

Cairo

THE MOTHER OF THE WORLD

Herbert L. Smith

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TO GLENDA

Listener, editor, encourager, enabler.

Contents

Ramblings.....	1
The Impossible City.....	15
Religion.....	32
Streets, Sidewalks, and Stairs.....	39
Places.....	55
Schools.....	74
Eternal Cairo.....	87
Physiognomy.....	108
Endings.....	119

Ramblings

I WENT TO CAIRO IN the mid-1990's and stayed for either three years or a lifetime. I can't be sure. In many ways I have never left, for Cairene life and thought have influenced my life and thought so completely that I am between two worlds; one world is my western roots and framework, the other the new and invasive world of Cairo that is jarringly different, intriguing, and inviting. I was and am captivated by Cairo, and am not at all sorry about it.

Cairo is a kaleidoscope of light and color. From the air, as I arrived for the first time, the city looked wearily drab and very much like the desert it sits on, but Cairo is no desert. Instead, a thriving, throbbing, turbulent city of tremendous contrasts and contradictions awaits on the shores of the Nile. Called "The Mother Of The World" by her citizenry, Cairo works, plays, lives, and plans the future as she recalls a former glory that is still vigorously present.

The ancient city of Memphis left a tiny remnant that is now contained in a small modern building just south of Cairo. A colossal statue of Ramses II, a beautiful alabaster sphinx, and a few smaller artifacts are all that remain. Some of the Pharaohs who once ruled there were buried in the pyramids at Giza, but almost everything except the pyramids themselves has disappeared over time, including the

mummified remains of the Pharaohs. A later city, Fustat, founded in the seventh century, was located in the place where Cairo sits today. It is that city that became Al Quhira, the Victorious City, and the Mother of the World.

Today's Cairo is, in a word, indescribable, and no rhetoric will ever say it all, just as the city cannot truly contain itself. It is too large for containment, perhaps not in a physical sense, but the city seems to exceed in its own excess and has to be experienced for a while in order to be understood. There is too much of everything: poverty, traffic, noise, pollution, heat, sun and people. It is difficult to find a quiet spot for a much needed respite. Despite this, Cairo is completely engaging. From the first moment I walked into the scene, I was beguiled by the swirl of color and activity that surrounded everything I saw, and I quickly learned to love it that way. Cairo has a way of forcing everyone to enter wholly into the activity of the city and to experience as much of it as possible whenever one is among her people and involved in their life.

I went to Cairo to work, to be a mentor for Egyptian teachers who taught English in the Experimental Language Schools. There were several of these schools, and there were seven American teachers who inaugurated the mentor program.

Although I didn't teach any classes of my own, I spent most of my time in secondary school classrooms (they are never called "high schools") with Egyptian teachers, talking with their classes and teaching certain parts of the daily lessons. I also answered a great number of questions about the U.S., many about its most popular export to the Egyptian people—the girls especially—a soap opera, *"The Bold And The Beautiful,"* that taught them that life in the U.S. was about beautiful people and places, and parties every night. While they feigned dislike for much of the soap, they were hooked, and that was obvious.

I had no experience with soap operas, and could not give any satisfaction about that kind of thing, but tried to tell the students that life in the U.S. for their counterparts was about staying home a lot in the

evening and doing homework, watching TV, or talking to friends on the phone. Or all of those things. They would hardly believe me, but for an unusual reason; they couldn't imagine what it would be like to be able to connect to friends by phone so easily. In Egypt the phone service is poor at best, and often has so much static on the line that it is hard to hear, and even more often the phone simply doesn't work.

The most frequent question, however, was asked with anticipation: "What do secondary school students in the U.S. think about Egypt?" I told them that American students learned about the pyramids and other ancient monuments and some were very interested, but that most were concerned about their own lives in the U.S. and didn't think much about other places.

The next question was almost always the follow-up; "But what do they think about Cairo today?"

After trying to answer that diplomatically a few times, I decided to give them the truth. "They don't think about Cairo at all, because they know absolutely nothing about it." There was silence, then someone would say, "But we think about America every day." Of course they do. They see it glitzy displayed on TV.

I had responded to an ad in a newspaper about working in Egypt, which was how I finally got there. I did not know anything about modern Egypt myself, and did some research before I went, but that was not adequate. I found many surprises, and that was probably for the best, because the surprises were the things that caught my attention and made me appreciate what was really there. Clearly, it was the unexpected that made me love Cairo.

The ancient monuments, Pharonic times, and the deep history of the place is the great attraction to which the world responds, the reason for the tourist industry and all its associated parts in Egypt. The Nile Valley, filled with treasures beyond our imaginations, is an amazing place, and I have many favorite sites: Karnak Temples and the Valley of the Kings, the obelisk quarry at Aswan, Sakarra and the Giza plateau—especially the Sphinx—the Cairo Museum, and the Roman

aqueduct that runs through the city toward the Khan al Khalili—these are the greatly magnificent remnants of other worlds in other times, but my real love goes primarily to some of the lesser places that tourists don't often find, and are not written about in guidebooks.

I once found a very old building in downtown Cairo when I went to a tailor shop on its upper floor. The building was old, by my standards anyway, probably somewhere between 250 and 300 years. Much of its interior had fallen to ruin. The stair case, a graceful, beautiful curving thing that led gently toward the top, was so worn that the stone steps had grooves where more than two centuries of feet had climbed, and the banisters and balustrades, missing some sections altogether, were of wood with no varnish remaining but were not splintered or rough. All the hands that had gripped them had worn them smooth.

The building was mostly empty and derelict. The tailor shop that remained on the top floor had been there for such a long time that no one knew for sure when it had been established. The proprietor had worked there for several decades, and he was only one in a line of tailors who had worked in that space. Once inside the door, the place was rather tidy, and there was glass in all the windows, electricity, and a small kitchen with a gas ring where tea was prepared many times every day. The floors were carpeted with one old carpet atop another, and there was even a vacuum cleaner, called a *hoover* in Arabic. A side hallway around the corner from the tailor shop entrance was partly closed off by a great pile of bird guano, and the broken windows throughout the building invited the wind as well as all the kinds of birds who made their home inside.

Most empty buildings in Cairo were filled with squatters. The peasants, called *felahin*, who came into the city for a better life, occupied every space that could be considered habitable, and some that did not seem to be, but they didn't live in *that* building. Maybe the flocks of birds kept them out, but the building was quiet, by Cairo standards, inside. Only the top floor and the stairs had any sign of activity. There were two or three areas that were used for businesses on

the top, and customers regularly walked up and down the beautiful staircase. On the main floor, along the sidewalk, the empty windows sagged and some of the brickwork had fallen in heaps here and there. If I hadn't known that the tailor shop was there I would have never thought to look.

I found many old buildings in Cairo that occupied my attention on walks and set my imagination working. I saw wonderful houses that were at least five hundred years old. Modern plumbing pipes and electric wiring filled holes that were drilled through the thick stone, but, in most ways, the houses remained as they had been since they were built. Some had been "quarried" from the outer casings of the great pyramids, the large stones brought into the city and used for public buildings and houses in the time before records were kept. Most had originally been single family homes, but they filled up as families grew, and are now home to generations of grandparents and uncles and cousins. The same houses tend to be occupied by descendants of the people who built them, so there is a very strong connection with the past in those places.

There are mosques that are a thousand years old. Two of them are near The Citadel, and I walked through them one day with a Muslim friend. They are difficult to describe, their beauty so enhanced by their age that they seem poetic, solemnly grand, and a bit whimsical at the same time. The patterns in the mosaics and the carved stone are not recognizable because Muslims do not copy any living thing in their art, but the entire effect is of being in a leafy place with bowers and water and sky.

The Hussein Mosque, located near the Khan al Khalili, is old but refurbished. I walked through it with my friend Nadi, carrying shoes and talking, at times loudly, all the way. A mosque is not usually a hushed place. The walls were plain, and the floor covered with the most beautiful carpet I have seen. It was a deep red, with gold patterns around the sides and across the floor so that the immense place was divided visually, and the areas defined and more habitable. Mosques

are sacred places, but the men who are there feel at home within their walls. They are places for living and thinking and reading as well as praying.

On that day we saw some groups of men sitting and talking, some reading, some keeping solitude, and even a group of mysticians in a far corner carrying on a dance that Nadi said would go on for hours; moving, turning, swaying, and jumping to the sound of their own voices keeping time, continuing in a trance for the duration. I wanted to see how the dance ended but we left because we couldn't stay for the hours it would take to come to a conclusion.

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Many people in the Middle East have little concept of maintenance. They do not repaint or repair their houses easily, and if something goes wrong with equipment they tend to wait until they can replace it, or find some way to get something else to use. Cars are a noted exception, but they hardly keep up their cars the way we do in the U. S. They are not obsessed with them, anyway.

I heard at times about someone getting a "new" house. I learned that they meant that those people were repainting, repairing, and re-furnishing the space that they already lived in, and so it would be renewed. In that sense, their house was a "new" once every twenty or thirty years.

I had some interesting experiences with Egyptian attempts at maintenance at my house, a very large just-built flat on the fifteenth floor of a twenty story residential building.

Very soon after I moved in, I got up one morning to get ready for school and there was no water. I knew that there were three different water pumps on my side of the building, and that my kitchen and both bathrooms (I lived in luxury by Egyptian standards) were all on different pumps. There was no water in any of the pipes, so I called the owner of the flat to ask what I could do about the situation. She was not happy. She told me that if I was not satisfied we could tear up

the lease agreement and she would find another tenant. After a short discussion, I could see that I was over-reacting, so I apologized for calling her so early and went into the kitchen for the bottles of water I used for drinking, emptied most of them into the bathtub, and was able to get myself off to school in time.

The water pumps, I learned later, were turned off in the entire building because one had burned out, and the maintenance people, not knowing what to do, had turned them all off so that the system would not be overworked. This reasoning did not make sense to me because the pumps were all separate, but I know that it made perfect sense to the maintenance men.

One other event is even more telling. There are two elevators in the building, one that stops on odd numbered floors, and one for the even numbered. They are side by side on the ground floor, and if mine was in use I could always get into the other and ride up to the sixteenth floor and walk down. Problems came when the electricity was off—which happened almost every day for about an hour—and the elevators didn't work at all. In order to go out I had to walk down all the fifteen floors, (and often up as well) and that was not easy because the lights were off, too. The stairwell was very dark until I got close enough to the bottom to see by the light coming through the entrance.

One day I noticed a sign in the elevator saying that it would be painted the following day. The next morning I went into the passage and pushed the button. The lights in the stairway were on, but the elevator didn't respond. Then I remembered the notice and went down one flight to get the elevator on the next, even numbered floor. There was no response.

In disbelief I walked down to the ground floor and looked at the elevators. Painters were working. They were painting *both* elevators at the same time, and everybody had to walk up as well as down for two days because the paint took more than twenty four hours to dry.

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An aspect of Cairene life that concerns many people is the carpet industry. It is said that children are enslaved in the carpet factories and used for long hours to make carpets. Many people have decided to boycott the carpet industry for that reason. One evening at about nine, I visited a carpet shop and saw a number of children there, not obviously working, but playing among the carpets that a few men were sewing. The workshop was open until about midnight, as was usual for such businesses in Egypt. They made entirely hand-made carpets there, and I didn't see a loom in the entire place. They all seemed to be stitched together in some way.

The carpets hung from cables that were fastened to tracks in the ceiling, and the children ran between the carpets, flapping the corners as they played a game of tag. They were noisy and squealing, but when one of the men called, two children came up and took the bottom of the carpet to pull it flatter so he could stitch a pattern into the very bottom edge. Other children stopped at times to place a few stitches into the very lowest part of the carpets themselves.

In my opinion, these children were not enslaved, although some in other factories may be, but were carefree and happy as they jostled in and out among the hanging carpets. I suspect that most factories use child labor in much the same way. Egyptians seem to understand that children need frolic and fun in order to do a good job at the tasks they are given.

I have often noticed the number of toy stores in Cairo. Every other block seems to have a store stuffed with stuffed animals, games, tri-cycles, balls; everything you can imagine would be available there. These toys are, of course, for families who can afford such luxuries for their children, but there must be lots of families who buy them, and there must be lots of happy children in Cairo, playing with the toys, enjoying the advantages of a middle class childhood. I noticed customers coming and going in the shops I passed, buying presents for

birthdays, special holidays, and even Christmas gifts. Some Muslims celebrate Christmas in an indirect way.

One Saturday morning in early January I went to a big hotel near my house for coffee and was surprised to see a long line of kiddies along with their mothers, waiting in the hallway outside a large ballroom. I looked through the open door and was even more surprised to find a huge throne-chair with Santa Claus resplendent upon it, a child in his lap.

I looked back at the line. The young mothers there were mostly Muslim because they wore carefully arranged headscarves, which Christian women do not wear, and they had brought their children to see Santa and to pose for a picture or two with him.

I asked a friend about this and he told me that Muslims don't celebrate Christmas exactly, but they do believe that Jesus was a prophet, and so the day to honor his birthday is popular with young families who have children. It's a good excuse to give presents.

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Although sometimes difficult to see, there is a daily schedule of life in Egypt—a rhythm. As in any very hot country, Egyptians take advantage of the night hours, when the sun is gone and the air is a bit cooler, to do much of their work. Businesses open in the morning at about nine, and close for the afternoon at one or two. They will reopen at six or six thirty, and business goes on until perhaps ten or later. The evening is the favorite time for families to go out visiting each other, and they tend to stay up very late.

Sleep is in two shifts; in the afternoon after a substantial meal has been eaten, and in the night between one or two a.m. until seven or eight, when they get up to do their daytime work. The total sleep time per day is usually eight hours or a little more, and being divided into two parts provides rest when they begin to get tired. I learned to use this sleep pattern and prefer it to the western world's sleeping only at night.

Many times I have received a phone call at about midnight from a friend wanting to drop by while he was in the neighborhood. I always said yes, even if, western fashion, I was already in bed.

Schools are a different matter for time scheduling. Classes begin at eight thirty, or are at least scheduled for that time, and end at about one thirty so that students can go home to eat and sleep. Many students, and teachers as well, come late and leave early every day. In the western world where we are taught that time discipline is important, we cannot accept this apparently irresponsible behavior. In the Egyptian world it is normal for everyone to be tolerant toward these kinds of things, but intolerant when it comes to western acceptance of many other behaviors, especially those dealing with male and female relationships.

There is, however, some sort of hidden line that no one should cross, even if some things are tolerated. A student who comes to school too late will usually find the gate locked, and no one admitted or allowed out until the gate is unlocked by a servant. A teacher who misses too many days or always arrives too late will be shunned by some of the other faculty members in order to learn the lessons of acceptable behavior in these matters. Those kinds of nuances are almost impossible to be learned or understood by anyone who comes into the situation as a foreign visitor, which I always was, no matter how much time we spent working together. I was not permanent, as we all knew.

I was told that school started at eight a.m. for the faculty and that classes began at eight thirty, and for the first few days I was there at or before eight. No one else came until about nine, not even the principal of the school or the head of the department, and no students were yet to be seen. I was alone with the servants who were still sweeping and preparing for the day. After a few days I started going to work at about eight forty five, fearing that any day everyone else would be there and I would be considered late, but that never happened. Eight a. m. was just a suggestion for a starting time. About nine was the reality.

In most matters, Egyptians are causal about time. A little late is not a bad thing, and few are upset if meetings or business lasts longer than usual. Work can be done at a different pace than in other parts of the world, and life is generally a take-it-as-it-comes proposition. One day at the school I was looking out the window at a neighboring university building that was being renewed. I had seen workers coming and going, but now I saw a lot of men congregated on the top floor, directly over the wall from where I stood. They had a large, heavy looking sledge hammer, and the men lined up, I would guess ten or twelve of them, and one by one they swung the hammer onto the floor. They were breaking the concrete. That method seemed a great solution for work that could become very tiring if only two or three were taking turns, but with the large group they could take a mighty swing and rest quite awhile before taking another. That is the Egyptian way. Do the work, but plan an efficient way to do it that is less tiring than working alone.

Egyptian farmers who still work the fields do so on tiny patches of land that most Americans would find totally inadequate. Yet they raise crops, alternating with tomatoes and beans, or perhaps carrots and a different vining crop, or sweet potatoes, a staple of Egyptian "snack" diet. The soil stays in good condition, largely because it is fed by underground water that comes from the Nile and is rich in nutrients. The farmers also provide for families. If the family is large they might work two or three patches of land, and they are able to live, although meagerly, on the proceeds they get when their produce is sold in Cairo.

They tend to sell the produce themselves, hauling it to the street markets by donkey cart, arriving early in the morning and staying until late if they haven't sold everything. Sometimes, other entrepreneurs buy the sweet potatoes, bake them in small ovens brought along in donkey carts, and sell them on the street. The carts are a common sight around schools, where the students buy the hot, sweet snack on their way home. The smoky odor is very alluring and I have been

tempted to buy one, but the warning, “Don’t ever eat street food!” that came from other westerners living in Cairo, prevented me.

I didn’t eat street food, but I still developed a serious illness that is more or less endemic in Egypt—hepatitis. It was the A type, and although I wasn’t sick very long, it did, in a manner of speaking, take a lot out of me. I stayed home a few days, but probably went back too soon because at the time I didn’t know what the illness was. I thought I just had a stomach upset and didn’t eat for awhile because nothing agreed with me. Later I discovered, on the advice of a friend whose husband and children had all suffered through the disease, exactly what the symptoms were, and went to a doctor to confirm what I thought. By that time the infectious state was past. Then I learned that I wasn’t the only person at my school who had hepatitis. Three other teachers were diagnosed at about the same time. I think the sickness may have been caused by some less than sanitary conditions with the tea and coffee glasses at school which were rather like communal cups. The tea and coffee were very hot, often too hot to handle. (I learned to pick the glasses up by holding the bottom edge and the upper rim carefully.) I had believed that the heat would kill any germs, but that was not the case. Anyway, very few people live in Egypt for any length of time without getting sick from *something*, and my something was hepatitis A.

Learning how to live in Cairo was always interesting. Sometimes it was a challenge to anticipate what might happen as a result of an action I might—or might not—take. One challenge was paying my electric bill. The bill itself was rather small, usually less than ten dollars every month, about thirty five Egyptian Pounds. There were three flats on the fifteenth floor; mine, on the north side, was the largest, and the other two were on the southeast and southwest. The man who came to collect the electric bills (there is no postal delivery system in Cairo) asked me to collect from my two neighbors for him, but I refused, having been warned about such schemes. I would end up pay-

ing for all the flats on the fifteenth floor because the neighbors would refuse to pay me. No receipts were ever issued.

A few days after I told him that I wouldn't collect from my neighbors, I came home to find my house dark. The electricity had been turned off. I tried to think like an Egyptian, and managed to succeed that one time. In the hall, just beside my door, were two boxes that held the fuses for my flat. These fuses were huge, about three inches wide, with a large screw-in base. I looked in the boxes and they were both empty. I remembered that the flat below mine was currently unoccupied, so went downstairs, opened the fuse boxes and removed the fuses. I put them into my boxes, the electricity came on, and I never had another problem with the electric man.

Another notable incident was the result of my visit to Jerusalem. Although the border was open between the two countries, Egyptians did not trust the Israelis. Many of my friends took serious exception to my plan to go to Israel one year during the semester break. I decided to go by bus because I wanted to see the land, to ferry across the Suez canal, and especially to see North Sinai. Israel had returned it to Egypt following a short war, which the Egyptians claimed as a victory.

I made the mistake, however, of making arrangements by telephone from my flat. I called the hotel in Jerusalem from my own phone. My telephone service had been upgraded by the owner of the flat because she knew that I wanted to call the U.S. often. I got a new, clear line about two months after moving there, and was unusually fortunate to have it. I used the line to call many places in the U.S., but made a serious mistake in placing a call to Jerusalem.

Everything was fine until I returned from the trip. By then my telephone had been returned to the old, noisy line, but with an addition. I had a listener. Whenever I picked up the phone I heard small sounds in the distance, and often there were voices as well. I wondered if my line had gotten crossed with another, but when I talked to

the owner of the flat she told me that I must be the object of government surveillance—a phone tap.

I called and talked to friends, always with the listener. I tried to call the U.S. but the static was so bad I couldn't hear. I had to do something, so I talked to the listener. For several days I would pick up the phone and speak directly to whoever was listening. I spoke harshly at first, but finally decided that friendliness might get more results, so I started chatting and asking about how he was (no women would ever be allowed to do that kind of work) and one day when he coughed I asked him, quite sympathetically, if he was sick. Simple things like that befuddled the listener, and sometimes when I spoke with friendliness and interest, he would answer me. Once we even had a brief conversation. It was both fun and infuriating, but didn't accomplish my purpose.

A friend went to the heart of the problem. He went to the telephone company office, not far from the school where I worked, and complained that he couldn't reach me when he tried to call. Then other friends began to do the same thing, and on some days three or four people went to complain. Finally, the owner of the flat went in to complain. In less than a week I had my good line restored and lost the listener.

In Arab countries, as in most places in the world, it's the squeaky wheel that gets the grease.