

CHAPTER I

THE SANCTUARY IN THE DESERT

THE blazing orb of the Egyptian sun had passed down behind the rugged hills of the Western Desert when Father Gregory, tall and gaunt, dismounted from his donkey at the gate of the little whitewashed building which stood amongst the palms and tamarisks at the foot of the cliffs. Looking eastwards, his eye followed the thin line of the path along which he had ridden, as it trailed down from the desert, now deep in the shadow of the Theban hills, into the vivid fields of the Nile Valley, where the sun still flooded the scene with a golden splendour; and thence through a straggling native village down to the banks of the river. Beyond the silent expanse of the water he could see, in the far distance, the houses of the little town of Luxor bathed in sunlight; and his gaze dwelt for a moment on the columns of the ancient temple which seemed to stand in disdainful majesty above the ramshackle cluster of the modern buildings. Behind the town and its palm groves stretched the desert again, with its range of peaked hills, pink and saffron and violet in the haze of the late afternoon.

Father Gregory was a man of over sixty years of age; and the ride down to the Luxor ferry and back, as well as an hour's shopping in the sun-scorched bazaars, had fatigued him considerably. With a sigh of relief, he handed the reins to his