

Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie

Letters from the Desert

*The Correspondence
of Flinders and Hilda Petrie*

edited by
Margaret Drower

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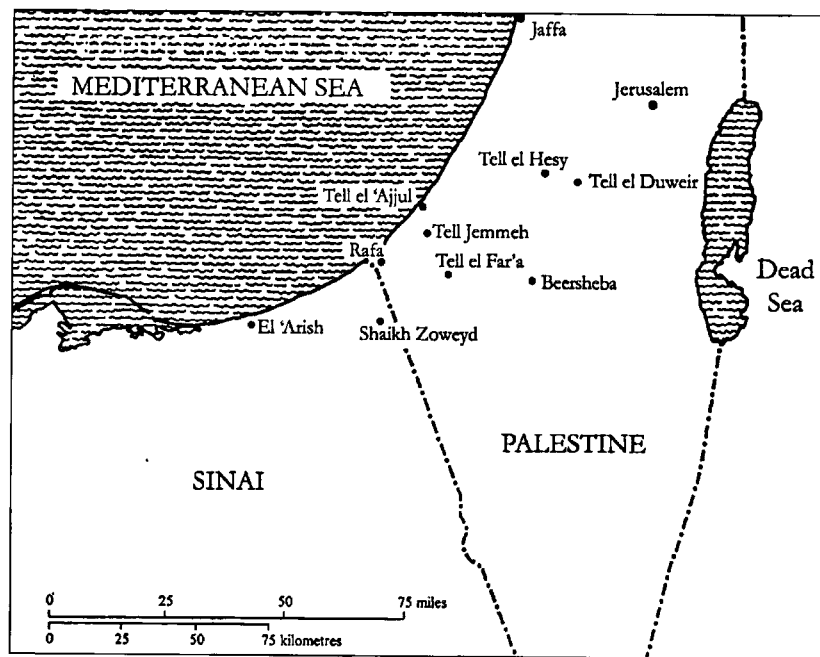
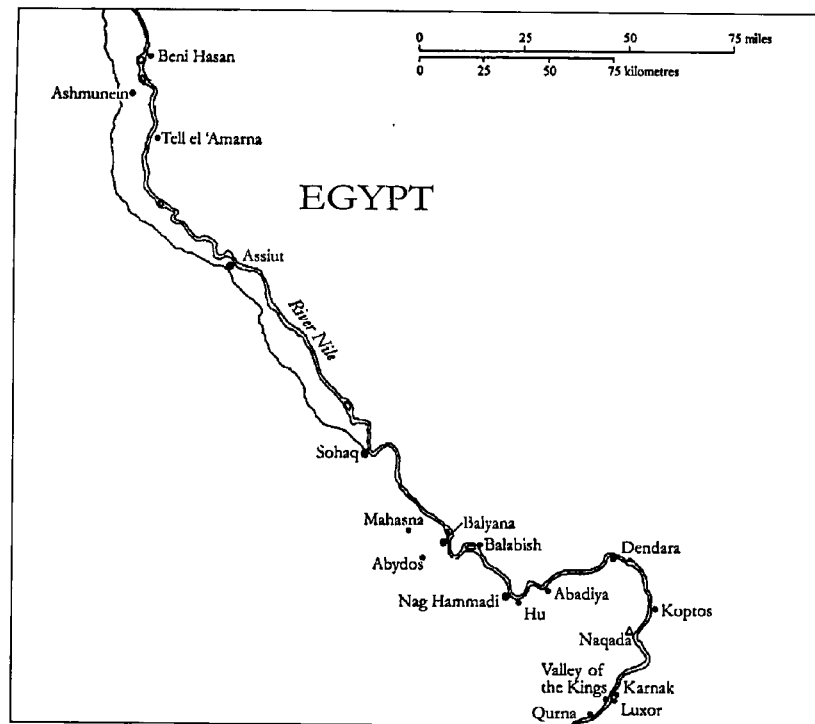
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A Digger's Life

In 1884 Flinders Petrie began digging at the ancient city of Tanis (San el Hagar, Biblical Zoan), the most northerly city in the eastern Delta. The article that he wrote whilst working at Tanis provides a good insight into what life was like on one of his digs; how he chose a suitable site, selected his workers, found or constructed a place to live and of the logistics and practicalities of dig life. From reading this extract it is difficult to believe that, although this was not his first experience of Egypt, it was his very first dig.

From The English Illustrated Magazine 1885-6, p. 440ff.

In digging for history the results are ever varying, no two sites are alike, no two days yield similar objects, no two discoveries are the same. Every day there is a new light on the past, a new clue to the work, unlooked for interests turn up, and in no matter is it truer that it is the unexpected that happens.

... The other day the question was put "But how do you begin on an ancient city? Do you dig into the side or the top?" My reply was "First find your city." Having found your city, find your labourers and then whether you begin at the side or at the top, or anywhere else, is no matter, provided you begin with some definite clue to what there may be, and with some clear purpose in view for each step of the work.

The first business then is to get scent of a lucky site, or as many of such as can be found, either by cross-questioning native dealers in antiquities, or by miscellaneous travelling, map in hand. By a good site I mean one in which there is a fair presumption of finding something that will rewrite whole pages of history for us, or alter all our ancient atlases; a place from which we may perhaps take a fresh departure in our history of art, and learn more of the literature or work of some age than was ever suspected before. Our site may perhaps be a low dusty mound in the midst of luxurious corn- and bean-fields, or steep hills of ruins in the salt wilderness, with marshes all around, or a slight swell in the billows of desert island, with houses and tombs and images half rising out of it.

Wherever we may settle the first business is to get quarters to live in, and to gain the confidence of the people. There are no cheerful notices of

'Apartments to Let', there are no hotel touts to greet you; if you are in a rocky place you may be tolerably certain to get an ancient tomb-chamber or quarry excavated in some cliff-face, and no better lodgings are to be had anywhere for solidity and equable temperature; the minor advantages may be a question of taste, such as the gratis supply of ancient bones or mummy-cloth in the dust and sand of your floor. But if no such accommodation can be had you may perhaps find a room or two in some bearable Europeanised accommodation (Arab huts are unbearable) or else live in a tent, or build a house out of mud and stones and ancient sculpture and Roman bricks and anything else that can be had. Each of these dwellings has its advantages, but the tomb is the best. There will be all sorts of strange tales floating about, as to your object and your personality. You may be put down as the forerunner of a whole regiment of soldiers that are supposed to be coming, or a government surveyor for the land-tax; your money may be said to be all false, someone will swear that you are a Greek if you speak Arabic at all rapidly, and everyone will be on the lookout – the sheikh of the village to the smallest child – to find out what can be got out of you. The sooner therefore you show your hand, and declare your intentions, the better; and if you can get a dozen people to work within a week you have made a good beginning.

Trenches, pits and holes of all shapes and sizes have now to be made, with only one uniform rule – wherever you begin, go to the bottom. A house at Zoan¹ took a man a week to clear it out, and just at the last in a corner of the cellar he found a rough red pot with a stone on top of it. In the pot were necklaces of silver and precious stones, and a ring of gold. Another house at Zoan that had blazed in the pillage of a civil war was cleared, and after dozens of tons of earth had been carried out and but little was found in it, there were some flakes of tinder, and we were upon baskets full of burnt manuscripts, priceless treasures, the religious and literary remains, the accounts and calendar and memoranda of an old Romano-Egyptian lawyer, whose own statue was found a little lower down, in the bottom of the cellar. Of the successive temples of Apollo at Naucratis only trifling chips were left from the plunderings of stone-seekers, but going to the bottom of the ground the old rubbish pit of the temple was found with pieces of hundreds of bowls and vases dedicated to the great god of the Milesians – pieces so old that they were buried out of sight long before the Father of History trod the streets of that city.

The regular way of digging in Egypt – whether it be for the foundation of a Cairene house, for making a canal, or for finding antiquities – is for a man to chop up the ground with a sort of adze, next to scrape the broken-up earth into a plaited palm-leaf bucket with the blade of an adze, and then deliver it to

¹ i.e. Tanis.

a small boy to carry away on his head or back. Hence all the excavators are grouped in independent units, each consisting of a man and his boys; there may be only one boy if the earth is left close to where it was dug, or there may be four or five boys or girls to one man, if it is to be carried to any great distance. A great part of the art of excavating consists in grouping these children properly; if anything of intrinsic value is likely to be found, then cross the party, by taking a man of one place and children of another, so that they will not agree to conceal things. If many trifling articles are found, put on a sharp boy who has shown his skill by picking up things before; a really bright fellow will bring in a dozen times as much as a dull one in the course of the day. In all cases the children have to be proportioned to the distances and the class of the work; and this is but one branch of what really requires more attention than anything else – the adjustment and arrangement of the work. Glancing at a group of workers it might seem that labour may be economised by some little distribution or order of the work, but on watching them it will be seen that labour may be economised by some little change in the distribution or order of the work, making a man cut away this patch before that, making a fresh path here, or joining some cuttings there, throwing the waste heap a little to one side or the other, changing the children from hole to hole, or a host of other little points. Often a man will neatly contrive such an order of work as looks very fair... but by which he is really doing about two-thirds of his proper allowance. A favourite plan is to cut a hole so deep that the man cannot lift the basket to the boy's head outside the hole, hence each boy waits till the other returns from emptying his basket, in order to be helped up with his own, and thus the man and the boys all do about half their proper work. The cure is to make them cut steps down into the hole, so that each boy can go down and have his basket helped up by the man. Another dodge is a cutting where half a dozen children are engaged is for them all to wait until their baskets are all filled, and then go up together singing, and meanwhile the men stand idle below because there are no baskets; then the children all come down and carry their baskets down with them. Thus they all do half their work, and they are not best pleased when the singing is stopped, each boy or girl is made to go up the moment the basket is filled, and each is ordered to throw down the basket when empty, so that it may be filled ready for them by the time they have got down to the bottom of the hole again. In short it is necessary to try to imagine some more efficient arrangement of labour before ever being satisfied with what you see going on before your eyes; and the density of the mechanical sense in the Arab mind is such that they will blindly continue any arrangement once begun, though it may afterwards be wasting half of their work to continue it; to adapt their plans to the circumstances is not dreamt of in their philosophy.

Having settled a good site, and arranged everything in working order, the usual course of a day is much as follows. In the winter we begin an hour after sunrise, to somewhat avoid the thick fogs and raw reeking-wet air; but in the summer at sunrise, with a longer halt at midday. Turning off my blankets about 5 a.m. and slipping into as much clothing as the country requires, I go out with my own overseers or *reises*; they never belong to the place we work in, but are brought with me from a distance, so that their feelings may go more with me than with the people. Out we march, and pick up many of our ragged regiment along the roadside waiting for us, others are ready in their holes, and the rule is that everyone must be in and ready to begin when I come on the ground. Then name-taking begins, and going round with a wage-book in hand, every worker has the day of the month entered against his name. Generally some of the hundred or hundred and fifty are absent, and the question goes round, "Where is Ali Basha," or Fatmeh um Ibrahim, or Mohammed Dakrori, as the case may be. "Not here today, but here is his brother, only just for one day." Now his brother may be anybody, a man's brethren are as universal as the Mohammedan address "oh, my brother," which is applicable to any of the faithful. If the proper man is an old hand and a good one, his brother is taken, if not objectionable; but if I want to get rid of him, no brother of his will do. I turn to the tail which always follows me — new hands waiting to be taken on. There stand, anxiously watching me, some dozen or two of men, and a host of children, down to little mites who are almost lost beneath the basket they bear. I look at each, each looks at me. Then, pitching on the best of them by his face, I call him out, and he springs down into the work, delighted to get on the books. It is worse than useless to take anyone on recommendation, or in fact to listen at all to any person's opinion of anyone else... the faces of these people are far the best guide; out of hundreds of workers I never had to dismiss but one that I liked when picking him out; and that one was an excellent fellow, barring an assault on a most irritating small boy, for which he had to go.

Having then gone the rounds, directed them all, booked all the names, and started such fresh work as may be needed, after three or four hours I turn back to the house. Then bath and breakfast set me up for the day. A petroleum stove is invaluable... with an oil stove, and a store of biscuits and tinned food, one is independent of the country, and cooking is reduced to manageable proportions; some fresh vegetables, tomatoes, cucumbers, etc. and fruit are all that need to be marketed for, and eggs are to be had from almost any of the villagers. While at breakfast often a maiden or two from the huts below my house would come up with a batch of eggs in a fold of her dress, and stand and chatter and laugh at the door; then perhaps one would put her head in and turn and whisper to another in wonder at the strange

ways and properties of the *khawaga*, or foreigner, which were always a source of amusement. Sometimes they indulged in two visits a day, coming up to ask if I wanted any eggs first, and then coming to bring them; and the smallest joke was cheerfully received. If one of my *reises* came by they would scuttle off at once, for they are accustomed to but scant courtesy from their own people. This however was on the west of the Delta, at Naukratis, near the modern Teh el Barud; the women on that side of the country have far less of the Mohammedan customs, and are never veiled unless they go to the large towns. They are thus unlike the Cairenes, or the people of the eastern side of the Delta, where even the little girls of ten years old are put into face veils. Most wondrously cumbersome their wealth is as thus displayed; one girl who brought up the water to my house at Zoan (about forty miles SW of Port Said), wore three gold coins, nearly thirty large silver coins, and a quantity of chains, beads, etc., all across her face, stitched on to the black veil which reached up to her eyes. The unveiled ladies of the west are quite as much patterns of propriety as their veiled sisters on the east, I believe, but they are happily free from the most oppressive custom. Perhaps we should look to some influence from the days of Greek colonisation there to account for the difference.

Eggs bought, and breakfast done, I go out again to look over all my men, or to work with them in any part where special attention is wanted; and then at noon, or earlier, going to some point from which they can all hear, I sound a blast on a large whistle; from all sides goes up a shout, baskets are tossed up, and away scamper the children to their dinners; some go home, others form groups with the men, and the lettuce and onions and thin dried Arab bread is brought out, and many an invitation I have to join them as I go about. Generally there is some work to do in putting away antiquities in the house, so I go back to attend to that. The noon rest is not very fixed in its beginning, but they are always allowed a definite amount; an hour in winter and three hours in the long hot summer days, when they begin at sunrise and finish at sunset. The whistle sounds again, and everyone is expected to fall in directly and go on with the work. Once at Zoan they became more and more lazy and dilatory, and tried to put off their return as long as they could; this was cured entirely and for ever by going down to them one day when they did not come up at the whistle, and saying that as they had not come it showed they did not want work, and so there would be none that afternoon, except for a few who were already up. I never had a man late again.

The afternoon is spent in watching the men in different parts, and often working with them if necessary. To keep up a proper activity in the work it is needful to hold the dread of dismissal before them continually. If a man is caught standing still he is noted, and after any further laziness is informed

some morning that his services are no longer required. But if he is caught sitting down it is all up with him; he knows he is found out, and works extra hard all the rest of the day, but next morning he is paid off. Naturally they try to show their best side when I am about, and hence some care is required to get at the truth. By examining the ground around the work, lines of approach can generally be found, by which it is possible to come near the men under cover; and when coming up, a quiet look without showing more than the top of your head is advisable. They thus learn that the chances are that you will see them before they see you, and a sudden dismissal of any lazy man, when they imagine they have not been watched has a most healthy effect. They show some ingenuity in keeping up appearances; sometimes the children are set to carry empty baskets to and from while the men do nothing; but even from a distance this may be detected by there not being any little cloud of dust which always rises when emptying a basket; a telescope soon clears up this device, and they suddenly all find themselves dismissed on the spot.

Besides the detective business over one's own men, there were sometimes sharp steeplechases after Arab dealers. They know that their coming to the work is morally indefensible, and they have an indefinite dread of being identified or caught. As however by law nothing whatever could be done to them, the object is not to catch them, but only to act on their feelings so as to make them flee before you. The way is to walk straight at any suspicious character, openly and ostentatiously; he moves off; you follow; he quickens; you quicken; he doubles; you cross to cut him off; then he fairly bolts; and off you go, with perhaps a furlong between, across the fields, jumping canals, doubling, hiding behind bushes, and so forth; if he once gains a village it is useless to look for him in the houses, so the way is to keep him out in the open for as much time as you can spare for the game; two to four miles is a fair run. This exercise is valuable both morally and physically; the rascals are always laughed at by my diggers for running away. ...

Far more serious matters however, have to be attended to personally; if a find is expected at any point the work must be continually watched, and if there is a dunce at the hole he is shifted away, and a picked man put on, with special directions. If papyri are possibly to be found the anxiety is great, and the first little flake of tinder is the sign for stopping the men at once and taking up the work myself. Tinder, I say, because there is no chance in Lower Egypt of buried papyri being preserved from rotting unless they have the good luck to have been carbonised in a conflagration. Then going down into the hole the earth must all be scraped away tenderly with a pocket knife, checking at once if there is the horrible silky rustle of scraping a papyrus; at last the earth is all picked away grain by grain, and there lies a mass of rolls of tinder, here and there burnt to white ash and the difficulty is to undermine

them so as to get them out without their dropping to pieces, for the smallest amount of earth lying on them when they are lifted will break them by its weight. Yet such may be their importance that no labour is too much to give in order to save whatever remains of them. Perhaps a whole lump all matted together can be removed *en bloc*, and carried up to my house for separation of the individual documents; then each wrapped in soft paper, and packed in small tin boxes, they will make the journey to England safely enough. After that the still more tender work begins of peeling leaf from leaf of the crushed rolls, which are generally cracked into separate slips; these slips mounted between sheets of glass then await the attention of some one who can *see* them – for all the writing is merely dull black ink, on no less dull black tinder – and someone who can *read* them. ...

Another sort of work that must be attended to is making plans and surveys; a map is the backbone of a research in any place, and no reasonable labour on it is wasted. It is well to have a rough plan as soon as possible, to guide the work, and to mark down on it any particular sites. But all this takes time, and it is almost impossible to do any continuous work of this kind while the men are on one's hands. Copying long inscriptions is also a tedious affair; but a cheerful tediousness, considering the value of the results. Besides this it is always requisite to keep an eye forward, and to have some piece of work ready planned, to be taken up whenever a man is at liberty. It needs some imagination to invent fresh work continually, which shall have some fair reason for its performance, and some useful connection with what is going on already. All the facts yet known have to be remembered; as far as possible, a sort of scheme of the site must be kept floating in the mind, and crystallising day by day as fresh facts turn up; everything that is likely to be found, from analogy with other places, or historical information, should be imagined as fitting in with the fixed data already found; and as many possible combinations have to be considered as in a four-move chess problem, which *may* have no solution.

When sunset comes near, it is time to go round, to all the workings where things are likely to have been found, and take in the spoils. One man hands up, perhaps, a perfect red jar, and some little scraps of figures, and I book in, say, threepence to Sidahmed Abdun; for owing to the scarcity of small change, and the quantity I should need, all the small payments are worked on paper, and settled when they have accumulated. Then at another hole there will be a small bronze figure and a few nails, and fivepence goes down to Mohammed Dafani. Then a boy brings a handful of scraps: one by one I look them over, and perhaps only a couple are worth having, so Mohammed Hassan Dahabiyeh gets a halfpenny to his name. So the selection goes on until sunset. Then the whistle sounds again, and up spring more than a hundred workers

from the ground, and cover the plain where a minute before scarcely a sign of life was to be seen. The work over, then comes the saturnalia of the day: a shouting, merry crew of men, and girls, and boys all speed homeward as fast as they can. I lead off at a brisk rate, and away we all go together; a man begins to race me in walking, and we spin along at well over five miles an hour until he makes a spring to keep up, and then he is laughed down for running.

On we sweep to the crazy old bridge, everyone tried to seize the inside of the curve round the canal, to be first on the planks; and some one way, some another, they file off in the orange twilight to their huts. Many, however, come on to my house; the girls bearing the baskets on their heads full of pottery and small antiquities, and many a child with some scrap, for which he or she hopes to realise the value of a chop of sugar-cane. I stand in my doorway and take in one thing after another until all the clear space on my floor is littered over with rows and heaps of fragments. When the last boy is settled with, they go off chattering, and I am left to pottery, dinner, and my own reflections. There is, however, a quantity of evening work to do, beside my cooking. The finds have to be sorted over, selected and marked, and the rubbish cleared out; plans have to be plotted; and a journal to be written up. Then at last it is well if I get under the blankets eight hours before I must turn out again; for eight hours is none too much, after sixteen hours nearly all on foot. Such is a digger's daily life.

But Arabs will not work without money, any more than any other men; and I shirk daily payments – the payday is Saturday afternoon. This is a great saving of time; one of the best-known explorers occupies more than an hour every evening of his work in paying his men, but by booking names daily, which is done during the morning inspections, and in itself does not take a quarter of the time of paying, the accounts can be settled weekly. On Saturday afternoon then, while the men are at work in their holes, they are paid off; the great advantages of paying while they are at work being that no time is wasted by ninety-nine men waiting while the hundredth is paid.

At one hole I owe a man fifteen piastres (three shillings) for five day's wages, and one-and-a-half piastres for the things he has found; now it is impossible to get enough piastres in this country to pay everybody; if you did you would be in a ceaseless strife over the false and the worn coins; so sixteen-and-a-half piastres I have to pay with one and a half parisis (worth nine-and-a-half piastres each), half a franc (two piastres), and one-and-three-quarter-piastres in copper, which is worth one-seventh of the silver. Almost anything will pass, and the bulk of the currency is made up of Spanish dollars, Maria Theresa dollars, francs, lire, leis, drachmas, shillings, florins, parises (struck by the Egyptian government and repudiated), and finally the silver

piastres (struck by the Egyptian government and decried by them), Turkish gold and piastres, copper piastres (also struck by the Egyptian government and repudiated), and finally the silver piastres, which are the government money of account, but which are so often forged and so largely worn that they are the most troublesome of all to do business with. Each of the above variety of coinage has two or more rates of exchange, the town rate and the country rate, and particular coins are in favour in particular places. Hence it is not so easy to pay your way in Egypt, even if you have the sinews of excavating in your money bag.

Besides all the digging work there are the happy days of prospecting when you cast aside dull care, load up your donkey, and tramp off across the countryside day after day. This is a most delightful life, in a perfect climate where there is no rain to be feared, and no cold winds to be dreaded, for such is Egypt in the spring; one donkey easily carries a small tent, about seven feet by eight, a roll of blankets, a petroleum stove, a canvas saddle-bag with a store of provisions in it, and often a small boy on top of all to drive the beast, looking at a little distance exactly as if he and the donkey were all trussed up together, ready for roasting, with the two tent poles sticking out crosswise from the mass. Then with a trusty Arab, whom you know, you can tramp over the hard mud roads, along the canals with the fragrant *sont* trees¹ overhanging the path, through the bean and clover fields and over the dusty plains. Mound after mound is seen on the dead-flat horizon, and visited. Sometimes nothing promising may appear, at other times some strange and unexpected find, and continually you see heaps of ruins of the town of former days, which seem only to need you to put the spade in to turn up almost anything you can dream of. No wonder that a people living in such a country have their heads full of treasure and jinns,² a country where continually peasants find what is equivalent to several years' wages, and where you often hear of some man having been enriched by finding a donkey-load of gold.

One amusing, but fatiguing way of travelling is to put up for the night at the village sheikh's. If you have the luck to light on a rich man you will probably have to sit up on the dais in the gateway, and hear some cases finished off in the dusk, for your host is magistrate of his village. At one end squats the clerk, reading over by a flickering lantern light the report of all the cases which he has drawn up, the sheikh putting in a correction now and then, which sometimes leads to a long discussion. ... At last, after almost going to sleep hearing the interminable drone of the old clerk and the buzz of

¹ *acacia nilotica*.

² A powerful being in Muslim mythology.

the busy-bodies, there is a welcome break up and some prospect of dinner, for it would be a mortal offence to set about cooking your own provisions if you go to a big man's house for shelter, and though you may have been on foot since sunrise, you must sit up in hunger and patience for a couple of hours of darkness before any food can be had. You may be served with a table all to yourself, in French fashion – according to their ideas – if in an over-civilised place, or you may be asked to sit at the round table where sits the sheikh or bey himself, his sons, his clerks and bailiffs, yourself, and your donkey boy, all around, each tearing off a leg or a wing of a fowl, and grabbing handfuls of rice from the great dish to stuff in his mouth. Perhaps the backgammon board will come out afterwards, and a few games fill another hour before you turn in for the night. All this is wearisome after a long days work, and the strain of having to talk and understand Arabic for hours, and make up conversation that shall be both interesting and intelligible, is not restful. On the whole it is better to stick to your own tent and stove, and your independence; pitch where you like, feed when you like and have a long night's rest after your fifteen or twenty miles' walk. Towards sunset you pick out a clean piece of ground near some village or town, and then with your man in a few minutes the tent is up, and everything inside; get a pan of water, light the stove, and go for a stroll while it is boiling up; if stopping near a Bedawi settlement you will be asked to dinner, and if you decline probably a big tray of fowls and rice and bread will be brought down in the dark, with perhaps some son of the sheikh come to dine with you. A few tins of jam make an excellent return for this. I have known a young Arab quietly save up the spoonful of raspberry jam to which I helped him; when asked why, he said it was for the harem. So if you give a supply it is pretty certain to go through the tentholt, and thus put your name in good favour all round. One of the best forms of *bakhshish*¹ in return for considerable help or services from well-to-do people is silver plate, and it is well to have some silver spoons (forks are useless to people who use their fingers) and a silver cup or two, if you expect to be thrown much on the assistance of sheikhs. The rule of the country is that when money cannot be given, some present of about equal or rather greater value is to be made, and your character will not stand very well if you behave unreasonably in this respect. But for small matters a most kindly spirit may be found among the country people. I have known a man insist on my riding his donkey across two miles of marsh, while he plowtered through on foot, and at the end stoutly refused to take anything, even for his children, baring his wrist and showing the cross as his reason for dealing thus with a fellow Christian. He was a Copt. ...

¹ Tip or gratuity.

The country people or fellahin are a cheerful and kind-hearted race in general, compounded in varying proportions from a Coptic and Bedawi ancestry, according to whether the Egyptians in each place were driven out or forced into Mohammedanism at the conquest by 'Amr in the seventh century. In some parts of Upper Egypt the people are nearly pure Egyptian, many large villages of Copts also remaining among them, while in the Delta, Copts are scarce, and the people have probably as much Arab as Coptic blood in them. The one way to the fellah's respect is absolute firmness, and the one way to his goodwill is a good joke; but bright as he may be so long as he is under, he is intolerable if he gets the upper hand. An Arab or a Turk can bear being in authority, but there is no worse tyrant over his fellow countrymen, and no more avaricious leech than a fellah sheikh.

Egypt is not at a standstill at present; it is moving faster, for better or worse, than it ever moved before. And this is true of its antiquities as well as of other things; the ancient cities are being in the present day dug away and their earth spread on the ground as fertiliser and this is going on at such a rate that some have almost entirely disappeared already, and fields of corn have taken their place, others are diminished to half the size they were a generation or two back, and are still diminishing every day. And the time does not seem very far distant when scarcely a site of a city will be able to be identified. Certainly Egypt will have exhausted its antiquity fields before England exhausts its coalfields. And up the Nile tombs are opened every year, and fewer left to be discovered. In one sense we are only just beginning to explore Egypt, and the treasure seems to us inexhaustible, but that is only because of the puny scale of our attack from the scientific side; in another, and terribly true sense Egypt is exhausting itself, the natives are ceaselessly digging, and unless we look to it pretty quickly the history of the country will have perished before our eyes, by the destructive activity of its inhabitants. Never before has that land of monuments been so fiercely worked upon, daily and hourly the spoils of ages past are ransacked, and if of marketable value are carried off; but whether preserved or not is a small matter compared with the entire loss of their connection and history which always results in this way. If we are not to incur the curse of posterity for our Vandalism and inertness, we must be up and doing in the right way.