

HENRYK SIENKIEWICZ

IN DESERT
AND WILDERNESS

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IN DESERT AND WILDERNESS

Henryk Sienkiewicz

Henryk Sienkiewicz, 1917

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PART FIRST

I

»Do you know, Nell,« said Stas Tarkowski to his friend, a little English girl, »that yesterday the police came and arrested the wife of Smain, the overseer, and her three children,—that Fatma who several times called at the office to see your father and mine.«

And little Nell, resembling a beautiful picture, raised her greenish eyes to Stas and asked with mingled surprise and fright:

»Did they take her to prison?«

»No, but they will not let her go to the Sudân and an official has arrived who will see that she does not move a step out of Port Said.«

»Why?«

Stas, who was fourteen years old and who loved his eight-year-old companion very much, but looked upon her as a mere child, said with a conceited air:

»When you reach my age, you will know everything which happens, not only along the Canal from Port Said to Suez, but in all Egypt. Have you ever heard of the Mahdi?«

»I heard that he is ugly and naughty.«

The boy smiled compassionately.

»I do not know whether he is ugly. The Sudânese claim that he is handsome. But the word 'naughty' about a man who has murdered so many people, could be used only by a little girl, eight years old, in dresses—oh—reaching the knees.«

»Papa told me so and papa knows best.«

»He told you so because otherwise you would not understand. He would not express himself to me in that way. The Mahdi is worse than a whole shoal of crocodiles. Do you understand? That is a nice expression for me. 'Naughty!' They talk that way to babes.«

But, observing the little girl's clouded face, he became silent and afterwards said:

»Nell, you know I did not want to cause you any unpleasantness. The time will come when you will be fourteen. I certainly promise you that.«

»Aha!« she replied with a worried look, »but if before that time the Mahdi should dash into Port Said and eat me.«

»The Mahdi is not a cannibal, so he does not eat people. He only kills them. He will not dash into Port Said, but even if he did and wanted to murder you, he would first have to do with me.«

This declaration with the sniff with which Stas inhaled the air through his nose, did not bode any good for the Mahdi and considerably quieted Nell as to her own person.

»I know,« she answered, »you would not let him harm me. But why do they not allow Fatma to leave Port Said?«

»Because Fatma is a cousin of the Mahdi. Her husband, Smain, made an offer to the Egyptian Government at Cairo to go to the Sudân, where the Mahdi is staying, and secure the liberty of all Europeans who have fallen into his hands.«

»Then Smain is a good man?«

»Wait! Your papa and my papa, who knew Smain thoroughly, did not have any confidence in him and warned Nubar Pasha not to trust him. But the Government agreed to send Smain and Smain remained over half a year with the Mahdi. The prisoners not only did not return, but news has come from Khartúm that the Mahdists are treating them more and more cruelly, and that Smain, having taken money from the Government, has become a traitor. He joined the Mahdi's army and has been appointed an emir. The people say that in that terrible battle in which General Hicks fell, Smain commanded the Mahdi's artillery and that he probably taught the Mahdists how to handle the cannon, which before that time they, as savage people, could not do. But now Smain is anxious to get his wife and children out of Egypt. So when Fatma, who evidently knew in advance what Smain was going to do, wanted secretly to leave Port Said, the Government arrested her with the children.«

»But what good are Fatma and her children to the Government?«

»The Government will say to the Mahdi,—'Give us the prisoners and we will surrender Fatma'—«

For the time the conversation was interrupted because the attention of Stas was attracted by birds flying from the direction of Eghtom om Farag towards Lake Menzaleh. They flew quite low and in the clear atmosphere could be plainly seen some pelicans with curved napes, slowly moving immense wings. Stas at once began to imitate their flight. So with head upraised, he ran a score of paces along the dyke, waving his outstretched arms.

»Look!« suddenly exclaimed Nell. »Flamingoes are also flying.«

Stas stood still in a moment, as actually behind the pelicans, but somewhat higher, could be seen, suspended in the sky, two great red and purple flowers, as it were.

»Flamingoes! flamingoes! Before night they return to their haunts on the little islands,« the boy said. »Oh, if I only had a rifle!«

»Why should you want to shoot at them?«

»Girls don't understand such things. But let us go farther; we may see more of them.«

Saying this he took the girl's hand and together they strolled towards the first wharf beyond Port Said. Dinah, a negress and at one time nurse of little Nell, closely followed them. They walked on the embankment which separated the waters of Lake Menzaleh from the Canal, through which at that time a big English steamer, in charge of a pilot, floated. The night was approaching. The sun still stood quite high but was rolling in the direction of the lake. The salty waters of the latter began to glitter with gold and throb with the reflection of peacock feathers. On the Arabian bank as far as the eye could reach, stretched a tawny, sandy desert—dull, portentous, lifeless. Between the glassy, as if half-dead, heaven and the immense, wrinkled sands there was not a trace of a living being. While on the Canal life seethed, boats bustled about, the whistles of steamers resounded, and above Menzaleh flocks of mews and wild ducks scintillated in the sunlight, yonder, on the Arabian bank, it appeared as if it were the region of death. Only in proportion as the sun, descending, became ruddier and ruddier did the sands begin to assume that lily hue which the heath in Polish forests has in autumn.

The children, walking towards the wharf, saw a few more flamingoes, which pleased their eyes. After this Dinah announced that Nell must return home. In Egypt, after days which even in winter are often scorching, very cold nights follow, and as Nell's health demanded great care, her

father, Mr. Rawlinson, would not allow her to be near the water after sunset. They, therefore, returned to the city, on the outskirts of which, near the Canal, stood Mr. Rawlinson's villa, and by the time the sun plunged into the sea they were in the house. Soon, the engineer Tarkowski, Stas' father, who was invited to dinner arrived, and the whole company, together with a French lady, Nell's teacher, Madame Olivier, sat at the table.

Mr. Rawlinson, one of the directors of the Suez Canal Company, and Ladislaus Tarkowski, senior engineer of the same company, lived for many years upon terms of the closest intimacy. Both were widowers, but Pani Tarkowski, by birth a French lady, died at the time Stas came into the world, while Nell's mother died of consumption in Helwan when the girl was three years old. Both widowers lived in neighboring houses in Port Said, and owing to their duties met daily. A common misfortune drew them still closer to each other and strengthened the ties of friendship previously formed. Mr. Rawlinson loved Stas as his own son, while Pan Tarkowski would have jumped into fire and water for little Nell. After finishing their daily work the most agreeable recreation for them was to talk about the children, their education and future. During such conversations it frequently happened that Mr. Rawlinson would praise the ability, energy, and bravery of Stas and Pan Tarkowski would grow enthusiastic over the sweetness and angelic countenance of Nell. And the one and the other spoke the truth. Stas was a trifle conceited and a trifle boastful, but diligent in his lessons, and the teachers in the English school in Port Said, which he attended, credited him with uncommon abilities. As to courage and resourcefulness, he inherited them from his father, for Pan Tarkowski possessed these qualities in an eminent degree and in a large measure owed to them his present position.

In the year 1863 he fought for eleven months without cessation. Afterwards, wounded, taken into captivity, and condemned to Siberia, he escaped from the interior of Russia and made his way to foreign lands. Before he entered into the insurrection he was a qualified engineer; nevertheless he devoted a year to the study of hydraulics. Later he secured a position at the Canal and in the course of a few years, when his expert knowledge, energy, and industry became known, he assumed the important position of senior engineer.

Stas was born, bred, and reached his fourteenth year in Port Said on the Canal; in consequence of which the engineers called him the child of the desert. At a later period, when he was attending school, he sometimes, during the vacation season and holidays, accompanied his father or Mr. Rawlinson on trips, which their duty required them to make from Port Said to Suez to inspect the work on the embankment or the dredging of the channel of the Canal. He knew everybody--the engineers and custom-house officials as well as the laborers, Arabs and negroes. He bustled about and insinuated himself everywhere, appearing where least expected; he made long excursions on the embankment, rowed in a boat over Menzaleh, venturing at times far and wide. He crossed over to the Arabian bank and mounting the first horse he met, or in the absence of a horse, a camel, or even a donkey, he would imitate Farys¹ on the desert; in a word, as Pan Tarkowski expressed it, »he was always popping up somewhere,« and every moment free from his studies he passed on the water.

His father did not oppose this, as he knew that rowing, horseback riding, and continual life in the fresh air strengthened his health and developed resourcefulness within him. In fact, Stas was taller and stronger than most boys of his age. It was enough to glance at his eyes to surmise that in case of any adventure he would sin more from too much audacity than from timidity. In his fourteenth year, he was one of the best swimmers in Port Said, which meant not a little, for

1 Farys, the hero of Adam Mickiewicz's Oriental poem of the same name.--_Translator's note_.

the Arabs and negroes swim like fishes. Shooting from carbines of a small caliber, and only with cartridges, for wild ducks and Egyptian geese, he acquired an unerring eye and steady hand. His dream was to hunt the big animals sometime in Central Africa. He therefore eagerly listened to the narratives of the Sudânese working on the Canal, who in their native land had encountered big, thick-skinned, and rapacious beasts.

This also had its advantage, for at the same time he learned their languages. It was not enough to excavate the Suez Canal; it was necessary also to maintain it, as otherwise the sands of the deserts, lying on both banks, would fill it up in the course of a year. The grand work of De Lesseps demands continual labor and vigilance. So, too, at the present day, powerful machines, under the supervision of skilled engineers, and thousands of laborers are at work, dredging the channel. At the excavation of the Canal, twenty-five thousand men labored. To-day, owing to the completion of the work and improved new machinery, considerably less are required. Nevertheless, the number is great. Among them the natives of the locality predominate. There is not, however, a lack of Nubians, Sudânese, Somalis, and various negroes coming from the White and Blue Niles, that is, from the region which previous to the Mahdi's insurrection was occupied by the Egyptian Government. Stas lived with all on intimate terms and having, as is usual with Poles, an extraordinary aptitude for languages he became, he himself not knowing how and when, acquainted with many of their dialects. Born in Egypt, he spoke Arabian like an Arab. From the natives of Zanzibar, many of whom worked as firemen on the steam dredges, he learned Kiswahili, a language widely prevalent all over Central Africa. He could even converse with the negroes of the Dinka and Shilluk tribes, residing on the Nile below Fashoda. Besides this, he spoke fluently English, French, and also Polish, for his father, an ardent patriot, was greatly concerned that his son should know the language of his forefathers. Stas in reality regarded this language as the most beautiful in the world and taught it, not without some success, to little Nell. One thing only he could not accomplish, that she should pronounce his name Stas, and not »Stes.« Sometimes, on account of this, a misunderstanding arose between them, which continued until small tears began to glisten in the eyes of the girl. Then »Stes« would beg her pardon and became angry at himself.

He had, however, an annoying habit of speaking slightly of her eight years and citing by way of contrast his own grave age and experience. He contended that a boy who is finishing his fourteenth year, if he is not fully matured, at least is not a mere child, but on the contrary, is capable of performing all kinds of heroic deeds, especially if he has Polish and French blood. He craved most ardently that sometime an opportunity would occur for such deeds, particularly in defense of Nell. Both invented various dangers and Stas was compelled to answer her questions as to what he would do if, for instance, a crocodile, ten yards long, or a scorpion as big as a dog, should crawl through the window of her home. To both it never occurred for a moment that impending reality would surpass all their fantastic suppositions.

II

In the meantime, in the house, good news awaited them during the dinner. Messrs. Rawlinson and Tarkowski, as skilled engineers, had been invited a few weeks before, to examine and appraise the work carried on in connection with the whole net-work of canals in the Province of El-Fayúm, in the vicinity of the city of Medinet near Lake Karún, as well as along the Yúsuf and Nile rivers. They were to stay there for about a month and secured furloughs from their company. As the Christmas holidays were approaching, both gentlemen, not desiring to be separated from the children, decided that Stas and Nell should also go to Medinet. Hearing this news the children almost leaped out of their skins from joy. They had already visited the cities lying along the Canal, particularly Ismailia and Suez, and while outside the Canal, Alexandria and Cairo, near which they viewed the great pyramids and the Sphinx. But these were short trips, while the expedition to Medinet el-Fayúm required a whole day's travel by railway, southward along the Nile and then westward from El-Wasta towards the Libyan Desert. Stas knew Medinet from the narratives of younger engineers and tourists who went there to hunt for various kinds of water-fowls as well as desert wolves and hyenas. He knew that it was a separate, great oasis lying off the west bank of the Nile but not dependent upon its inundations and having its water system formed by Lake Karún through Bahr Yúsuf and a whole chain of small canals. Those who had seen this oasis said that although that region belonged to Egypt, nevertheless, being separated from it by a desert, it formed a distinct whole. Only the Yúsuf River connects, one might say with a thin blue thread, that locality with the valley of the Nile. The great abundance of water, fertility of soil, and luxuriant vegetation made an earthly paradise of it, while the extensive ruins of the city of Crocodilopolis drew thither hundreds of curious tourists. Stas, however, was attracted mainly by the shores of Lake Karún, with its swarms of birds and its wolf-hunts on the desert hills of Gebel el-Sedment.

But his vacation began a few days later, and as the inspection of the work on the canals was an urgent matter and the gentlemen could not lose any time, it was arranged that they should leave without delay, while the children, with Madame Olivier, were to depart a week later. Nell and Stas had a desire to leave at once, but Stas did not dare to make the request. Instead they began to ask questions about various matters relative to the journey, and with new outbursts of joy received the news that they would not live in uncomfortable hotels kept by Greeks, but in tents furnished by the Cook Tourists' Agency. This is the customary arrangement of tourists who leave Cairo for a lengthy stay at Medinet. Cook furnishes tents, servants, cooks, supplies of provisions, horses, donkeys, camels, and guides; so the tourist does not have to bother about anything. This, indeed, is quite an expensive mode of traveling; but Messrs. Tarkowski and Rawlinson did not have to take that into account as all expenses were borne by the Egyptian Government, which invited them, as experts, to inspect and appraise the work on the canals. Nell, who, above everything in the world, loved riding on a camel, obtained a promise from her father that she should have a separate »hump-backed saddle horse« on which, together with Madame Olivier, or Dinah, and sometimes with Stas, she could participate in the excursions to the nearer localities of the desert and to Karun. Pan Tarkowski promised Stas that he would allow him some nights to go after wolves, and if he brought a good report from school he would get a genuine English short rifle and the necessary equipment for a hunter. As Stas was confident that he would succeed, he at once began to regard himself as the owner of a short rifle and promised himself to perform various astonishing and immortal feats with it.