

A JOURNEY BY THE WAY OF THE PHILISTINES.

By MRS. GRAY HILL.*

Illustrated from Oil and Water Colour Sketches and Photographs by the Author.

ALL the armies that have invaded Syria from Egypt, or Egypt from Syria, the greater part of the traffic of merchants between the two countries from a very remote past down to recent times, the slave-dealers who carried Joseph with them as a chattel to be sold in Egypt, his brethren who went down from Syria to buy corn in the valley of the Nile, Joseph of Nazareth and the Virgin with the infant Jesus escaping from the soldiers of Herod, must all have passed across the tract of barren and almost waterless land known as the "Little Desert," or, as it is called in the Bible, "the way of the Philistines."

Before the establishment of steam traffic between Alexandria or Port Said and Jaffa, merchandise was still generally conveyed by this route. But now, although the telegraph wire can carry the news across the sand in a moment (I have known it, however, to take nine days in the process and sometimes not to carry news entrusted to it at all), and although a solitary postman mounted on a swift dromedary rides each way once a week with a letter-bag, the merchandise which passes consists of little but horses going from Syria to the Cairo market. Eothen passed this way in the summer heat, but it is now very rarely that a European traveller treads this ancient path. Probably some day the railway will destroy its romance for ever; but till that fell invader comes, those who love unclouded skies of brilliant azure, the purest and most invigorating of air, little oases

of palm trees springing up under intensely yellow hills of virgin sand, occasional glimpses of the deep blue of the Mediterranean, above all freedom complete and unbroken from the labours and worries of our busy work-a-day world, and relief for a brief space from the commonplace surroundings of English life, will find nothing in this wide world more delightful than a ride in the spring of the year across this desert from the Suez Canal to Gaza, where the fertile, undulating

lands of Southern Philistia, rich with wild flowers and young barley, begin to roll away to the plain of Sharon and the Judean hills.

Twice my husband and I have together made this delightful journey, and once I have made it alone. The following is a description of one of these most pleasant rides.

Our tents were pitched ready to receive us at El Kantara, which travellers who have passed through the Suez Canal will

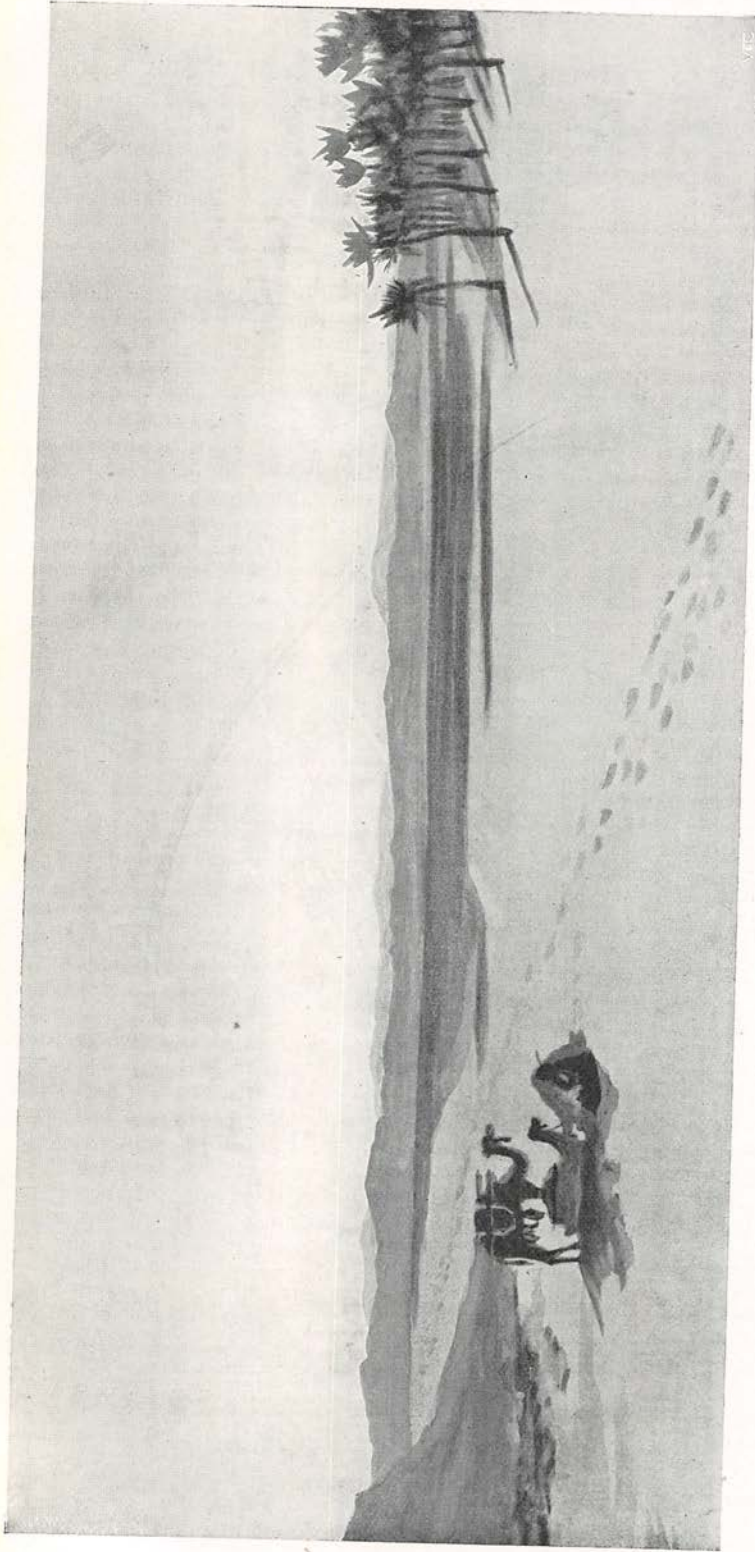
remember as the first station north of Ismailia, and we reached them soon after leaving our British steamer at Port Said.

Can there be anything more charming to one who has had former happy experiences of camp life in Syria than to see the good tents pitched, the preparations making for the evening meal, the animals fresh for the journey tethered round and eating and drinking their fill, the last light of the sun dying out from a daffodil sky, and the young moon already shedding a brilliant light, and promising a week hence to make the night as resplendent as the day? If there is, we have never known it. It was strange as we sat late that evening upon the banks of the Canal with the desert at our back, to watch



OASIS OF EL GOUGA.

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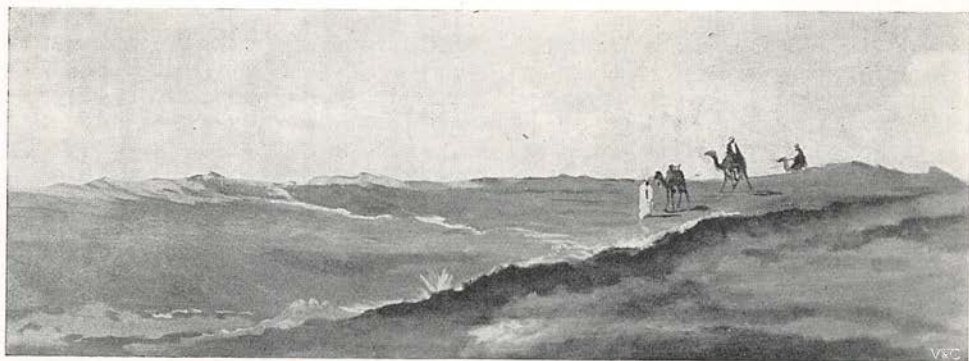


OASIS OF EL KATYA.

the great steamers pass up and down, with the electric lights hanging at their bows casting a brilliant arc of radiance in front of them, while as they moved away from us the darkness closed in all the blacker behind. What an impressive contrast between the restless, powerful present exemplified in the passing vessels, and the unbroken calm of the long past which seems to haunt the desert! How much longer will that tranquillity remain undisturbed?

Early on the morning of the next day we awoke to a lovely dawn,

and after one more look at the majestic ships passing silently through the sandy waste we turned our faces to the north-east and rode joyously forth. We had with us our old dragoman and factotum, George Mabbady, and eight other men, together with a wild-looking fellow from the neighbourhood of Gaza who acted as a guide, and whom from his close resemblance to one of the human wolf faces of Lavater we christened the "Wolf." The usual complement of horses, mules, and donkeys, and three camels to carry water for



THE DESERT.

ourselves and barley for our horses, made up our caravan. It had come for us from Jerusalem, whither we were bound.

Two of our men—old friends—told us how they had arrived at the Canal without food or money, and had run along the bank offering an *abiye* (native woollen cloak) to a passing English steamer as a price for their conveyance to Ismailia, and how someone on board, not understanding what they wanted, pointed a pistol at them, whereupon they fell back disheartened and exhausted.

A few hours of very pleasant riding over sand interspersed with a little scrub, in sunlight brilliant but not oppressive, and in air light and buoyant as the spirit of hope, brought us within sight of the group of palms called El Gouga, where our tents were pitched for the night. At sight of the grateful shade our tired but brave little mares, scenting rest and water, made a rush through the heavy sand until we dismounted.

A roll in that great purifier refreshed them mightily, and they were then tethered to palm trees to enjoy the shade. The sun made beautiful shadows of the long elegant stems and tufted heads of the palm trees, and a flickering light on the white sand. The rest and peace after the long hours in the saddle were more charming than I can tell. We sat in the soft, yielding sand, elbowed out for ourselves arm-chairs in it, and fell into a sweet sleep while the soft air blew over us. Then climbing up a slope, and passing through the palm grove, we saw the desert stretching away in a wide undulating expanse to the eastward, and on the horizon a chain of bare hills.

The well at El Gouga, like almost all the wells which we saw in the "Little Desert," is walled round with the trunks of palm trees instead of stones, of which latter none are to be found in the district of sufficient size for the purpose. But the water in these wells is not great in volume, and is



THE DESERT.

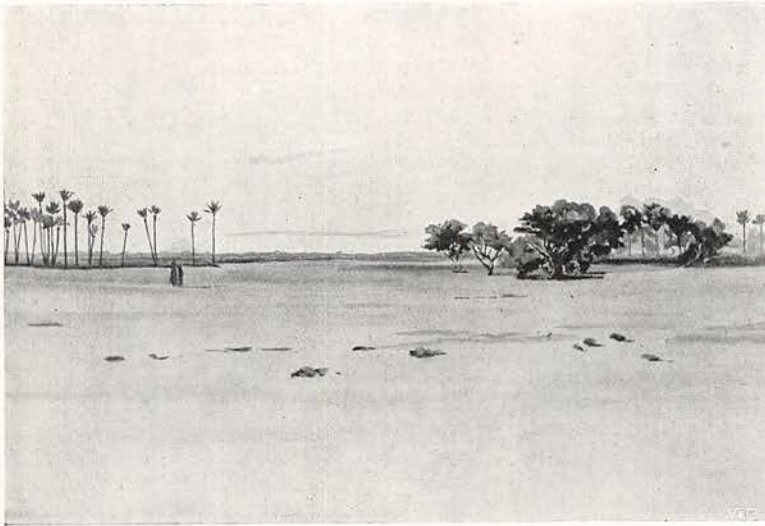
nearly all brackish and unwholesome. Where did the vast hordes of men and beasts, toiling over this thirsty land to invade the rich country beyond, find their drinking and cooking water? Are there not great tanks made by the mighty men of old buried beneath these sands? Or is it true, as we have heard, that water can be obtained almost anywhere in the desert by digging? On the way to El Gouga we passed the postman from Jaffa riding on a dromedary. He reported the road as safe and sped swiftly on.

A splendid sunset, perfect peace, "starry darkness . . . clothed with calm," deep, happy sleep, and a reawakening to a cloudless dawn followed upon the first pleasant

flamingoes wheeling round and round high in the air, showing as they turned first one universal flash of white, and then of red, or rather a reddish purple, that seemed borrowed from the brush of that great colorist the late Sir Edward Burne-Jones. They circled in majestic bands, broke up into smaller bodies, reunited, and separated again, and finally, to our great regret, gradually faded from our sight in one long flight eastwards. A splendid glow of orange tint in the sky compensated us that evening for the loss of these lovely birds.

The next day, the next, and the next were all as pleasant. We had travelled far along the beautiful sandy desert when in the distance appeared the groves of palms of

Katya. Horses and men summoned up all their strength, and hastened on to the longed-for water and shade. Our cook set out in search of food. A chicken was all we hoped for. Inside some fences of palm branches within the grove we found an old man, of whom we asked a fowl. "I have chickens plenty, but don't give them to you." The cook said: "We do not ask them with nothing; we buy for money." "Not for



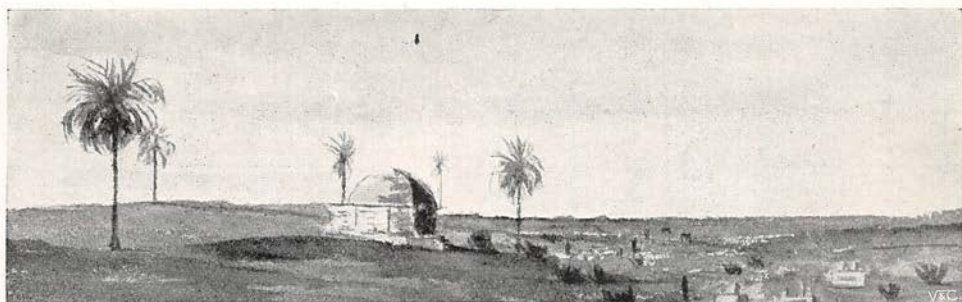
THE OASIS OF EL ARISH.

day of our journey. It was like "a world of one entire and perfect chrysolite" for beauty and delight.

On our way we passed several small groups of palms sheltered under the sand-hills, and one well (Bir el Nus). Some of the hills of sand we saw were several hundred feet high, their tops being wreathed up by the wind into sharp curved edges and peaks, which probably change their shape and appearance with every gale that blows. These hills of pure, untrodden sand, smooth as fallen snow, stand out against the blue sky in the intensely clear atmosphere of this silent land in the most striking way. Scarcely a human being is met with in the long day's march, and only a hoopoe or a sandpiper flies by. Once, however, we saw a great flight of

money, either," said the surly old man. But his wife, seeing the silver coins, came up at once with a scraggy hen, and the old man was shunted and we began to bargain. Even the scaggiest hens will make soup, so we got a fair evening meal of this and rice, and went to rest again with the beautiful feeling of tired limbs, and with a brilliant moonlight all round us. What a glorious night it was! After a good sleep we got up and opened the tent door in the utter silence of the night, and watched the reflections of the tall trees and the distant billowy sand, silver white, reaching to the horizon under the light of the heavens. Such scenes cannot be described in words, but it is a joy of life to see and have remembrance of them.

My drawing represents a *kouba*, or tomb of



TOMB OF A MOSLEM SAINT.

some Moslem saint. It is surrounded by a few rude graves.

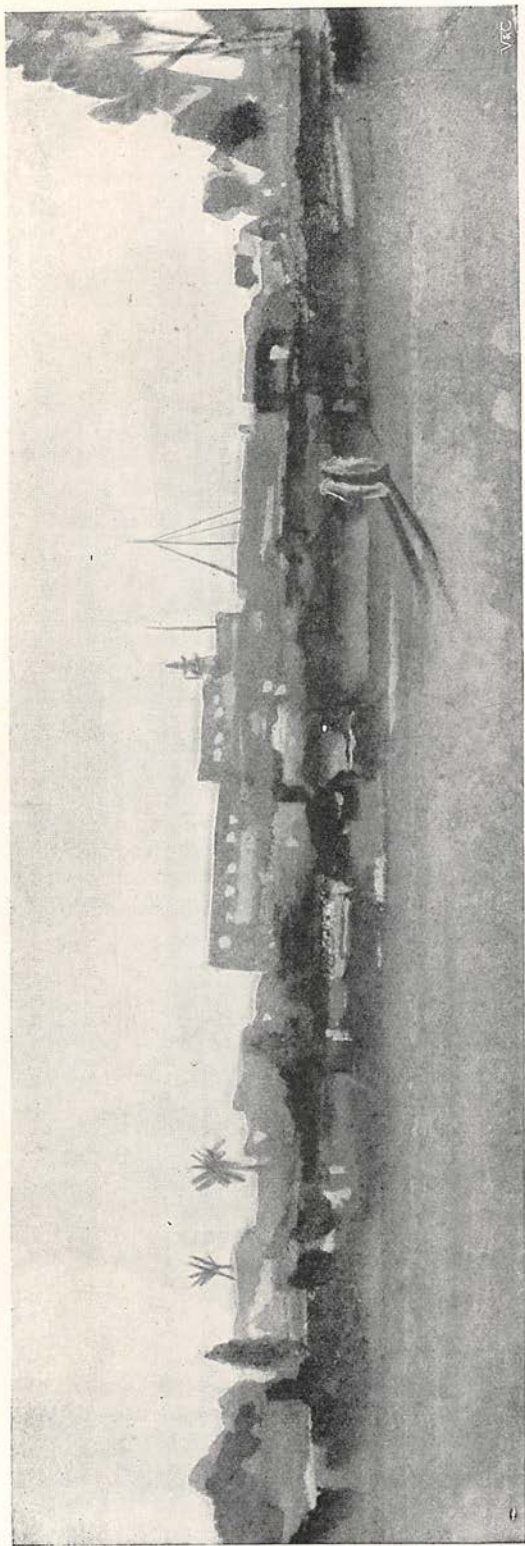
Six days' riding under brilliant sunshine, and yet not in weather oppressively hot (for a fresh north wind blew in from the sea); sometimes through the virgin sand, deep and heavy for the horses, sometimes through the low scrub, amongst which (sign of recent rain) large yellow daisies now and then appeared; crossing wide *mellehas*, or hollows in which salt is found on the surface of the ground, and gathered by the Beduins for their use; reposing for the noonday halt under a solitary palm tree or in the open plain; resting often on the pure sand; watching in the fading light of day the camels coming down to the well, and the Ishmaelites drawing water for them; awakened by lovely dawns, and rocked to repose by more lovely sunsets, and at night camped under the "majestical roof fretted with golden fire" which there spans the

desert, brought us to El Arish, which is the farthest outpost of Egypt to the eastward.

The approach to this little town, after the long days in the desert, excited much joy in the whole caravan. The thought of the *narghilé* and coffee-house, with the gossip and news given and received, made the muleteers very happy, and the sight of dwellings, though of the poorest kind, brought pleasure to them. In the distance one sees the little garrison town on the height, in the foreground a big ridge of cactus plants, and in the middle distance a small plantation of juniper trees, and beyond, and framing the whole landscape, a long line of deep blue sea. The whole life of the place is given up to the caravan traffic, and camels are the riches of the community. It stands about two miles from the sea, whose sands are here always encroaching. Dromedaries are kept at El Arish. This being the border town, many runaways and rogues,



CROSSING A MELLEHA.



TOWN OF EL ARISH.

Beduins and others, are captured in and near the place, and are sent off to Cairo or Jerusalem. Quails are found here, and the people get fish out of the sea.

Coming down to the shore shortly before sunset, we found a dead turtle lying on its back on the sandy beach. At a little distance from the town, on the border of an oasis, we pitched our camp. No sooner had we done so than an Egyptian quarantine officer came up, and maintaining, notwithstanding our protests, that we had come from Jerusalem instead of Cairo, wanted to put us into quarantine. Fortunately, we were provided with a letter of recommendation from the Governor of Cairo to the Governor of El Arish, which soon put the matter right. The latter Governor lives in a *khalat*, or castle, and has a military force of fifty or sixty men with which to keep the Beduins in order; and the thick and high walls of the castle would, I suppose, be as impregnable to the tribes now as in the days before gunpowder.

The morning after our arrival we went to call on this functionary, who showed us a fine deep well of good water, of which he was very proud. A remarkably handsome camel worked the wheel which raised the water, and close to it was a small stone box-like sarcophagus, covered all over, inside and out, with hieroglyphics, which he said had recently been discovered in the neighbourhood. It had apparently stood upright, as at one end was a conical top that gave it the appearance of a watch-box for a baby soldier. Round the *khalat* nestles the little town, with its poor bazaar and mosques and mud-walled houses. The people are all Moslems, and are said to be very fanatical, which is very probable, as they are almost entirely cut off from the rest of the world by the desert on three sides and the sea in front. Then we went to see the head of the Egyptian police, who sat at a table surrounded by soldiers. The walls of the room were papered with photographs of criminals who may be expected to pass through here, escaping from Egypt to Syria, or from Syria to Egypt. He offered us two soldiers as escort, and asked us to let him know if



WEDDING FESTIVITIES.

we met any of the men represented on the walls. The soldiers laughed when we said that we thought we had better offer coffee to any such folk, and not quarrel with them.

As we were about to leave El Arish, we heard the sound of tom-toms and drums in the distance, and thinking it must be a wedding, we went to see the fun. A picturesque crowd had gathered round two dummy figures, which were paraded on camels and represented the bride and groom. They walked round and round to

the noise of the crowd, which became quite excited as the tom-toms beat quicker and quicker, whilst scores of youths and boys kept time by clapping their hands. At last a circle was formed on the sand, and these two scarecrow figures were made to move up and down in the middle. The camels were dressed up with scarlet bales of worsted and long saddle-bags with great hanging tassels. A man on a fine mare rode up and began to dance with her, round and round, backwards and forwards, in an ambling way.



DANCING AT THE WEDDING FESTIVITIES.

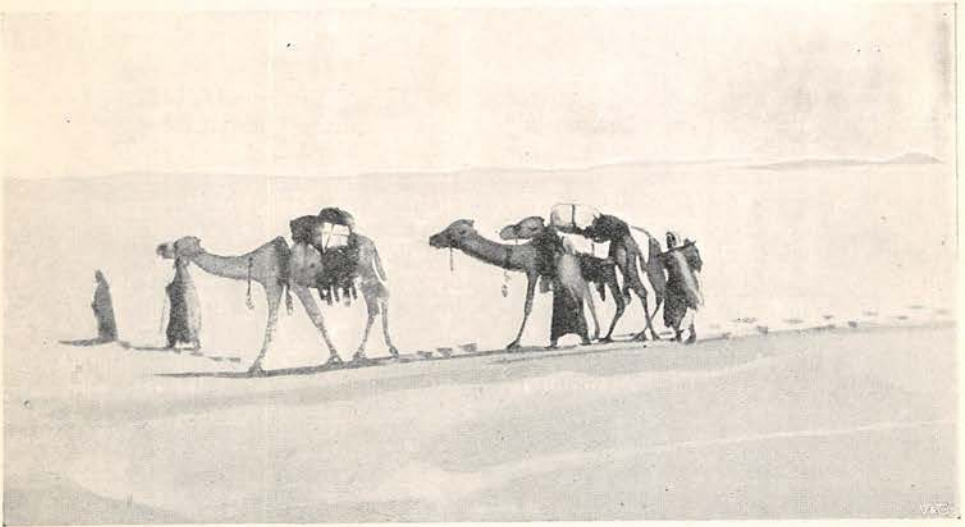
Suddenly he burst through the circle at a rapid gallop and brought the animal almost up on its haunches, then back to the crowd, over which the mare's heels scattered sand in showers. Guns went off rapidly one after another, the men firing in the air; and then the nodding figures representing the bride and groom returned to the little town, where the real happy pair were themselves waiting to go through the marriage ceremony. It was a pretty sight, and we saw some sweet faces amongst the children and young lads.

Here we were overtaken and joined by two poor Moslem pilgrims going from Egypt to Jerusalem, who were glad of our protection and the food which we could give them; and in return they assisted in packing the baggage, holding the mules, etc. We bought

again from Egypt and the North Syrian coast. There is in the town a little *suk*, or bazaar, of small importance, where barley can be purchased. Thus the traveller can get helped on his onward journey by forage for his animals and dates for himself.

The only part of this journey about the safety of which there is sometimes need for anxiety is in the district lying between El Arish and the first Turkish town of Khan Yunis. But the Governor of the former had told us that the country was quiet, and sent the Sheik of El Arish with us to show us the way, and to exercise the influence which he possesses in the neighbourhood in case of any difficulty arising.

This worthy man was well provided with warlike weapons, and rode upon a beautiful



TRAVELLERS WE MET IN THE DESERT.

a sheep and made a feast for our men and the pilgrims, who all sat down in the sand, under some wild fig trees (the sand here is blown in from the seashore, and evidently covers some good soil), with the fresh green of their young leaves sharply defined against the bright blue sky, and our dragoman advised that "we all make happy together." And so we did.

Here noble groves of palms rise against the exquisite blue sky. They help to support the natives, who value the dates, which they often pound together, and sell in this state to the Beduins who live far away in the desert. The natives also grow water-melons in the sand. We could see the blue Levant, but no shipping of any kind. Small vessels do, however, arrive now and

naga, or female dromedary, which he boasted had once carried him from El Arish to El Kantara on the Suez Canal in one day. He was much amused to see my husband treat me with politeness, handing to me water before drinking himself, etc., and was surprised on being informed that this was the English custom. I do not think, however, that he believed it, for he told our dragoman that it was evident that my husband was entirely governed by me, and that nothing would induce him to place himself in such a position towards a woman.

Soon after leaving El Arish we began to see signs of cultivation of the soil. Small patches of scant young barley, daffodils, and a few tiny iris flowers appeared in a gently undulating country, and camels were seen



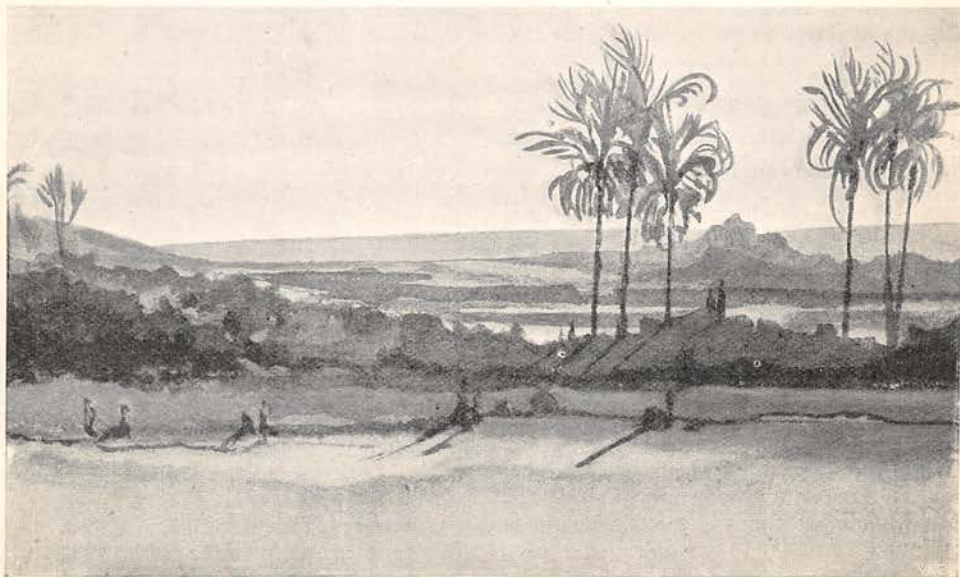
KHAN YUNIS.

ploughing, and larks heard singing melodiously in the air. Then again returned the bare sand, the scrub, and the high slopes of yellow hills cutting off the sea from view. In the distance we saw a small white dome, and passing a long inlet of the sea we came to the hamlet of Sheik es Zwayed, with its few palm trees and humble Arab burial-place, and a broad green of short grass and yellow daisies on which we pitched our tents. From this place the cultivation increased, and camels and donkeys, sheep and goats became frequent. Two hours riding the next morning brought us to Raphia, where two old columns, doubtless the surviving pillars of some ancient building, standing near a solitary tree, mark the boundaries of Egypt and Turkey; and here I suppose the Holy Land proper begins, for the appearance suitable to a land of milk and honey becomes observable. Two hours more brought us to the first Turkish town, Khan Yunis, a very picturesque-looking place with palm trees and a fine old mosque, and a *khalat*, or castle,

a long white building with circular towers, round which are wretched houses occupied by the soldiers.

Drenching rain had fallen on this day's march and wet us through, and for shelter and to dry ourselves we entered a small barrack-room where there was a good fire in a brazier, and a number of soldiers, some lying asleep and some talking. They treated us very politely, helping us to dry our saddles and saddle-bags and giving us coffee, in exchange for which we supplied them with cigarettes, much to their satisfaction.

Here we thought we should have to produce a passport and submit to examination of luggage; but no one questioned or troubled us, and the rain having ceased and the sunshine appeared, we proceeded on our way. At a little distance in the direction of the sea were groups of palm trees, and beyond lay a large pool or lagoon of brackish water, between which and the blue Mediterranean spread a long promontory of sand. Hundreds



DEIR EL BELAH.



YOUNG MEN OF GAZA PLAYING CARDS.

of wild ducks frequented this sheet of water. Brilliant yellow sand-hills ran down to the sea, and we now entered the beautiful green plain of Philistia.

From Deir el Belah the country became much more fruitful, the plain rising gradually into higher and more undulating land. In the early morning light the young crops of barley and lentils shone resplendent with dew-drops. The wild flowers, especially the red anemones, were radiant, larks were singing in the air, and a few fleecy clouds floated over the scene. We now betook ourselves to the broad, sandy highway which leads at first through lanes of prickly pear by Wady Selga. This *wad* after heavy rains carried a stream of water to the sea. The wreathed and billowy forms of the pure sand-hills, intensely white under the midday sun, were exquisite in shape and contrast with sea and sky. Palm trees whose trunks were nearly covered by the sand showed their beautiful waving tops above it. There are a few little hamlets scattered about, of which the Terabin Arabs are the terror, stealing cattle, cutting down fruit trees, and punishing resistance with violence; but the soldiers in the garrison towns keep better order amongst them than they did formerly. Several hours more and we were in Gaza, where (having visited the place before) we only waited to lunch in the cemetery outside the town, and call on one of the British medical missionaries stationed here. Some idle apprentices playing at cards on a tombstone reminded us of Hogarth, and we took a photograph of them, while they cast contemptuous looks towards us.

Wherever digging goes on here, the remains of old buildings are found; and in order to get a foundation for the mission-house, it was found necessary to go down over fifty feet. I suppose that the shifting soil is composed of sand blown in from the seashore

during many centuries, which has buried many old erections here, as at Askalon. Excavations at Gaza and Askalon would surely yield some valuable results. Some very fine Greek sculptures and statues have been found at the latter place by the natives.

From Gaza our way lay at first through pleasant olive groves. Narrow paths ascending brought us to high ground, which afforded distant views of a wide

country green with the rich young crops lying under a cloud-sprinkled sky, with intense blue between the shadows, and in three hours more we came to the village of Bureir, which was as far as we could attain that day towards Tel el Hesi, the site which Dr. Flinders Petrie identified with Lachish, and which Dr. Bliss more fully excavated for the Palestine Exploration Fund.

We rode there the next morning. There was not much for the uninstructed eye to see amongst these ruins except trenches and pieces of pottery, and decayed sunburnt bricks and marks of fire. The flight of steps and portal of stone drawn by Dr. Petrie had been removed by the Arabs for building material. From the Tel we had a charming view of hilly country emerald with young corn, and in the distance the blue mountains of Judæa.

Anyone who happens to have read my husband's book, "With the Beduins," may remember the opinions of our friend and dragoman, George Mabbedy, about the stars. He recurred to the subject again on this journey. We tried by the aid of a candle, an orange, and a walnut to explain to him our Western notions of the sun, earth, and moon, and the revolutions of both the latter; but he could not at all understand the matter. The heavens were to him as a flat ceiling spread over the earth. We thought, however, that we had made a little progress with him one evening, for the next day he said he had not been able to sleep for thinking of the subject. But it appeared it was not the wonders of the celestial system which had kept him awake, but sad commiseration of our delusions.

He said: "That never come into my head. Stars are lamps for light earth. That what God says. People that write book of stars are poor, and want make little money to

eat bread. One cannot believe such thing. Speak something else; I hear no more about stars." After a pause, hoping that we were convinced of our error, he resumed: "You still believe stars, or finish?" We said we still believed. Then, speaking more earnestly, he continued: "You must not believe. I tell you true. It is not so." As soon as we got to our camp that day he asked for the Bible, and triumphantly read aloud out of the first chapter of Genesis: "'He made the stars also.' You see, God made stars. It is not said worlds. Believe me, they are lamps." When we argued that, although the heavenly bodies were in the Bible called stars, that did not imply that they were not worlds, finding nothing immediately to reply, he said: "This not good chapter. I will read in Samuel or Judges of fight." He is very well acquainted with all the fighting parts of the Old Testament, which please him much, and some of them he read out aloud. We were in Samson's country, and his talk fell upon that mighty man.

"This Samson very strong man, but he was naughty. He tear lion and kill him. After, he find honey in carcass, and give his father and mother to eat, but he did not tell them where he find it. I wonder that they did not smell that it came from carcass." This question had not occurred to us before, but it is perhaps worthy of note.

Two or three days more and we reached Bethlehem, where George's wife and children came out to greet us with flowers in their hands, and the same day we rode past the walls of the Holy City, down into the valley of the Kedron, and up the northern slopes of

Olivet, or the southern slope of Scopus (it is all one ridge, and no one knows where one ends or the other begins), to our own piece of land at Ras Abou Kharoub (the height of the father of Kharoub trees), where stands our Eastern home. Over the wall had been placed a board inscribed with the words, "Welcome Home!" above which hung an onion to avert the Evil Eye. The gun of salutation was fired off, and our workmen came running out to kiss our hands. It was delightfully patriarchal.

This is the highest point in the hills that stand about Jerusalem, 2,725 feet above the sea, and nearly 300 feet above the platform of the Haram or "Noble Sanctuary" where the Temple once stood, and the Dome of the Rock and Mosque of Aksa now stand. The north-east angle of the walls of Jerusalem points direct to this spot, so that from it the faces of the south and north wall are equally open to view. Then, looking eastward, we beheld the mountains of Moab and the Dead Sea.

The dawn, the sunrise, the sunset, the after-glow, the moon-rise, the starry night—all are equally beautiful from this spot. But loveliest is the dawn. The first faint flush comes over the hills of Moab, and then the surface of the Dead Sea shows like an *aqua marina*; and turning to the Holy City, we see its domes and minarets stand out in the cold light, soon to be irradiated with the first rays of the sun. To the east stretches the wilderness of Judæa, solemn and bare; to the west, in this spring season, the young corn and the wild flowers, and the trees putting forth their leaves, seem to make the desert blossom as the rose.



SHEEP WAITING FOR THE WATER-DRAWERS.