

An Unprotected Female at the Pyramids

by

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In the happy days when we were young, no description conveyed to us so complete an idea of mysterious reality as that of an Oriental city. We knew it was actually there, but had such vague notions of its ways and looks! Let any one remember his early impressions as to Bagdad or Grand Cairo, and then say if this was not so. It was probably taken from the "Arabian Nights," and the picture produced was one of strange, fantastic, luxurious houses; of women who were either very young and very beautiful, or else very old and very cunning; but in either state exercising much more influence in life than women in the East do now; of good-natured, capricious, though sometimes tyrannical monarchs; and of life full of quaint mysteries, quite unintelligible in every phasis, and on that account the more picturesque.

And perhaps Grand Cairo has thus filled us with more wonder even than Bagdad. We have been in a certain manner at home at Bagdad, but have only visited Grand Cairo occasionally. I know no place which was to me, in early years, so delightfully mysterious as Grand Cairo.

But the route to India and Australia has changed all this. Men from all countries going to the East, now pass through Cairo, and its streets and costumes are no longer strange to us. It has become also a resort for invalids, or rather for those who fear that they may become invalids if they remain in a cold climate during the winter months. And thus at Cairo there is always to be found a considerable population of French, Americans, and of English. Oriental life is brought home to us, dreadfully diluted by western customs, and the delights of the "Arabian Nights" are shorn of half their value. When we have seen a thing it is never so magnificent to us as when it was half unknown.

It is not much that we deign to learn from these Orientals,--we who glory in our civilisation. We do not copy their silence or their abstemiousness, nor that invariable mindfulness of his own personal dignity which always adheres to a Turk or to an Arab. We chatter as much at Cairo as elsewhere, and eat as much and drink as much, and dress ourselves generally in the same old ugly costume. But we do usually take upon ourselves to wear red caps, and we do ride on donkeys.

Nor are the visitors from the West to Cairo by any means confined to the male sex. Ladies are to be seen in the streets quite regardless of the Mahommedan custom which presumes a veil to be necessary for an appearance in public; and, to tell the truth, the Mahommedans in general do not appear to be much shocked by their effrontery.

A quarter of the town has in this way become inhabited by men wearing coats and waistcoats, and by women who are without veils; but the English tongue in Egypt finds its centre at Shepheard's Hotel. It is here that people congregate who are looking out for parties to visit with them the Upper Nile, and who are generally all smiles and courtesy; and here also are to be found they who have just returned from this journey, and who are

often in a frame of mind towards their companions that is much less amiable. From hence, during the winter, a cortege proceeds almost daily to the pyramids, or to Memphis, or to the petrified forest, or to the City of the Sun. And then, again, four or five times a month the house is filled with young aspirants going out to India, male and female, full of valour and bloom; or with others coming home, no longer young, no longer aspiring, but laden with children and grievances.

The party with whom we are at present concerned is not about to proceed further than the Pyramids, and we shall be able to go with them and return in one and the same day.

It consisted chiefly of an English family, Mr. and Mrs. Damer, their daughter, and two young sons;--of these chiefly, because they were the nucleus to which the others had attached themselves as adherents; they had originated the journey, and in the whole management of it Mr. Damer retarded himself as the master.

The adherents were, firstly, M. Delabordeau, a Frenchman, now resident in Cairo, who had given out that he was in some way concerned in the canal about to be made between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea. In discussion on this subject he had become acquainted with Mr. Damer; and although the latter gentleman, true to English interests, perpetually declared that the canal would never be made, and thus irritated M. Delabordeau not a little--nevertheless, some measure of friendship had grown up between them.

There was also an American gentleman, Mr. Jefferson Ingram, who was comprising all countries and all nations in one grand tour, as American gentlemen so often do. He was young and good-looking, and had made himself especially agreeable to Mr. Damer, who had declared, more than once, that Mr. Ingram was by far the most rational American he had ever met. Mr. Ingram would listen to Mr. Damer by the half-hour as to the virtue of the British Constitution, and had even sat by almost with patience when Mr. Damer had expressed a doubt as to the good working of the United States' scheme of policy,--which, in an American, was most wonderful. But some of the sojourners at Shephard's had observed that Mr. Ingram was in the habit of talking with Miss Damer almost as much as with her father, and argued from that, that fond as the young man was of politics, he did sometimes turn his mind to other things also.

And then there was Miss Dawkins. Now Miss Dawkins was an important person, both as to herself and as to her line of life, and she must be described. She was, in the first place, an unprotected female of about thirty years of age. As this is becoming an established profession, setting itself up as it were in opposition to the old world idea that women, like green peas, cannot come to perfection without supporting- sticks, it will be understood at once what were Miss Dawkins's sentiments. She considered--or at any rate so expressed herself--that peas could grow very well without sticks, and could not only grow thus unsupported, but could also make their way about the world without any incumbrance of sticks whatsoever. She did not intend, she said, to rival Ida Pfeiffer, seeing that she was attached in a moderate way to bed and board, and was attached to society in a manner almost more than moderate; but she had no idea of being prevented from seeing anything

she wished to see because she had neither father, nor husband, nor brother available for the purpose of escort. She was a human creature, with arms and legs, she said; and she intended to use them. And this was all very well; but nevertheless she had a strong inclination to use the arms and legs of other people when she could make them serviceable.

In person Miss Dawkins was not without attraction. I should exaggerate if I were to say that she was beautiful and elegant; but she was good looking, and not usually ill mannered. She was tall, and gifted with features rather sharp and with eyes very bright. Her hair was of the darkest shade of brown, and was always worn in bandeaux, very neatly. She appeared generally in black, though other circumstances did not lead one to suppose that she was in mourning; and then, no other travelling costume is so convenient! She always wore a dark broad-brimmed straw hat, as to the ribbons on which she was rather particular. She was very neat about her gloves and boots; and though it cannot be said that her dress was got up without reference to expense, there can be no doubt that it was not effected without considerable outlay,--and more considerable thought.

Miss Dawkins--Sabrina Dawkins was her name, but she seldom had friends about her intimate enough to use the word Sabrina--was certainly a clever young woman. She could talk on most subjects, if not well, at least well enough to amuse. If she had not read much, she never showed any lamentable deficiency; she was good-humoured, as a rule, and could on occasions be very soft and winning. People who had known her long would sometimes say that she was selfish; but with new acquaintance she was forbearing and self-denying.

With what income Miss Dawkins was blessed no one seemed to know. She lived like a gentlewoman, as far as outward appearance went, and never seemed to be in want; but some people would say that she knew very well how many sides there were to a shilling, and some enemy had once declared that she was an "old soldier." Such was Miss Dawkins.

She also, as well as Mr. Ingram and M. Delabordeau, had laid herself out to find the weak side of Mr. Damer. Mr. Damer, with all his family, was going up the Nile, and it was known that he had room for two in his boat over and above his own family. Miss Dawkins had told him that she had not quite made up her mind to undergo so great a fatigue, but that, nevertheless, she had a longing of the soul to see something of Nubia. To this Mr. Damer had answered nothing but "Oh!" which Miss Dawkins had not found to be encouraging.

But she had not on that account despaired. To a married man there are always two sides, and in this instance there was Mrs. Damer as well as Mr. Damer. When Mr. Damer said "Oh!" Miss Dawkins sighed, and said, "Yes, indeed!" then smiled, and betook herself to Mrs. Damer.

Now Mrs. Damer was soft-hearted, and also somewhat old-fashioned. She did not conceive any violent affection for Miss Dawkins, but she told her daughter that "the

single lady by herself was a very nice young woman, and that it was a thousand pities she should have to go about so much alone like."

Miss Damer had turned up her pretty nose, thinking, perhaps, how small was the chance that it ever should be her own lot to be an unprotected female. But Miss Dawkins carried her point at any rate as regarded the expedition to the Pyramids.

Miss Damer, I have said, had a pretty nose. I may also say that she had pretty eyes, mouth, and chin, with other necessary appendages, all pretty. As to the two Master Damers, who were respectively of the ages of fifteen and sixteen, it may be sufficient to say that they were conspicuous for red caps and for the constancy with which they raced their donkeys.

And now the donkeys, and the donkey boys, and the dragomans were all standing at the steps of Shepheard's Hotel. To each donkey there was a donkey-boy, and to each gentleman there was a dragoman, so that a goodly cortege was assembled, and a goodly noise was made. It may here be remarked, perhaps with some little pride, that not half the noise is given in Egypt to persons speaking any other language that is bestowed on those whose vocabulary is English.

This lasted for half an hour. Had the party been French the donkeys would have arrived only fifteen minutes before the appointed time. And then out came Damer pere and Damer mere, Damer fille, and Damer fils. Damer mere was leaning on her husband, as was her wont. She was not an unprotected female, and had no desire to make any attempts in that line. Damer fille was attended sedulously by Mr. Ingram, for whose demolition, however, Mr. Damer still brought up, in a loud voice, the fag ends of certain political arguments which he would fain have poured direct into the ears of his opponent, had not his wife been so persistent in claiming her privileges. M. Delabordeau should have followed with Miss Dawkins, but his French politeness, or else his fear of the unprotected female, taught him to walk on the other side of the mistress of the party.

Miss Dawkins left the house with an eager young Damer yelling on each side of her; but nevertheless, though thus neglected by the gentlemen of the party, she was all smiles and prettiness, and looked so sweetly on Mr. Ingram when that gentleman stayed a moment to help her on to her donkey, that his heart almost misgave him for leaving her as soon as she was in her seat.

And then they were off. In going from the hotel to the Pyramids our party had not to pass through any of the queer old narrow streets of the true Cairo--Cairo the Oriental. They all lay behind them as they went down by the back of the hotel, by the barracks of the Pasha and the College of the Dervishes, to the village of old Cairo and the banks of the Nile.

Here they were kept half an hour while their dragomans made a bargain with the ferryman, a stately reis, or captain of a boat, who declared with much dignity that he could not carry them over for a sum less than six times the amount to which he was justly

entitled; while the dragomans, with great energy on behalf of their masters, offered him only five times that sum.

As far as the reis was concerned, the contest might soon have been at an end, for the man was not without a conscience; and would have been content with five times and a half; but then the three dragomans quarrelled among themselves as to which should have the paying of the money, and the affair became very tedious.

"What horrid, odious men!" said Miss Dawkins, appealing to Mr. Damer. "Do you think they will let us go over at all?"

"Well, I suppose they will; people do get over generally, I believe. Abdallah! Abdallah! why don't you pay the man? That fellow is always striving to save half a piastre for me."

"I wish he wasn't quite so particular," said Mrs. Damer, who was already becoming rather tired; "but I'm sure he's a very honest man in trying to protect us from being robbed."

"That he is," said Miss Dawkins. "What a delightful trait of national character it is to see these men so faithful to their employers." And then at last they got over the ferry, Mr. Ingram having descended among the combatants, and settled the matter in dispute by threats and shouts, and an uplifted stick.

They crossed the broad Nile exactly at the spot where the nilometer, or river guage, measures from day to day, and from year to year, the increasing or decreasing treasures of the stream, and landed at a village where thousands of eggs are made into chickens by the process of artificial incubation.

Mrs. Damer thought that it was very hard upon the maternal hens--the hens which should have been maternal--that they should be thus robbed of the delights of motherhood.

"So unnatural, you know," said Miss Dawkins; "so opposed to the fostering principles of creation. Don't you think so, Mr. Ingram?"

Mr. Ingram said he didn't know. He was again seating Miss Damer on her donkey, and it must be presumed that he performed this feat clumsily; for Fanny Damer could jump on and off the animal with hardly a finger to help her, when her brother or her father was her escort; but now, under the hands of Mr. Ingram, this work of mounting was one which required considerable time and care. All which Miss Dawkins observed with precision.

"It's all very well talking," said Mr. Damer, bringing up his donkey nearly alongside that of Mr. Ingram, and ignoring his daughter's presence, just as he would have done that of his dog; "but you must admit that political power is more equally distributed in England than it is in America."

"Perhaps it is," said Mr. Ingram; "equally distributed among, we will say, three dozen families," and he made a feint as though to hold in his impetuous donkey, using the spur,

however, at the same time on the side that was unseen by Mr. Damer. As he did so, Fanny's donkey became equally impetuous, and the two cantered on in advance of the whole party. It was quite in vain that Mr. Damer, at the top of his voice, shouted out something about "three dozen corruptible demagogues." Mr. Ingram found it quite impossible to restrain his donkey so as to listen to the sarcasm.

"I do believe papa would talk politics," said Fanny, "if he were at the top of Mont Blanc, or under the Falls of Niagara. I do hate politics, Mr. Ingram."

"I am sorry for that, very," said Mr. Ingram, almost sadly.

"Sorry, why? You don't want me to talk politics, do you?"

"In America we are all politicians, more or less; and, therefore, I suppose you will hate us all."

"Well, I rather think I should," said Fanny; "you would be such bores." But there was something in her eye, as she spoke, which atoned for the harshness of her words.

"A very nice young man is Mr. Ingram; don't you think so?" said Miss Dawkins to Mrs. Damer. Mrs. Damer was going along upon her donkey, not altogether comfortably. She much wished to have her lord and legitimate protector by her side, but he had left her to the care of a dragoman whose English was not intelligible to her, and she was rather cross.

"Indeed, Miss Dawkins, I don't know who are nice and who are not. This nasty donkey stumbles at ever step. There! I know I shall be down directly."

"You need not be at all afraid of that; they are perfectly safe, I believe, always," said Miss Dawkins, rising in her stirrup, and handling her reins quite triumphantly. "A very little practice will make you quite at home."

"I don't know what you mean by a very little practice. I have been here six weeks. Why did you put me on such a bad donkey as this?" and she turned to Abdallah, the dragoman.

"Him berry good donkey, my lady; berry good,--best of all. Call him Jack in Cairo. Him go to Pyramid and back, and mind noting."

"What does he say, Miss Dawkins?"

"He says that that donkey is one called Jack. If so I've had him myself many times, and Jack is a very good donkey."

"I wish you had him now with all my heart," said Mrs. Damer. Upon which Miss Dawkins offered to change; but those perils of mounting and dismounting were to Mrs. Damer a great deal too severe to admit of this.

"Seven miles of canal to be carried out into the sea, at a minimum depth of twenty-three feet, and the stone to be fetched from Heaven knows where! All the money in France wouldn't do it." This was addressed by Mr. Damer to M. Delabordeau, whom he had caught after the abrupt flight of Mr. Ingram.

"Den we will borrow a leetle from England," said M. Delabordeau.

"Precious little, I can tell you. Such stock would not hold its price in our markets for twenty-four hours. If it were made, the freights would be too heavy to allow of merchandise passing through. The heavy goods would all go round; and as for passengers and mails, you don't expect to get them, I suppose, while there is a railroad ready made to their hand?"

"Ye vill carry all your ships through vidout any transportation. Think of that, my friend."

"Pshaw! You are worse than Ingram. Of all the plans I ever heard of it is the most monstrous, the most impracticable, the most--" But here he was interrupted by the entreaties of his wife, who had, in absolute deed and fact, slipped from her donkey, and was now calling lustily for her husband's aid. Whereupon Miss Dawkins allied herself to the Frenchman, and listened with an air of strong conviction to those arguments which were so weak in the ears of Mr. Damer. M. Delabordeau was about to ride across the Great Desert to Jerusalem, and it might perhaps be quite as well to do that with him, as to go up the Nile as far as the second cataract with the Damers.

"And so, M. Delabordeau, you intend really to start for Mount Sinai?"

"Yes, mees; ve intend to make one start on Monday week."

"And so on to Jerusalem. You are quite right. It would be a thousand pities to be in these countries, and to return without going over such ground as that. I shall certainly go to Jerusalem myself by that route."

"Vot, mees! you? Would you not find it too much fatigante?"

"I care nothing for fatigue, if I like the party I am with,--nothing at all, literally. You will hardly understand me, perhaps, M. Delabordeau; but I do not see any reason why I, as a young woman, should not make any journey that is practicable for a young man."

"Ah! dat is great resolution for you, mees."

"I mean as far as fatigue is concerned. You are a Frenchman, and belong to the nation that is at the head of all human civilisation--"

M. Delabordeau took off his hat and bowed low, to the peak of his donkey saddle. He dearly loved to hear his country praised, as Miss Dawkins was aware.

"And I am sure you must agree with me," continued Miss Dawkins, "that the time is gone by for women to consider themselves helpless animals, or to be so considered by others."

"Mees Dawkins would never be considered, not in any times at all, to be one helpless animal," said M. Delabordeau civilly.

"I do not, at any rate, intend to be so regarded," said she. "It suits me to travel alone; not that I am averse to society; quite the contrary; if I meet pleasant people I am always ready to join them. But it suits me to travel without any permanent party, and I do not see why false shame should prevent my seeing the world as thoroughly as though I belonged to the other sex. Why should it, M. Delabordeau?"

M. Delabordeau declared that he did not see any reason why it should.

"I am passionately anxious to stand upon Mount Sinai," continued Miss Dawkins; "to press with my feet the earliest spot in sacred history, of the identity of which we are certain; to feel within me the awe- inspiring thrill of that thrice sacred hour!"

The Frenchman looked as though he did not quite understand her, but he said that it would be magnifique.

"You have already made up your party I suppose, M. Delabordeau?"

M. Delabordeau gave the names of two Frenchmen and one Englishman who were going with him.

"Upon my word it is a great temptation to join you," said Miss Dawkins, "only for that horrid Englishman."

"Vat, Mr. Stanley?"

"Oh, I don't mean any disrespect to Mr. Stanley. The horridness I speak of does not attach to him personally, but to his stiff, respectable, ungainly, well-behaved, irrational, and uncivilised country. You see I am not very patriotic."

"Not quite so much as my friend, Mr. Damer."

"Ha! ha! ha! an excellent creature, isn't he? And so they all are, dear creatures. But then they are so backward. They are most anxious that I should join them up the Nile, but--," and then Miss Dawkins shrugged her shoulders gracefully, and, as she flattered herself, like a Frenchwoman. After that they rode on in silence for a few moments.

"Yes, I must see Mount Sinai," said Miss Dawkins, and then sighed deeply. M. Delabordeau, notwithstanding that his country does stand at the head of all human civilisation, was not courteous enough to declare that if Miss Dawkins would join his

party across the desert, nothing would be wanting to make his beatitude in this world perfect.

Their road from the village of the chicken-batching ovens lay up along the left bank of the Nile, through an immense grove of lofty palm-trees, looking out from among which our visitors could ever and anon see the heads of the two great Pyramids;--that is, such of them could see it as felt any solicitude in the matter.

It is astonishing how such things lose their great charm as men find themselves in their close neighbourhood. To one living in New York or London, how ecstatic is the interest inspired by these huge structures. One feels that no price would be too high to pay for seeing them as long as time and distance, and the world's inexorable task-work, forbid such a visit. How intense would be the delight of climbing over the wondrous handiwork of those wondrous architects so long since dead; how thrilling the awe with which one would penetrate down into their interior caves--those caves in which lay buried the bones of ancient kings, whose very names seem to have come to us almost from another world!

But all these feelings become strangely dim, their acute edges wonderfully worn, as the subjects which inspired them are brought near to us. "Ah! so those are the Pyramids, are they?" says the traveller, when the first glimpse of them is shown to him from the window of a railway carriage. "Dear me; they don't look so very high, do they? For Heaven's sake put the blind down, or we shall be destroyed by the dust." And then the ecstasy and keen delight of the Pyramids has vanished for ever.

Our friends, therefore, who for weeks past had seen from a distance, though they had not yet visited them, did not seem to have any strong feeling on the subject as they trotted through the grove of palm-trees. Mr. Damer had not yet escaped from his wife, who was still fretful from the result of her little accident.

"It was all the chattering of that Miss Dawkins," said Mrs. Damer. "She would not let me attend to what I was doing."

"Miss Dawkins is an ass," said her husband.

"It is a pity she has no one to look after her," said Mrs. Damer. M. Delabordeau was still listening to Miss Dawkins's raptures about Mount Sinai. "I wonder whether she has got any money," said M. Delabordeau to himself. "It can't be much," he went on thinking, "or she would not be left in this way by herself." And the result of his thoughts was that Miss Dawkins, if undertaken, might probably become more plague than profit. As to Miss Dawkins herself, though she was ecstatic about Mount Sinai--which was not present--she seemed to have forgotten the poor Pyramids, which were then before her nose.

The two lads were riding races along the dusty path, much to the disgust of their donkey-boys. Their time for enjoyment was to come. There were hampers to be opened; and then the absolute climbing of the Pyramids would actually be a delight to them.

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