

we are on our way," and many rather hastily and untruthfully agreed that the coast disappearing over the starboard quarter formed their most favourable impression of Italy. Perhaps because we were disembarking in Egypt, with the prospect of spending weeks there, accounted for this attitude of an almost resigned acceptance. Perhaps in the case of so many the magnet of Home had decreased in attraction against the powerful, indefinable pull of a comradeship in the hazards of war; it had been so completely a separate life. But, in the main, I think it was that years of discipline, routine, and restraints, both physical and mental, had formed a shell too strong to be cracked by the significance of fact. It was to most of us just another army movement, continuing years of army movements, and even though one knew that one was starting on the long voyage home it did not seem, in army parlance, to "ring a bell."

But the train wheels as we ground slowly through the graveyards of the Dead City, along the line that runs under the towering escarpment; while we rolled backwards and forwards through the main Cairo network, were steadily clicking the message through, "You're going home. You're going home." And acceleration came with the long, flat stretches of rocky desert so that, detraining for a night in a transit camp a few miles short of Port Tewfik (Suez), the trance of four war-hypnotic years had started to fade a little and one could say with less mesmeric bewilderment, "I am going home."

There is nothing spectacular in the actual movement of large bodies of men. A group is collected at one point by a series of sub-collections and eventually transferred to another point, but there is little to indicate the intricate, detailed administrative work behind such a movement. The organization needed to transfer several thousand men from Italy to a point of embarkation in the Middle East is tremendous. Beginning many months ago, when first the order was given for the repatriation of this particular group of long-service men, there had been a colossal sea of detail and calculation.

Apart from such major issues as the availability of shipping, rolls had to be prepared, men withdrawn from units, replacements found for key personnel; men had to be assembled from many points and then the whole roster of military procedure involved—medical inspections, kit inspections, inoculations, dental inspections, withdrawal of equipment, issue of clothing, balancing of pay-books; parades, parades, parades—had to be carried out, first in Italy and again in Egypt. One had little time, then, to realize more than remotely the purpose of it all. One knew, but it still meant next to nothing. Reflexes were still those of a soldier, an automaton used for military purposes. There seemed not to be anything personal in it all.



Waiting !

It was this vast, intricate network of administration that brought us at its peak to the small piers of Port Tewfik, to a sight of dirty grey hulls in the roadstead, and from the last roll check to embarkation lighters. A warming spring sun shone beneficently over Suez waters, blue as publicity posters ever made them, kitbag and suitcase-laden, men clumsily negotiated steps and rails to the lighters' decks. And it was in sober fashion that the men chaffed the garrulous, dirty-galabiehed *rais*, master of the lighter. He was "George" almost with affection. He was the representative of all "Georges," and, through him, in the chaffing that was almost affection, there was a farewell to the character of the galabieh, for so long kicked, cursed, caricatured—and liked.