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AMONG THE HILL FOLK OF ALGERIA



Synopsis

TO the reader of guide books, of railway time-tables, and of the advertisements of tourist agencies it may appear almost absurd that a traveller should pretend to have anything new to say about a range of wild and barren hills whose western spurs are visible to the naked eye of the visitor to one of the most popular tourist resorts of the whole world; Biskra, the oasis on the fringe of the Algerian Sahara, whose hotels are thronged each winter by hosts of seekers after sunshine and a dry climate*It may indeed seem incredible to these visitors, as they wander around Biskra's crowded market, or lounge in the beautiful garden of the Chateau Landon, that less than one hundred miles away, amid and beyond the ranges of barren rocks, whose glorious coloration at sunset fills them with wonder and almost with awe as they gaze to the north-east from the oasis, there are to be found to this day many villages in which a European woman has never been seen, and a white race of natives very many of whose arts and crafts, customs and beliefs have never been described in print.Nevertheless it is a fact that during our three winters spent in the fastnesses of the Aur&s mountains, for such is the name of the hills to which I have referred, my wife has been the first European woman to be seen by the stay-at*home inhabitants of many a remote village.natives who do not wander to the great centres of civilization, and that we have been enabled to elicit a considerable amount of information as to the manners and customs of the fair-haired Berbers of the hills which has hitherto remained unknown to European students of native life.The object of our journeys in the winters 1912-13, 1913-14, and 1919-20 was to collect specimens of Berber handicraft for the Pitt-Rivers Museum, Oxford, as well as to glean all possible information upon the life of the people and upon the ancient medicine and surgery which, it was suspected, had been secretly practised in the Aur&s for many generations past, and which it has been our privilege to examine in some detail for the first time.Some of the information we have collected has been laid before various learned societies in England; it is hoped, in due course, to publish the technical results of our work in full.The present volume, far from attempting to discuss at length the various ethnographical problems presented by the Berbers, constitutes an endeavour to answer some of the innumerable questions as to their life and as to the conditions under which journeys in the hills can be carried out that have been put to us by passing travellers at Biskra, El Kantara, and elsewhere, each time we have come down from the Aur&s to rest; questions which show clearly that many a visitor to Algeria would gladly learn more of the life of its natives than a stay in a tourist centre can reveal to him, and that there are many who would undertake expeditions among the Mil-folk were they aware of the conditions prevailing in the mountains.Having wandered up and down all the main valleys of the Aur&s massif, visiting many of its remotest hamlets as well as all its

larger villages, I have endeavoured in the following pages so to describe the country that any of my readers who care to undergo the discomforts incidental to travel in such districts may follow in our footsteps, and in addition, for it is hoped soon to construct motor roads through the heart of the massif, to point the way to many interesting and beautiful localities which will, in the future, be accessible to the tourist who indulges in the luxury of a car. In taking the reader from village to village in the Aurès I have attempted to bring to his notice many of the more remarkable of the customs of the Berbers so that, having accompanied us through these pages in our wanderings in the hills, he may obtain a greater knowledge of the life of this ancient people than he could acquire without spending many months in daily contact with it or by the study of existing

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