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### **Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia**

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Chapter V. Cairo to Port Said

## CHAPTER V.

### CAIRO TO PORT SAID.

**An Unexpected Delay—An Old Pasha on his Travels—Many Wives bring Many Cares—A Nubian Eunuch—Egyptian Railways—The Sweet-water Canal—Zag-a-Zig—A Showy old Turk—An Amusing Skirmish—Sanded Up in the Desert—Arabs and Arabic—Ismailia, the Deserted Village—"Water is Gold"—Ferdinand de Lesseps—"Have a Shine, Sir?"—Steaming on the Canal—A Possible Explosion—Port Said, the "Silver Gate to the Orient"—A "California" Town that knows no Sabbath—The Arab Juggler Performs the Egg Trick.**



HE steamer upon which we were to embark at Suez having been unexpectedly delayed in London, and being advised that we should have two weeks time on our hands, we at once determined to make a short trip to Jerusalem and back, via Port Said and Jaffa.

Our route was from Cairo to Ismailia, one hundred miles, by rail, thence by the Suez Canal to Port Said.

At the station, while waiting for our train, I witnessed a scene characteristic of Turkish married life outside the harem. A venerable looking old gentleman, whose rich dress and number of attendants indicated wealth and position, was about to take a journey by rail accompanied by two of his wives. An inner waiting room is provided at

the station for Turkish ladies, and it was not until the train was nearly ready to start that he made his appearance, and walked across the platform to the compartment reserved for his party, followed by the two closely veiled ladies. They were dressed in loose, baggy white gowns, their faces so completely covered that not even an eye could be seen. A eunuch, black as Erebus, walked beside each, and hurried them into the train, then quickly pulled up the blinds. Perhaps they were young and handsome as the "light of the harem," or they may have been old and ugly, which is quite as probable. The servants put into the compartment several large bundles which seemed to be silk and satin dresses, tied up in white cloth. Ladies in the East never use Saratoga trunks when traveling. The head eunuch was a large, finely proportioned Nubian, over six feet high, with a bright intelligent face. He was dressed in European costume, all but the fez. His feet were encased in patent leather boots, and altogether he was got up in most nobby style. He ordered the copper-colored Arab servants about, with a grand air, and while he stood by the door receiving the pasha's last orders, he glanced rather superciliously at the pale-faced strangers. As his master's confidential servant, major-domo, or head guard of the harem, I could imagine the orders given him to look sharp after the ladies left behind, and especially to keep an eye on that black-



THE EUNUCH.

eyed young Circassian girl, "Lulu," who was quite too fond of going shopping in the bazaars, and gadding around while her lord and master was away. The train started, the eunuch strutted off, and I saw him driven away in the elegant carriage that had brought the pasha and his wives to the station.

This railway, like all others in Egypt, is owned by the Khedive and managed by government officials. It is smooth and well equipped, the cars and locomotives being of French manufacture. We left Cairo at nine in the morning, and our course for the first hour was down the Nile valley, then branching off to the east we followed the line of the Sweet-water canal, originally built by the Pharaohs to connect the Nile with the Red Sea at Suez. In the lapse of ages it became filled up by the desert sands, but was re-opened a few years ago as far as Ismailia, to supply water to that new "city of the desert," situated on Lake Timsah, now the central station of the great Suez canal, and half way between the Mediterranean and the Red Sea.

We reached a station called Zag-a-Zig about noon, and were at once assailed by the half naked beggars, who with arms extended, loudly called for "*baksheesh! baksheesh!*" Here we were to change cars, and waited for two hours to take the train from Alexandria to Suez via Ismailia. The station house is large and well built, and includes a hotel kept by a Frenchman, who provided us a very good dinner. The native guards and railway officials are generally very civil and attentive, especially to the first class passengers, who are mostly Europeans. They all speak French as well as Arabic, but few can understand a word of English. As I strolled along the platform, which was crowded with people of almost every nationality and condition of life, I was attracted by the gay costume

of an old grey-bearded Turkish officer, with bright turban, loose blue trousers, and cashmere shawl tied around his waist, in which was stuck a pair of handsome silver mounted pistols. He wore an elegant sword, scimiter-shaped, in a silver scabbard, and was what the English would call a "great swell" among the humble *fellahs*, or Egyptian peasants, around him. Nothing daunted by his formidable appearance, I saluted him courteously, and by pantomime expressed my admiration of his armament, which so gratified him that he unbuckled his scimiter for me to examine. Though silver mounted and very handsome, I found it exceedingly dull and even rusty. The pistols were old fashioned flint-locks, without any flints; and upon a close examination I could see that his whole "get up" was more for show than use. With my little "Smith & Wesson" and a good stout club, I should have been more than a match for him in close quarters.

At a station a few miles further on, an amusing scene occurred. Near by is an encampment of perhaps a thousand Egyptian soldiers. They wear a neat, white undress uniform, are of fair size, and look well fed and serviceable. Their arms are breech-loading rifles of modern pattern. The officers are dressed in dark blue frock coats and red trousers, and all—officers and men—wear the red fez cap. As soon as the train stops the soldiers make a rush for the cars, and clamber over them in every direction. The officers, armed with rattans, beat them back with solid whacks, laid on with a will. No one seems to take offense, and they run like a flock of sheep. To submit thus to blows, shows a want of manliness and spirit, characteristic of the modern Egyptian. It would never be submitted to by the soldiers of any civilized nation. Even in India a blow from an officer would fire the blood of the lowest Sepoy, and result either in immediate vengeance, or in

the suicide of the poor fellow, whose self-respect would be forever lost by such an insult.

Leaving the "skirmish" in full blast, the signs of vegetation rapidly diminished, until the green trees and narrow strip of fertile soil which line the track of the reopened canal on our right, were the only relief to the eye. All else is a sandy desert, broken up into ridges by the wind, and in appearance not unlike the alkali plains of the Humboldt Valley. We had now a new experience in railway travel. Our speed diminished and about four o'clock we came to a stand-still. A fierce gale was blowing from the northwest, and the fine sand drifted by the wind had covered the rails, stopped the train, and we were *sanded up*.

I have a vivid recollection of being snowed up many years ago, between Dunkirk and Buffalo, but this was quite a different sensation. Alighting from the train to view the situation, we were soon glad to again take refuge in the cars and tightly close all the windows and blinds, as the sand driven by the fierce sirocco, penetrated our clothing and blinded our eyes, while the howling of the natives engaged in clearing the track, filled our ears with discordant din. Of all the languages I have ever heard among heathens or Christians, I think Arabic deserves the distinction of requiring the most words to express the fewest thoughts. The Arabs are a most voluble race, and whether at work or play I will match their tongues against three times the number of any other people on the earth. A stranger would think a frightful combat was imminent, but they rarely come to blows, their excited jabbering being but empty sound signifying nothing. After a long delay the train started on, but soon again came to a stand-still. We at last reached Ismailia, several hours behind time, with no other damage than could be repaired by a bath and a thorough shaking of our well sanded garments.

Ismailia, named after the Khedive of Egypt, was four years ago a town of great expectations. Its short history is the counterpart of many a promising city along the line of the great railways of America. Its pleasant situation upon the shore of Lake Timsah, and its central position, being midway between Port Said and Suez, seemed to indicate that it would rapidly become a place of importance. When I was here three years ago, it was very flourishing, and boasted a population of over five thousand. Speculation in corner lots was rife, and new buildings, not very substantial, to be sure, but good enough for a climate like Egypt, were pushing back upon the desert sands behind the town. It had a large and elegantly furnished hotel, several handsome residences surrounded by gardens, and a public square, and wide streets planted with shade trees, near which along the gutters, trickled a stream of pure fresh water.

That "water is gold" is as true in Egypt as in India, where the proverb originated. Its magic effect in converting a desert into a garden, is shown by the Mormons in Salt Lake City. Behind the town and between it and the desert, is a wide sweeping double crescent of trees growing newly out of the sand, but fresh and green from a channel of water running near their roots. When fully grown these trees will protect the town from the encroachment of sand swept in before the fierce winds from the desert. This sand, which looks so hopeless and useless as an element of fertility, is not pure silica, but a mixture of calcareous loam and sand, needing only the addition of fresh water to form a rich and fertile soil. The desert of Suez, which stretches for ninety miles from the Nile to the Red Sea, was doubtless once well watered and fertile, and cultivated like a garden. That it has now become a howling wilderness, is accounted for by some depression of the Nile

bed, or change in its course, by which its eastern outlets have become closed. As it never rains in this country, cut off the supply of water and it would all turn to a desert. Take away the Nile from Egypt, and the whole land would become a mere counterpart of the desert of Suez.

But the Ismailia of to-day is in sad contrast with its bright promise of three years ago. As we remained here until the next day, we had an opportunity to stroll through the largest deserted village I ever saw. Not one in twenty of the buildings seem occupied, and the few that show signs of habitation are mostly saloons where the occupants are playing cards or billiards. Only about one thousand people are left, who seem too poor to get away. The fine hotel is closed, its elegant furniture having been removed to a much smaller house, where we found no other guest but ourselves.

The grand palace built by the Viceroy of Egypt to entertain the Empress of France, the Prince of Wales, and other royal personages, is dilapidated, the windows broken, and the court-yard half filled with drifted sand.

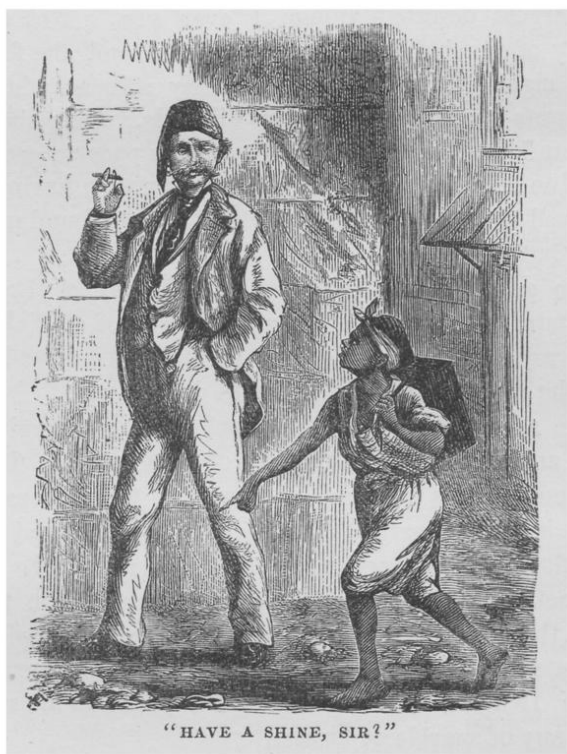
The administration of the canal has its central offices here, and the elegant residence of Ferdinand de Lesseps, surrounded by a grove of semi-tropical trees, seemed like an oasis in the desert. He is still the head of canal affairs, and though nearly seventy years old, has all the energy and activity of mind and body that enabled him to overcome the most disheartening difficulties, and complete one of the greatest engineering works of the nineteenth century. It will remain a grander monument to his memory than any of marble or bronze.

We saw him ride past in a basket phaeton with his young wife and three children, the largest not over five years old. This is the only wheeled vehicle left in the town, and was the only sign of life in the streets, except a few disconso-



late-looking donkey boys and a boot black, perhaps the identical young *gamin* who hailed me here three years before, when Ismailia was in its glory, with the question, in pantomime, "Have a shine, Sir?"

This bright little Arab boy, who looked as if he might have slept the night before in a dry goods box in Ann street or the Bowery, was in waiting at the hotel door with "Black your boots?" "have a shine, Sir?" in pantomime



as plain as if spoken in English. Of course I went in for a "shine." The whole double-handed performance, concluding with a sharp rap on the box, was so completely *a la*

*New York*, that I am sure it never originated in this out of the way corner of Asia and Africa, but was introduced by some enterprising New York *gamin*, probably at the great celebration when the canal was opened. Perhaps, like the wandering Jew, he is still on his travels, and future explorers may trace this "march of civilization" among the little "pigtales" of Canton and Pekin.

The immense pumping works erected by the canal company to supply water to the town of Port Said, forty-two miles distant, are located in Ismailia, and well repaid our visit. The engines are of French manufacture, very powerful, and as elegantly finished as any machinery I ever saw. While inspecting these works we had the good fortune to meet M. de Lesseps, the "*Fondateur*" of the canal, as he is called, who very kindly showed us around the works and explained many interesting details in the administration of the canal.

Late in the afternoon we embarked on a little steamboat not over thirty feet long, with a high-pressure engine that whizzed like one of our steamers in full play at a fire, suggesting the possibility of our being at any moment scattered in small pieces over the banks of the canal and into the desert beyond. We preferred to spend the five hours required for the trip to Port Said on deck, as far aft as possible, prepared to jump, in case we heard any unusual noise in the boiler-room of our little craft. Once, by invitation of the captain, to whose kind attentions we had been specially commended, we descended into the miniature cabin, but the sound through the thin partition, of the combined engineer and fireman stirring up the coal under the boiler, convinced us that the deck was a more healthy place, and better adapted for viewing the canal.

It was late at night when we reached Port Said, where the runners from the different hotels pounced on our lug-

gage in a style peculiar to seaport towns all over the world. In such cases words are of no account, and the only persuasive argument is a good stout stick. There are several hotels, all French, but neither can be recommended as good.

Port Said is a lively town. The population is made up in great part of adventurers from every nation bordering the Mediterranean. The abounding hotels, restaurants, casinos, and the wide, sandy streets, remind one of a new town in America. French, Italian, Greek, Arabic, and Turkish are heard in the streets quite as often as English. Speculation is rife, and the business of the place increasing rapidly. Every line of coasting steamers between Alexandria and Constantinople touch here, as it has the most accessible harbor on the whole southern coast of the Mediterranean. The sanguine talk of Port Said, as the "Silver Gate between the Orient and the Occident," in fifty years to be a modern Venice, the rival of Alexandria. Its harbor is entirely artificial; formed by two parallel piers running out from the shore into the open sea a mile and a half—the longest piers in the world. They are built of artificial blocks of stone weighing twenty tons each, composed of desert sand and hydraulic cement. Some of these have been exposed for over six years to all the fury of the fiercest gales, without in the least affecting their stability. This harbor is said to be better than that of Alexandria, (one hundred and fifty miles west,) and can be safely entered by day or night, at all seasons of the year.

The next day was Sunday in western lands; but this can hardly be classed among the Christian cities, and in Port Said, Sunday is said to be the liveliest day in the week. The French steamer for Jaffa was to sail at five P. M., so we had ample time to look about us. Moored in the harbor, near the entrance to the canal, were many

steamers and ships loading or discharging cargoes. Nearly all steamers bound through the canal to India, here take supplies of coal that last as far as Aden, at the foot of the Red Sea.

On the broad quay a large crowd had collected around an Arab juggler, who, assisted by a little imp of a boy, was performing the well-known egg trick in a manner decidedly amusing and original. As we stood for a few minutes on the outside of the throng, laughing at the novel performance, his quick eye espied us, and the youngster dove head foremost through the crowd to present his cap for *baksheesh*. In this he was not disappointed, and as we turned away we concluded that our liberality would afford a free show to the crowd for the next half hour.