

A DESERT DRAMA

BEING

The Tragedy of the *Korosko*

BY

A. CONAN DOYLE

**WITH THIRTY-TWO FULL-PAGE
ILLUSTRATIONS BY S. PAGET**

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**TO MY FRIEND JAMES PAYN IN TOKEN OF MY
AFFECTION AND ESTEEM**

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PREFACE

This book has been materially enlarged and altered since its appearance in serial form

A. Conan Doyle

October 17, 1897

A DESERT DRAMA

CHAPTER I

The public may possibly wonder why it is that they have never heard in the papers of the fate of the passengers of the __Korosko__. In these days of universal press agencies, responsive to the slightest stimulus, it may well seem incredible that an international incident of such importance should remain so long unchronicled. Suffice it that there were very valid reasons, both of a personal and political nature, for holding it back. The facts were well known to a good number of people at the time, and some version of them did actually appear in a provincial paper, but was generally discredited. They have now been thrown into narrative form, the incidents having been collated from the sworn statements of Colonel Cochrane Cochrane, of the Army and Navy Club, and from the letters of Miss Adams, of Boston, Mass. These have been supplemented by the evidence of Captain Archer, of the Egyptian Camel Corps, as given before the secret Government inquiry at Cairo. Mr. James Stephens has refused to put his version of the matter into writing, but as these proofs have been submitted to him, and no correction or deletion has been made in them, it may be supposed that he has not succeeded in detecting any grave misstatement of fact, and that any objection which he may have to their publication depends rather upon private and personal scruples.

The __Korosko__, a turtle-bottomed, round-bowed stern-

wheeler, with a 30-inch draught and the lines of a flat-iron, started upon the 13th of February, in the year 1895, from Shellal, at the head of the first cataract, bound for Wady Haifa. I have a passenger card for the trip, which I hereby produce:

S. W. "*Korosko*," February 13TH.

PASSENGERS.

<i>Colonel Cochrane Cochrane</i>	<i>London</i>
<i>Mr. Cecil Brown</i>	<i>London</i>
<i>John H. Headingly</i>	<i>Boston, USA</i>
<i>Miss Adams</i>	<i>Boston, USA</i>
<i>Miss S. Adams</i>	<i>Worcester, Mass,</i> <i>USA</i>
<i>Mons Fardet</i>	<i>Paris</i>
<i>Mr. and Mrs. Belmont</i>	<i>Dublin</i>
<i>James Stephens</i>	<i>Manchester</i>
<i>Rev. John Stuart</i>	<i>Birmingham</i>
<i>Mrs. Shlesinger, nurse and child Florence</i>	

This was the party as it started from Shellal with the intention of travelling up the two hundred miles of Nubian Nile which lie between the first and the second cataract.

It is a singular country, this Nubia. Varying in breadth from a few miles to as many yards (for the name is only applied to the narrow portion which is capable of cultivation), it extends in a thin, green, palm-fringed strip upon either side of the broad coffee-coloured river. Beyond it there stretches on the Libyan bank a savage and illimitable desert, extending to the whole breadth of Africa. On the other side an equally desolate wilderness is bounded only by the distant Red Sea. Between these two huge and barren expanses Nubia writhes like a green sandworm along the course of the river. Here and there it disappears altogether, and the Nile runs

between black and sun-cracked hills, with the orange drift-sand lying like glaciers in their valleys. Everywhere one sees traces of vanished races and submerged civilisations. Grotesque graves dot the hills or stand up against the sky-line: pyramidal graves, tumulus graves, rock graves,—everywhere, graves. And, occasionally, as the boat rounds a rocky point, one sees a deserted city up above,—houses, walls, battlements, with the sun shining through the empty window squares. Sometimes you learn that it has been Roman, sometimes Egyptian, sometimes all record of its name or origin has been absolutely lost. You ask yourself in amazement why any race should build in so uncouth a solitude, and you find it difficult to accept the theory that this has only been of value as a guard-house to the richer country down below, and that these frequent cities have been so many fortresses to hold off the wild and predatory men of the south. But whatever be their explanation, be it a fierce neighbour, or be it a climatic change, there they stand, these grim and silent cities, and up on the hills you can see the graves of their people, like the port-holes of a man-of-war. It is through this weird, dead country that the tourists smoke and gossip and flirt as they pass up to the Egyptian frontier.

The passengers of the *Korosko* formed a merry party, for most of them had travelled up together from Cairo to Assouan, and even Anglo-Saxon ice thaws rapidly upon the Nile. They were fortunate in being without the single disagreeable person who in these small boats is sufficient to mar the enjoyment of the whole party. On a vessel which is little more than a large steam launch, the bore, the cynic, or the grumbler holds the company at his mercy. But the *Korosko* was free from anything of the kind. Colonel Cochrane Cochrane was one of those officers whom the British Government, acting upon a large system of averages, declares at a certain age to be incapable of further service, and who demonstrate the worth of such a system by spending their declining years in exploring Morocco, or shooting lions in Somaliland. He was a dark, straight, aquiline man, with a courteously deferential manner, but a steady, questioning eye; very neat in his dress and precise in his habits, a

gentleman to the tips of his trim fingernails. In his Anglo-Saxon dislike to effusiveness he had cultivated a self-contained manner which was apt at first acquaintance to be repellent, and he seemed to those who really knew him to be at some pains to conceal the kind heart and human emotions which influenced his actions. It was respect rather than affection which he inspired among his fellow-travellers, for they felt, like all who had ever met him, that he was a man with whom acquaintance was unlikely to ripen into a friendship, though a friendship when once attained would be an unchanging and inseparable part of himself. He wore a grizzled military moustache, but his hair was singularly black for a man of his years. He made no allusion in his conversation to the numerous campaigns in which he had distinguished himself, and the reason usually given for his reticence was that they dated back to such early Victorian days that he had to sacrifice his military glory at the shrine of his perennial youth.

Mr. Cecil Brown—to take the names in the chance order in which they appear upon the passenger list—was a young diplomatist from a Continental Embassy, a man slightly tainted with the Oxford manner, and erring upon the side of unnatural and inhuman refinement, but full of interesting talk and cultured thought. He had a sad, handsome face, a small wax-tipped moustache, a low voice and a listless manner, which was relieved by a charming habit of suddenly lighting up into a rapid smile and gleam when anything caught his fancy. An acquired cynicism was eternally crushing and overlying his natural youthful enthusiasms, and he ignored what was obvious while expressing keen appreciation for what seemed to the average man to be either trivial or unhealthy. He chose Walter Pater for his travelling author, and sat all day, reserved but affable, under the awning, with his novel and his sketch-book upon a campstool beside him. His personal dignity prevented him from making advances to others, but if they chose to address him, they found him a courteous and amiable companion.

The Americans formed a group by themselves. John H. Headingly was a New Englander, a graduate of Harvard, who was completing his education by a tour round the world. He stood for the best type of young American,—quick, observant, serious, eager for knowledge, and fairly free from prejudice, with a fine ballast of unsectarian but earnest religious feeling, which held him steady amid all the sudden gusts of youth. He had less of the appearance and more of the reality of culture than the young Oxford diplomatist, for he had keener emotions though less exact knowledge. Miss Adams and Miss Sadie Adams were aunt and niece, the former a little, energetic, hard-featured Bostonian old-maid, with a huge surplus of unused love behind her stern and swarthy features. She had never been from home before, and she was now busy upon the self-imposed task of bringing the East up to the standard of Massachusetts. She had hardly landed in Egypt before she realised that the country needed putting to rights, and since the conviction struck her she had been very fully occupied. The saddle-galled donkeys, the starved pariah dogs, the flies round the eyes of the babies, the naked children, the importunate begging, the ragged, untidy women,—they were all challenges to her conscience, and she plunged in bravely at her work of reformation. As she could not speak a word of the language, however, and was unable to make any of the delinquents understand what it was that she wanted, her passage up the Nile left the immemorial East very much as she had found it, but afforded a good deal of sympathetic amusement to her fellow-travellers. No one enjoyed her efforts more than her niece, Sadie, who shared with Mrs. Belmont the distinction of being the most popular person upon the boat. She was very young,—fresh from Smith College,—and she still possessed many both of the virtues and of the faults of a child. She had the frankness, the trusting confidence, the innocent straightforwardness, the high spirits, and also the loquacity and the want of reverence. But even her faults caused amusement, and if she had preserved many of the characteristics of a clever child, she was none the less a tall and

handsome woman, who looked older than her years on account of that low curve of the hair over the ears, and that fulness of bodice and skirt which Mr. Gibson has either initiated or imitated. The whisk of those skirts, and the frank incisive voice and pleasant, catching laugh were familiar and welcome sounds on board of the *Korosko*. Even the rigid Colonel softened into geniality, and the Oxford-bred diplomatist forgot to be unnatural with Miss Sadie Adams as a companion.

The other passengers may be dismissed more briefly. Some were interesting, some neutral, and all amiable. Monsieur Fardet was a good-natured but argumentative Frenchman, who held the most decided views as to the deep machinations of Great Britain and the illegality of her position in Egypt. Mr. Belmont was an iron-grey, sturdy Irishman, famous as an astonishingly good long-range rifle-shot, who had carried off nearly every prize which Wimbledon or Bisley had to offer. With him was his wife, a very charming and refined woman, full of the pleasant playfulness of her country. Mrs. Shiesinger was a middle-aged widow, quiet and soothing, with her thoughts all taken up by her six-year-old child, as a mother's thoughts are likely to be in a boat which has an open rail for a bulwark. The Reverend John Stuart was a Non-conformist minister from Birmingham,—either a Presbyterian or a Congregationalist,—a man of immense stoutness, slow and torpid in his ways, but blessed with a considerable fond of homely humour, which made him, I am told, a very favourite preacher and an effective speaker from advanced radical platforms.

Finally, there was Mr. James Stephens, a Manchester solicitor (junior partner of Hickson, Ward, and Stephens), who was travelling to shake off the effects of an attack of influenza. Stephens was a man who, in the course of thirty years, had worked himself up from cleaning the firm's windows to managing its business. For most of that long time he had been absolutely immersed in dry, technical work, living with the one idea of satisfying old clients and attracting new ones, until his mind and

soul had become as formal and precise as the laws which he expounded. A fine and sensitive nature was in danger of being as warped as a busy city man's is liable to become. His work had become an engrained habit, and, being a bachelor, he had hardly an interest in life to draw him away from it, so that his soul was being gradually bricked up like the body of a mediæval nun. But at last there came this kindly illness, and Nature hustled James Stephens out of his groove, and sent him into the broad world far away from roaring Manchester and his shelves full of calf-skin authorities. At first he resented it deeply. Everything seemed trivial to him compared to his own petty routine. But gradually his eyes were opened, and he began dimly to see that it was his work which was trivial when compared to this wonderful, varied, inexplicable world of which he was so ignorant. Vaguely he realised that the interruption to his career might be more important than the career itself. All sorts of new interests took possession of him; and the middle-aged lawyer developed an after-glow of that youth which had been wasted among his books. His character was too formed to admit of his being anything but dry and precise in his ways, and a trifle pedantic in his mode of speech; but he read and thought and observed, scoring his "Baedeker" with underlinings and annotations as he had once done his "Prideaux's Commentaries." He had travelled up from Cairo with the party, and had contracted a friendship with Miss Adams and her niece. The young American girl, with her chatter, her audacity, and her constant flow of high spirits, amused and interested him, and she in turn felt a mixture of respect and of pity for his knowledge and his limitations. So they became good friends, and people smiled to see his clouded face and her sunny one bending over the same guide-book.

The little *Korosko* puffed and spluttered her way up the river, kicking up the white water behind her, and making more noise and fuss over her five knots an hour than an Atlantic liner on a record voyage. On deck, under the thick awning, sat her little family of passengers, and every few hours she eased down and sidled up to the bank to allow them to visit one more of that innumerable

succession of temples. The remains, however, grow more modern as one ascends from Cairo, and travellers who have sated themselves at Gizeh and Sakara with the contemplation of the very oldest buildings which the hands of man have constructed, become impatient of temples which are hardly older than the Christian era. Ruins which would be gazed upon with wonder and veneration in any other country are hardly noticed in Egypt. The tourists viewed with languid interest the half-Greek art of the Nubian bas-reliefs; they climbed the hill of *Korosko* to see the sun rise over the savage Eastern desert; they were moved to wonder by the great shrine of Abou-Simbel, where some old race has hollowed out a mountain as if it were a cheese; and, finally, upon the evening of the fourth day of their travels they arrived at Wady Haifa, the frontier garrison town, some few hours after they were due, on account of a small mishap in the engine-room. The next morning was to be devoted to an expedition to the famous rock of Abousir, from which a great view may be obtained of the second cataract. At eight-thirty, as the passengers sat on deck after dinner, Mansoor, the dragoman, half Copt half Syrian, came forward, according to the nightly custom, to announce the programme for the morrow.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said he, plunging boldly into the rapid but broken stream of his English, "to-morrow you will remember not to forget to rise when the gong strikes you for to compress the journey before twelve o'clock. Having arrived at the place where the donkeys expect us, we shall ride five miles over the desert, passing a very fine temple of Ammon-ra which dates itself from the eighteenth dynasty upon the way, and so reach the celebrated pulpit rock of Abou-sir. The pulpit rock is supposed to have been called so because it is a rock like a pulpit. When you have reached it you will know that you are on the very edge of civilisation, and that very little more will take you into the country of the Dervishes, which will be obvious to you at the top. Having passed the summit, you will perceive the full extremity of the second cataract, embracing wild natural beauties of the most dreadful variety. Here all very famous people carve their names,—and so

you will carve your names also."

Mansoor waited expectantly for a titter, and bowed to it when it arrived. "You will then return to Wady Haifa, and there remain two hours to suspect (sp.) the Camel Corps, including the grooming of the beasts, and the bazaar before returning, so I wish you a very happy good-night." There was a gleam of his white teeth in the lamplight, and then his long, dark petticoats, his short English cover-coat, and his red tarboosh vanished successively down the ladder. The low buzz of conversation which had been suspended by his coming broke out anew.

"I'm relying on you, Mr. Stephens, to tell me all about Abousir," said Miss Sadie Adams. "I do like to know what I am looking at right there at the time, and not six hours afterwards in my state-room. I haven't got Abou-Simbel and the wall pictures straight in my mind yet, though I saw them yesterday."

"I never hope to keep up with it," said her aunt. "When I am safe back in Commonwealth Avenue, and there's no dragoman to hustle me around, I'll have time to read about it all, and then I expect I shall begin to enthuse and want to come right back again. But it's just too good of you, Mr. Stephens, to try and keep us informed."

"I thought that you might wish precise information, and so I prepared a small digest of the matter," said Stephens, handing a slip of paper to Miss Sadie. She looked at it in the light of the deck lamp, and broke into her low, hearty laugh.

"*Re* Abousir," she read; "now, what *do* you mean by '*re*,' Mr. Stephens? You put '*re* Rameses the Second' on the last paper you gave me."

"It is a habit I have acquired, Miss Sadie," said Stephens; "it is the custom in the legal profession when they make a memo."

"Make what, Mr. Stephens?"

"A memo a memorandum, you know. We put *re* so-and-so to

show what it is about."

"I suppose it's a good short way," said Miss Sadie, "but it feels queer somehow when applied to scenery or to dead Egyptian kings. '*Re* Cheops,'—doesn't that strike you as funny?"

"No, I can't say that it does," said Stephens.

"I wonder if it is true that the English have less humour than the Americans, or whether it's just another kind of humour," said the girl. She had a quiet, abstracted way of talking as if she were thinking aloud. "I used to imagine they had less, and yet, when you come to think of it, Dickens and Thackeray and Barrie, and so many other of the humourists we admire most, are Britishers. Besides, I never in all my days heard people laugh so hard as in that London theatre. There was a man behind us, and every time he laughed auntie looked round to see if a door had opened, he made such a draught. But you have some funny expressions, Mr. Stephens!"

"What else strikes you as funny, Miss Sadie?"

"Well, when you sent me the temple ticket and the little map, you began your letter, 'Enclosed, please find,' and then at the bottom, in brackets, you had '2 enclo.'"

"That is the usual form in business."

"Yes, in business," said Sadie, demurely, and there was a silence.

"There's one thing I wish," remarked Miss Adams, in the hard, metallic voice with which she disguised her softness of heart, "and that is, that I could see the Legislature of this country and lay a few cold-drawn facts in front of them, I'd make a platform of my own, Mr. Stephens, and run a party on my ticket. A Bill for the compulsory use of eyewash would be one of my planks, and another would be for the abolition of those Yashmak veil things which turn a woman into a bale of cotton goods with a pair of eyes looking out of it."

"I never could think why they wore them," said Sadie; "until one

day I saw one with her veil lifted. Then I knew."

"They make me tired, those women," cried Miss Adams, wrathfully. "One might as well try to preach duty and decency and cleanliness to a line of bolsters. Why, good land, it was only yesterday at Abou-Simbel, Mr. Stephens, I was passing one of their houses,—if you can call a mud-pie like that a house,—and I saw two of the children at the door with the usual crust of flies round their eyes, and great holes in their poor little blue gowns! So I got off my donkey, and I turned up my sleeves, and I washed their faces well with my handkerchief, and sewed up the rents,—for in this country I would as soon think of going ashore without my needle-case as without my white umbrella, Mr. Stephens. Then as I warmed on the job I got into the room,—such a room!—and I packed the folks out of it, and I fairly did the chores as if I had been the hired help. I've seen no more of that temple of Abou-Simbel than if I had never left Boston; but, my sakes, I saw more dust and mess than you would think they could crowd into a house the size of a Newport bathing-hut. From the time I pinned up my skirt until I came out, with my face the colour of that smoke-stack, wasn't more than an hour, or maybe an hour and a half, but I had that house as clean and fresh as a new pine-wood box. I had a *New York Herald* with me, and I lined their shelf with paper for them. Well, Mr. Stephens, when I had done washing my hands outside, I came past the door again, and there were those two children sitting on the stoop with their eyes full of flies, and all just the same as ever, except that each had a little paper cap made out of the *New York Herald* upon his head. But, say, Sadie, it's going on to ten o'clock, and tomorrow an early excursion."

"It's just too beautiful, this purple sky and the great silver stars," said Sadie. "Look at the silent desert and the black shadows of the hills. It's grand, but it's terrible, too; and then when you think that we really *are*, as that dragoman said just now, on the very end of civilisation, and with nothing but savagery and bloodshed down there where the Southern Cross is twinkling so prettily, why, it's

like standing on the beautiful edge of a live volcano."

"Shucks, Sadie, don't talk like that, child," said the older woman, nervously. "It's enough to scare any one to listen to you."

"Well, but don't you feel it yourself, Auntie? Look at that great desert stretching away and away until it is lost in the shadows. Hear the sad whisper of the wind across it! It's just the most solemn thing that ever I saw in my life."

"I'm glad we've found something that will make you solemn, my dear," said her Aunt. "I've sometimes thought—— Sakes alive, what's that?"

From somewhere amongst the hill shadows upon the other side of the river there had risen a high shrill whimpering, rising and swelling, to end in a long weary wail.

"It's only a jackal, Miss Adams," said Stephens. "I heard one when we went out to see the Sphinx by moonlight."

But the American lady had risen, and her face showed that her nerves had been ruffled.

"If I had my time over again I wouldn't have come past Assouan," said she. "I can't think what possessed me to bring you all the way up here, Sadie. Your mother will think that I am clean crazy, and I'd never dare to look her in the eye if anything went wrong with us. I've seen all I want to see of this river, and all I ask now is to be back at Cairo again."

"Why, Auntie," cried the girl, "it isn't like you to be faint-hearted."

"Well, I don't know how it is, Sadie, but I feel a bit unstrung, and that beast caterwauling over yonder was just more than I could put up with. There's one consolation, we are scheduled to be on our way home to-morrow, after we've seen this one rock or temple, or whatever it is. I'm full up of rocks and temples, Mr. Stephens. I shouldn't mope if I never saw another. Come, Sadie! Good-night!"

"Good-night! Good-night, Miss Adams!" and the two ladies passed down to their cabins.

Monsieur Fardet was chatting, in a subdued voice, with Headingly, the young Harvard graduate, bending forward confidentially between the whiffs of his cigarette.

"Dervishes, Mister Headingly!" said he, speaking excellent English, but separating his syllables as a Frenchman will. "There are no Dervishes. They do not exist."

"Why, I thought the woods were full of them," said the American.

Monsieur Fardet glanced across to where the red core of Colonel Cochrane's cigar was glowing through the darkness.

"You are an American, and you do not like the English," he whispered. "It is perfectly comprehended upon the Continent that the Americans are opposed to the English."

"Well," said Headingly, with his slow, deliberate manner, "I won't say that we have not our tiffs, and there are some of our people—mostly of Irish stock—who are always mad with England; but the most of us have a kindly thought for the mother country. You see, they may be aggravating folk sometimes, but after all they are our *own* folk, and we can't wipe that off the slate."

"*Eh bien!*" said the Frenchman. "At least I can say to you what I could not without offence say to these others. And I repeat that there *are* no Dervishes. They were an invention of Lord Cromer in the year 1885."

"You don't say!" cried Headingly.

"It is well known in Paris, and has been exposed in *La Patrie* and other of our so well-informed papers."

"But this is colossal," said Headingly.

"Do you mean to tell me, Monsieur Fardet, that the siege of Khartoum and the death of Gordon and the rest of it was just one great bluff?"

"I will not deny that there was an emeute, but it was local, you understand, and now long forgotten. Since then there has been

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