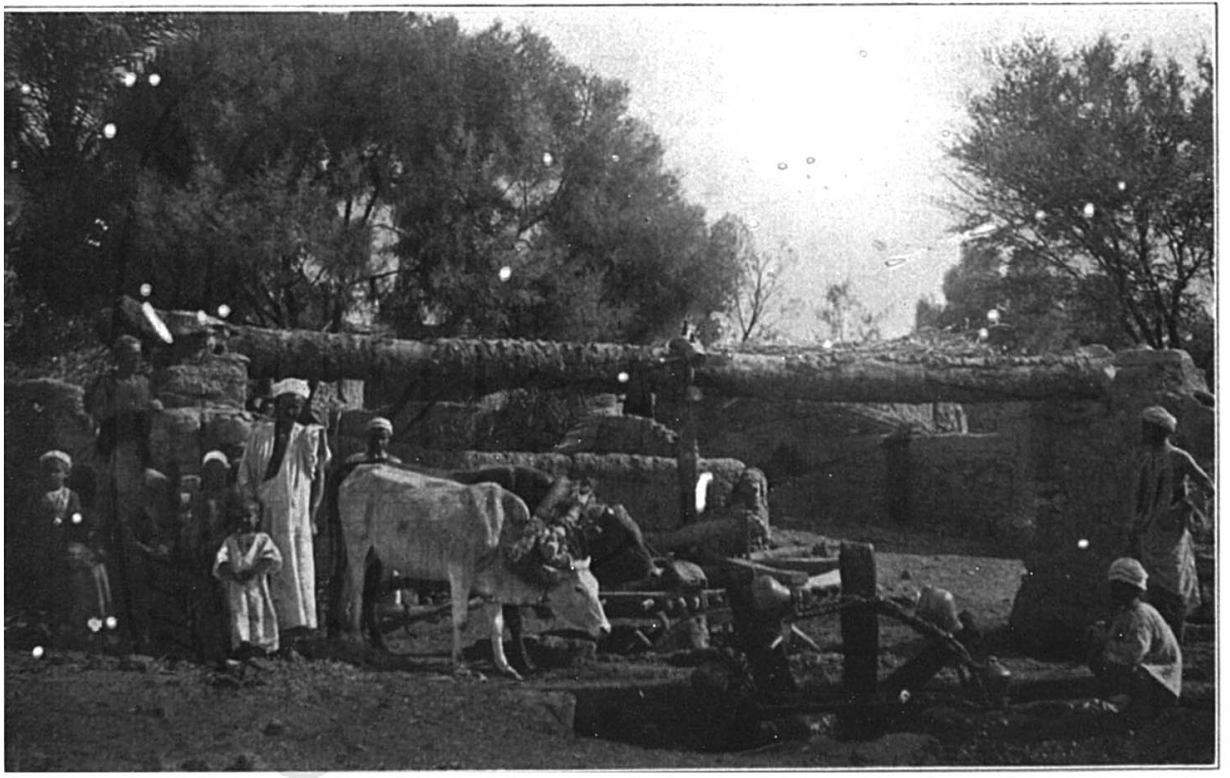
CHAPTER XIV

THE CHILDREN OF EGYPT

"Now remember," said a sun-burnt British sergeant to a new arrival in Egypt, "in dealing with these 'ere natives—severity always; justice when possible." The British officer or civilian, however, is seldom inclined to be severe with the native villagers, soldiers, and workmen with whom he comes into contact; for, after a short residence on the banks of the Nile, it becomes clear to him that he has to deal with a pack of good-natured youths who merit severe treatment not more frequently than do our English schoolboys, and who, like them, are most amenable to a line of conduct which is kindly, consistent, and strongly maintained.

The Egyptian peasant seems to have failed to grow up. It is as though he were a relic of the days when the world was young, preserved to this present age together with the Sphinx and the Pyramids. The mind of the lower-class Egyptian has not expanded since the time of the Pharaohs, and when one looks at the modern inhabitants of the country one sees in them the people of five thousand years ago, the tenants of the world's youth. Thus it comes about that the British official in Egypt has to teach as well as take up his share of the burden of government. He has to act as tutor to a most engaging, though sometimes provoking, rabble of children.

How can you be severe with a native who sends you a beautiful letter, written in purple ink, upon pink paper, addressed to "Sir Excellency Mister Chief Inspector"; and beginning, "Honoured Enormity"; or how can you apply the booted toe to the petitioner who commences his appeal with the words, "Sire, prithee goggle not at my



Modern Egyptian peasants beside a water-wheel

beseech"? I have from time to time collected some of these letters received from natives, and in reading them over it is impossible to overcome the feeling that one has inadvertently slipped through a rent in the veil of Time and become a denizen of the land of childhood. To make my meaning clear, I will here quote some of these documents; and the reader will thus understand how difficult it is to regard the writers as responsible men of our sober twentieth century.

Little children, before they are taught their manners, are wont to tell tales against one another to their mothers or nurses; and the English official in Egypt is continuously besieged by complaints of this kind, most of which are quite unable to be substantiated. Here, for example, is a typical specimen:

"Mohammed Aly, the watchman of the Rest-house, states that while he was watching his spot the Head Watchman came and asked him to go and buy two pigeons. Having the watchman went, the Head Watchman entered the house and began to drink kind of intoxications. On his return found him drinking. He annoyed and became too angry. He said it was not right. Thereupon they quarrelled and he insulted him with his foot. This watchman prays you to peep through this matter."

A native who had had words with one of our employees attempted to revenge himself by writing to me to accuse his enemy of taking bribes.

"I have the honour to inform your kindness," says the letter, "that Ahmed Hassan the Chief Porter under your noble direction is taking bibes (*sic*) like hens, eggs, veg., and some other things, and he takes also one pound from every porter. So I beg from your kindness to examine him in this manufacture and to accept my request and highly obliged."

Revenge is also the motive of another complaint, reading as follows:

"I lay this matter before you, as I know you are very fond to know all what your men do. The Inspector at . . . became so proud of himself thinking he was the only chief one there who can do as he likes. He is always willing to mischief the poor in order that he can do what he likes. Also he is a gallant and tries to lead the good women a fast life. That is because he is not willing to be watched by the faithful men of occupation. He is always interfering with some other man's affairs, and he is hard trying to gather money so much for himself."

Here is another effort :

" Sir, with heart full of deep sympathy and eyes full of hot tears, I am Ahmed Hassan who was dismissed last week, have the honour to inform you :—I am a poor man have crowded children and a wife without state cannot find any way by which I live, that is case deserving kindness upon justice. What shall I do ? Kindly I beg you sir for the sake of by God to remain me in my job."

A request for employment was worded in the following confident manner :

" Petitioner, Mohammed Ahmed, your slave, begs to state that he has served the Government in Cairo twenty years, and thanks God his has done his duties most energetically. Born in a tropical country and having spent thirty years in Egypt my body has become damp and now I am very anxious to return to my own place. As you have done me so many kindnesses in the past I shall be obliged if you will recommend me for employment there, as I am poor and am well convinced that the most beloved thing to you is my welfare."

The correct address on the envelope often puzzles the native greatly. Lord Cromer once received a letter addressed simply to " The Lord, Cairo ". Sir Eldon Gorst was on one occasion addressed as " His Majesty Gorst ". Lord Edward Cecil was once the recipient of a letter addressed to " Sessel the Substitute ", he being then an Under-Secretary of State, an office which is called in Arabic " El Wakil "—i.e. " Deputy ".

The native stable-boy in charge of our hospital for sick animals desired a rise in his wages, and wrote me the following petition :

" We respectfully beg to lay before your kind notice. I am Abdullah Ahmed of the animals. I beg to acquainted your Excellency I had been appointed to that place according to your noble order. I beg to inform you Sir from the time in which I worked I got a great tired because I feed buffaloes, camels, she goats, cows, he horses, asses, all these animals with out sickness neither wounds. Although I say to the police officer increase my wages he say No, fool. I beg you to increase my wages and I implore God to grant you a happy life."

The above letters have been written either by the professional scribes who are generally to be found seated outside the government offices in any provincial town, or by friends of the petitioners who had learnt to

write while employed as dragomans or servants in European households. Sometimes, too, a minor clerk in a Government office will not be above writing such a letter in return for a basket of vegetables, let us say, or a couple of pigeons. Such people pride themselves on their knowledge of English, and often display a keen desire to converse or correspond with one another in our language however slight their acquaintance with its intricacies may be.

An example of the ludicrous results of this affectation is shown upon a sheet of paper which I have before me. At the head of the paper is my Egyptian secretary's note to a certain station-master, reading, "Kindly reserve three sleeping baths (berths) on the train to-night." The station-master sent the note on to the *wagon-lit* inspector with the words, "Please make the needful and write and obliged." The inspector forwarded the note to the superintendent with the endorsement, "Please command"; and that official returned it after adding the words, "Yours truly, are reserved." The station-master then received the note and forwarded it to my secretary, with the message: "Dear. You find your require and oblige"; and my secretary sent it on to me with the final endorsement: "Sir, the baths are ready."

There is another class of correspondence of which a few specimens lie before me. These are letters, petitions, and reports of minor native officials, who, although belonging to the lower classes by birth, have received a good education and speak English with some fluency. Writers of this class generally use language which is somewhat Biblical in character, as will be seen in the following petition:

"Sir, one, only one Kind word from you will go a great way off and do a great deal of good, therefore, I write these lines in the hope of getting that good word. I have already been tried in the furnace. Poverty, mortification, and disappointment have done their work upon me, and my soul and body are now sufficiently sick. Will you therefore, have compassion upon me and approve my reinstatement in the office from which I was dismissed as a last chance?"

Here are two short letters of a different type. The first was written by a sporting Egyptian employed in my department, whose pony I had ridden with enjoyment on two occasions. It reads:

"As I believe you will be pleased to hear that my horse whom you have loved has gained the first prize in the first course of our Sporting Club races yesterday, therefore I have written these words to you for pleasure."

The second letter was left at my house on Christmas Day by another employee, and reads:

"With the greatest pleasure and most gaiety I have come to say Happy Christmas to you."

Both these are typical specimens of a naïve and childlike, but quite charming, class of letter which an English official in Egypt constantly receives.

The following official note was received by me from an Egyptian of a somewhat nervous temperament:

"The Inspector of . . . begs to inform you that he is quite sure that the robbers will be found in their hiding. When he received your word saying that you would attack them at this midnight his hand shivered with gladness and his heart was full of joy. He will be at the place of meeting with the horses at the time you say, but owing to his mother is about to die he hopes you will not need him to accompany you."

I must now be permitted to relate a few anecdotes concerning the children of Egypt, which will further display that quality of youthful simplicity which is usually so very engaging, and which leads more often to an internal convulsion than to an outburst of wrath.

A curious fact in regard to the Egyptian peasant is that, in a manner of the little child, he seldom knows his own age. A lad with a budding moustache will tell you in all seriousness that he is forty, and a wizened old man will, with many gestures indicating his uncertainty, declare himself to be "perhaps about thirty." A true story is told of an old native who was taken before the magistrate on a charge of stealing six buns from a pastrycook's shop. Asked what his age was, he replied that he thought he was about 112. The magistrate turned to the clerk and

inquired whether any previous offence was recorded against the prisoner. The clerk replied that there seemed to be nothing against him—at any rate not for the last hundred years. The magistrate then addressed the old man once more, and asked him whether he had no grandchildren or other descendants with whom he could live and who could keep him out of mischief. "Oh," replied the prisoner, "I am well enough looked after, thank you. I live with mother."

A somewhat similar tale comes from the upper reaches of the Nile. In the Sudân there are always a large number of camp followers who do odd jobs for the troops stationed in outlying places, and these men receive daily rations from the War Office, the amount varying according to the age of the individual. A short time ago a grey-haired native sergeant of many years' service asked his commanding officer whether the rations of one of these hangers-on might be increased from those of a boy to those of an adult. "Why?" asked the officer. "Is the man more than eighteen years old?" "Oh yes, I think he *must* be," said the sergeant, after some hesitation. "He is my father."

The Egyptian is generally inclined to be very literal in the interpretation of his instructions, and several amusing anecdotes are told in this regard. An English official died suddenly at a lonely outpost in the Sudân, and the Egyptian officer on whom the charge of affairs had devolved wired acquainting the authorities with the sad news. Very wisely the Englishman at headquarters, who had heard stories of persons being buried alive, telegraphed back saying: "Make certain that he is really dead before burial." The reply of the Egyptian official was received a few hours later. It reads: "Have made certain with revolver."

Another story is told of an Egyptian clerk at a railway station in the far south who was much disinclined to act on any occasion without precise instructions. One day the officer at the depot received a telegram from him

which read: "Station-master is being devoured by lion on platform. Please wire instructions." On another occasion this same clerk telegraphed down the line to the nearest English official the following startling message. "Station attacked by lions, tigers, bears, and wolves." The Englishman replied: "Your message ridiculous. Wire precisely what you mean." To this the clerk, after some hesitation, humbly answered, "Delete tigers and bears."

When the great dam at Aswân was being built, the Egyptian government gave notice to all Nile boatmen that the river would be closed to traffic at this point for the period of one year. In spite of ample warning, however, several vessels arrived from Lower Nubia after the date fixed for the closing of the waterway, and were therefore held up on the south side of the works. After waiting a month or two one of the skippers came to the engineer in charge and asked him how long he would have to wait before he could continue his journey down stream, as he was somewhat in a hurry.

"Well," said the official, "I expect you will have to stay where you are for about ten months more."

"Thank you, sir," the boatman answered, quite unmoved. "Would you be so kind as to lend me a bit of rope? I suppose I shall have to tie up."

There are times when the simplicity of the Egyptian becomes annoying. Indeed there are occasions when these irresponsible ways lead to terrible crimes, for which the hangman's rope is none too severe a punishment. A tragic story of this kind was told me a year or two ago in Upper Egypt. Three young peasants wished to play a practical joke on an unpopular villager, who was for the moment believed to be absent from home; and they decided that the most amusing plan would be to enter his house and make hay with his goods and chattels. They therefore went at dead of night to the place, and made an examination to ascertain the easiest manner of forcing an entrance. In the back wall they discovered that several

bricks were loose, and by removing these a hole was made of a size sufficient to permit of a child crawling through. With many suppressed giggles they returned to their own dwelling place and secured the services of a little girl about nine years old who was related to one of their number. They then hurried back to their victim's house, and telling the girl that she must open one of the doors or windows from the inside, they pushed her through the hole. Now it so happened that the unpopular gentleman had returned from his travels and was asleep within the front chamber; and very soon the little girl appeared at the hole in the wall, calling to her companions to pull her back again as quickly as possible. At that moment the owner of the house awoke, and, hearing the noise, rushed into the back room. There he saw in the semi-darkness the figure of the girl struggling to escape through the hole, and promptly he seized her by the legs and began to pull. The practical jokers on the other side of the wall, realising what was happening, grabbed the girl's head and also began to pull.

"Allah!" said one of them. "He'll drag her in and recognise who she is, and then he'll have us up for burglary."

"Pull!" gasped another; "he'll get her!"

"You'll pull her head off if you're not careful," said the third.

"O well, she's only a girl," answered his companion. They now each had a hand upon the unfortunate child's head and throat, and with a mighty tug they pulled her through the hole. They then picked up the limp body and raced back to their own home.

"Well, well," panted one, as they sat once more in safety, "that was a narrow squeak!"

"Poor little girl!" said the second. "She was a comely lass!"

"Ah me!" sighed the third. "But we'll give her a good funeral to-morrow."

Their alternate laughter and tears presently attracted

the attention of other members of the family, and soon their crime was out.

During an epidemic of cholera some years ago orders were sent to the native authorities in the villages to "isolate" any cases of the illness which might be detected. An English official, happening to visit one of these villages a short time after this order had been issued, asked the head man whether any cases of cholera had occurred among his people.

"Only one," replied the old Egyptian—"a girl. We 'isolated' her."

"Good!" said the Englishman. "How did you do it?"

The native smiled and drew his finger across his throat. "With a knife," he said.

The Egyptian's idea of justice is peculiar; and although the better class native judges are usually excellent exponents of the law, instances are often to be noticed of an absurdly childish reasoning. A short time ago two natives were had up before the courts on the charge of having carried firearms without licenses. In passing sentence the native judge fined one of the offenders one hundred piastres and the other fifty piastres. An English official asked the Judge why he had not given the same punishment to both men.

"Well, you see," said the Egyptian, "one of the guns was longer than the other."

So much has been written in regard to native superstitions that little need here be said upon the subject. I cannot refrain, however, from recording one story dealing with this phase of Egyptian life. A native *effendi*, a man of the educated classes, found himself in trouble one morning at the Zoological Gardens at Cairo owing to the fact that he had been observed by one of the keepers to climb the railings surrounding the giraffes' compound and to open and shut an umbrella several times, apparently for the purpose of frightening one of the animals. When he was closely questioned as to his

actions he stated that he had wished to shade the giraffe's neck from the sun, in order that he might have the pleasure of watching the creature shrink to the size of a mouse, a phenomenon which he had been told would be observed if a shadow were cast upon that part of its anatomy at noon.

Another native, who had been watching a chimpanzee with awful interest for some time, asked the keeper what manner of diet was provided for animals of that kind. The keeper having told him, the visitor smiled, and, taking his arm, drew him aside. "Now that nobody can hear what we are saying," he whispered, "tell me truly: do you not feed them on the flesh of criminals who die in the city prisons?" As a deterrent to crime it might have been as well had the keeper admitted that such was the case.

Egyptians will believe stories of the wildest kind, which in Europe only a child would accept. For example, when the Aswân Dam was built, many natives declared that the English had only undertaken the work in order to convey the water of the Nile in pipes to England for the benefit of the British farmer. Many of the peasants believe that England is inhabited solely by men who spend one half of the year in digging through perpetual ice and snow for the gold which lies below, and the other half of the year in spending the proceeds in Egypt, which is obviously the hub of the universe.

This credulity is so general that the native peasant, believing the English official to be similarly minded, often invents, and even acts out, the most absurd story by which to conceal the actual facts of a case. It recently happened that two brothers were followed home one night through the streets of their village by a watchman who regarded them as suspicious characters. Entering their house and shutting the door, the two men observed through the crack that the watchman took up his stand outside. One therefore suggested to the other that they should get him into trouble by accusing him of some unjustified act of violence against themselves; and it

was finally agreed that the elder brother should shoot the younger in the leg, and that they should then declare that the officious watchman was the aggressor. The family gun was procured, the younger brother held out his leg, and the elder fired at him. Unfortunately, however, he was not a good shot, and the wretched victim, receiving the whole charge in his stomach, promptly died. The watchman was at once accused of the crime, and was sent to prison on a charge of manslaughter. He also had a brother; and this man, thirsting for revenge, went to the enemy's house, and there shot himself in the leg, declaring to the people who rushed in that he had been the victim of a murderous assault. His story, however, was not believed, and at length the whole tale came out.

A year or two ago some natives who were harvesting in their fields sent one of their women down to the river for water. As she was returning with the water-jar upon her head, a boy of about fifteen years of age belonging to another family asked her to let him drink from the jar. This she refused to do, there was a quarrel, and the woman received a knife-wound from which she died. The boy's family at once handed him over to the relatives of the victim, and made no attempt to shield him from the consequences of his act. The aggrieved party, however, were by no means satisfied. "This is all very well," they said, "but you have killed one of our finest women, and you offer us a miserable little boy as the murderer. That will not do at all." They therefore accused the headman of the offending family, and concocted their story so well that he was found guilty and sent to penal servitude.

In conclusion I must relate one more story in order to illustrate the peculiar manner in which tragedy and comedy go hand in hand amongst the children of Egypt. A well-known robber was arrested at a small station in the Sudân during the time when martial law was still in force; and he was promptly sentenced to death. The

solitary English officer in charge of the post refrained from attending the execution, the arrangements for which were left to the discretion of his Egyptian colleagues. A gibbet was erected, and about nine o'clock on the next morning the condemned man was driven up to it in a mule-cart. The rope was passed round his neck, the mule was whipped up, and the cart passed from under the feet of the victim, who was left swinging in mid-air. The officer, however, had forgotten to tie the man's hands; and he promptly swarmed up the rope to the cross-beam, there seating himself comfortably in the piping hot sunshine, while the troops stood gaping around him, the officer mopping his forehead in an ecstasy of heat and vexation. Nobody knew what to do. They could not shoot the man, for their orders were to hang him; and, on the barren sandy ground, no stones could be found to throw at him in order to dislodge him. The Egyptian officer therefore entered into friendly conversation with him, begging him to come down and be hanged like a man, instead of sitting up there swinging his legs like a monkey. This the robber totally refused to do, and he declared that nothing short of a free pardon would induce him to descend. The officer therefore endeavoured to appeal to the man's better feelings, "Look here," he said, "it is all very nice for you, sitting up there in the breeze, but down here it is dreadfully hot; and, you know, none of us have yet had our breakfasts, and we are feeling extraordinarily faint and uncomfortable. Please do come down and be hanged properly, or I, for my part, will most certainly be sick."

The robber, however, refused to move; and at last the English officer was sent for, who, acting in accordance with an unwritten law, pardoned him there and then, thereby enlisting the faithful services of a scout who has since done very valuable work.