

The traveller

Stanley was moving forward under the great Chefren Pyramid. He was sighting it with an absent and frowning stare. Though strange, the sight of that gigantic mausoleum was leaving him indifferent. He could hear no voice, no howl, no feeble whisper carried by the past. The clamour of the street traders was covering the vibrations that surely those simulacrum must give off.

«Get lost» he had burst out, clearly annoyed, and after having taken a few pictures, he had headed toward the Sphinx. The big statue towered in the distance, high and mighty in its turbulent fixity. Stanley speeded up and as soon as he was under the lee of it, he crouched down on a solid alabaster block. He started watching it. Tourists were still far away and a rare silence was dominating the valley. Curious, he dwelled on the tiniest details. The pharaon face was staring gravely at the horizon, thoughtless to the slow passing of time. Its feline paws were stretched out on the sand casting a long enigmatic shadow.

Captivated, he took a few pictures, then put the equipment away and again stood watching. Over the neat sky a scorching sun was tormenting the dusty glades of the desert, mercilessly hanging over his thoughts.

The traveller remained in silence, his mind free and relaxed. For a long time he glided on that sensation, until the blaring

flood of tourists overflow on the scalding plain. Satisfied, he got up and slowly moved away.

He had started travelling bewitched by the conquests and re-births that every journey brings within. It was the only way he knew to drive away the uneasiness that resided in him and there were few places where he hadn't been. Everywhere he'd go, he could always merge into the surroundings an Arab among the Arabs, an Aboriginal among the Aboriginals. He could speak more than fifteen languages and a countless amount of dialects. His father had left him a considerable fortune and he, rationing it wisely, was using it up looking out for himself. Rejecting the short-lived temptations of growing up that would have made him a slave of work, at the same time he was shunning the hapless savouring of money that often makes rich people so mean and trivial. What the heck do you need money for when death would even everything out anyway? Emotions, nobody could have ever deleted them. They were close to his heart, to his mind. So he had become a traveller, a hunter of memories and a brilliant interpreter of his desires.

With measured steps he took a last glance at the pyramids, watching the cusps poking at the sky. He briefly sensed a feeling, a fleeting anxiety, then a smile appeared on his face. «I knew...» he whispered tight-lipped, heading towards the exit. Walking slowly he crossed the gate approaching a man seated on the bank.

«How did it go?» asked the man straightening his gellabia¹.

«Well, Papyrus, but it could have been better.»

«... or worse» continued the man pointing out the coaches crowded with tourists.

«Damn» Stanley burst out even more impatient. «Why the hell

¹ Robe wore by people from North Africa.

don't they stay at home?»

«My friend, the times have gone-by when you travellers were a rare commodity.»

«Bloody mass tourism!»

«Yeah» Papyrus replied with a knowing air, «though...»

«Thought?»

«... no tourists, no money!» he concluded with a sardonic smile. Mohammed Fouad Rachid, called Papyrus, kept laughing heartely. Stanley looked at him hiding his anger behind a roar of laughter, then he reached the car and slowly got in.

«Taban?» (Tired?) the Egyptian asked weighting down on the seat.

«La» (No) Stanley replied gradually weakening his smile.

After the last slide, Stanley turned the light on. Dreamily, he kept going over the pictures of that journey. Papyrus' voice was still echoing inside his head, overflowing it with his captivating laughter.

A melancholic tear ran down on his face while he pulled out the slide tray. Slowly he went to the huge cupboard that stood out in the room and, having looked at the empty parts, he put the slides away in a recess. Absent-minded, he looked at several directions, losing himself in the tangle of shelves, then he reached out for another tray and went back to the projector. He turned the light off, once again making room for his memories. Once again he could smell the Nile, see the *feluca*² flowing and the sunset breaking on the water. In a moment he again sank into the silence of Kom Ombo, among the huge colonnades of Karnak, in the quivering mystery of Abu Simbel. Faces of friends he had

² Typical sailing boat used by fishermen on the Nile.

met were standing next to Papyrus' smirk, plying him with a tender yearning.

After the projection, he turned on the *abatjour* approaching the wall where the many pictures from his travels were hung. Pensive, he stood looking at them. Landscapes took turns with smiles and those urgent echoes reached his thoughts.

Pleased, he let himself be carried away by the moment and he slowly closed his eyes, trying to hold those memories. Fresh air filled his mind, cleansing it in the clear waters of recollection. Then, suddenly, the light started faltering and a strange tremor spread over the room. The cupboard swung raising a sinister symphony of creaking and the first pictures started falling like the fringed petals of a daisy. Stanley prayed for the earthquake to slow down while seconds became frightening and claustrophobic infinities.

«Damn, it's lasting too long» he burst out, clearly alarmed. Another violent push seemed to compress the tired walls and, instantly, the cupboard fell down. Thousands of slides scattered on the floor colouring the soft carpets of the room. Stanley looked at them, appalled, while terror made him goggle.

Contented, the earthquake seemed to release its grip and slowly drew back into the dark world where it had come from. Short of breath, Stanley let the time go by while a strange smell picketed his nostrils. Getting over his surprise, he tried turning the light on, but the *abatjour* was supine on the floor, its lampshade bent and wailing. On instinct he leaned down and pressed the button. He only just had time to notice the crunching sparkling of electricity when lighter fuel, spilt from its smashed container, lit up with a purplish-blue flame that quickly spread throughout the room. The first pictures started burning and bubbling on the thin slides' gelatines. Those breaths swiftly glided

along the stacked spaces of the *parquet*, belching new tongues of flame everywhere. Stanley stood open-mouthed while his world was slipping into the blaze; then, angrily, he dashed into the closet catching, an extinguisher. With fury he stripped the safety pin and, having aimed the nozzle, he nervously pulled the trigger. A violent jet of foam spurted out on the flames, stifling their arrogance in a faint whitish froth. He kept discharging it wildly until the blaze dissipated in thin and stinging smoke.

When the mist lifted, he watched, wretchedly, the smoking remains of his past and a tear moistened his face. Goggle eyed, he stayed there staring until when, down on all fours, he started piling them at random. Nervous sobs gave a rhythm to his breath, lost and resigned on those ashes still warm. Shaking, he reached the sitting room, poured himself some *Porto* and sipped it. The liquor slid on the cold sides of the glass, gradually warming his palate. That embrace started giving him some courage and a slight smile appeared on his tired face. For the last time, he looked at the ashed memories and then, with determination, he threw the remains into the bin.

When everything was cleared, he threw a look at the many empty spaces in the cupboard that were still dripping with memories.

«It doesn't matter» he cried out, breathing again now. «They are all held in here» he concluded beating his chest with his hand.