

Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Tirol

Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

Fogg, William Perry

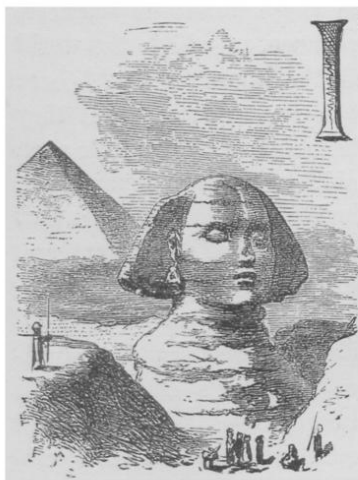
London [u.a.], [1875]

Chapter IV. Memphis and the Pyramids

CHAPTER IV.

MEMPHIS AND THE PYRAMIDS.

El Kaherah—The Nile—Ancient Knowledge of the Egyptians—Lost Arts—Visit to Memphis and Sakharra—An Early Start—Rival Boatmen—Sand Storm in the Desert—The City of the Pharaohs—Temple of Apis—Mariette Bey—Cemetery of the Sacred Bulls—Lunch among the “Old Masters”—An “Antique” Factory—Typhoons at Sea and Siroccos on Land—Pyramids of Ghizah—A Left-handed Regiment—Fertility of the Soil—Old Cheops—Up we go—Sunrise from the Summit—The Heart of the Great Pyramid—The King’s Chamber—The Sphynx—A Nubian Type of Beauty—No Immortality from Piles of Stone.



It is written that “El Kaherah,” which the Europeans have metamorphosed into Cairo, was founded by a general appointed by Ali, the husband of Mahomet’s fair daughter Fatima; but the present city was not built until some centuries later, for Egypt is quite a mushroom of a town, only some nine hundred years old. But it was built on the ruins of much older cities,

near the site of the earliest temple-palaces of the Pharaohs; and, after Constantinople, is the oldest Mahometan city in the world.

The Nile, the most mysterious of all rivers, flows on the same from age to age, its greasy, muddy, turbid waters

the source of fruitfulness in a land that without them would speedily become a desert. Unchanged they have rolled on since the touching story of Joseph and his brethren was enacted on their banks, since Pharaoh's daughter bathed in the turbid stream, since the Israelites slaved along the shores, and many centuries later they bore the gorgeous galleys of the voluptuous Cleopatra.

Egypt was for ages the storehouse of knowledge, and the art of magic is still studied in the land, where of old the potentates, who united the kingship and priesthood in one person, called in its aid in humbugging the masses of the people. We are taught that the early race of men was originally endowed with miraculous powers, the knowledge of which lingered for centuries among the Chaldeans. They were skilled, perhaps, in those wondrous sciences, such as mesmerism and clairvoyance, of which the world is just now beginning to regain the knowledge. If these are among the "lost arts," it is not surprising that they represented magic to the people in that early age; for even now, with all the science and skill of modern civilization, they are almost a sealed book. We read in the Bible that Moses was skilled in all the knowledge of the Egyptians. What was this knowledge, known only to the wily priesthood to which all the Pharaohs belonged, and into which the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter was doubtless initiated? The story of Moses leading God's chosen people through the desert toward the promised land, discloses some of his skill in controlling the masses, who were probably quite as ignorant as the Egyptians among whom they had delved as slaves.

Having exhausted the sights of Cairo, except the bazaars, which one never tires of visiting, we arranged for a trip to Memphis and the pyramids of Sakharra. To accomplish this in one day required an early start, and

soon after the sun was up, we found ourselves on the banks of the Nile, looking for transportation across its rapid muddy current. The floating bridge had been rendered impassable by some accident, and we could only cross by boat. The struggle among the rival boatmen as to who should take us over was exciting. Being only *passengers*, my friend and I stepped back out of the crowd of shouting, screaming, scolding Arabs, and let them settle the matter in their own way. Any attempt to touch us or our effects, was instantly resented with a rap from our rattans, for although we did not understand Arabic, the logic of a stick is well understood everywhere in the East. The shaking of fists and gesticulations were numerous, but we knew they were "mere sound and fury signifying nothing." At last the din and hubbub ceased, and we stepped quietly into the boat of the victorious party, and were quickly set across the river. At the railway station on the west side, we took the train to Budershain, twelve miles up the river. There were crowds of filthy Arabs swarming over the third-class cars, and so much delay in starting on account of the broken bridge, that we did not arrive there until ten o'clock. We hired donkeys at the station to go to the site of Memphis, five miles distant. Before starting, we noticed that the sun was clouded in, and to me it seemed that a rain storm was coming up. But it very rarely rains in Egypt, and to one familiar with the climate the signs indicated something infinitely worse—a sand storm. We had not reached a mile from the station when it came down upon us with great fury. The force of the wind was terrific, and the flying sand seemed to cut the skin like a knife. In a minute we were blinded in spite of the green goggles we wore, and the sand penetrated eyes, nose, ears, and mouth. We were in a desert of sand, and the air was so full of the fine cloud that we could not see ten feet be-

fore us. We turned our backs to the gale, and the howling of the wind and the braying of the donkeys, made such music as I never heard before, and hope never to hear again. I had read of caravans being overwhelmed and buried in the sands, but could never before realize the horrors of such a catastrophe. I took the *puggree* off my hat and tied it over my face for a veil, and holding on to our "donks" for dear life, we took refuge under the lee of a sand hill until a gust had passed. It lasted about twenty minutes, and left the sand drifted in places like snow. As soon as the storm lulled, we pushed forward to a collection of mud huts where once stood the great city of Memphis, the proud capital of ancient Egypt—the city from which Pharaoh is supposed to have led forth the chivalry of the land, in pursuit of the hosts of Israel on their march for freedom. A beautiful forest of palms covers a portion of the site, a noble burial place even for such a city. Its circumference, according to ancient writers, was over seventeen miles, and the ruins of its famous temples are now covered by the sand of the desert and the alluvial deposits of the river. Excavations have been made in various places, and the ground is littered with broken statues of granite and marble. One colossal figure lies prone upon the ground, supposed to be the statue of Sesostris. The expression upon the upturned face is of quiet, benignant repose, or of pensive sorrow; in harmony with the desolate aspect of the whole place. It represents a once powerful king and ruler, prostrate amid the ruins of his capital. A crowd of Arabs surrounded us, screaming for *baksheesh*, and they scrambled and quarreled for the few copper coins we threw them, like a pack of half-starved dogs.

After a short rest we again started over the plain for the pyramids of Sakharra, four miles distant, but before

reaching them we were overtaken by another sand-storm, fiercer, if possible, than the first. Luckily, it came from behind, and we fled before the blast which nearly took our poor donkeys off their feet. These pyramids are older and much more dilapidated than those of Ghizah, near Cairo. Before these crumbling mounds are the Sarapeum, or Temple of Apis, and the tombs in which the sacred bulls are buried. These have lately been discovered, and are among the most interesting monuments of Egypt. An enterprising Frenchman, Mariette Bey, has spent several years and a large sum of money, in bringing to light these wonderful relics of antiquity. We took refuge from the storm, in a small building erected for his residence while superintending these excavations, where we found an old Sheik, who claimed authority over this part of the desert—which simply means the privilege of levying blackmail on all visitors. We paid the fee, and with a young Arab for a guide, commenced our explorations. The surface of the country for miles in every direction is a desert, and the sand-drift has covered many feet deep these ancient remains. It is probable that once this barren waste was as fertile as any part of the Nile valley, but a change in the bed of the river, and the gradual encroachment of the desert has made it what it now is.

We descend by a sloping path to the entrance, and lighting our candles, find ourselves in a long rock-hewn gallery, which formed the cemetery for the bulls that were worshiped in the adjoining temple of Apis. Opening from this gallery like side chapels, are twenty-four recesses cut out of the limestone rock, and in each of these is an immense sarcophagus, formed from a single piece of black porphyry. They are of uniform shape and size, about sixteen feet long, eight feet wide, and about nine feet in height. The outside is covered with hieroglyphics, with

edges as clean-cut and fresh as if just finished. On two or three the figures are only traced, as if the work had been abruptly stopped. They are polished outside and in, smooth as glass, and the heavy lids of most of them have been pushed off a few feet, so that we can see the interior. They are now all empty, the sacred bulls they once contained having long ago crumbled to dust. With the assistance of my companions, I let myself down into one and examined the interior. The space inside was large enough to contain a mammoth ox, the surface was beautifully polished, and the side, when struck by the hand, gave out a clear, bell-like sound. It seemed strange and almost ludicrous thus to stand, candle in hand, within the stone coffin of a sacred bull! "These be thy gods, O Egypt!" Strange that a people so advanced in the arts and sciences, so distinguished for wisdom, who have left behind ruins that are still the admiration of the world, should have religious ideas so low as to worship four-footed beasts, birds, and creeping reptiles! What an immense amount of money, time, and labor have been expended to excavate these long galleries, to bring these huge blocks of porphyry many hundred miles, to carve and polish them with almost miraculous skill, and then to fit each one in a niche to become the coffin of a—bull. And this was done, too, by a people without labor-saving machinery, who knew nothing of the use of iron tools—for I believe no iron instrument of any kind has been found in Egypt. The tools they used were of an alloy of copper and tin, but hard and pliant as steel. How to make it so, is one of the "lost arts," which all the machinery and boasted knowledge of Birmingham or Sheffield, cannot now accomplish.

We afterwards visited the temple near by, and wandered through several rooms which have but lately been recovered from the sand. They are lined with white marble or

cement, and upon the walls and ceilings are paintings as bright in colors and fresh-looking as if executed only yesterday.

In one of these rooms, seated on the sand, and surrounded by the works of the "old masters" (probably 4,000 years old), we took our frugal lunch, and drank English ale to the memory of the quaint old fellows whose pictures stared at us from the walls—then tossed the bones to their descendants, a crowd of hungry Bedouins, who eagerly picked up every scrap.

Outside we found a lot of Arabs employed in unrolling mummies, thousands of which are buried in a pit near the temple. Great piles of skulls, crumbling bones, and scraps of mummy cloth were scattered around. We secured here some genuine relics and antiques, old as the Pharaohs. Most of the so-called antiques sold in Cairo, especially the *scarabei*, or sacred beetles, are made, as I am told, at the factory of an enterprising Yankee or Englishman named Smith, in Assouan, at the foot of the first cataract of the Nile.

Having spent three hours at Sakharra, we started on our return. Our intention had been to cross the desert from here to Ghizah, but the weather made such an expedition dangerous, if not impossible. At intervals all day, the fierce sirocco would break on us, and we caught two more before we could reach the station at Budershain. I have had a little experience of typhoons at sea, and I would much rather face the cyclone of the Pacific, with a good ship under me, than the sirocco of the Sahara desert, where sand instead of water is the moving element, mounted on a miserable little half-starved donkey.

The great pyramids of Ghizah are situated at the edge of the desert on the opposite side of the river, and about six miles distant from Cairo. To see the sun rise from

the summit of Cheops, is well worth the effort required to ensure an early start. There is a fine smooth carriage road all the way. Having crossed the Nile by the new iron bridge, we drive for three miles through a beautiful avenue of acacia trees, past a large palace of the Viceroy, and long barracks around which soldiers are lounging—fat, saucy-looking fellows, who look better fed and clothed, and more happy than the miserable laborers from whom they are conscripted. In former times, to save a son from being forced into the Pasha's army, it was not an unusual thing for a parent to put out the right eye of his child, or cut off the first joint of the forefinger of his right hand. But this mutilation was stopped when the Pasha formed a regiment of left-handed men, which proved quite as efficient as the rest of the army—which is not saying much. The last three miles of the road, is on a dyke or embankment which saves it from overflow by the river. The date-palms which we see scattered over the plain are now in blossom, and produce the finest dates in the world. We meet hundreds of donkeys and camels plodding slowly along towards the city, bearing immense loads of vegetables and fresh cut grass. On either side of the road are fields of grain, maize, clover and lentils, growing most luxuriantly from a soil so rich that it actually looks greasy. It is entirely an alluvial deposit from the Nile, and on it the crops spring up very swiftly, having a peculiarly bright green appearance, and are very tender to the touch from their rapid growth. Two crops of grain, sometimes three, and of grass and vegetables usually four crops, are taken from the same soil every year.

For a long time the pyramids were right before us, and so deceptive is their appearance under the cloudless sky, with no other object upon the vast plain with which to compare them, that they seemed actually to grow smaller

as we approached. We drove to the very foot of the great pyramid of Cheops, and our carriage was at once surrounded by a crowd of Arabs. We drove them all away and demanded to see the Sheik, who lives here and professes to control these wild children of the desert. We told him to select for each of us, two good men from the expectant crowd, and commenced at once the ascent. Figures can convey but an inadequate idea of the immensity of this vast pile. It is four hundred and eighty feet high; higher than the tallest spire in Europe; two hundred feet taller than Trinity Church steeple. The base is seven hundred and sixty-four feet on each side, and it covers an area of twelve acres. To build a causeway to carry the stone from the Nile, would require one hundred thousand men for ten years, and to build the monument, three hundred and sixty thousand men for twenty years. The difficulty of climbing the pyramid is not so much from the steepness of the ascent, as the great size of the blocks of stone composing each layer. An Arab taking hold of each hand, lifts us up from one layer to the next, and it is a succession of steps about three feet high, with a space of one or two feet to stand upon. When about a third of the way up we stopped to rest, and another Arab popped out from behind a stone and urged us to engage his services. He explained by pantomime how useful he could be in pushing us up behind. Boys carrying small earthen bottles of water followed us up, knowing that we should be thirsty enough to give them a few piasters for a drink, before we reached the top. Our Arabs wore no clothing but a white cotton shirt, and kept up a constant chattering like so many black-birds. To spring from block to block and pull us up after them, did not seem to tire them in the least. On the summit is a space about twenty-five feet square, the apex as well as the casing of the pyramids, having been

removed by the Caliphs, for constructing mosques and palaces at Cairo. We reached the top just in time to see the sun rise above the horizon of the great ocean desert, and spread out before us, was one of the finest panoramas in



CLIMBING THE GREAT PYRAMID.

the world. The dryness and purity of the air in Egypt enables one to discern objects at a great distance.

We could see the Nile winding its way through a carpet of verdure, on which are many scattered villages—the city of Cairo with its domes, minarets, and palaces glittering in the morning sun—and beyond all, the white shining sands of the desert.

The Arabs pointed out the autograph on stone of the Prince of Wales (very badly cut), and offered us hammer and chisel, but we declined the cheap immortality of enrolling our names so high up on tablets of stone, along with those of Jones, Smith, and Robinson, which cover

nearly every inch of the space. To descend was more difficult and dangerous than to climb up, for it requires steady nerves to look off from such a dizzy height, standing upon a shelf scarcely a foot in width. But our faithful Arabs never let go of our hands for a moment, until we reached *terra firma*, where a liberal *baksheesh* made them dance around us like so many wild Indians. "Yankee Doodle, good, good," was the style of their returning thanks. This title seems to denote high rank in Egypt, and is used as an especial compliment to all Americans.

Resting on the huge blocks of stone on the shady side, we took our lunch and indulged in a fragrant *chibouk*, before entering the long, narrow, dark passages that lead to the heart of the great pyramid. After climbing several inclines and sliding down others, with barely room to stand upright, we reached the king's chamber, where our tapers made little impression on darkness so intense that it could almost be felt. This apartment is lined with polished granite, and is thirty-four feet long, eighteen broad, and about twenty in length. In the center stands a red granite sarcophagus, in which King Cheops was buried, ages before the time of Moses. The air here was so stifling that we did not tarry long, and were glad to escape into the open air once more. The second and third pyramids are somewhat less in size than that of Cheops; and the six others comparatively small. In front of the great pyramid and facing the river is the Sphinx. This most fantastic animal, has ever been looked upon as one of the greatest wonders of Egypt. A colossal female head rises above the sand, attached to the body of a lioness, about which excavations have been made so as to show its form hewn from the solid rock. The features have the thick lips and high cheek bones of the Nubian, which was the type of beauty to the ancient Egyptians.

The circumference of the head measures over one hundred feet. Time and ill-usage have made sad havoc with the monstrous face, but there is a placid beauty about its features, an abstracted expression, resembling that of the large Buddhist idols of Japan and India. The conception is a grand one, and well calculated to inspire with terror the weak minds of its worshipers.

As we ride back to Cairo we turn around to gaze upon these marvelous structures, and are lost in amazement at the immense amount of labor expended for no practical utility. If their sole object was to perpetuate the names of the builders—Pharaohs, kings, and priests—whatever their titles may have been, how futile the attempt at immortality, for the names of the builders have in most cases passed away.

“Proud monuments of kings, whose very names
Have perished from the records of the past.”