A WAYFARER IN EGYPT

CHAPTER I

ALEXANDRIA

ONCE upon a time the crews and passengers and toiling slaves that had crossed the Mediterranean in tall ships and long galleys, saw, flashing high above the low African coast, the beams from the first great lighthouse in the world, and by day, as they drew near to Alexandria, there rose upon their vision a prospect of walls and towers and palaces gleaming white and splendid above the blue water, and their hearts rejoiced to see such an ending to their weary voyage. Where is all this splendour to-day?

The wayfarer of the twentieth century, crossing in a comfortable ferry boat, sees a row of unimposing buildings breaking but a very little the flat coast line, and gradually distinguishes the breakwaters, docks and shipping in the fine harbour, but singularly little of the town behind. Alexandria of the past, founded by a hero of romance, the intellectual capital of the world under his Greek successors, the setting for the loves of Antony and Cleopatra, the great religious centre in the early days of Christianity, has vanished as if it had never been. All that remains is its climate, its blue sea and its excellent situation as a port and gathering-place for all the commerce of the Levant.

As the steamer warps its way into harbour one small boat after another puts out to meet it, decked with the flags of every hotel in Cairo and Alexandria; amid a babel of noise and the distant waving of handkerchiefs and hats from the crowded quay. If one is arriving in the East for the first

time, it is rather lively and amusing, but amusement is soon merged in unpleasant excitement when the rush of porters and hotel touts comes on board, and most people, tired and bewildered with the din and the fighting with wild beasts to get their luggage through the Customs, are thankful to subside into the peace of a comfortable hotel, or better still, to catch the train to Cairo and get done with it. So Alexandria is only thought of as a port to land at or leave from and hardly counts as part of Egypt. Indeed, with only a short time to dispose of, it is best to treat it so, for other things are much more interesting and much more strange.

But there are people who come to Alexandria and Alexandria only, for business reasons, and there are others who come to Egypt for a long winter and stay late into the spring, and such may find that Alexandria has more to offer than appears at first sight. In the early summer when Cairo is hot and dusty, there is a different climate down here ; a cool breeze, a sparkling sea, gardens fresh and blooming and beautiful bathing. Because the seaside is so much more attractive than inland the town has extended east and west for a long way, to Mex and Ramleh. The western part has unfortunately grown into a very mean quarter, which prevents Mex from ever becoming popular, though once you get there it is a pleasant spot enough, but the eastern suburb is a much frequented watering-place and runs out for many miles along the shore, narrow, like a stretched string, on which the stations of the electric tramway form a line of knots.

The present town of Alexandria was mostly built by Mehemet Aly, the great-grandfather of the reigning king of Egypt. He ruled Egypt from 1809 till 1848 and did his best to give it the outward appearance of a progressive and civilized state. Before he raised himself to power, Alexandria had dwindled to insignificance, for during the Middle Ages the Canopic mouth of the Nile had dried up and Alexandria could no longer attract much trade, there being no waterway into the country. Rosetta, at the mouth of the Bolbitine branch, took its place as the principal port of Egypt. But Rosetta, on its sandy beach, could never become a good harbour and

Mehemet Aly saw how much the country would gain by reverting to Alexandria, so, as soon as he could afford it, he set about the construction of a canal which should connect the port with the Nile a considerable distance inland. Directly this canal was made, Alexandria began to flourish again and Rosetta to decline.

The change it brought about is well realized in reading two books of travel, one written early in Mehemet Aly's reign, the other near its end. The first is by Belzoni, who went to Egypt in 1815, with his wife, and describes their landing in the month of May at Alexandria, where they found the plague raging and were quarantined for several weeks in what he calls the French Occale, under hideously uncomfortable conditions. When the plague subsided, towards the end of June, they hired a boat which put to sea, but was driven back by bad weather; however, on the following day they got round to Rosetta and sailed up the Nile in four days from there to Boulac, the port of Cairo.

Belzoni's accounts of the country are especially valuable, because he and his wife were not rich people and could get none of the favour and protection which, even then, were available for well-to-do and influential travellers. His description of the absolutely mediæval conditions prevailing in Cairo and in Egypt generally, are in striking contrast with what Miss Martineau, writing thirty years later, has to say. She was perhaps, after Herodotus, the most intelligent tourist who ever wrote a book on Egypt. Her landing was in 1846, in November, and she and her party spent four days in Alexandria, where they "enjoyed the hospitality of several European residents." There seems to have been a good hotel, where the passengers to India by the overland route spent a night or two on their way out or home. An hotel omnibus took Miss Martineau and her friends to the Mahmoudieh Canal, where they found a steamer waiting and only took a day and a half to reach Boulac.

I quote her statements about the making of the canal, as they are very interesting, and, I believe thoroughly well founded.

"This is the canal which, as everybody knows, cost the lives of above twenty thousand people, from the Pasha's hurry to have it finished, and the want of due preparation for such a work in such a country. Without tools and sufficient food, the poor creatures brought here by compulsion to work, died off rapidly under fatigue and famine. Before the improvements of the Pasha are vaunted in European periodicals as putting European enterprises to shame, it might be as well to ascertain their cost,—in other things as well as money;—the taxes of pain and death, as well as of piastres, which are levied to pay the Pasha's public work. There must be some ground for the horror which impels a whole population to such practices as are every day seen in Egypt to keep out of the reach of Government:—practices such as putting out an eye, pulling out the teeth necessary for biting cartridges and cutting off a forefinger, to incapacitate men for army service. . . . Any misfortune is to be encountered rather than that of entering the Pasha's army, the Pasha's manufactories, the Pasha's schools. This can hardly be all baseless folly on the part of the people. If questioned, they could point, at least, to the twenty-three thousand deaths which took place in six months in the making of the Mahmoudieh canal."

The railway from Alexandria was made very early—in 1855—but the canal is still very much used for slow traffic.

Mehemet Aly laid out the town on a rather spacious scale, and the large square which bears his name and has his statue in the middle, is a handsome centre for the city. But Alexandria suffered terribly in the bombardment—or rather, in the riots that followed the bombardment—of 1882 and the parts that have been rebuilt are unprepossessing. This comparatively modern history is becoming so hazy in many minds that perhaps a page or two giving a brief summary of it will not come amiss.

Mehemet Aly's government was extremely oppressive to the Egyptians, but favoured foreign settlers and, on the whole, the country prospered greatly under him and his successors, until, in 1863, his grandson Ismail became Khedive. Ismail was inordinately vain. He had all the instincts and desires of an Oriental despot, but posed as an enlightened western

ruler; wishing really to take his place among European potentates as a kind of modern Haroun el Raschid or Soliman the Magnificent, and all in the best Paris style. Inevitably he soon wanted to borrow, and, Egypt being even then very rich, he borrowed at first on easy terms and felt sure that he had unlimited sources of wealth behind him. But he was surrounded by a set of unscrupulous financiers who made fortunes themselves, but saw to it that less and less from each loan went to the Khedive. Had it not been for the American War, and the immensely increased price of cotton which resulted from it, the crash would have come sooner than it did, but even so, in 1869, when Ismail dazzled Europe by his magnificence on the occasion of the opening of the Suez Canal, he was well on the way to be the bankrupt ruler of a bankrupt state. In 1875 Lord Beaconsfield bought his large holding of Canal shares for England, which have turned out to be a very brilliant investment. A year or two later and the game was up. No more loans could be raised, for nothing more wherewith to pay interest could be wrung out of the Egyptian peasantry, and not only was a state of famine becoming normal, but nothing had been done for years to keep up the irrigation works on which the life of Egypt depends. The bondholders were largely French, but there were many English as well, and after some negotiations, English and French Commissioners were appointed as liquidators and set apart the revenues of Ismail's private estates to pay the interest, but saw clearly that little could be done so long as Ismail, who was notoriously keeping very bad faith, remained at the head of affairs.

The next step was what is known as the Dual Control, whereby England and France jointly took charge of the finances, and they managed to have Ismail deposed and his son Tewfik appointed in his place. Tewfik was a very different man from his father, and a far more honest one, but his position was very difficult. The Dual Control had no means of enforcing their reforms and the troubles of Egypt needed more drastic treatment than the mere remodelling of the finance could give; moreover, a Dual Control is not very

likely to be a success in public any more than in private concerns. Tewfik, surrounded by Turkish intrigues and very conscious of the wretched state of Egypt, did not know whom he could trust. Things went from bad to worse, until, in the beginning of 1881, the Egyptian officers of the army, who had been shockingly ill-treated, gave voice to their grievances under the leadership of Colonel Ahmed Arabi ; one of their chief complaints being that they were excluded from any of the higher commands, which were all given to Turks. Nothing was done, either to subdue the disaffection or to redress the wrongs ; mutiny followed and flourished, until the Khedive was dominated by Arabi and compelled to accept his terms. England had, long before, along with several other European powers, pledged herself to maintain the dynasty of Mehemet Aly in Egypt ; France was not one of the contracting powers, but had been by far the strongest influence in Egypt throughout the nineteenth century, and it was England and France together who were now endeavouring to work out the financial reforms. But who could have foreseen such a hopeless situation ? The leader of the mutineers now Minister of War, the Treasury empty, creditors clamorous, the country destitute, and, to add to the difficulties, storm clouds beginning to gather in the Sudan. Looking back over nearly half a century, one can see that there was some case for leaving the whole thing alone, as the French did. They withdrew, but England felt that her honour was too much involved. Egypt had once been prosperous and law abiding ; with some help she might be so again : besides, though England had never wanted the Suez Canal, now that it was there, it was of supreme importance to keep some hold upon it. But there were divided counsels for a while, and Admiral Seymour, who commanded the fleet that was watching proceedings at Alexandria, must often have been in doubt as to what he was expected to do. A riot broke out in Alexandria in June, 1882, in which a good many Europeans lost their lives and the large commercial community was thrown into panic. Some people believe that Arabi had a hand in fomenting this disturbance, in order to make it clear that his was the only authority capable of

dealing with it; anyhow, when he was appealed to, he promptly brought troops and restored order. So far, well; but after this he appeared to be taking steps to constitute himself dictator, and in particular, to be preparing to defy England. He began building forts round the town, which could only be intended as a menace to the British Fleet. Admiral Seymour ordered him to stop, warning Arabi that, if he continued, the forts would be demolished. Arabi took no notice, went on building, and on July 11 the Admiral ordered the bombardment. This did a great deal of damage to the forts, and by that evening Arabi had evacuated the place and retired several miles inland. But, as Admiral Seymour did not follow up his action by occupying the town, which had been left with no military or police force, an appalling riot ensued; whole quarters of Alexandria were laid in ruins and the entire industrial and commercial system collapsed.

The subsequent history of the events of 1882 will be better told in the following chapter, in which the route from Port Said to Cairo goes over the ground of Arabi's final overthrow. In Alexandria things righted gradually, but the place must have lost most of the Oriental character it formerly had.

It is extremely difficult, even with a map of Alexandria before us, to understand what the town looked like in ancient days, for its configuration has totally changed and some parts of the Ptolemaic city are now below sea-level, while parts which were once under water are now dry land. In old times the Eastern harbour was the one most used; now all the shipping comes and goes from the Western harbour. The two are separated by a peninsula of very recent formation. The hammer head of this peninsula is the island of Pharos, which lies east and west. The great lighthouse was at its eastern extremity, where the ruins of Kait Bey's fort now stand: many of the fine squared blocks that belonged to the lighthouse can be seen round about. It was 500 feet in height and four-storied; the lowest story, 200 feet high, contained the acommodation for the keepers and mechanics

as well as storehouses for fuel and implements. The second story was octagonal, the third circular and at the top was the lantern, which must have been covered by some sort of dome. A huge bonfire blazed here nightly, but there was also a mirror, which was very celebrated, and functioned by day, but I do not think its use has ever been satisfactorily explained. A long causeway, the Heptastadion, connected the island with the town and was pierced by several openings to admit of boats passing from the one harbour to the other. As the town fell into decay, this causeway silted up and buildings rose upon the rubbish, gradually extending it until, in late Arab times, most of the population were gathered there, thus converting the Pharos from an island into the peninsula of the present day. The big square laid out by Mehemet Aly, with his statue in the middle of it, is built upon this neck of land reclaimed from the sea. In an open space not far from it, now the terminus of the Ramleh trams, once stood the two obelisks known as Cleopatra's Needles, although they never had anything to do with her. Nearly fifteen hundred years before the shape of her fascinating nose set the world in jeopardy, Thothmes III had erected these obelisks in the Temple of Heliopolis; the Romans brought them to Alexandria when they were ruling the country, a little after Cleopatra's time, and there they remained, all through the Middle Ages, great landmarks from sea and shore, till the nineteenth century, when they were moved again, and farther afield, for one of them is now in Central Park, New York, and the other on the Thames Embankment.

A little farther to the east, a promontory, where once the Ptolemaic palace stood, juts out into the harbour. The University, Museum and Library were somewhere near by and probably connected with the royal palace, but all trace of these buildings has disappeared. The most famous temple of Alexandria, the Serapeum, was on higher ground, a little distance inland, and some evidence of its former glory is still to be seen, though almost the only thing that remains above ground is the so-called Pompey's pillar. It had no more to do with Pompey than Cleopatra's Needles had with Cleopatra;

in fact it is a later piece of work altogether and was probably set up in the Serapeum in honour of the Emperor Diocletian, in the third century A.D. But in the enclosure surrounding it are long subterranean galleries which must have belonged to the Temple.

Two groups of ancient tombs are worth a visit. Of these, Kom el Shugafa, near Pompey's pillar, is the larger and perhaps the more important. It is a sort of Catacomb, three stories deep, the lowest being under water. The whole tomb, stairs, chambers and galleries, has been hewn out of the rock and is rather impressive, in spite of the hybrid, queer vulgarity of its decoration. The date is of the second century A.D., after the Roman Occupation of Egypt was well established.

The other catacombs at Anfouchy, on the Pharos, are smaller, older and rather better in style. They are of the late Ptolemaic period, with Roman additions. A few other tombs have been found here and there about the town, in the digging of foundations and laying of water pipes to modern houses, but the ancient streets and the Ptolemaic drainage system are too far below the present water-level to permit of any thorough excavation being made.

The small objects found on the Alexandrian sites are housed in the Museum, a collection which has been made the most of by an admirable curator, Professor Breccia, and is of considerable interest to scholars, but rather depressing to the ordinary visitor. The Egyptian things in it may be skipped with a good conscience; there are so many and so much better in Cairo, but there are some good Greek objects; a few fragments of really high-class sculpture and one or two fine heads of Serapis, interesting, as showing how entirely Greek he is in origin, and how closely he is approximated in art to the type of Zeus. Of small sculpture, some little terra-cotta figurines are charming; they are like Tanagra statuettes, but have a character of their own. And there is a fine collection of Ptolemaic coins. The ancient Egyptians did not coin money, but after they had begun to trade extensively with the Greeks, they used the little silver Athenian owl, which was current round most of the Mediterranean, and, after

Ptolemy I there is a complete and beautiful series of Egyptian coins.

Not much remains from the Christian churches of Alexandria, but there is a superb capital, which probably came from one of the four columns which supported the dome of the Cathedral of St. Mark. No one knows when this great church fell into ruins. The Arab conquerors do not seem to have deliberately destroyed it, but they could not be expected to keep it in repair. We may reasonably suppose, however, that it was still standing when the Venetians carried off the body of the saint in a basket, slung between two trusty men who held their noses and called out " pig " to discourage the Muslims at the Alexandria Customs, as they have been at pains to tell us on the mosaics in San Marco. Certainly it seems to have been a most justifiable, not to say laudable, theft, for nobody missed him out of Alexandria, while the Venetians gloried and still rejoice in the possession of the relic.

But there is little in the Museum or in the town that can bring the ancient Alexandria to life again for us. A better way to take in something of its extent and grandeur is to go out of it. An excursion along the east coast will show us Abukir and Canopus, and, out to the west, beyond Lake Mariout, is a most interesting bit of country, closely connected with the old Alexandrian history.

Abukir is the easier trip to manage, as it makes a pleasant motor drive out past Ramleh, with its hotels and bathing beaches and big new houses. Abukir was the scene of a good many events during the Napoleonic Expedition to Egypt, the chief one being the Battle of the Nile, in 1798. Napoleon's fleet had managed to elude Nelson's pursuit and Napoleon, as soon as he landed, had made a dash off for Cairo with the troops, leaving Admiral Brueys in command of the fleet, with instructions to dispose of the ships with the utmost regard to safety from attack. Admiral Brueys sailed round to the Bay of Abukir, believing it to be a perfectly safe anchorage. Nelson, by a brilliant manœuvre, got half his fleet round into the Bay, behind the French fleet, and attacked at the same time from the open sea with the other half. The French