

MIDDLE EASTERN WHIMSICALITIES:

BEFORE I, one of that strange tribe still consistently referred to as "furlough men," embark upon this whimsical treatise and advice to young Kiwis, I would like it made quite clear that any reference to any place does not necessarily mean that we are going there. I am going to speak in this article about life in Egypt, but for Pete's sake don't come along in six week's time and say, "What the devil are we doing in Ti-buktu? The Arabs probably know where we are going - they know everything - but we do not."

One's first view of Egypt is, unfortunately for all concerned, the Port of Suez. It is not a pretty sight, nor has it a pretty smell. Previous disembarkations have taken place by way of lighters from ship to shore, and I might add that the lighters have not been used exclusively for troops; the first New Zealand troops to land on 12th February, 1940 followed hard on the heels of several shipments of animals.

On shore you will see a motley assortment of "fellahin," the poorer natives of the Middle East, a few Berberines, dark-skinned natives of the Sudan, and many nondescript wharf loafers who are supposed to be wharf labourers. Of these classes all but the more lofty Sudanese will beg, borrow or steal cigarettes, food or money. One of your first sights will assuredly be that of a group of poorly attired natives fighting over a cigarette butt. If you give them a cigarette, they will be grateful and murmur, "Ilhandulillah," (Praise be to Allah); but it is as well to remember that they will pick your pockets, if you give them half a chance. Its all in the game to them.

The smell, the dust and the flies - these are Suez. You cannot escape either one of these elements anywhere in Egypt, and in many parts you will be overcome with all three postilences at once. Near native quarters and among the roofless ruins of mud houses, in which live large families and all their animals, the smell, dust and flies are at their worst.

The train journey to Cairo is uncomfortable and dusty, but it is packed with interest. You will pass through your first desert, miles and miles of earth that is hard packed by the feet of Time, dotted with camel-thorn bushes, with occasional piles of hard jagged rock. It is not the desert of your imagination; there are no undulating miles of sand-dunes, none of the desert of "Beau Geste." There are a few sand-hills but they are not continuous.

Here you will see an odd camel, the utilitarian ship of the desert, who carries a look on his face that is reminiscent of a disparaging and disapproving maiden aunt. At your approach he raises his disdainful glance and glowers at you under long eyelashes, chewing the while with a rhythmic circular motion of the lower jaw.

Through the train windows on your right you can see that which heralds a new civilization and proclaims to the world the glory of another age, the Great Pyramid of Cheops. This huge monument and tomb of the Pharaoh, Cheops, which stands 481 feet high and covers an area of 13 acres and which was built over 5000 years ago, is well worth a visit. But, as well as being a lasting monument to what is really the cradle of civilization, it is also a signpost to show a wanderer the way to the capital of Egypt.

On either side you will see cultivated areas. Wherever there is a waterway in Egypt, you will find also the means of raising the water to the level of the fields. The result of their methods, primitive as they may be, is land fertile enough to bear two or even three crops each year.

Among the fields are numerous Arab villages. In filth and squalor it would be hard to find anything in the world that is their equal. Among the tumble-down dwellings of mud and straw, most of which are roofless, stands tail-flicking water buffalo, evil-smelling goats, several imperturbable donkeys and an occasional nonchalant camel. Around the feet of these creatures swarm hens and naked children.

The contrast between these outskirts of Cairo and the airy modern city which houses its European inhabitants and its many thousands of middle-class and wealthy Egyptians, is a very marked one. Cairo has often been called the city of contrast. Here squalor and splendour exist side by side. In one street can be found tall modern buildings, and close by the hovels of the native population with all the dust and filth of ages upon them.

(To be continued).

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