaze of the sunshine at the infernal hour of one.

Mounting our horses at the gates of the rest-house, and accompanied by one policeman, we rode along the glaring river bank to the jimcrack landing-stage, where the little steam-ferry was waiting without a single passenger at this hottest hour of the day. The three horses were led into a clumsy native vessel which was then attached to the ferry and towed across the swollen river to the eastern bank, where it arrived with a bump that sent the horses staggering across the boat. We saddled up and were off well before two o'clock, cantering along the embanked road towards the town of Akhmîm. On either side of the road, and spreading around the town, the floods stretched in a glaring sheet of brown water, beaten into small waves on our left by the hot wind from the north, but smooth upon our right, and alive with millions of tadpoles swimming in the shelter of the embankment. Here and there villages formed islands in the sheet of water; and a few palm-trees rose from the flood at various points like pin flags upon a large war map. Outside these villages the small boys splashed about in the water, having, it would seem, the time of their lives; and as we rode along the straight unsheltered embankment, buffeted by the wind, roasted by the heat arising from the road, and baked by the sun above, our horses jumping about until the perspiration streamed from them and from us, we cast envious eyes at those happy children bathing in the shade of the palms, and omitted to realise for a while that we also were out for our pleasure.

At length we clattered over the bridge into the town of Akhmîm, and were swallowed up for a while in the narrow streets and winding alleys, where the sun beat down

on us with renewed force, and the dust rose in clouds around us.

Akhmim is one of the most ancient cities in Egypt, and in fact Leo Africanus says that it is *the* oldest, having been founded by Akhmim, the son of Misraim, the offspring of Cush, the son of Ham ! It is built upon the site of the ancient Panopolis, the main seat of the worship of Min—the Egyptian god who was identified in Greek days with Pan. Herodotus tells us an extraordinary story which relates how Perseus came to this city while searching for the Gorgon's head, because he had been told by his mother that it was the place in which his ancestors had dwelt. It is now much fallen from its ancient glory, but it is still a town of some 30,000 inhabitants. It is a peculiarly picturesque place, unspoilt by the introduction of debased European architecture, as are so many Egyptian towns. It is now largely inhabited by Copts (*i.e.*, Christians)—a fact that is made apparent by the presence of very filthy pigs which run unchecked about the streets, and which are rather inclined to frighten one's horses. The houses are well built, and in places pass across the street, so that one rides, as it were, through a tunnel, in the shadow of which the fruit-sellers spread their dates, pomegranates, and melons, upon richly coloured shawls, at the sides of the road. Akhmim, by the way, is famous for the manufacture of these shawls ; and Strabo tells us that in old days the inhabitants were notable manufacturers of linen.

There were few people about as we rode through the town, for the natives have a proverb which states that only dogs and Englishmen move abroad in the heat of the day. Nevertheless, we had sudden encounters, rounding sharp corners, with heavily laden camels or sleepy-eyed buffaloes ; and once or twice we had to ride with caution through groups of sleeping figures. At the far side of the town we passed a very beautiful mosque, surrounded by a high wall, the doorway in which was ornamented with fine blue tiles. Through it we could see

the courtyard with its cool-looking sycamore and place of ablution, and the highly coloured mosque in the background ; but our horses were restive, and with this passing glimpse we were off once more along another embanked road leading towards the Eastern Desert, the hills of which now rose before us in the far distance. Again the hot wind beat upon us across the inundation, and once more the full glare of the open day surrounded us.

The afternoon was drawing in when at last we floundered through a half-flooded field on to the sandy slopes of the desert at the foot of the hills. Here there is a vast cemetery, dating from the days of the last Pharaohs, when the people of Panopolis laid their bones at the edge of the wilderness, the Eastern Desert being dedicated to Pan-of-the-Goodly-Way, the Egyptian Min, as so many ex-votos testify. The graves have all been dug out many years ago by robbers, and now the surface of the sand is littered with skulls and bones and portions of mummies. Dry, black faces grin at one, with set teeth and blind eyes, from the open tombs ; and mummified hands and arms supplicate the passer-by from the sand. My horse put his hoof through the brain-pan of some old subject of Pharaoh ; and, dismounting presently, I picked up the remains of a blue glazed drinking-vessel that had belonged to another. It is this plundering of ancient cemeteries that the Department of Antiquities has set itself to check ; but here the Government was thirty or forty years late in taking the matter up, and the watchman who now parades the cemetery, gun in hand, has little left him to protect.

These dead men's bones lie before the entrance of the Wady Salamûni, as though protecting the sacred place from the curiosity of modern eyes. No tourists have found their way here, and indeed but few white men of any kind. Sohag, the capital of the province, is not a convenient or interesting town at which to stop ; and to most persons it would seem unreasonable to suppose that anybody could wish to ride the long and tedious distance over the breadth of the Nile valley, and to penetrate

amongst the forbidding hills of the desert, guarded by so many objectionable dead bodies. On the advice of my friend, the native Governor and his companions made the excursion ; but though marquees were erected and refreshments were lavishly displayed therein, I do not think that he made any pretence of enjoying himself.

Riding across the cemetery and picking our way amongst the open graves, we reached and entered at last the mouth of the valley, which cut into the solid range of hills like a great fissure, with walls of yellow limestone rising on either side to a height of some four hundred feet. Here we were sheltered from the wind, and at intervals there was the deep shadow of the rocks to give us comfort. Overhead, the strong blue of the sky formed an almost startling setting to the bold crest of the cliffs, where white-winged vultures circled above us or perched on ledges of rock to take stock of our cavalcade. In places the cliffs rose sheer to the sky ; sometimes the rock shelved back with tumbled *débris* of boulders and gravel sloping a third of the way up it ; or again, huge pinnacles of rock and cavernous ledges broke up the face of the cliff, as it were into grimaces. A prehistoric torrent had scooped out a deep recess in the base of the cliffs on either side, and had tumbled a mass of water-worn boulders into the bed of the valley, where they lay encased in gravel. This torrent at one time must have rushed and roared down from the desert, half filling the valley on its way to join the huge Nile ; but now it has sunk to a trickling subterranean stream, infiltrating through the gravel, its presence only indicated by the few bushes of scrub, and occasional stunted tamarisks and other trees which grow amidst the boulders in its old bed.

A path worn by Coptic pilgrims, and perhaps by others before them, wound in and out amidst the rocks, and upon this our horses picked their way. Now it would lead us over the soft gravel in the middle of the valley ; now it would rise high upon the sloping hillside to avoid a mass of boulders below ; and now it would pass over a level

platform of rock, upon which the horses clattered and slipped. The pace was necessarily slow, and, as it was now past five o'clock, we were beginning to feel weary and uncommonly thirsty. The sun presently passed off the valley, and shone only upon the upper part of the cliffs, thus throwing a soft glow around us which gave a wonderfully rich tone to the browns and greys of the rocks. As we proceeded farther up the wady, the clumps of vegetation became less infrequent, and here and there one was surprised to see a small purple-flowered creeper winding amongst the stones. Protruding from small holes in the face of the rock another kind of creeper was growing. This is called by the natives by a word which we would translate as "capers". It has a small round leaf of a silvery green, and it hangs down in thick clusters from the minute holes in the rock wherein, as by a miracle, it has taken root. I do not know its technical name, but I can testify to its beauty as we saw it, in the glow of the late afternoon, surrounded by the barren magnificence of the cliffs and rocks.

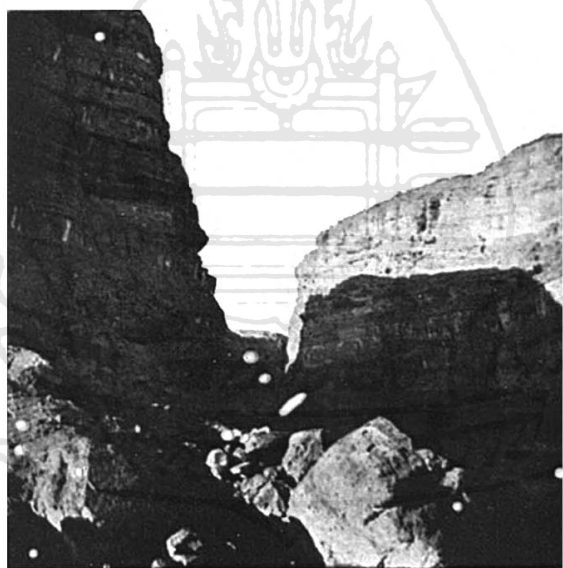
At one point, upon the right-hand side of the valley, the path led us past a large rock, upon the west face of which there were several Greek and Coptic inscriptions. One of the former is interesting, for it records the existence of a kind of sporting club whose members hunted wild animals in the desert. Two of the chief huntsmen, both Greeks, are mentioned by name: Messouëris and Alexikratēs. The old inhabitants of Panopolis seem to have prided themselves upon their sporting tendencies, and Herodotus says that they used to hold gymnastic games, comprising every sort of contest, in honour of Perseus.

In this connection I should like to record an incident which happened while we were at Sohag. Upholding the sporting traditions of the neighbourhood, the Deputy-Governor thought he would organise some shooting expeditions among the notables of the town, there being a few gazelle in the desert and plenty of duck in the pools at its edge. He therefore sent to Cairo for his three sporting-guns

and some ammunition. These were forwarded to him by railway ; but some over-suspicious official examined the package, and immediately the rumour spread that a haul of contraband arms had been made. The Coptic papers next day published the astounding news, which was copied in the European press, that twenty guns and a large amount of ammunition had been seized, and that an anti-Coptic rising in Sohag, led by the Deputy-Governor, was imminent. Much excitement was caused thereby, and not a little trepidation amongst the Copts of Akhmîm and elsewhere, at which the kindly owner of the guns, with a twinkle in his eye, expressed his concern to us, as we sat with him one evening in the club which he and his friends had recently founded for the purpose of bringing Copts and Mussulmans together. Thus is the Unrest kept in the forefront of men's minds.

Proceeding slowly up the valley, we rode, slipping and scrambling, along the narrow pathway : the noise of our going echoed from cliff to cliff. Occasionally the shrill cry of a hawk rang through the wady, and its soaring flight would lead the eye up from the mellow tones of the rocks to the deep colour of the sky. Then a stumbling step would bring the attention down to the pathway once more, where a lizard, scuttling away over the stones, would direct one's glance into some shadowed cranny where the creepers flowered amongst the gravel. At intervals along the path small piles of stones had been placed upon the rocks at the wayside, either to mark the road or to act as the record of the passage of a pilgrim, this latter being the custom obtaining amongst desert people from remote times, though I have never been able to ascertain clearly whether it has a religious origin. Guiding ourselves by these little heaps when the path was obscure, at length we came, quite suddenly, upon the Coptic ruins to which the pilgrims were wont to journey ; and here we dismounted for a few minutes. .

High upon a ledge of rock, a hundred feet from the valley, a small, ruined building of unburnt bricks clung



Two views in the Wady Salamūni: early morning

perilously to the cliff, and marked the site where a forgotten Coptic hermit had dwelt in the early centuries of the Christian era. A chimney in the rock appears to have led up to it, for there is some more brickwork to be seen here. But probably a rope-ladder against the face of the cliff was also used, for these anchorites were not uncommonly as agile as they were saintly, choosing to live, as they so often did, in inaccessible caverns, or on the perilous topes of ruined temples, or even upon the capital of an ancient column. Upon the shelving cliff-side ran a ledge of rock, a continuation of that on which the building was erected. This had been made into a kind of promenade about a hundred yards in length, blocked at the far end by a stout wall. A low fender of stone passed along the brink of the ledge, thus preventing the danger of a headlong fall into the valley below on the part of the star-gazing hermit, who, presumably, took his daily constitutional at this fine elevation.

In honour of the saint, as it would appear, a small chapel had been built at the foot of the cliff; and, though this is now much ruined, two of its arches, constructed of thin, red bricks, are still intact, and some of the white-washed walls are yet standing. Near this chapel there are the much-destroyed ruins of what seems to have been a small monastic settlement, perhaps founded in honour of the hermit of the cliff dwelling; but very little now remains of the settlement.

A dramatic residence, indeed, for a man of God and for his followers! Here, in the splendid desolation of this valley amongst the hills, one could well imagine an anchorite turning his thoughts to things beyond the ken of the dweller in the cities. There is an atmosphere of expectancy in these desert cañons, a feeling that something lies waiting around the corner, a sense of elusiveness inviting a search, a mysterious suggestion of an impending event which I do not know how to describe, but which might well be interpreted by a religious mystic as a revelation of a higher power. The feeling that one is

watched, and indeed watched benevolently, is experienced, I should think, by almost all travellers in the desert ; and there is no locality where one may lie down o' nights with a greater sense of security, nor any place where words may be whispered to the unknown, with better hope that they are heard. The people of the Greek age in Egypt, offering prayer to an in this desert, were wont to make their supplication to Pan who was " within hearing " ; and now, though the old gods are dead and the new God sometimes seems very far off, those who journey in the wilderness still may believe that there is Something listening and always " within hearing " .

Continuing our way up the valley a short distance farther, we came, just before sunset, to Bir el Ain, where we proposed to spend the night. As we approached the end of our journey we had noticed that the vegetation, such as there was, was fresher in colour, as though more fully watered ; and several birds were observed hereabouts. A black and white wheatear flew from rock to rock beside us ; two little pink-beaked finches rose from a tamarisk as we passed ; and, in a soft feathery tree of the acacia family, which grew solitary in the gravel bed, two very small birds—warblers of some kind—flitted silently from branch to branch, their little weight hardly stirring the twigs upon which they alighted. The nearness of the water thus was obvious ; but the charmed surroundings of the well were an extraordinary surprise. After the heat and exertion of the day, and the long ride through the almost sterile valley, the scene of our cool camping-ground beside the water possessed a charm which perhaps it would have held in lesser degree under other circumstances. To me it appeared as a kind of fairyland.

Under an overhanging cliff at one side of this magnificent cañon there was a small pool of clear water, on to which one looked down from the gravel surface of the old torrent bed. A few yards farther up the valley, amidst smooth, moss-covered boulders, there was a thick cluster of vivid green reeds and grasses. A gazelle-trodden path

through these led to the brink of a second pool, which passed, in serpentine fashion, amongst the rocks, bordered by reeds swaying gently in the breeze. The water was clear and still, and, in the twilight, most mysterious. A few yards away three palm-trees spread their branches towards the enclosing walls of rock; and near them a slow trickle of water passed out from a hole in the face of the cliff and ran tinkling down to feed the pool below. In all directions grasses and creepers, growing amidst the gravel and the boulders, made the valley alive with colour; and yet this virility was enclosed in dead stone, like a jewel held in its case.

I must admit that I left my companion to superintend the policeman's work of watering and feeding the horses; for the silent pool amidst the reeds kept me, as it were, enchanted by its side. How still it was in the gathering dusk, how far removed from the world of work! Surely Pan was "within hearing": Pan, whom the people of the nearest villages and towns had all worshipped in bygone days. If one kept quite still, moved not a muscle, perhaps he would suddenly appear, seated amongst the reeds over yonder, pipes in hand. The birds which had lately twittered and chirped in the valley were now silent, and one might have supposed them listening to music which the mortal ear could not distinguish. Perhaps of a sudden one's ears would be opened, one's eyes would see, and the god who, more than all other gods of his day, still holds the imagination, would be made manifest beside this desert pool. But the darkness increased and Pan did not come; and soon the preparations for the night could wait no longer. When at last I arose from the cool and silent place, it was with the conviction firmly set in my mind that this pool and valley were not only sacred to the Copts, but had been holy ground, a sacred place of the god of Panopolis, or ever the Christian faith had been heard of.

It is not unusual in Egypt to find that the worship of a Coptic or Mussulman saint has been substituted for that

of an ancient Egyptian god. At the head of the Nubian highroad at Aswân the shrine of the ancient gods has been made the site of a mediæval shêkh's tomb; and those who now go there to make their prayers before and after a journey are but carrying on a custom as old as history. Amongst the ruins of Thebes there is a hill up which barren women and as yet childless brides climb at dead of night to lay their supplications before the shêkh whose tomb is there erected. They do not know that their ancestors climbed the same hill in the days of the Pharaohs to offer the same petitions to Meritsegêr, the serpent goddess who had dwelt thereon since the beginning of things. And so in this valley I feel sure that the Coptic hermit who resided here was of no great consequence as judged upon his own merits, as indeed the fact that he is now forgotten indicates, but that the inhabitants of Akhmîm, accustomed in the pagan days of Panopolis to regard this place as holy ground, came gradually to ascribe to him the origin of its sanctity and to forget that in reality its sacredness dated from those days when Pan admired himself in the reedy pool and danced upon the rounded rocks. *Sic transit gloria divini!*

The modern name of the place, Bir el Ain, is the Arabic for "The Well of the Well-spring"—a somewhat uncomfortable sounding title, I am told, to native ears; and I am inclined to think that *ain* is derived from the ancient Egyptian word of probably similar sound, meaning "a religious festival". The place might in that case be so called because it was the well to which the yearly processional festival of Pan made its journey. We know that the image of the god Amen was conducted in this manner round the deserts over against Thebes, in a festival which, Professor Sethe thinks, may have given its name to the famous Wady Ain whither there is some reason to suppose that the procession made its way. It does not require an undue stretch of the imagination, therefore, to suppose that a similar religious ceremony was performed over against Panopolis.

However, be this as it may, no one who has visited this pool, and who has sat at its edge in the cool of the twilight, will deny that Pan might be expected to have made an appearance here in the days of his power.

In the darkness my friend and I spread our blankets upon the gravel, and set to with relish upon our meal of cold meat and egg, drinking deep from our water-bottles. Then, after a cigar smoked in the silence of contentment, and a last inspection of the horses, we settled down for sleep. The moon, rising behind the cliffs, threw a warm light upon the opposite crest of the rocks and cast the valley wherein we lay into deeper shadow. Not a sound was to be heard except the contented munching of the horses; and long before the moonlight had waxed strong we had dropped quietly to sleep and to dreams of Pan.

At about midnight my friend started up from the ground of a sudden, and as he did so a dark creature bounded away up the valley to the pool, sending the gravel flying beneath its feet. In the light of the moon it appeared to be of great size, but its form was indistinct as it rushed past.

"It was *licking* my forehead!" said my friend, not quite sure whether he had been dreaming or not.

"It was probably Pan," said I. And as it was too much bother to get up and find the policeman's rifle, my companion, rubbing his forehead, returned to the realms of sleep, whither I had preceded him; and neither of us know whether our midnight visitor was a prowling hyena or something more uncanny.

An hour later he again sat up with a start, and away flew an enormous eagle-owl which had been contemplating him at a distance of a few inches from his face. I see, by the way, that Shelley, the great authority on Egyptian birds, states that this neighbourhood is much infested with this species of owl; and I will testify that they are very formidable creatures. By this time the moon was sailing overhead, and it was difficult to sleep in the strong light, which turned the rocks to alabaster and the

vegetation to wax. Moreover, there were things moving about in the valley : silent footfalls and deep breathings. And one of the horses became restive. However, sleep at last claimed us, and we did not wake again until the first light of dawn was apparent in the sky.

Speedily we arose and washed in the cool water of the spring, thereafter making a breakfast from the remains of the evening's meal, washed down with water. At five o'clock we set off to walk a further distance of three or four miles up the valley, to a place where my companion, on his last visit, had found another hollow full of clear water which passed into a passage between the overhanging cliffs and thence opened out into a cavernous pool. He had dived in and had swum into this further pool, where the daylight penetrated in subdued power through an opening in the rocks above ; and we now were desirous of repeating the performance. A rough path, probably made by the people of the desert who watered their flocks in this valley, led us with some interruptions, up the narrowing wady, as yet untouched by the sun's rays. Now we clambered up the hillside, now down into the river-bed ; now we jumped from boulder to boulder, and now trudged through soft shingle. At length we came to a place where the valley forked, and here a dark cleft in the rocks on our left front marked the spot where the pool should have been. But, alas ! the water had dried up, and even the mud at the bottom, stamped by the hoofs of gazelle, was hard and firm. Along the narrow passage where my friend had swum in deep water we walked dry-shod, and so entered the cavern hollowed out by the downward rush of long-forgotten torrents. Nevertheless the place was not without its attractions, and its romantic situation amidst pinnacles of rock and gigantic boulders made it well worth seeing.

Returning to the valley outside, we became the object of hostility of two grey hawks, who made a spirited attack upon us, swooping down to within a few feet of our heads and screeching at us in a truly brave manner. Their nest

must have been close at hand, but we had no time to make a search for it. Walking back to the Bir el Ain with the sun now blazing upon us, we reached once more the shadow of the palms and the cool sight of the water, somewhat before eight o'clock.

I should mention, perhaps, that I found in the pool a curious creature, swimming near the bottom. It was shaped almost precisely like a scorpion, having the long tail and claws of that objectionable creature; but it was of a dark olive-green colour, and appeared to be both helpless and harmless. I have no idea what it is called technically, nor how it comes to be found in isolated desert-pools:

Lying down at the edge of the pool with my back against a comfortably sloping stone and a water-bottle by my side, half an hour of profound comfort slipped by. The cool breeze of early morning rustled amongst the reeds and swayed the branches of the palms; dragonflies hovered over the quiet water; finches uttered their strange notes from the tamarisk near by; and overhead the hawks circled and cried above the majestic cliffs. It was enchanting here to lie, remote from the worries of work, and to let the mind wander in a kind of inconsequent contemplation of things in general. But soon it was time to be moving out into the sun once more, and we had to bid adieu to this holy place of Pan, where life was cool and shadowed, and where there was water for the thirsty and the soothing sound of the wind in the reeds for the weary. The blazing ride down the valley and along the embanked road to Akhmîm was accomplished at a tolerable pace, but from Akhmîm to the river bank we went at full gallop, arriving in a cloud of dust just in time to catch the steam ferry; and half an hour later the rest-house at Sohag was echoing with the impatient shouts for drinks, baths, shaving-water, luncheon, and all the rest of the urgent and unordered requirements of two very hot, very dirty, and very hungry mortals.