

The Train to Alexandria

by Lesley Dawson

We had been on a tour of Egypt, down the Nile as far as Aswan and had returned to Cairo to meet up with colleagues. It was quite daunting being adrift in this city with its crazy drivers after being cossetted by a tour guide and a printed schedule.

We had been invited to visit our friend Mohammed who was staying with his in-laws in Alexandria. It would be easy, said Mohammed, to get the train from Cairo. We would have no problems. Confirmation of our plans was made by phone with Mohammed's young brother-in-law. Between us we thought we had communicated well, despite his limited English and my poor Arabic. They will meet us at the station in Alex. And take us to a suitable hotel.

Having looked at the train itinerary printed on the wall of our carriage Andy worried that there were two stations in Alex. "Do you know which one we get off at?" Confidently I ventured "I'm sure we will know. We will see them on the platform".

At the first station we looked around for familiar faces. No joy. It must be the next station. We duly alighted there in expectation of seeing a smiling Mohammed but no joy here either. We should have exited the train at the earlier station.

"What will we do now?" "Let's get a taxi to the Brothers School and ask them where they suggest we stay. They might even offer us a bed there." Our Egyptian Brothers were not helpful at all. They did not know where we could stay and certainly never offered us accommodation there.

"What do we do now?" Our taxi driver, seeing the lack of hospitality at the school offered to take us to a cheap guest house he knew. Why not? We couldn't think of any other options. We pulled up at this dilapidated building and Andy suggested I went in and if I thought it suitable, he would be satisfied. What a responsibility.

I was not particularly impressed by the room I was offered, but by this time was thoroughly fed up with the whole city and presented our passports to the landlady for the tourist police to see.

Wanting to be anywhere but this room, I suggested a walk along the Esplanade in the direction of the lighthouse. We glumly paced along the path without seeing the beauty of the place and not comfortable with each other.

About halfway to the lighthouse we saw two men walking towards us and as they drew closer, to our delight and relief, saw that they were our friends.

After much shouting of “Alhamdullilah/Thank God” and “Insha’allah/God willing” accompanied by much hugging and back slapping we thanked our lucky stars for this fortunate meeting. Luck is a thing that comes in many forms and who can recognize her?

We were whisked away to a “much more suitable hotel, that was nor very expensive,” after which we visited Mohammed’s father-in-law, an illustrious sheikh and were fed sumptuously on fish, the size of which we had never seen before. All ended well and we slept in comfort that night.