

“Fantasy Cruise of the Nile”

(from: ***Two Weeks in Eternal Egypt***)

by Norman Weeks

In school I was taught that, of all the world’s great rivers, the Nile is the longest, while the Amazon carries in its flow the greatest volume of water. I recently read that, despite my old geography lesson, satellite data has revealed that the Amazon is, in fact, some few miles longer than the Nile. If the eye-in-the-sky sees truly, the Amazon now holds the double superlative. However, I have my doubts, because, whereas the Nile, so linear, is easily traceable, the Amazon drains a wide sprawl of watershed, making its point of origin difficult to determine. Where falls the raindrop the farthest distance from the mouth of the Amazon?

Whatever the geographical fact, the Nile, along with the Amazon and the Ganges, retains its global appeal to human imagination.

The Nile. Imagine, imagine...

On our Aswan *felucca* sail, I heard the captain announce, in broken but intelligible English, that he provided not only cross-river shuttle service, but was also willing to rent out his *felucca* for a many days’ downriver cruise of the Nile. We would sail away into spontaneous adventure, living on the *felucca*, eating and drinking and going with the flow. At night, we would sleep upon the deck, our eyes taking in the stars over the desert as the last sight before our minds drifted off into dreams.

My groupmates ignored the captain’s offer, but I listened to it most attentively.

When the *felucca* put in back at Aswan and my groupmates had disembarked, handing their *baksheesh* (tip) to the captain and turning their backs on him, I lingered behind, until I was alone with the captain.

He extended his hand tentatively for the *baksheesh*, but then he perceived that I wanted more communication with him.

Instead of putting something into his hand, I took the sleeve of his robe and pulled him toward me. I made him understand that I wanted to charter his *felucca* for the many days’ sail down the Nile, that I wanted to live on the *felucca* with him and experience the Nile as he himself experienced it. I told him that I wanted to leave that very afternoon, if possible. Could he provision us on such short order?

Yes, he told me. He could send his boy to purchase all the provisions we needed and then call me to come from the M.S. *Prestige* as soon as all was ready.

I asked him how much he would want to undertake such a trip, then, after his answer, I offered him a substantial amount over that.

Everything agreed and arranged, I returned to the ship, which was still moored at the landing, waiting to depart, perhaps never departing.

I went into the bar, where I saw my groupmates seated about, looking bored and frustrated. I sat alone in a booth, ordered a beer, and waited in expectancy.

In an hour or so, a crew member informed me that a boy from a *felucca* was calling for me in the reception area. I rose immediately, returned to my cabin to take up a few items of clothing for the expedition, and, without telling anyone, slipped off the ship with the boy.

We walked down the shoreline to the waiting *felucca*. The captain greeted me heartily, opened a wooden box to show me the provisions he had obtained, took my hand and brought me aboard. The boy quickly went to work on the riggings.

I put on my pith helmet against the Egyptian afternoon sun and sat down in the *felucca*, my heart beating both at the naughtiness of my irresponsible secret escape from the group and in anticipation of the adventure ahead.

A few directions called out from the captain to the boy, and the *felucca* was off the shore and drifting. The sail flapped, then filled with the breeze. The captain took the tiller and directed us out into the fullness of the flow of the Nile.

We passed the many cruise ships lined up along the shore, as if mired there. I knew that inside those ships were hundreds and hundreds of tourists going nowhere, sitting and drinking and sighing. I lay low in the *felucca*, so that none of them would spot me through a porthole and envy the special privilege I was receiving, or, worse, from back on the *Prestige*, try to stop me.

It was not long before Aswan was left behind and we sailed into the Nile of the time before the foreigners intruded.

The Nile riviera is an agricultural one, its inhabitants peasants whose principal contacts are with the vegetation and animal life of the river valley. I saw the peasants bent over in the nurturance of the burgeoning green between

their bare feet; or trotting along on their little donkeys; or working the *shaduf*, the leather basket mounted on a pole with counterweights, the simple device by which they lift the water of the Nile onto the land to nourish their crops.

We passed many stretches of uncultivated shoreline too, dense reed-filled marshes, where, of a sudden, a huge bulbous mass would erupt from the water, followed by a smaller mound splashing behind. A hippopotamus mother with baby, startled by the sight of us, fleeing and trampling the papyrus, then, arriving in deeper water, snorting, submerging, and disappearing with a double spout through the nostrils. There was a billow and undulation on the surface where the mother hippopotamus went down, but the baby just vanished.

I was surprised to see the great beasts, but the captain merely smiled at my wide-eyed naiveté; this was the normal Nile to him.

Another time, I leaned over the side to gather water into my cupped hands to throw upon my face to cool me. And there, a few feet from my face, staring up at me, were yellow reptilian eyes! A Nile crocodile, paddling alongside, as if one of us aboard might stumble on the deck, fall into the water, and so feed him this night. I recoiled from the monster and backed away to the center of the *felucca*.

Again, the captain smiled at me. He muttered a few words of reassurance. It didn't seem that he was speaking Arabic; it sounded like some other language, and yet I understood, if not the words, the intent, the reassurance.

The sun approaching the western horizon of hills, the captain pointed to the provisions and to the prospect of dinner. I looked into the box, where I saw some bread of dark color and crude form and some fruit—dates, figs, and apricots. That seemed like a meager meal to me. But the captain gave me a baited hand line and pointed over the side.

I lowered the line into the water and in but a few seconds a silvery fish was in my hand, then into the clay pot that was lying by. It took about fifteen minutes for me to catch enough fish to feed the three of us. I think the boy envied me; I'll bet that fishing is his favorite onboard activity. The captain looked pleased that his client was willing to share in the work of subsistence.

The captain landed the *felucca* on a shore, started a tiny fire with some dry grasses, and, with great economy of scarce fuel, grilled the fish. The three of us sat on the shore, ate the fish and bread and fruit. For drink, we passed around a clay pot filled with water the captain had drawn from the Nile.

As soon as I finished eating, I felt tired from the excitements and exertions of our first day. The captain and the boy too seemed ready for sleep, so the three of us got back on the *felucca*, selected a section of deck, and, making do with

some scraps of sail as covers, lay down to sleep. I must have looked up at the first stars of the night for a few brief seconds before I drifted off to sleep. ...

We rose with the sun's arrival at the ridge of the eastern hills. A brief washing, some dates and bread for breakfast, and we were off again.

At midmorning, the captain turned the *felucca* toward a mud-and-wattle shack set back from the shoreline. He indicated that we were going calling.

As we approached, some peasants emerged from their dwelling, shouted greetings, and called their fellows to the welcome celebration.

As the captain got off the *felucca*, he was kissed and embraced like everybody's favorite uncle. He introduced me to the assembly. The family, one after another, approached and touched me.

We were led into the house, which was almost devoid of furniture or furnishings. These were very poor people, these *fellaheen*, the peasants of the Nile. And yet there was a rich and happy familial glow in their shelter.

We all sat down on reed mats on the earthen floor. The woman of the house brought in shallow clay bowls, handed one to each of us, then brought in a clay jug, from which she poured out some brew. It tasted like beer, but a crude, somewhat sweet, beer it was. Still, I liked it well enough, and, as we sat in jovial companionship, I felt that I was one of them, although not a single word that anyone said could I decipher.

The woman served us some meager food, a bowl of some kind of porridge, which we all ate heartily. Then—perhaps the effects of the beer on a hot day—, we all drifted off to a corner of the house or outside in its shade for a nap. The *felucca* boy propped himself in the corner and nodded off.

A few hours later, all of us aroused, we thanked our hosts profusely. I reached into my pocket for some *baksheesh* I might give them, but, strangely, I found my pockets completely empty. How had I set off on this tour without any money? Yet, our hosts did not look as if they expected, or wanted, payment. They embraced us and sent us on our way with blessings. I regretted not having anything to give them. How could I ever repay their hospitality?

That afternoon, the winds failed us, but, as we were headed downstream, the captain merely sat at the tiller, keeping us pointed straight ahead. We still had the flow beneath us to carry us along. Yet, the current too had become sluggish.

The afternoon took on an aura of dreamy monotony. The three of us languished on the deck, whether the boat drifting by the scenery or the scenery drifting by the boat, I could not tell. It was as if we were suspended motionless in the eternal milieu of Egypt.

The sun proceeded across the sky at its accustomed speed, completing its immemorial circuit. ...

The next morning the captain began to recite: "Kom Ombo, Edfu, Esna, Karnak, Dendera, Abydos, Akhetaton." He repeated the words and pointed downstream, waving his arm toward an ever farther and farther distance. "Kom Ombo, Edfu, Esna, Karnak, Dendera, Abydos, Akhetaton." Then I understood that those were the names of the places ahead of us on our itinerary.

Some hours later, his eyes straining ahead, the captain shifted the tiller and directed us toward the shore. The boy leapt up in excitement.

The breeze seemed to pick up a bit, carrying us more swiftly toward the shore. High on a bluff overlooking the river, I caught a distant glimpse of a temple.

The captain drove the bow into the bank, finding a narrow slot among a fleet of beached rivercraft, the most primitive craft I have ever seen, most of them made out of twisted reeds, some half waterlogged, all brightly adorned with colorful banners.

Ahead of us, toward the temple, we heard a great hubbub. What was going on?

The captain led me ashore and up a slight hill toward the temple. I stared at the temple in wonder, for not only was it in a perfect state of preservation, it seemed virtually brand-new in the brilliance of its painted columns and sharp-cut hieroglyphs.

More astounding was the mass of people milling outside the temple, hundreds and hundreds, poor people in rags, chanting some song of joy, of utter exultation!

From within the temple enclosure, I heard a male chorus and exotic instruments, tambourines and rattles and cymbals, being struck in an otherworldly clatter and clangor.

I made a move forward toward the temple, but the captain restrained me. No, he made me to understand, I could not go in. Only certain people were allowed within the temple precinct. The rest of us would have to remain outside.

The captain and his boy joined in on the chant of the multitude.

I looked around me. It is usually the tourist who is the center of local attention in Egypt, everybody trying to sell some trinket or render some menial service to extract a *baksheesh*; yet, not a soul paid the slightest attention to me. Instead, they all chanted and raised their arms in prayer.

I found myself swept up in their devotions. I too raised my arms to the gods of Egypt and chanted something unintelligible to myself but in perfect harmony with those around me.

At last, dispersing along with the rest of the crowd of pilgrims, returning to our *felucca*, we cast off and continued downstream.

For the rest of that day and on the next, we spoke little, so under the spell of our experience at the temple the three of us were. And I continued to let myself be carried along. ...

The next morning, as we rounded a bend in the river, we caught sight of some looming sails. There, approaching us, to my bewilderment, was a great fleet of immense sailing ships, out of proportion to any other craft we had encountered on our trip, and gleaming with gold, brilliant with color. On the decks I saw numbers of men, arrayed in formation, the points of their spears glinting in the sun.

The great fleet, propelled by scores of rowers, proceeded upriver straight ahead through the middle of the channel, as the captain and the boy scrambled to get our *felucca* out of the way of the procession.

On the last boat of the fleet, I saw at the stern a raised platform, and seated thereon was a fine bronzed figure of a man, bare chested except for a breastplate, a high crown upon his head, a crook in one hand, a flail in the other, posed as if a statue. He was surrounded by kneeling attendants.

I looked at the captain quizzically, but he was too busy trying to swing the *felucca* around to pay attention to me.

“What?...What?...What?” I kept repeating, staring at the fleet in stupefaction.

As the fleet drew very close, and as we had just gotten out of its way, the captain pointed to that last boat in the procession, whispered hoarsely, “Pharaoh!”, and threw himself prostrate upon the deck of the *felucca*. So did the boy.

Along the shoreline, the *fellaheen* likewise cast their faces and the palms of their hands into the muddy earth of Egypt. I had an impulse to prostrate myself; but all I could do was sit and stare.

The great fleet sailed swiftly past us, none of its passengers taking the least notice of our *felucca*, nor, I might be grateful, of my laggard disrespect of the great personage.

Our *felucca* carried down with the current, the fleet proceeding swiftly upriver, we soon fell out of sight of one another, a bend of the Nile intervening.

The captain and the boy regained their feet, returned to the tiller and riggings, retook control of the *felucca*, and straightened our downstream course.

I wanted to ask the captain about the apparition we had seen, about what it was that had just happened to us, but the captain went about his nautical business as if nothing untoward had happened.

And so, we sailed along, day after day,—I soon lost count of the days. With each moment and experience, I absorbed the atmosphere of the Nile, of Egypt itself.

Although few words passed between my guide and me, I felt a kinship with him, a kinship without language or nationality or citizenship or century. I was *in* Egypt, at last. ...

Then, one morning, I spotted a shiny white cruise ship steaming toward us from behind. It was the first evidence of twentieth-century technology we had seen since leaving Aswan. The churning of its engines, then a whiff of diesel fuel I caught in the breeze dispelled the spell into which I had fallen.

The captain took no notice of the cruise ship bearing down on us, but I felt a panic of anxiety. I became ever more agitated as the ship drew nearer and nearer.

I read its name on the hull: M.S. *Prestige*. It soon caught up to us and drew alongside.

I looked up, and there on the open deck of its stern I saw Paul, our group leader. He had a bottle of *Stella* beer in his hand and was leaning over the railing, gazing down at me from that great height.

“There you are!” Paul exclaimed. “You should have told us where you were going. Every time I counted the group, I always came up one short. It took me quite a while to figure out that *you* were the one who was missing.”

Jan came alongside Paul and said to me sweetly, “And what about *me*? I missed you. Please come back now.”

And so, taking up the few belongings I had with me, I embraced the captain and the boy, bade them farewell, and clambered back aboard the M.S. *Prestige*.

The other twenty-one members of our Kaotica group gathered around me in the reception area, demanded to know what I had been up to.

And the reception clerk gave me a disdainful look, letting me know that I did not meet the standards of cleanliness and grooming expected aboard a five-star ship. Jan led me to our room and directed me into the shower. ...