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Francis Sacheverell Darwin

Excerpt

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CHAPTER I

*CORUNNA, ST JAGO, VIGO, OPORTO**November and December, 1808*

I LEFT Breadsall Priory in Derbyshire on Sunday morning November 20th 1808, and slept that night and the following at Birmingham. On Tuesday the 22nd, with my friend Mr Theo. Galton, I proceeded to Falmouth, where on Saturday the 26th we found the packet for Corunna was about to sail in two hours. Being provided with passports from the Secretary of State's Office, and having paid 20 guineas each for our passage to Corunna, we embarked in the Express Packet, Capt. Sampson, and weighed anchor at 10 o'clock the same morning.

Our society on this voyage consisted of a well-informed man, a Mr Arbuthnot, who had formerly held some civil appointment at Ceylon; Mr Clarke, who had belonged to the Army, and now went as a Volunteer into the Spanish Service; and Mr Adey, a young gentleman on his way to join Sir J. Moore's regiment, the 52nd. T. G. and myself now became more acquainted every hour; and on this voyage we formed a most sincere friendship, which increased and strengthened as our dispositions were better known to each other.

The wind was favourable; and in the space of a day and night we were in the midst of the Bay of Biscay. Here it was we first experienced a heavy

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sea; and the waves running mountains high now raised us above, and now appeared to engulf our ship in the bosom of the deep.

During the obscure light of parting day we reflected on the uncertainty of human events, and occasionally conversed upon the change we had chosen—from the quiet comforts of an English home, to a country involved in all the miseries of War.

The gale increased towards midnight; and all hands on board were actively employed until morning in making everything secure and keeping the pumps at work. As the morning dawned we found ourselves very near to a large ship, which proved to be a Spanish merchantman—greatly to our satisfaction, for the Captain suspected her intentions were not very friendly, and we had in a great hurry made the vessel ready for action: the appearance of our brig had also inspired the Spaniards with a corresponding terror, and we spoke each other with all our guns ready to fire at the word of command.

We continued to toss about this vast bay for two or three days, during one of which the wind entirely died away and our ship rolled amongst the heavy swell. Towards mid-day a fine turtle asleep on the waves attracted our attention, and the Captain expected to catch him—but we had no such treat as Turtle soup on this voyage.

At 5 o'clock p.m. on Wednesday the 30th we had

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the happiness of once more setting our feet on terra firma at Corunna. Here we found everything in confusion from its vicinity to the Army, which was at this time about 30 miles from the City; and it was with difficulty we obtained even chairs to sleep upon at the Leo d'Oro. It was impossible to return to our vessel, or to get on board any other, in consequence of the embarkation and disembarkation of soldiers and stores. The "Tonnant," 84 guns, is the Flag-ship at present in this place; she was taken at the Battle of the Nile, and was the last in the French Service which struck to Lord Nelson.

Mr Clarke went on in the evening to St Jago de Compostella—having understood that some Spaniards were in arms at that place, and wishing to join their detachment against the enemy. We took leave of Messrs Arbuthnot and Adey; and on the 4th December—each mounted on a stubborn mule, for which we paid ten dollars—we proceeded on the road to St Jago early in the morning, over a dreary tract of country of 40 miles, and a great part of the journey only distant a few miles from the French outposts. We became more reconciled to the cold and wildness of the scenery as the evening closed in; and it was dark when we arrived at a Posada in the City.

On the following morning we delivered a letter of introduction, given to us by our bankers in Corunna—MM. Riberas—to Mr Saldarini, an Italian gentleman, whose civilities during our stay

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were unbounded. Mr Saldarini informed us of the melancholy fate of poor Mr Clarke, who had been robbed and murdered the night before: we could not gain any local information about the remains of our unhappy friend, and never afterwards heard more of him.

Our Italian friend informed us that a beautiful young English girl was in a convent in the next street, and that the laws of this nunnery would permit us to speak with her if we would aver that we were related to the poor girl—which we did not hesitate to assert, and thus arrived within the precincts of this solitary abode. Charlotte Glasgow appeared in the melancholy costume of a Spanish nun, and in company with an old abbess: she informed us that five years had elapsed since the time in which she left her mother's care and eloped with a Spanish captain, who brought her to St Jago, and himself died four days afterwards of a dreadful fever, leaving her destitute of food and friends. We spent above an hour in conversation with this poor girl, and every moment made us more interested in her cause: we gave her all the tea out of our canteen, and left money for the convent.

Lord Holland, whom we found with his lady at Corunna on our arrival there, followed us to this City—where we offered him the use of our rooms at the Inn; and in return he presented us with a bottle of excellent Claret.

On the 6th December we left St Jago, and after

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a tedious journey of 40 miles reached Pontevedra at about 6 o'clock in the evening. Here the accommodations were bad, as at the preceding Posada (or inn)—where we had been much annoyed with mosquitos. This day we hired only two mules—one for our baggage, and the other carried us alternately; and thus we diminished our expenses, and had besides a variety of exercise. The town of Pontevedra is small, poor, ill-built, and uninteresting.

7th December—Our journey was short; and with much pleasure we entered the town of Vigo, where most of the Transports rendezvous to receive the Army in case of retreat. After dinner we walked to a monastery with Signor Francisco, a Portuguese gentleman, who was very polite at the table d'hôte. He introduced us to the Abbot, who had little to exhibit except a fine prospect of mountains and the Harbour. On returning from our walk we found the town in the greatest alarm in consequence of an appearance on the road from Pontevedra which the inhabitants had magnified into the bright helmets of retreating soldiers—until with the aid of our telescopes we discovered it to be the reflection of the sun upon the windows of Lord Holland's carriage!

At Vigo we again procured two mules; and in company with Signor Francisco, who conversed with us in French, we proceeded to Iny—a town situated near the river Minho, which divides Spain from Portugal in this part. The distance was about

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16 miles, and here the passports were obtained to cross the river; but no sooner had we reached the other side, than a guard of soldiers marched us as prisoners to a small fort on the summit of a hill commanding the passage of the Minho. Signor Francisco had accidentally spoken a few words of French in the boat—which was the cause of our being arrested; and the Governor told us it was well we were not killed—so great is the hatred of the Spaniards to the French. Our passports explained everything satisfactorily; but, as we had been so long detained and the day was far advanced, we slept that night in the garrison.

At 5 o'clock in the morning—having as usual been almost devoured during the night, and the draw-bridges, gates, etc. of this little fortress being opened—we sallied forth for the town of Viana, and reached it at 7 in the evening. Viana is a pleasant little town full of convents, some of them fine buildings: for want of a better lodging we were obliged to sleep in a dirty kitchen with 12 or 14 other people on a stone floor. The next morning leaving the town at 6 o'clock, and despairing of any comfort, we descried a nice clean coffee-house already open; and in the enjoyment of an excellent breakfast on coffee we forgot the miseries of the preceding night. On resuming our march we passed through Barcellos to an inn on the road about 16 miles from Oporto, and here for the first time made use of our bags to sleep in. These tied

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round the neck, and thus entirely enclosing the body, kept it from the mosquitos, etc.

11th December—The roads on this day's journey we found very heavy and sandy, the country mountainous and covered with thick forests of pine. Upon some of the trees we were surprised to see little girls of about 10 years old cutting wood at the height of 60 to 80 feet from the ground. At a house where we stopped on the road we observed a Spanish doctor bleeding a Portuguese officer, who had fallen from his horse; and, having lacerated his patient's arm and succeeded in drawing blood, to our great surprise he tasted it, with a most mysterious countenance—in order, as he informed us, to ascertain the extent of the injury received by the fall!

As we approached Oporto the country assumed a more cultivated appearance; but torrents of rain rendered the latter part of our journey very uncomfortable. Oporto is a fine town containing a population of about 60,000 inhabitants. It is situated on a hill upon one side of which the houses descend to the river, and extend along its banks to a great distance: over the Douro is a bridge of boats, well constructed, which rise and fall according to the tide. This communicates with the small town on the opposite side of the river—the entrance to which is very bad owing to a dangerous Bar or sand-bank, which at low water is nearly exposed; and very few ships of any description now harbour here. The wine of Oporto is expressed from the grape about

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16 leagues up the river, where are hills entirely covered with vineyards: it is brought down to market, and sold in one day to the numerous merchants of Oporto. About 30,000 pipes are sent annually to England.

Our lodgings were at a comfortable house in the Rue des Angleses; and we dined every day in company with a Captain Daubrava and a Mr Gooden, a very polite merchant.

At Oporto there is a good Opera house, but not so large as Covent Garden Theatre. The performance is comparatively very poor, especially in the ballets: one female only, Mme Angelina, in dancing, afforded any amusement. The inhabitants, in going to the Theatre, are always accompanied by a man with a flambeau to prevent murder, which is so constantly perpetrated in the streets. I saw one poor fellow whose side was actually laid open by a stiletto. Yesterday above 40 men were taken up, and executed on suspicion of treason: many of them died with great bravery. In walking with Captain Daubrava to-day we saved a Frenchman from an infuriated mob, who were pursuing the poor fellow to death. His gratitude to us in consequence was so great, that even the weather-beaten countenance of our brave German friend¹ could not refrain from tears.

Since leaving Corunna there has not been a drop of rain excepting on our arrival at Oporto. Fahrenheit-

[¹ Presumably Captain Daubrava. F. D. S. D.]

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heit's thermometer stood yesterday at 2 o'clock at 58° in the shade. There are at present several hundred wounded English soldiers, who are daily sent to Oporto from the Army to embark for England.

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CHAPTER II

*LISBON AND CINTRA**December 1808—January 1809*

DECEMBER 19TH: We left Oporto; and on this day's journey of four leagues we overtook a Spanish sailor—a man of colour, his name Raphael. He had been in the English Service, and was useful to us as an interpreter. We slept at a dirty posada—where we should have been murdered, if our friend the black had not awakened us and pressed our immediate departure, in consequence of our interfering with the landlord who had been beating his wife.

We proceeded 7 leagues over a barren country. The muleteer and his son, who accompanied us, smoked their pipes, sung 'Viva Rey Fernando,' and crossed themselves before several monuments of travellers who had died or been killed in these deserts. About half way to Coimbra we met about 40 carts, drawn by oxen, and escorted by part of the 38th Regiment, with provisions for Salamanca.

We arrived at Coimbra about 2 o'clock on the 21st December. The afternoon we spent in resting at the posada, being a good deal fatigued after the day's journey, and but little inclined to explore the town: however, on the following day the highest point above the City was our object, to obtain a prospect of the whole. Coimbra stands on very