

The Troglodytes, Strange Cave Dwellers of Tripoli

Frank Edward Johnson, Returning from Tour Through Mystic Country, Describes These People

"La ilah ilah Allah."
"Mohammed ar-ra-soula Allah."
"Allah is Allah! There is no God but Allah."
"Mohammed is the Prophet of God."

THIS is the call to prayer that rings out five times a day from the lips of the musain to the dark skinned people of the town of Guermessa, one of the most inaccessible strongholds of the Troglodytes, cave dwellers, in Tripoli. They come from their homes in the caves, turn their faces toward Mecca, kneel and bow together, touching their faces to the ground several times.

Religion is foremost in the minds of these rugged Arabs, dwellers in caves in almost impassable mountains, overlooking the Great Sahara, described by Frank Edward Johnson, who has just returned to the United States from a tour through the country for the National Geographic Society.

In these underground dwellings the people live like the patriarchs of old. Sometimes one hundred persons live in a single dwelling. The head of the family is the master, and he lives with his sons, his sons' sons, their wives and their children. Each family has an individual cave.

Scattered from Gabes to Debibat and from Matmata over the Tripoli border are cave dwellers. They live on the mountain sides. Sometimes there are small groups, many times a single family. The towns are built in ovals, with only one entrance for each tribe, so that a small group of men heavily armed could if necessary, protect their strongholds from thieves or enemies.

All of the Troglodyte towns are set far in the wilderness and can be approached only with the greatest difficulty, according to the word brought back by Mr. Johnson. This makes them places of exceptional vantage in time of war. The people could see an enemy approaching in the desert for many miles unless it was at night. Even then the passageway—a narrow path through the mountain—would be too dangerous for approach, for a misstep would mean a fall of hundreds of feet onto the rocks below.

Guermessa, which Mr. Johnson spent much time in, is one of the most difficult Troglodyte towns to reach, for it is located on the top of a sugar loaf mountain extending nearly 2,000 feet above the desert. The narrow, zigzag trail to the summit is so slippery that even the mountain goats have difficulty in passing through it. It has been worn smooth by centuries of wear and the rocks are like polished marble.

Sidi Hadj, the holy man of the town, and Mr. Johnson became close friends and the American spent considerable time in his cave at Guermessa. Sidi Hadj's own cave was large, and the rear part of the floor was raised about a foot higher than the front of the cave," said Mr. Johnson in describing it in the society's magazine. "Rugs from Kairovan and Persia were laid over the stone floor and numerous Tonareg leather cushions stuffed with sheep's wool were strewn about.

"These thick Oriental rugs were intended to sleep on and not to walk upon. The uneven stone floor of a Troglodyte cave is a very uncomfortable place to sleep on, but use a couple of thick Oriental rugs and cover yourself with a berrous, or Arab cloak, and you have a most comfortable bed.

"On the stone walls of the cave hung a miniature arsenal of flintlock pistols and long barreled guns and shotguns. A very large wooden chest, painted green, with Moorish designs in red and gold, stood at the back of the cave, which was about seven feet high by fourteen feet wide and about twenty-four feet deep.

"Two Persian pictures of Mecca decorated the walls, and some ornamental berberon for wearing during a fantasia, and the usual cous-cous plates and platters brought from Ghadames, usually used for decoration by the Troglodytes. They reminded me of our Indian woveen plates and baskets of certain tribes of the Far West and New Mexico. They are so well woven that they hold liquids like a dish, and they have simple but decorative patterns worked in color.

"Dinner was served that night by the wives of Sidi Hadj's sons, and, although it was extremely plain, proved tempting and excellent. On the Troglodyte table usually is placed a platter of native wheat with a half or whole sheep or lamb. The eldest son of the host cuts it into long strips and pulls these apart with his fingers. Each person at the table then takes the portion directly in front of him. Several huge bowls, loving cups, are passed around filled with water when the diners become thirsty. Oftentimes Arabs make their meals on a few handfuls of barley and some dried dates, water and a cup of coffee.

"The Troglodytes of extreme southern Tunisia speak Berber-Arabic and are all Mohammedans. Their ancestors were all mountain Troglodytes, living on the steep peaks of the table lands, overlooking great stretches of desert land. But as years went on the scarcity of food and water drove the younger generations of some of the villages into the plains, where they have lived since.

But they were used to the cave homes, and so in the lowlands they built artificial caves. These are found in Medenine, Metmenet, and other towns further south. Some of the caves are used as dwellings and others, larger, serve as storehouses for food, guns, ammunition, harness and agricultural implements.

Most of the tribes are nomadic during about nine months of the year. While most of the party are wandering with the

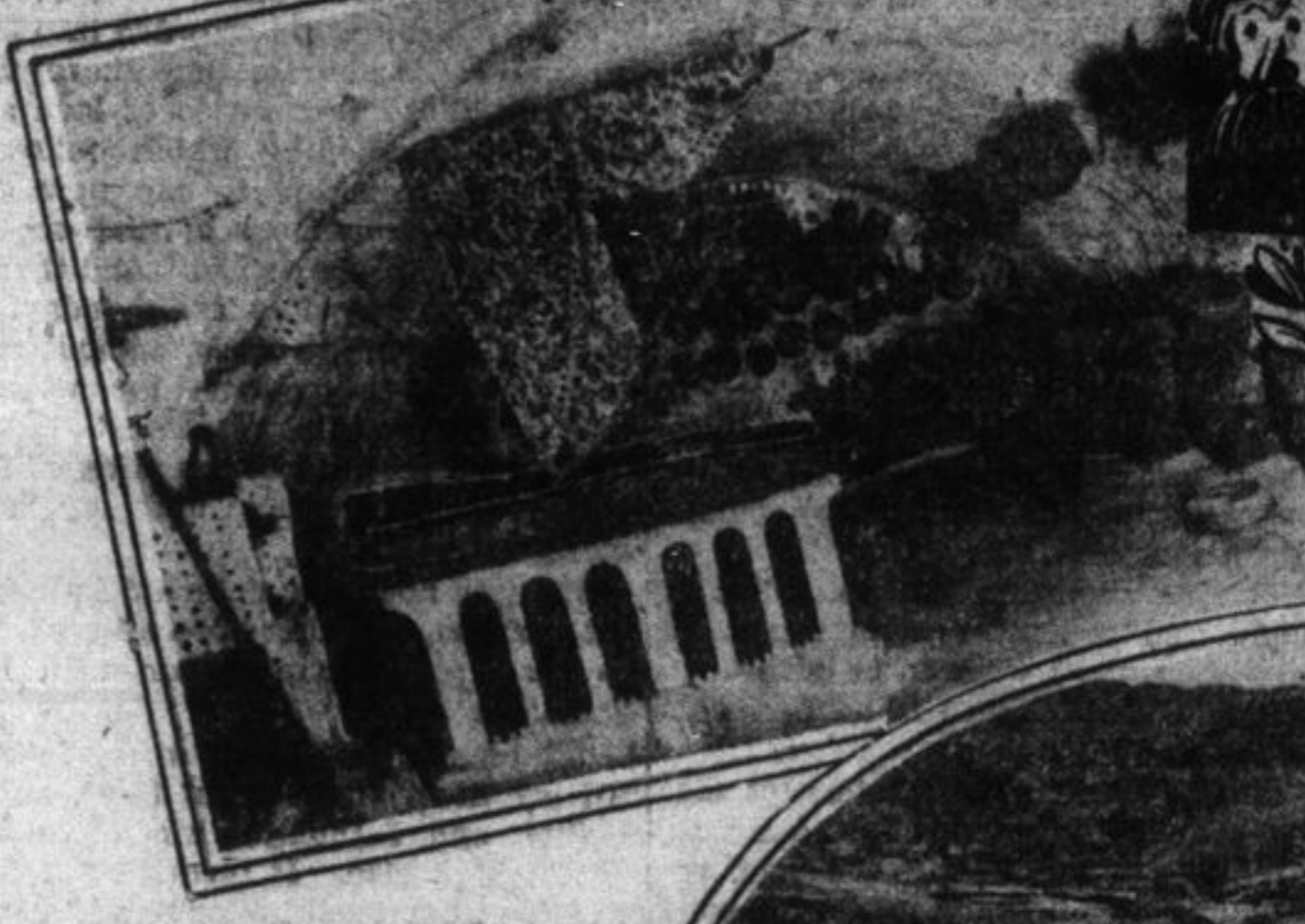


Cave Dwelling Women at a Well.
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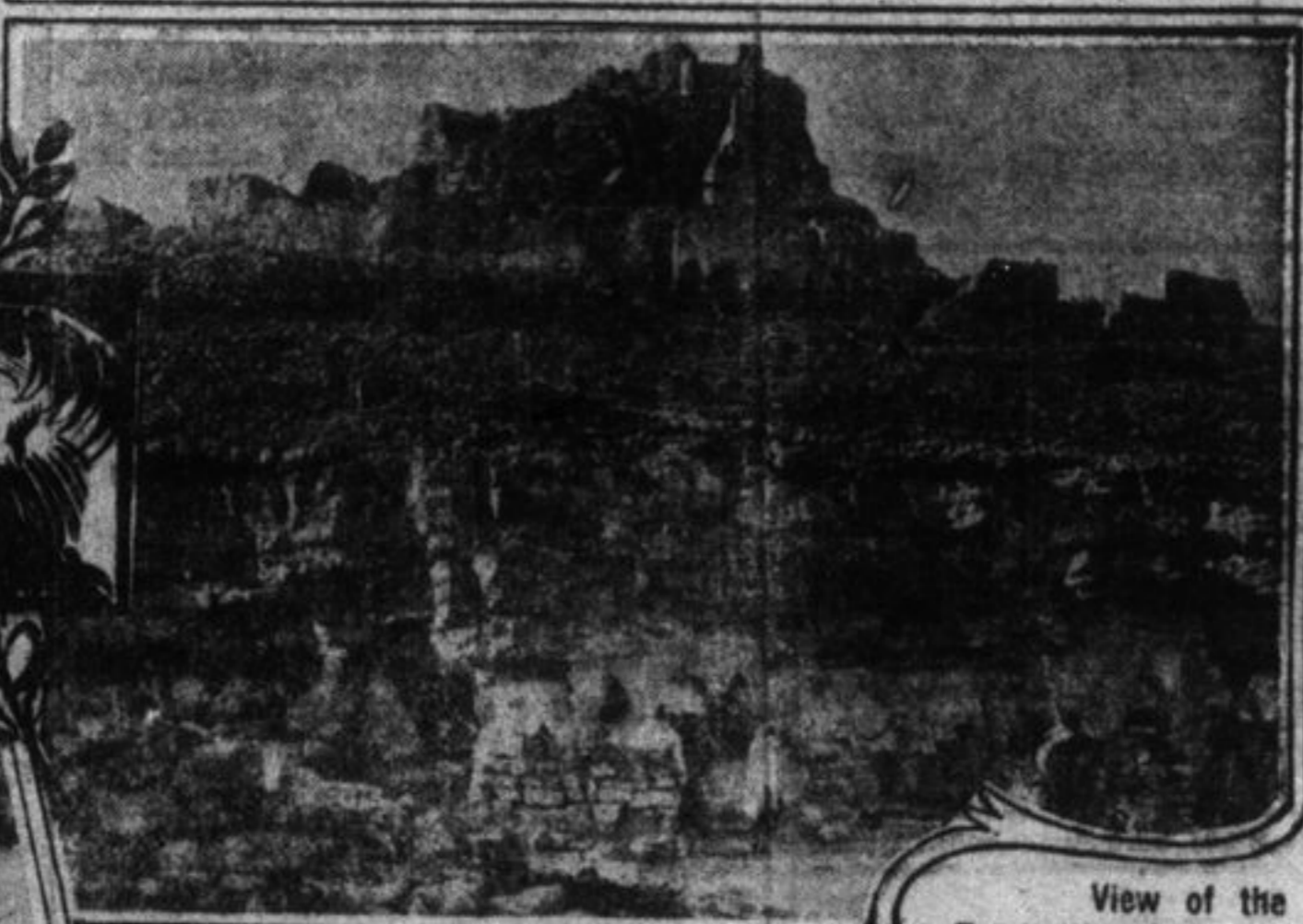


Courtyard of a House at Matmata, Showing the Openings Leading to Little Caves for the Animals.
From National Geographic Magazine, Washington, D. C. Copyright 1914.

Troglodyte Courtyard or Patio, of the Shell of Matmata Showing Entrances into Various Caves.
From National Geographic Magazine, Washington, D. C. Copyright 1914.



The Sheikh's Private Cave.
From National Geographic Magazine, Washington, D. C. Copyright 1914.



View of the Troglodyte Town of Douirat, Showing Mosque and Stronghold, Now Falling Rapidly into Decay.
From National Geographic Magazine, Washington, D. C. Copyright 1914.



General View of Matmata, a Town of 5,000 Inhabitants, Without One House.
From National Geographic Magazine, Washington, D. C. Copyright 1914.

came some of the strongest men stay behind to protect the caves and property. In the valleys of the Hausian mountains, where are located the villages of Matmata, Benioussa, Beniziten and Hadidji, the building of caves was a necessity. The tribes tired of living in the high tablelands where climbing was difficult, so went to the lower sections.

It was impossible there to build houses, for food was lacking and water was scarce. Instead they dug enormous circular holes in the earth averaging 27 feet in depth and 195 feet in circumference. Entrances to the great courtyards, which are open to the sky, is gained through underground tunnels cut through the rock, which is soft and yields easily to the spade. This rock hardens when it comes into contact with the air.

Grain will keep indefinitely in these subterranean caves, which are perfectly dry.

The men of Matmata have more energy than most Arabs, and the heads of the household are supreme.

"Often two or three adventurous youths receive permission from their fathers, for without permission they could do nothing, and start on foot or on donkeys for Tunis," says Mr. Johnson. "The journey is long. Kairouan, sacred city of the sands, is usually visited on route; also the tombs of several celebrated marabouts. Arriving penniless and unknown in Tunis, these young Troglodytes earn money by carrying trunks, running errands or going to market and carrying vegetables and provisions for housekeepers.

"When they have earned enough money to buy two or three copper pots and what looks like a large flower pot they hire a small shop, hardly as large as a closet, with an open front facing on the street. Here about four o'clock in the morning they begin frying cakes in their copper pots, which taste something like apple fritters. They sell for five centimes, or one cent. The day laborers going to work are their patrons.

"About seven o'clock in the morning work is over, and they close the shutters, clean up and go to sleep. About half past three in the afternoon the shop is again opened. The embers in the flower pot, which is in reality a stove, are

blown with small bellows until they glow and more fritters are fried. The demand seems greater than the supply.

"In about four years' time these young men can lay aside enough money to buy some broadtail sheep and goats and several camels and return to their native Troglodyte town, where they take to themselves a Troglodyte maid and establish a small but happy home of their own."

In his visit to these picturesque people Mr. Johnson discovered some interesting customs practiced by travellers in the interior of Northern Africa. Whenever one caravan encounters another the salutation, "Salam salikoun." "Peace be upon you," is awaited eagerly. It would mean little to a stranger, but when it is sung out on the desert there is safety.

"No one using the greeting 'Salam salikoun' would ever dare bring down the wrath of God upon his head by attempting to rob your caravan or murder you in your sleep," Mr. Johnson says. "One can safely pitch one's tents next to the Bedouin using the above greeting, knowing that all would be well."

"If one caravan does not give this salutation then the other must beware. Danger is near. The greeting is used only between Mohammedans, and if a Christian is accompanying the caravan he is included with this phrase:—"May

peace be upon those that accompany the stranger."

This salutation also is used by friends when meeting alone. No matter what the state of a man's birth or his power or his dignity, if he is on horseback he must greet the man on foot. The man on foot first greets the man that is sitting. The man on horseback speaks first to the man riding a mule. The man on the mule speaks first to the man on the donkey.

In this the rule of greeting is from the highest to the lowest, and never the lowest to the highest. If two men of equal station meet the younger man then greets the elder, in order to show respect to age.

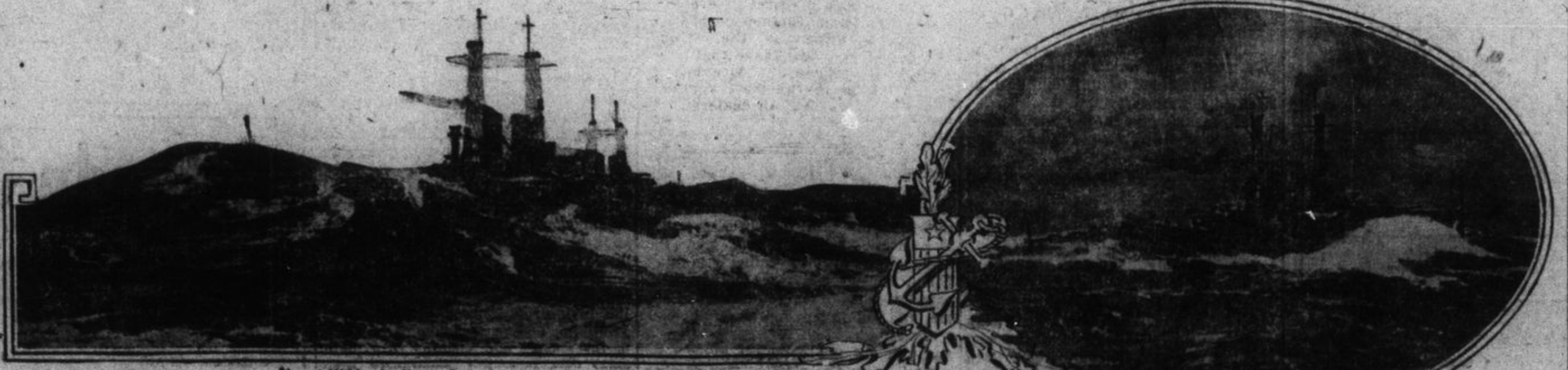
Tea making is a ceremonial of unusual importance to the Arabs, and, although it was introduced only about twenty years ago in Morocco, it has spread over the greater part of Northern Africa. Green tea is given preference to all other brands, and, although English breakfast tea has been tried, its flavor is not considered the most excellent.

A Troglodyte sheik when serving tea sits in his rock cave behind a low table, which is usually only about five inches high. On this are arranged several teapots, of copper and brass and silver. These oftentimes come from Mecca. As many tiny cups as there are guests are placed on a tray.

The sheik's sons wait on their father, for they hold more respect for their parent than any other race of people in the world. A son is not permitted to smoke in the presence of his father.

The sons then bring in a loaf of sugar, plating it with a hammer near the sheik. The teapots, which have been filled with water, then are placed on glowing coals. When the water boils the tea is added and great lumps of sugar are placed in the pots. Each cup then is slowly filled and the sheik tastes his to see if it is all right. All the cups are emptied into the teapot, shaken up and poured out again. This process continues for a long time until the tea is al-

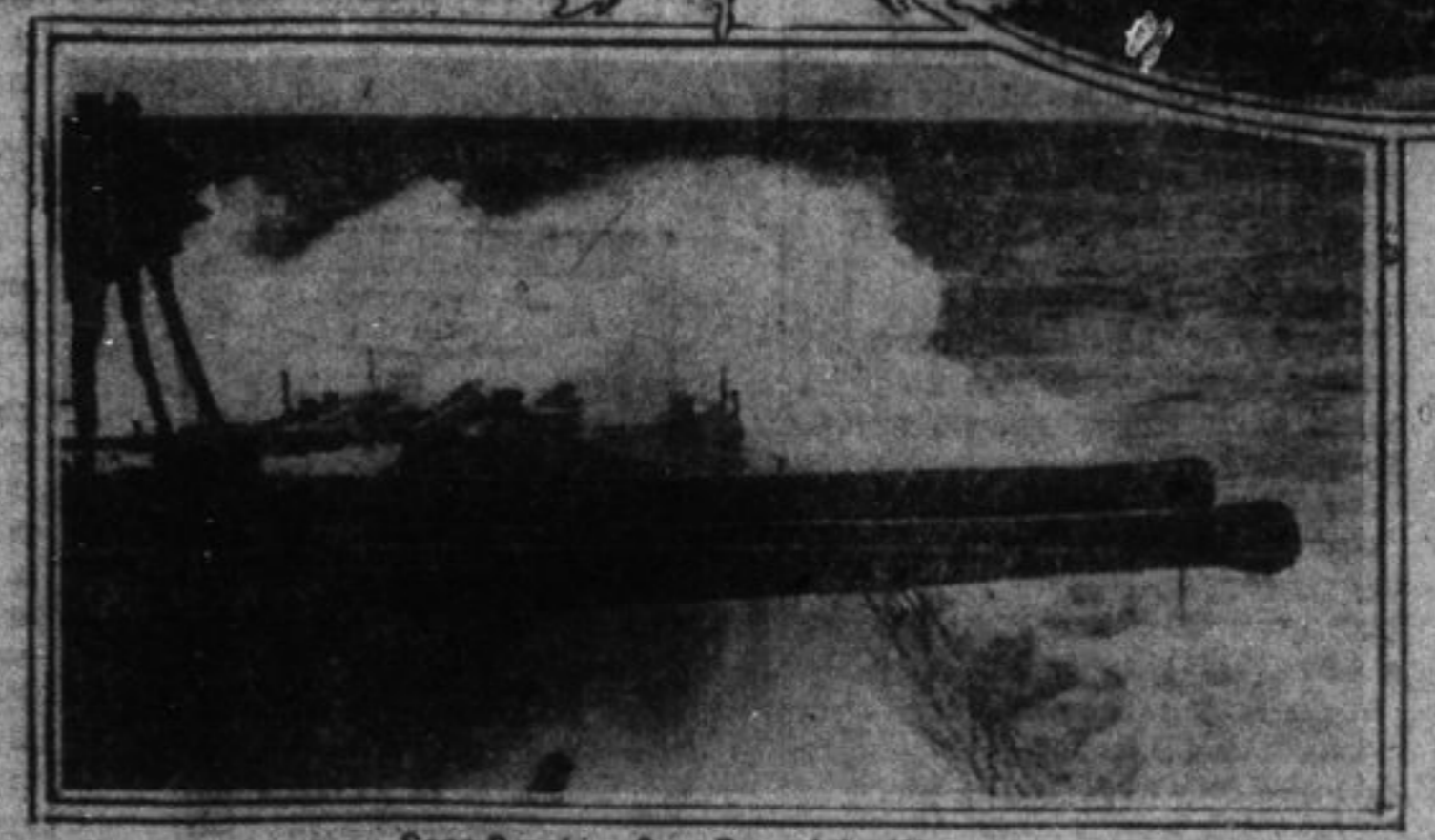
Mighty Dreadnoughts Battle Desperately with Relentless Winter Gales at Sea



Almpet Hidden by Heavy Seas.
From Scientific American.

LITTLE respect has the Atlantic Ocean for anything smaller than an dreadnoughts are correct in the itself, and that includes bulkhead immense ships as seaworthy as it is possible to make any kind of craft. The younger officers and sailors of the navy learned this thoroughly on the homeward bound voyage of the recent cruise to the Mediterranean. Many of them imagined that the huge engines of steel beneath them would ride calmly through the worst Old Ocean could do, but when the seas began to smash on the fore-castles and the bows began to lift and plunge through an arc of forty and fifty feet they realized that Father Neptune is still in command.

As a matter of fact, the gales through which the battle ships rode demonstrated that the magnificent lines of the Wy-



Seas Breaking Over Bow of the Wyoming.

Rising to a Big Sea.
From Scientific American.

the rim of salt and their decks inundated with the crystals left by the smashing seas.

The storm came upon the fleet early in the morning of Thursday, December 11. A fresh gale had sprung up the night before, but it did not annoy us on board the Wyoming. We even played medicine ball on the forward deck of Wednesday afternoon, only stopping when the hall was lost overboard. By morning, however, we were plunging and galling like a tortured animal. My station was well forward, and I awoke with water two inches deep washing in every direction over the floor.

most like a liquor. Mint and other ingredients often are added, so that the mixture does not resemble tea.

In extreme Southern Tunisia, Mr. Johnson says, the more noise one makes in drinking tea the better pleased appears the host.

Matmata is the chief town of the caidship of Matmata, which comprises the villages of Tamerred, Zerouss, Benioussa, Toudjane, Beniziten and Hadidji, and has 5,000 inhabitants. In the town of Matmata there is not a single house, only a picturesque mosque, built since the French occupation. They live in caves dug in the earth.

The holes in Matmata vary in depth and width, but most of them are fifteen metres deep by fifteen metres in circumference. Around these, which serve as a courtyard, are numerous caves dug in the sides of the hole. These serve as living rooms and storerooms. Entrances to the dwellings is had by means of underground tunnels through rock or earth.

In the centre of the courtyard there is usually a huge cistern, large masonry troughs running into it. There is but little rain there, but when there is it pours, and every drop is carefully preserved. The Troglodytes are so careful of water that they only give it to their horses and other animals once in twenty-four hours, and then not all they want.

Matmata has a special code of etiquette, says Mr. Johnson. It is not only considered bad form, but exceedingly dangerous, to approach near enough another man's dwelling to look down into the circular courtyard to see his women. Each dwelling has a pack of white Kabyle dogs that keep a constant watch and would fly at and tear to pieces any person who approached.

Besides this, it is exceedingly improper to enter a passageway to a dwelling house without sending a small girl or boy in first to let the women know that you are coming.

Sheik Ferdjani's cave in Matmata is described by Mr. Johnson in the most minute detail.

"The cave was whitewashed," he said. "To the left is a wooden chest and a gun, one of many. Back of the gun is a stand cut out of the rock, and a dark object, an oil lamp, the form dating back to the Greek and Roman days. There was a white object in the centre, a bedstead cut out of the rock, and there were comfortable mattresses filled with wool, and native blankets and rugs.

Above the bedstead was a sort of cupboard where snuff, matches and other articles are placed. "To the right were large oil and water jars. At the back of the cave are concave covers, the largest ones having come from Ghadames. These covers and concave plates are highly prized and very ornamental. Above the plates and covers were a Persian picture and an Arab almanac. When Mohammed had to flee from Mecca, 622 A. D., that date became the first year of the Mohammedan calendar, and is called 'Hegira.'"

When a man marries in this country he has to give to the parents of the bride a gift, these gifts varying according to the tribe and locality. In the mountain ranges around Tatahouine, in Matmata, he gives four goats and two kids, four sheep and two lambs, twenty litres of olive oil, sixty litres of barley and forty of wheat. Other gifts, in some sections, are made to the father-in-law, and in some a present to the mother of the girl.

By these gifts he may obtain a physically perfect girl, but with less he may obtain a girl blind in one eye, but otherwise sound. "In certain tribes the form of abduction takes place," said Mr. Johnson. "The marriage and the value of presents is arranged by a mutual friend. The bridegroom and his chums make up a small but warlike party, fully armed, and about midnight they stealthily approach the village tent or cave of his beloved, who is waiting. He puts her up behind him on his full blooded Arab steed and away they speed. Wails, lamentations and gun shots come from the home of the girl. She is taken at once to the home of the mutual friend who has arranged the marriage and is handed over to the care of the women.

"On the morning a warlike party of men, fully armed, ride up and demand the release of the abducted girl. After a long fight is prepared and the girl taken to the home of the bridegroom, the wedding takes place."