

A Family in Egypt

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1955

When approaching Egypt by ship, almost the first sign of her is the clouded water of the sea through which the vessel passes.

The north coast of Egypt is so flat, that Port Said or Alexandria are nearly reached before it shows itself. Curious distorted shapes of miraged buildings and palms are first seen; then slowly the landscape heaves itself out of the sea and the outline of a harbour falls into shape.

The noise of the ship's engines slackens. Along the outer breakwater the sailing vessels of the Mediterranean ride at ease. They have changed little in form or function through the ages. The sponge fishers are there from the Greek islands, the melon boats which ply these waters with their beautiful green global freight, and the smaller fishing boats, whose crews hang up the nets to dry on the rigging, are there too. By day it is a gay, living scene; but pass along this breakwater by moonlight and they seem like mythical ships. Silently they dip and bow with the movement of the deep green water. One rocks behind the other until, at the end of the line of moon-tipped masts, there gently floats the very ghost of a brigantine.

The approach to Egypt by air takes the traveller soaring high above the coast line, above the sea, its white frill and the yellow desert. Soon the crops and rich soil appear, offspring of the river. The Nile itself, broad and brown, is crossed, and Cairo lies ahead looking strangely fairy-like with its minarets just visible through a dove-coloured mist.

Flying this way by night, only one thing can be seen. Where the dark of the sea joins the dark of the desert and delta, there below, laid out on the black velvet, is a diamond necklace, a fitting adornment for Cleopatra herself. That necklace is her capital, the city of Alexandria, strung along the coast, beautiful and shapely.

Alexandria is a city of a million people, with large squares, fine streets, and for miles along the coast runs a Corniche road which is certainly the finest of its sort on the Mediterranean. Yet here and there in the midst of the modernity there are links with the past.

The last view I had of Alexandria was in the summer of 1955.

It was an everyday summer evening.

When the sundown breeze floats in from the sea, the populace leave their workshops and homes. They stream into the open squares, and wherever a patch of grass can be found they sit themselves upon it and prepare to enjoy the cool of the evening in family manner.

There is a wonderful mixture of Oriental and European dress (American would be more accurate as far as the men are concerned). Many small boys and their elders sport highly-coloured shirts of the square pattern made to hang outside the trousers. Though some fifty per cent of the older men present still wear the comfortable galabia, the percentage of younger men in native dress is less. None of the ladies of the party is veiled but many wear the black drapery over the top of the head hanging down almost to the ground behind.

Whole family circles sit cross-legged in a ring gaily chattering as they eat roasted monkey nuts, salted almonds and dried melon seeds. In and out of this thick parterre of population the vendors of such edibles pick their way. Some sell biscuit rings covered with sesame seeds which are threaded hoop-la fashion on sticks protruding from the rim of a round basket. Nearby is a smart handcart for selling ices. Other drinks are sold by a perambulating salesman who carries the whole paraphernalia on his person. A huge, longspouted jug containing a form of sherbert is strapped round his shoulder and waist, often topped by a lump of ice and decorated with jingling brass. On the other side of his belt are the glasses neatly fitted in a case. He announces his approach by using two brass saucers as castanets most deftly with his free hand. The seller of such drinks has a bright coloured cloth from hip to knees wound over his other clothes.

On go the neon lights, trains clatter to the left, buses rattle to the right, and the twentieth-century

crowds in upon the scene. It is a gay sight and noisy. Yet, in the middle of the hubbub, on a lawn as thickly beset with people as Brighton beach on holiday, a space is cleared, clean matting is now spread, and the leader of the evening prayer stands forth. Some sixty men of all sorts stroll over from among the crowds and take their place behind him in solemn and reverent prayer according to the Prophet Mohamed's instructions thirteen hundred years ago.