

# WILEY



---

Journal of an Excursion in Oman, in South-East Arabia

Author(s): S. B. Miles

Source: *The Geographical Journal*, Vol. 7, No. 5 (May, 1896), pp. 522-537

Published by: geographicalj

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1773995>

Accessed: 26-06-2016 20:22 UTC

---

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at  
<http://about.jstor.org/terms>

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).



*Wiley, The Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers)* are collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Geographical Journal*

## JOURNAL OF AN EXCURSION IN OMAN, IN SOUTH-EAST ARABIA.\*

By Colonel S. B. MILES.

It is, perhaps, needless to remark that our present geographical knowledge of Oman, in Eastern Arabia, and especially of its orographical system, is derived almost exclusively from the map of Lieut. Wellsted, I.N., whose 'Travels in Arabia' was published in 1838. The value of the work accomplished by Wellsted has been universally acknowledged, and, considering the difficulties he had to contend with as the pioneer explorer, he deserves the greatest credit and commendation for the light he has thrown on the country.

Among the regions Wellsted did not personally visit, and consequently did not describe, is that portion of the great mountain chain which forms the backbone of Oman, lying between Maskat and Ras Al Had.

The system of mountains herabouts is somewhat complicated, but may be said to consist broadly of two parallel ranges forming a continuation of the Jebel Akhdar chain, and embracing between them as far as Kuryat a rich and thickly peopled valley known as the Wadi Tyn.

This valley, which rises a little to the north-east of Semmed, terminates at Ghubra el Tam, where the torrent has excavated its way through the hills, forming a very remarkable cañon or channel, the seaward side of which is known to navigators as the Devil's Gap.

The exterior of this gap I had seen in 1874, in company with an officer of H.M.S. *Rifleman*—Lieut. Black, who afterwards unfortunately perished in the ill-fated *Eurydice*; but the opportunity of fully exploring the gorge and the Tyn valley did not occur until ten years later. In the month of February, 1884, however, I was able to make arrangements for the journey, and the Sultan H. H. Seyyid Turki appointed Seyyid Nasir bin Mohammed Al Bu Saidi to lead the escort, our guide and kefir being Shaikh Nasir bin Gharayib el Jabri, who was directed to join our party the next day at Natat.

It was on the morning of the 11th that we mounted our camels and rode out of Mattrah into the broad and shallow Wadi Harmal, or "Vale of Rue." Passing Felej castle and the village of Ruwi, one of the market gardens of Maskat, we strike off to the left up the Wadi Adi, a winding gorge or defile about 4 miles in length cut through the hills, which leads into and drains part of the small plain called Seh Hatat, a basin or opening in the lofty and precipitous hills behind Maskat. The Wadi Adi, which has a rough stony bed of many colours, and the mural surfaces of which disclose a singular variety of geological strata, bifurcates at its outlet from the hills into two streams, the

\* Map, p. 576.

torrent after heavy rain pouring not only into the Wadi Harmal, but also into the watercourse that runs by El Wateyeh.

At 10 miles from Mattrah, we arrive at Al Birain, a hamlet of the Beni Wahaib tribe, so called from two copious fountains issuing from the rocks hard by. From these springs two new felejes, or underground streams, have been conducted for the purposes of irrigation. The water being sweet and unfailing, orchards and gardens have been planted, and are thriving famously. Palms and various fruit trees, grain, and lucerne luxuriate here. A lofty tower, that indispensable and ubiquitous adjunct to an Arab settlement, without which the source of water-supply for the use of the inhabitants would lie at the mercy of their enemies, is being built on a gentle eminence, and will soon be completed. I had heard something about these felejes at Maskat, and was therefore much interested at seeing them. One of them was the property of a joint-stock company there, of which the Sultan's wazeer was the chief shareholder and promoter. The other shares were held by Indian merchants. The spring had been purchased from the Arab owners for a consideration, and I found that the shafts of the felej had been already sunk, and that the underground connections were in progress. The shareholders receive the water in their gardens in proportion, of course, to their interest in the company, the allotment being made every ten days. We halted here for the night. The elevation above the sea is 420 feet.

In the mountainous parts of Oman the roads run almost invariably along the beds of the hill torrents or wadies, which form the natural highways into the interior, and are sometimes sandy watercourses, sometimes deep rocky ravines, and sometimes broad fertile valleys.

Our second march was to lead us over the northern and more elevated of the two mountain ranges I have mentioned above, by the Kahza pass, which forms one of the main channels of communication between Maskat and the Sharkiyah, or eastern district of Oman; and as our day's journey was likely to be a long and toilsome one, we started early in the morning, and travelled in a southerly direction to where the Wadi Kahza enters the plain. This expanse is occupied not only with the usual stunted trees and shrubs of the wilderness, which are in this land never too abundant, and which have been here sadly diminished by the race of woodcutters who infest the neighbouring valleys to supply Maskat with firewood, but also with many singular natural pillars of considerable size, their surfaces indicating, with a precision that would be very interesting to a geologist, the composition of the surrounding hills.

We soon enter the Wadi Kahza, and commence the ascent up a gentle gradient along a good gravelly bed, treeless and waterless, cut through a deep bed of coarse conglomerate.

By-and-by we pass on our left the outlet of the Wadi Amda, which,

scoring the northern side of this range in a direction almost parallel with the Wadi Kahza, forms a shorter and more direct route to the Tyin valley. It is, however, a very rugged and difficult pass, the defile, I was told, being only a foot wide at one part, with a wall of rock on one hand and a precipice on the other. After a short rest under the grateful shade of a clump of large trees, we pursued our journey up the ravine for an hour and a half, the acclivity gradually increasing in sharpness as we proceed. Above us here tower two lofty peaks, one on either side, that to our right being a cap-shaped point called Jebel Sell. And now commenced the real struggle of the ascent, the zigzag path of which was so frightfully steep, and the footing so rugged and insecure, that the camels, though helped and encouraged with the utmost endeavours of the Arab drivers, only climbed it with extreme difficulty.

By the time we had reached the summit at 3 p.m. I was able to realize the truth of the warnings given me beforehand by the Arabs as to the perilous nature of this pass for beasts of burden, for the way-side was strewn with the whitening bones and skeletons of camels that had fallen over the edge and been left to perish. Fortunately, we had no fatal accident, though five of the animals fell during the ascent, and bruised their legs. The elevation of the Akabat el Kahza I found to be 3900 feet; but Jebel Tyin, which stands in front of us, is a giant by comparison, and rears its head to an altitude of 5250 feet. Just as we mounted the top we met Shaikh Saud bin Hamad of the Rehbiyin tribe, who was on his way to Maskat to solicit pardon from the Sultan for his perfidious conduct in opening the road to the rebel army on their way to besiege that town in September, 1883, on which occasion they were completely defeated. The Rehbiyin tribe have for many centuries possessed and occupied the Kahza pass, and have always been in receipt of an annual subsidy for holding it closed against the Sultan's enemies. The rencontre with our party did not appear very pleasing to the shaikh, who had always been profuse in his protestations of loyalty to the government, and after a hasty salutation he commenced to descend the path by which we had ascended.

With our faces still towards the south, we crossed the ridge and began to move down the Wadi Mugheira, a ravine which I found, to my surprise, to present not only a more severe gradient, but even a more rugged and formidable path than the Kahza. The banks are as steep as if artificially scarped, for the stratification is vertical or at very obtuse angles, and runs parallel to the direction of the wadi. Shapeless blocks of blue limestone, large enough to form a serious obstacle, are piled up in profusion in the rocky bed, rendering our progress very slow. Patient and docile as the camels were, it seemed impossible sometimes that they could extricate themselves from the confused masses of rock among which they appeared to be entangled, and keep

their feet on the slippery water-worn stones; but their drivers managed to get them through without mishap.

Owing, perhaps, to the protection afforded by the rugged nature of this torrent bed, and also to the presence of pools of water among the huge rock fragments, vegetation is tolerably abundant—tamarisks, oleanders, kafas, euphorbias, the tirucalla or milkbush, rhamnus, and acacias are the most common and characteristic, but many others I did not know are to be seen.

It was nearly sunset before we were able to remount our camels, and quite dark before we reached the foot of the Mugheira ravine, where we were to camp. Here we found water, but no shelter, and as it was too late to look about, we lighted fires and bivouacked for the night. Our camping-ground was 2070 feet below the summit of the Kahza pass, and the air was cold and humid here, owing to the quantity of vegetation and the numerous pools of water around.

On the following day we retraced our steps for a short distance, and then, turning to the south-east, began to ascend the Wadi Mansab, a broad highway with a slight acclivity and smooth, sandy bed, offering an excellent road. This wadi flows into the Wadi Semail near Surur, and forms, indeed, the principal route between the Tyin and Semail valleys. There are two large villages, Subh and Nafaah, in it, besides several hamlets, and it is fringed along the greater part of its course with fine date groves. I had been advised at Maskat before starting to travel by the Semail-Mansab route as the more easy and convenient way, but I had decided on taking the shorter though more troublesome route, as I was anxious to examine the Kahza pass, which I had never seen, while the Semail valley was very familiar to me. The nejd or upland of the Wadi Mansab was reached in two hours, and we soon espied in front of us the village of Al Wasit, belonging to the Rehbiyin, where I intended to halt.

The quarters assigned to me were in a pretty orchard composed of numerous fruit trees interspersed with flowering shrubs and plants, and here I soon made the acquaintance of the whole community, a very small one certainly, who crowded round to see their first English visitor. Our march this day had been a very short one, only 6 miles, as the camels wanted rest after the fatigues of the Kahza pass. Al Wasit is a picturesque little place in itself, but its surroundings are bleak and desolate in the extreme. Situated on the barren slope of the mountain range, nothing meets the eye but dark masses of hills, exhibiting no signs of human habitation, and decked with but scanty verdure. The head shaikh of the tribe resides here with his attendants, but there is no village, as the paucity of water does not admit of a large population. One little rill trickling from a neighbouring glen is allowed to collect in a reservoir, from which it is drawn economically for domestic use and irrigation. Notwithstanding its apparent insignificance, however, Al

Wasit is much frequented by native wayfarers and traders, as well as by the chiefs of other tribes, who come to visit the influential Shaikh of the Rehbiyin, Salim bin Hassam bin Mohammed, who at this time happened to be away.

On occasions when the martial tribes of Al Sharkiya contemplate rising and marching on Maskat with the object of extorting concessions from the Sultan, or of ousting him in favour of some rival, it becomes a matter of importance to gain over the tribes holding command of the various mountain passes through which a passage for the invading army must be purchased or forced. Most of the tribes holding such passes as Akk and Kahza are in receipt of a regular stipend from the Maskat government to keep them closed against the tribal coalitions on the war-path, but this precaution does not always avail. In September, 1883, the Rehbiyin tribe had played false to the Sultan, and, though in receipt of a good subsidy, had listened to the cajolements of Seyyid Abdul Aziz and Shaikh Salih bin Ali, and had given passage to the enemy, whereby they had been able to pour down the Kahza pass with such secrecy and dexterity as to take his Highness by surprise. The attack, however, owing in great measure to the support afforded to the Sultan by H.M.S. *Philomel*, which shelled the rebels from their position, an action fully approved by our Government, had signally failed. Some of the rebels had been already chastised, and the Rehbiyin, among others, were still afraid of reprisals against themselves.

*February 14.*—The road hence to the Wadi Tyin led us in a south-easterly direction down the Wadi Wasit, a well-wooded shallow water-course with a few palms. Leaving this nullah through a small gap between two vertical cliffs of white limestone, we arrive, after a short ride, at Naksa, a hamlet lying at the angle formed by the junction of the two wadis, and, passing this, we find ourselves at once in the stony bed of the Wadi Tyin. To our right, some little distance up the ravine, is a village called Baad, which is the highest settlement belonging to the Tyin tribes; but the source of this wadi is at Rautha, further south.

Beneath us now lay stretched, in all its picturesque beauty, one of the largest, most beautiful, and most populous valleys in Oman, the Wadi Tyin, a broad, straight vale lying between two mountain ranges, and extending north-west and south-east for a distance of nearly 25 miles. This rich oasis contains twenty-nine villages belonging to the Rehbiyin, Beni Arāba, Siābiyin, Nahaya, and Beni Battāsh tribes, embosomed in dense palm groves, with orchards and fields of varied cultivation. Many of these settlements are concealed in the secluded and secure ravines which deeply gash the mountain slope on either side of the valley, but many others extend along the fertile bed, their orchards and plantations fringing the oasis at intervals for miles. It is watered by no less than 360 springs according to the Arabs, with whom this number is a conventional one, and though it does not possess a

broad continuous river, the supply of water in the bed is perennial and abundant, flowing sometimes on the surface, sometimes disappearing in the porous soil. The northern of the two ranges holding Wadi Tyin between them is known in the valley by the name of Jebel Beida, or the White Mountain. It is tabular, and appears to be mainly composed of limestone in horizontal stratification, the average height being perhaps 3000 feet. Arid and sterile as these hills look, they are nevertheless inhabited by a considerable population of shepherds and goatherds, who rear large flocks. Their dwellings are mere oval shanties constructed of loose stones, and they subsist on the flesh and milk of their animals, cultivating only a few vegetables and indigo, which is in extensive demand in the valley. The crevices and hollows in the hills produce an abundance of thorny undergrowth and coarse herbage, from which the goats manage to extract food and nutriment in the most inaccessible spots. But the botany here and throughout the hilly districts is decidedly limited in character, and there is no great variety of species; indeed, the French botanist, Aucher Eloy, reckons that the total number of species in Oman does not extend five hundred. The usual vegetation here consists of colocynth, rue, acacia, vera and arabica, aloes, calotropis, senna, liquorice, euphorbia, brambles, sidr or rhamnus, and others. The wild animals are the ibex, called wail of the Arabs; the wild goat recently identified by Mr. Oldfield Thomas, and named after its discoverer, Dr. Jayakar; hares, foxes, hyenas, etc.

The range on the southern side of the Wadi Tyin is known to some as Jebel Hallowi, to others as Jebel Sauda. This range forms a minor spur from the great chain striking off near Zikki. Its mean height appears to be about 2000 feet, and it has no peak of any great altitude. On the southern flank, which merges gradually into the desert, it throws out several large shallow watercourses, such as the Wadi Andam, Wadi Beni Khalid, and Wadi Halfain, all flowing to the sea south of Ras al Had. The dwellers in this favoured vale, the Wadi Tyin, have made the most of the natural advantages and capabilities of their rocky home, and have, with the indomitable energy and perseverance of the Arab character, industriously laboured to produce all that the fertility of the soil, conjoined with warmth of climate, is capable of. In addition to the usual grains and vegetables raised in Oman, they cultivate kumkum or turmeric, sugar-cane, bastard saffron, and henna. But it is to fruit culture that the Arab specially devotes his attention. The date, the most characteristic tree of Eastern Arabia, ranks, of course, first, and the vast assemblage of palms in this valley is very striking. Vines, peaches, apricots, custard apples, guavas, figs, pomegranates, plums, limes, sweet limes, quinces, oranges, bananas, citrons, mangoes, melons, and mulberries are also cultivated, and with considerable success.

We now pass, at a rapid trot, several villages in succession, each

embowered in an umbrageous date grove, the water here perennially flowing in a copious stream. The first village is Al Bir, with a watch-tower perched on an eminence commanding an extensive view down the valley, and having an aqueduct raised on stone pillars crossing the road. At this point the valley is 1900 feet above sea-level. Nestled in a corner is a town called Miss, inhabited by the Beni Jabir, with beautiful orchards, and enshrined in a little forest of date-palms, which rear their graceful crests over it as if to shade it from the scorching rays of the sun. As our guide, Shaikh Nasir, belonged to this tribe, we were heartily welcomed by the people, and invited to stop, but this I was obliged to decline.

Almost adjoining it is another town with a good cluster of houses, and possessing a masonry aqueduct built up 20 feet above the bed of the wadi to feed the palms and cultivation, a work of considerable pretension for such a place. We halted at Sibal, a fine, large village some miles further on, with an abundant supply of water, and every kind of fruit growing in the gardens. The venerable and courteous chief of this place, Shaikh Mesud, who had met us on arrival, furnished me with a comfortable hut to lodge in, and after we had sat together for a little time to drink coffee, took me for a walk round the town. There are some substantial houses in it, four mosques, and several *sablaks*, or meeting-places. The shaikh pointed out Akabat Amda, which bears a little to the north-east, and informed me that another pass called Akabat Mankal lay almost opposite Sibal and eastward of Amda; he said it was steeper than the Kahza, and was formed by two ravines, viz. Wadi Tima, running into Wadi Tyin, and Wadi Sarreya, on the Kuryat side. The shaikh was acquainted with three roads leading from Wadi Tyin to Al Sharkiya, two of which branch off from Malhalhah, and one from Gubra el Tam. There is much traffic between Al Sharkiya and Maskat by these passes, the roads converging at the Akabat Amda on the northern range, which forms the most direct passage.

In other parts of Oman I had found that certain tribes, particularly those who possessed large herds of camels and droves of asses, had obtained, in the course of ages by length of usage, peculiar privileges throughout the country as carriers of merchandize, but in this valley I could hear of no tribe that could boast of this privilege; all the traders, pedlars, and peripatetic vendors of goods being Mekrani Beluches, who act as agents or travellers for the Hindu and Khoja merchants of Maskat and Kuryat, the latter never venturing to penetrate into the interior of Oman themselves. Collecting from the various settlements in the valley and adjacent parts, the fruits and other produce of the soil, these Beluches bring back in return the sugar, oil, cloth, metals, and other commodities required by the people, though the large Arab proprietors have, of course, direct transactions with the Banians.



The name of this place is suggestive. In the Omani dialect, Sibal means an ape or monkey, and it was the name of a famous idol worshipped by the Arabs in pagan times before Islam. As there are no monkeys in Oman, it is possible that here in ancient days stood a temple dedicated to that image.

Sibal is 1500 feet above the sea, and is distant from Al Wasit about 13 miles. The journey hence to Ghubreh el Tam took us five hours, the distance being about the same, and the aneroid showing a fall of 500 feet in elevation.

From Sibal to Ghubra el Tam the valley continues to present the same character as in its upper part, occasionally contracting and expanding, but on the whole widening considerably as we proceed eastwards, while the hills on either side maintain their altitude. Water is abundant everywhere, in pools and in motion, and many streams pour down from the hillside to swell the volume of the main torrent in flood-times. We pass many villages on our way, cultivation and palm groves alternating with desolation and arid rock. Two of the settlements of the Beni Battash, Hidda and Akdah, are so close together that they form but one large town extending for upwards of a mile, picturesquely flanked by two lofty watch-towers, which command the approaches and guard the water-supply. We were riding slowly and peacefully past Akdah, when our advance was suddenly and unexpectedly challenged by the inhabitants, who, either from panic or some other cause, gathered on the road in front of us in great excitement and offered to bar our progress, firing their matchlocks in the air and brandishing their spears and swords frantically, as if we deserved instant annihilation. This insult on the part of the people greatly provoked Seyyid Nasir, who abused them roundly, and could not conceal his vexation. However, it soon appeared that the noisy demonstration was not of an alarming nature, and as the shaikhs and elders of Akdah used their efforts to quiet the mob, the storm was soon over, and we proceeded quietly on our way. I did not mention the incident to the Temima of the tribe, Shaikh Shamas, when we met next day, but he heard of it from others, and was greatly ashamed of his people's conduct. He apologized to us for it, and announced his intention of punishing those concerned, but I doubt if he possessed the power of doing so.

The town of Ghubra el Tam is very picturesquely situated on the skirt of an eminence, which, lying at the end of the valley and thus forming a barrier against the onward progress of the stream, has caused it to swerve to the northward and cut its way through the mountain range down to the sea. It has some good houses and a population of over a thousand of the Siābiyin tribe, and is protected by a strong fort of oblong shape perched on the western extremity of the hill.

At this time there was very little water in the wadi, the unusual

dryness of its bed being due to the severe and long-continued drought, from which this part of Oman had been suffering, and our party were congratulating themselves on having arrived at such an opportune time for passing through the gorge, when their joy was suddenly turned into dismay by a slight shower of rain which fell in the evening. The clouds now began to gather so ominously in the sky, that if it had not been so late I should have pushed on at once without halting. It had, however, already become too dark to permit of this, and with some foreboding—for the intensity of the heat seemed to threaten a thunder-storm—we took up our quarters for the night in the habitation our hosts the shaikhs of the town had allotted to us. Had it rained heavily, as many of us fully expected, I should have had to wait here until the torrent had subsided sufficiently to allow of our proceeding through the gap, which would undoubtedly have entailed a delay of several days.

The exploration of this cañon had been one of the main objects of my journey, as it had not before been traversed by a European, so I was resolved to seize the present chance of visiting it at all risks. Fortunately, the night passed without the expected downpour, and though the morning of the 16th broke gloomily and lowery, the rain still held off, and the stream flowing at our feet had risen but slightly. After a consultation, we deemed it best to face the peril of a sudden rush of water through the gorge, and hazard the passage before the storm, which now appeared inevitable, could burst upon us and unite the rills and streamlets of the valley into a swift and overwhelming torrent. Having hastily loaded the camels, therefore, we started early, and crossed the bed of the wadi, in which the water was running a little over 2 feet deep, just opposite the town. We then found ourselves at once at the entrance of the great cleft, which is as sharp and abrupt as if we were entering the portals of some monstrous castle and stood immured within its massive walls. Towering loftily, sheer and perpendicular above the narrow floor, the huge walls of rock give the appearance as if the mountain range had been suddenly split in twain from the base to the summit by some convulsion of nature, exhibiting a singular illustration of impressive grandeur. The breadth of the passage here is about 100 yards, but it varies throughout its length from 500 to 150 yards, while the cliffs rise to an altitude of from 1000 to 1500 feet, as near as I could judge. The stream appeared to flow 4 or 5 miles an hour, and gradually increases in volume as we progress, being fed by the springs of water which burst from the crevices in the walls. Throughout the chasm the camels were wading nearly up to their knees.

After riding along this grand and curious gallery for a quarter of a mile, we are told to dismount, having arrived at a sort of deep step or waterfall called the Akaba. Here the camels are relieved of their baggage and saddles, and are taken along a ledge of the precipice on the left bank which leads circuitously to the bed further on, while the

men of our party are let down by a rope over the projection on to the floor of the wadi below. This remarkable step or fall in the rock offered a very serious impediment, as it was of considerable depth, while huge blocks and fragments of blue and white limestone, that had fallen from above, added to the difficulty, and presented an obstacle which was absolutely insuperable to the camels, even when freed of their loads. The path leading to the fall, along which we had to scramble, was so rugged and slippery, and the cliff was so smooth and waterworn, that even the Arabs, who are as nimble as cats, did not find it easy work.

The solicitude evinced for my safety, not only by my own party, but also by the Siābiyin who had accompanied us from Ghubreh, was almost touching, though the descent could not in fact be called perilous. Indeed, throughout my excursions in Oman, I always had reason to be grateful to the Arabs of my escort, and not unfrequently to the local Arab shaikhs, for their zeal and self-sacrifice on my behalf. They never resented the inconvenience and fatigue I often caused them, but deferred without question to my wishes as to the when and the whither; while on any occasion of unusual toil or danger, they seemed to regard my safety and comfort as a main point of consideration.

At the bottom of this pass, called Al Makuba by our Siābiyin guides, we waited an hour for the camels, which, though carefully led by the drivers, did not traverse the narrow and dangerous ledge on the other bank without serious difficulty and hazard. Fortunately, however, they arrived at last in safety, and the baggage, which had in the mean time been lowered down by the Arabs, having been replaced, we mounted and resumed our journey.

The channel is here at its broadest, but it narrows further on, and becomes gloomy and cavernous, the mountain frowning above to a height of about 1500 feet. The cliff on the right bank at this part is known as Hail el Kebir, that on the left as Hail el Harim. Winding along this stupendous chasm, we occasionally have to encounter immense fragments of rock, piled in confusion on the floor, and obstructing the road, while above us are to be seen curious crags, overarching rocks, and other peculiar features of natural architecture. There is no lateral opening throughout the entire length, and only one small ravine falls into it, this being on the left bank. The geological structure of this range, as disclosed by the walls of this chasm, is mainly limestone, superimposed, probably, on the plutonic formation of which the rocks at Maskat are an outcrop. The lowest stratum to be seen is conglomerate, the upper layer of which is arenaceous. Overlying this with a horizontal stratification are courses of limestone, white or blueish, the upper rocks appearing to be of a reddish colour.

As may readily be supposed, the heavy and tumultuous torrents that frequently sweep the bed preclude the possibility of trees and plants

surviving the rush of water, and we consequently find here no vegetation whatever. Even the long period of three years that had elapsed since the last flood had not produced any sign of bush or reed that I could see.

After heavy rain, the volume of water flowing through this chasm must be enormous, and the surging and raging torrent must then be a magnificent sight. It not unfrequently happens that travellers and caravans coming from Kuryat are engulfed and overwhelmed by the sudden rise and rush of the stream, as the innumerable tributaries and affluents in a drainage-area of some 200 square miles, swelling after rain, would concentrate at the gorge with marvellous rapidity and force, and form a mighty and irresistible wave, destroying everything in its path.

This effort of nature to provide an outflow for the pent-up waters of the Tyin valley through a mountain range is the most singular specimen of earth-sculpture I have seen in Arabia, and consists, in short, of a narrow, winding, vertical-sided gallery or cañon, extending for about 6 miles in a north-east and south-west direction, excavated through the solid limestone rock by the erosive action of water in a period of countless ages.

The peculiar character of this chasm, and the grand and picturesque scenery of its surroundings, create an impression on the mind which is not easily effaced. The Arab name for it is the Wadi Thaika, meaning the "Strait or Narrow Torrent."

It was one o'clock before we emerged from the cañon, our rate of progress in it being necessarily slow, and we found the opening at this end less abrupt than at the other, the walls gradually receding on each side and declining in altitude as we proceed. The high point of the range known as Kuryat peak to navigators, and to Arabs as Jebel al Zatri, now lies to our left, and raises its head 6200 feet above us, falling in terraces to the plain, while the mountain cliff to our right over Dagmar has been reckoned at 4000 feet.

Winding round a low hill, we come all at once upon the town of Mezâra, the chief settlement of the powerful Beni Battash tribe, surrounded by thousands of date-palms, rearing their tufted heads in a dense grove; and so sudden and unexpected is our appearance, that no little commotion is caused among the inhabitants, who fly to arms, and rouse themselves into an absurd fit of excitement. Much firing and shouting ensues, but the hubbub evaporates on the appearance of Shaikh Mohammed Adi, who holds this part of the town, and who is most pressing for us to be his guests and remain the night.

But Seyyid Nasir whispers to me that the two shaikhs are not on good terms, and suggests the expediency of moving on to the castle. We accordingly politely decline Shaikh Mohammed's invitation, and ride up to the spot where Shaikh Shamas bin Mohammed, the temima or paramount chief of the tribe, is awaiting us.

I had known this venerable and noble-looking shaikh for many

years, as he often came to Maskat, and I had learned to like and respect his character. His reception now was most cordial, and I was much gratified at it, as it greatly increased the pleasure I felt at being able to pay him a visit in his own home. As we halted and dismounted on the bank of a small but rapid stream that intersects the plain and winds among the palm groves and settlements, Shaikh Shamas came down from his castle at the head of a long procession of his people, and gave Seyyid Nasir and myself a hearty welcome. With a levity and humour uncommon among Arab shaikhs, who are usually grave and dignified, he put his hands on my throat and declared he would throttle me if I did not promise then and there to spend a day with him and accept his hospitality. There was no disputing with him on this point, so, having been carried over the river by his men, I walked up the eminence with the shaikh and Seyyid Nasir, followed by a dense crowd of Arabs to the fort. Just as we approached it, an old twelve-pounder gun lying unmounted on the ground in front of the gateway was fired off in honour of the occasion, the report reverberating finely among the surrounding hills. From this gateway, and in a higher degree from the roof of the castle, the landscape presented to the view is one of exceeding beauty. The town is situated in a small circular plain, the low hills encircling which, with their dark background of lofty peaks and tabular mountains, render it invisible from the sea, and constitute a natural fortification, giving an assurance of peaceful security. The lower part of the plain is filled up by habitations, plantations, orchards, and cultivation, while standing high on the east side is the castle, square, substantial, and imposing.

The temima took us into his reception-hall, where we sat down to talk while coffee was being roasted, pounded, and boiled at the other end of the room. The interior of the castle does not accord with the pretension of its external appearance, for it is but scantily furnished and decorated, and can boast of but little comfort. Chairs, sofas, and furniture, as we understand it, are not to be found in the shaikh's residence, for the Oman Arab is a plain man, simple in his habits, and free from ostentation; his wants are few, and, however well off he may be, he does not indulge in luxurious sloth, or surround himself with many articles of needless luxury. Even the women's apartments are bare and empty; a carpet, a box of clothes, and articles of domestic use are the only things to be seen. The temima, however, was extremely courteous, and treated us very hospitably.

He informed me that the abutment of the range on the north-west side of the Thaika gap was called Jebel Nuwai, and that on the south-east side was Jebel Naab; the Beni Nuwai and Beni Naab being two of the pastoral tribes who occupy the tableland of these hills, and subsist on their flocks of goats and sheep. These shepherds are probably of mixed Arab and aboriginal descent, and form the main

following in war of the settled tribes in the neighbourhood, of which they are, in fact, the Bedouin portion.

Mezara greatly charmed me by its quiet beauty. The rich orchards and gardens and the rippling brook made the locality very delightful and attractive, and I almost envied Shaikh Shamas his residence in so favoured a spot; but, shut in as it is by hills, I should imagine it to be excessively hot and oppressive in the summer months. Just below the town is an aqueduct on five arches, constructed a few years ago for the purpose of leading water from the stream to irrigate the cultivation. Running into the Thaika valley beyond Mezara is a ravine called Wadi Khabba, with a large village of the same name; and under the lofty cliffs to the south-east of Hail are Wallja and Sunt, the latter belonging to the Sābiyin tribe.

Good fortune had befriended us in allowing our passage through the dreaded Thaika without being overtaken and submerged by a flood. We had, however, only just escaped in time, as the heavy masses of clouds which had been brooding over us since yesternoon began now to descend in a deluge, and a grand thunderstorm broke upon the hills and valleys.

The rain continued all the afternoon, and was most joyfully welcomed by the Arabs, who naturally looked on our arrival in their town as a propitious omen.

Our departure from Mezara the next day was accompanied by the same demonstrations of friendship as our arrival, and, after taking leave of our hosts, we mounted our camels in the presence of the whole community. For 5 or 6 miles our course led along the bed of the river, which, known above as Wadi Thaika, receives here the appellation of Wadi Hail. The banks near Mezara are about 1000 feet high, and perpendicular, but they continue to decrease in elevation and to broaden out as we advance seaward. Along the left bank runs a fine masonry felej, with shafts to raise the water at intervals, recently constructed to replace an old one built by the sultans of the Yaareba dynasty, two centuries before, and now fallen into decay. It soon leads off northwards to supply the gardens and groves of Hail el Ghâf.

On arrival at the settlement, we were met by Seyyid Hilal bin Said bin Hamad and his two brothers, and were escorted to a building forming a single spacious reception-room, situated in a pleasant garden. Here we sat and rested for several hours, enjoying the fragrance of the flowers and the balmy atmosphere of this salubrious spot.

The Hail el Ghaf settlement is said to have been founded by Seyyid Khalfan Al Bu Saidi, a notable man in Oman in the early years of this century, who took a conspicuous part in cementing the friendship of the English with the Maskat government, he being at that time wali or governor of that town.

Prior to the selection of this locality for building and planting by

Seyyid Khalfan and his family, Hail el Ghaf was merely a patch of elevated ground, partly surrounded by the wadi, and covered with a thicket of acacia trees (ghaf), from which circumstance it derives its name. The land was purchased from the Beni Battash tribe, who, however, retained a portion of it, and still exercise a sort of protection over the place. The benign sway of the Al Bu Saidis, and the liberal manner in which money has been expended, have caused the village to flourish and the population to increase to its present number, about 1200 souls.

Hail abounds in orchards and cultivation, and a vast quantity of fruit and vegetables are sent to the Maskat and other markets. The Arabs are as passionately fond of flowers as they are of strong perfumes, and take great delight, when they can afford it, in horticulture. The number and variety of fruit and flower trees, imported at various periods from Persia and India into Oman, testify to the appreciation by the Arab of these plants, and to the care bestowed on them. The "bostans" or gardens, therefore, as may be supposed, absorb most of the time of the aristocracy of Hail, who seem to take the keenest enjoyment in tending their roses and jasmine, and in spending the livelong day in the shade of their *sablaks* or summer-houses. The most beautiful feature in the vicinity of Hail is a broad, straight avenue of superb mango trees over two miles in length.

At 4 p.m. we started for Kuryat, where I intended to pass the night, and on the way we encountered another thunderstorm and heavy downpour of rain, which drenched us through. It was hailed as a blessing by the Arabs to the parched and thirsty soil, and their loud exclamations of gratitude sufficed to reconcile us to our discomfort. We rode fast to escape the deluge, and covered the 12 miles between Hail and Kuryat in an hour and a half.

I took up my quarters in Seyyid Hamad bin Khalfan's large house, which is fortified with two towers, and here I was detained the whole of the following day by the rain, which fell in torrents and without intermission, much to the delight of the inhabitants, but somewhat to my annoyance, for I had visited Kuryat on many previous occasions, and knew it too well to desire its further acquaintance. This town lies 31 miles south-east of Maskat, and is situated about a mile from the shore, on the maritime plain lying between the great range and the sea. The plain contains about a dozen hamlets, and is intersected by two wadis. It forms an extensive pasture-ground, on which in former days an excellent breed of horses was reared by the inhabitants, who exported them from Kuryat in considerable numbers to Surat to supply the Indian market. Chiefly owing, I believe, to internal dissensions, this trade became very precarious, and ultimately came to an end about two centuries ago. The population of Kuryat is 3000, and it has a good bazaar with several shops belonging to Hindu traders, who supply the settlements in the Wadi Tyin and in the hilly districts

east of Maskat with foreign merchandise, the Wadi Tyin being the main artery through which the traffic between Kuryat and the interior passes. This port and Sur are the Karteia and Tsor, the Carthage and Tyre, of the race whom we know as the Phœnicians, and who, as far back as the time of Solomon, or earlier, had trading-stations along the southern coast of Arabia. They are undoubtedly of great antiquity, and retain their primitive names to this day. Their convenient and important position on the Arab coast just opposite India, must, like Kilhat and Khor Jerama (Corodamon), have led to their early occupation as trading depots by the merchants of those times who were engaged in exchanging the productions of the East and West.

The sun rose on the 19th in a clear sky, and we were soon beyond the outskirts of Kuryat, ascending the Wadi Mijlas, a deep and narrow ravine which leads in a tortuous fashion and in a generally south-west direction to Sawâkin, whither the Wali of Kuryat accompanied us on horseback. Sawâkin is a small and pretty hamlet, and forms a triangle with Hail el Ghaf and Kuryat, from which latter town it is 9 miles distant. Here, enshrined in a fine plantation of palms, is a large house built by Seyyid Said bin Khalfan, who used this charming and peaceful retreat as his country house in the hot weather. After an hour's halt at Sawâkin, we leave the Wadi Mijlas, and, striking off to the west, traverse a rough, desolate, and very broken country, a confused mass of ridges and hillocks of limestone, the strata of which appear to slope generally southwards. We twist and turn along the watercourses, which, adorned with dwarf acacias, thorny shrubs, and jungle herbage, intersect the country.

We pass several villages on the road, Heither, Muntheriya, and others, all belonging to the Beni Wahaib and Beni Hassan; and about halfway to Maskat, Sarraya, a small town of cloth-weavers, is pointed out in a well-watered and fertile ravine 6 or 7 miles away to our left. In the evening we reached Al Hajar, a village in the Wadi Hatat, where we camped for the night. It is a comparatively new settlement, for when I first visited the spot in 1876, the ground was being prepared to receive Busreh date-palms, and a felij, half a mile long, had been projected and commenced by Seyyid Hilal bin Ahmed, who had purchased the fountain from its proprietors, the Beni Wahaib. Though water is very plentiful and the soil tolerably productive, the plantations did not appear to have thriven as well as might have been expected. The felij was destroyed, it seems, by a flood soon after it was completed, and had to be rebuilt, and other causes have combined to retard progress; but, like its neighbour Al Birain, which I have mentioned before, it struggles on, and is fairly profitable to its enterprising founder. Tobacco is one of the chief articles cultivated about here, and is grown for the Maskat market.

The Wadi Hatat, in which we now stand, extends, under its various



names of Wadi Kahza, Wadi Hatat, and Wadi Maih, from Jebel Kahza to Yiti, being joined on the way by the Wadi Amda and numerous other ravines. At the foot of Wadi Kahza the hills open out, and a small plain is formed 9 or 10 miles long called Seh Hatat, which has been the scene of many a sanguinary battle in Oman history. It contains several villages and much cultivation, and is possessed by five tribes, viz. the Beni Wahaib, Beni Hassan, Beni Jabir, Beni Battash, and Al Maashera.

The range to our left, on the other flank of which runs the Wadi Tyin, and to which the Rehbiyin and Siabiyyin tribes gave the general name of Jebel Beida, is not known by this name to the Beni Wahaib, who, indeed, could give me no appellation for it.

The Wadi Maih, which extends from Al Hajar to the sea at Yiti, is a narrow vale about 9 miles in length, with a rough stony bed and a fast-flowing stream of water, in which the fragrant and ubiquitous oleander is extremely abundant. It is in general barren, with occasional patches of cultivation. The hamlets in it are Al Mezra Alowi, where the orchards are walled or revetted up on the banks to preserve them from the encroachment and rush of the torrent; then El Mezra Sifala, then Rijaa, and then Yiti.

The geology of the Hatat valley is extremely curious and interesting, as it exhibits on the one hand the nature and stratification of the sedimentary rocks, of which the great mountain chain of Oman appears to be principally composed; and on the other, the metamorphic or igneous structures forming the dark group of hills at Maskat. The bed of the Wadi is throughout of limestone pebbles, underneath which is a coarse conglomerate. The hills are most varied in colour, and the strata lie at all angles.

In the Seh Hatat there are many curious natural pillars about 25 or 30 feet in height, standing some distance apart, and apparently the effect of denudation, the general aspect of this plain suggesting the idea that it may have been in remote times the basin holding the drainage of the surrounding hills in the form of a lake, until the eroding action of the water had excavated its way through the Wadis Maih and Adi down to the sea.

Near Al Hajar the limestone rocks were of a reddish tinge, and appeared to be mixed with layers of blue mud.

In the Wadi Maih the mural section shows the plutonic action in a most unmistakable form, the rocks being all confused and crumpled up, and the strata lying in folds or arches, as it were, over huge blocks of limestone.

We left Al Hajar the following morning, and pursued a course varying from north-west to north. After passing Al Birain, we enter abruptly the defile of Wadi Adi, and then, turning down the Seh Harmal, we soon arrive at Muttrah.