

## A Family in Egypt

*Mary Rowlett*

### **Birds, Beasts and Beetles**

In the centre of the Nile, as it flows past Cairo, lies the island of Gezira. On that island was a wild, overgrown garden. And in that garden was a house. My sister and I were both born there and it became our much loved home for many years, till my father's death in 1950, when we returned it to the Egyptian Government, whose property it was. The family had lived there for forty-two years.

The Khedive Ismail had originally formed the Zohria Gardens, as they are called, to be an experimental ground for trees and shrubs which he ordered from India to see if they would flourish in Egypt. He succeeded well, and many of the present trees in the gardens and avenues of Cairo are the direct lineal descendants of the fine old giants who now, some eighty years later, reign supreme in the Zohria. One old banyan in particular has spread its tentacles downwards from its branches in all directions, and formed further trees around it in the true banyan fashion. It is a sobering thought that some of these large offshoot trees, whose trunks are now about two yards in circumference, used to serve as excellent giant strides when, as a small girl, I would grab their downward-growing rootlets which still hung several feet off the ground, like hanks of grey hair from some giant head. The banyan tree did not always seem a friendly giant to me, although I never hesitated to take such liberties with its hair. Sometimes, after swinging gaily round with heels in the air, I would pause and stare upwards into the world of dark foliage above, full of mystery and the unknown. Something would rustle overhead, probably a disturbed bat; a coldness would grip my heart and I would hurry away into the more sunlit parts of the garden.

The bird life in this and the surrounding garden was a constant source of fascination, though the grounds are separated from the noise and dust of Cairo by little more than the Nile itself.

The garden has several big trees which add a great deal to the interest, for some of these trees are the citadels of the crows and some are castles of the kites—hereditary enemies. During the many years that I have watched birds in this garden, I have never known a crow and a kite truce; I see no reason to believe there has ever been one; the war of the Spanish Succession was the skirmish of a day compared with this ageless warfare. The battles sometimes take on enormous proportions; thirty or forty a side. I have rarely seen hand to hand, or should it be claw to claw, fighting. It is mostly strategical guerilla warfare. The kites, who never lose their dignity, are pestered and baited by the crows, who will come in a flight of three or four, squawk in a kite's face, then turn tail and fly off. After two or three sallies of this type, the kite loses patience, and with his shrill though beautiful cry, gives chase. Having achieved some reaction from the kite, the crows assume a justified indignation and return to the charge, six or seven strong.

Soon there is a battle royal, everyone joins in, and the air is rent with caws and cries. As children we found these crow and kite fights absorbing and thrilling. Every crow flying away from the scene of action, was a messenger sent back at the risk of his life to get reinforcements, every kite flying forward ahead of his fellows, was their gallant captain, every huddle of crows cawing and nodding at each other on a neighbouring tree, was the general and his staff in consultation; and so on. Many is the time I have been dragged protesting from the window and made, quite rightly, to continue dressing or my lessons.

I know of no other bird who shows more palpably than the Egyptian crow what he would certainly be saying if he could speak. In the spring a whole family of crows, with much noise, will settle pointedly on a kite's tree near a nest. When the owner protests you can almost hear the crow saying in mock surprise: "Oh, dear me now, I quite thought it was my tree - fancy, children, this isn't our tree after all!" She will noisily gather her young together and fly off, but not before having wrecked the kite's afternoon peace. Besides being clowns they are really great villains, and in the spring, search every bush and hedge for small nestlings or eggs to devour. When I came into the garden and caught one at it, his every movement and expression seemed to say, "Now let me see, what was

I doing on this hedge? Oh, just walking along: extraordinarily nice thing, a hedge, to walk on in the spring, don't you think?" and he pretended to look innocently grieved when I chased him off. One year we put an old earthenware jar in a stand on the lawn, filled with water for the birds. The crows were terrified of it. They would come as near as they dared with their ridiculous sideways hop, then suddenly get in a panic and retreat hurriedly in disorder. Soon, however, they become only too familiar with it, and instead of clear, fresh water, it was always a soup of frogs' legs and bits of bread stolen from the gardener's meal.

The Cairo crow behaves, with any food he is unable to eat at the moment, in the same way as does a dog—he buries it. It would be interesting to know if this is a general habit of hooded crows or if the Cairo crows have invented it for themselves. I have often watched them carry off a piece of bread, dig it into the corner of a flower bed and camouflage the place by putting leaves and grass neatly over it with their beaks. They will also take a piece of bread which is too hard and dip it repeatedly in water by the garden tap until it is soft enough to please them. On some occasions a whole company of crows will take on a sort of mock solemnity and dignity. For no apparent reason, and usually at sunset, they will gather on the roof in rows and caw and caw together, then all will be silent for a moment or two before they start again, often led by a kind of choirmaster among them. "How the crows are praying tonight," our Italian maid would remark in awed tones.

As opposed to the crows, only once have I seen a kite lose his dignity. This one had become entangled in the long trails of *bignonia venusta* hanging from a tall tree and he was dangling head downwards, flapping feebly. We sent up a sporting garden boy to free him; it was a perilous climb, but he did it. The bird fell apparently senseless to the ground, breaking its fall on a rose bush. We laid its head in a saucer of water and left it. Five minutes later it drank some water recovered and flew off. One thing the crows and kites had in common is that they both noticed instantly if we were having a meal in the garden. We could not leave the table for a minute without a crow flopping on to it and pecking at everything, or a kite with its beautiful swoop bearing down and neatly removing a titbit. A kite will remove food like this from a child's hand so quickly and dexterously that the child hardly has time to be frightened. In the same way, the kites carry off golf balls, as Gezira golfers know to their cost. If you happen to have a kite's tree in your garden you are, with luck, about all square at the end of the season, because after a few days when the kite finds the balls are not edible nor are likely to hatch into anything, it will turn them out of the nest, to be gleaned by the owner of the garden below. Once I was richer by a polo ball acquired in this way.

For sheer decorative value, I think the prize goes to the buff-backed heron. He is common enough in the fields, but only occasionally honours us with *his* presence in the garden. Stalking elegantly across the green lawn, he looks like a fairy-tale prince transformed into a beautiful white bird. When he is in the act of catching frogs and beetles for his dinner, the illusion disappears; he fixes them with a hypnotic stare, stretches out his long neck parallel with the ground, waggles it from side to side in the most lunatic way, and then gives a sudden stab at his prey. Sometimes three or four of these herons will decorate the garden for a few days and then disappear again for months. A still less frequent visitor to the garden is the peewit. Occasionally on spring evenings, when the sun has just set, a flock of them wheel round showing the black and white of their rounded wings, and settle on the lawn searching for food. They are fascinating to watch, with their little runs of a yard or two and sudden halts, their heads on one side, listening, and their low cries one to another; but they are shy. These peewits roost on the lawn, but are off again in the early morning.

There are many other entertaining residents. The palm doves, for instance, whose chief characteristics are a fighting spirit (how they ever came to symbolise peace I cannot think) combined with marked idiocy which makes them attempt, day after day, to build on the shutters of the house. The shutters being closed every evening means the collapse of the twigs so laboriously collected.

Then there are the beautiful families of hoopoes who carry on their heads the golden feather crowns, the gift of Solomon. When out walking one day, King Solomon found the sun too hot, so

the Arab story goes. He asked if any animal or bird could help him. The hoopoes flew up and formed themselves into a close flock between Solomon and the sun. The king offered them anything they liked to ask for as a reward. They chose crowns of gold, though he warned them that it was a vain and unpractical thing for which they asked. Sure enough, a few days later the chief hoopoe came back and begged that the crowns should be removed: they were so heavy that all the hoopoes had stiff necks and could not fly in comfort. Solomon forgave them, and as they were truly penitent, provided them with beautiful light feather crowns instead.

The smallest and most endearing of the resident birds is the graceful warbler. It is about two inches long with another two inches of tail. Every year it builds a little domed nest in a lavender bush near the house and lays five apricot-coloured eggs about the size of a fingernail. These little birds hop about eating insects off the bushes twelve inches from your nose, with no concern whatsoever.

Pride of place for colour and movement goes to the bee-eaters who are the dashing young men on the flying trapeze of the ornithological world. Chestnut brown, lemon yellow, and verdant green, they swerve and glide, float and dive through the air, searching for food in the very essence or self-confident abandon. In early summer in the fields they can be one moment high above your head, and the next moment so low and close that every feather is seen against the background of ripening corn.

Nearly every wild animal has, by now, disappeared from Gezira.

I have not seen a fox for many years now. But it is encouraging to note that the ordinary garden birds, if anything, have increased. The Egyptians themselves take an interest in them. In the fine Agricultural Museum there is a beautiful collection of birds, one of the most artistically arranged that I know. An interest in, and protection of, birds has more than an intellectual or scientific value for Egypt, as her very life depends so much on the success of her crops and therefore to a great extent on that eternal battle between man and the insect pests, a battle in which many varieties of birds are man's staunch allies.

Reptile life was not missing either. There was one large bush past which, as children, we walked rather sideways with an occasional oblique glance, like a dog passing an enemy he does not feel capable of tackling that day, for a cobra was said to live there. Had not the gardener once found in it a nest of small, slithery, newly-hatched snakes? The darting little lizards were a very different proposition. These we loved. An old weeping willow was their especial habitation. It was gnarled and barren in the few winter months but, in early spring, about February, its hanging strands became supple with sap and the leafdrops of palest green broke out at the tips and soon covered the tree, falling to the lawn, a delicate cascade of pale spring green.

Under and around this tree darted the lizards. Sometimes you could hardly see them as they sped round on their highly important business. But sometimes they would stand so still that we children, on our knees in the dust, silently gazing, could see the beat of the lizard's heart against its shining skin. We never even tried to catch the lizards, they were too beautiful, but we hounded up hordes of black beetles, of the sort that inhabit open outhouses, scuttling under stones in the warm dust. We used to construct what we called black beetle farms, where we hoped they would breed; but they did not. Our biological knowledge was perhaps insufficient.