

## True Tales of a Traveller Series

### 04: Alternative Medicine

His younger brother was far less fluent in foreign languages, and apparently less internationalised. The two worked together on an international trade project, Marcel revealed to me after we had spent some time in casual conversation about travel in Egypt.

Once he learnt about my travel background, and my intention to continue travelling in the region, Marcel insisted that Jeanette and I visit his family home, where he could tell us more about this lucrative trading project, which we could work with him on if we wished, as they always needed new people. With his fluent English and polite etiquette, he seemed to easily win Jeanette over, which was a cause of some concern for me. I was used to her attracting a lot of interest among local males, and I knew she didn't really like that, but who could refuse this gallant Franco-Egyptian gentleman? I didn't want to have to rescue her from a local's home and bring her back to the guesthouse. But, Marcel made clear, throwing up his hands, that if we had no interest in his little project, well, that was also fine; and his brother would be only too happy to drive us both back to this location or to our guesthouse, whichever was more convenient. Still, he felt he had to tell us more about the project, and mentioned that there were already several other Europeans involved, and they certainly hadn't regretted their involvement. So we agreed, and he drove us to his family home in a large house a few kilometres out of town.

As his mother brought us tea and snacks, Marcel pointed out that his house was home to three generations; his grandparents, parents, himself and his brother, then added in a joking tone that if they could get his brother married it may soon be home to four generations! "What about yourself," I asked, "are you married?"

"Me?" Marcel asked with obviously feigned surprise. "Oh, no, I'm too old now. And, anyway, who would want someone like me, always in some other country?" I wondered if his deliberately self-deprecating manner was his way of letting Jeanette know that this eligible bachelor was in fact unattached...?

We engaged in casual conversation on cultural differences between Egypt, France and Sweden, in a spacious hall-like room which provided views of Luxor through a large open doorway. Marcel's brother brought out a suitcase to show us, and placed it in front of me.

"What do you think of the artifact, Alix?" Marcel asked me with a restrained smile.

I couldn't understand what he meant. "You mean the suitcase", I asked, looking around to see if there was something I was missing.

"No. The ancient artifact, in the suitcase", Marcel insisted with an open palm held in the direction of the case. Suddenly, I believed I understood. He hadn't noticed that something he thought had been put in the case, in fact had not been put in it at all. Only his brother had just seen the case, not him.

I picked up the small case and showed him it was empty of any contents. "There's nothing in the suitcase".

Marcel took the case from me, pushed one side slightly inwards with both thumbs, and a pocket I wouldn't have guessed was there became visible. From it, he extracted a wooden board on which a partially complete mosaic was fixed.

"Voila!" He exclaimed, as he stood, and held the artifact up to make sure we had both seen it. Jeanette looked at him, eyes wide. Marcel sat down again on Jeanette's left side - I was on her right - placed the artifact on the coffee table in front of us, then leaned towards Jeanette and whispered, with a sense of awe, "This is over 2,500 years old." Then, looking at me, he added with a smile: "And very, very valuable. This will sell for a very fine price in Switzerland, which is where it's going the day after tomorrow. You may be surprised to know how much."

I felt some concern at Marcel's whispering to Jeanette. It seemed to me to be far too close, and far too intimate for Egyptian decorum. Did he fancy his chances with her? Was he deliberately trying to make her feel at ease with his closeness? Or was he just so thoroughly Westernised that he paid no heed to local notions of propriety when the only other local person present was his brother?

These questions occupied my mind and made me a little slow to realise exactly what Marcel's 'trade project' was all about.

But I soon caught on. "This, I designed myself," Marcel told us, pointing to the suitcase with some pride, then opened the suitcase again to demonstrate that the pocket was not easy to detect. I had to admit; I would not have noticed it on a cursory inspection, had I been a customs official, for example.

I asked how such an item could be sold in Switzerland? Would it be legal?

"It isn't illegal in Switzerland, but it would not be legal here," Marcel told me, shaking his head with an expression that wrinkled his forehead, that seemed to indicate troubled and yet perplexed emotions at this apparent injustice.