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CHAPTER 1

THE LAND OF EGYPT

EGYPT is one of the most interesting countries in the world. Its records are among the oldest, and it has had a long and wonderful history. This book is going to tell the story of those faraway days, thousands of years ago, in that interesting country, and we shall be able to learn how people lived then, how their houses were built and how they dressed, how they worked and traded and fought, how they amused themselves, and how they worshipped in their temples. In museums there are still to be seen many articles used by the Egyptians, things they had in their houses: jewelry, ornaments, weapons, and toys with which the children played. There is no other country in the world that can show us such ancient things as Egypt, and these things are not only interesting because they are old, but because they are the beginnings of many things that we use today: the first paper, the first writing, the first book, and the first statue all came from Egypt.

Now, in every land, the shape of the country, the surroundings, and the climate have had a great deal to do with the history of the people who lived there, and this is especially true of Egypt. If you look at the map, you will see that Egypt is a long and narrow country along the banks of the river Nile. Someone once described the shape of Egypt as being like that of a lily, the Nile being the long and crooked stem, and the Delta the flower. The Nile is about three thousand miles long, a little longer than the width across the Atlantic Ocean between Europe and America. Its source is in Victoria

Nyanza, in Central Africa, and it is known as the White Nile; about thirteen hundred and fifty miles from the sea, it is joined by the Blue Nile, and a hundred and forty miles further on, by the Atbara; after this junction the river flows on to the sea as a single stream, the Nile itself.

Egypt is very narrow compared to its length; it consists of the valley of the river and nothing more. Between the Nile and the Red Sea are the Arabian Mountains; they are wild and desolate, and no Egyptian ever made them his home, but the region was used as a stone quarry, and there the Egyptians went to procure the great stones for their huge buildings. It was a dreary land, where famine and thirst and death reigned. Slaves were sent to work in the quarries, and many never returned. West of the Nile are the Libyan Mountains, just as desolate as the mountains in the East, and beyond these the land slopes down to the Desert of Sahara. The land of Egypt is, therefore, simply the strip of land lying on either bank of the Nile, about seven hundred miles in length, with desolate, lifeless mountains on each side as soon as the river valley is left behind. The width of the valley varies from ten to thirty miles; sometimes the mountains come so close to the river that there are only a few miles of fertile land on the bank. There is very little rain in Egypt, hardly any at all in Upper Egypt. The sky is a beautiful blue and the sun is always bright, so Egypt can be pictured as a bright shining river, with green banks, cliffs sloping up to the gray mountains, and brilliant undimmed sunshine over all.

An ancient Greek historian once said that "Egypt was the gift of the Nile." This saying is quite literally true, for it is the Nile that makes the country fertile. Perhaps you have already been wondering, how could anything grow in a country where it seldom or never rained? But in the mountains from which the Blue Nile and the Atbara come, there is a rainy season beginning about April. The rain comes down so heavily that the rivers rise and become very much swollen. Also, the snows

melt, and all these waters rush into the main body of the stream, bringing with them rich deposits of thick black mud. As the river flows on towards the sea, it overflows its banks, covering the soil with the thick, rich mud. This inundation begins in Egypt about the end of June, and the river goes on rising until the middle of September, when it remains stationary for two or three weeks and then rises again, reaching its greatest height in October. Then it begins to sink gradually, until by the following June it reaches its normal level before the rising begins again. To the ancient Egyptians this was a most extraordinary thing, which they could not explain in any way, so they said that the Nile was "an incomprehensible mystery." In modern times great canals and embankments have been built, so that when the overflowing begins, the water irrigates a large surface of land, making it rich and fertile; the towns and villages are reached by roads over the embankments, the canals being built so that the water is carried to the places that need it most.

The course of the Nile is interrupted six times by cataracts. These cataracts are not great waterfalls like Niagara, but they are found in rocky regions where the rocks are so hard that the river is unable to wear down a channel as in the other parts of its bed, and so it winds in and out amongst great rocks that seriously interfere with navigation. In ancient times, when men knew less about engineering, the Nile was navigable only as far as the first cataract. The part of the country from this first cataract to Memphis was known as Upper Egypt (the kings of which wore a White Crown), and the part from Memphis to the sea was called Lower Egypt (the kings wearing a Red Crown). These ancient Egyptians called their land *kam*, a word meaning "black" or "dark-colored," from the color of the soil.

In the days when the Nile was still digging a bed for itself through the rocky soil, the northern part of the country was entirely under water. The Mediterranean Sea reached nearly

as far as where Cairo now stands, making a wide bay. The water, however, was very shallow, and as the river brought down its thick deposits of mud, the bay gradually filled up, until it became a swampy but very fertile soil. In places the water remained deep, and this resulted in the Nile branching into several arms and entering the sea by a number of mouths. At one time there were seven mouths, but in modern times the water has been drained off and now there are only two. This formation is known as the Delta. The name was given to it by the Greeks, who saw in it the shape of their capital letter "D," which is made in the form of a triangle and is called Delta. (Since then all river mouths which branch out in this way have been known by the same name.)

The climate of Egypt is almost the most perfect in the world. The desert air is pure and dry, so that the heat is rarely oppressive, and there is no humidity. The nights are always cool, even in the heat of summer, and in winter they are surprisingly cold.

The shape of the land and its climate have influenced the history of Egypt. Because of the length and narrowness of the country, communication between the various towns and villages scattered along the banks of the Nile was difficult. So instead of having one government, they developed independent governments of their own, and there were a number of small city states instead of one strong one. But, on the other hand, as soon as the people began to learn how to irrigate, they found that it was necessary to join together in some form of government, and to organize an ordered way of living together. We shall soon see that the Egyptian buildings were very huge; the people were probably influenced by the flat stretches of land along the river banks and wanted to build something in contrast to them. The surrounding mountains also influenced the ideas of the earliest Egyptians about the rest of the world; we shall see what these ideas were in another chapter.