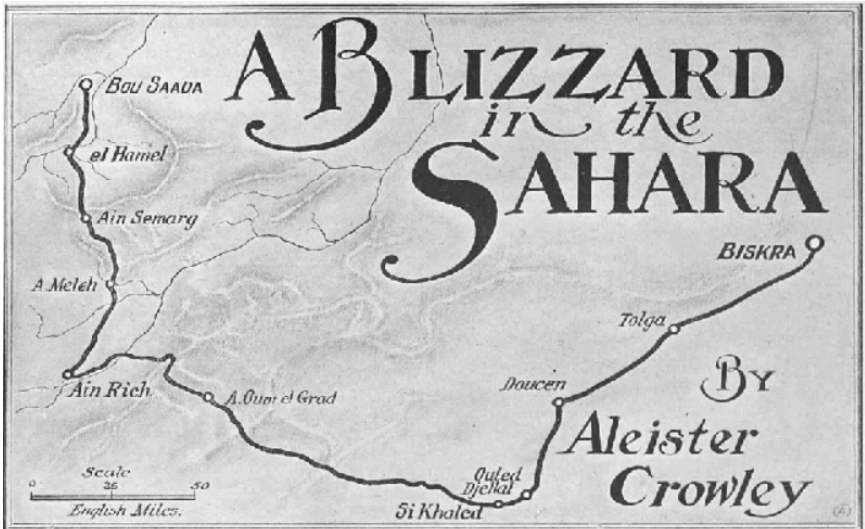


A Blizzard in the Sahara

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From Bou Saada to Biskra: A Sketch of the Route followed by Mr. Crowley
Bou Saada is about two hundred miles south of Algiers

On my first trip to the Sahara just over a year ago, the local proverb ran: "It never rains south of Sidi Aissa." A month's tramp did little to dispel this dream; we had a perfect time, so perfect that last December, having brought "The Rites of Eleusis" to a fortunate conclusion, I said: "Let me return to the desert."

Therefore did I don the breeches of buckskin and the ancient coat, loaded the Webley, and filled the rüch-sac with tobacco. Therefore did I speed unto Bou Saada, and, seated firmly but gently in front of the hotel, besought Allah to provide me with a baggage-camel. I got one; but it was Eblis who sent it!

I also had an interpreter, named Mohammed, but he soon taught us to call him "Lloyd George."

Two days later we started for the desert. The first halt, Sidi el Hamel, is a Saharan University. There was a "marabout," a holy man, and he received me brotherly and regaled me with Kous-kous, which I permitted my faithful disciple to share.

(I always travel with a disciple; it saves trouble. I let his beard grow and shaved his head, except for two tufts on the

forehead, to make him look like the Devil. He did. The natives were very much impressed.)

From el Hamel we wandered southward to Ain Semarg, Ain Meleh, and Ain Rich.

From Ain Rich there are no villages until Sidi Khaled, distant one hundred kilometers—which, considering the bad going, is worth one hundred miles.

It was a beautiful morning, with but a touch of north-east wind. We were feeling very fit; I had forgotten all about England, and we began to congratulate ourselves on another pleasant journey. I suppose the north-west wind was eavesdropping.

We had some food in an unexpected and decayed hovel about noon; for the wind had got up sufficiently to make it too cold to sit about. An hour later we struck for the mountains. It was a really fine mountain pass; the descent a splendid gorge, precipice-walled. The camel-driver wanted to pitch camp about three o'clock, and we had trouble with him.

Camel-drivers have no sense at all; in England they would get either the Embankment or the Home Office. This imbecile had been all his life in the desert, and had not yet learnt that he and his camel needed food. He never took any with him, and having reached a suitable spot thirty miles from the nearest blade of grass, complained of hunger.

I had hoped he would have found some thistles.

This by parenthesis. We wandered on, and presently emerging from the gorge came upon an Arab, who spoke of a Bedouin encampment down stream.

This we found a few minutes after nightfall. The wind was violent and bitter beyond belief, but no rain fell. "Rain never falls south of Sidi Aissa."

So we fed and turned in. Our tent was an Arab lean-to, a mere blanket propped on sticks, some necessary to its support, others designed to interfere with the comfort of the people inside.

My disciple, fatigued by the day's march, fell asleep.

As it happened—pure luck, for he had no more sense than the camel-driver; disciples never have—he had chosen the one possible spot. As for us, I woke in about half an hour to feel the most devilish down-pour. It was as bad as Darjeeling and the ridge that leads to Kinchenjanga. We had pitched the tent in a fairly sheltered spot under the walls of the river; but the rain ran down the props of the tent and through the tent itself, and soaked us.

In the morning, after a night spent in that condition when one is half asleep from exhaustion and half awake from misery, the storm still blew.

We waited till nearly nine. The Bedouins told us that four miles on there was a village. We thought of coffee, and made tracks. So off we went over the sopping desert and reached the "village" in an hour. There were palms and gardens—and one deserted hovel, with no door. The roof, made of boughs weighted with big stones and made tight with mud, was half broken through. A giant stone hung imminent, halfway fallen. All day we waited for the rain to stop falling in the place "where it never fell."



Night came, and the blizzard redoubled its violence; but the shelter allowed us a little sleep until the mud dissolved, and the roof became a sieve. The rest of the night was a shower-bath.

In the morning there was no great sign of improvement. I had to kick the camel-driver into action and chase the camels

with my own fair feet. He had a million excuses for not going on, all on a level. "The camels would catch cold." Good from the man who had left them all night in the rain! "They would slip." "They would die." "They were too hungry." From the man who hadn't brought food for them! "They were tired"—and so on. But I got the party off at last, and came in a couple of hours to a tomb with a coffin in it. There they sat down, and refused to stir. I simply took no notice.

My disciple took one camel and I took the other and went off. We left them in the tomb, grouching.

Steering by map and compass, I judged a good pass through the next range of mountains, and made for it. The flat desert was standing in water; and the streams were difficult for the camels, who hate water as much as disciples do.

It was better on the mountain-side. Near the top of the pass we perceived our men following, as the lesser of two evils. I was sorry, in a way; it would have been a fine adventure to worry through to Sidi Khaled with those two brutes and a daft Davie!

It was just at the top that I said, without any apparent reason, "The storm's over." My disciple did his Thomas act. There was no opening in the furious grey heaven; the wind raged and the rain poured. But I stick to it; I had felt the first contention of the south wind in a momentary lull. And I was right—as I always am.

(If my readers want modesty, they must pay for it at separate higher rates.)

The descent of the pass was far from easy. The "road" crosses and recrosses the bed of the river as often as it can; sometimes even follows the course.

And this stream was a furious spate, slippery and dangerous for men, impassable for members of the Alpine Club, and almost impassable for camels. It was nearly nightfall before we left the gorge, and a barren plain confronted us.

It was useless to struggle on much further. The rain still poured; the desert stood six inches deep in water. The hills were a mass of snow.

(We heard afterwards that many houses had been washed away at Ouled Djellal in this unprecedented storm. Traffic was interrupted by snow on the East Algerian Railway, and the Meréchal Bugéaud was forty hours late at Marseilles, having had to beat up under the lee of the Spanish shore for shelter.)

So I picked out a good big tree by the stream, and we pitched camp.

We had little hope of lighting a fire; but there is in the desert a certain impermeable grass, and by using this as a starter we got it going. No sooner had the blaze sprung up, filling the night with golden showers, than the envious stars determined to rival the display. Every cloud disappeared as by magic. But the fire remained the popular favourite!

All night I toiled to dry myself and my clothes, refreshing the old Adam with coffee, potted pheasant, and Garibaldi biscuits at not infrequent intervals.

The morning was ecstasy. The light came over the sand, wave upon wave of grey. The desert was dry. There was no water in the stream, save in rare pools. We struck camp early.

We glanced up at the path which we had travelled; the ranges still glowed with unaccustomed snow; from the northwest the wind still struggled fitfully to assert its dominion; but we, with joy and praise in our hearts, turned our glad faces, singing, to the assurgent sun.