

A THREE WEEKS' JOURNEY IN THE LIBYAN DESERT.

By Miss VIOLETTA THURSTAN, S.R.N., M.M., F.R.G.S.

A streak of primrose light in the east revealed in silhouette the two Ford lorry cars that stood waiting outside the tent door. Water tins, camp furniture, food, valises were piled on the cars, our servant, Mahomed, established himself on top of all. The Sudanese soldier-driver muffled to his eyes, for it was cold, crawled up, strapped his carbine to the side, saw that the basket of carrier pigeons was securely tied on. All was ready, and we started on our thousand mile desert journey.

Our goal was the oasis of Siwa, the site of the ancient Oracle of Jupiter Ammon, where Alexander the Great and many another famous traveller had made pilgrimage.

Presently we crossed a stone causeway along a salt lake, climbed a low limestone hill, and entered the great desert that stretches from west to east over the greater part of North Africa.

The wind was cold, but there was just a hint of spring in the air. Sometimes the car crushed an aromatic herb, or we passed a clump of asphodel in bud, and the sun was deliciously warm when we stopped at noon for lunch.

The busy world we had been living in had disappeared. There were few signs of humanity in this great expanse of space, but sometimes a lonely Beduin shepherd might be seen with his flock, or an occasional cluster of tents near a well.

At dusk the Government Rest-house was reached. A colossal meal befitting our appetites was prepared and eaten, and we fell asleep almost before our cigarette was finished. A pleasant but inadventurous day; the next was to be a more eventful one.

We were on our way again by 6 a.m. Hitherto we had been following the line of the coast, but soon we struck south. After covering perhaps 25 miles, we in the second car heard an ominous grinding noise. The driver of the first car was startled by suddenly coming across a large herd of gazelle feeding, he swerved suddenly, the car hit a rock and collapsed.

This is where the pigeons come in. Two messages on thin paper were written and inserted in the holder attached to each pigeon's leg, and the birds were set free. Twice or thrice they circled round, and then flew straight off to the Government barracks we had just left.

While we were waiting a message came from a Beduin sheikh inviting us to a meal in his tent. An unfortunate sheep was being slaughtered for our entertainment just as we arrived. The sheikh, a dignified old man with a long flowing beard, stood at the door of the tent and gave us the beautiful desert greeting: "Mahabba ya saatak. Eysh halek?"

Bright-coloured carpets and pillows were laid on the ground for us to recline on, and camel's milk brought to refresh us.

Presently the meal was served by two of the sons. The sheep was brought in in the cooking pots and smelt deliciously savoury. We were invited to choose our portion, which we seized with our fingers, a cake of barley bread acting as a plate. A better meal was never eaten!

After it was finished, the sheikh broke off the nose of a sugar loaf, and forcibly inserted it into the tiny teapot, together with a little green tea and some mint, then poured on hot, but by no means boiling, water. The drink, served in tiny tumblers was as sweet as syrup, but delightfully fragrant. Politeness demands that three tumblers of this should be drunk with loud sucking noises and smacking of lips. This we did amply, being very polite people, and then took leave of our host.

We had hardly returned when the relief car hove in sight. Blessings on the desert wireless post.

This accident delayed us very much, and we had to camp a couple of hours after our second start. No Government Rest-house this time, but a camp bed under the stars, which on a windless night is a foretaste of Paradise.

At noon next day we entered the great waterless belt. For more than 100 miles there is no well, no shred of vegetation, no animal life, not a beetle on the ground or a vulture in the sky. The track is marked by the bleached bones of the camels that have fallen by the way, and tragic heaps of stones showed the resting-place of the many travellers, who have failed to survive this searching test.

This is one of the oldest caravan routes in the world. When the date season begins, camels laden with cotton, cloth, sugar, tea, and other commodities that the Siwans require, cross this desert, returning with Siwan dates, which some consider the best in the world.

Again we camped under the sky, and the fourth morning found the cars descending gingerly the rocky track down the cliffs that encircle Siwa. No other car except the accommodating Ford could possibly accomplish it.

The view of the oasis comes on one suddenly. It is refreshment to our eyes to see the vegetation, the palms and the water below. What must it be for the travellers who have journeyed on foot across this ruthless desert for so many weary nights and days.

The town of Siwa is built on two conical hills that rise, suddenly out of the oasis. The Medani occupy one hill the Senussi the other. Hereditary quarrels between the two take up much time. About three miles from the town is the ruin of the old temple of Jupiter Ammon. Up to quite modern times there was a considerable part of the temple left, but a Turkish governor of the town wanted stone for his house, and blew up the temple with dynamite, leaving only an arch and wall intact.

Another interesting expedition was made on camels to a huge sugar loaf hill about twelve miles west of Siwa, honey-combed with ancient tombs, few of which had been opened. Near it were some old Coptic ruins, showing that at one time Christianity must have penetrated even to this remote spot. Stretching westward was a large salt lake, in the middle of which was a small island. This, we were told, was an Enchanted Island, and there were emeralds strewn about it for anyone to pick up.

Only—NO ONE WHO HAS SET FOOT ON THE ISLAND HAS EVER BEEN SEEN AGAIN.

Our camels refused, perhaps wisely, to try to ford the lagoon.

Next time we come we will bring a raft. All too soon, the return journey had to be undertaken.

It is very difficult to stop, when one once begins to describe the enthrallments of the desert. But there is such a thing as space to be thought of—not the boundless spaces of the desert, but the very limited space of a magazine article, and this, I fear, I have exceeded already.

COMING EVENTS.

February 5th.—Complimentary Dinner to Major R. W. Barnett, M.P., and presentation of Register of Nurses for England and Wales. Chairman, Mrs. Bedford Fenwick, S.R.N. St. James's Room, Hotel Metropole, London (Whitehall Entrance). 7.45 for 8 p.m.

February 7th.—Lecture by Miss Mary Chadwick, "Illness a Regression." 6, Guilford Place, W.C.1. 3 p.m.

February 20th.—General Nursing Council for England and Wales. 12, York Gate, Regent's Park, N.W. 2.30 p.m.

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