



GIOVANNI BATTISTA BELZONI

34111
1959

THE GREAT BELZONI

STANLEY MAYES

Belzoni is a glorious instance of what singleness of aim and energy of intention will accomplish. He was a man with no single pretension to calculate on attaching his name to Egypt, but by his indomitable energy he has attached Egypt to his name for ever. . . .

BENJAMIN ROBERT HAYDON
in his Journal for 1821



PUTNAM
42 GREAT RUSSELL STREET
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humorous Greek mercenary in the army of Psammetichus II (593-588 B.C.) and his comrade 'Axe'. This gave them a latest date for the building of the temple, but it was in fact nearly seven hundred years old when the Greeks passed that way; today we regard it as the overblown achievement of a civilization already decadent after two thousand years of dynastic history.²³

When they left Abu Simbel, Bankes's party had reduced the general level of the sand considerably, so that the visitor had a much better idea of the grand façade. A year later Finati passed that way again, now in the service of Sir Frederick Henniker, who, as he frankly admitted, was more interested in hunting and fowling than in Pharaohs and hieroglyphics. However the baronet was not going to miss Abu Simbel. He found that in the course of twelve months the sand had completely covered up the entrance again and the men of Abu Simbel—who may have helped nature in expectation of a tourist trade—were prepared to dig it out again in twelve days if he employed thirty men. To call their bluff, Henniker forced in a pole with a sheet wrapped round it and made a kind of funnel through which he was able to slide into the temple. He had to reduce his 'habiliments', as he says, 'to a pocket-handkerchief', but he stayed four hours in that super-heated atmosphere, marvelling at the liveliness of the battle scenes. Getting out again through the sheet was a tricky business, for he had to work against the stream of soft sand that poured down into the entrance. Finati eventually pulled him clear, whereupon Henniker—who attracted oddity—found himself confronted by 'a Russian colonel very impatient and very angry at having been stopped. He went to the entrance, and returned immediately fully satisfied—the aperture was not large enough for him.'

If Giovanni ever read Sir Frederick Henniker's *Notes* he might well have taken offence at a couple of flippant phrases that seem like a direct 'dig' at Belzoni's fair-ground past. The colossi in front of the smaller temple, he says, are 'of such a size that a man who exhibits himself at three-ha'pence per foot would scarcely arrive above the knee', while the statues of the larger temple are 'equal to nine copies of the Irish Giant placed in a perpendicular line'. (O'Brien was a regular attraction at Bartholomew Fair round the turn of the century.) But Giovanni could hardly have been more delighted than by the words with which the baronet bade farewell to Abu Simbel—'contented to finish my journey in this part, with having seen *the noblest monument of antiquity that is to be found on the banks of the Nile*'.²⁴

CHAPTER X

I have been very successful, as you may communicate to Mr. Hamilton, in my researches in Upper Egypt; and above all, have discovered a King's tomb, where the paintings are exquisitely beautiful and fresh as on the day they were finished.

HENRY SALT in a letter to Mr. B.,¹ 1818

ON their way down river Belzoni and his companions met Dawud and Khalil. The latter plagued them with paltry presents in the hope of getting a better. The former protested his innocence of everything that had happened at Abu Simbel, even before the travellers made any complaint. But it was politic to keep on good terms with Dawud, now that he was the unofficial custodian of the temple. Giovanni therefore gave him some boots and looking-glasses for his wife.

There was more trouble now with the crew and, in particular, with Hasan. Once, after a violent scene, he drew his dagger and tried to stab Belzoni. Captain Irby had his hand badly cut in wresting the weapon away from him.

At Philae they found Sarah serene and unruffled on the top of the temple of Isis. They came down the Cataract in the Nubian boat and then thankfully paid off the crew and saw the last of them.

They reached Luxor in another boat on 17 August and installed themselves in the temple sanctuary. There was a letter from Salt saying that he intended shortly to come up the Nile to look at the antiquities. But Giovanni's first thought was to find out who was digging at Thebes, and where. The two Copts had gone and in their place were a couple of Piedmontese—Rosignano, with whom Giovanni had had an unpleasant encounter already, and a certain Antonio Lebolo, a former *gendarme* of Milan. Profiting by the absence of Belzoni, Drovetti's agents had turned their attention from the temples of Karnak to the tombs of Qurna, and had been pretty successful among the mummies. Giovanni was reluctant to work anywhere near these men, and partly for this reason, partly because of the hopeful indications he had found a few months before, he decided to concentrate on the Valley of the Kings.

Irby and Mangles spent a few days sight-seeing round the tombs and temples before they left for Cairo, and Giovanni was delighted to act as cicerone to such an appreciative pair. He found Mangles in particular a most enthusiastic admirer of his discoveries. He liked the company

Banks on 16 November. He says: 'I had the delight of receiving a few days back your very kind and obliging letter respecting the Memnon, for which I beg leave to return my sincerest thanks. Since the receipt of it, I have had an opportunity of showing that part of the contents which refers to your idea of collecting for the British Museum to Mr. Belzoni, who feels very grateful for this notice of him, and has begged me to remit for him a letter containing his proposals to the Trustees of the British Museum'. Salt enclosed this and asked for an answer at the first opportunity since, as he said, 'Mr. Belzoni proposes to leave Egypt in April next if his services should not be required'.

Giovanni's memorandum to Salt begins: 'As I understand it is the wish of Sir Joseph Banks that I should enter into an arrangement with the Trustees of the British Museum to employ myself in excavating and collecting antiquity in Egypt, I take this method of acquainting you that I should feel myself highly honored in engaging with the said Trustees for the periode of two years, promising that I would endeavour to the best of my knowledge to employ the above time in the most minute researches.' He goes on to say that after calculating the expenses necessary 'on a scal equal to that of Individuals who have lately been very successful,'—obviously he had Salt and Bankes in mind—'I find that, on the most economical system, they would amount to the sum of one Thousand five hundred Pounds per annum, including the necessary presents to the Beys, Hasheffs and Kaimakams of the Country, leaving it to the Trustees to decide on whatever recompenses they may think proper for my own exertions on this occasion. . . .'⁷

Before they left Thebes, Belzoni and Salt went over to Karnak and there with Drovetti checked the position of the few enclaves that were still reserved to the English on that side of the river. As they walked along, Drovetti tried to pull Belzoni's leg by telling him about a mysterious stranger who frequented the ruins; he dressed exactly like Belzoni, and Drovetti thought he was up to no good. Salt laughed at this, but Giovanni took it very seriously. He believed it was an attempt to exculpate in advance anyone who might be tempted to loose off a shot at him from behind a wall; the man could then say in his defence that he thought it was the sham Belzoni. Giovanni seems very humourless over this, but future events came near to proving him right.

Later, as the French ex-consul gave them sherbet and lemonade in his hut among the ruins, Giovanni let fall a word about the obelisk at Philae. Drovetti pretended astonishment: those rogues at Aswan had deceived him; they had many times promised to bring down the obelisk for him and had obviously done so only to extort money. Salt and Belzoni explained their prior claim and added that the obelisk now belonged to Bankes. Drovetti graciously bestowed it on him with much

the air, Giovanni thought, that he had used when he gave *him* the cover of a sarcophagus.

Salt's party left Thebes on 16 November. (Giovanni had celebrated his fortieth birthday just eleven days before.) They reached Edfu on the 21st and found Drovetti's men in occupation of the temple. They also heard a disquieting story that one of his agents had gone off post-haste to Philae in response to an urgent message from the ex-consul.

At Gebel el-Silsila, where the river ran through a narrow granite gap in the mountains, they overtook Drovetti's agent, the Piedmontese *ex-gendarme*, Antonio Lebolo. They hailed him, but he would not stop. A few miles further on, at Kom Ombo, Belzoni left the party and hurried after him in a *kanjia*. At Aswan Lebolo tried to persuade the Agha that he must not allow the English to remove the obelisk. But the Turk pointed out that Belzoni had already taken possession of it two years before and had left money to pay for a guard. Lebolo thereupon resorted to bribery and secured an affidavit before the Qadi that Drovetti was the owner. Then he disappeared.

Giovanni heard of Lebolo's activities as soon as he arrived in Aswan. When he remonstrated with the Agha and reminded him of the thirty dollars he was to receive after the obelisk was safely shipped, the Turk admitted unabashed that Drovetti's men had already made several attempts to remove it; the last one failed because there was too little water in the Cataract. It was this that disturbed Giovanni most; the season was already late and the high Nile had subsided rapidly. He hurried off at once to Philae and was there met by an old man who handed him a note. It was written in French and said: 'M. Drovetti's *chargé d'affaires* begs European travellers to respect the bearer who is guarding the obelisk in the island of Philae, the property of M. Drovetti.' It was signed 'Lebolo' and dated a week earlier.

By now the main party had reached Aswan. There was no difficulty with the Agha, who admitted that Giovanni had been the first to lay claim to the obelisk. Fortunately too there was a boat available, but the *reis* of the *shallal*, the 'captain' of the Cataract, looked askance at the idea of lowering it through the rapids with such a load when the water was low. Two months before he had refused the French when the level was much higher. However, there was one compelling argument, and with half the amount paid in advance the *reis* promised to do what he could. The Agha was also given a gold watch, worth nearly four pounds, in the name of Mr. Banks.

Giovanni had even less equipment for moving the obelisk than he had when he tackled the Young Memnon. There was scarcely any wood to be had at all. But with the old primitive method of roller and lever he managed to get the fallen obelisk down to the water's edge—a matter of

he went straight to Biban el-Muluk, where, waiting for him steadfast among the tombs, he found the faithful Sarah.

Sarah had had a hardly less adventurous year than Giovanni, though she had made no great discoveries. After a slow start—she was delayed two months at Rosetta—she reached Jerusalem on 12 March, just in time for the celebration of Easter. Finati had now left her to join Bankes, and James Curtin, who wanted to return to England, was presently allowed to enter the service of Mr. Legh. On 1 May she set off for Jordan, defying the regulations that forbade pilgrims to leave before the appointed time. When a guard tried to stop her, she struck at him with her whip. He drew his sword, but she slipped off her mule and dared him to touch her. Then she walked boldly past the barricade and the guard in amazement let her go.

Later she joined the vast throng of pilgrims, mostly Greeks, who were going to bathe in Jordan. There were English travellers too, but she preferred to be independent of them, especially as someone—it may have been Bankes—had hinted broadly that he could not understand 'people being so romantic as to travel about, who had no fortune to support it'.⁹

But the Belmores were kind and friendly, and Sarah joined them later for an excursion to Nazareth. On her own again—except for a servant provided by the convent there—and still dressed as a Mamluk youth, she stayed in Arab tents and Turkish villages and was villainously bitten by fleas.

In Jerusalem once more she made a determined effort to enter the Mosque of the Dome of the Rock—risking death or conversion to Islam for her pains—but only succeeded in seeing the neighbouring Mosque of al-Aqsa.¹⁰ Then, knowing that Giovanni was not able to join her in Palestine, she booked a passage on a boat leaving Jaffa. When she got aboard, she found the cabin full of melons and the deck full of Albanian soldiers—a combination that distressed her more than any previous *contretemps*. To make matters worse, she was suffering from a bad bilious attack. Eventually she got rid of the melons and was befriended by two Italians, who looked after her during that uncomfortable thirteen days' voyage.

At Cairo she waited two months for Belzoni. Once, with a curiosity born of the old fair-ground days, she went to see Abdallah, the captured Wahhabi chief, who had been brought in irons to Cairo before being sent to Constantinople for execution. Sarah found him a young man of 'about twenty-eight or thirty, of a very expressive and interesting countenance'.

Finally she decided to go to Thebes. Taking with her as escort a

genuine Mamluk—a deserter from Dongola who had met Belzoni at Abu Simbel—Sarah hired a *kanjia* with two small cabins and left Cairo on 27 November. At Luxor she learned that Giovanni had gone up to Philae, so she crossed the river to wait for him in the Valley of the Kings. There the guards on the tomb of Seti told her that the torrential rain of the previous week-end had flooded the place in spite of all they could do. When she went inside to look at the damage she saw that a great deal of mud had been brought in and the dampness had already made some of the fine flaky limestone crack and fall from the walls. There was nothing she could do but get the Arab boys to remove the mud. Then she sat down to wait for Giovanni. He arrived triumphantly a week later on 23 December.

The damage dashed him a little. It was the jambs of the doorways that had suffered most, but in one of the chambers the upper part of a relief involving three figures had come away from the wall; in another a whole figure had fallen and broken in three pieces, but Giovanni was able to save it from further injury.¹¹

Christmas came, and he and Sarah spent it together in the quiet solitude of a valley that was already old and remote when the Christian era began. 'On earth peace, good will toward men.' But not among rival collectors of antiquity in the inexhaustible ruins of Thebes. It was now that Giovanni found himself entering upon what he later called, in a sombre and self-dramatizing mood, 'new contests with evil beings'.

On Boxing Day Giovanni mounted his donkey in Biban el-Muluk and trotted off to the Nile with the intention of crossing over to inspect the English enclaves at Karnak. A French visitor, Édouard de Montulé,¹² who was sketching in the Memnonium, saw him pass. But we have only Belzoni's version of what happened later that day. On the way from Luxor, he says, an Arab warned him not to go where the other Europeans were, but he took no notice of this. Coming to Karnak, he found some of Drovetti's men digging in a spot near the two small lakes which had definitely been reserved for the English. There were no Europeans with them and Giovanni's Greek servant wanted to intervene, but he would not let him and they rode past. Belzoni looked at some digging grounds at the northern end of the temple area and then started back. They were riding through the ruins not far from the grand First Pylon of the temple of Amun when Giovanni suddenly saw a crowd of Arabs hurrying towards them. At their head, shouting and gesticulating, were the two Piedmontese, Lebolo and Rosignano. Giovanni heard Lebolo asking in an angry voice what he meant by taking the obelisk from Philae. (The boat had arrived on Christmas Eve and the tantalizing present that was not for them was stuck tactlessly under their very noses.) In a

moment they were all round him. Lebolo seized the bridle of his donkey with one hand and grabbed Giovanni's waistcoat with the other. Rosignano levelled a gun at him and swore violently. The Arabs overpowered the Greek and relieved him of his pistols. Rosignano said it was time Belzoni paid for all he had done to them, and Lebolo declared that he was to have had one-third of the proceeds from the obelisk if Belzoni had not stolen it.

'My situation was not pleasant,' says Giovanni, mildly understating. 'I have no doubt that if I had attempted to dismount, the cowards would have despatched me on the ground, and said that they did it in defence of their lives, as I had been the aggressor. I thought the best way was to keep on my donkey, and look at the villains with contempt.'

Then, as they glared at each other, another party of Arabs came hurrying up with Drovetti in the lead. Why, he wanted to know, had Belzoni stopped his men from working? Giovanni indignantly denied that he had done any such thing and protested at the way he was being treated. Drovetti ordered him to dismount and Giovanni refused. But the next moment a pistol went off behind his back and he slipped smartly to the ground. Then, according to Belzoni, Drovetti seemed to realize that his henchmen had gone too far, and he tried to smooth things over.

It was now there appeared someone whom Giovanni for reasons of delicacy refers to throughout as 'the stranger'. He admits, however, that he was an old acquaintance, 'neither English nor French', who had come to Egypt 'not to see antiquities, but to purchase some if he could'. He was returning to 'one of the capitals of Europe', and Giovanni had asked him to take four of the lion-headed statues in his name as a present 'to a certain high personage'. From these hints and some clues given by de Montulé it is clear that the stranger was an Italian named Sylvestre, in whose company the Frenchman had arrived in Thebes. Sylvestre had bought a cargo of antiquities which he intended shipping to Rome, and on the day of the fracas he had been with Drovetti in Karnak. As soon as he appeared Giovanni told him what had happened; Drovetti said they had 'only had a few words, and that was all'. But Sylvestre, according to Giovanni, declared that he had seen the Arabs pick up their arms and rush out of the huts, and he recalled that Drovetti had said he must run after them and prevent trouble. Giovanni believed he had here an important witness to the fact that a premeditated attack had been made upon him.

He went back to Biban el-Muluk angry and perhaps a little afraid. He had no doubt that there had been an attempt on his life¹³ and, though it seems likely that Rosignano—if it was he—discharged his pistol only to frighten Belzoni, tempers were roused and anything might have happened. There is some corroboration of the seriousness of the affair

in de Montulé's account of it. He admits that he was not an eye-witness of the quarrel, but he says that the following day Lebolo spoke to Mustafa, his interpreter, and tried to get him to go across with him to Qurna. De Montulé suspected a further attempt on Belzoni's life and would not let his man go.

De Montulé is a reasonably unbiased observer and he seems to have assessed the situation pretty well, for he says: 'I firmly believe that Messrs. Drovetti, Salt and Belzoni are not to blame, but their Agents, who are frequently rewarded in proportion to the value of the discoveries which they make, and consequently nourish mutual animosities against one another.' The Frenchman is also illuminating on another point. Giovanni says that many of the Arabs of Karnak were horrified at Rosignano's outrageous behaviour and took his part. But he had always found the Arabs on that side of the river very different from the men of Qurna, over whom he seemed to exercise a peculiar fascination. De Montulé recalls that the night before this incident took place he saw and heard a number of Arabs in Drovetti's headquarters under the First Pylon passionately inveighing against 'the colossus of the left bank'.

Giovanni was concerned now only to pack up and get out. Yet it took him another month to make all ready. The wax moulds and drawings of the tomb—representing almost a year's work—had to be made secure for their long journey. Then there was the delicate problem of moving the alabaster sarcophagus—poised precariously as it was above the entrance to the tunnel—up the narrow steps, through the chambers and corridors, out into the valley. One careless step by a workman and the precious, fragile shell might have been shattered. It was put into a strong crate—how Giovanni made or found that in Thebes he does not say—and then conveyed on rollers for more than two miles over rough, uneven ground and for another mile over soft sand and small stones to the water's edge. There was also the lid of the other sarcophagus to be taken out of the tomb of Ramses III. This, Giovanni says, was the best piece he ever acquired on his own account. Drovetti, who had seen it lying near the sarcophagus, half-buried under *débris*, did not realize how fine it was when he offered it to Belzoni at the outset of his career as a collector. The red granite cover lay reversed; it was only when Giovanni cleared it and turned it over that he saw the splendid figures of the king and the two attendant goddesses, Isis and Nephthys, carved in relief upon it. The lid was broken at the foot, but above the knee the figures were perfect.¹⁴

Belzoni left Thebes for the last time on 27 January 1819. 'I must confess,' he says, 'that I felt no small degree of sorrow to quit a place which was become so familiar to me, and where, in no other part of the world, I could find so many objects of inquiry so congenial to my in-

clination. I must say, that I felt more in leaving Thebes, than any other place in my life.'

Sarah was less sorry to go. She was just recovering from a bad bout of jaundice and had been very frightened by the attack on her husband. Yet to an Englishman they met on their journey down the Nile she seemed a very angel of sweetness and grace. It was that strange character Nathaniel Pearce, the sailor who had deserted the ship in which Salt and Lord Valentia once explored the Red Sea coasts, to become the first English resident in Abyssinia. He had been a person of great influence with the Ras of Tigré, but on that ruler's death and the outbreak of civil war Pearce left Abyssinia to join Salt in Egypt. He had come down to Cairo and was now anxiously making his way up the Nile again in search of the consul like a faithful dog looking for its master. Sarah was the first Englishwoman he had seen for over fifteen years. He had almost forgotten his own language. But his gratitude for Sarah's cordial and Giovanni's kindly interest are touchingly recorded in the pages of his journal.¹⁵

The Belzonis took their assorted cargo—obelisk, sarcophagus, mummies and moulds—direct to Alexandria. There Giovanni found a letter from Salt, who was still in Nubia. He had told him about the incident at Thebes, and the consul now advised him to take legal action against his assailants. Giovanni learnt that the vice-consul, Mr. Lee, had already instituted proceedings on his behalf and taken the matter up with the French consul, M. Roussel. He therefore decided to wait for Salt's return.

Meanwhile Sylvestre had arrived in Alexandria but was no longer willing to give the kind of evidence Belzoni had supposed he would in Thebes. He had, in fact, come to an understanding with Lebolo. He also went back on his promise to take four of Giovanni's statues 'as a present to a certain court' and departed instead with a large collection bought from Belzoni's rivals for re-sale.

Giovanni now resolved to send two of the statues as a gift to his native city. On 12 March he wrote to the civic authorities at Padua, offering them a pair of black granite Egyptian figures, 'having the body of a woman and the head of a lion', the best of their kind in his collection. He added rather diffidently that some people thought they represented the combined zodiacal signs of Leo and Virgo. But he was quite positive and precise about the place the statues should occupy; he wanted them to go just inside the east door of the *Gran Salone di Padua*, the thirteenth-century Town Hall, on pedestals two feet high.¹⁶

The pride and pleasure of public benefaction were muted a little by private grief. Giovanni's brother Antonio—the gay, wine-loving Antonio—had died recently, and he wrote now—belatedly, it seems—

to comfort his mother and say that he would be with her soon. He sent her money—four hundred thalers—and urged his brothers Francesco and Domenico to take a little house on the river which would not cost them much more than they were paying at present. In the same letter he told them about his offer to the municipal authorities and asked them to be certain to deliver the enclosure to the right person. There was a postscript in which Giovanni said he wanted it known that the family came originally from Rome and had been settled a long time in Padua. Could his brothers therefore look in the baptismal registers of Santa Sofia and tell him when their name Belzoni became corrupted to Bolzon because of the Venetian accent?

It was impossible for Giovanni to sit idle in Alexandria and wait for Salt's return. The difficulty was to know what to do. He thought of excavating in Lower Egypt, but Drovetti was back in Alexandria, and he was sure there would be opposition. His thoughts turned again to the desert, which had such a powerful attraction for him since his expedition to Berenice. Some months before he had considered the idea of going to the Kharga Oasis, which Cailliaud had visited in the summer of 1818. There was another small oasis west of that—el-Dakhla—from which Drovetti had just returned and was later to claim—if he had not done so already—that he was the first European in modern times to explore it. But Giovanni had met a young Scotsman, Archibald Edmonstone,¹⁷ travelling up the Nile with two companions in January of that year. As they intended visiting el-Kharga Giovanni told them of the smaller oasis beyond, and Edmonstone's party was in fact the first to reach it. On their way *back* in February they met Drovetti on his way *towards* it. Yet he persisted in claiming that he had been there at the end of 1818—a circumstance that throws new light on the character of Drovetti and must have infuriated Belzoni beyond words if he ever knew about it.

But el-Kharga and el-Dakhla were too remote for Giovanni now; both were in the latitude of Thebes. It occurred to him, however, 'that the temple of Jupiter Ammon had been an object of search for a long time, and by more than one traveller but that the true spot where it existed had not been fixed'. He considered also 'that the Faioum was a province as yet little explored' and that he might 'make an excursion in it perhaps undisturbed, and from thence proceed to the western desert'. To avoid letting people know where he was going, he did not bother to apply for a *firman*, but as soon as he had settled Sarah in a house at Rosetta, kindly lent by an English merchant of Alexandria, with a man to call each day to buy her food as the plague had begun to show, he set off for the Faiyum.

Two stories have invested the name of Ammon with romantic adven-

Ammon, that Giovanni was determined to see it and test its qualities. According to Herodotus, the water was tepid at sunrise, colder when the market-place began to fill up, and coldest of all at noon; it became warmer during the afternoon, was hot in the evening and boiled at midnight.³³

Giovanni realized he must not show too much interest in the well, so he merely expressed a desire for a bath, and the place was pointed out to him. He says that the water bubbled up from a great depth in a shaft some eight feet square. When he first put his hands in the water—after sunset—it felt warm. He returned to the house where he was staying and at midnight slipped away again with the Sicilian and the *hajji*. The water then was apparently much warmer, but as Giovanni had broken his thermometer he could not be certain. Again, a little before sunrise, he went to the well on the pretext of bathing. The water now seemed warmer than it had been the night before, but cooler than at midnight. On a fourth and final visit at noon he found it quite cold.

Belzoni saw that the phenomenon was easily attributable to the comparative stability of the water's temperature and the wide variations in atmospheric temperature. Gardner Wilkinson, who visited the Little Oasis a few years later, found the temperature of the water to be about 93° Fahrenheit.³⁴ Giovanni confused what Herodotus had said, but it made no great difference; he was only concerned to know if the existence of this well identified the oasis as the home of the oracle. It seemed to him, from the descriptions given by Browne and Hornemann, that Siwa had as much claim as Wah el-Bahariya to be considered the site of the temple of Ammon; 'the only objection I have against Siwah is, that the ruins in that place are surrounded by water, of which we have no account from the ancient authors, yet it might have formed a lake since that time'. It is a pity, therefore, in view of his cautious attitude here, that the title-page of Belzoni's *Narrative* should assert so positively that he made a journey to the *Oasis of Jupiter Ammon*.³⁵

Giovanni wanted to go on to Siwa, but neither offers, promises nor entreaties would persuade 'Grumar' to take him there. He had to be content with visiting the much smaller Oasis of el-Farafra—really a dependency of the Wah el-Bahariya and two days' journey from it to the south-west. He found there only the ruins of a Coptic convent and church and a few suspicious inhabitants. Giovanni returned to the Wah el-Bahariya on 4 June.

The people were now much more friendly and the Qadi at one point took him aside and made him a proposition. He and his father and the Shaikh were agreed that if Giovanni would turn Muslim, they would give him a share of their lands and he might choose four wives from among their daughters and 'be happy there without going about so much

after stones'. Giovanni had some difficulty in extricating himself from this situation without causing offence.

On the way over the ridge to Zabu, Belzoni's camel stumbled and rolled down the rocks with him. Fortunately there were no limbs broken, but Giovanni's side was badly bruised—he may even have cracked a rib or two—and he had to lie up for three days. His bed was placed in a narrow passage 'constantly crowded with people, who occasionally trod on my feet, or gave me a kick on the head'. Worse still, there were passing cows, buffaloes, donkeys, sheep and goats that treated the man on the ground with scant consideration. To crown all, a funeral feast was going forward on the day of the accident, with much ululation on the part of the women. The widow, who saw Giovanni trying to write up his notes, later came to him in tears and begged for two pieces of magic paper—'one to get another husband, as soon as possible, and the other to make use of for the same purpose if he should die'. She was very displeased at Giovanni's refusal to encourage such superstitious practices.

By the 8th Giovanni was able to ride his camel again, though his ribs were still black and sore. On the journey back to the Nile the water supply ran low and he knew all the agonies of thirst. He reached Beni Suef on 15 June and from there returned to Cairo. Salt meanwhile had arrived from the south, having been obliged to leave his jovial party in Nubia because of another of those recurring bouts of illness that troubled him all his life. The plague was still raging in Cairo and Giovanni had to visit the consulate secretly by night.

The meeting was quite friendly. The two men went through their accounts together and it was found that Salt still owed Belzoni one hundred and sixty-nine pounds out of the five hundred promised to him over a year before. The consul made this up to the round figure of two hundred pounds. He also picked out a number of items in his collection, which he thought he could spare, and gave them to Belzoni. Salt says he 'seemed quite a satisfied man, and expressed a hope in parting that we should continue friends'.

Off went Giovanni to Rosetta where Sarah was patiently waiting for him, beguiling the time with her pet chameleons. By now he had probably received a letter from the Trustees of the British Museum, declining his offer—solicited by them—to collect antiquities on their behalf.³⁶ There remained only the Karnak affair to settle. But this proved utterly frustrating. Drovetti wanted the charges to be preferred against himself by Salt; Belzoni insisted that his accusations were made only against Lebolo and Rosignano. Then M. Roussel was recalled to France, and the vice-consul, who took over the case, wished Belzoni to put down twelve hundred dollars immediately to cover his expenses

in going up to Thebes with a boat-load of lawyers and lawyers' clerks. However, this was circumvented and eventually Lebolo and Rosignano were brought down to Alexandria. But another loophole was soon found. The men accused were both Piedmontese and not French subjects. So the vice-consul ruled—probably under pressure from Drovetti—that the case against them could only be heard in Turin.

Giovanni gave up in disgust at this and prepared to leave. 'At last, having put an end to all my affairs in Egypt, in the middle of September, 1819, we embarked, thank God! for Europe: not that I disliked the country I was in, for, on the contrary, I have reason to be grateful; nor do I complain of the Turks or Arabs in general, but of some Europeans who are in that country, whose conduct and mode of thinking are a disgrace to human nature.'

CHAPTER XIV

Belzoni is a grand traveller, and his English is very prettily broken.

LORD BYRON, quoted by Dr. Samuel Smiles ¹

THE *podestà* of Padua was a puzzled man. A certain Belzoni, calling himself a native of the city, had written to say he was sending two ancient Egyptian statues which he would like to have set up in the Palazzo della Ragione on either side of the east door. In due course this unusual gift had arrived through the agency of the British consul in Venice and the donor's brothers in Padua. Not daring to cross the unknown benefactor's wishes, Signor Venturini had nervously placed the two black barbaric statues of Sekhmet under the high roof of the Salone, where they faced the huge wooden horse that commemorated a tournament held in 1466, and were flanked by the frescoes of Giusto Menabuoi and Niccolò Moreto with their symbolic figures of the months. Startled by their strangeness, knowing nothing of Egyptian art or religion and not much more of Belzoni, the *podestà* was anxious not to seem unworthy of his position as the civic head of an ancient seat of learning. Accordingly he addressed himself to Professor Meneghelli, Librarian and Keeper of the Numismatic Museum in the University of Padua, for enlightenment on the two savage feline goddesses that had invaded his Town Hall.

The professor knew little more than the *podestà* about ancient Egypt. But he took a hint from Belzoni's own letter and perhaps added a cautious gloss of his own. The *podestà* was delighted with his explanation. How appropriate it all was! How well the new comers now fitted in with their civilized surroundings in the Palace of Reason! An astrological theme inspired both. The letter that Signor Venturini composed with the help of his secretary Macoppe was a little masterpiece of its kind, combining as it did a dignified acceptance of the gift, a little homily on the virtues of the Good Citizen, a ray of light from Padua's 'lamp of learning' for the benighted wanderer in Egyptian darkness, and a useful note on the changed political situation in Italy.

The letter, dated 16 June 1819, began thus: 'The character of a true citizen who loves his native country is seen in the man who remembers and cherishes it, however long he may be absent, however far away he may be. You are that praiseworthy citizen who, after an absence from Padua of some nineteen years, living in far-off places as you now are in Egypt, have not forgotten your own country, but rather wish to em-