

Théophile Gautier

Egypt (1869)



Cairo, from the gate of Citzenib, looking towards the desert of Suez. (1846-1849)

David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)

Artvee

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Part I: From Paris to Messina

Translator's Introduction

Théophile Gautier (1811-1872) was born in Tarbes, in the Hautes-Pyrénées region of south-west France, his family moving to Paris in 1814. He was a friend, at school, of the poet Gérard de Nerval, who introduced him to Victor Hugo. Gautier contributed to various journals, including *La Presse*, throughout his life, which offered opportunities for travel in Spain, Algeria, Italy, Russia, and Egypt. He was a devotee of the ballet, writing a number of scenarios including that of *Giselle*. At the time of the 1848 Revolution, he expressed strong support for the ideals of the second Republic, a support which he maintained for the rest of his life.

A successor to the first wave of Romantic writers, including Chateaubriand and Lamartine, he directed the *Revue de Paris* from 1851 to 1856, worked as a journalist for *La Presse* and *Le Moniteur universel*, and in 1856 became editor of *L'Artiste*, in which he published numerous editorials asserting his doctrine of 'Art for art's sake'. Saint-Beuve secured him critical acclaim; he became chairman of the *Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts* in 1862, and in 1868 was granted the sinecure of librarian to Princess Mathilde Bonaparte, a cousin of Napoleon III, having been introduced to her salon.

Gautier remained in Paris during the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71, and the aftermath of the 1871 Commune, dying of heart disease at the age of sixty-one in 1872.

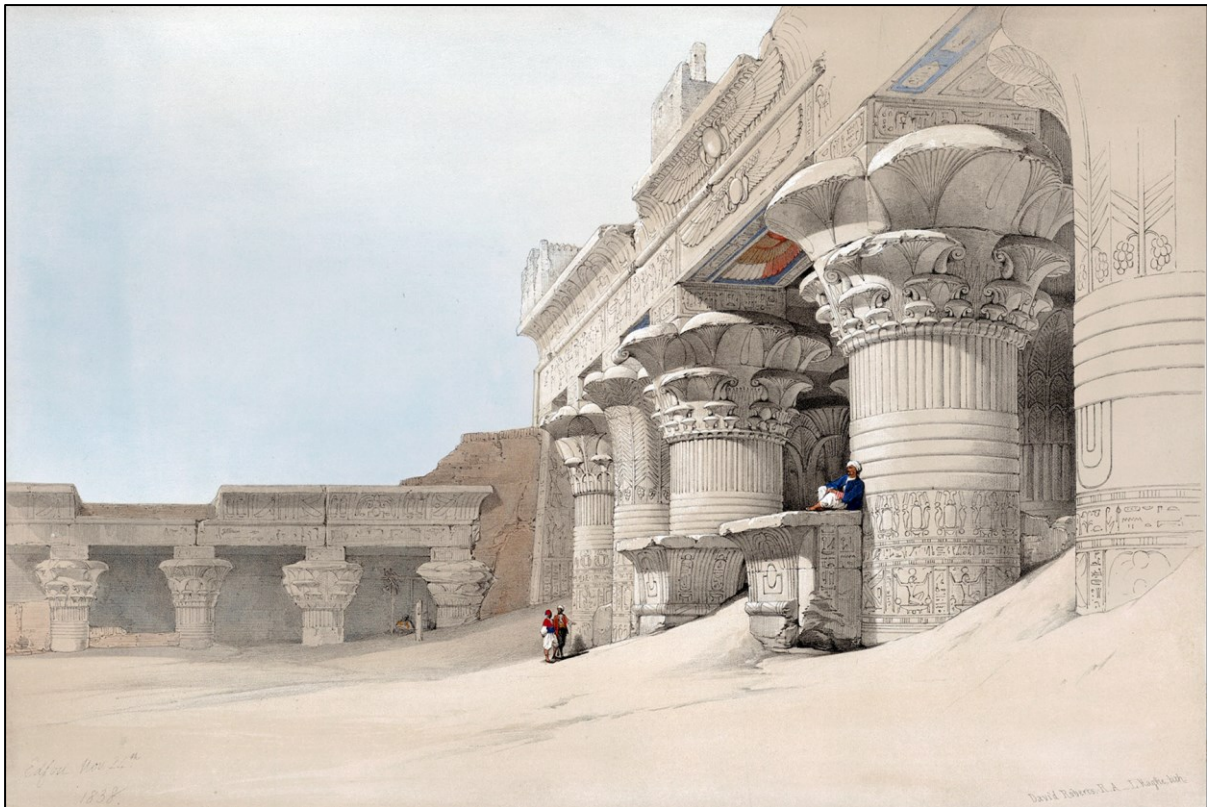
Though ostensibly a Romantic poet, Gautier may be seen as a forerunner to, or point of reference for, a number of divergent poetic movements including Symbolism and Modernism.

In August 1869 Gautier was invited by the Khedive of Egypt, Ismail Pasha, to attend the inauguration of the Suez Canal, due to take place on November 17th. Unfortunately, in Marseille, on October 8th, after dinner in the evening, he fell on the stairs, dislocated his left shoulder, and fractured his humerus. He continued his journey, aboard the *Moeris*, with two companions, Florian-Pharaon, editor-in-chief of *La France* and Auguste Marc, editor of *L'Illustration*, and reached Cairo, via Alexandria, on October 16th. Cairo was the third of the three 'cities of his dreams', the other two being Granada and Venice. Greatly limited in what he was able to see and do, due to his accident, after viewing the Pyramids from the Citadel, and visiting the port of Cairo on the Nile, he chose not to accompany his companions to Upper Egypt, attended the inauguration of the Suez Canal, and left Cairo for Italy in December. This memoir includes a description of the trip, and by way of an epilogue, is supplemented, here, by his note of 1872, regarding a travel book by Paul-Marie Lenoir, a student of one of Gautier's friends, the artist Jean-Léon Gérôme, whom Lenoir accompanied on two tours of Egypt. Both items were published posthumously in the collection *L'Orient* of 1877.

This enhanced translation has been designed to offer maximum compatibility with current search engines. Among other modifications, the proper names of people and places, and the titles given to works of art, have been fully researched, modernised, and expanded; comments in parentheses have been added here and there to provide a reference, or clarify meaning; and minor typographic or factual errors, for example incorrect attributions and dates, in the original text, have been eliminated from this new translation.

Chapter 1: The *Exposition Universelle* (1867)

In the garden of the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris, Egypt is not far from Turkey. There is no need to take the steamboat from Alexandria to Marseille. Just follow a sandy stretch of path, and one finds oneself before the temple of Edfu. One passes through the pylon (*monumental gate*), with its tiers of solid stone blocks, to follow an avenue lined with sphinxes of quite effective dimension, though reduced to a third of actual size, and arrive at the temple, firmly supported by powerful columns with lotus-shaped capitals. The sides of the walls, the shafts of the columns, the corbelling of the cornice are covered with those long processions of hieroglyphics, in which reverie seeks a mysterious meaning, and which adorn the robust surfaces of Egyptian architecture with their brilliant colours the centuries have been unable to alter. It is astonishing, and strangely disorienting, to find oneself, suddenly, face to face with one of these monuments that one journeys to visit beside the Nile on some desert plain quivering in the heat. The illusion is complete, so exact is the copy's fidelity. One would believe oneself in front of a real temple from the time of the Pharaohs if one did not see French decorators busily filling with sacramental colours the contours of the flat, stamped bas-reliefs. Here is plaster, not granite. Yet the tone is so precise that one could mistake it for such.



Edfu (1838)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)
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Inside the temple, the Egyptian antiquities discovered by Auguste Mariette, will be exhibited, and a statue, more than six thousand years old, a marvel of art, revealing a prodigious vanished civilisation, as old as time.

Not far from the temple of Edfu, stands the Okel or Arab caravanserai, with its high yellow walls striated with red brick areas forming the prettiest designs, its overhanging *moucharabias* (*latticed bays*), projecting from the exterior walls like large birdcages, and its terraced roof.

The interior consists of a two-story *patio*, surrounded by shops and rooms illuminated by light from the courtyard, in which merchants and travellers might take their ease, in the coolness and quiet. The *moucharabias*, like aerial salons, are furnished inside with low divans, and their fine lattice-work of cut wood, which allows one to see outside without being seen, rise against the sky, looking much like those perforated papers with which sweets are covered, filter the light and the breeze, and grant a magical appearance to this delightful Oriental dream. The Spanish, Moorish equivalent of the *moucharabia*, is the *mirador*, where long-veiled señoras, as Alfred de Musset has it (*see his poem 'Madrid', verse 2*), spend a large part of their existence seated on tiles or mats, in the style of *Fatma*, *Zoraïde*, and *Châïne-des-Cœurs* (*'Chainer of Hearts'; see Antoine Galland's 'Les Mille et une Nuits', 'The Thousand and One Nights,' published 1704-1717*)

Perhaps a viewing of this caprice will lead some rich and spirited pleasure-seeker to order a summer pavilion built, with Oriental-style moucharabias, in the midst of their park or at the lake's edge; all they will lack is the sun, heat and palm-trees.

A few paces from the Okel, lies the stable that houses the Maharis, or racing dromedaries, charming beasts with pale hides and of extraordinary slenderness, whose swan necks bear an elegant head with large eyes like those of a gazelle. Their drivers, dark-skinned Arabs, dwell beside them, and spend their days dreaming, leaning against the walls of the porch, where a tap endlessly drips into a stone trough. The Maharis were moved for a few days to the Jardin d'Acclimatation; the journey had tired them; creatures of the desert, they are not used to travelling by steamboat and wagon.

The palace of the Bey of Tunis attracts and holds the gaze, through the charm of its proportions and its intriguing details. The facade is flanked by two square pavilions surmounted by saw-tooth battlements like those of the walls of Seville. From the façade a sort of terrace projects forming the floor of a gallery with small columns which is accessed by a staircase flanked by six lions, three on each side, paws outstretched like sphinxes. Gracefully curved domes crown various of the rooms and offer to view, within, those displays of ornamentation enhanced with gold, purple, and azure, of which the rooms of the Alhambra hold such precious examples.

The centre of the building is occupied, like that of any Oriental dwelling, large or small, by a *patio*, or open-air courtyard, which in the hottest hours is covered by a canopy sprinkled with scented water. A fountain rises in the midst of this *patio*, onto which the rooms open, and which is furnished at its corners with divans. The lower sections of the walls are decorated at eye level with *azulejos*, glazed ceramic tiles in charming taste. Cloth hangings, cut and sewn from the same fabric as the embellishments of Andalusian jackets, line the room located at the far end of the patio. Nothing could be more original or beautiful. Stained-glass windows, their panes like precious stones gathered in Aladdin's cave, have been created, after first coating the coloured glass with gypsum, by modern Arab artists, as skilled as those who decorated the Halls of the Two Sisters and of the Abencerrages, and the Mirador of Lindaraja, in the Alhambra. They have traced with the point of the chisel, without prior design, openwork ornamentation which allows the sapphire, ruby, and emerald tones of the glass to shine through. One could not imagine a softer, more mysterious, or more magical effect. The apartment of the Bey, next to the patio, is decorated with rare magnificence. The richest fabrics of the Orient, the most beautiful carpets, cover the divans and floors: Sultanas could make gala dresses from the *portières* (*door curtains*) that mask the entrances, and the finest filigree-workers would be driven to despair by the delicacy of the moucharabias. It is as if the English artist John Frederick Lewis, whose marvellous painting 'The Courtyard of the Coptic Patriarch in Cairo' (*see the 1864 study in the Tate Gallery, London*) can be seen at the Exposition, had created their aerial wooden lacework. On the friezes, amidst the flowers, foliage and ornamentation, runs a legend in beautiful Arabic letters, 'Happy the country governed by justice.' alluding to a verse of the Koran (*See Sura 16, an-Nahl, verse 90*). The allusion is all the more ingenious since the word for justice, *sadiq* in Arabic, is also the actual name of the Bey (*Muhammad III As-Sadiq*).

Another building, like an Egyptian temple, contains a relief map of the Nile Valley and a reproduction of the work being carried out on the Isthmus of Suez. In a few days, we will be able to see the extent of this gigantic project that will bring India so much closer to us. The Earth's topography needed amending thus, and when the Panama Canal is complete humankind will be able to travel around its little domain at ease.

Let us end this exotic walk with a glance at the Mexican temple of Xochicalco which, sited on its large embankment, has an Egyptian air about it. There stood the hideous image of Huitzilopochtli, who was fed with smoking human hearts on a golden spoon. Such sacrifices took place barely three hundred years ago. Humanity is truly slow to acquire civilisation, and needs a few such Universal Exhibitions.

On the second floor of the Okel, the caravanserai-bazaar where the crowd stop to watch the skilful and graceful Arab workers labouring in their little workshops with primitive tools, one notices a door on which is written the inscription: 'No entry to the public'. Here is the anthropological museum, a collection of several hundred skulls, some of which are of such great antiquity that one could well say they are older than the world, without too excessive a display of hyperbole.

In this collection there are boxes of mummified remains from various centuries, taken from tombs or underground chambers that have not been violated by treasure-hunters, and last Monday (27th May, 1867) one of these coffins covered in hieroglyphics was to be opened, and the body it contained unwrapped (*by Auguste Mariette, and his student Gaston Maspero*) in the presence of doctors, scientists, artists and men of letters.

My curiosity was highly aroused. Those who do me the honour of reading my novels will understand why. The scene, that would take place in reality, I had imagined, and described in advance, in my *Roman de la Momie* (Romance of the Mummy, 1858). Which I do not say in order to advertise the work, but simply to explain the very particular interest I had in the funereal manipulation of those archaic remains.

When I entered the room, the mummy (*of a woman named Neskhons: her mummified remains are in the Cairo Museum, the canopic jars in the British Museum, the sarcophagus in Cleveland Museum of Art*) which had already been extracted from its box, was lying on a table, a human form vaguely outlined beneath the thick bandages; the sarcophagus itself was placed not far away.

On the sides of this coffin are representations of the judgment of souls, as commonly depicted in Egyptian funerary art. The soul of the deceased, brought there by two funereal genies, one hostile, the other favourable, bows before Osiris, the great judge of the afterlife, seated on his throne, the pschent on his head, the braided horned beard on his chin, the whip in his hand. Further on, her good or bad actions, symbolised respectively by a pot of flowers and a rough stone, are weighed in the scales. A long line of judges with the heads of lions, sparrowhawks, and jackals await, in hieratic pose, the result of this weighing to pronounce their sentence. Below the painting unfold the prayers of the funeral ritual and the confession of the deceased who does not accuse herself of her faults, but on the contrary speaks of those she has

not committed: 'I have not been guilty of murder, theft, or adultery'... Another inscription contains the genealogy of the dead woman, both the paternal and maternal branches. I will not transcribe here the series of unfamiliar names that end in the name of Neskons, the lady sealed in the box where she believed herself secure, waiting for the day when her soul would, after its trial, be reunited with her well-preserved body, and would enjoy supreme bliss incarnated, in flesh and blood. A hope deceived, for death like life cheats us!

The un-swaddling operation began. The outer envelopes of fairly strong cloth were opened with scissors; a faint, vague odour of balm, incense, and other aromatic drugs, spread through the room like the perfumes in a pharmacy. Among the linen, the end of the bandage was sought, and, having found it, the mummy was placed upright so that the interminable strip, yellowed like unbleached cloth by palm-wine and the liquids employed for preservation, could be unwound, and folded away.

Nothing was stranger than that large rag doll, containing a corpse, struggling stiffly and awkwardly beneath the hands that undressed it, in a sort of dreadful parody of life, and yet the bandages continued to pile up around it like endless remains of a fruit being peeled, whose core cannot be attained. Sometimes the bandages held compressed pieces of cloth similar to fringed towels, and intended to fill gaps or support contours.

Pieces of linen, pierced at the centre, allowed the head to pass through, conformed to the shoulders, and fell over the chest. All these obstacles overcome, a sort of veil was arrived at, similar to coarse Indian muslin and coloured with a pinkish dye of a softness of tone that charmed the artist in me. It seems to me that the dye used must have been *roucou* (*annatto*, an orange-red colourant), unless the muslin, originally red, had taken on a flesh-pink shade through contact with the unguents, and due to the action of time. Beneath the veil a system of strips of finer cloth, began, which had gripped the body more closely in their labyrinthine embrace. Our collective curiosity, deeply stirred, became feverish, and the mummy was made to rotate rather briskly on itself. Ernst Hoffmann or Edgar Allan Poe might have found there the starting point for one of their terrifying tales. At that moment, a sudden storm lashed the windows with rain, the large droplets sounding like hail: pale flashes of lightning illuminated the old yellow skulls and grimacing grins of the six hundred death's heads on the shelves of the cupboards in the anthropological museum, and the dull rumbling of thunder served as accompaniment to this waltz of Neskons, daughter of Horus and Rouaa ('*Rouaa*' is Arabic for a vision or dream. She was in actuality the daughter of Smendes II, high priest of Amun at Thebes, and Takhent-djehuti), pirouetting between the impatient hands un-swaddling her.

The mummy was shrinking noticeably, and its slender form was becoming more and more pronounced beneath the thinning mass. An immense quantity of linen cluttered the room, and one wondered how it could all have fitted into a box scarcely larger than an undertaker's coffin. The neck was the first part of the body to appear free of bandages, but it was coated with a largish mass of naphtha that had to be removed with a chisel. Suddenly, through the black debris of the naphtha, on the upper chest, gleamed a bright flash of gold, and soon a thin sheet of metal cut in the shape of a sacred hawk was exposed, wings spread, tail fanned like the eagles on coats of arms. On this golden leaf, a poor funerary jewel that had escaped the corpse-

robbers, there had been written, with reed and ink, a prayer asking the gods protecting the tombs of the dead to keep the heart and entrails of the dead woman from being scattered far from her body. A delightful miniature bearded vulture carved in hard stone, an attractive charm to hang from a pocket-watch, was attached by a thread to a necklace of blue glass plaques, from which hung a sort of turquoise enamel amulet in the shape of a scourge. Like those barley-sugars whose crystallisation reduces transparency in places, some of the plaques had become semi-opaque, no doubt under the heat of the boiling bitumen poured over them which had solidified.

All this is nothing out of the ordinary, we often find in the coffins of mummies a quantity of these small objects, and there is no dealer in curiosities who does not possess some of these figurines in blue paste; but here an unexpected and touchingly graceful detail presented itself: beneath each armpit of the dead woman was placed a completely-discoloured flower, like those long pressed between the leaves of a herbarium, but perfectly preserved, and which a botanist could undoubtedly have named. Was it a lotus flower or persea? No one could say; there were only scholars there. This discovery gave me thought. Who had placed the poor flower there as a supreme farewell at the moment when the body of a much-regretted woman was about to disappear beneath the first layer of bandages? That fragile flower four thousand years old, that foretaste of eternity, made a singular impression.

Among the linen wrappings a small berry of a fruiting species difficult to identify was also found. Perhaps a berry whose juice was mixed in that potion called *nepenthe* (See Homer's 'Odyssey', IV, 219–221) which made one forget all. On a carefully-extracted fragment of fabric, the name of an unknown king belonging to a no less unknown dynasty could be read within its cartouche (*subsequently identified as that of Siamun, sixth pharaoh of the twenty-first dynasty*). This mummy unwrapped at the *Exposition Universelle* filled a gap in history, and revealed a new pharaoh.

The figure was still hidden, as yet, beneath its mask of linen and bitumen, which was hard to remove, for it had solidified over an indefinite number of centuries. With a blow of the chisel, a shard was removed, and two white eyes with large black pupils shone with artificial life between bistre-coloured eyelids. They were eyes of enamel such as were customarily placed on the faces of carefully prepared mummies. The clear, fixed gaze from this dead face produced a somewhat frightening effect. The corpse seemed to regard with disdainful surprise the living forms bustling around it. The eyebrows were perfectly distinguishable on the arches hollowed out by the removal of the flesh. The nose, which, we must admit, rendered Neskhons less pretty than *Tahoser* (*the princess in Gautier's aforementioned novel*), was turned down at the tip to hide the incision through which the skull had been emptied of its brain, and a sheet of gold had been placed over the mouth like a seal of eternal silence. Her very fine, soft, silky hair, separated into light curls, did not extend beyond the tip of the ears, and was of that reddish colour so sought after by the Venetians, and which the jaded whim of some elegant women has returned to favour today. It looked like a child's hair dyed with henna, as one sees in Algeria. I doubt that its colour, which would render Neskhons ultra-fashionable, is natural; her hair must have been originally brown like other Egyptian women, and its auburn tone was undoubtedly produced by the essences and perfumes used in embalming. One finds the same shade of

reddened gold adorning two female heads exhibited in the display cases, one of them, strangely enough, coiffed exactly like the Venus de Milo, with opulent wavy headbands, and the other with a profusion of braids coiled together to form a helmet, as women arrange their hair today.

Little by little the body revealed itself in all its sad nakedness. The torso showed reddish areas of skin which on contact with the air acquired a bluish bloom similar to that on oil paintings, and revealed in one flank the incision that had served to remove the entrails and from which escaped, like the stuffing from a disjointed doll, aromatic sawdust mixed with small grains of a residue resembling rosin. The emaciated arms were folded, and the bony hands, with gilded nails, simulated, with a sepulchral modesty, the posed gesture of the Venus de Medici. The feet, slightly contracted by the desiccation of their flesh and nerves, seemed delicate and small; their nails were, like those of the hands, coated with small gold leaves. Was she then young or old, beautiful or ugly, this Neskhons, daughter of Horus and Rouaa, called 'lady' in her epitaph? A question hard to answer. She is now little more than skin and bones, and how can one find in these dry, stiff lines, the slender contours of those Egyptian women we see painted in temples, palaces, and tombs, or as Lawrence Alma-Tadema traces them with his brush, tuned to the archaic? But is it not an astonishing thing, one which seems to belong to the world of dreams, to view there on the table, and still in an almost-intact form, a woman who walked in the sun, loved, and lived three hundred years after Moses, almost a thousand years before Jesus Christ? For such is the likely age of this mummy that whimsical fate brought from its sarcophagus amidst the *Exposition Universelle*, amidst all our modern machinery. What strange events the future hides! In what an infinity of suppositions, in the presence of such seemingly straightforward facts, reverie has the right to indulge! Like Hamlet speaking to the gravedigger, one arrives at a philosophical demonstration of Alexander's dust 'stopping a bunghole' (see Shakespeare's *'Hamlet', Act V Scene I*). I mused on the thought that during a similar *Exposition Universelle* in some future century, our current civilisation having been replaced by another, there would be nothing surprising in some professor of anthropology of that time speaking of vanished races, nor delivering over my skull a most brilliant dissertation on the genre of the Serial-Writer, that species consisting of the Man of Letters crossed with the Poet, and I cast upon the poor mummy a warm but melancholy glance of farewell.

Chapter 2: The Isthmus of Suez

Let us return to Egypt. Not far from the Arab *okel*, where I witnessed the mummy's unwinding, stands a sort of palace or temple, its walls adorned with hieroglyphs, its columns topped with capitals decorated with gilded female masks, and brightly painted lotus flowers. At the far end of the building, like the choir to the nave of a church, there is a round aedicule (*shrine*), a slight deviation from the rectilinear Egyptian architecture, a deviation that will shortly be explained.

At the gate, a square pillar of a semi-transparent material first catches the eye; it is a block of rock salt cut from the floor of one of the Bitter Lakes of the Isthmus of Suez. Had it not been for the difficulty of transporting it, it could easily have been cut twice or three times as large; because the deposit is thick, and obelisks could be carved from it.

I entered and find myself in a vast room, lit from above, whose temperature, when the sun strikes the glass, must differ little from that which heats Ferdinand de Lesseps' engineers. A Mahari, a racing camel with a white coat, very artistically stuffed and mounted, provides further local colour. Along the walls, in glass cases, are arranged samples of the rather meagre fauna and flora of the country, shells from the Mediterranean and Red Seas, fragments of fossils, and some minor antiquities discovered during the excavation of the Canal. In the centre, on a large table, is a relief plan of the Isthmus of Suez, a strange yellow model bordered by the azure of those two seas. Here and there a few lines of greenery speckle the sand; arid dunes rise above the plain on the side of the Red Sea, and carve out that 'Vale of Wandering' by which the tribes of Israel exited Egypt. The Isthmus of Suez forms a sort of depression between Africa and Asia, whose slopes end there in imperceptible elevations. This land bridge, which connects the two continents, is only about eighty miles long at most. No more than a simple thread of terrain. In pre-historic times, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea must have communicated with one another. The latter, at least, advanced further north, extending its tip to the base of the Bitter Lakes, where it left deep saline layers, and still-glutinous mud.

This minor obstacle, this thin strip of land, barely perceptible on the map has for centuries forced ships to circumvent the enormous continent of Africa, its southernmost cape extended towards the pole, such that India and China were regarded as being at the world's end in relation to the nations of Europe; the Far East receded to an almost fabulous distance. It was not always so. Sesostris (*a legendary Pharoah, see Herodotus et al, possibly based on Senusret II and his successors*) conceived the idea of linking the two seas, not by transecting the Isthmus, but by digging a canal which started from the Pelusiac branch of the Nile (*between the El Baqar Canal and the city of Pelusium, Tel el-Farama*) near Bubastis, and ended at Arsinoe (*Suez*) at the tip of the Gulf of Suez. This canal, begun by Sesostris, continued by Necho II, Darius, and Ptolemy II Philadelphus, was completed under the first Lagids (*the Ptolemaic Dynasty*); it was about a hundred and twenty-five miles long, and thirty feet deep, and two triremes could pass abreast. It existed, sometimes blocked and re-excavated, until the eighth century, when Caliph al-Mansour had its mouth closed to deny trade access to Baghdad. Traces of this silted-up canal can still be found.

Sesostris' idea has recently been revived by Ferdinand de Lesseps and completed with that boldness which the power of modern science allows. This gigantic project, conceived in 1844, is already no longer merely a project. The chimera has become a reality, and all that remains is to excavate a few more miles of the plateau of El Guisr, to cut through the Serapium heights, and to excavate the narrow space that separates the southern end of the Bitter Lakes from the tip of the Gulf of Suez. A work of two or three years, at most, and vessels will pass from one sea to the other through this Bosphorus created by engineers.

A similar operation performed on the Isthmus of Panama, the link that connects South America to North America and prevents the Atlantic Ocean from flowing into the Pacific, will allow free movement around the globe and eliminate lengthy and unnecessary detours. This will soon occur, since the planet must be prepared for the new and unknown future, though one which can be foreseen, resulting from the great scientific discoveries, the honour, of our century.

But let us set aside these considerations, which are not pertinent to the frivolity of a stroll around the Universal Exhibition, and return to our relief map. It presents itself to the eyes of the curious, on entering the room, as to those of a traveller arriving from India. One has before oneself, to the north, the Mediterranean, to the left a portion of cultivated and verdant lower Egypt, where the Nile, approaching that sea, divides into several branches and spreads across its delta like the crown of a palm tree. Towns and villages dot this fertile region. To the right, unfolds an arid, humped plain of sandy hills crossed by the maritime canal. There the burning dryness of the desert reigns, and one would have nothing to drink other than one's own sweat if a freshwater canal, dug by the company, did not extend from Lake Timsah to Zagazig, bringing water from the Nile, roughly from the middle of the line traced by the maritime canal. It is from the Gulf of Pelusa that the latter canal through the Isthmus of Suez starts, and the first blow of the pickaxe has broken ground on the narrow strip of sand from which Port Said rises, a young city, born only yesterday so to speak, and created by the labours of the company (*the Suez Canal Company, formed in 1858*). The canal crosses Lake Manzala, a kind of marsh or lagoon deriving from the extravasated Nile and extending along the coast. A thin line of sand extending as far as Damietta separates the stagnant water from the brine. The raised bank of the canal forms a dike that will soon allow the reclamation of the eastern tip of the lagoon, where ancient Pelusium lay, and prevent the Nile flood from spreading there.

On other tables of the exhibition, are displayed plans, also in relief, representing sections of the canal, with examples of those powerful machines that today replace the laboured efforts of the fellahin. Dredgers; elevators, throwing the earth torn from the ground far beyond the banks, by means of a kind of inclined bridge or sheet-metal conveyor; flap-loading barges; tugs, and all sorts of surprisingly-efficient machines, are reproduced on a sufficient scale to allow one to see their details, and enliven the ribbon of blue water bordered by two banks of yellow sand.

On the side walls, photographs show the ground and earthworks along the isthmus in their various aspects. Two paintings, one by Narcisse Berchère, the other by François-Pierre Barry, form a striking contrast. In the one we see the isthmus in its wild state, burnt, powdery, bristling with a few meagre tufts of esparto grass, and crossed by a picturesquely barbarous caravan; in the other, water filling the canal's deep trench for the first time, in the presence of a group of officials and engineers.

The Suez Company, which seeks to make the public aware of the importance and difficulty of its work, not content with relief plans, models of the machinery, and photographic views, has placed in the rotunda at the end of the building, a panorama of the Isthmus itself executed with every semblance of nature, and the magic of perspective. This panoramic view was

painted by Auguste Rubé and Philippe Chaperon (*the celebrated theatre decorators and scenographers*), from the designs of Alfred Chapon, the company's architect.

From the hall one ascends to the platform, sheltered by a canopy, where viewers stand, via a corridor deliberately maintained in darkness, such that when one emerges one is at first dazzled by the brilliance of a sky whose azure turns to white, so intense is the light. One is transported, suddenly, to the intense heat of Africa, and almost feel the sweat beading one's temples as if one had actually just disembarked at Port Said from some vessel of the Messageries Impériales line (*the merchant shipping company, founded 1851 as Messageries Maritimes*). The journey was not a long one.

In the right-hand corner, as the panorama is not a complete circle, one can see Port Said, and the waters of the Mediterranean azure on the horizon; further to the left are the puddles of Lake Manzala, bordered by strips of sand and speckled with islets, extending to the African coast. One can see the port construction sites; concrete blocks drying in the sun, awaiting submergence; white sails in the commercial basin; and, on the far side of the canal where it joins the sea, in Port Said itself, the city's dwellings ranged parallel to the shore. Lake Manzala borders the canal which traverses it, between its two banks formed of earth removed from the excavations. A canal crossing a lagoon as if between two walls, is quite a strange sight, and is not one of the least curiosities of this gigantic undertaking. This stretch of about twenty-eight miles in reality, is necessarily foreshortened in the panorama. Here is the El Quantara camp with its double rows of barracks, its hospital located on a hillock, and its pontoon bridge where the caravans from Syria pass. The canal leaves Lake Manzala and traverses dry land, but not for long, because soon it meets Lake Ballah, an irregular depression of land that the water fills, or drains from, depending on the time of year. Here, the ground rises and forms a kind of dam, which is called the 'sill' of El Guisr, and which had to be cut through so as to allow passage for the canal which is deeply entrenched at this point. One can see the city of Ismailia, the director's hut, and, like a silver thread heading westwards towards fertile Egypt, the freshwater canal whose channel feeds the new city; to the east the infertile, burning sand extends in dusty waves towards Syria. Near Ismailia, one can distinguish the Arab village with its bazaar and mosque, since, in painting their panorama, Auguste Rubé and Philippe Chaperon have deviated from scale, and granted more importance to interesting locations than to the empty spaces, the exact reproduction of which would have proved quite monotonous, and required an unnecessarily large canvas, one of vast dimensions, for every object to be represented. The Serapium, the name given to the bulge which prevented the Red Sea penetrating further north and into the Isthmus, has not halted Ferdinand de Lesseps' engineers, and, crossing the Serapium, the canal traverses the Bitter Lakes, a vast dried-up basin, presenting the appearance of an arid valley with bluish tints, gleaming with powdery salt, and striped with muddy strands. In certain portions of the basin, the crystallisation has taken on bizarre forms resembling the ruins of shattered cities and fortresses. This vast basin is able to contain no less than thirty-two billion cubic feet of water, and will take nearly a year to fill from the sea; an operation which will take place when the work is fully complete. The last obstacle confronting the engineers before reaching the Red Sea at Suez, is an excessively hard shelf of rock, which can only be removed with explosives, and which extends for several miles in the area of Chalouf. Then

comes the plain of Suez, at the foot of the Djebel-Genessé, and the last undulations of the Attaka. Picturesquely-sited camps for the company workers enliven this sandy expanse, which is shown being crossed by a convoy travelling from Cairo to Suez, on a narrow iron track, a plume of white smoke overhead.



Suez (1840)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)
[Artvee](#)

This whole corner of the panorama is superb in its use of colour. One views the admirable shades that mountains take on in sunlight, when devoid of greenery. Distance clothes them in a shimmering mantle, in which azure and amethyst shadows contrast with areas of gold and rose-red. Thus, laid bare, the epidermis of the planet exhibits the planetary radiance that Earth must possess when seen from the moon.

When one leaves the rotunda, one feels one has made an actual journey across the isthmus, and passed from one sea to the other, on one of those steamboats which will soon make the direct journey from Marseilles to Calcutta (*Kolkata*).

Chapter 3: Aboard the *Moeris* (1869)

Cursed be the strong-willed! Their captious reasoning tempted me, for the first time in my life, to ignore the common superstition regarding setting sail on a Friday, and punishment soon followed; a rather harsh one for a single infraction. And then, I was about to fulfil a wish of old, which had been endlessly postponed till tomorrow. Shaking off my sadness at departure, I had experienced that dangerous joy that rouses the anger of the *Fates*, those jealous goddesses offended by the happiness of mortals, a state, alas, rarely achieved and ever incomplete!

In a fit of philosophical carelessness quite contrary to my nature, I had failed to carry on my person the necessary sacred medal, a ring with a turquoise setting, a branch of forked coral, or a hand shaped from pink lava making the fateful sign or grasping a dagger. My only amulet was a small gold Venetian gondola, hanging amidst my pocket-watch trinkets, a charming souvenir, but insufficient defence against the malignant influences to which the traveller is exposed.

Moreover, a pair of very beautiful, gentle, bluish-grey eyes that gleamed at me, from the corner of the carriage, now and then, for some unknown reason, took on a sinister and terrible expression like those of Christine Nilsson in her role as 'The Queen of the Night' in Mozart's *The Magic Flute*. Pupils of an intense blue deeper than black marked the centre of those steely pupils and gave them a Valkyrie-like look. The eyebrows contracted slightly towards the root of the nose. Duly warned by those unequivocal signs, I should have taken the necessary precautions: extended the index and little fingers, folded the middle and ring fingers inwards, and brought the thumb towards the palm of my hand. Though hardly deserving of such a gesture, it is true, at least such a potentially harmful glance is always, if not prevented, at least deflected. In my blindness, I neglected that very simple means of defence, recommended by Neapolitan prudence, which is forever on guard against *jettatura* (*the evil eye*); and with a careless show of admiration worthy of a rationalist, I contemplated those fascinating and dangerous eyes, at once so fierce and so gentle.

And that was not all: at the very moment I was leaving the offices of the Imperial Messageries Company, where I had left my luggage, a funeral procession arrived at the Cannebière, preceded by white penitents, as fearsome as ghosts at midday. Their heads buried in their hoods, they cast, through the holes in their masks, black looks that seemed to rise from the depths of eternity, and, walking with hurried step, murmured in cavernous voices their prayers for the dead; beneath the hem of their frocks, one could glimpse modern trousers, and large, iron-shod shoes. Bright, cheerful sunlight illuminated this gloomy procession, which traversed, as if in haste to escape from life, the busy crowds who saluted the black carriage with a distracted air. One of these penitents brushed me with his shroud and threw me a strange glance, which sent a little shiver down my spine.

The omens were definitely not favourable; I would have been wise to have returned home; but like Caesar, told to beware the Ides of March, I heeded not the warning. False shame held me back, and fear of the mockery that the philistines of common sense would not fail to address to me, if I returned to Paris abruptly, made me forge ahead; though I felt, inwardly, a presage of misfortune, and that secret voice to which one should always listen murmured: 'Do not go!'

The *Moeris*, a superb packet-boat, whose pharaonic name was well suited to a voyage to Egypt, was under steam, only awaiting the arrival of the last bags of dispatches before casting off, and I was chatting on deck with one of my old friends from that days of the July Revolution of 1830, who was now a government commissioner at the Imperial Messageries, about the past, and our bohemian life in the cul-de-sac of the Rue du Doyenné, where we all lived a gay, carefree life together, full of dreams and hopes, surprising the old house that sheltered us with our noise and activity. This conversation, awakening old memories, disposed me to melancholy. An indefinable sadness, mixed with vague apprehension, invaded my heart in spite of myself, and the last sentence I addressed to the companion of my youth, when the final signal for departure sounded, was this: 'Why don't I return to shore with you; we could dine together at La Réserve, and I could take the ten o'clock train to Paris; I feel something bad is about to happen!'

My instinct was right, and my presentiment soon confirmed. To reassure myself, I murmured: 'The land of Kemet (*the Egyptian name for Egypt meaning 'the black land'*) will be kind to me. In my novel *The Mummy*, I spoke of the gods of ancient Egypt with respect. I neither mocked Isis for her cow's horns, nor Pasht (*Bastet*) for her cat's whiskers. Before those gods with the heads of creatures, baboon, jackal, hawk, crocodile, my seriousness did not waver for an instant. My incense smoked in its cup at the end of my bronze *amschir* (*censer*) beneath the nostrils of Hathor, the Egyptian Venus, and I took care not to tug, as a Voltairean might, the funereal beard of Osiris. Those ancient divinities worshipped by the populace, in gigantic and splendid temples which neither the centuries nor mankind have razed, when Europe was merely a marshy forest populated only by a few tattooed savages wielding flint weapons, would retain, despite their ruin, sufficient power to protect a poor superstitious poet against *fascino* (*enchantment*) and evil omens.

Accompanied at a distance by the *Arethusa*, the *Moeris* had attained the high seas; dinner, which brought together scientists, painters, journalists, doctors, engineers, men of the world, a truly intelligent elite, had been all the more joyous as the weather was fine, and the influence of the waves not yet felt.

On deck, sparks from a host of cigars shone like fireflies, and a sprinkle of stars were alight, in the darkening sky. The ship's lanterns had been hoisted, but now, and before the shadows completely enveloped us, the unfortunate idea of descending to the lower deck to find my cabin, and prepare for the night, prompted me to leave the group of friends with whom I was debating, while leaning on the rail and watching the water flow by. But, on the first step of the staircase, my footing failed me, and, rising with difficulty, dizzy from the fall, I realised my left arm was broken near the shoulder. My presentiment had been realised: I had paid my debt to jealous Fate!

Fortunately, Dr. Paula Broca, a ‘prince of science’, as they say today, was aboard the *Moeris*, and he, with the help of Dr. Émile Isambert and the ship’s doctor, reset my broken humerus, strapped it, in a manner as simple as it was ingenious, and as far as was possible repaired the damage. What was then required was time and patience. A young employee of the Messageries Company kindly lent me the after-cabin, larger and more comfortable than the others in which passengers are piled two stories high, in beds like chest of drawers. The editor of *L’Illustration* (*Auguste Marc*) settled there to keep me company, and look after me. I feared a fever, but escaped one, and the next day, after a night that a fairly strong dose of opium had not prevented from being a sleepless one, clambered back on deck, one empty sleeve flapping like that of a veteran who had left his arm at Waterloo. No doubt seeing me suffering from another manner of affliction, seasickness was kind enough to spare me, and, despite the catastrophe of the previous day, I lunched with a fairly good appetite at the table already devoid of most of its guests, since, though the weather was fine, the swell was strong enough to trouble sensitive stomachs. It is true that I had to have my bread and meat sliced, and my drinks poured for me, and was obliged to be fed like a baby, but ten friendly hands immediately extended themselves to do me these small services.

After lunch, I sat myself down in one of those articulated armchairs that unfold like deck-chairs, while a comrade stood nearby, ready to entertain me with conversation and help me relight an extinguished cigar. Sometimes, in the midst of our conversation, this companion would turn pale, then green, and demand of the waiter a glass of rum, a cup of tea, or a lemonade, and finally disappear, and another, with a more settled stomach, would replace him.

But enough of these details. purely personal, which I would not have spoken about if various newspapers had not divulged them. To pass over them in complete silence would be mere affectation, while to insist on them would prove tedious, because nothing is more unbearable than the words ‘I’ and ‘me’, and, if I use them, it is only to link one sentence to another, and because the successive tableaux of which a journey is composed ever require a spectator. I reduce myself as far as I can to being simply a detached eye, like that of Osiris on a mummy’s cartonnage, or the ones whose black pupils adorn boats’ prows at Cadiz or Malta.

The coast had long since disappeared, and we were sailing a deserted sea, still able to see, through our binoculars though barely, on the rim of the horizon, a wisp of smoke driven on the wind, that betrayed the presence of the *Arethusa*, which we had left behind. Employing its jib sails, the *Moeris* was moving swiftly, and without too much pitching and rolling; yet that indefinable unease, for which no one has yet found a remedy, had invaded most of the passengers, who had returned to their cabins to try and seek relief in a horizontal position. Others remained on deck, huddled beneath their travel blankets, not daring to face the sickening and insipid smell exhaled from the vessel’s interior. However, a group of young women, with pale but warmish complexions, and large black eyes, which seemed elongated by their use of kohl, who were hooded in red or brightly striped mantles, formed a kind of ‘Decameron’ (*see Boccaccio’s collection of stories told over ‘ten days’*) sheltered by the housing on deck, and smiled, with a show of pity akin to mockery, at the gallantries that the assorted young men, barely suppressing their nausea, attempted to offer them. Women know how to find a way to look pretty and decorative at sea, which is no easy matter.

A crossing, without land in sight, floating between the sky and water within the circle of the horizon, which, with all due respect to the poets fails to grant one any idea of infinity, presents few subjects for description. The waves swell, advance, break, and form those crests of foam that we call *whitecaps*, with a sterile agitation, and monotonous variety that ends up wearying the eye. Boredom takes hold in spite of oneself, though one strives hard to admire the play of light, the sunrises and sunsets, and the glittering trails of light that the moon sheds on the endlessly teeming waves. One begins to wish for something less vague and immense, more limited, more precise, on which the mind can rest, like those birds of passage which, tired of their flight, alight for a moment, to catch their breath, on the ship's yards.

Soon we crossed the strait that separates Corsica from Sardinia (*the Strait of Bonifacio*), islands adrift on the sea like two immense jagged leaves from a tree, and the passengers, having regained the deck, admired, without fail, the rock strangely eroded to the shape of a bear that seems to guard the tip (*Capo d'Orso*) of the latter; but night, falling quickly in the month of October, wreathed their coasts in shadow, and when morning came, Sardinia had vanished like a cloud, and we found ourselves in the midst of a watery solitude, undisturbed by the presence of another vessel.

Towards evening, we passed in sight of the Lipari Islands, but too far away to distinguish anything other than uncertain grey patches which from a distance almost blended into the blue.

At midnight, a line of light burst from the darkness. It was the curved quay, at Messina, at the far end of the harbour. The vessel hove to, there, so as to deliver the mail. There was a momentary question with regard to a potential disembarkation, due to my injury which might render the journey to Egypt difficult or dangerous. But the idea of being left all alone on an island, like Philoctetes on Lemnos, appealed to me not at all, since I lacked the bow and arrows of Heracles that prompted Ulysses to rescue him (*see Homer's 'Iliad' Book II*), and I asked to continue my journey, which was granted, after 'deliberations involving Medicine and Friendship', as one might have said in the eighteenth century. The letters I had dictated to reassure my parents, and a few others who still deigned to be interested in me, complete with autographs proving I was still alive, were added to the bag of dispatches. Leaning on the rail, I watched the boats arriving from the shore to offer small coral objects for sale to the passengers. They formed a picturesque spectacle, these boats whose lanterns cast fiery serpents on the sea, and from which rose all the turbulence of southern vociferation. Nothing could have offered more of the fantastic than the shadows of the gesticulating sailors and tradesmen gathered at the foot of the ship's ladder.



The Harbour of Messina with the Shore of Calabria in the Distance (1901)
Charles Rowbotham (English, 1858-1921)

[Artvee](#)

We set off once more, and I regretted having seen nothing of the city but for a few bright spots of light. I would have liked to know more of the actual setting of Schiller's *Bride of Messina* (1803).

Next morning, when daylight returned, the coast was already far away, and appeared on the horizon only as a line of mist from which emerged a white peak, which was Etna covered in snow.

The day passed without incident, then the night, in open water. 'Waves, and yet more waves!' (See Victor Hugo's poem '*La mer! Partout la mer*') The air, quite fresh till then, was warming, noticeably, announcing the proximity of a hot shoreline. A few ships, heading in the same direction as ourselves, were silhouetted at the edge of the sky.

An opaque band of greyish colour gradually emerged from the water. A few palm trees, a few windmills, appeared. It was Alexandria.

Part II: From Alexandria to Cairo

Chapter 4: Alexandria

The approach to the harbour possesses the property of curing seasickness far better than those Maltese bonbons they advertise, or other such impotent panaceas. All of us were on deck, completely free of it, and gazing through binoculars at the rapidly emerging shoreline. The buildings stood out clearly, and various palaces raised their large blue facades above the houses below. A few minarets granted the skyline an Oriental appearance. Pompey's Pillar adorned with its large capital, rose on high like a beacon. A light breeze slowly turned the windmills, each with eight sails, whose appearance reminded me of the windmills of Syros. Here and there date-palms bloomed, like feather dusters whose handles were stuck in the earth, and over all stretched a sky that was pale, being so bright.



Alexandria (1846-1849)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)
[Artvee](#)

In the harbour, clustered an extraordinary influx of vessels from every nation: English, American, Austrian, Italian, French, whose sunlit flags fluttered joyfully, their masts and rigging forming a leafless forest, through which sailors, busy with one task or another, fluttered like birds. There were sailing-ships, and steamboats in greater numbers, these the poetry and prose of sea-going vessels. Nothing is more cheerful than such a spectacle. Human activity appears there in all its richness, and a city that lacks a seaport is always lacking to some degree. They are a charming sight, these many vessels, with carved and gilded figures at their prows; their painted load-lines; their copper fittings, coated with verdigris by sea-water on arrival from India or China and having as yet had insufficient time to be washed down; their masts as high

as cathedral spires; their topsails like minaret balconies; their shrouds recalling acrobats' tightropes; their delicate tangle of rigging, whose tenuity seems to defy the brush; their funnels striped with black, white or yellow; their rounded disc-like paddle-drums; their names inscribed at the stern, on the crowning-board, sometimes in Arabic, Greek, or Russian; their ship's boats elegantly suspended; all the intricate details, so complex yet so precise, of things so strong yet apparently so light!



Alexandria (1846-1849)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)
[Artvee](#)

As soon as the *Moeris* had dropped anchor, at a considerable distance from shore, for ships of heavy tonnage cannot approach the quay directly, a large number of boats, canoes, and steamboats detached themselves from the jetty. These, the Khedive's envoys of hospitality, flew to meet us. They danced as they hastened through the choppy water, amidst which the light was shattered to a thousand shards, as in a broken mirror. Some had sails, others were oared, but a steamboat, bearing the star and crescent on its red flag, easily left them in its wake. One could already distinguish among the vessels the wide variety of facial types and costumes that render the ports of North Africa so interesting.

Nubar Pasha (*Minister of Foreign Affairs*), and Antonio Colucci Bey, (*President of the Sanitary Superintendence and the Municipality of Alexandria*), with their retinue, had soon climbed the boarding-ladder of the *Moeris*. Nubar already knew of my accident, and revealed the full interest that he took in my misfortune by thanking me for not having allowed myself to be discouraged by that unhappy beginning. Courtesies having been exchanged, the transshipment of various packages and pieces of luggage began, which was no small matter. Despite the eagerness of the porters, of all kinds, to receive the items which the sailors were hoisting from the hold, they formed a tumultuous throng, wherein polyglot imprecations were exchanged. They jostled, and stumbled against each other, grasped each other, and thrust each other to the top of the ladder, at the risk of falling into the sea, or tumbling back down into the boat, which would have been more serious. Finally, the flow of trunks moderated a little, the cascade was at last exhausted, and I was able to embark on the steamboat supported by my comrade. A crate on the poop deck served as a seat, and after a few minutes we were ashore, on a sandy beach.

On this strand, beneath the rays of a burning sun, whose heat enveloped us, suddenly, like the atmosphere in a steam bath, swarmed a motley crowd composed of black Africans, Copts, Fellahin, Barabra (*Nubians*), Greeks, and Maltese, restrained with great difficulty by the Khedive's officials, young men of distinguished manners, recognizable by their official *tarbouches* (*the tarbouche is the conical brimless fez*) and responsible for welcoming guests from Europe on landing, and directing them to their respective hotels. The difficult problem to solve in this melee was how not to be parted from one's luggage. Twenty arms of all colours were stretched out for the smallest parcel. Two or three Herculean fellows fought furiously over a hat-box or an overnight bag; and whoever had managed to seize one would start racing towards the city, without knowing where the traveller was going. The officials managed to moderate this excessive zeal, and the luggage was loaded, near their owners, onto carriages waiting a little further away. The coachmen of the most diverse races, some in white robes and turbans, others in the blue tunic and felt cap of the fellahin, some wearing the wide trousers and fez with blue tassel of the Greeks of the Islands, others in a *Frankish* costume that one might have thought borrowed from the wardrobe of *Robert Macaire* (*a character created on stage by Frédérick Lemaître*), waved their whips, and the travellers, only just seated, set off at a gallop through the compact crowd which parted to the cries of the *sais* (*stable-boys*) preceding the carriages.

Although I advised my coachman to go slowly, because of my arm, he simply moderated the pace of his animals for a moment, then resumed a gallop, humiliated by proceeding at a walking pace. How eagerly I looked around, to capture the slightest characteristic detail! Nothing equals the impression produced by a first glance. Alexandria is not a wholly Oriental city, but it has more character than travellers claim. Despite the clumsy European shapes affected by the fine houses, one feels one is in North Africa. Here, a door is framed by ornamentation carved in the Turkish style; there, a *mashrabiya* (*an enclosed, latticed balcony*) allows a glimpse, through its fine grille, of a woman looking out; further on, a floor overhangs, a house ends in a terrace, or a date-palm darts above a wall its column surmounted by a capital of leaves. At a street-corner a woman masked like a domino appears; half-naked donkey drivers

drive their donkeys before them; and a camel advances with measured steps, swinging its long neck.

We soon arrived at the Hôtel d'Angleterre, whose door was blocked by a riot of carriages and porters. Order was gradually restored. The accommodation of each guest was designated in advance, special arrangements were soon made so as not to separate groups of friends or acquaintances, and each, followed by fellahin bowed beneath the luggage, and preceded by utterly polite attendants, headed towards their room, climbing a vast staircase with a green-painted banister.

My lodgings framed in their large windows a wide stretch of sea and a patch of sky in which seagulls hovered. The waves, whose final surge broke in foam on the rocks at the foot of the hotel, were at that moment hosting a few sailing boats whose manoeuvres amused me, and consoled me somewhat for my being unable to run about town like my companions: not that I was unable to walk, but in the busy crowd, and the congested streets full of horses, donkeys, camels, and vehicles of all kinds, I feared an unpleasant jolt to my arm, so recently mended. Besides, the very next day, at nine in the morning, I was scheduled to board the train for Cairo, and needed a little rest on a floor less mobile than that of the ship, so as to restore my strength. I therefore remained within, admiring the glaucous blue of the sea, seated in an armchair, till dinner, which was served on an immense veranda decorated with latanier-palms, and tropical plants with large leaves, and aired by the breeze from the harbour and the light-filled bay.

Waiters in black coats and white ties, as correctly-dressed as those at the Grand Hôtel de la Paix (*on the northwest corner of the intersection of the Boulevard des Capucines and the Place de l'Opéra, in Paris, opened in 1862*), moved with silent eagerness about the horseshoe-shaped table, filled with hungry guests, most of whom had not eaten since Marseille. These waiters received the dishes from the hands of native servants, in long robes and turbans, who bore them from the pantry or the kitchen; numerous bottles, topped with shiny metallic-paper caps, adorned with pompous labels, and bearing the names of great wines, followed one another in quick succession, not belying their illustrious attributions too greatly. All were visibly happy to no longer have in front of them a plate fixed between two strips of wood, and to be able to raise their glass to their mouths without a sudden roll of the vessel causing them to spill the contents down their beard or waistcoat. They formed joyful plans, and were excited in advance by the wonders they were about to see. Cigars lit, coffee drunk, the travellers dispersed in small groups to explore the older quarters of the city, always the most picturesque, and grant themselves the intriguing spectacle of an Oriental city at night.

All rose early, next day, and weighted themselves with a cup of coffee, a bowl of broth or tea, or a piece of cold meat, depending on their appetite. The real lunch was to take place en route, at a railway station. Carriages arrived, and we headed towards the track, whose *terminus* was at the other end of the town. On the way, my curiosity tried to compensate for the deprivation of the day before. The houses, in that Italian-Oriental style I so often encountered, were mingled with shacks, built of disparate materials, shops, cafes and restaurants, decorated with signs in Italian, English, French, Arabic, or Greek, which my memories of school study

allowed me to decipher, whenever the carriage, delayed by some traffic congestion, was not travelling too swiftly. We followed a new road, recently opened, through a forest of date-palms, whose roots, sometimes exposed, clung strangely to the embankments of the trench.

Some of these beautiful trees, shaken by the pickaxe, leaned haphazardly, others remained standing like the last columns of a ruined temple. On the road, among billows of dust, strings of camels laden with stones or sugar-cane passed by, trotting with their usual small, quick steps; donkeys were spurred on by their donkey-drivers; and boldly mounted horses stamped or galloped; primitive carts drawn by buffaloes creaked by; pedestrians hurried forward, most of them balancing some burden on their heads, while municipal water-carriers busied themselves, sprinkling the road from skinfuls of water, which were suspended from their loins by straps, and the contents of which they continually squeezed forth. A dazzlingly bright sky, much less laden with cobalt and ultramarine hues than painters usually depict, stretched above this panorama, strikingly new to my European eyes.

Egyptian railway stations are unremarkable and resemble any other; but the crowds that throng the platforms remind you, instantly, that you have left Europe. Seeing those dark complexions, those faces with prominent cheekbones, and vague sphinx-like smiles, those long flowing robes, those tunics tightened about the body with a camel-hair cord, like those of biblical shepherds, those rolled-up turbans, these red skullcaps with silk tassels, those visages with long beards reaching down to the knees, I knew I was clearly not at the Gare de l'Ouest, in Paris, preparing to buy my ticket for Auteuil, Versailles or Saint-Germain.

That morning, there was a frightful jumble of *kavasses* (*kavass* is *Ottoman Turkish* for an *armed guard*), dragomans, local servants, railway-employees, guests and native travellers, groups of whom were, every minute, disturbed by the passage of carts or by fellahin, carrying, on their backs, trunks and enormous packages, held by a cord tied around their foreheads. All followed their luggage with a very natural anxiety through this prodigious throng. The Arabic signs written on the walls were of no help; dialogue was reduced to simple pantomime. But soon one of the Khedive's officers, who apparently spoke every language, intervened, and graciously acted as interpreters for the French, English and German foreigners; all difficulties were removed as if by magic, and order was established amidst this inevitable confusion.

I am not seeking to ridicule my travelling companions, in any way; since I have been obliged to open myself to mockery more than anyone; we fail to see ourselves, and the mote in our own eye becomes a beam in our neighbour's, but it is difficult to imagine costumes more comically eccentric than those of most of the guests. For a caricaturist, they presented excellent motifs to employ. Certainly, one should not underestimate the effects of a change of climate, and the most vulgar prudence recommends a few safety precautions; but truly, they were far too ready to adopt them. Many had equipped themselves for this little four-hour train ride as for a trip on the upper Nile beyond the Cataracts, and yet the temperature was no greater than that of Marseille or Algiers at that time of year. The headgear, especially, intended to protect against sunstroke, was particularly bizarre. The most common was a kind of double-bottomed helmet, quilted and padded with white canvas, with a flap that folded over the nape of the neck like the mail of an ancient Saracen helm, a lampshade-visor lined with green and, on either side

of the head, two small holes for air circulation. As if all this were not enough, a blue veil, similar to that worn by sportsmen at the races at Ascot or Chantilly, was wrapped like a turban around this helmet, ready to be deployed on occasion to protect bearded faces from the sun, faces which seemed to have no need of that refinement. I will say nothing regarding the unbleached canvas caps with appendages protecting the cheeks and collar, which were simply that; but an Indian headdress, arranged in the English style, deserves special description. Imagine a disc of white cloth, placed like a lid on top of a cap with jowls and neck guards. The gentlemen who had adorned themselves with this comfortable invention appeared to have on their heads an umbrella, whose handle had been pushed into their skulls. Some, of a more picturesque sentiment, had adopted the Syrian *keffiyeh*, striped in yellow, red, blue and violet, fastened about the forehead with a braided cord, and whose ends, terminating in long tapers, float carelessly over the back of the head. Those, less fond of local colour, wore a soft felt hat, hollowed at its top with a fold similar to the indentation of a twin-peaked mountain. Others, wore a Panama hat with wide brims lined with green taffeta; some, the fez of the Nizam (*the Turkish army*), amaranth-coloured with a long silk tuft; while one aged scientist, of the most amiable humour, whose name is one of the glories of chemistry, had retained his European stovepipe hat, black coat, white tie, and shoes with dangling laces, saying that he was so accustomed to that costume, that, dressed otherwise, he would believe himself naked, he not being the traveller who bore the fatigues of the journey least cheerfully.

One also noticed a large display of blue-tinted spectacles; spectacles with smoked lenses as if for viewing solar eclipses; spectacles with blinkers extending over their arms and shaped to the wearer's temples, behind which it was sometimes difficult to discern a friendly glance. Ophthalmia is common and dangerous in Egypt, and the stories told about it are not reassuring. If one falls asleep with the window open, one runs the risk of waking up with blurred vision; at least that is what the author of *Pierrot: Caïn* (by *Henri Laurent Rivière*, published 1860) who is also a brilliant naval officer, told me: 'Though, truly, it does no harm,' he added with his characteristic and humorous sang-froid, by way of consolation.

White flannel pea-coats, with or without hoods, more or less adorned with bright colours; canvas overcoats; basin jackets or butter-fresh quilted ones, nankeen or unbleached silk waistcoats with fanciful buttons, clasped by broad, red wool belts; baggy trousers tucked into leather gaiters reaching to the knee; morocco leather travel-kits; binocular cases slung from the shoulder; hunting rifles wrapped in their scabbards, and thrown over the shoulder; Inverness capes; multi-coloured blankets, and all the annoying world of utensils that the traveller believes he must take with him, gave a rather strange appearance to that crowd of Europeans, bustling about the railway-platform and mounting an assault on the carriages, a midst men in turbans, clad in gowns like those women wear.

The carriages, of English manufacture, have bodies painted white, and bear their classification in English and Arabic. The first-class carriages are partitioned and equipped with large armchairs upholstered in green leather; they have double-ceilings, separated by a large enough gap so that the sun's heat does not turn the interiors into baking ovens in which one might cook alive; a circular opening forms, in the centre, a sort of air-well and promotes ventilation; openings are also provided at the sides to take advantage of the slightest breeze;

shutters replace the blinds on the door windows. The second-class carriages communicate with each other like those on Swiss railways; but, in a characteristic detail, at the end of the compartment, a closed area is reserved for women, like a sort of harem. We had already noticed this concession to Muslim reserve on the steamboats that serve the Levant ports. The third-class carriages, simple gondola trucks covered by a roof, were literally crammed with fellahin, Barabra (*Nubians*), black Africans, and common folk of all skin-colours and ages. It is they, it is said, who form the core of the railway's revenue; they greatly appreciate this method of travel, though in the carriages reserved for them no great sacrifice has been made to comfort.

All settled more or less happily. No last straggler remained stranded on the platform. The engine whistle gave that shrill cry to which the ear can never become accustomed, and which always surprises one, even though expected, and the locomotive, emitting a jet of steam, moved off, dragging the carriages behind it, which travelled the rails with a tremendous noise like the clanging of scrap metal.

I had departed, and soon a long-cherished dream would be fulfilled. When young I had longed to see Venice, Granada, Toledo, Constantinople, Moscow, Athens – and Cairo. I needed only to visit that city of the Caliphs, from which I was now separated by a journey of scarcely four hours.

Chapter 5: From Alexandria to Cairo

As one leaves the station, one crosses beneath an aqueduct pierced for the railway to pass through. Such long arcades, extending deep into the countryside, always produce a happy effect: 'A lake is the opposite of an island; a tower the opposite of a well; an aqueduct the opposite of a bridge,' says *Gubetta* to *Dona Lucrezia*, in antithetical style (see *Victor Hugo's* play '*Lucrece Borgia*', Act I, Part II, Scene I). The aqueduct bears a river on its arches, the voids of which frame blue glimpses of landscape. Nothing grants the horizon a more monumental aspect. The Roman Campagna is proof of this.

The track first passes over a narrow strip of sandy land that separates Beheira Ma'adieh, or Lake Aboukir (*Aboukir Bay*), from Lake Mariout, the former Lake Mareotis, now invaded by salt water. As one climbs towards Cairo, one has Lake Mariout to one's right and Lake Aboukir to one's left. The former spreads out like a sea between banks so low that they disappear, depriving the eyes of the means of gauging the extent of the lake, which merges with the skyline.

The light fell vertically onto these flat areas of water, scattering glittering sequins of a brilliance to tire the eyes. In other places, grey water stagnated over grey sand, or took on the dull white of tin-foil. Skirting those dormant inland seas, one might have believed oneself in Holland amidst the polders. The sky was pale as a Willem Van de Velde sky, and we travellers

who, taking the painters on trust, had dreamed of fiery colours, gazed with astonishment at this immense, absolutely level expanse, of a greyish tone, where nothing recalled Egypt, at least as one had imagined it to be.

On the far side of Lake Mariout, amidst gardens of luxuriant vegetation, rose the pleasure houses of the city's wealthy merchants, officials and consuls, painted in cheerful colours, sky-blue, pink or yellow, with white highlights; and, from time to time, the large sails of the *canges* (*sailing-boats*) travelling to Fouah (*Fuwwah*) or Rosetta along the Mahmoudiyah Canal, showed their triangular shape above the line of crops and appeared to be traveling over open ground. This bizarre effect, which always surprises the eye, is often encountered around Leiden, Dordrecht and Haarlem, and in those marshy regions where the water surface is level with the land, or sometimes, contained by dikes, exceeds it by several meters. The course of the Mahmoudiyah Canal is a winding one, the Turkish engineer who excavated it finding it necessary to create his canals as Allah did rivers.

Where the salt-water ends, the aspect of the country changes, not by gradual transitions, but suddenly: here absolute aridity, there exuberant fertility. Wherever irrigation can bring a drop of water, vegetation is born. The infertile dust becomes productive soil. The contrast is most striking. We had passed Lake Mariout, and on either side of the railway stretched fields of dura, wheat, and cotton plants in various stages of growth, some opening their pretty yellow flowers, others shedding the white silk of their hulls. Gutters full of muddy water, fed by wider canals derived from the Nile, traced lines on the black earth, and gleamed, here and there, in the light. Small dikes of beaten earth, easily opened with a pickaxe, held back the water until it was time to irrigate and, to raise it to higher levels, the crude wheels of the *saqiya*s (*shadufs*) turned, set in motion by buffaloes, oxen, camels or donkeys. Sometimes, two sturdy, naked fellows, tawny and shining like Florentine bronzes, standing on the edge of a canal, swung, with astonishing dexterity, a basket made of waterproof esparto-reeds, suspended from two ropes whose ends they held, skimming the surface of the water, and sending the contents flying into the neighbouring field. Fellahin, in short blue tunics, tilled the earth, gripping the handle of a primitive plough pulled by a camel and a humped ox from Sudan. Others were picking cotton and wheat husks, or digging ditches, or dragging tree branches employed as harrows over the furrows, barely left intact by the flood. Everywhere there was a degree of activity that scarcely fits one's ideas of traditional Oriental nonchalance.

The first fellahin villages one comes across, to right and left of the path, create a strange impression. They are clusters of huts made of raw brick, sealed with mud, and with flat roofs sometimes surmounted by a sort of lime-plastered turret for pigeons, and whose sloped walls vaguely recall the shape of a truncated Egyptian pylon. A low door like that of a tomb, two or three holes pierced in the wall, these are all the openings to these huts, which seem more the work of termites than of men. Often half the village, if one can give that name to a pile of earth, has collapsed, dissolved by the rain, or undermined by the flood; but little harm is done: with a few handfuls of usable rubble drenched with mud the house is soon rebuilt, and five or six days of the sun's heat are enough to dry it and make it habitable.

This description, while scrupulously accurate, gives no very attractive idea of a fellahin village. Yet, plant a clump of date-palms next to these cubes of grey earth, have one or two camels kneel in front of the doors, similar to the entrances to burrows, bring forth a woman draped in her long blue shirt, holding a child by the hand, and carrying an amphora on her head, and let a shaft of sunlight light the scene, and you will have a subject full of charm and character, which painted by Prosper Marilhat's brush would delight all.

A thought that comes to the mind of the least attentive traveller, from their very first step in this Lower Egypt where, since time immemorial, the Nile has accumulated silt in thin layers, is the deep intimacy which the *fellah* has with the earth. The adjective 'autochthonous' (*indigenous*) is truly one that suits him: he derives from the clay he treads: he is kneaded by it, and only barely frees himself from it. Like a child at his nurse's breast, he manipulates it, he presses it, to make the milk of fertility gush forth from its dark nipple. He sinks halfway into this fertile mud, he digs at it, stirs it, waters it, dries it, as needed; he marks canals, raises causeways, draws from it the rammed earth with which he builds his ephemeral house, and with which he will cement his tomb. Never has a respectful son cared more for his aged mother; he never leaves her, as do those vagabond children who abandon their native roof to seek adventure; he always remains attentive to the slightest need of his ancient ancestor, the black earth of Kemet. If she is thirsty, he gives her something to drink; if an excess of moisture troubles her, he diverts her; and so as not to harm her, he works her almost without tools, with his hands, his plough only skimming her telluric skin covered each year with a new epidermis by the flood. Watching him walk back and forth over the soggy ground, one feels he is in his element. With his blue garment, resembling a pontiff's robe, he presides over the union of Earth and Water. He unites the two principles which, heated by the sun, make life bloom. Nowhere is the harmony of man and soil more visible; nowhere is the earth itself more important. It extends its colour over all: the houses take on its hue, which the bronzed complexions of the fellahin also approach; and the trees, sprinkled with fine dust, the waters, laden with silt, conform to this fundamental harmony. I reflected thus, as I sped across the vast brown plain, in a carriage drawn by a locomotive, and said to myself that, to paint it, the artist would only need on his palette the one pigment, which is precisely the colour called '*Mummy brown*', with a little white, and cobalt blue, for the sky. The animals themselves wear this livery: the tawny camel, the grey donkey, the slate-blue buffalo, the grey pigeons and the reddish birds fit the general tone.

What is equally surprising is the activity that reigns in the countryside. On the roads that border the canals and cross the flooded sections, one sees a whole world of travellers and passers-by. No road in France, even on the outskirts of a populous city, is as busy. Orientals rarely stay at home, and the slightest pretext is enough for them to set off, especially since there is no need to worry, as with us, about the weather. The barometer is fixed at 'fine', and rain is such a rare occurrence one would be happy to be wetted.

Nothing is more amusing, more varied and more instructive than this procession of folk going about their business, viewed, one after another, in the carriage-window, as in a picture-frame whose engravings or watercolours are constantly being replaced.

Firstly, here are camels, advancing, with a resigned and melancholic air, with ambling steps and swaying necks, strange animals, whose awkward forms seem like first attempts at a long-lost original. On the hump of the first the driver in a turban is perched, one leg crossed over the other, as majestic as Eliezer, Abraham's servant, off to Mesopotamia to seek a wife for Isaac. He abandons himself with nonchalant flexibility to the unsteady, but regularly repeated action, of the animal, sometimes smoking his *chibouk* (*a long-stemmed tobacco pipe*) as if he were sitting at the door of a café, sometimes hastening the slow pace of his mount.

Camels have the taste for, and habit of, travelling in single file, and five or six, or even more, are usually roped together in series. The caravan travels in this manner, in strange silhouette against the flat line of the horizon, and appears, for lack of an object of comparison, to be of enormous size. On the flanks of the caravan, trot three or four young agile boys armed with sticks, for in the Orient beasts of burden never lack grooms and squires. Among these camels, there are red, coffee-coloured, brown, and even white ones, but fawn is the most common colour; they bear stones, wood, grass held by esparto-netting, bundles of sugar-cane, chests, furniture and everything that might be loaded onto carts at home. Just now I said I thought I was in Holland, travelling between its vast stretches of submerged land; but the camel, passing along the bank of the canal, soon dispelled the illusion. I felt I was approaching Cairo, not Amsterdam.

Then, then are horsemen riding lean but fiery beasts, and herds of little donkeys carrying, on the end of their rumps, almost on their very tails, their masters, whose legs trail on the ground, ready to regain their footing in case of a fall, or a rebellion on the part of the malicious creature, who, on a whim, often rolls in the dust in the middle of the road. Donkeys, in the East, are neither despised nor ridiculed as they are in France; they have retained a Homeric and Biblical nobility, and all ride them, without shame, the rich and poor, the old man and the adolescent, and women as well as men.

But here is a charming group, progressing beside the canal. A young woman, wrapped in a long blue cloak, the folds of which drape chastely around her, is mounted on a donkey guided with care by a still vigorous man, but one whose beard is already mixed with grey and a little white. In front of the mother, and supported by her with one hand, sits a naked child, of exquisite beauty, very happy and amused by the journey.

It was a scene ready-made for a *Flight into Egypt*, the figures lacking only the thin gold halos above their heads. The Virgin, the Christ Child, and Saint Joseph are supposed to have looked thus, and travelled this way, in actual and naive reality, their equipment revealing no greater wealth. What a pity that some great painter, a Perugino, Raphael, or Albrecht Durer, was not present!

Wilhem Meister, in Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, has a similar encounter (*see Book I*) which inspires him with similar reflections, but I doubt the mountain-travellers resembled their divine prototypes so nearly.

Damenhur, which the railway passes, has an appearance that can differ little from that of the ancient cities of Egypt now submerged beneath the sand, or simply fallen to dust. Tall

embankment walls, made of raw bricks or rammed earth retaining the colour of the earth, surround it, like the foundations of a temple. The houses, ending in terraces, rise one above the other like a pile of cubes punctuated by small black openings. A few dovecotes, with whitewashed domes, and minarets striped in red and white, alone give this city of ancient appearance an Islamic flavour. From the summits of the terraces, women, squatting on mats or standing in their long draperies of brilliant hue, gazed on, no doubt attracted by the train's passage. Silhouetted against the sky, they took on a rare elegance and slenderness. They looked like statues planted on the roofs of buildings, or the pediment of temples.

The train, which stopped here, was immediately invaded by a group of women and children offering the travellers fresh water, sweet and bitter oranges, and honeyed pastries, and it was a pleasure to see these dark figures appear at the carriage door, showing their white teeth in broad smiles. The locomotive whistle blew a piercing note, and we set off again. I would have liked to stay a while in Damenhur, but a journey, like life, is composed of sacrifices. How many charming things, if one wishes to reach one's destination, one is forced to leave by the wayside! To see all? God alone can do so; human beings must be content to see a little! I was obliged to leave Damenhur, and contemplate the dream from afar without wandering its depths.

As far as sight could reach, aided by a telescope, the countryside extended, cut by canals, criss-crossed by channels glittering with puddles of water, dotted with clumps of sycamores or date-palms, striped with crops, dotted with *saquias*, and animated by the perpetual to-ing and fro-ing of workers and passers-by, following on camels, horses, donkeys, or on foot, the narrow reed-lined roads. From time to time, in the shadow of a mimosa, rose the white dome of a *marabout* (*the Muslim shrine of a hermit or holy man*). Sometimes a naked child stood motionless at the water's edge, in a pose of unconscious reverie, letting himself be penetrated by mighty Nature, and not even turning his head to watch the convoy fly past at full speed. Such deep displays of gravity in childhood seems specific to the Orient. What thoughts occupied this child's mind, as he stood on his mound of earth like a stylite on his column?

From time to time, flocks of pigeons, busily pecking, took to sudden flight as the train passed, to land a little further away on the plain; aquatic birds flew through the rushes, their legs stretched behind them; gentle wagtails hopped, tails flickering, on the crest of the embankments, and in the sky, at great heights, sparrowhawks soared, and kites, and bearded vultures traced immense circles; buffaloes wallowed in the muddy ditches, and flocks of black sheep, ears drooping almost like goats, hurried along before the staves of their shepherds. These youths, dressed in short white, or sun-faded blue tunics, their legs bare, their feet covered in grey dust, with their felt caps, and their curved shepherd's crooks, made me think, given the ancient simplicity of their costume, of patriarchal scenes from the Bible.

Our breakfast coffee and tea had long been digested when the good news spread through the carriages that, at the next station, lunch, a mark of the Khedive's hospitality awaited us. Indeed, the train halted, and everyone disembarked before invading the banquet hall. With a seat already allocated beside my friend, who was kind enough to offer to cut the pieces of food on my plate, an operation impossible one-handed, I wandered about, while waiting to be served, observing the landscape around the station.

I had hardly taken a few paces when a magical spectacle surprised my astonished eyes: I had before me the Nile, the ancient 'Hapy' or 'Iteru', to grant it its ancient Egyptian names, the inexhaustible fount of water, the mysterious river, the liquid enigma, whose secret so many travellers, from antiquity to the present day, have vainly sought to penetrate, its problematic sources receding further, beyond the marshes and lakes, towards the Mountains of the Moon (*the Rwenzori Mountains, source of the White Nile*) in the very heart of this unfathomable African continent, known only to elephants, rhinoceroses, giraffes, lions, monkeys and its dark-skinned inhabitants. By one of those involuntary physical impressions which come to dominate the imagination, the word 'Nile' awakened in my mind the idea of that colossal marble god, nonchalantly leaning on his elbows, in a room of the Vatican, allowing himself with paternal gentleness to be clambered over by little cherubs, representing the different heights, in cubits, of the various phases of the Nile flood.

Well! It was not in its mythological aspect that the sacred river first appeared to me. It flowed, at full breadth, widely spread, like a torrent of silt, reddish in colour and barely having the appearance of water, with an irresistible swollen rapidity. It was almost like a river of mud, with a few rare touches of pale azure, here and there, as reflected rays of light from above gleamed from its tumultuous waves. It was then at the height of its inundation; yet its flow possessed the tranquil power of a beneficent and regular phenomenon, not the convulsive disorder of a torrent. The immense sheet of water, laden with fertile silt, produced, in its majesty, an almost religious impression. How many vanished civilisations have been reflected, for an instant, in that flood which forever repeats! I stood there, pensively, forgetting about eating, absorbed, and feeling that vague anguish one experiences when a wish has been fulfilled, and reality replaces the dream. What I saw before me was indeed the Nile, the real Nile, this river that I had so many times sought to discover with the eye of intuition. A sort of stupor nailed me to the bank: what could be more natural however than to encounter the Nile, in Egypt, in the midst of the Delta. But the mind meets with such moments of naïve astonishment!

Dahabeeyahs (lateen-sailed passenger boats) and canges, their large sails forming scissor-like shapes together, tacked along the river, or crossed from one bank to the other, while recalling the form of the mystical baris, of the days of the Pharaohs (see Herodotus, 'Histories', 2.96. and the example of a 'baris' vessel discovered in the waters around the ancient submerged port of Thonis-Heracleion, in Aboukir Bay).

Chapter 6: From Alexandria to Cairo - Continued

When my eyes were sated with this grandiose spectacle, my stomach, which had proved so deferential as to remain silent, out of respect for poetry, prosaically reclaimed its rights, and drove me back, dying of hunger, to the station's dining-room. My good friend Auguste Marc obligingly cut the pieces of food on my plate, and served me *left-handedly*, that day, as

throughout the rest of the journey, with a loyalty and patience that never wavered. This temporary one-handed motion, led me to the conclusion that the right hand is, at heart, nothing more than a schemer, a troublemaker, who takes all the glory for herself and unjustly relegates to the shadows her humble sister, whose very designation is a kind of insult. Yet the right hand can do virtually nothing without the help of the left; reduced to itself, it is as if paralyzed. It resembles those famous playwrights whose name is written in large letters on a poster, while the name of the obscure collaborator who actually did three-quarters of the work is omitted.

One might also compare the roles of our two hands to those of Martha and Mary in the Gospels (*see Luke 10: 38-42*). Mary poured perfume on the Lord's feet, Martha attended to the household chores, and, although Jesus said that Mary played the best part, we must not disdain Martha who modestly took care of the cooking. Justice having been rendered to the left hand, to which not enough importance is granted, let me return to our lunch which was abundant and delicious, well-served, and washed down with everything that can be drunk, from Château Laffitte to pale ale, from soda-water to Nile water filtered and freshened in Theban jugs; the finest water in the world, to which only the water from the well of the Plaza de los Aljibes (*the Square of the Cisterns*), in the Alhambra, I find comparable.

Despite its excellence, I am forced to admit that most travellers seemed to prefer Sauterne or Saint-Emilion, not being of the opinion of those Caliphs who had Nile water carried to them, at great expense, as far as Baghdad, placing that *vintage* above all others. After drinking coffee, we set off again. The appearance of the country was much the same. The cotton, wheat, and dura crops stretched as far as the eye could see; here and there shone areas covered by the flood; bluish buffaloes rolled about in the pools, and armoured themselves with mud; water-birds stood at the edge of puddles, sometimes taking flight as the train passed, as families of fellahin, squatting on the edge of the ditches, watched it go by. On the road, paraded that interminable procession of camels, mules, donkeys, oxen, black goats, and pedestrians, which gives such extraordinary animation to the level and placid landscape. I had noticed in Holland, formerly, the importance that figures take on in flat country. The absence of any uneven terrain grants them dominance, and, as they are usually silhouetted against the sky, they take on greater grandeur. It seemed to me that I was gazing at those same areas of coloured bas-relief, representing agricultural scenes, which sometimes decorate the chambers of ancient Egyptian tombs. From time to time a village appeared, or a species of farm, whose grey earth walls, sloped in embankments, that recalled, in their beautiful lines, the shape of the base of ancient temples. A few groves of trees, sycamores or mimosas, enhanced by a clump of date-palms, highlighted the soft hues, by contrast with their vigorous greenery. At other times, fellahin huts, topped with dovecotes plastered with lime, were sited next to one another like beehives, or the minarets of a miniature mosque arose. We soon arrived at the station serving Tanta, a fairly important town, where the beautiful mosque of Ahmad Al-Badawi (*founder of a thirteenth century Sufi order*) attracts pilgrims, three times a year, and where markets are held frequented by caravans.

Tanta, seen from the railway station, since the length of the halt is not sufficient for one to visit the town, presents a lively and picturesque aspect. The Arab-style houses, with their *moucharabiehs* and their awning-shaped ventilation shafts, are mixed with buildings in the

Orientalised Italian style, favoured by the supporters of progress and new ideas but the despair of artists, displaying facades whitewashed in soft colours, ochre, salmon or sky-blue, and adobe huts with flat roofs, all being dominated by the minarets of the mosque, and the white domes of various *marabouts* (*shrines*); add to this the obligatory accompaniment of Pharaoh fig trees, and palm-trees rising above the low walls of the gardens. Between the town and the station stretches a wasteland, akin to a sort of fairground occupied by camps, with huts made of reeds or date-palm branches, and tents made of old scraps of canvas and sometimes even the unfurled material of a turban.

The domestic life of these frail dwellings is performed in the open air. On a small fire of camel droppings, coffee is made, cup by cup, in a small yellow copper kettle, and thin cakes of dura are cooked on sheet-metal plates. Sugar canes are cut into pieces, from which the fellahin suck the sweetish juice, and sliced watermelons reveal their bright pink entrails, pitted with black pips beneath the green skin. Women pass to and fro, clasping the end of their veil in their teeth, so as to hide half their face, carrying Theban jugs or copper vases on their heads, with the elegance and contours of statues, while the men, squatting on the ground or on strips of carpet, knees to chin and bent at an acute angle like the joints of grasshoppers, a well-nigh impossible pose for a European, and one which recalls those judges of the Amenti (*the ancient Egyptian underworld of the dead*) arranged in rows one behind the other on the papyri depicting funerary rituals, maintain that dreamy immobility so dear to Orientals, when they have no task to do, since movement, with no other purpose than to exercise oneself, as Christians understand it, seems to them pure madness.

Dromedaries, isolated or grouped in a circle, kneeling beneath their loads, stretched their long necks on the sand, motionless under the baking sun; donkeys, some coquettishly harnessed with a red-morocco saddle raised in a hump behind their withers, and a babyish headstall, others with a pack-saddle made from a piece of carpet, awaited the railway passengers lodging at Tanta, to transport them from the landing-stage to the town. The donkey-drivers, in short blue or white tunics, with bare legs and arms, wearing felt caps, a stick in their hands, and resembling those slender figures of shepherds or ephebes, so lightly drawn, encircling the bellies of Greek vases, stood beside their donkeys in an indolent pose which they soon abandoned if a possible fare wandered from the station and advanced in their direction; then there were frenzied gesticulations, guttural cries, and a competitive jostling in which the unfortunate tourist seemed likely to be torn to pieces, or leave the best part of their clothes behind. A few stray dogs, tawny-coated, and with the ears of jackals, fallen from their former state, and seeming not to remember that they counted among their ancestors 'barking' Anubis, '*latrator Anubis*' (see Virgil's '*Aeneid*' VIII, 698), looped between the groups, but without taking the slightest interest in what was happening.

The ties that bind dogs to humans in Europe do not exist in the Orient. Their social instinct remains undeveloped, their empathetic feelings unelicited: they are masterless, and live in a wild state, amidst civilisation. They are not required to serve, but nor are they cared for. They have no home, and live in holes that they dig, or they settle in the depths of some half-open tomb. No one worries about feeding them, and they provide for themselves by gorging on carrion, and nameless detritus. There is a proverb that claims that wolves do not eat each other:

dogs in the Orient are less scrupulous; they devour their sick, wounded, or dead colleagues very readily. It seems strange to us to see dogs that make no advances, seek no caresses, and keep to themselves with melancholic pride.

Little girls in blue dresses, and little black Africans in white tunics, circulated through the carriages offering pastries, cakes, bitter oranges, lemons and apples. Yes, apples: in the East, one is served a great deal of the sour fruit of the North which, along with wretched, chewy pears, form part of all desserts, in which, of course, neither pomegranates, bananas, dates, oranges, nor Barbary figs, nor any of the native products, abandoned no doubt to the common folk, ever appear.

The locomotive whistle blew its high-pitched rattling note, and the power of steam carried us back across the ever-damp, ever-green Delta. However, as we advanced, areas of pink soil appeared on the horizon from which plant life had disappeared completely. The desert sand, eternal plaything of the winds, advances in sterile waves like those of the sea, gnawing away at the strip of cultivated ground, surrounded and beaten with a dusty foam, like a reef that it strives to cover. In Egypt, everything beyond the level of the flood is as if struck dead. There is no transition; where Osiris ends, Typhon begins. Here the most luxuriant vegetation flourishes; there, not a point of grass, not a patch of moss, not a single one of those wild plants that exist in solitude and abandonment; all is crushed sandstone without admixture of soil. And yet! Allow a drop of water from the Nile to fall there, and the arid sand will immediately turn green. These zones, the colour of pale salmon, made a happy contrast of tone with the vigorous hues of the great plain of verdure spread out before our eyes.

Soon we met another branch of the Nile, the Phatnitic branch (*Damietta branch*), which flows into the sea near Damietta. The railway crosses it, and on the other side are the ruins of ancient Athribis, on which a fellahin village (*Banha*) has been superimposed. The train moved briskly, and soon, to the right, above a line of vegetation, almost black in the dazzling light, the triangular silhouette of the pyramids of Cheops (*Khufu*) and Chephren (*Kafre*), far off and tinged with azure, stood forth, like a single mountain, notched at the summit, when seen from that angle and distance. The perfect transparency of the air brought them nearer, and it would have been difficult, if I had not known its extent, to appreciate, accurately, the interval that separated us. To see the pyramids while approaching Cairo, what could be more natural? I should have expected the sight, and I did expect it; and yet I experienced an extraordinary degree of emotion and surprise. One cannot imagine the effect produced by that vaporous outline, so light in tone that it almost merged with the colour of the sky, and which, not having been alerted to, one might have missed. Neither the years, nor human barbarity, have had the power to overthrow these artificial mountains, the most enormous monuments, after the Tower of Babel perhaps, that mankind has erected in the last five thousand years, once claimed, according to the Bible, as well-nigh the age of the world; our own civilisation, despite its energetic means of destruction, would scarcely succeed in doing so.



Pyramids of Giza, from the Nile. (1846-1849)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)

[Artvee](#)

The Pyramids, on their broad bases, have watched the centuries and dynasties pass like waves of sand, and the colossal Sphinx, stern of face, at their feet, still smiles with its ironic and mysterious smile. Disembowelled, they have kept their secret and have yielded only ox-bones, beside an empty sarcophagus. Eyes, sealed so long ago that Europe had perhaps not yet emerged from the flood when they were open to the light, had gazed at them from the place where I sat. They were contemporary with vanished empires, with peoples swept from the earth. They have seen civilisations we know little of, heard the language we seek to divine from their hieroglyphics, known customs that would seem to us as chimerical as a dream. They have been there for so long, that the stars have changed places; and their summits retreat into a past so prodigiously fabulous that it seems we see the light from the first days of the world shining behind them.

While reflecting thus, I was rapidly approaching Cairo, that Cairo which I had so often discussed with my poor friend Gérard de Nerval, with Gustave Flaubert, and with Maxime Du Camp, who, in retelling the stories of their visits, excited in me a feverish curiosity. We create, for ourselves, fanciful ideas of those cities we have wished to see since childhood, and have long inhabited in our dreams; ideas which are most difficult to erase, even when we find

ourselves face to face with the reality; the sight of an engraving, or of a painting is often the starting point. As for myself, my Cairo, built with material derived from the *Thousand and One Nights* (see Antoine Galland's twelve-volume *'Les Mille et Une Nuits, Contes Arabes Traduits en français'*, 1704-1717), clustered about the scene depicted in Prosper Marilhat's *Vue de la Place de L'Esbekieh et du Quartier Copte, au Caire* (1833, currently in private hands) that singular and striking painting the artist sent from Egypt to one of the first exhibitions that followed the July Revolution. If my memory does not fail me, that was my primary source; and, despite whatever degree of perfection he may have subsequently achieved, I cannot believe he ever painted a stranger, more vivid, or more original, picture. His *Esbekieh Square* made a fresh and deep impression on my mind. I returned to the Salon twenty times to see it; I could not take my eyes from the work, which exercised on me a sort of nostalgic fascination.

The painting, which eclipsed the canvases around it of a more sober nature, was of an incredible fierceness of colour. Against a sky of a raw blue, whose ultramarine shaded to indigo, rose two immense trees of the species *Mimosa Nilotica*, with a monstrous base that one would have thought made of a bundle of twisted columns, and branches that were themselves enormous trunks forming bizarre bends and bearing masses of foliage to cover a forest. These two trees alone occupied almost the entire frame and, beneath the shade they projected, one could glimpse, in the bluish darkness, an apparently-idle *saqiyah* (water-wheel), a woman with a jug of water on her head, various crouching figures, and an Arab perched on a camel. Further away, towards the left, leaning against each other, in all their Oriental carelessness, were the Arab houses that lined the square, with their *moucharabiehs*, their overhanging floors, their corbels supported by beams, and all the characteristic details that progress, lover of straight lines and flat surfaces, had not yet pruned away. A palm-tree raised its plume of leaves above the houses, and behind the trees, beneath the canopies of their foliage, one could glimpse another row of buildings forming the rear of the square and topped by a minaret. To the right, serving as a background to the line of okels (*caravanserais*), the escarpments of Mokattam were outlined. A terrible, blinding light poured like spoonfuls of molten lead over the entire foreground.

It was from that scene that my dreams departed on fanciful tours through the narrow streets of ancient Cairo, once frequented by the Caliph Haroun al Raschid (*Harun al-Rashid*), and his faithful vizier Giaffar (*Ja'far al-Barmaki*), disguised as slaves or commoners. My love for this painting was so well known that, after the death of the famous artist, the Marilhat family, with whom I had been friendly, gifted me his pencil drawing, made on the spot, which served as a study for the painted canvas.



Ezbekieh Street in Cairo (1833)

Prosper Marilhat (1811–1847)

[Wikimedia Commons](#)

We arrived: a prodigious tumult of carriages, donkeys, donkey-drivers, porters, domestic servants, and dragomans raised something akin to a riot in front of the railway platform, the line terminating at Boulaq a short distance from Old Cairo. Once the unloading of our luggage was complete, and I had been installed with my friend in a splendid open carriage preceded by a *sais*, it was with secret delight that I heard the Egyptian Providence which was watching over us, in the uniform of the Nizam and wearing an amaranth-red fez, declare to our coachman: ‘Shepherd’s Hotel, Esbekieh Square.’ I was to be lodged at the heart of my dream!

Part III: Cairo and Epilogue

Chapter 7: Ezbekieh Square

After a few minutes, the carriage stopped in front of the steps of Shepherd's Hotel, which formed a sort of terrace with a veranda, furnished with chairs and sofas from the Tronchon factory, for the convenience of travellers wishing to take the air. The master, or rather the manager of the hotel, Monsieur Gross, welcomed us eagerly, and assigned us a beautiful room, with a lofty ceiling, furnished with two beds wrapped in mosquito nets, and whose window looked out onto Esbekieh Square.

I had no hopes of finding Prosper Marilhat's painting before us, unframed and enlarged to its actual dimensions. The accounts of tourists recently returned from Egypt had informed me that Esbekieh Square no longer appeared as before, the waters of the Nile turning it into a lake in times of flooding, though it still retained its pure Arab character.

It had been refashioned as a large European-style square, divided by wide paths into regular sections, bordered by light palisades made of reeds or palm-ribs, which they hope to sell as sites for housing, much as in the Parc Monceaux, while reserving parts of the land as promenades; but happily, so far, there is no sign of any building work and, without my wishing any harm to this speculative venture, it would be desirable for the benefit of Cairo that things remain as they are.

Enormous trees, mimosas and sycamores, among which I easily recognised those in Prosper Marilhat's painting, though further enlarged by the passage of time, decorated the centre of the square with domes of foliage, of a green so intense it appeared almost black. On the left, rose, as in the painting, a row of houses in which one could distinguish, among a few new buildings, old Arab dwellings more or less modernised; though a large number of the moucharabiehs have disappeared, enough remains to preserve the Oriental character of that side of the square. I must admit though that on one of the first houses in the row, painted in that intense colour that in

France is called 'wig-maker's blue', these words could be read in large letters: *Home of the Famous Old Wine-Cellar*.

Above the trees, on the other side of the square, beyond the line of roofs, I could see the turrets, with alternating white and red bases, of four or five minarets, rising into a light azure sky which in no way resembled, I confess, Prosper Marilhat's indigo sky; however, it was now October, whereas in summer the skies of Egypt can possess a more cobalt or ultramarine hue.

On the right, the escarpments of Mokattam, tinged with a pinkish grey, showed bare flanks, devoid of any appearance of vegetation.

The trees in the square hid the new theatre buildings from us, those of the Cirque, the Opéra-Italien and the Comédie-Française, whereby my dream was not harmed too greatly.

My damaged state required a degree of care and two or three days of absolute rest: it was not too much to ask. If one has a yen for travel, one will easily appreciate my desire to launch myself into the maze of picturesque streets, through which a motley crowd swarmed; but it was not to be thought of for the moment. I thought that Cairo might come to me if I could not go to it, and thereby show itself as more accommodating than the mountain was to the Prophet; and, indeed, Cairo was kind enough to do so.

While my more fortunate companions dispersed throughout the town, I settled on the veranda, armed with my telescope and binoculars. It was the best observation post one could choose, and even without directing my attention to the square, the marquee sheltered many a curious type. There were dragomans, most of them Greeks or Copts wearing the fez, in small braided jackets and wide trousers; *kavasses* (*Ottoman armed guards*), richly dressed in Oriental style, with curved sabres on their thighs, and *kandjars* (*curved daggers*) at their belts, holding canes topped with silver knobs; native servants in white turbans and blue or pink robes; little black Africans, with bare legs and arms, dressed in short tunics striped in bright colours; merchants offering *keffiyehs* (*headscarves*), *gandouras* (*loose robes*) and Oriental fabrics manufactured in Lyon; and photographers displaying views of Egypt and Cairo, or reproductions of national types, not to mention the visitors who, having arrived from all parts of the world, deserved a little attention.

Opposite the hotel, on the other side of the road, carriages, placed at the disposal of the guests through the generous hospitality of the Khedive, waited beneath the shade of the mimosas; a one-eyed inspector, a piece of turban wrapped around his head, wearing a long blue kaftan, directed them forward and transmitted the travellers' orders to the coachmen. A battalion of donkey-drivers, with their long-eared beasts, were stationed there also. It is said that there are no fewer than eighty thousand *ânes* in Cairo. I write *ânes* (*donkeys*), and not *âmes* (*souls*); let me not equivocate on the matter like *Doctor Rondibilis* in Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (*Book III, 31-33*); the souls are far more numerous, the city having three hundred thousand inhabitants. But the number of donkeys does not seem too exaggerated. There are some to be found in all the squares, at all the corners of the hotels, and around all the mosques; in the most deserted places, a donkey driver and his donkey will suddenly appear from behind a section of wall to place themselves at your disposal.

These donkeys are very amiable, lively, and cheerful. They lack the pitiful look, and air of melancholic resignation of the donkeys of our country, who are poorly fed, beaten and despised. One feels they esteem themselves the equals of other animals, and are not, as with us, the target of inane sarcasm all day long. Perhaps they know that, Homer once compared Ajax to a donkey (*Iliad*, Book XI, 557), a simile that is ridiculous only in the West, and perhaps they remember the tradition, also, that one of their ancestors bore Miriam (*Maryam bint Imram*), the virgin mother of Isa (*Jesus*), when she washed his swaddling clothes beneath the sycamore tree at Matarieh (*El Mataraya, Cairo*).

The donkeys' coats vary from a blackish-brown to white, via every shade of fawn and grey; some have stars and white socks. The prettiest are shorn with ingenious coquetry, so as to draw, around their hocks and legs, patterns that give them the appearance of wearing openwork stockings: when their coat is white, the tip of the tail and the mane are even painted with henna. These adornments, you understand, apply only to purebred animals, the luminaries of the donkey race, and not to the *common herd*.

Their equipage consist of a headpiece decorated with braid, silk, or woollen frills, sometimes with coral beads or copper plates, and a morocco-leather saddle, usually red, swelling towards the pommel, to prevent falls, while lacking a cantle (*a raised back*): this saddle rests on a piece of carpet or striped fabric, and is held in place by a wide band that passes diagonally beneath the animal's tail, like a crupper. A strap holds the piece of carpet or fabric, and two fairly short stirrups swing at the animal's sides. These harnesses are more or less expensive, depending on the wealth of the donkey-driver, and the rank of the people he accompanies; but here I am only speaking of hired donkeys. No one in Cairo is ashamed to employ such a mount: old men, mature men, dignitaries or the bourgeoisie. Women ride astride, a style that in no way compromises their modesty, given the abundance of folds in the wide breeches that almost entirely cover their feet; They often set on the saddle before them a small, half-naked child, whose balance they maintain with one hand, while with the other they guide the reins on the animal's neck. Generally speaking, it is well-off women who allow themselves this luxury, because the poor female fellahin have no other means of locomotion than their feet, which the dust clads with grey, as if they were wearing boots. These beauties, though one can only suppose them to be such, since they are masked more hermetically than fashionable women at the Opéra ball, wear a *habarah* over their garments, a kind of black taffeta robe-like dress, beneath which the air rushes, making it swell in the most ungainly way, as soon as the pace of their mount accelerates.

In the Orient, a rider, whether on horseback or on a donkey, always requires two or three attendants on foot: one who runs in front, stick in hand to part the crowd, another who holds the animal by the bridle, and a third who holds it by the tail or at least places his hand on its rump; sometimes there is even a fourth who hovers at the side to rouse the animal with a whip. At every moment, such a group, akin to that in Alexander-Gabriel Decamps' painting *The Turkish Patrol* (*Wallace Collection, London*), that strange work which made such an impression at the 1831 Salon, passed before me, only to vanish in a whirlwind of dust, making me smile; but no one seemed to sense the comedy of the scene; ever a gross personage dressed in white, his belly clasped by a wide belt, perched on a small donkey and followed on foot by

three or four poor devils, haggard, swarthy, with a famished appearance, who, through excess of zeal, and in the hope of *bakshish*, seemed to be carrying along both mount and rider.

I hope to be forgiven for these somewhat lengthy details concerning donkeys and their drivers; but they hold such a large place in the life of Cairo that one must give them the importance they truly claim.

As I watched this panorama unfold, a young boy of thirteen or fourteen approached the hotel steps. His costume consisted of a felt skullcap and a sort of ragged tunic with wide sleeves, which he pushed back towards his shoulders with a gesture that was not lacking in grace. He looked more intelligent and refined than his years allowed, and his movements had the ease and precision of people accustomed to public display. At his side hung a sort of leather satchel. A little, younger friend of his led two monkeys of the cynocephalic species (*with a doglike head, like a yellow baboon*) on a leash. These monkeys, at their master's command, began to turn circles as if on a merry-go-round, to walk on their hands, to leap and somersault forwards and backwards, to pretend to be dead, to pass a stick behind their necks while resting their two paws on it, a position that the Arabs sometimes adopt by using their long rifles as sticks, and other simian exercises obtained not without some displays of rebelliousness, and gnashing of teeth. Thus far, there was nothing particularly special about the show: the acrobats and animal-trainers of our countries teach their animals more difficult tricks.

The second part of the performance however was more interesting: the young boy added to his talents as a conjurer and monkey-trainer, those of a snake-charmer. He was of the Psylli (*a Libyan Berber tribe, see Pliny the Elder's 'Naturalis Historia' vii 14*), one of those who toy with the most venomous reptiles, possessing the power to draw them from their holes at the sound of the Dervish flute, and have them obey their slightest gesture. They are summoned to houses where a snake is believed to be hiding, and never fail to find it. Sceptics claim that, even if there are none present, they bring one of their own, so that their skill never appears lacking, but all the fellahin believe, firmly, in the incantatory spells of the Psylli, and many people of higher rank share their faith, established in Egypt since remotest antiquity.

This young boy took from his leather bag a snake of the *Naja* species (*a cobra*), from which, no doubt, the fangs had been removed; he held it delicately by the two fingers behind the head, and threw it with a sudden movement onto the pavement. The circle of curious onlookers which enclosed the lad suddenly widened, and the monkeys, betraying anxiety, backed away, as far as the length of the rope attached to the belt about their loins allowed. The snake remained motionless and as if dazed for a moment, then, gradually warmed by the rays of the sun, and the temperature of the slab on which her inert coils unrolled, she began to move slowly, to stretch out, to raise her head, and to look around her with an irritated air, her forked tongue vibrating between her flat lips; then her neck swelled, and two voluminous pouches beside her head and neck dilated. She coiled upon herself, recalling perfectly, by her attitude and the swelling of her jaws, the sacred *uraeus* which so often figures on the cornices of temples, the walls of pylons, and the *pschent* (*the double-crown of Upper and Lower Egypt*) of the gods and pharaohs. It makes for a rather singular effect, to see before oneself, alive and moving, a reptile which one had been tempted to treat until then as a merely a hieroglyphic symbol. The ancient

Egyptian sculptors admirably captured the character of the animal, and their representations of the *uraeus* might serve as a model for the engravings in a book of natural history.

The snake-charmer, one he saw his subject was fully awake, took her by the collar, pressed his thumb on her head, and the Naja stiffened like those snakes that cold has hardened, that break like glass rather than bend; but the young lad blew and spat in her mouth, and the snake regained her undulating elasticity.

He wrapped the cobra round his arms, round his neck, and made her slide into his garment and out through a sleeve, tricks which are not dangerous if the creature is, as is more than likely, deprived of its fangs, but which nevertheless inspired in me an involuntary terror.

The snake itself is in no way ugly; the scales that cover it are symmetrically interlocked, and the colours with which they are tinted are often pure and brilliant. If beauty lies in the curved line, as William Hogarth claimed (*in his 'Analysis of Beauty', 1753*), nothing could be more graceful than this reptile, whose articulation is a series of harmonious undulations and sinuosities. Its triangular head, animated by lively eyes, has nothing hideous about it in itself.

Why is it that the sight of a snake often makes the bravest tremble, and that someone who would confront a lion might flee at the hiss of a cobra? The green, blue, and metallic yellow that coat this twisted and flexible body recall, as if to inspire mistrust, the colours of various poisons. The strength of the snake, a fragile animal whose spine would be broken by the lightest stroke of a wand, lies in fact in its venom, the weapon of the traitor and the coward who, likewise, creeps in the shadows towards his victim. No more than a pinprick, barely a drop of blood, a bluish stain on the skin, and you are dead. The ancient curse still weighs on the serpent, whose head the offspring of woman shall crush, according to the promise of Scripture (*Genesis 3:15*). All animals feel the same horror. As I have said, the monkeys, from the beginning of the session, had entered into a singular agitation which had been succeeded by a dejection quite contrary to the usual petulance of these animals. They reminded me of the touching and comical prostration of the monkeys at the Hippodrome when, in the wings, dressed in clothes, they were about to be launched onto the curving track of the *centrifugal railway*. They showed the same despair. The monkeys in Cairo undoubtedly knew the fate that awaited them, and the display that was to follow.

Indeed, their master shook off their torpor by shaking the rope tied to their loins, drew them closer to him with two or three sudden jerks, and, taking his snake by the tail, swung it over their heads; then the poor monkeys, maddened with terror, began to spin in circles, crying in a pitiful manner, performing extravagant somersaults, raising their little black paws to the sky as if to protest against the tyranny of man, tearing the hair off their heads, and almost ripping their bellies open, as they sought to break their chain.

Meanwhile the irritated *uraeus* swelled its throat tremendously, undulated furiously, and resembled, in the hand of the snake-charmer, the whip of the ancient Eumenides (*the Erinyes, or Furies, of Greek mythology*); the poor monkeys, like innocent Orestes, could have cried out if they had but known Racine: 'Why are these snakes hissing about *our* heads?' (*An adaptation of line 1638 of Racine's 'Andromaque', Act V, Scene V*)

The display ended in a hellish chase: the snake-charmer stamped, the cobra gave out a strident sound and zigzagged like lightning, and the poor monkeys, mad with terror and horror, engaged in senseless gyrations, able to flee only in circular fashion. They screeched, jumped, and gesticulated with every sign of despair. Finally, their master, no doubt wearied, released the snake, which returned of its own accord to a bag thrown on the ground, its usual lair, and the monkeys, barely recovered from 'so fierce an alarm' (see *Molière's Tartuffe Act V, Scene VII*) their eyes wide, their muzzles pale, began to scratch their ears again, bite their lips, bare their teeth, and take date stones from their cheeks to crack them. Sensation, so lively in monkeys, is fleeting and swiftly forgotten; the baboons no longer seemed to recall the cobra.

In every country in the world, jugglers' performances end with a collection, and the snake-charmer toured the audience shouting: 'Bakshish! Bakshish!' Thanks to the presence of Europeans, the takings were abundant, and he won more silver coins than his usual haul of pence.

The approach of evening drew the travellers back to the hotel, and the carriages deposited them in front of the steps amidst joyful tumult. Various conversations had begun, each recounting what strange and picturesque things he had seen, when an unusual, inexplicable, crescendo of noise was heard which dominated the babble; it resembled the tolling of a bell, a drumroll, the din of a cart's iron wheels. The sound swelled, diminished, then burst forth again with a dreadful crash. It was like baying from a bronze mouth, like the ululations of an infernal dog howling at Hecate's livid disc (*the moon*).

It was simply a Chinese gong which a *fellah*, one of the hotel servants, was striking with a padded mallet, to inform the Khedive's guests and travellers that dinner was served.



The coffee shop. (1846-1849)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)

[Artvee](#)

Chapter 8: What One Can See from Shepherd's Hotel

However well-frequented Shepherd's Hotel may be, I doubt it has ever seen so large a number of guests seated around the tables in its immense dining room.

The dinner was a very happy one, generously washed down with Bordeaux, Champagne and Rhine wines, not to mention the finest English beers. The service was delivered by a swarm of polyglot, most correctly-dressed waiters in black coats, white ties, and white gloves, who would not have been out of place at the Hôtel du Louvre (*then at 168 Rue de Rivoli, Paris*). The menu resembled that of other grand establishments of the kind, and nothing betrayed the fact that we were in Cairo. Those who had hoped to order something displaying 'local colour' had to resign themselves to excellent French, with a touch of English, cuisine, as is natural in a house whose customary clientele is almost entirely British. Not one Arab dish appeared in the hands of a dark-skinned slave in white turban and pink robe. Not even a plate of those famous tarts with pepper, so appetisingly present in the *Arabian Nights* (see *Antoine Galland's 'Les Mille et Une Nuits', LXXXIX, published 1704-1717*); but we regretted it little, local colour being often more pleasing to the eye than to the palate.

The travellers were grouped at table according to their elective or professional affinities: there were places set for the artists, the scholars, the men of letters, and for the journalists, the worldly and the novices; but all this without rigorous delimitation. Visits were made from one tribe to another, and when the coffee arrived, which some took in the Turkish style and others in the European, all ranks and countries joined in conversation amidst the cigar-smoke; one saw German doctors talking aesthetics with French artists, and serious mathematicians listening, smilingly, to the journalists' gossip.

There were few women among the guests, and they, in the English manner, had withdrawn towards the end of the dinner, to leave the men free to drink, smoke, and chat, elbows on the tablecloth. Soon the room emptied, and the Khedive's guests dispersed into the streets of Cairo, or took a stroll in Esbekieh Square. I resumed my post on the veranda.

The night was more like an azure day, with the moon taking on the sun's role, than what is understood as night in Western countries. That orb, dear to Islam, shed its light on the black masses of mimosas lit from below by rows of gas candelabras, sanded the paths with silver dust, and delineated with perfect clarity the shadows of carriages, pedestrians and donkeys, progressing more rapidly in the cooler air.

The sound of instruments, cornets, violins, guitars, and voices, explosions of music more perceptible than in the daytime, reached me on intermittent gusts of air, amidst the relative silence of night, from the noisy cafés near the 'famous wine-cellar'. I would, indeed, have preferred to have heard Arab music, its unfamiliar and characteristic tones accompanied by the dull rhythm of the tarboukas (*goblet drums*) and those high-pitched cries, launched from time to time, akin to the 'ole' of Spanish songs, but one must resign ourselves to these small disappointments. Despite the regret felt by poets and artists, civilisation imposes its fashions, forms, and customs, and what I would willingly call its 'mechanistic' barbarities on the formerly picturesque scene, and café music is an improvement on Arab improvisors and musicians, or such is the opinion of the philistines even though it is not mine. Yet, the vague fragments of music were not unpleasant, for, as Lorenzo says to Jessica in *The Merchant of Venice*: 'soft stillness and the night become the touches of sweet harmony.' (*See Shakespeare's 'The Merchant of Venice', Act V, Scene I*)

While I was reflecting thus, the evening was advancing, the strollers were becoming rarer, the Khedive's guests were returning alone or in groups, and I felt the humid atmosphere enveloping me like wet drapery. This nocturnal freshness, when one is exposed to it while immobile, often causes blurred vision, which can become dangerous, and I recalled to mind Henri Rivière's advice, already mentioned, even though the effect were without lasting harm. I therefore returned to my room, and settled down, for the rest of the night, in one of those wooden armchairs, imitated from the bamboo armchairs of China, which extend beneath the feet and form a chaise longue, because the cast to protect my fracture might otherwise have been damaged by my position in bed, amidst the involuntary movements of sleep. The dark hours were soon past, and a shaft of bluish daylight, slipping through the window panes, extinguished the red glow of the candle, which I had left burning as was my custom.

My first thought was to rush to the window, and was quite surprised to see that Shakespeare's lines: 'But, look, the morn, in russet mantle clad, walks o'er the dew of yon high eastward hill' (see *'Hamlet', Act I Scene I*) applied much better to dawn in Cairo than Homer's classic phrase: 'Rosy-fingered dawn' (see *the frequent uses of that epithet in the 'Iliad' and 'Odyssey'*).

Nothing looked more like a Normandy sky than the Egyptian one seen at that hour. Wide bands of grey cloud stretched over the square, and a mist like billowing smoke, driven by the wind, drifted across the horizon. Without the formal attestation of the minarets and palm-trees, one would have had difficulty believing oneself to be in North Africa.

Against this autumnal sky, sparrow-hawks, kites and bearded vultures soared in great circles, uttering shrill cries; swarms of pigeons flew past, their wings close to the ground for fear of the birds of prey, besides grey hooded crows of a distinct species; while, beneath the trees, and on the paths, sparrows like those in Europe were hopping around, chirping.

The cities of the Orient wake early in the morning; their activity, which decreases around midday, commences at dawn, to take advantage of the coolness.

The Fellahin women wore long blue dresses, their only garment, which hung about their slender forms like antique drapery. The dress is slit across the chest, and when the woman is young or has not borne children, reveals contours of a sculptural purity reminiscent of the proud breasts of sphinxes.

Muslim modesty is not as concerned with the body as is the European; it concerns itself with the face, and is not greatly alarmed by those slight betrayals by the drapery, corrected, from time to time, by a casual hand.

The rest of the costume consists of a veil of the same colour as the dress, wrapped around the head and falling over the shoulders. To hide their features, especially when infidels cast a curious glance on them in passing, the women draw a section of this veil over the lower part of their face, and grip it in their teeth; but at that early hour, when there were still few Europeans in the streets, they took fewer precautions. The Coptic women, who are Christians, neglect to veil themselves at all, and I could contemplate at leisure, from the height of my observation-post, their heads with long eyelines, slightly prominent cheekbones, round cheeks, mouths opened in an indefinable smile, and chins striped with a few light bluish tattoos, in all of which the primitive Egyptian type persists, and which resemble the features of those sculpted heads of women atop canopic jars. Nothing was more elegant than the base of their necks, and the curve of their breasts, projected forward due to the habit they have of balancing burdens on their heads.

All these female fellahin, young or old, virgins or matrons, fat or thin, carried something: this one held an elongated vase, as one might a drinking urn, on the palm of her upturned hand, with ancient grace; that one's pose revealed, up to the elbow where the folds of the blue fabric were gathered, a thin, round arm, the colour of light bronze, encircled at the wrist by a few bracelets of silver or copper; others bore, in the manner of a Canephora (*Kanephoros*, basket-

bearer) on the Parthenon, a jar of earthenware or yellow copper on their heads, laterally if it was empty, and upright if filled with water. Sometimes the woman would support it with her hand, while her arm, exposed to the shoulder by this movement, was clasped to the urn like a handle of purest design.

Others had a child astride their shoulder, dragged another by the hand, and often carried a third against their stomachs, which did not prevent them also being laden with a bundle on their heads.

Some, more scrupulous, were not content with the *melaya*, as they call the large blue mantle which serves to veil them, and whose ends fall to their feet: their faces were fronted by a piece of rectangular meshwork leaving only the eyes, enlarged and accentuated by kohl, uncovered; the mesh was composed of small braided strips of black silk, linked and joined by means of silver plaques, and was supported by a reed triangle bordered by gold thread, resting on the nose. The whole resembled a mask with a satin beard.

I saw several women pass by, that morning, who belonged to a more affluent class of fellahin. As the hour progressed, figures paraded before us, their clothing announcing a higher social position. In every country in the world, the poor are earlier risers than the rich, and it is they, in Cairo as in Paris, who first appear on the streets.

The fellahin were succeeded at intervals by women, or as Joseph Prudhomme (*a bourgeois Parisian character created by the actor and caricaturist Henry Monnier*) would say in his flowery style, 'ladies,' wrapped in the ungainly habarash of black taffeta, and masked in a piece of white cloth extending over the breast like a stole. Followed by a black African woman dressed in white, they almost always walked two by two, probably wives or concubines of the same master. Sometimes, they raised and shook their arms, laden with gold and silver bracelets as one does when one wants to let the blood return from one's hands. This movement pushed back the borders of the mantle, the opening of which allowed one to see their yellow satin trousers, as wide as skirts, and the narrow brassiere of braided velvet bringing the globes of their breasts together beneath their transparent gauze chemisette. Most of these 'ladies' enjoyed that plumpness so dear to Orientals, and thus resembled full moons. The opulence of their charms formed a piquant contrast with the slender thinness of the young fellahin girls.

The water-carriers in Cairo responsible for public irrigation walked with a slow and regular step, carrying goatskins at their waists, reminiscent of those that the good knight of La Mancha attacked, though these, if slashed by his invincible sword, would spill no wine (*see Cervantes' 'Don Quixote', chapter 35*). One of the legs of each skin, fitted with a wooden nozzle, served as a tap, and dispersed a fine drizzle of Nile water over the road dust.

Employees in the costume of the Nizam, a black frock-coat buttoned tightly, and an amaranth-coloured fez, topped like a *kepi*, and adorned with a long black silk tassel, were riding towards their respective ministries, preceded and followed by their servants, while displaying that air of ennui possessed by employees in every country of the world on their way to their offices, and by children off to school.

Officers, whose red tabards, cut in the European style, still retained traces of old Oriental taste in the fantasy and richness of their ornamentation, and who were doubtless in greater haste to arrive, galloped past on magnificently harnessed thoroughbred horses. The corners of their crimson velvet saddlecloths displayed a crescent with one, two, or three stars, according to the rider's rank.

Emitting a guttural cry in Arabic, the familiar translation of which is: 'Guard your feet!' a pair of those *saïs* (*grooms*) or runners appeared, *kurbash* (*whip*) in hand, who precede their master's carriage, and open a passage for it through the crowds blocking the narrow streets of the city. One could imagine nothing more elegant and graceful than these young pages. of fifteen or sixteen years of age, chosen from the characteristic types of the various nations of which Cairo offers an assortment. The *saïs* costume is charming: it consists of a velvet waistcoat richly embroidered with gold or silk braid in arabesques, a wide belt tightened on a wasp-like waist, white drawers like those of the *Zeybeks* (*Turcic irregular militia*), a small skullcap set on top of the head, and a gauze shirt whose long sleeves, slit to the shoulder, float backwards in the breeze, seeming to equip the backs of these fast runners with an angel's wings. Their legs and feet are bare, and they sometimes wear a thin ligature above the ankle, no doubt to avoid cramp. The speedy *Basques*, who leaning on large silver-headed canes ran before the carriages of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, would have been nothing but tortoises compared to these excessively nimble *saïs*, equipped with lungs of large capacity, and fine, sinewy legs, who easily outstrip the horses, however swiftly the coachman drives, and who often stop to await them. Behind the *saïs*, at some distance, came an elegant carriage, of English or Viennese manufacture, with an *Arnaut* (*Albanian*) in a *fustanella* (*pleated kilt*) as coachman, containing a high-ranking official of majestic girth with, before him as befits a subordinate, his Greek or Armenian secretary, intelligent-looking and thin of face; or even a mysterious *coupé*, accompanied by black Africans with compact chests, long legs, and perfectly hairless cheeks, on horseback, its wheels trimmed with gold bands, and in which one could glimpse through the interstice of the veil or *burkha*, black eyes sparkling like diamonds, and through the half-opening of the *habarah*, the gleam of gold and precious stones, and shimmers of yellow, pink or white. They were the women of some great lord's harem, some Pasha or Bey, who were out shopping or visiting friends: for the fair sex, under Islamic rule, are far from being prisoners, as is imagined in the West.

This procession, it goes without saying, was intermingled with English, Italians, French, Germans, Greeks and folk who are known there as Franks and Levantines, dressed more or less in European style, ahead of or behind the fashion, and sometimes seeming to have borrowed their wardrobe from those arch-villains *Robert Macaire* and *Bertrand*. Such types, interesting perhaps to study at another time, held little interest for me then, and I preferred to examine, as they appeared before us, the characteristic examples of the peoples of North Africa, of whom Maxime Du Camp gives us such a vivid and exact sketch, enhanced with touches of aquarelle since the impression he provides is most colourful, in his beautiful book entitled *Le Nil* (*'The Nile, Egypt and Nubia'*, 1854): 'Turks, hampered by ugly frock coats and narrow trousers; fellahin, naked under a simple blue cotton blouse; Libyan Bedouin, wrapped in grey blankets, their feet wrapped in cloths tied with rope; Abadiehs, (*dwellers on reclaimed land, exempt from*

force labour and taxation) wearing nothing but wide white underpants, and whose hair, greased with tallow, is pierced with porcupine-quills; Arnauts (*Albanians*) with long, turned-up moustaches clad in fustanellas (*kilts*), and red jackets, their weapons in their belts; Arabs from Sinai clothed in rags, never removing their cartridge belts decorated with glass beads; Sudanese from Sennar (*on the Blue Nile*) whose faces, black as night, have a Caucasian regularity; Maghrebis (*folk from Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Morocco or Mauritania*), draped in their burnouses; Abyssinians, wearing blue turbans; Nubians, dressed in tatters; men from the Hejaz (*western Saudi Arabia*), walking gravely, their feet shod in sandals, their heads covered by a yellow keffiyeh, their shoulders by a trailing red robe; Wahhabis (*Salafi, members of a revivalist sect within Sunni Islam*), of whom Europe is unaware, and on whom perhaps today rests the religious fate of the Orient; Jewish money-changers, and sometimes a completely naked Santon (*holy man*) who advances reciting his profession of faith.'

On that day, my traveller's conscience obliges me to admit, I failed to see his 'completely naked' Santon, but lost nothing by waiting, in expectation.

What strikes the foreigner, what transports him farthest from his own city and its suburbs, what proves to him that, despite the inroads made by civilisation, he is truly in the long dreamed-of Orient, is the camel, that strange creature, which seems to have outlived a vanished creation. When it advances towards one with its convex back, its swaying legs whose joints are marked with deformed calluses, its large feet made to tread in the sand, its thin flanks, flaked with a few tufts of coarse wool, its long neck reminiscent of that of an ostrich, its head with its drooping lips, and obliquely cut nostrils, whose large melancholy eye, bordered by whitish eyelashes, expresses gentleness, sadness and resignation, one involuntarily thinks of the youth of the world, of Biblical times, of the Patriarchs, of Jacob and his tents, of the wells where young men and young girls met, of the primitive life of the desert, and one is always surprised to see an example pass by brushing against many a black garment, and swinging its head above the little fashionable Parisian hats, whose flowers it is sometimes tempted to nibble.

My wish to see them was, that morning, largely satisfied. The procession was complete, from the white *Mahari* (*racing dromedary*), bearer of dispatches, led by an Arab perched on a high saddle, one leg folded under him and the other dangling, to the miserable pack-camel, almost squashed flat between the heavy stone slabs tied to its sides with networks of palm-fibre cords. I saw all kinds: brown, tawny, coffee-coloured, old, young, fat, thin, carrying bundles of sugar-cane, beams, planks, chopped-straw, bales of cotton, bags of wheat, furniture, cushions, sofa-frames, cages, kitchen utensils, jugs, copper vases, everything in fact that can be loaded onto a poor animal, even small children, whose round, cheerful heads protruded over the edges of the basket in which they were suspended.

The camel naturally ambles, that is to say, it advances its front foot and its hind foot on the same side instead of trotting with alternate steps like the horse. This gait endows its walk with a singular solemnity, augmented by the rhythmic swaying of its neck. In appearance, the camel's gait is slow, but its steps are lengthy, and cover a good distance. However, that is enough for the moment concerning camels; the reader may not share my sympathy for those

humped and knock-kneed creatures, and besides, there is plenty of opportunity to return to my account.

The carts from Sudan drawn by oxen with silvery hides covered in black markings, or slate-coloured buffaloes with their horns swept back, also interested me greatly for their character and strangeness. In his painting of *The Grain Threshers*, which one would think was copied from the bas-reliefs of a tomb of the eighteenth dynasty, Jean-Léon Gérôme has rendered the wild poetry and sculptural forms of the latter animals most admirably.

But since I began my observations, the sun, dispelling the mist and cloud, has already risen high above the horizon, my telescope weighs heavy, and though my eyes have had their fill, my stomach also demands its own. Let me join my companions at the lunch table. They will recount all I have been unable to see...



Mosque El Mooristan, Cairo. (1846-1849)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)
[Arvee](#)

Chapter 9: Epilogue (1872)

Neuilly, January 29, 1872.

The theatres were supposed to close for the grim anniversary, but did not; though not from lack of patriotism. Permission was required for a theatre not to open its doors to the public that evening; a permission which was either not granted, or was requested too tardily. Also, there was a degree of uncertainty regarding the fatal event, which not everyone assigned to the same date. The correct date was January 26 1871, at midnight (*the commencement of the partial ceasefire between France and Prussia, which was followed by the armistice of January 28th, and the 1871 Treaty of Versailles signed on the 26th February*)

On the horizon, intermittent lightning throbbed, flashes of gunfire; distant cannon balls thundered dully against the ramparts, enemy bombs described their arc, the Prussian shells falling with a shrill noise on the roofs of our houses, perhaps bringing death or dreadful mutilation. But this infernal din, to which we had become accustomed for so many weeks, was not unpleasant: it proclaimed that Paris was still resisting, and, though the sacrifice was useless, was persisting, out of heroic stubbornness, in prolonging things as far as possible.

In an instant, the sky became as black as the canopy of a catafalque. There was suddenly a deep, mournful, deathly, and absolute silence that froze all hearts. Nothing could be more terrible than the absence of all noise in that funereal calm; the crash of the tocsin, the crackle of gunfire, the cries from some massacre would have seemed joyous by comparison. We understood that all was irreparably lost. If Paris had been consulted, it would have died of hunger rather than surrender, and the last survivor, with failing hand, would have set the torch that burnt Moscow to the buildings of the Sacred City; to generate, on this occasion, a 'glorious' conflagration.

Why reiterate what has already been so well expressed? Because it is hard to abstract one's mind from the feeling that occupies one's soul. One can forget a victory, but a defeat! The dark memory hovers before one's eyes like a bat in a twilit sky. Sometimes one thinks one has chased it away, but it returns, suddenly, interposing its wings once more between oneself and the spectacle of external things.

I cannot accuse Nature today, of insulting my grief with untimely splendour, as she so often does. The sky melts to water, the earth dissolves to mud, gusts of rain lash the windows driven on a storm that makes the tops of the park's tall trees crash together with an oceanic sound. The wind wanders through the corridors, and its complaint resembles a human lament. Nothing annoys or disturbs my dark melancholy.

Sitting by the crackling fire, with my cat, Éponine, stretched out on my knee like a black sphinx, I had given myself over to the irremediable sadness that overtakes the vanquished, thinking of my mutilated and bleeding homeland, of friends lying here and there, anonymously, beneath the grass, of futures abruptly torn away, of the collapse of hope, of ancient pride compromised, of fateful and necessary resignation, of all that such a day can suggest of bitterness, heartbreak, and despair. I experienced a feeling previously unknown to me, and, according to Stendhal (*see, for example, his 'Mémoires d'un Touriste', Volume II, 1854 edition, Lévy, page 22*), the most painful of all: impotent hatred. Less poetically than Lamartine, but with a sadness as true, I spoke, in the depths of my soul, my *novissima verba* ('final words', *see Lamartine's poem of that name*). Never had I felt so desolate, so lost, so detached from life. It is the point where ennui turns to spleen, and makes one think of death as a distraction. I was at this point in my Hamlet-like monologue when, along with the newspapers and letters, a book was brought to me.

It was a volume *in-18* (a format where the printed sheet is folded into eighteen leaves) with a slate-grey cover, inscribed with a name previously unknown to literature: Paul Lenoir, a student of my friend Gérôme. It was entitled *The Fayoum, Sinai and Petra, an excursion into Middle Egypt and Arabia Petraea ('stony Arabia' the Roman province)*.

I am fond of the travel-writings of artists who deign to quit the pencil or brush for the pen. Their habit of studying nature, and their awareness of form, colour, and perspective, gives a certainty and a precision to their descriptions that men of letters scarcely attain. In order to *see*, it might seem that all that is necessary is to open one's eyes; yet it is a skill that one acquires only through lengthy effort. Many people, of great intelligence moreover, in whom nothing escapes the world of the mind, traverse the universe as if truly blind. Painters grasp the characteristic trait, the dominant note, at first glance. They employ in their writing, as in their sketches, assured and expressive touches, boldly set in place, and maintaining locality of tone. One sees what they describe as well as one does what they paint.

Those magic words: *Fayoum, Sinai, Petra*, were already acting within me, prompting my imagination to soar beyond the present reality. Patches of blue seemed to appear in the grey sky. Palm trees with slender stems spread their spidery foliage against the gilded dust of a distant horizon. The white domes of the *marabouts* (*shrines*) were like rounded breasts full of milk, and minarets raised their pointed spires in the azure. The vague sound of a *darbouka* (*goblet-drum*), adding its bass to the notes of a Dervish flute, reached my ears on murmuring gusts of air, amid the familiar rustlings of the house.

I opened the book, even though I had decided not to read that day my mind being so weighed down by the burden of grief. On the first page, a drawing by Gérôme appears, 'The Portrait of Fatme', depicted like a smiling hostess at the threshold of her home, inviting one to enter. She has long gazelle-like eyes of a sad and sweet placidity; a fine, slightly hooked nose, which a brief line links to the slightly thickened lips, blooming with a mysterious sphinx-like smile; cheekbones softened by the smooth design; and a delicate chin tattooed with three perpendicular blue lines, representing a feminine type frequent in Egypt, fixed in a few strokes of the pencil, and with that profound ethnographic feeling which distinguishes him, by the

painter of 'The Prayer', 'The Lovers', 'A Cange on the Nile' and 'The Slave Market'. Gazing at Fatme, I was seized by an invincible nostalgia for Cairo, and there I was, following the happy band among which Paul Lenoir made one; travelling through the Mouski (*one of the three entrances to the Jewish Quarter*), the bazaars, the narrow streets crowded with camels, horses, donkeys, dogs, fellahin and all the peoples of Africa; walking in Esbekieh Square, the Boulevard des Italiens of Cairo; visiting the mosques of Sultan Hassan, Caliph Hakim (*the Al-Hakim Mosque*), and Amr (*the Amr ibn al-As Mosque*); witnessing, on Al-Rumaila Square (*Salah al-Din Square*), the departure of the sacred camel that bears a carpet, the annual gift of the Khedive, to Mecca; admiring, at the foot of the Mokattam, the tombs of the Caliphs and the Mamelukes; travelling in a carriage down the Grande Allée of Shobra; and stopping at Boulaq, by the river-bank, to watch the female fellahin drawing water from the Nile, posed like Danaïdes (*the fifty daughters of Danaus condemned, in the Greek myth, to pour water forever in the Underworld*).



Procession before the tombs of the Caliphs, Grand Cairo (1846)

David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)

[Artvee](#)

In short, I was evoking, in the company of that cheerful band of comrades for whom Paul Lenoir seemed to speak, as the orator of the troop, the journey I made to Cairo, for the opening of the Suez Canal. And now, I was visiting with them the pyramids of Giza and Saqqara; descending to the underground passages of the Serapeum re-discovered by Auguste Mariette (*in 1850*), to count the thirty-three gigantic sarcophagi of Apis bulls, the lids of which were raised by the soldiers of Cambyses (*see Herodotus 3.27-29*); reaching Fayoum (*Faiyum*), now through large forests of palm trees, now along canals or across pools left by the flooding of the half-retreated Nile, halting at villages built of adobe and raw bricks, whose inhabitants display the naive gentleness natural to the fellahin, the most harmless people in the world.

At Senoures, our playful troupe encounters Hasné, the country's fashionable dancer, the choreographic star of the Fayoum. Gérôme has made an engraved sketch of her for the book, in which the pure ancient Egyptian type is recognisable. Her head looks like a head on the lid of a canopic jar. Her erect pose has a hieratic immobility. Her arms hang down, her eyes are lowered, her half-open lips reveal her teeth. But do not be fooled by this deceptive calm: when the demon of the dance takes hold of Hasné, she displays the suppleness of a snake and the grace of a gazelle. The eye can barely follow the undulations of her arched torso.

I will not describe in detail the city of Medinet, the most important of the Fayoum, because I am eager to join the caravan of these gentlemen, who are leaving for Sinai and Arabia Petraea, the latest and most interesting part of the journey.

It is indeed a true caravan! The Khedive has generously offered our artists racing dromedaries, magnificent beasts drawn from his own stables. Pack-camels follow them, carrying provisions and all the essential paraphernalia for a desert excursion. The appearance of the procession, with its dragoman, guides, and escorts, is nothing short of imposing.

We soon reach, by walking the desert sand which turns pink in the morning and evening beneath the first and last ray of the sun, *Ain Moussa*, the five fountains of Moses, the only springs of drinking water in the Sinai Peninsula, and plunge into the arid immensity, traversing areas of dust finer than crushed sandstone, skirting the edge of the sea, or entering those long narrow valleys that the Arabs call *wadis*, and which resemble corridors dug through the rock by the violence of winter torrents. The mountains of this system, by a somewhat rare geological arrangement, form parallel chains which draw closer and join together at one end. Proximity strips them of the azure veils with which distance clothed them. Nearer to, they take on extravagant and unbelievable hues, large veins of intense red, bright yellow, Veronese green, bishop's violet, and a silver-white which is not snow as one might think, strangely striping their gaunt sides. These strange colourations, doubtless explicable as outcrops of marble, granite, and porphyry of various shades, astonish and confuse the eye. The painter who attempts to render them knows in advance that the faithfulness of his reproduction will be doubted, because Nature must appear as plausible as art. There are effects that are undoubtedly true yet too singular; from the employment of which it is perhaps better to abstain. This does not apply to artists whose self-imposed mission, in their travels, is that of emphasising the unusual aspects of the distant shores they view. These mountains really seem to have fallen like stony meteorites scattered from an ancient planet shattered into fragments. The caravan finally arrives

at Wadi Mukattab, the Valley of Inscriptions, at a height of two hundred metres; the sides of the mountain, as polished as marble prepared for the purpose, are covered with Sinaitic inscriptions; for more than three kilometres, these extraordinary signs literally cover the two slopes which rise steeply like two immense written pages.

What scholar will reveal to us the mysteries traced thus by an unknown hand on the very surface of Nature? What Bible, what Genesis, what philosophy, offers its enigma concealed within this gigantic hieroglyph?

After passing Mount Serbal, whose last spur runs to the sea, our small troop, leaving Wadi Solaf, finally views the Holy Mountain. 'Before us,' writes Paul Lenoir, 'Sinai itself soared into space, and its imposing silhouette stood out against the backdrop of the mountains surrounding it. Jebel Katharina, which precedes and surpasses it, amazed us with its colossal proportions; some scholars in search of novelty and historical contradiction consider this mountain the one true Sinai of Scripture.'

On the right, at an extraordinary height, we can see white buildings, the remains of the palace that Abbas Pasha (*Abbas Helmy I of Egypt*) had built for him, on whim, in this inaccessible region.

The Convent of Sinai (*St. Catherine's Monastery*) located on the spot where tradition has it that the Lord himself gave the tablets of the law to Moses, looks more like a fortress than a convent. It is a solid, hermetically-sealed construction, designed to thwart surprise attacks; for the immense riches it contains have always excited the covetousness of bandits and barbarians. Until recently, the Convent of Sinai had no door; one could only enter by being hoisted inside, in a basket roped to the end of a pulley, like a bale of straw or a sack of flour in a granary. That method of ascent is now only used for supplies, and one enters through a doorway opened at the foot of the wall, much like any other door. The engraving of this convent-citadel reminds me of the monastery of Troitsa (*The Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius*), near Moscow, which has a similar warlike aspect and contains a treasury in which the pearls it holds are measured by the bushel.

From Sinai, we journey by abominable roads to Petra, an ancient monolithic 'city', so to speak, for most of its buildings, still standing since Roman times, are cut into the cliffs, and have the peculiarity of presenting facades which lead to nothing. The tombs, dug into the side of the mountain, look like windows from which the dead might lean out to gaze at passers-by, if there were any, or like boxes opening onto the theatre dug into the rock itself, where one can still count thirty-three steps describing a perfectly distinct semicircle. The architectural style seems connected to that of the temples and palaces at Baalbek, and especially their decorative aedicules (*shrine like structures*). Petra, long forgotten in the desert, as the ruins of Palenque were in the depths of the forests of Mexico, is truly the capital of Arabia Petraea, and no pun intended. It rises alone amidst immense landslides of stony blocks among which Bedouin, of the most dangerous tribe, glide like lizards.



Petra, Jordan (1834)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)
[Artvee](#)

And now that I have accompanied our artists on the most perilous part of their journey, and know them to be out of danger, let me travel to Jerusalem, and return to Paris, where the newspaper awaits my copy, and where a greyish fog descends from the sky, as if to lower the curtain on the enchantment of the Orient.



Cairo; looking west. (1846-1849)
David Roberts (Scottish, 1796-1864)
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The End of Gautier's 'Egypt'