

LIFE IN ABYSSINIA.



WHILE some recent knowledge has been acquired of the north of Abyssinia, the shores of the lake and the western districts have been partially described only in the memoirs of Bruce, since whose voyages one hundred years have elapsed.

In his recently published account of his travels in that country, Mr. Winstanley gives a lively account of his difficulties about servants, guides, camels, and baggage—the kind of story which has often been told before, but which is always amusing, although the experiences recorded must often have been anything but amusing to those who passed through them. We get an impression of vast regions of bare, dark, blistering rocks, and of almost limitless expanses of bright, scorching sand, where the supplies of water are precarious and poor, and where the population is found thinly scattered at wide intervals. Of course there were glimpses of better things at intervals, but, upon the whole, travelling through this region of Africa must be extremely trying both to physical strength and to patience and other moral qualities. The Soudan has been heard a good deal of in connection with Egyptian affairs, and also as the scene of Colonel Gordon's efforts for the destruction of the Central African slave trade. It consists of an enormous tract of African territory lying to the south of Upper Egypt, and extending to the Equator, and includes also the coast of the Red Sea to the east and south-east of Abyssinia. Much of what is now known as the Soudan was formerly called Nubia, at one time part of the ancient kingdom of Ethiopia. Mr. Win-

stanley thus describes Kartoum, the capital of the Soudan:—

“Kartoum is not a handsome city, and it is certainly not a healthy one. The rate of mortality, which is not specially high during the winter and spring, increases with fatal certainty after the first rainfalls in July; but the traveller, who is either restless or unfortunate enough to investigate this quarter of the world, has to bear in mind that he has selected a portion of the earth's surface the least enjoyable and the most difficult of access, where the climate, originally trying to human endurance, has to be faced with few of the alleviations of Western comfort usually carried with him by the European to burning lands, and, in place of thick-built mansions, wide verandahs, ice, and punkahs, a modest clay house on the ground-floor, and warm Nile water, represent his principal luxuries. His most enjoyable promenade is confined to a walk along the flat shores of the river, or should his tastes incline him to equestrian exercise outside the settlement, bare, flat sand plains and hot, scorching winds await him in his ride. Still, there are instances of acclimatization to the trials of Kartoum, and the worthy Consular representative of Austria has passed thirteen years of his life in this malarious capital, and remains a hale and cheerful resident. Vast improvement has, however, taken place in the few past years, and there is an architectural pretension in the public offices and ordinary dwellings of the present day, in strong contrast with that of those buildings which previously formed the most favoured quarter of the town.

Facing the Blue Nile on its western bank stands the palace of the Governor General, a large, square, handsome

mansion raised by Ismail Pasha, a former ruler of the Soudan, its well-stuccoed front, numerous regular windows with glass frames and varnished Venetian blinds, forming a great contrast with other neighbouring buildings of a more primitive type, its only threatened rival—the Mudirieh, or Government bureau, which is partially faced with stone—being not yet finished. A large garden encloses the palace in its rear, abounding in date-palms and lemon trees; an attempt has been also made to acclimatize certain European plants, and tame elephants of tender years, ostriches, and antelopes walk within its limits. In front, and overhanging the river, a small kiosk is erected of graceful form, upon which a clustering creeper winds its clinging folds, a pleasant evening haunt for the eternal coffee and cigarette or chibouque. The arsenal, the finance department, and a long range of houses, occupied by various merchants and storekeepers, line the terrace along the river, the shores of which are thronged by native craft discharging or taking in cargo, a busy stream of dusky Arabs, miserably thin, in light clothing, being grouped about in dozens, employed in carrying or arranging the merchandise on the landing-places. I do not know why, but it is so, that, whilst the Arab male of the poorer class is always emaciated to the last degree, the female of a similar rank is moderately plump and well-conditioned.

Many small steamers usually lie off the arsenal, the property of Government; these are used in the execution of various official duties, and connect the widely separated districts on the Nile. The flags of several European trading nations are exhibited above the houses of their Consular representatives, and give a somewhat home aspect to the town, whilst the most pleasant and soothing feature of all is to be found in groves of green waving palm-trees which adorn the entire front at intervals, abounding

in heaviest luxuriance at the two extremities; these give Kartoum from a distance an air of richness and fertility which impresses the beholder with an expectation a closer acquaintance fails to confirm, and my first hopeful aspirations, formed as I turned the curve of the Blue Nile, suffered a slow, painful diminution on my closer approach.

When we quitted our leafy residence, we at first proceeded over a tract fairly even, plentifully strewn with trees and shrubs, taking an easterly direction parallel to the small mountain chain, about two miles long, which bounded Wahnaat on the north. Before we had cleared this, we turned southward, and, reaching some low hills, skirted their bases in a path so thickly grown on the left hand with tall bushes as to shut off the view on that side, thus forming a long natural lane. The track was now narrow and rugged, and adapted only for single file.

The Habesh warriors, who ran alongside or in advance of the party, maintained no order, but constantly changed their positions, as fancy dictated, and shifted from rear to front, or climbed the lower part of the hills, making their native haunts resound with wild shouts, and perpetually urging increased speed in their (to me) unknown tongue, their proceedings conveying an impression of wild savagery in consonance with the surrounding scenery. They were not, as I have before mentioned, embarrassed with much clothing, save swords, spears, and shields, and their principal protection from the weather lay in elaborately adorned heads of hair. They were good-humoured in a terribly noisy, demonstrative manner, and their repeated inquiries as to whether things generally were not 'melkum' caused me to acquire my first Abyssinian word, the translation thereof being 'good.'

Now what with the sinuosities of the narrow path; the novelty, and indeed discomfort, of my mule-saddle, blessed

with native stirrups, into which I could only insinuate the point of my foot, whilst the leathers were at least half a foot too short; the cries and injunctions to accelerated pace of the bold mountaineers; and a general sensation of being considerably under-mounted, my responses to their friendly wishes, I must confess, were but half-hearted, and I really thought that things might have been 'melkumer.' My attention was, however, fully occupied; my friends, to whom I had so recently said farewell, faded from my mind; I ceased to make invidious comparisons, and with each stride of the sturdy little animal I bestrode I became more habituated to the situation."

Besides all the vexation of unnecessary delay, unpleasant association with barbarous and unprincipled people, and a hundred more or less grave instances of trickery, mystification, and annoyance, Mr. Winstanley had to endure, in the hut assigned for his use, a host of minor annoyances which would constitute a severe trial to even the most hardened adventurer. Here is a description of night experiences in an Abyssinian hut:—

"At 11.30 p.m. I awoke in horror and agony, and some minutes elapsed before I could realise what was happening. Bitten over with a force and violence never experienced from any known nocturnal tormentor, I began to believe Abyssinia must be the home in real life of some of those hideous insects of colossal mould which make night hideous to clowns in pantomimes. Hastily lighting a lantern—a feat rendered nearly impossible owing to the instant attack made on my hand—I found bed, table, boxes, and ground, covered by huge ants: ants in millions, big ants and little ants, all ceaselessly in motion, the larger ones three-quarters of an inch long; the bite of these causes exquisite pain, and is so vicious that in removing the insect the head is left fixed in the flesh. It was very difficult to clear them from

one's person, and effect a change of clothes—a proceeding which had to be gradually performed outside the house. Then there remained the task of driving them from the hut; for this there exists but one effective means, viz., to light fires about the ground and around all articles in their possession. After perseverance in this course, the interior of my house presenting meantime the appearance of a Liliputian bivouac, in about two hours their retreat was as magical as their advent.

I had discovered by this time that in my present abode retirement for the purpose of rest included many possibilities besides sleep. Tired out by protracted and inglorious contests waged against superior numbers of the remorseless fly during the day, I found a brood of latent foes, which, selecting as their period of action the human being's period of repose, awoke into life at night, and did not go home at morning. The acrobatic flea, the pugnacious ant, corpulent and unprincipled-looking spiders, highly-scented cockroaches, and long-tailed rats kept me in a constant state of nocturnal activity, and furnished a clue to my neighbours' restlessness; then mules walked in and sniffed, dogs and donkeys did the same, and goats, with their short patter, patter, also came and contemplated me with solemn interest.

I had been provided before starting for Abyssinia with a patent powder against fleas and a valuable specific against Bs. I had been told that it was an excellent thing to rub one's self all over with camphor-ball before seeking one's couch, and that a wash of eau-de-Cologne was indispensable; but, reduced to action, these remedies became somewhat tedious, and I found the most effectual defence was provided by putting one's self into a large cotton bag, drawing the string round the neck, and then camphoring the face; this left one free to engage the larger quadrupeds."