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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter III. Scenes in Cairo

CHAPTER III.

SCENES IN CAIRO.

Church Bells do not make a Sabbath—Dragomen—Scenes in Front of the Hotel—Peddlers and Mountebanks—"Me very good Juggler"—Donkeys and Donkey Boys—A "Donk" with an Illustrious Name—The Fez—The Bazaars—Sprinkling Machines—The "Light of the Harem"—Old Abraham comes to Grief—The Story Teller—Citadel—The Mamaluke's Leap—Mosque of Mohamet Ali—Island of Rhoda—Moses in the Bulrushes—The Nilometer—Joseph's Granaries—The Egyptian Museum—Shoobra Gardens—A Mahometan's Paradise—Heliopolis, the "City of the Sun"—The Virgin's Sycamore Tree—Dancing Dervishes—Whirling into High Seats in Paradise.



THE sound of a sweet toned bell woke me early this morning, and for a moment it seemed that I must be once more in a Christian land; but a glance from my window across the little garden by the side of the hotel, showed the sun rising over the domes and minarets of the capital of Egypt, and in the streets below were long lines of camels, crowds of swarthy Egyptians all wearing the

universal red fez cap, and innumerable donkeys half buried under enormous burdens of fresh cut grass. A sonorous bray from one of these would for the moment drown all other sounds, even the chatter and clamor of their mas-

ters, which is incessant except during the hours of darkness. I now fully realize that I am not in America, nor in any other civilized land, and that the sound of the bell does not bring with it the Christian Sabbath. Opening the door I clap my hands, and a native servant appears with a tray on which are *cafe-au-lait*, eggs and bread. The regular breakfast is not served until twelve o'clock. Around the porch of the hotel, which faces a large and handsome square, is a scene full of amusement and novelty to the stranger. But before I can reach the door, I am assailed by a crowd of gaily-dressed dragomen and guides, all most anxious to serve me, each provided with a handful of testimonials in various European languages. But I have learned by experience that this class are almost universally a set of thieves and swindlers, preying upon strangers, and their exactions are only limited by the ignorance or weakness of those who may fall into their hands. It is a Levantine proverb that the three nuisances of the East, are plague, fire, and dragomen. So for the present I decline their urgent offers of service, and stand at the door watching the curious scene. Here are a dozen peddlers of antique relics from the pyramids (probably bogus), canes, bright silk scarfs and turbans; another enterprising dealer has a basket full of young alligators or crocodiles, about a foot long, and holding up one of these charming productions of the Nile urges me to buy it—"only one franc, sar." On the opposite side of the street a mountebank is swallowing swords and snakes, surrounded by an admiring crowd of donkey boys, cab-drivers, and "hangers-on." As a European passes by, he airs perhaps his whole stock of English—"Me very good Juggler—look, see!" Dogs without number fill every vacant space, their snarling and barking now and then varied, when a vigorous kick sends them yelping away. A private carriage drawn by a pair of hand-

some Arabian horses drives rapidly by, and in front of the horses run two Nubians with long white rods, screaming to the people to get out of the way.

But a new face is described by the donkey boys and they go for me at once. These boys and donkeys together form an institution without which Cairo would lose half its attractions. The latter are generally fat and tough, and endowed with all the laziness and obstinacy of their race. The large soft saddles are covered with red morocco, and the trappings are flashy and ornamented with cowrie shells. The stirrup straps are not fastened to the saddle, but



A CAIRO INSTITUTION.

merely pass over it, and unless the boy holds the opposite one, in mounting or dismounting, you come down with a run. The fall, however, can never be much, although somewhat awkward to the stranger with so large a crowd of lookers-

on. The donkey boys, generally about half-grown, are the keenest little *gamins* I ever saw, and for antic drollery have no equals. One steps up to me, pulls his forelock with one hand and gives a corresponding kick behind, *accidentally* hits another boy in the region of the stomach, and with a grin of humor on his dirty face says: "Take ride, sah? Mine splendid donkey. Name Prince"—then catching an English word I uttered, he quickly adds, "of Wales. Prince of Wales, sah"—if I had uttered a French word the name would have been "Prince Napoleon." Others behind him taking the cue call out, "Mine Billy Button," "Tom Jones," "Waterloo," "Duke Wellington," etc. But one bright-eyed little urchin (was he so much brighter than the rest?) calls out "Mine Berry good donkey Yankee Doodle"—"General Grant." That last shot told, and I followed the boy to take my first ride on the "donk" with so illustrious a name.

Before I had been long in Cairo, I discovered that it would be a matter of economy as well as comfort to invest in a fez. My friends at home will understand that to wear a fez in the East, does not necessarily make one a Turk; but it will save by about one-half what you have to pay in the bazaars, as it implies that you are not a stranger to be taken in. English travelers are everywhere the least inclined to adopt the costume or language of a foreign country, and are made to pay accordingly. The French and Italians have that happy facility of identifying themselves with the people wherever they may be, which in the East has very much increased their popularity and influence. Here the nationality of a stove-pipe hat is recognized on sight. In order to see and understand the peculiar customs and life of a strange people, one should drop that haughty air of disdain and superiority, and so far as is consistent with propriety and comfort, mix with

the people in a dress that will not attract the special attention of every one he meets.

The bazaars of Cairo are only surpassed by those of Damascus and Constantinople in the extent, richness, and variety of the thousand-and-one articles of Oriental manufacture; and can best be seen on foot and donkey. The streets are so narrow and crooked that the older part of the city resembles a huge honey-comb. The upper stories project over the one next below, and the front is usually of lattice-work, which enables the bright-eyed damsels to watch all that passes in the street without being seen themselves. There are no sidewalks or pavement, but the streets are cool and moist, the high, projecting buildings shutting out the heat of the sun, and in many places, canvas or boards completely roof in the narrow space at the top, and form an arcade. Troops of hungry dogs do duty as scavengers and keep the streets in tolerable sanitary condition. The only sprinkling machine known here is the same generally used in the East—a water-carrier with a goat-skin slung across his shoulders.

My donkey-boy followed up the "General," making his presence known by frequent whacks over the flanks of the poor beast, and emphasizing them with epithets rather rough and emphatic, than complimentary to his pedigree. The "donk" from instinct or long experience seemed to know when the blow was coming, and would make a sudden spurt to avoid it, which threatened the rider with being dropped off behind. The bazaars swarm with people. Men and women, donkeys, camels, and oxen, bearing heavy loads, are inextricably mingled, every one in the way of others, with no rule of turning out to the right or the left, all shouting, screaming, pulling and whacking the beasts, with most ludicrous appeals to the Prophet. It now requires a sharp lookout, not so much for fear of running

over some one—for the foot passengers have a miraculous way of escaping danger—as to avoid coming to grief by being wedged in between a camel laden with stone or wood, and the projecting panniers of a mule filled with vegetables or boxes of merchandise. Regardless of the hubbub and confusion of the street, you can see the turbaned merchant sitting cross-legged on a mat in front of his little seven by nine shop, smoking his *chibouk* and sipping his coffee with true Mussulman coolness and gravity. Turning into a by-street, I slipped off the “General,” and leaving him in charge of the boy, I found a standing place on the corner to watch the passers by. As I wore the fez I attracted no special notice, and a grim old Turk made room for me on the board in front of his shop. Here



OLD ABRAHAM COMES TO GRIEF.

comes a woman out shopping, an occupation of which the fair sex are as fond in Cairo as in New York, followed by a eunuch, black as Erebus, with an armful of parcels.

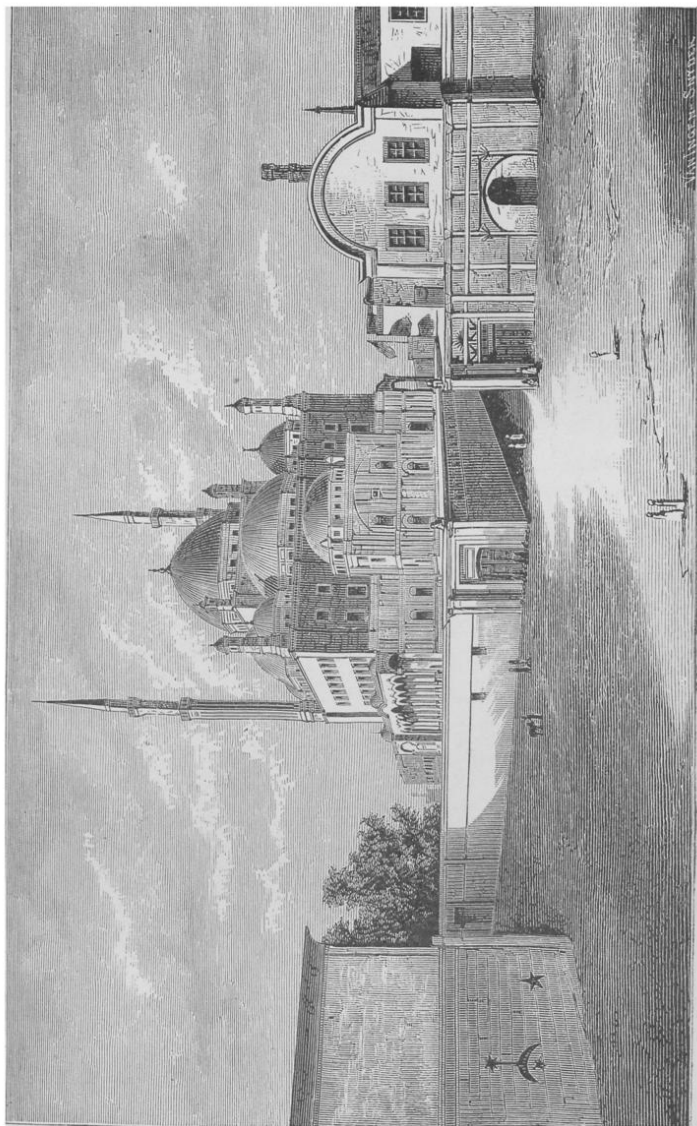
She may be the "light of the harem," or her grandmother, for aught I can tell, as she is wrapped in the universal white cotton winding sheet, and her face is hidden behind a brown figured gauze veil. She does not vouchsafe to shoot "an eyelash arrow from an eyebrow bow" in this direction, so I presume she is old and ugly. Next comes the very personification of the "Father of the Faithful," with long, white beard, a massive, wrinkled face, and Oriental dress, identical with that worn by the old patriarch. He rides an easy going mule, and seems absorbed in holy meditation. But at the intersection of a narrow side street, he comes in contact with a mettled Arab, ridden by a young fellow at a sharp canter, and over goes old Abraham sprawling in the dust. This occurrence is not so unusual as to cause any excitement, and it is only the stranger who laughs at the catastrophe. He picks himself up, remounts, his mule more astonished, perhaps, than his rider, and jogs on again, as if nothing had happened. Near by is a barber shop, where, if I understood Arabic, I could hear the latest Caireen scandal, and in the café over the way, a story-teller is surrounded by a crowd of eager listeners, as in the times of the Caliphs and the "Arabian nights." For half an hour I watched the passing throng, and longed for the pencil of a Hogarth or a Nast to fix on paper the comical scenes.

Then with the donkey boy and the "General," I take a quieter route toward the Citadel, which is located on a high bluff overlooking the whole city and its environs. The glistening domes and minarets of the four hundred mosques of which Cairo boasts, are at our feet; to the east are seen the obelisk of Heliopolis and the tombs of the Mamelukes; on the west and south, are the ruins of old Cairo, the grand aqueduct, the island and groves of Rhoda; while further on across the Nile are the pyramids of Ghi-

zah and Sakharra, and beyond these lies the great Libyan desert. Close by is the famous "Mameluke's leap," where fifty years ago that bloody old tyrant, Mohamet Ali, having enticed these unruly chiefs into the Citadel, shut the gates and slaughtered them all but one, Emil Bey, who dashed his horse over the low parapet, and down the face of the wall, forty feet, escaping with his life, although his horse was killed. As I looked over the wall down the steep precipice, this feat seemed a most daring one, and the escape almost miraculous. The tombs of the Mamelukes are magnificent monuments of these descendants of Circassian girls, torn from their mountain homes by ruthless slave-dealers. But their sons lived to rule with iron hand, the offspring of those who wrought their mothers' shame, and, as bold warriors, twice to hurl back the Tartars from Europe, under the fierce Tamerlane.

In the center of the citadel is the mosque of Mohamet Ali, the finest in Egypt, and second only to that of St. Sophia at Constantinople. At the entrance, an old priest takes me in charge and points to my boots, which I understand to mean, "Put off thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground." I give him a franc, and he brings a pair of large, loose slippers which he ties on over my boots. Shade of the prophet! how degenerate have we become in these latter days! An unbelieving dog of a Frank enters the holy precincts with his boots on! A circular marble colonnade encloses the large courtyard into which we first come. In the center is a fountain of marble, elegantly carved, where the faithful, having left their slippers outside, wash their feet before entering the sacred mosque to perform their devotions.

Standing beneath the grand dome, which is of beautifully-stained glass, the walls and pillars of variegated



MOSQUE OF MOHANET ALI.

From a photograph in possession of the Author.

marble, and hundreds of lamps and chandeliers of fine crystal overhead, the effect was most impressive. A "dim religious light," in strong contrast with the noonday glare without, pervaded the interior. The marble floor was covered with Persian carpets, on which a crowd of worshippers were kneeling, all facing toward Mecca, and muttering prayers, while at regular intervals they reverently bumped their foreheads on the ground. Some of them glanced scowlingly at me, but I knew the old priest, in view of the expected *baksheesh*, would not let me come to grief. In one corner, protected by a screen of gilt lattice-work, is the tomb of the builder of the mosque, Mohamet Ali. In the midst of all this magnificence, where marble and gold, crystal and precious stones have been lavished without stint, I was surprised at hearing the twittering of hundreds of sparrows, who seemed quite at home in the cool and quiet interior of the mosque. They were flying all around under the dome, and their chirping could be heard above the murmuring of the faithful, kneeling on the floor below. How much more acceptable to the Almighty were their voices of praise, than the mummery of the ignorant and superstitious crowd beneath!

This mosque, upon which immense sums of money have been spent, with its stained glass and somewhat gaudy decorations, bears little resemblance to those beautiful temples erected by the Moslem conquerors of India. There the lightness and elegance of Saracenic architecture, have united with most wonderful skill in carving the pure white marble; and the "Pearl Mosques" of Agra and Delhi seem infinitely superior in beauty and simplicity, to this tawdry specimen of the Mahometan architecture of the present age.

During our ten day's stay in Cairo we visited many places and objects of interest. One fine cool morning we

crossed in a boat to the island of Rhoda, where the Khedive has a palace in the midst of a beautiful garden fragrant with orange blossoms. Here, according to tradition, the infant Moses was launched among the bulrushes and found by Pharaoh's daughter. While musing on the strange scenes which this old river had witnessed, the lines of Dr. Holmes occurred to me, in which he comically inquires the whereabouts of the good, far-gone days of childhood, with their brightness and freshness :

"Where, oh, where are life's lilies and roses,
Bathed in the golden dawn's smile?
Dead as the bulrushes 'round little Moses,
On the old banks of the Nile."

Here on the Island of Rhoda is the famed Nilometer, a slender stone pillar in the centre of a well, graduated with cubits—one of the most ancient relics of a remote age. Herodotus mentions that the measurement of the river's rise and fall, thereby to calculate the probable extent of the harvest, constituted a part of the priestcraft of the Pharaohs.

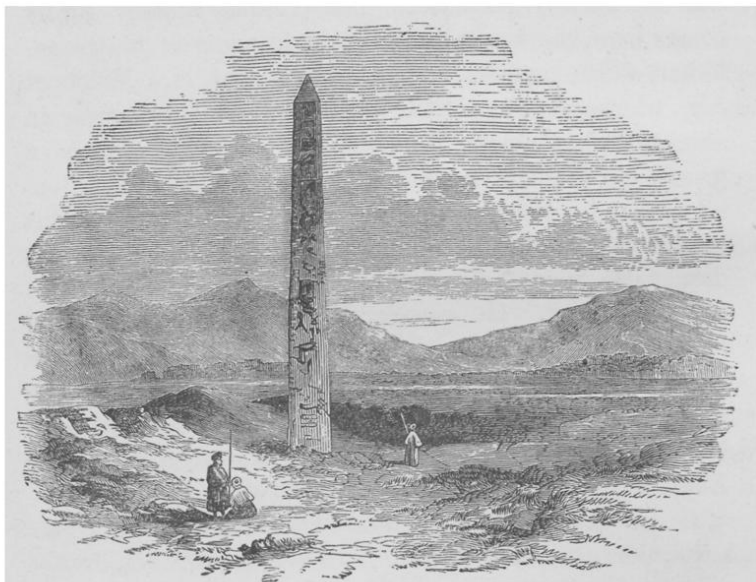
Returning to the main shore, we visited Boulac, a portion of the city which contains an immense government foundry and a museum of Egyptian antiquities. In this neighborhood, we had been told, were the granaries of Joseph—the first great speculator in wheat of whom we have any record—but we were unable to find them, and I am inclined to think them a myth.

We also visited the Shoobra gardens and palace, having first obtained a government order through our Consul. The drive to this famous place is through a splendid avenue four miles long, shaded by very large and old sycamore trees. Here in the center of a beautiful garden was the favorite palace of old Mohamet Ali. Sparkling foun-

tains, marble kiosks, elegant furniture, divans embroidered with gold and covered with the richest brocade, decorations of finest alabaster—nothing had been spared to make this an earthly paradise. The present Viceroy rarely comes here, but keeps up the place in honor of his grandfather, whose memory is held in great respect. Mohamet Ali, whose portraits hang on the walls and appear in several places among the frescoes, is represented as a grizzly old Turk, with an immense white beard, in Oriental turban and costume, surrounded by the ladies of his harem as beautiful as the houris of a Mahometan's paradise. He was crafty and ambitious, but a daring and energetic ruler. He massacred the Mamelukes in cold blood because they stood in the way of his ambitious schemes. Having made himself master of Egypt and Syria, he would have won Constantinople and perhaps have established there a strong government, had not the English interfered to save the present effete dynasty.

It is a pleasant drive of six miles from Cairo to Heliopolis, the "City of the Sun." In old times, when Joseph ruled in Egypt, this was a place of much importance. It was called "On," and here Joseph lived and took the priest's daughter for a wife. All that now remains of the ancient city is a single red granite obelisk seventy feet high, covered with hieroglyphics. It was erected four thousand years ago, and successive inundations of the Nile have raised the surface of the ground twenty-five feet above its base—perhaps even much more, as it was usual to place these structures on high mounds. Near the site of this ancient city is the old sycamore tree, under whose branches, many centuries afterward, Joseph and Mary, as they journeyed to Egypt with their little boy, sat down and drank from a cool spring, the water of which instantly changed from salt and bitter, to the pure sweet fountain

which it remains to this day. Of course this is perfectly *authentic*. To doubt or question the genuineness of the old world's traditions and relics, would not only deprive these



OBELISK OF HELIOPOLIS.

places of half their interest, but dispel those pleasant illusions so attractive to the visitor.

In the center of Old Cairo is a mosque and college of dancing dervishes or *fakeers*, and every Friday, they hold a *séance*. We reached the place after threading a labyrinth of crooked streets, and were ushered into a room in a building adjoining the mosque, where several other parties of foreigners were assembled. We were offered seats on the divan extending round the room, and a servant brought tiny cups of coffee of fine flavor, but thick and sweet as syrup. Then came *chibouks*, and cigarettes for the ladies. After a half-hour's delay we were shown into

the mosque, where the performance came off. A circular space about forty feet in diameter and smoothly floored, was enclosed in a low railing, outside of which were the spectators, and in a small gallery seats were provided for us as specially invited guests. In the gallery opposite was the orchestra, consisting of eight instruments like clarionets, and four small drums. Twelve dervishes then marched into the arena and ranged themselves around the inner space, after bowing to each other and to their superior or head priest, who wore a green robe and turban, indicating that he had made the pilgrimage to Mecca. All but the head fakeer wore tall, steeple-shaped felt hats, without any brim, short jackets and long white robes tied about the waist. Their faces looked pale and emaciated with fasting. One of them went into the musicians' gallery, and read from the Koran for about twenty minutes in a drawling, sing-song tone, while his bretheren knelt on the floor below, frequently bowing their heads to the ground. The music then struck up and the performers rose from their knees and marched several times round the arena. The head dervish, who seemed to be held in special reverence, stood on a mat by himself, and each one in passing him stopped to make a low salaam, and then turned round and salaamed the one next behind. Then the music became gradually more lively, and one after another threw up their hands and began to whirl. Faster and faster they whirled, their arms now extended at right angles, and with eyes closed in a sort of dreamy ecstasy, then spun round like tops, their gowns spreading out with the rotary motion to the size of most extravagant crinoline. I timed them with my watch and found that seventy times a minute was the maximum speed. They kept up this performance for about an hour with occasional intervals of rest, when they would suddenly stop, fold their arms over their breasts,

and march slowly around the arena, apparently made no more dizzy by their gyrations than the ball-room belle who has been "taking a turn" to the music of Strauss. At last the orchestra ceased playing and the *séance* was ended. When the performers, having put on their outside robes, quietly left the building, the true believers bowed very low as they made room for them to pass. They evidently considered them very holy men who would whirl themselves into the highest seats in paradise.

This performance comes off every week, and crowds of Mahometans, as well as nearly all the foreign visitors in Cairo, go to see it. It is a free exhibition—no tickets being taken at the door—nor is any contribution box passed round. The dervishes are all Turks, and their complexion, pale from fasting and abstinence, is so much lighter than that of the native Egyptians, that they seem to us as white as Europeans. This curious sect is of modern origin, and Mohamet Ali brought them from Constantinople to Cairo, more than fifty years ago. Nothing in civilized lands resembles their performances so much as the whirling of the Shakers.