

AN EGYPTIAN WATERING-PLACE.

BY M. L. WHATELY.



EGYPT is not rich in places of resort on the sea-coast, considering that it has a share in two seas. Suez is most interesting to a traveller or painter, being beautifully situated, and commanding magnificent views of the Red Sea and the mountains of both Africa and Asia; but it is very hot in

summer, the town dirty and crowded, and seldom, therefore, resorted to in the warm season. Alexandria is, of course, much visited, and has the advantage, attainable by a short railroad, of a very pretty little watering-place—Ramleh—that little bit of Europe in Egypt, built almost entirely by European colonists, originally English merchants. But Alexandria or its vicinity does not suit everybody; and a very curious place for sea-side visitors in the neighbourhood of Damietta is, by natives of Egypt, as well as by many Levantine families, very much preferred. This is “Ras-el-Birr” (or the “Head of the Land”), a small sandy peninsula between the Mediterranean and the mouth of the Nile, several miles beyond Damietta. That ancient city, so famous in days of yore as the last spot where the gallant but unfortunate Crusaders held sway in the East, is not exactly a sea-port itself, being several miles from the open sea; but the noble river on which it stands is navigable for large ships, and the harbour would be a splendid one were it not for the bar which hinders the entrance of vessels of any considerable size; they are dependent on time and tide* and weather, and small merchant sailing-boats are constantly employed to take their merchandise across the bar into the river. It is to be hoped that this great drawback to commerce may one day be removed; if so, the city would be once more a place of great importance. The sea appears to have encroached very much, as the peninsula occupied a larger area, even in the memory of living persons.

This little strip of land, then, is the watering-place which is preferred to many others offering at first sight much greater advantages. Fine scenery, trees, shade—it possesses none of these, and it is certainly a strange, bare spot. How any one could have fixed on it is a wonder, as, in spite of its neighbourhood to a large town, it has both peculiarities and hindrances that are quite unique. No doubt, indeed, the

Egyptians have shown their usual acuteness about fine *air*, in fixing on this out-of-the-way spot as one in which invalids may recruit their wasted powers, and the weary denizens of cities breathe the purest of sea-breezes. But whoever first came had much courage, and even now, with the added facilities of later times, it is very troublesome to reach, and very singular in its arrangements.

You ask, perhaps, Are the houses so poor or ill-built? Are they native abodes of the humble classes, and so unfitted for civilised enjoyment? Or are they ruins? As the spot has been used for a sanatorium time out of mind, possibly visitors have to reside in the crumbling remains of former splendour built by invalid beys and pachas, and now sunk into decay and haunted by lizards and beetles? Not so; the curious part of this watering-place is that there are no houses at all in it—no dwellings—not the merest hovel! There is a tongue of sand between the river and the sea, and that is literally all—nothing else, not a cliff—not a sand-hill where even a rabbit could make a burrow—not a rock where a sea-bird could lay her eggs—not a single inch of shingle, even! If this be not a strange watering-place, what is such? Listen, all you holiday-makers of Ramsgate and Eastbourne and Brighton, to the account of a sea-side residence where there is not to be found so much as a single stone with which a hut for a pigmy might be raised—merely flat sand and water!

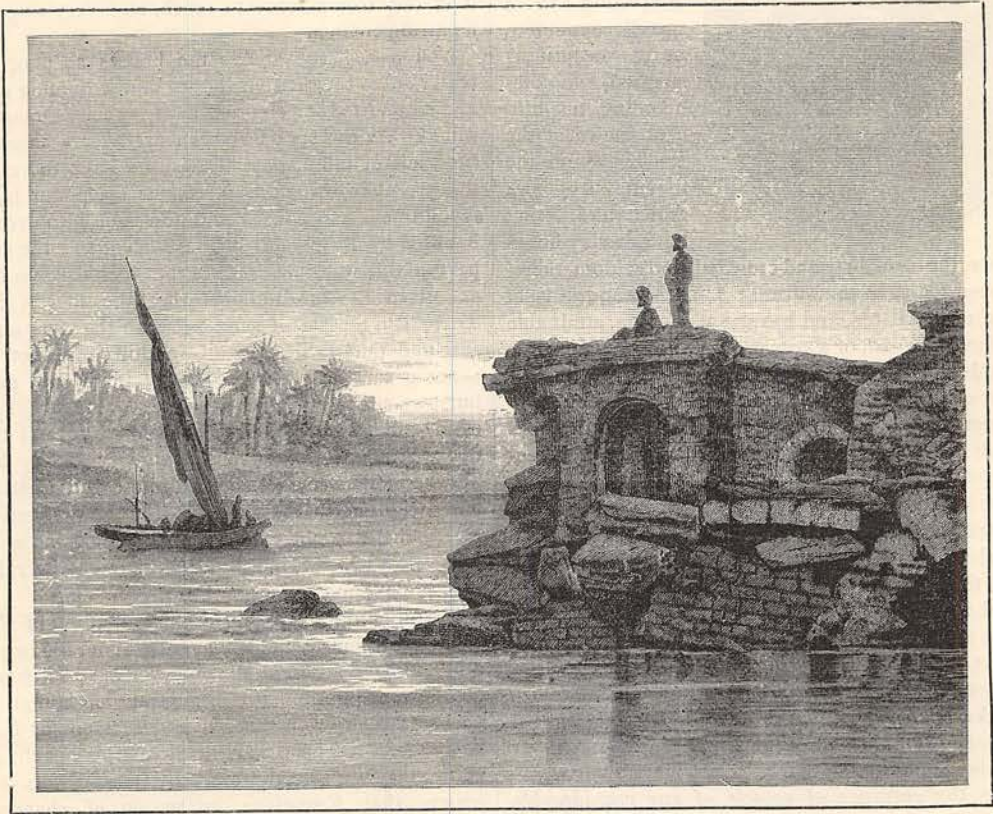
Tradition does not tell who first thought of Ras-el-Birr as a sojourn; but whoever had courage to go and abide, as a pelican in the wilderness, so far from the comforts of life and the habitations of human kind, deserves to be remembered and blessed for his discovery; for the health-giving air of this distant sandy peninsula is perfectly marvellous, and this is the reason that Egyptians in search of change and strength put up with so many inconveniences in order to profit by it.

Again and again I have been urged to visit Ras-el-Birr by native friends who declared there was no air in Egypt, and they usually added, anywhere in the world, so wonderfully renovating to the weary frame as that to be inhaled where the Mediterranean and the Nile mingle their waters. “I went there nearly dead,” said one, “and returned as if made afresh.” “I took my children,” said another, “and they became in a few days as strong as sturdy peasants.” But when I asked how they stayed in a place so utterly devoid of resources, and heard that they lived in temporary abodes made of a few poles stuck in the sand, with mats of native reeds fastened around them, it seemed as if none but a Bedouin could exist for more than a day or two in such a dwelling, especially in a country where the sun has such power. “It was rough, no doubt,” was the reply; “but health cannot be too dearly bought.” Then some one said that a

* There *is* a tide in the Mediterranean, but much less than in more open seas, whence the prevalent idea that it has *no* tide.

Nile boat was sometimes used, and this seemed more feasible, as, if our party took our house with us like the snail, who carries his on his back, we might come back at once if we did not like the place. Most visitors go by railway to Damietta,* and there procure a boat to conduct them to the river's mouth, a trip varying from two to four or five hours, according to circumstances. They have to bring their bedding and other requisites, which makes it both an expensive

route. No cliffs of varied hues to catch the sunset rays, and turn to gold and purple in the dying beams of day; no palm-groves with little villages beside them every mile or two, till you approach Damietta; no pyramids in the distance or glimpses of desert beyond the cultivated line of verdure;—less variety and less *life*, the villages being chiefly more inland, and the coast belonging to large estates of wealthy pachas and merchants. Yet the shores have their own



RIVER-WALL ON THE DAMIETTA ARM OF THE NILE.

(From Ebers' "Egypt.")

and troublesome journey; but native Egyptians are able to dispense with a great deal on occasion, and, as they say, health is beyond everything.

Taking our abode with us had its disadvantages. We proceeded for some time nearly at the leisurely pace of the snail to which I alluded; the wind being southerly, as is usual at that season of the year. It was necessary, therefore, to depend mainly on the stream, aided by oars which could only be used in the early morning, when the wind invariably lulled. The banks of the Nile from Cairo northwards are very different from those of the southern

style of beauty. The rich green of the plantations of cotton and maize refreshes the eye in burning August, as well as the clumps of trees round every sacchea (or water-wheel). These are sometimes weeping willows or mulberry-trees, but in general sycamore figs, which afford a deep shade, and are very fine trees when suffered to attain a good size. The cattle watering in the early evening, under the gum-arabic trees on the sloping bank, or near the winding path rudely made by the trooping women with pitchers on their heads, is a scene the eye delights to rest upon. The herds of buffaloes are more numerous than even in the neighbourhood of Cairo, though there are fewer goats and sheep. However, this is a digression; we must return to the northward route towards our

* Before this railroad, which is quite a recent affair, they went either by river-boats or on donkeys.

Egyptian Land's End. From Mansoura, a considerable place on the river, though not particularly interesting to a passing traveller, we made more rapid progress, having the aid of a steamer which, being empty and on its way to Damietta, was induced to give a welcome lift to the wind-bound boat. The banks of the ancient river became gradually more and more fertile; groups of palms laden with the graceful bunches of fruit, just beginning to assume their golden tints, were interspersed with other trees, and the shore was fringed with waving reeds and grass and water-plants; while rice-fields with their exquisitely delicate green began to appear among the maize and cotton. Curious old villages were passed; some, indeed, the captain of our boat called towns. Here and there I observed minaret towers and half-ruined mosques of very quaint and picturesque form. At length, among groves of palms and masts of numerous boats, Damietta came in sight; its crescent shape, following the curve of the river, seeming peculiarly suitable to the ancient city, so famous of yore, in which the Crescent finally gained the mastery over the romantic and rash Crusaders.

The wind, which prevailed all the day, made it impossible to proceed to the mouth of the river. Our boat weighed anchor, therefore, at midnight, and at an early hour the next morning we found ourselves on the sandy shore of the little peninsula of Ras-el-Birr. Its thirty or forty wigwams, or temporary abodes of poles and mats, were in an irregular sort of row at a very short distance from the water. We were told that most visitors only remain from one to three weeks. Some who stay the summer make their wigwams more elaborate, and furnish them with a few rustic chairs, a sofa, &c. But none had glass windows; a rude hole cut in one of the mats afforded light, and was blocked up when it was dark; a lamp was suspended at the entrance of each; the mat was folded back for a door, like the canvas of a tent. Canvas tents are not used here, because they are said to be not only less of a protection from the sun, but more at the mercy of the wind. Those who stay long enough to make it worth while, have a second smaller wigwam, with a stove for cooking, or such apparatus as can be used without danger of fire. It says much for the salubrity of the air, that with such accommodation this desert spot is so well liked that families who have come once usually return year after year. "One can sleep in these huts with the air streaming through, and never feel too hot," said a lady to me. "It is true," she added, laughing, "that when the wind is very strong indeed, now and then the *water* comes up and streams through also; it happened to me once this year, but this is not frequent." I thought being washed out of bed even once in a season rather too much; but she declared it did not rise nearly high enough for that—the waves merely dashing up, and a high bedstead being quite out of their reach. In winter, however, it is not possible to occupy the peninsula at all on account of the sea, which then washes all over it. The cleanliness insured by this yearly flooding is a great blessing.

We anchored on the river side, as is usual, for safety, the other being by no means safe for that purpose. A stretch of sand, barely half a mile across, lay between our anchorage and the sea. This strip of sand is wider higher up, and is somewhat uneven, running out into tiny bays, and, moreover, depends for its size partly on wind and tide (the *very* small tide of the Mediterranean), but at best it is a mere strip—I should think barely a mile at its widest, but about six in length. The substratum is solid, for it has not diminished in extent, as far as I can ascertain, for many years past. Formerly, as I said, the peninsula was larger.

The effect of the wide river on the one side, the open sea on the other, and the contending waves of sweet and salt water when the breeze and current are strong, as seems very frequently the case, is quite unlike anything I have seen in other sea places. The Nile, being now full, rolls its waves, tawny with the mud of the far-off land whence it comes, to meet the white-crested billows of the "Salt Sea," as the natives of Egypt always call the Mediterranean. On the river-coast a blue line marks the distant verdure of the mainland, dotted with palms standing out against the clear sky. The little rude-looking fort and an equally rude village appear a short way down the river, the Crescent flag just visible from our station. Right in front is the sea, with the river flowing into it, and on the opposite side sea also, with the bar between them rising in one place into a little island of sand.

Fish, chiefly caught by casting nets, is abundant, and helps the diet of the visitors very much. They procure their stores, and even meat, from Damietta, but milk and eggs from the village on the river nearly opposite. Winter is the time for game, when travellers of a sporting turn come to shoot near Damietta; but in summer it has little or nothing to offer, and as the peninsula of Ras-el-Birr is not habitable, as before said, in winter, it is little known. The sea-bathing is first-rate; the water rolls over sand, soft yet firm, and sloping gradually down; so that with common prudence there is no danger, and the temperature in such a climate is, of course, delightful. Every one bathes, and young and old enjoy it almost equally.

We ascended the lighthouse by a winding staircase. It commands a fine bird's-eye view of country and sea. Lake Menzaleh is just visible on the one side in the distance, and the palm-groves and minarets of Damietta on the horizon behind. In front is the blue sea, with dangerous sand-banks peeping above its waves; the tawny line of the full Nile strongly marking the union of the fresh and salt waters. Numerous boats and ships add life to the wide-spread scene.

After a week's stay we quitted the little sea-village, with its mushroom-like habitations, soon to be swept away, leaving the coast to gulls and waders. Even our short sojourn, however, had a marked effect in the strength it gave, so that we can speak in high terms of this strange Egyptian watering-place.