

CHAPTER II

THE STATUES BY THE NILE

The first thing that I remember of this journey to Egypt is that I was sitting in the warm morning sunshine on the deck of our little trading vessel, that went by the name of the heathen goddess, Diana. We were in the port of Alexandria. Martina, who now went by the name of Hilda, stood by my side describing to me the great city that lay before us.

She told me of the famous Pharos still rising from its rock, although in it the warning light no longer burned, for since the Moslems took Egypt they had let it die, as some said because they feared lest it should guide a Christian fleet to attack them. She described also the splendid palaces that the Greeks had built, many of them now empty or burned out, the Christian churches, the mosques, the broad streets and the grass-grown quays.

As we were thus engaged, she talking and I listening and asking questions, she said,

"The boat is coming with the Saracen officers of the port, who must inspect and pass the ship before she is allowed to discharge her cargo. Now, Olaf, remember that henceforth you are called Hodur." (I had taken this name after that of the blind god of the northern peoples.) "Play your part well, and, above all, be humble. If you are reviled, or even

struck, show no anger, and be sure to keep that red sword of yours close hidden beneath your robe. If you do these things we shall be safe, for I tell you that we are well disguised."

The boat came alongside and I heard men climbing the ship's ladder. Then someone kicked me. It was our captain, Menas, who also had his part to play.

"Out of the road, you blind beggar," he said. "The noble officers of the Caliph board our ship, and you block their path."

"Touch not one whom God has afflicted," said a grave voice, speaking in bad Greek. "It is easy for us to walk round the man. But who is he, captain, and why does he come to Egypt? By their looks he and the woman with him might well have seen happier days."

"I know not, lord," answered the captain, "who, after they paid their passage money, took no more note of them. Still they play and sing well, and served to keep the sailors in good humour when we were becalmed."

"Sir," I broke in, "I am a Northman named Hodur, and this woman is my niece. I was a trader in amber, but thieves robbed me and my companions of all we had as we journeyed to Byzantium. Me, who was the leader of our band, they held to ransom, blinding me lest I should be able to swear to them again, but the others they killed. This is the only child of my sister, who married a Greek, and now we get our living by our

skill in music."

"Truly you Christians love each other well," said the officer. "Accept the Koran and you will not be treated thus. But why do you come to Egypt?"

"Sir, we heard that it is a rich land where the people love music, and have come hoping to earn some money here that we may put by to live on. Send us not away, sir; we have a little offering to make. Niece Hilda, where is the gold piece I gave you? Offer it to this lord."

"Nay, nay," said the officer. "Shall I take bread out of the mouth of the poor? Clerk," he added in Arabic to a man who was with him, "make out a writing giving leave to these two to land and to ply their business anywhere in Egypt without question or hindrance, and bring it to me to seal. Farewell, musicians. I fear you will find money scarce in Egypt, for the land has been stricken with a famine. Yet go and prosper in the name of God, and may He turn your hearts to the true faith."

Thus it came about that through the good mind of this Moslem, whose name, as I learned when we met again, was Yusuf, our feet were lifted

over many stumbling-blocks. Thus it seems that by virtue of his office he had power to prevent the entry into the land of such folk as we seemed to be, which power, if they were Christians, was almost always put in force. Yet because he had seen the captain appear to illtreat me,

or because, being a soldier himself, he guessed that I was of the same trade, whatever tale it might please me to tell, this rule was not enforced. Moreover, the writing which he gave me enabled me to go where we wished in Egypt without let or hindrance. Whenever we were stopped or threatened, which happened to us several times, it was enough if we presented it to the nearest person in authority who could read, after which we were allowed to pass upon our way unhindered.

Before we left the ship I had a last conversation with the captain, Menas, telling him that he was to lie in the harbour, always pretending that he waited for some cargo not yet forthcoming, such as unharvested corn, or whatever was convenient, until we appeared again. If after a certain while we did not appear, then he was to make a trading journey to neighbouring ports and return to Alexandria. These artifices he must continue to practise until orders to the contrary reached him under my own hand, or until he had sure evidence that we were dead. All this the man promised that he would do.

"Yes," said Martina, who was with me, "you promise, Captain, and we believe you, but the question is, can you answer for the others? For instance, for the sailor Cosmas there, who, I see, is already drunken and talking loudly about many things."

"Henceforth, lady, Cosmas shall drink water only. When not in his cups he is an honest fellow, and I do answer for him."

Yet, alas! as the end showed, Cosmas was not to be answered for by anyone.

We went ashore and took up our abode in a certain house, where we were safe. Whether the Christian owners of that house did or did not know who we were, I am not certain. At any rate, through them we were introduced at night into the palace of Politian, the Melchite Patriarch of Alexandria. He was a stern-faced, black-bearded man of honest heart but narrow views, of whom the Bishop Barnabas had often spoken to me as his closest friend. To this Politian I told all under the seal of our Faith, asking his aid in my quest. When I had finished my tale he thought a while. Then he said,

"You are a bold man, General Olaf; so bold that I think God must be leading you to His own ends. Now, you have heard aright. Barnabas, my beloved brother and your father in Christ, has been taken hence. He was murdered by some fanatic Moslems soon after his return from Byzantium. Also it is true that the Prince Magas was killed in war by the Emir Musa, and that the lady Heliodore escaped out of his clutches. What became of her afterwards no man knows, but for my part I believe that she is dead."

"And I believe that she is alive," I answered, "and therefore I go to seek her."

"Seek and ye shall find," mused the Patriarch; "at least, I hope so, though my advice to you is to bide here and send others to seek."

"That I will not do," I answered again.

"Then go, and God be with you. I'll warn certain of the faithful of your coming, so that you may not lack a friend at need. When you return, if you should ever return, come to me, for I have more influence with these Moslems than most, and may be able to serve you. I can say no more, and it is not safe that you should tarry here too long. Stay, I forget. There are two things you should know. The first is that the Emir Musa, he who seized the lady Heliodore, is about to be deposed. I have the news from the Caliph Harun himself, for with him I am on friendly terms because of a service I did him through my skill in medicine. The second is that Irene has beguiled Constantine, or bewitched him, I know not which. At least, by his own proclamation once more she rules the Empire jointly with himself, and that I think will be his death warrant, and perhaps yours also."

"Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof," I said. "Now if I live I shall learn whether any oaths are sacred to Irene, as will Constantine."

Then we parted.

Leaving Alexandria, we wandered first to the town of Misra, which stood near to the mighty pyramids, beneath whose shadow we slept one night in an empty tomb. Thence by slow marches we made our way up the banks of the Nile, earning our daily bread by the exercise of our art. Once or twice we were stopped as spies, but always released again when I produced the writing that the officer Yusuf had given me upon the ship. For the rest, none molested us in a land where wandering beggars were so common. Of money it is true we earned little, but as we had gold in plenty sewn into our garments this did not matter. Food was all we needed, and that, as I have said, was never lacking.

So we went on our strange journey, day by day learning more of the tongues spoken in Egypt, and especially of Arabic, which the Moslems used. Whither did we journey? We know not for certain. What I sought to find were those two huge statues of which I had dreamed at Aar on the night of the robbing of the Wanderer's tomb. We heard that there were such figures of stone, which were said to sing at daybreak, and that they sat upon a plain on the western bank of the Nile, near to the ruins of the great city of Thebes, now but a village, called by the Arabs El-Uksor, or "the Palaces." So far as we could discover, it was in the neighbourhood of this city that Heliodore had escaped from Musa, and there, if anywhere, I hoped to gain tidings of her fate. Also something within my heart drew me to those images of forgotten gods or men.

At length, two months or more after we left Alexandria, from the deck of

the boat in which we had hired a passage for the last hundred miles of our journey, Martina saw to the east the ruins of Thebes. To the west she saw other ruins, and seated in front of them two mighty figures of stone.

"This is the place," she said, and my heart leapt at her words. "Now let us land and follow our fortune."

So when the boat was tied up at sunset, to the west bank of the river, as it happened, we bade farewell to the owner and went ashore.

"Whither now?" asked Martina.

"To the figures of stone," I answered.

So she led me through fields in which the corn was growing, to the edge of the desert, meeting no man all the way. Then for a mile or more we tramped through sand, till at length, late at night, Martina halted.

"We stand beneath the statues," she said, "and they are awesome to look on; mighty, seated kings, higher than a tall tree."

"What lies behind them?" I asked.

"The ruins of a great temple."

"Lead me to that temple."

So we passed through a gateway into a court, and there we halted.

"Now tell me what you see," I said.

"We stand in what has been a hall of many columns," she answered, "but the most of them are broken. At our feet is a pool in which there is a little water. Before us lies the plain on which the statues sit, stretching some miles to the Nile, that is fringed with palms. Across the broad Nile are the ruins of old Thebes. Behind us are more ruins and a line of rugged hills of stone, and in them, a little to the north, the mouth of a valley. The scene is very beautiful beneath the moon, but very sad and desolate."

"It is the place that I saw in my dream many years ago at Aar," I said.

"It may be," she answered, "but if so it must have changed, since, save for a jackal creeping among the columns and a dog that barks in some distant village, I neither see nor hear a living thing. What now, Olaf?"

"Now we will eat and sleep," I said. "Perhaps light will come to us in our sleep."

So we ate of the food we had brought with us, and afterwards lay down to rest in a little chamber, painted round with gods, that Martina found in

the ruins of the temple.

During that night no dreams came to me, nor did anything happen to disturb us, even in this old temple, of which the very paving-stones were worn through by the feet of the dead.

Before the dawn Martina led me back to the colossal statues, and we waited there, hoping that we should hear them sing, as tradition said they did when the sun rose. Yet the sun came up as it had done from the beginning of the world, and struck upon those giant effigies as it had done for some two thousand years, or so I was told, and they remained quite silent. I do not think that ever I grieved more over my blindness than on this day, when I must depend upon Martina to tell me of the glory of that sunrise over the Egyptian desert and those mighty ruins reared by the hands of forgotten men.

Well, the sun rose, and, since the statues would not speak, I took my harp and played upon it, and Martina sang a wild Eastern song to my playing. It seemed that our music was heard. At any rate, a few folk going out to labour came to see by whom it was caused, and finding only two wandering musicians, presently went away again. Still, one remained, a woman, Coptic by her dress, with whom I heard Martina talk. She asked who we were and why we had come to such a place, whereon Martina repeated to her the story which we had told a hundred times. The woman answered that we should earn little money in those parts, as the famine had been sore there owing to the low Nile of the previous season. Until

the crops were ripe again, which in the case of most of them would not be for some weeks, even food, she added, must be scarce, though few were left to eat it, since the Moslems had killed out most of those who dwelt in that district of Upper Egypt.

Martina replied that she knew this was so, and therefore we had proposed either to travel on to Nubia or to return north. Still, as I, her blind uncle, was not well, we had landed from a boat hoping that we might find some place where we could rest for a week or two until I grew stronger.

"Yet," she continued meaningly, "being poor Christian folk we know not where to look for such a place, since Cross worshippers are not welcome among those who follow the Prophet."

Now, when the woman heard that we were Christians her voice changed. "I also am a Christian," she said; "but give me the sign."

So we made the sign of the Cross on our breasts, which a Moslem will die rather than do.

"My husband and I," went on the woman, "live yonder at the village of Kurna, which is situated near to the mouth of the valley that is called Biban-el-Meluk, or Gate of the Kings, for there the monarchs of old days, who were the forefathers or rulers of us Copts, lie buried. It is but a very small village, for the Moslems have killed most of us in a war that was raised a while ago between them and our hereditary prince,

Magas. Yet my husband and I have a good house there, and, being poor, shall be glad to give you food and shelter if you can pay us something."

The end of it was that after some chaffering, for we dared not show that we had much money, a bargain was struck between us and this good woman, who was named Palka. Having paid her a week's charges in advance, she led us to the village of Kurna, which was nearly an hour's walk away, and here made us known to her husband, a middle-aged man named Marcus, who took little note of anything save his farming.

This he carried on upon a patch of fertile ground that was irrigated by a spring which flowed from the mountains; also he had other lands near to the Nile, where he grew corn and fodder for his beasts. In his house, that once had been part of some great stone building of the ancients, and still remained far larger than he could use, for this pair had no children, we were given two good rooms. Here we dwelt in comfort, since, notwithstanding the scarcity of the times, Marcus was richer than he seemed and lived well. As for the village of Kurna, its people all told did not amount to more than thirty souls, Christians every one of them, who were visited from time to time by a Coptic priest from some distant monastery in the mountains.

By degrees we grew friendly with Palka, a pleasant, bustling woman of good birth, who loved to hear of the outside world. Moreover, she was very shrewd, and soon began to suspect that we were more than mere wandering players.

Pretending to be weak and ill, I did not go out much, but followed her about the house while she was working, talking to her on many matters.

Thus I led up the subject of Prince Magas and his rebellion, and learned that he had been killed at a place about fifty miles south from Kurna. Then I asked if it were true that his daughter had been killed with him.

"What do you know of the lady Heliodore?" she asked sharply.

"Only that my niece, who for a while was a servant in the palace at Byzantium before she was driven away with others after the Empress fell, saw her there. Indeed, it was her business to wait upon her and her father the Prince. Therefore, she is interested in her fate."

"It seems that you are more interested than your niece, who has never spoken a word to me concerning her," answered Palka. "Well, since you are a man, I should not have thought this strange, had you not been blind, for they say she was the most beautiful woman in Egypt. As for her fate, you must ask God, since none know it. When the army of Musa was encamped yonder by the Nile my husband, Marcus, who had taken two donkey-loads of forage for sale to the camp and was returning by moonlight, saw her run past him, a red knife in her hand, her face set towards the Gateway of the Kings. After that he saw her no more, nor did anyone else, although they hunted long enough, even in the tombs, which the Moslems, like our people, fear to visit. Doubtless she fell or threw

herself into some hole in the rocks; or perhaps the wild beasts ate her. Better so than that a child of the old Pharaohs should become the woman of an infidel."

"Yes," I answered, "better so. But why do folk fear to visit those tombs of which you speak, Palka?"

"Why? Because they are haunted, that is all, and even the bravest dread the sight of a ghost. How could they be otherwise than haunted, seeing that yonder valley is sown with the mighty dead like a field with corn?"

"Yet the dead sleep quietly enough, Palka."

"Aye, the common dead, Hodur; but not these kings and queens and princes, who, being gods of a kind, cannot die. It is said that they hold their revels yonder at night with songs and wild laughter, and that those who look upon them come to an evil end within a year. Whether this be so I cannot say, since for many years none have dared to visit that place at night. Yet that they eat I know well enough."

"How do you know, Palka?"

"For a good reason. With the others in this village I supply the offerings of their food. The story runs that once the great building, of which this house is a part, was a college of heathen priests whose duty it was to make offerings to the dead in the royal tombs. When the

Christians came, those priests were driven away, but we of Kurna who live in their house still make the offerings. If we did not, misfortune would overtake us, as indeed has always happened if they were forgotten or neglected. It is the rent that we pay to the ghosts of the kings. Twice a week we pay it, setting food and milk and water upon a certain stone near to the mouth of the valley."

"Then what happens, Palka?"

"Nothing, except that the offering is taken."

"By beggar folk, or perchance by wild creatures!"

"Would beggar folk dare to enter that place of death?" she answered with contempt. "Or would wild beasts take the food and pile the dishes neatly together and replace the flat stones on the mouths of the jars of milk and water, as a housewife might? Oh! do not laugh. Of late this has always been done, as I who often fetch the vessels know well."

"Have you ever seen these ghosts, Palka?"

"Yes, once I saw one of them. It was about two months ago that I passed the mouth of the valley after moonrise, for I had been kept out late searching for a kid which was lost. Thinking that it might be in the valley, I peered up it. As I was looking, from round a great rock glided a ghost. She stood still, with the moonlight shining on her, and gazed

towards the Nile. I, too, stood still in the shadow, thirty or forty paces away. Then she threw up her arms as though in despair, turned and vanished."

"She!" I said, then checked myself and asked indifferently: "Well, what was the fashion of this ghost?"

"So far as I could see that of a young and beautiful woman, wearing such clothes as we find upon the ancient dead, only wrapped more loosely about her."

"Had she aught upon her head, Palka?"

"Yes, a band of gold or a crown set upon her hair, and about her neck what seemed to be a necklace of green and gold, for the moonlight flashed upon it. It was much such a necklace as you wear beneath your robe, Hodur."

"And pray how do you know what I wear, Palka?" I asked.

"By means of what you lack, poor man, the eyes in my head. One night when you were asleep I had need to pass through your chamber to reach another beyond. You had thrown off your outer garment because of the heat, and I saw the necklace. Also I saw a great red sword lying by your side and noted on your bare breast sundry scars, such as hunters and soldiers come by. All of these things, Hodur, I thought strange, seeing

that I know you to be nothing but a poor blind beggar who gains his bread by his skill upon the harp."

"There are beggars who were not always beggars, Palka," I said slowly.

"Quite so, Hodur, and there are great men and rich who sometimes appear to be beggars, and--many other things. Still, have no fear that we shall steal your necklace or talk about the red sword or the gold with which your niece Hilda weights her garments. Poor girl, she has all the ways of a fine lady, one who has known Courts, as I think you said was the case. It must be sad for her to have fallen so low. Still, have no fear, Hodur," and she took my hand and pressed it in a certain secret fashion which was practised among the persecuted Christians in the East when they would reveal themselves to each other. Then she went away laughing.

As for me, I sought Martina, who had been sleeping through the heat, and told her everything.

"Well," she said when I had finished, "you should give thanks to God, Olaf, since without doubt this ghost is the lady Heliodore. So should Jodd," I heard her add beneath her breath, for in my blindness my ears had grown very quick.