

EGYPT FROM A RAILWAY TRAIN.

BY G. A. MACKENZIE, M.A.

Three years ago I stood on the deck of an Australian steamer at Suez and looked out over the gulf with a pleasant sense of expectancy. For six weeks we had been at sea, labouring across the stormy Australian Bight, slipping over the great billows of the Indian ocean, with the constant trade winds and the tireless albatross behind us, gliding under dim mountain-peaks in the gulf of Aden, or sweltering through the sun-plagued reach of the Red Sea. At last we had steamed past the desolate heights of the Sinai range—what a world of sacred history the sight calls up!—and drawing near the cloud of sand which hangs over the head of the gulf, had dropped our anchor in the middle of a cluster of the ships of many nations, waiting their turn to enter the great canal. And now, with a great "land-hunger," to use the term Mr. Gladstone applies to Ireland, upon us, we gazed at the low dusty plain where Suez was, and at the boats with one great wing-shaped sail which skimmed over the water towards us. Presently the occupants of these boats were clambering over the side of our ship, and the deck was in the possession of a crowd of genuine orientals. Some were clothed in graceful loose-flowing robes and parti-coloured turbans. But most of them were men of the poorer class, boatmen and fruitsellers in white skull-caps and coarse blue gowns, their brown legs and feet bare, and little of the brilliancy of the Orient about them. We had seen them before in copies of the monumental designs and hieroglyphics of ancient Egypt.

You may travel round the world, from London to New York, from New York to San Francisco, from San Francisco to Auckland, from Auckland to Melbourne, from Melbourne to Suez, and until you reach Suez you will not feel that you are in a foreign country. But here at last you leave Britain and Britishers—for the places I have named are but settlements in that "Greater Britain" of which Sir Charles Dilke writes—and know the fascination of being surrounded by an entirely strange and distinctive civilization.

Since the opening of the Suez canal passengers for London from Australia or India generally make the whole journey by water. But the judicious traveller will, if it be in his power, disembark at Suez, take the rail to Alexandria, and thence proceed to his destination by way of Messina, Naples, Rome, and Paris. Even if he cannot linger on the way the glimpse of Egypt, of the vine-clad Sicilian hills, of Ætna Stromboli and Vesuvius, of the Bay of Naples and the wonders of Rome and Paris, will well repay the divergence from the direct route. This divergence I had determined to make, and with two Italian fellow-voyagers bound for Genoa, I committed myself to the tender care of an Arab boatman, who undertook, for an exorbitant consideration, to land us at the town of Suez.

When we drew near the landing place a mob of ragged citizens came whooping down to the water's edge to receive us. Having dragged the boat ashore, despite the protests of the boatman, who grudged others the privilege of plundering us, they quarrelled among themselves for the possession of our effects, and without recognizing the existence of the owners finally carried them away. We had not expected to be robbed in broad daylight in what we had understood to be a partially civilized town. Such, however, seemed to be the fate in store for us, until there came to our aid a gentleman in a white petticoat who

begged us to be calm. We had only to place implicit confidence in him, he would see us safely through all dangers; the robber-horde was merely conveying the baggage to the custom-house; it was his profession to take care of helpless travellers; in a word, he was a dragoman. A dragoman! we felt that we were indeed in Egypt.

At the custom-house we found the mob with the luggage, still contending amongst themselves for the control of the various articles. When a monetary transaction with the brown gentlemen in fezzes who presided over the customs had been gone through by the direction of the dragoman, which transaction was accepted as a guarantee that we had no dutiable goods, a procession was formed for the hotel, somewhat in the following order:—

Citizen with valise,
Citizen with trunk,
Citizen with hat-box,
Citizen with umbrella,
Other citizens with other effects,
The dragoman,
The travellers,
Unemployed youth of Suez.

Narrow unpaved streets where the desert sand flows about at will, low plastered or clay houses, now and then a trellised window, a dome sometimes and a minaret, bespeaking a mosque—this is Suez. Arabs in brilliant turbans and robes sit at their doors smoking, or trot by on donkeys, and from a cross street, his nose high in air and his contemptuous underlip protruding, a swarthy rider perched upon his back, shambles a camel who does not belong to a menagerie.

"The Hotel D'Orient, advantageously known, offers to travellers, besides an excellent comfort, the calm and tranquility of a boarding-house. Halls for baths. A private saloon for billiards. They speak English, French, and Italian."

Such is a literal translation of the advertisement of the little French hotel at Suez. Though the party who spoke English was apparently absent on important business—he generally is—though I was unable to find the saloon for billiards, and the "*salles de bains*" dwindled into one sepulchral cell, where some yellow Nile water had been stagnating for several weeks past, still I feel bound to say a good word for the Hotel D'Orient. It does give a sense of comfort and tranquility, after six weeks of the sea, to sit in a little plot of clay—there is no turf in Egypt—protected from the sun by a trellised vine, under which a fountain plashes musically. It is pleasant to partake of a clean and well-cooked dinner, and learn once more what fresh bread and vegetables taste like, particularly when one is ministered to by a stately and courteous Mahometan who owns four wives.

Beyond donkey-riding I do not know that there is much exciting employment at Suez. If the glory of the town as a place of trade has departed—and it has, since the canal has been opened to carry past the commerce which used to discharge there—the glory of its donkeys still remains. I have no strong feeling for the camel. Personally I have but a distant acquaintance with him, but I confess to a prejudice against a creature who, with such personal disadvantages, can look so supremely self-satisfied. But the donkeys of Egypt, especially those of Suez, are faithful, willing, and easy-footed. They have been known, it is true, to lie down in front of a railway train, but the rider has only to dismount and the donkey is sure to get up again in good time.

"Has the donkey a name?" I inquired of the bright-eyed black urchin who trotted along behind me, urging on the animal I rode, with outcries and a sharp stick.

"Oh yis, Fruit of Philosophy!"