

Zeitoun  
Cairo

12/12/14.

My dear Hazel,

I think we will get a mail from home before long. There are persistent rumours that a tremendous big mail is being sorted down at Alexandria. I shouldn't wonder if you get a whole bunch of letters at once, too. They say the letters we posted at Colombo are still with us.

I hardly need say that we were horribly disappointed when we found our destination was Egypt. Right up to Suey we were quite positive that we were going to Europe. Still this place has its compensations, and provided we are not kept too long, we are too well off to complain. The climate is so good, and the country and the people so extremely interesting. I dare say most of the troops will be horribly tired of the place as soon as the novelty wears off, but I think I will always find plenty of interest in learning Arabic, practising French, and studying the people in general.



I will resume my account of the trip from Suez, though the details are already rather dim in my mind, not so much from the lapse of time as from the host of novelties and wonders I have seen since.

We reached Suez on Wednesday morning, Dec. 2nd, about daybreak. I was sleeping in a coil of rope on deck, I remember, and was routed out by the boatswain, as it was a mooring-rope. The African coast is very close, but on the Sinai side ~~it can~~ the shore can hardly be distinguished. We lay some miles from the town till after dinner, and the natives came swarming out with boats of fruit etc. Terrible swindlers they were, as we found when we knew the local prices better. The business part of the town contains some tall buildings, and I was surprised at its extent. It is divided from the residential quarter by a lagoon or swamp, and the entrance to the canal is through this European quarter, which contains some fine hotels and houses. On entering the canal, we found there was a



beautiful avenue running along it, full of gardens, trees and picturesque architecture, all with the same profusion of bright colours that we noticed at Colombo.

The trip through the canal occupies about fifteen hours, so we passed through most of it in darkness. In any case it appeared to be uninteresting. The canal is very narrow, except at one part, where it opens out into a big salt lake, about twelve miles long. The land is absolute desert, and the only natives we saw appeared to be employed on the canal. There was a line of small encampments of Indian troops right along - splendidly built, fierce looking fellows.

In the early hours next morning a most unearthly din began to trouble my dreams, and I gradually awoke to the fact that we at anchor at Port Said, and that the boat was thronged with shrieking, yelling natives, carrying up coal in baskets from the barges. They were working in gangs of hundreds, and seemed to be practically starved. They prowled



round and snatched greedily, at any food they could get - even the pig-wash from our breakfast-tables. The harbour at Port Said is an artificial one, dug out like the canal, and entered from the sea by a continuation of the canal. It is surrounded by stores and ware-houses, which cut off the view of the town. We saw some good buildings on leaving the harbour in the afternoon. The statue of the engineer Delesseps, right out on the sea-wall, is a particularly good one.

We reached Alexandria about nine next morning, and our company disembarked an hour later. The whole disembarkation occupied a week, and the companies which remained at Alexandria had a good look round there, but we saw practically nothing of the town. I only know that the harbour is a splendid one, built out with breakwaters, and the shipping is tremendous, on a larger scale, I should think, than Sydney. We remained waiting round the wharf all day, expecting to leave



any minute, then we got on the train, went about two hundred yards, and stopped again for hours. After a very tedious day, we had an awful night journey, in filthy third class carriages. Sleep was impossible, and the night seemed interminable. We could see that the country up the Delta was very thickly populated, carefully irrigated and closely cultivated, and we envied those who made the journey in daylight. We finally reached the station of Palais Troubbek, opposite the Khedive's palace of that name, at four o'clock in the morning, and marched out to our camping-ground at Zeitoun. We waited an hour for the dawn, and then set to work to pitch camp. Our regiment had a full complement of tents, but some of the others are still bivouacking. The Friday and Saturday were fully occupied with fatigues, and practically no rations were available. It was a real taste of active service conditions. However, we got to town each evening, weary as we were, to



buy a meal and see the night side of Cairo. By Sunday we were fairly ship-shape, and have had no cause to complain of the "tucker" since. We have a regular programme now. At 5.30, while it is still black night, reveille sounds, and the four brass bands march round the camp, making most unwelcome music.

At 6.30 there is physical drill, and at 7 breakfast - porridge, "bully beef" and coffee. From 8 to 2 we get through the solid part of the day's work. Our regiment usually marches out about five miles into the desert, and practices attack, entrenchment work, etc. The last three days our scouts have been working independently, locating various villages by means of map and compass, and writing reconnaissance reports on them. This is much more interesting than the ordinary routine work, as we have more chance of observing things, and we get about the country more, instead of sticking in the desert. At two o'clock we get back to dinner, very



tired and hungry, and get some excellent "gibbo" - a stew of meat, cabbage, turnips and new potatoes all mixed together. There is a short parade for rifle drill etc. from 3.30 to 4, just for the purpose of keeping us in camp, and then we are free till roll-call at 9.30. If we are feeling energetic, we go to Cairo; ~~if~~ not, we just go visiting to the English camp, or spend a pleasant quiet evening at one of the restaurants in Heliopolis. This is a large suburb on the edge of the desert, built entirely during the last three years by a Belgian syndicate. The houses are all very large, many of them larger than any hotel in New Zealand, so I suppose they are divided into flats and apartments. They are without exception handsome in design, but not solidly built. The dry climate makes that unnecessary, as the cheapest building will keep its fresh appearance practically for centuries. For the same reason they can go in for delicate tracery, stucco-work, and bright colours,



which in New Zealand would soon become effaced and shabby. There is a pleasure garden there called Luna Park, containing a "wonderland" of side-shows - skating rink, water chute, etc. etc., but I have not been there yet. The restaurants are delightful, and I can't understand why there are none in New Zealand. You can sit either indoors or out among the trees, and can get a light meal and very good beer and wine, all cheap. There is always a piano which the soldiers take charge of, and at some places there are pictures shown in the open air.

Our leave is really too short to see much of Bairo. We can only get there by tea-time, and walk round in the evening, catching the 9<sup>00</sup> clock train. The Belmich station is only eight minutes from camp, so we find the train quicker than the Helioholis tram, though both are excellent services. In spite of the vast extent of the city, there ~~are~~ seem to be very few decent European streets in the business quarter.



Of course there may be others, but it is very hard to find the way anywhere, and we generally seem to wander round in a circle, not covering any fresh ground since the first night. Any likely looking road seems to merge into dirty native slums, and back we go again. The native quarters were at first the chief centre of attraction. They certainly opened my eyes to the limits of degradation which men and women can descend to, but I hope never to see them again. I prefer to go to a music-hall, though most of them are very poor affairs, only redeemed by the sociable atmosphere and the easy friendliness which prevails among all the different regiments. The Australians are fine fellows, but rather too swaggering, and I find the quaint, shrewd, simple-hearted Lancashire men more interesting company.

We hope to get away tomorrow (Dunday) about two o'clock, and perhaps pay a visit to the Pyramids of Ghizeh, where the Australians are



encamped. They are fifteen miles from town, but the tram takes you there in 40 minutes for one piastre ( $2\frac{1}{2}d$ ). They are across the Nile from here, so the trip should be full of interest in every way. The Nile is on the far side of the town, and we have not seen it yet. Our scout officer is thinking of taking us for a three days' trek in that direction, tramping, bivouacking and making reports on the military aspect of the country. It should be a grand outing, for the Major is much too good a sort not to give us plenty of opportunities for sight-seeing. The ~~chief~~ other places most visited are Old Cairo, where there are old palaces and tombs of the Mamelouks, and the museum of antiquities, somewhere in the town.

It is surprising how difficult it is for an Englishman to get anything he wants here. The natives, of course, speak nothing but Arabic, and their dialect is very different from book Arabic. The shops and cafés in the better part of the town



are entirely in the hands of Greeks and Italians, and a fair number of French. The best-educated Egyptians, who are a very courteous and intelligent class of men, speak both French and English, but they are much more familiar with French than English, probably because the Greeks and Italians, with whom they have dealings every day, can nearly all speak French, but have very little English.

We had some trouble with the coinage at first, but it is really very simple. The piastre is the standard coin, and there are also  $\frac{1}{2}$  piastres, and 2, 5, 10, 20 and 40 piastre coins, all silver. The piastre and  $\frac{1}{2}$  piastre are nickel. Our next pay on Monday, including some back pay, is to be nearly 400 piastres, which sounds like a small fortune, and will really go much farther than \$4 in New Zealand. Living is very cheap. Meat is scarce and rather dear, but poultry and eggs are cheap. A meal of three eggs, with bread and tea or



beer, costs three piastres ( $7\frac{1}{2}d$ ). Butter is practically never used in the country, though we have plenty so far in camp. A piastre will buy a good glass of wine, 10 oranges, 20 tomatoes or a dozen post-cards. You get a shave, a hair-cut and a newspaper for a  $\frac{1}{2}$  piastre apiece. The train fare to town (8 miles) is a  $\frac{1}{2}$  piastre, second class.

On the whole, we must admit that we are having a very good time here. It was hardly what we left our happy homes for, but perhaps our chance of service will come later. In the meantime we are having a happy, healthy life, and we should be in good form if we do get to the front. If only we could get that New Zealand mail, I would have no grievance left.

When next I write, I hope to tell you much more about the sights of Cairo and the surrounding district.

Good-bye, my love. I am thinking of you always.

With love from  
Becie.

P.S. I forgot to say that I have tried Hall-Jones for company, but he is in the stockland lot, and came up from Alexandria on Thursday. I think you have met him - he is one of my best friends.