



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 visit 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 rucksac 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 kilometres—which, considering the bad going, is worth one hundred miles.

It was a beautiful morning, with but a touch of north-west 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 'til 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,