

CHAPTER X

LOWER NUBIA AND THE GREAT RESERVOIR

WHEN the great dam at Aswân on the frontier between Upper Egypt and Lower Nubia was built, the Nile valley for some eighty miles southwards was turned into a vast reservoir. The natives were handsomely compensated for the destruction of their houses and the submersion of their land, and their villages were rebuilt on the hillsides at a higher level. The reservoir is full each year from about January to June, while during the remaining months of the year the river resumes its natural level, and the people come down from their lofty dwelling-places to cultivate their small fields, like Mr. and Mrs. Noah from Ararat. Now, however, the dam, having proved so great a success, has been heightened; and in recent years the level of the water in the reservoir has been so increased that the country is flooded for well over a hundred miles. Several ancient buildings and many cemeteries and other remains have gone under the water; and for half the year the country is like a great lake with temples for islands. In order to decide what steps had to be taken to prevent any loss to Egyptology in this respect, the present writer made an elaborate report for the Government in 1906-7; and as a result of this a large sum of money—£60,000 or £70,000—was voted for archaeological works. Not only was every temple repaired, strengthened, and thoroughly studied and photographed, but every single cemetery and ancient site was exhaustively excavated. Thus, not a scrap of information was lost to science, and every possible precaution was taken to safeguard the interest of the antiquary.

LOWER NUBIA AND GREAT RESERVOIR 173

It was early in the summer of 1912 that I paid my last visit to Lower Nubia, on board a P.W.D. steamer; and I should like to record here some unofficial impressions of this very interesting reach of the Nile.

Upon the first day of our journey we passed through the five great locks of the dam which mount to the higher level like some huge Brobdignagian stairway, and steamed southwards over the wide stretch of the pent-up waters, past groves of palm-trees standing deep in the flood, past the rough points of submerged rocks which once formed the promontories of the mainland, past slopes of golden sand which had formerly descended to the edge of cultivated fields, but now slid straight into the water in the manner of a perilous chute. It was our plan to push through to Abu Simbel, which is some miles south of the area to be affected by the new flood-level, and then to examine the main ancient sites on the way down. At mid-morning we steamed through the magnificent Pass of Kalabsheh, where towering granite cliffs drop sheer into the water and rugged piles of that splendid stone form islands in the river; and towards sunset we passed the temple of Dakkeh, whose lofty pylons can be seen for many a mile. About eight o'clock in the evening, when darkness had fallen and the sky was massed over with stars, we halted near the temple of wavy Saba'a, and by the light of a lantern made our way to it over the soft sand.

The work in this temple is poor. The edges of the blocks of stone with which the walls are built are roughly trimmed, and the crevices are filled with plaster to hide the reproach of their bad workmanship. One wonders how much the dishonest contractor, or perhaps the Viceroy of Rameses II, in whose reign it was built, obtained out of the transaction; for, knowing modern Egypt and the tortuous ways of the native architect, one has developed a sort of jocular misanthropy that is not bounded by the years. The friend who was with me, and who is a highly cultured barbarian, expressed unmitigated disapproval of the entire place, and begged

to be conducted back to the steamer with all dispatch ; but to me the ruin, although undoubtedly a monument of slovenly work, has a rugged dignity. In the shifting light of the lantern which caused the shadows, like fibbertigibbets, to perform the most grotesque antics, and the decorated walls to stand out from them in a kind of luminous animation, one felt that there was still something to be learnt from it.

At dawn next day we steamed onwards, rounded the great bend of the Nile between Korôsko and Derr, and halted during the morning at the foot of the hill of Kasr Ibrim, upon which the commanding ruins of an ancient fortress bask in the sunshine. One climbs up a winding path upon the north side of the hill, and mounts under impregnable walls to the narrow gateway, which it is almost surprising to find open. From inside this doorway a staircase rises to the higher levels of the hill ; and now the ruined walls of the barracks cluster in close array before one, while over to the right another and more elaborate doorway, flanked by massive pylons, stands almost on the edge of the cliffs. These two doorways date from about B.C. 25, when the Roman General Petronius placed a garrison here after he had defeated the one-eyed Ethiopian queen, Kandake, and her thirty thousand warriors and driven them into the Sudân. A few hundred years later a Byzantine garrison erected a Christian church on the hill-top a short way to the south ; and threading one's way through the narrow streets between the deserted houses, this building suddenly comes into view. The ruin has a peculiar charm. The masonry arches and the well-built apse have, at the first glance, almost a Norman appearance ; and here, as it were, at the top of the world, the scene is so foreign to Egypt that it holds all the charm of novelty to the Egyptologist, tired, as to some extent he must be, of the temples beside the Nile.

The cliffs on the west side of the ruins drop almost sheer to the river, and from the top one may throw down

stones which strike the green water far out of earshot and only just within sight. Sitting here in the morning sunshine, after our hot climb up the hill, a silent contentment possessed us which no words of mine can attempt to express. The river, the cultivation, and the desert were stretched out below us, all far away, and inviting only a mild quizzical contemplation. From this eminence we patronised Egypt, and smiled at all her petty troubles. What a place, we both declared, in which to build a little house! We could sit at the door all day long, smoking a pipe and musing upon the world's worries at this safe distance from them. On second thoughts, however, my friend came to the conclusion that in a dreamer's life of this kind a very good piano would be necessary and a few reproductions of great pictures. A small library, too, would be essential, and perhaps a few congenial friends. I was about to discourse with some heat upon the oppressiveness of culture and the intolerable demands it makes upon its devotees, chaining them to cities and communities wherein alone its rites may be practised, when I was checked by a glance at my watch; and forthwith we descended the hill down to the steamer and its sun-baked decks.

We reached Abu Simbel towards sunset, and at once went ashore. The temple is cut out of a bluff of rock which overlooks the Nile a few miles before the Sudân frontier is reached. It was dedicated to the hawk-god Harmachis, one of the forms of the sun-god; and it was so designed that the rays of the rising sun strike right at the temple, illuminating the façade, and penetrating at certain times of the year into the innermost sanctuary, where the statue of Rameses the Great awaits it with the gods. The four enormous figures of Rameses which sit in such solemnity at the entrance, as though to greet the sun, will be familiar to the reader; and those who have had the good fortune to visit this part of the world will remember that a great drift of sand had swept down the hillside at the north of the temple and had threatened

in a few years to engulf it entirely. In 1909 this drift had pushed almost to the doorway of the temple and had thus covered the feet of the two colossi on that side of the façade. The terrace in front of the great statues had here been hidden for thousands of years, and I suggested that if the entire drift were removed some important discoveries might be made. These hopes were fully realised when the work was undertaken in 1909-10 by the Department of Antiquities under the direction of Monsieur Barsanti. When the drift had been attacked by some hundreds of men and had been carted away in trucks to form a large and level platform in front of the temple, the buried terrace was exposed and was found to be ornamented with a series of statues: figures of the hawk, of the sun, and of the king alternating at short intervals along its whole length. These figures, sculptured in pale-coloured sandstone, now stand like sentinels at the feet of the great deeper-toned colossi, and add very considerably to the sense of size and majesty which these huge forms inspire. At the north end of the terrace a small open chapel was discovered, on the east side of which were two miniature pylons. In this chapel stood a high altar, and upon this altar four sacred apes, sculptured in stone, were found. They crouched with their hands raised in adoration to the rising sun, which, as it topped the eastern hills, would strike right upon their faces between the pylons. Before them stood two small obelisks, symbols of the sun; and near by, upon another altar, was a small shrine containing another ape and a small scarab representing the re-creation of life at dawn.

The whole temple is built for the one hour of sunrise; and therefore the next morning we went ashore once more before the sun had risen. Sitting in front of the temple, facing the colossi, we watched the light increase upon the stone, the colour of which grew ever more warm and golden. It was as though the sandstone were illuminated from within, like thin alabaster. The serene faces of the great statues became as nearly godlike as any work of man

can become. Their calm unmoved greeting to the sun, so different from that of us men, who must needs shade our eyes, being unable to look him in the face, had something sublime about it not convincingly to be explained away, and not to be diminished by the obvious fact that they were but masses of natural rock. I am not convinced that the mountains are dead, nor can I tell what gods of the western desert may not look out from this sacred hill through the eyes which the old men of Egypt have here made for them. Although I have seen this temple so many times, have watched the broken fragments of these colossi pinned back into position with iron bars, and have reckoned the tons of cement which have been shot into the cavities and cracks in their interior, yet still the spell of their monstrous dignity remains, they still seem to look to the eastern horizon with all the expectancy of living nature, and still speak with the voice of the winds of the dawn.

As the sun rose high and the first mystery of the daylight passed into a less suggestive glare, we entered the inner halls of the temple, which are excavated in the rock, and wandered from room to room. The light here was strong enough at this time of day to illuminate the whole interior, so that even the corners were not in darkness. Some of the reliefs are extremely well executed, and there is one scene in particular, upon the left wall, representing the Pharaoh in the act of slaying a foreign soldier in battle, which is one of the great masterpieces of Egyptian art, though I do not find it quoted in any of the textbooks. At length we passed out into the sunlight once more, and, after lingering a short while longer, the internal call for breakfast induced us to return to the steamer. We weighed anchor at once, and in a couple of hours or so reached the village of Toshkeh, on our return journey down stream.

On this occasion we paid no more than a rapid visit to the ancient cemeteries which lie a few hundred yards from the river at this point; but when I was here in 1910, I went

back some six miles into the western desert to visit the field of the battle of Toshkeh, where on August 3, 1889, Sir Francis (now Lord) Grenfell defeated an army of Dervishes under Wad er Nejumi. The Dervishes were invading Egypt along the desert route, which avoids the twisting course of the Nile, and at this point they were met by the opposing forces and practically annihilated. The battlefield is most interesting; for many of the dead still lie upon the ground where they fell, and in all directions the marks of the conflict are apparent, even the tracks of the gun-carriages being still visible passing across the firm surface of the sand. On a mound of rock, at the foot of which one may see the neat squares and circles of pebbles marking out the general's quarters on the eventful day, there is a monument under which the Egyptian soldiers who fell are buried; and a commemorative inscription in marble proclaims to the unvisited and silent desert around how these men "gave their lives for their country". I trust that I shall not appear cynical if I record here the impression of surprise which one could not help feeling upon seeing these fine old British sentiments applied to Egyptian soldiery. The Egyptian Tommy, good fellow that he is, has not yet learnt to bother himself about patriotism, though in isolated cases he is beginning to read newspapers and to fill his head with sentiments to which it is difficult to put a name. It was cruel fate that caused him to be conscribed for the army, and something uncommonly like the black magic of an enemy that sent him in the month of August to fight in Nubia. What the cause was about hardly concerned him; and, knowing the cheery, inconsequent *fellah*, it requires a considerable stretch of the imagination to suppose that he felt possessed of a country to defend or was prepared to give his life for it.

Behind some rocks we came across the skeleton of a sniper, still clad in a few rags of tattered blue. By his side were four used and three unused cartridges; and a bullet-hole in his forehead explained the latter. Under

another skeleton the soft sand was caked into a solid lump, where the blood had flowed from the fatal wound. A group of bodies in the open plain marked the site of a last stand; and the bones of two jackals near by suggested the scene of savage feasting and quarrelling which took place under the moon for many nights after the slaughter. The battle was fiercely contested, and under the blazing summer sun it must have been a severe test of endurance to the Egyptian officers and men, most of whom were used to the more temperate climate of the north of Egypt. One portly officer told me that his tongue swelled in his mouth from thirst, and after the battle it was a good six hours before he could swallow more than a few drops of water at a time.

We spent the night at Derr, the capital of Lower Nubia, and early next morning steamed down to the temple of Amada, which stands on the left bank a few miles down stream.

Our next stop was at Korôsko, where the river bank is lined with the ruins of the barracks of the British troops stationed there during the troubled days of the 'eighties. We climbed up a hill behind these ruins, on the summit of which a guard-house is erected, where a view is to be obtained of the valley along which the road to the Sudân leads out. It was along this road that General Gordon made his way to Khartum in 1884. In this valley one may still see the tracks of the carts and gun-carriages of the ill-fated expedition which set out from here under Hicks Pasha and was utterly annihilated in the desert. The tracks pass down the valley and disappear amongst the hills; and even so the expedition disappeared and was swallowed up. Some of the enemy, now good servants of the Government, will tell you how false guides misled the troops, and how they were shot down as they lay exhausted by thirst within a mile of the wells. At the mouth of this valley there is the cemetery, where some forty British officers and men lie buried. The tombstones, badly engraved by the regimental sculptor,

and almost all bearing the one remembered text, " God is Love ", cut in shaky letters, are inclined, as my friend put it, to give one the hump ; and we walked back in silence to the steamer, leaving our fellow-countrymen to the complete stillness of this now deserted corner of the world, where, at all events, they must sleep sound.

From Korôsko we steamed all day down to Kubbân and Dakkeh, some seventy miles above Aswân. We spent the night at the latter place, and upon the following day visited the temples of Gerf Husên and Dendur, halting in the evening at Kalâbsheh, where the largest temple in Lower Nubia stands. This building is now deeply flooded when the reservoir is full, but it has been so thoroughly strengthened that there is no danger of it falling. Then, next morning, we steamed through the pass, under the granite cliffs, and halted at Tafeh, which lies on the west bank. The pent-up river has here inundated many acres of cultivable ground, and for a considerable distance we rowed in a small boat amidst palms and acacias standing in the flood. A little temple erected on what now is an island rises amidst the trees, and is reflected in the still water. There can be no doubt that the making of the reservoir has here converted mediocre scenery into a very paradise of beauty. The shadow of the trees upon the Nile, the sunlight that penetrates through the trees and illumines the grasses and plants below the surface, the granite cliffs that come down to the river and form a dark back-ground to the clear water, combine to form a picture of extraordinary charm. The temperature was over 110 in the shade ; and my companion who was not used to the climatic conditions of the upper country, said wistfully that he expected to have a fit at any moment. We reached the top, however, without accident ; and here the view was sufficiently magnificent to divert all thought from physical discomforts. Below us the Nile made its way through the pass, bordered at the entrance by the vivid green of the trees ; and beside us the picturesque ruins

LOWER NUBIA AND GREAT RESERVOIR 181

of a Roman pavilion made the scene work on the imagination as it did on the senses. "In this very pavilion," said I, "Juvenal may have sat to admire this self-same prospect; for one of the garrisons under his command was to be found here." The thought set my friend quoting from the *Satires*; and, as the perspiration ran like tears down his cheek, he had the hardihood to recite those lines from the *Fifteenth Satire*: "That nature gave the noble man a feeling heart she proves herself by giving him tears." After that we could but return to the steamer.

The temples of Kertassi and Dabôd were passed during the day, and at about sunset we moored against the walls of the temple of Philae, our journey at an end and the railway station of Shallal in sight. The temples rose from the water which flooded them, for the most part, to a depth of some ten feet or so; and from the deck of the steamer we could step on to the roof of the Western Colonnade and could look down into the green depths from which the columns rose. As the day was hot, it was impossible to resist the inclination to bathe in this sacred area. We had had our swim each day, of course, but here there was the prospect of a bathe which should recall the fairy dreams of our youth and set us in mind of the forgotten tales of the palaces of the sea.

We dived into the water at a point where the roof of the colonnade was in ruins and the flood lay silently beneath us, lapping around the long rows of columns a few feet below their capitals; and, coming to the surface in a shower of bubbles, we headed northwards, swimming along the covered colonnade, all the gods of Egypt sculptured upon the wall on our left, and on our right the columns between which the opposite colonnade was seen, separated from us by a canal-like stretch of open water. These two colonnades flank the great approach to the pylons of the Temple of Isis; and when, therefore, we had reached their northern end, we turned to our right out of the shadows and swam towards the great doorway in the

full radiance of the setting sun. Here I recollected that there stood a high granite pedestal from which the statue of a seated lion had fallen ; and feeling our way carefully through the water, we found this submerged pedestal and came to rest upon it. Deep below us lay the overthrown lion, and down to it we were constrained to descend, rising again with the blurred impression of a face that smiled hideously through a green veil.

We then swam onwards, and, turning on our backs, floated silently through the great doorway, the spread-winged vultures carved above us and the Pharaoh offering to the gods on either side. Thus we passed into the forecourt of the Temple of Isis, and were completely shut in by the towering buildings. The water here was so silent and unruffled, the reflections of the columns and walls were so clear, that the place seemed to have been hidden to the world for centuries ; and we had the feeling that we were exploring for the first time the mysterious sanctuaries of unknown gods. We seemed to be intruders into some secret palace of the Nile, and we knew not what fairy adventure was before us. Here was the silent green stretch of the water, in which our two heads moved about like floating gourds ; here were Hathor, and Isis, and many another goddess, furtively peeping at us from just below the surface, so that to satisfy ourselves we must needs sink under the flood and peer at them thus ; here were dark doorways leading to holy places wherein our voices echoed as though someone were calling us ; and here, too, were graceful columns whose elaborate capitals shimmered in the ripples which we made.

On our left was the temple known as the Birth House, where the celebrations took place in commemoration of the birth of Horus amidst the reeds and swamps of the Delta. Into this temple we floated, turned upon our backs once more, passing from hall to hall. The seven Hathors beat their tambourines to us in the sculptures upon the walls as though to encourage us to enter the mystery of the sanctuary ; and Taurt, the hippopotamus

goddess, imprisoned for ever in stone, looked down upon us with envy as we moved so contentedly in her own element. The sanctuary was almost dark, and there was a cavernous silence in it that was not a little aweing. In the dim light we did obeisance to the figure of the hawk Horus, who stood in a clump of sculptured reeds, just above the surface of the flood ; and, diving once more, we laid sudden hands on that fair Isis who sat nursing her baby so tightly there under the waters. The light of the sunset glowed in our eyes as we swam out of these dark halls and turned again into the forecourt of Isis, making our way towards the main temple. The drab-coloured sandstone of the ruins became golden against the deep tone of the sky ; and the water spreading around us was made more green and mysterious by the contrast.

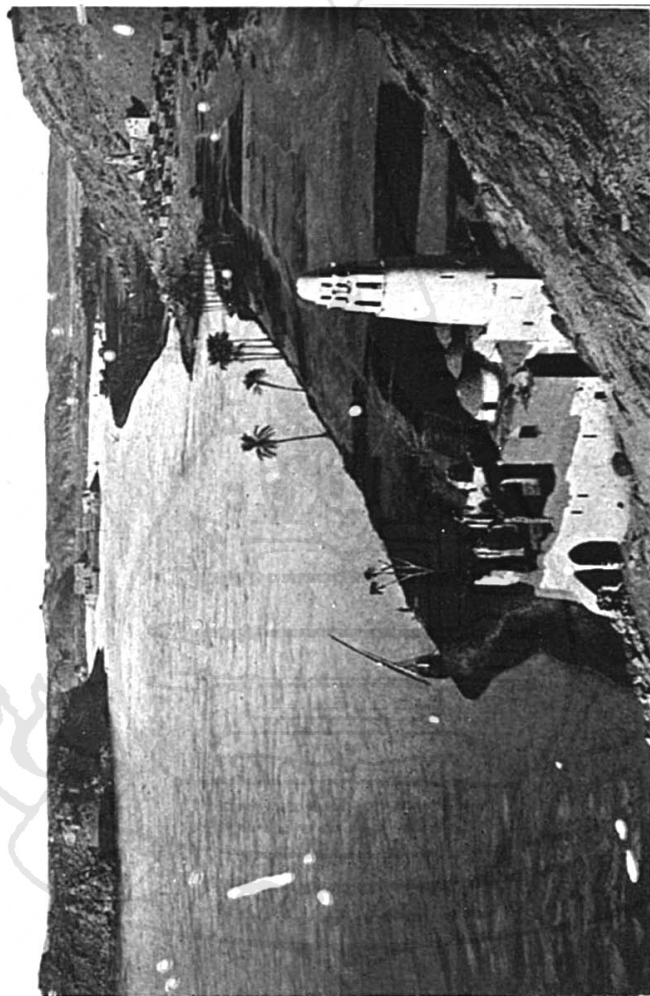
Looking down we could see the dim outlines of ruined walls traversing the paved court, and broad stairs descending into the darkness. Water-plants swayed beneath us, tangled themselves about the limbs of the submerged gods, and sinuously crept over the royal decrees of the Pharaohs. Beneath the water in this forecourt stands the great granite inscription which relates how the Pharaoh Ptolemy VII had given all the country from Philae southwards to the island of Derâr, near Dakkeh, to the great Isis to be her possession for ever ; and as we dived to look at the drowned face of the goddess the fear of her wrath was not altogether absent. The territory between these very points had been submerged and given over to Nilus ; and even here in her sanctuary the water-gods whispered, and only the spirits of the river ascended the steps of her altars.

The main temple, being built on a higher level, has no more than a foot of water in its halls, and through this we waded over to the stairway which ascends to the roof. A scramble over the top of the building ensued, and from its heights we looked down upon the whole panorama of the temples reflected in the lake of the reservoir like the palaces of a dream. Eastwards rose that famous,

kiosk sometimes called "Pharaoh's Bed", and somewhat nearer stood the little shrine of Hathor. South-westwards the huge pylons reared themselves against the sunset; and northwards the top of the Roman gateway made a solitary point on the face of the flood.

Seized with another impulse, we ran down the steps once more, splashed through the halls of Isis, and slid into the water down the broad stairway of the forecourt. Bearing off to our left, we swam down a corridor, through a dark chamber, and so out into an open avenue leading between ruined walls to the temple of Hathor. Along this we struck out, the rows of gods gliding by us, and presently entered the temple, which caught much of the last light of the day. Hathor being the Egyptian Aphrodite, the walls of her shrine are covered with festive scenes. Half submerged in the water, we could see in the open court a figure standing beside some rushes, playing a double pipe, other figures making music upon the harp, an ape playing the guitar, the Pharaoh offering festal coronets, flowers, and wine to the goddess of joy, and the little dancing god Bes leaping about and beating a tambourine. The water was not silent here, for the evening breeze ruffled the surface and sent the ripples whispering into the sanctuary; and in answer to the mood of the place we splashed through it, laughed at little Bes, and sat whistling a tune upon a fallen column. Then, as the early stars came out, we dived through a small side-door, submerged almost to the lintel, and, thus leaving the temple, swam across open water towards the kiosk.

Looking beneath us as we went, we could sometimes discern the buildings below, and could catch glimpses of strange shapes as we glided over the altars of forsaken shrines and struck the bubbles down into the faces of gods and Pharaohs. The half-seen ruins in the depths of the water took hold of the imagination and suggested much to the mind that would have been scorned in other circumstances. What spirits of the Nile dwelt in these sunken



The Nile at Philae, looking North
The island of Philae is seen in the middle of the picture. When the dam at Aswan is closed the water rises here, flooding Philae and the deserted villages in the foreground

chambers?—what cities of the river were approached through these dusky halls? If only one could have breath to dive down through that dark doorway below the water, down the wide stairs, and along the passage . . . ! The reflections of the gathering stars suggested that there were little lamps to light the way below; and presently, no doubt, we should swim into the illumination of fairy palaces, and come suddenly upon the enchanted maidens of the deep. They would take hold of us with their cool hands, glide over us with their soft limbs, and entangle us with their hair. The summons of their eyes would lead us onwards till their cold lips touched ours; and thus down to fantastic depths they would beguile us, through chambers of silver lit by a thousand stars, to halls of gold illumined by many a sun. Their hands would hold our hands, feel the muscles of our arms, and touch our faces; and ever they would lead us onwards, till of a sudden we should stand blinded at the doorway of that shining cavern wherein the old god Khnum dispensed the floods of the Nile and ordered their going.

The darkening water was replete with suggestions of this kind as we swam through it towards the kiosk. If only we could find the right doorway amidst all these ruins below us; if only the ghostly shadows of the water-plants, the pale forms of submerged altars, should be lit for a moment by the passing of some luminous spirit, so that we might dive below and follow . . . ! But as the fancy thus drifted we had crossed the open space and had entered the shadow of the great kiosk, whose columns towered above our heads against the last-left light of the sky, and were reflected with the stars in the water beneath us. Seated here on a sunken wall, my companion asked me whether I had called to mind Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind* as we swam from the temple; and therewith he repeated those haunting lines which tell of one who

Saw in sleep old palaces and towers . . .
 All overgrown with azure moss and flowers
 So sweet, the sense faints picturing them.

And as we swam back to the steamer at length, through the gate of Philadelphus and down the colonnade, I felt that the whole experience had given us a new point of view in regard to the reservoir. One did not look forward only to the six months of each year when the water sinks and Philae is left once more high and dry : the portion of the year when it is inundated also makes it appeal. Philae clean and bare, as it must have been in ancient days, was good to look upon ; Philae overgrown with trees and grasses, as it was before the dam was built, was picturesque ; but Philae floating in the water, as it now does for half the year, has that indefinable charm of unreality which is the very essence of beauty.

