

The Suez Canal.

(By CHARLES EDWARD RUSSELL.)

Port Said, basking in the sun; a sandy, sizzling, raucous place, compact of all the tribes and redolent of all the evil smells of earth. Alongside the coal-barges, great and dirty—a thousand of the maniacs of four brown nations shrieking and dancing over the coal; on the other side a massed flotilla of petty pirates; in an ill-conditioned boat, charging the pirates, a squad of the red-fezed and white-jacketed policemen of his debilitate Majesty, the Khedive of Egypt; clouds of coal-dust to offend the eye, and a Babylonian horror of gabbling tongues to stun the senses and weary the soul. And above all this seething tumult and mad revel of confusion stands forth the serene image of order, system, of cold, calculating, relentless method, the colossal statue of Ferdinand de Lesseps.

So you go from the West into the East; out of the European world into the Asiatic; and that statue, imperturbable before the gateway, marks the dividing line. On this side you are in your own country; on the other the thin silver cord of the great canal stretches out over the yellow desert to alien things and peoples. You look up at the statue, as below on the steamer you slide by at quarter speed, and in some occult way the calm, masterful face, the long, strong jaw, the pose of command and authority, touch the easy springs of racial pride. Below are the scuffling hordes of Asia; above the reserve and strength of the Caucasian; and the essence of the contrast is good to taste. Here is the race that does things, your race and mine; here is efficiency against inefficiency; power and concentration against ineptitude; and that, you tell yourself, is the story of the Suez Canal.

From the clouds of dust, and the shrieking bedlam, you, making terms with a petty pirate, flee to the shore to wander the sandy streets, and watch the human kaleidoscope turning and turning beneath your eye. Arabs, Egyptians, Turks, Syrians, Greeks, Italians, Russians, Frenchmen, Germans, English, are in that mass, with anthropological odds and ends unidentified. The street signs are a study in polyglot; men lie and steal and gamble in all the tongues from Babel; and the variety of costume makes you think of something stagey and theatrical until you hit upon the exact word your mind has been groping for to describe all this—vaudeville. Port Said is a kind of vaudeville; it is the show-place of nations. The Arab sheiks, white-turbaned, tall, austere of countenance, lithe of step, seem placed on show for your delectation; the gaudily-attired water-peter seems a fantastic impostor; the Parsee money-changer appeals to you as a piece of stage setting, and the red fezzes seem donned for the occasion. But two things are genuine enough to any apprehension—the hot dry wind of the desert that strikes with a material impact on your face, and the incessant bawling of the men that swarm about you offering to be guides. And these you drive in the end to a cafe on the shore where you can sit, and from a safe distance watch the maniacs and the eddying life of the water-front.

The sun slants westerly, and the maniacs break into a chant, the whole mad gang singing together as they pass up the coal in baskets hidden in a choking miasma of coal-dust. It is one of the primal tones of Asia. I have heard the same thing in the streets of Canton. There are four notes in it—maybe five—and the maniacs sing it hours together while they pass up the coal. As for the words, heaven knows what they are, for the four nations speak four different tongues and each maniac screams in his own vernacular, but all to the same tune—more or less. And all the while the foremen or drivers or bosses or whatever they may be, with blows and oaths incessantly drive the workers onward. Broad-nosed negroes, Arabs, Egyptians, and Syrians are in that gang. You remember, doubtless, the pictures from the old Egyptian temple walls, the slender, bare men with a strap about the loins and a strange, cylindrical headdress that made their heads seem projected far backward, their strange lips, and strange eyes! There they are, shovelling coal on that barge, the same loin-cloth, the same strange cylindrical head-dress, the same thin, naked bodies. Thirty centuries have passed over earth sooner than the habits of one race. These are the men that built the pyramids; with such drivers and such blows and such misery of

hopeless toil. And now they coal the R.M.S. Moldavia at the entrance to the Suez Canal.

Down at the other end of your panorama, away from Europe, down toward the desert and the silver canal line, is the great, glorious office-building of the Canal Company, white stone, glittering in the sun, very imposing, a proper antithesis of the howling wretches on the barges, a proper complement to the beautiful statue. Between lies Port Said. When the canal days dawned, the company built it to house the vast army of workmen while alive and to serve as a convenient pit to throw them into when dead. It has thriven mightily since, for to all the vast trade of the boundless East it holds the door, and takes tribute. It began as a charnel-house; it will end as one of the great cities of earth; and if the sands whereon it was built could speak, they might tell awful tales.

But now in the manner of our kind we think of no such thing. All night the steamer lies at Port Said, while the cafe orchestras blare and the roulette wheels turn; and in the morning, with the clear dry air sweeping in from the desert, the sky full of the bewildering wealth of far Mediterranean colour, you are carried past the struggling town, past the company's beautiful white office into the very canal itself; for so far you have been in but the artificial harbour at its mouth. This ditch, 137 feet wide, 31 feet deep, cut straight for league upon league through level desert or banked across shallow lagoons—how simple it seems when you think of Culebra Cut and the manifold terrors of Panama! You can stand on the fore-castle head and the banks meet in front of you and again far behind, so straight it is. But for the passing-station every five miles, with its little house and cluster of palms and telegraph signal, and maybe a waiting steamer, there is no change in the drear uniformity.

Anything that has steam must be passed at a passing-station; there is no room in the canal. But the native boats, the Arab dhows, lateen-rigged, manned by naked brown and black men, you may pass anywhere, provided you stop your engines long enough to let them go by. Your steamer may move six miles an hour through the canal, but at no faster rate. The dhows pitch mightily in your swell, threatened with disaster against the near-by banks; but the brown, naked men care naught, only sit in the sun and stare.

Lo, where the sand insatiate drinks The steady splendour of the air— you say; for all about is flat desert. And leaning over the rail, staring at the flat, yellow glaring expanse, you are aware that the lady next to you is talking.

"Henry dear," she says (not to you; to her husband), "just see how fresh and cool those trees look out in that sand!"

You look, too, and the trees certainly do seem wonderfully fresh and sweet, and you wonder at them in such a place. Before them is an expanse of water, and that looks fresh and sweet also; but strange in a way you cannot define. And presently, as you gaze, trees and water vanish, and where they were is only the sand insatiate and the steady splendour of the air. It was naught but mirage; reappearing and vanishing wherever you look, until you are not sure whether even the sand itself, the stretches of smooth, oily lagoons, or the very camel trains be real.

But to the camel trains indeed, you may swear with full assurance, for by the might of these, and the bawling boys that drive them, and the brown labourers, and the great black reptiles of dredges here and there, you use the canal or have a canal to use. The great insistent problem of Suez is the sand and the wind that forever blows and blows it into the canal. But for endless toil and sleepless vigilance the ditch would fill up. Such was the fate that overtook its predecessors. For this is no nineteenth century nor European project, as a matter of fact, but a thing two thousand years old, or more.

Then from the time of the Moors, in the ninth century, down to fifty years ago, there was no canal, and all the huge traffic to the Orient came and went by the Cape of Good Hope. Some time when we are celebrating the surpassing wisdom of the Caucasian mind, let us put this in: The ancients cut the isthmus; we went around the Cape, taking six months to get to India. I read the other day that somewhere in England there is a monument in memory of Lieut. Waghorn of the British army. One monument!—to the man that first drove into

the British intelligence the fact that, canal or no canal, the Cape of Good Hope route was not necessary. His idea was to steam to Alexandria, carry the passengers, mails, and freight overland to Suez, and re-embark them on the Red Sea. It was so simple and obvious that any child with a map could have hit upon it; but Waghorn hammered for years at the British Government before he could get anybody to listen to him. At last, he was graciously allowed to see what he could do, and in 1846 he got letters from London to Bombay in thirty days. When that fact had sufficiently permeated safety, sanity and conservatism, the Waghorn route was adopted—for the mails. So moves the world. The demonstration that the thirty-day plan was feasible gradually centred attention upon a certain mad Frenchman, ceaselessly shouting about his canal project; the great Indian revolution of 1857 showed the British public that quick transit was more desirable than conservatism, and so at last De Lesseps raised his money and began to dig sand and kill fellows. The dredges scoop from the bottom of the canal the blown-in sand, and dump it along the shore; the camel trains bring up rocks and supplies for the army of workmen that must toil always to keep this highway clear. Egyptians and Arabs are the workmen, Scotchmen the engineers, naked savage boys the camel drivers, clinging with one hand to the first camel's tail and with the other beating the beast ceaselessly. One boy manages eight or ten camels, tethered in a string—their loads on their backs. When the steamer comes, invariably he drops the tail to which he has been holding and races along the shore screaming for bakshish, and revealing to the interested passengers the amazing extent of his professional skill in picturesque profanity.

That other and narrower stream to starboard there is the fresh-water canal built to supply Port Said and the labourers while the Suez was being built. It reaches up towards the Nile somewhere. Close beyond it is the embankment of the railroad from Port Said, along which American-built locomotives slip the swift express trains past the slowly moving steamers. And still farther are the endless lagoons and dreary sands. That is the scenery. More monotonous country is not known to man, but from every steamer the passengers study the prospect with unflagging interest. The hot sands stretch far away, unvaried, unrelieved, the air radiates visibly from their blistering surface, the sun burns madly in a sky of perfect violet, the whole thing is tiresome, but you watch every mile of the way and think it too short. Because here is the work of man's hands that has done most to further trade and bind together peoples and to contract the round earth to the hollow of your hand.

In the mid-afternoon you pass the place where the great caravan track to Cairo crosses, and maybe if you are lucky, there is a caravan, trains of camels heavily laden, black negroes, and the Arab on his horse—not very different from his pictures; dirty, maybe, but always a respectable-looking figure.

No towns, no villages, and, except for the passing-stations, no human habitations; unless by some assault upon speech you can call those things human habitations wherein, back of the station-houses the brown men live, where the savage women are always cooking before a fire, and the savage children are always swarming about. At the first turn, at Lake Tensah, in the late afternoon, there is a glimpse of the town of Ismailia far away, but the steamer no more than slackens her speed to change pilots, with the pilot boat steaming alongside, and plunges between the sandy walls again.

Sunset is the supernal glory of the Suez day—a Mediterranean sunset intensified; redder reds, more vivid saffrons, a more gorgeous and intoxicating riot of colours, against which the palms of a passing-station are painted with a sudden stroke likely to take away your breath. And when, in the excellent phrase of the old Roman, Night rushes in from the ocean, and the great search-light on the bow turns its flood up the canal, there are other surprises. Then the palms and the passing-stations are all done in silver and the shores seem strangely unreal; and all the ship's company gathers on the fore-castle or on the forward promenades to watch this memorable pageant.

You do the ninety-nine miles of the canal in about seventeen hours if you are not held up anywhere at a passing station. Part of the distance is traversed through the Bitter Lakes, where there is ample room and good water, and the chief

below hooks up the engines to full speed; but all the canal proper is traversed at quarter speed or less to save the banks from being washed clean away.

Soon the picturesque passing-stations will be of time gone by and will no more delay steamers; for the company has undertaken to widen the entire canal until two vessels can anywhere pass in it. Then the speed limit may possibly be raised and the time of passage be shortened. Even now the work of widening is well in hand. Easily enough the company can afford the great though expensive improvement, for the profits are goodly. In 1904 the receipts were £4,632,739—that is all. For a passage through the canal the charges are 7 francs 25 centimes (1.45 dol.) a ton for vessels and 2 francs 25 centimes (.45dol.) for each passenger. The profits are such that they pay seven per cent to the stockholders after numerous charges have been met. Among the odd items of the charges are a payment to the employees of two per cent of the net earnings and another of ten per cent to the board of managing directors, of who there are fifteen, six being French and six British, and an intellectual feast.

By the crowning triumph of the wily Disraeli's career, the Government of Great Britain in 1877 became the principal owner of the canal. Quietly and without asking the permission of Parliament, Disraeli bought for £4,000,000 the entire holdings of the Khedive of Egypt. At once arose a mighty howl of protest by indignant Britons, for England had always looked askance upon the canal. But Disraeli bought the stock, and the British Government ever since raked off the goodly profits and held its ownership as a secret menace against the world's commerce. All the nations of Europe have solemnly agreed that the canal is to be open to all ships at all times, and all the nations know that the British Government might seize the whole thing if it chose.

We are about to go heavily into the canal business as builders and operators. The task we have undertaken is the most colossal (of its kind) in history. Compared with the difficulties at Panama the difficulties at Suez seem trifling. Instead of the dead level and easy sand of Suez, Panama presents terrific rock cuttings and puzzling problems in engineering; instead of a fairly healthful climate, Panama has malarial and deadly pestilences. Here, then, is something for us in the records and results of Suez, the next greatest canal in the world, in what it cost in money and human lives and human suffering, and what it has meant for the world; for these things indicate what may be ahead of us.

First, about the results to the world: here is an outline of the business that the Suez Canal has done:—

Year.	No. Ships	Ton	Tons
1869	10	6,576	
1870	486	436,600	
1886	3100	8,180,000	£2,260,000
1891	4207	12,200,000	3,540,000
1897	2986	11,120,000	2,844,000
1904	4217	18,661,092	4,632,000

TONNAGE		
	1886	1890
British	6,260,000	8,060,000
German	320,000	1,120,000
French	700,000	820,000
Italian	190,000	590,000
Dutch	310,000	520,000
Various	400,000	950,000

In 1904, 210,849 persons were passengers through the canal. This is an analysis of the tonnage that year:—

Country	Vessels	Gross Tonnage
Great Britain	2679	12,164,501
Germany	542	2,736,067
France	262	1,167,105
Holland	223	814,204
Austria	135	632,323
Italy	94	306,395
Russia	82	249,801
Norway	72	194,278
Spain	29	125,116
Denmark	21	77,204
Turkey	43	65,679
United States	17	30,220
Greece	17	32,305
Japan	6	32,813
Egypt	7	7,866
Belgium	2	6,060
Sweden	2	3,812
Portugal	3	4,408
Chile	1	1,545
Total	4237	18,661,092

But you could pick up the figures without end and give no idea of the real value of the thing. No one in this generation glimpsed what it meant until the age