

**THE GATES OF THE EAST:
TEN CHAPTERS ON THE
ISTHMUS OF SUEZ CANAL**

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The Gates of the East: Ten Chapters on the Isthmus of Suez Canal by Charles Lamb Kenney

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CHARLES LAMB KENNEY

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CHAPTER I.

THE OVERLAND ROUTE.

THANKS to Mr. Thackeray, everybody is familiar with the main features of one of those long voyages to or from India which were the rule about thirty or forty years ago. We all have followed Joss and Major Dobbin on their voyage home in that glorious sailing ship, the "Ranchunder." Persons proceeding to India, or returning from thence, rented a cabin in those dear, lumbering, easy-going Indiamen, as they would a house or a villa, for the better part of, if not for the whole of a twelvemonth. The ship called and took provisions and water at Cape Town and St. Helena, and half a-dozen other harbours and islands on the long run round the enormous continent of Africa. The passengers, dining for months together at the same table, and passing and re-passing one another in their daily walks on the deck, became either fast friends or bitter enemies. Indifference was out of the question among persons who were compelled to herd together on so long a voyage. People in England who had friends in India believed they kept up an intercourse with them if they heard from them once a-year, and even that correspondence, meagre as it was, drooped and decayed; for a letter written in September of the one year was answered possibly by October in the year following, when the thoughts,

the feelings, and the circumstances of the writers were altered, if not forgotten, even by themselves. The news of Indian battles reached the Government at home, and the friends of those engaged, at a time when the success which was the cause of national rejoicing had possibly been followed by a reverse or two, and hot and scalding tears fell on the list of killed in a *Gazette* when the heroes who were so lamented had for many months been resting in their graves—when brushwood and jungle had sprung up from the ashes of the men whose loss was lamented, and whose virtues were commemorated on a new marble tablet, bright with gilding and polish, in the parish church. Events in India were fairly beyond the control of those who pretended to govern at home. Our Indian Empire, a comparatively small and uncertain tenure, might be lost and won long before the ship which carried the intelligence had sighted the coasts of Europe. What was news in England had become historic matter in India. Commerce, too, was subjected to all the thousand vicissitudes of time and distance. He must be a bold and rich man who would set up as an Indian merchant. No advices from the Indian markets could reach the London houses under five or six months after the date of the letter, and in case of accident, even a longer time elapsed. Speculations with Indian produce—exportations of goods for India, were a wild and dangerous game. Enormous fortunes were made, but enormous fortunes also were lost, when each man, as it were, staked his money in the dark; when extraordinary powers of foresight and combination might do a little, and all the rest was done by accident. As a matter of course, commercial transactions with India were limited. The European population was very small—the native Indians under British rule were but new subjects, whom no frequency of intercourse with Europeans had made familiar with European neces-

saries and luxuries. Trade with India was confined to a few harbour towns and strips of territory along the coast, or on the banks of the rivers nearest the sea. In all other respects our Indian possessions might exist for the sake of revenue; but they supplied few materials for, and formed no feature in the commerce of our country. For all purposes of Government, trade, and familiar intercourse, India was too far off to be really important. The length of the voyage, the impossibility of quick and safe communication between England and India, was painfully felt at home; it was still more painfully felt by the European Indians themselves. But there was no way that any one could see of remedying this evil. Steam-ships, indeed, were introduced into the coasting-trade of the European nations, but steamers, it was understood, were available only for short voyages. It was the time when the few who believed that steamers would eventually run between Liverpool and New York, were silenced in their timid avowal of such belief, by the impatient shrug and contemptuous smiles of practical men. Steamers to India or even to the Cape were quite out of the question. Even the boldest and wildest visionaries, if they had such hopes of centuries to come, dared not avow them. The state of things I refer to must be fresh in the memory of all men who have lived more than forty years, and who at this day see hundreds of schemes realized and in practical and flourishing execution of which their seniors told them, in their time, that they were utterly absurd, visionary, ridiculous, and bordering on madness.

To tell the whole truth: painful as the length of way between England and India was felt in the latter country, and painfully as it might affect individuals at home, there were few men in England who troubled themselves about the means of shortening the distance, and lessening the period which travellers and despatches had to be on their

way. The British possessions in India were important, but they were insignificant compared to what they are at present. Governments of the day were of opinion that our power was fairly established. They most wisely and humanely repudiated the idea of further conquest. All Governments do. Besides, our Indian possessions bounded the East for us. Beyond those limits all was darkness and barbarism—impenetrable to the trader, and explored only now and then by a cunning "political," or a venturesome missionary. No trading ships had any business to go farther than the Bay of Bengal. Borneo was known only to geographers. China was hermetically closed against all Europeans excepting the Dutch. Japan was never thought of. The vast continent of Australia unexplored, and, in fact, undiscovered, served only as a penal settlement for the worst of criminals. The British possessions in India were a strong inducement to desire a shorter and quicker route than the long sail round the Cape of Good Hope; but the inducement was not near so strong then as it is now, when the whole of Hindostan, with its 150,000,000 of subjects and tributaries; when China, with its 350,000,000 of inhabitants; when Ceylon and the islands of the Indian Archipelago; when Australia with its European population, collected there within the memory even of schoolboys, offers a daily-widening field to British enterprise. At present, such a state of things as was quietly and even cheerfully acquiesced in forty years ago would be insufferable. But it must be owned, that the East would not be to us what it is now, had that state of things been permitted to continue.

It was not an easy matter to effect an alteration. As early as 1823, certain members of the Government of Bombay bethought themselves that the route round Africa was not of necessity the only route by which travellers and couriers might proceed to England; that the run from Bombay to

Aden at the point where the Red Sea opens into the Indian Ocean was hardly one-fourth of the length of the run from Bombay to the Cape; that the Red Sea, though long, and reputed to be dangerous by Fathers of the Church and Mussulman pilgrims bound to Mecca, was, after all, neither so tedious nor so dangerous as the passage round the Cape, which Cape the Dutch—good sailors too—nicknamed Cape Terrible. They further bethought themselves that a ship carrying mails and passengers might discharge its burden at Suez; that the courier and passengers might, without difficulty or danger, cross the desert which separates the Red Sea at Suez from the Mediterranean at Alexandria; and that another ship waiting in the latter port might receive them on board, and carry them to Malta, and thence to England. The Bombay Government proposed all this to the Home Government, stating, at the same time, that experiments had been made, and that the whole voyage might be performed in thirty-five days. The proposal was rejected. Revived in 1826, it was not a whit better received. The Overland Route by which passengers and despatches reach us from India at the present time, and which has just now, by a new Government contract, been officially pronounced the shortest and most expeditious route between England and Australia, was, in 1823 and 1826, proposed to the Government of the day, and each time the proposal was rejected, if not with contempt, at least with compassion.

No doubt the Government of the day acted from conscientious motives. No doubt they consulted not only what they considered their own convenience, but also what they considered the general welfare. Most assuredly did they take the opinion of men of vast experience and high scientific attainments. And when the plan had been rejected by Government, the Government organs and the Government speakers told the world the reasons why. The plan was

utterly visionary. It had no practical features. It was made irrespective of existing circumstances. No ship could pass the Straits of Babelmandeb. Ships might be windbound in the Red Sea for months and months. Instead of being shorter than the voyage round Africa, the run from Bombay to Suez would be as long as the run from Bombay to England. And how could couriers be expected to cross from Suez to Alexandria? Were there no wild Bedouin tribes in the desert, sword in hand, watching for Cabinet messengers, that they might devour them? And the travellers? Where were they to come from? What men would be mad enough to venture upon a journey across a desert wild—when, according to all authorities, old and new, travellers in a desert never come out of it, but always die of thirst. But suppose the travellers did not die of thirst, was not Egypt the home of the plague? Would not the travellers to a man die of that dreadful distemper? And if by a miracle some of them survived, where were they to go? What country could receive their tainted bodies—what purification would avail to cleanse those missionaries of pestilence?

We can afford to smile at all this. But the first advocates of the Overland Route found it no laughing matter. Lieutenant Waghorn, whose name is indissolubly connected with the present highway to India, undertook, in 1829, at his own risk and expense, to carry despatches from England to India, through Egypt and the Red Sea. He did carry those despatches; and he carried them at his own risk and expense, for the purpose of convincing the most incredulous—that is to say, the experienced advisers of the Government of the day—of the practicability of the Overland Route. His journeys were successful, and the importance of the new road to India was acknowledged by all, and urged upon the attention of Government by the great London journals. In 1834, a Parliamentary Commission was appointed to inquire