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Richard Lepsius

Excerpt

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L E T T E R S

FROM

EGYPT, ETHIOPIA, AND THE PENINSULA

OF SINAI.

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LETTER I.

ON BOARD THE ORIENTAL STEAMER.

*September 5, 1842.*

ALL our endeavours were taxed to the utmost to render our departure on the 1st of September possible; one day's delay would have cost us a whole month, and this month it was necessary to gain by redoubled activity. My trip to Paris, where I arrived in thirty hours from London, was unavoidable; two days were all that could be spared for the necessary purchases, letters, and notes, after which I returned richly laden from that city, ever so interesting and instructive to me. In London I obtained two other pleasant travelling companions, Bonomi and Wild, who had readily resolved to take part in the expedition. The former, long well known as a traveller in Egypt and Ethiopia, is not only full of practical knowledge of life in that country, but is also a fine connoisseur of Egyptian art, and a master

in Egyptian drawing; the latter, a young genial architect, enthusiastically seeks in the Orient new threads for his rich woof of combination.

At length everything was bought, prepared, packed, and we had said farewell to all our friends. Bunsen only, with his usual kindness and untiring friendship, accompanied us to Southampton, the place of embarkation, where he spent the evening with us.

As one usually arrives at a sudden, scarce comprehensible quietude, on entering a harbour from the stormy sea, after long and mighty excitement, and yet seems to feel the earth swimming beneath one, and to hear the breakers dashing around, so did it happen to me in a contrary manner, when, from the whirl of the last days and weeks in the haven, from the immeasurable world-city, I entered on the uniform desert of the ocean, in the narrow-bounded, soon-traversed house of planks. And now there was nothing more to be provided, nothing to be hurried; our long row of packages, more than thirty in number, had vanished, box by box, into the murky hold; our sleeping-places required no preparation, as they would scarcely hold more than our persons. The want of anxiety caused for some time a new and indefinite uneasiness, a solicitude without any object of solicitude.

Among our fellow-passengers I mention only the missionary Lieder, who, a German by birth, is returning with his English wife to Cairo. There he has founded and conducted a school since 1828, under the auspices of the English Missionary So-

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ciety, which is now destined exclusively for the children of the Koptic Christians. Lieder has introduced into this school the study of the Koptic tongue, and thus once more brought into honour that remarkable and most ancient language of the country, which for several centuries has been totally superseded among the people by the Arabic. The Scriptures are, however, yet extant in the Koptic tongue, and even used in the service, but they are only intoned, and no longer understood.

On the 1st of September, at 10 o'clock, we left Southampton. We had the wind against us, and therefore did not reach Falmouth for four and twenty hours, where our vessel awaited the London post, to take the letters. There we remained several hours at anchor in a charming bay, at each side of the entrance of which an old castle lies upon the heights, while the town, situated in the background, form a most picturesque group. About 3 o'clock we went to sea again; the wind took us sideways, and caused much sickness amongst the passengers. I esteem myself fortunate, that in no passage, however stormy, have I had to complain of this disagreeable condition, which has, for the unsharing spectator, a comical aspect. It is, however, remarkable, that the very same movement that cradles every child to soft slumber, and forms the charm of a sail down the river, causes, by its protracted pendulum-like motion, unconquerable suffering, prostrating the strongest heroes, without, however, bringing them into any very serious danger.

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Next day we reached the Bay of Biscay, and ploughed laboriously through the long deep waves that rolled to us from the far-off shore. Sunday morning, the 4th, we had a very small company at breakfast. About 11 o'clock we assembled to prayers, notwithstanding the continual motion. Over the pulpit the English flag was spread, as the most sacred cloth on board. Herr Lieder preached, simply and well. Toward 4 o'clock we began to see the Spanish coast, in light misty outlines. The nearer we approached it, the shorter the waves became, as the wind blew from the shore. The air, the heavens, and the ocean, were incomparably beautiful. Cape Finisterre and the neighbouring coast line came out more and more prominently. Gradually the whole company, even the ladies, assembled on deck. The sea smoothed itself to a bright mirror; the whole afternoon we kept the Spanish coast in sight. The sun set magnificently in the sea; the evening-star was soon followed by the whole host of heavenly stars, and a glorious night rose above us.

Then it was that the most splendid spectacle commenced that I have ever beheld at sea. The ocean began to sparkle; all the combs of the breaking waves burnt in emerald-green fire, and from the paddles of the vessel dashed a bright greenish-white torrent of flame, which drew behind it, for a great distance, a broad flashing stripe amidst the darkling waters. The sides of the vessel and our downward-looking faces were shone upon as if by moonbeams, and I could read print with the greatest ease by this water-fire. When

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## OCEAN INFUSORIA.

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the blazing mass, which, according to Ehrenberg's researches, is caused by infusoria, was most intense, we saw flames dancing over the waves to the shore, so that it seemed as if we were traversing a more richly-starred heaven than the one we beheld above us. I have also beheld the ocean-light in the Mediterranean, but never in such extraordinary perfection as this time: the scene was magical.

Suddenly I saw new living fire-forms among the waves, that fled radiantly from the sides of the vessel. Like two giant serpents, which, judging from the length of the vessel, must have been from sixty to eighty feet long, they went trailing along beside the ship, crossing the waves, dipping in the foam of the wheels, coming forth again, retreating, hurrying, and losing themselves at last in the distance. For a long time I could assign no cause for this phenomenon. I recollected the old and oft-told tales of monstrous sea-snakes that are seen from time to time. What I here beheld could not have resembled them more than it did. At length I thought that it might only be fishes, who, running a race with the steamer, and breaking the uniform surface of the water, caused the long streams of light behind them by their rapid motions. Still the eye was as much deceived as ever; I could discover nothing of the dark fishes, nor guess their probable size, but I contented myself at length with my supposition.

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## LETTER II.

ALEXANDRIA.

*September 23, 1842.*

My last letter I posted on the 7th of September, at Gibraltar, where we employed the few hours allotted to us in examining the fortress. The African continent lay before us, a bright stripe on the horizon; on the rocks beneath me climbed monkeys, the only ones in Europe in a wild state, for which reason they are preserved. In Malta, where we arrived on the eleventh of September, we found the painter Frey, from Basle, whose friendship I had made at Rome. He brought me intelligence by word of mouth that he would take part in the expedition, and for that purpose he had arrived several days before from Naples. We had to wait almost three days for the Marseilles post at this place. This gave us, at all events, the opportunity to visit the curiosities of the island, particularly the Cyclopean walls discovered some years before in the neighbourhood of Lavalette, and also to make some purchases. Through Lieder I made the acquaintance of Gobat,\* who until now had been the principal person at the Maltese station of the

\* On the sudden death, soon after our departure from Palestine, of Bishop Alexander, Gobat was selected by H.M. the King of Prussia as the Protestant bishop of Jerusalem, which post he has filled with good success since 1846.

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## ALEXANDRIA.

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English Missionary Society, but who was now awaiting some new destination, as pecuniary circumstances had caused the Society to give up this station altogether. I had great pleasure in knowing so distinguished a person.

From Malta we were accompanied by the missionary Isenberg, who resided for a long time with Gobat in Abyssinia, and who is favourably known to philologists by his grammar of the Amharic language. Under his protection there was a young lady of Basle, Rosine Dietrich, the bride of the missionary Krapf, who has married her here, and will now return to the English missionary station at Shoa, by the next Indian steamer, with her and his colleagues, Isenberg and Mühleisen. He was married in the English chapel, and I was present as a witness at the solemnity, which was celebrated in a simple and pleasing manner.

On our arrival, on the 18th of September, we found Erbkam, Ernst Weidenbach, and Franke, who had been awaiting us for some days.

Mohammed Ali had sailed out in the fleet, as he looked anxiously forward to the arrival of Sami Bey, who was to bring him the desired reduction in tribute: instead of it he obtained the appointment of Grand Vizier.

The Swedish General Consul D'Anastasi, who manages the Prussian Consulate for our absent Consul Von Wagner, and who interests himself zealously in our behalf, presented us to-day to the Viceroy, and we have just returned from the audience. The Pasha expressed great pleasure at

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the vases which I had brought him in the name of His Majesty. Still more did he feel himself honoured by the letter of the King, of which he immediately had a translation prepared, reading it very attentively through in our presence. He signified to me his intention of giving us the reply when we again left the country. He received and dismissed us standing, had coffee presented, and showed us other attentions, which were afterwards carefully explained to me by D'Anastasi. Boghos Bey, his confidential minister, was the only person present, nor did he seat himself. Mohammed Ali showed himself brisk and youthful in his motions and conversation; no weakness was to be seen in the countenance and flashing eye of the old man of three-and-seventy springs. He spoke with interest of his Nile expeditions, and assured us that he should continue them until he had discovered the sources of the White River. To my question concerning his museum in Cairo, he replied that it was not yet very considerable; that many unjust requisitions were made of him in Europe, in desiring rapid progress in his undertakings, for which he had first to create the foundation, that had been prepared long since with us in Europe. I touched but slightly on our excavations, and took his permission for granted in conversation, expecting it to be soon given me in due form.\*

\* The firman of the Viceroy, with the most unlimited permission to carry on all excavations that I should think desirable, with a recommendation addressed to the local governments to support me, was given to me before my departure from



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## THE PRUSSIAN EXPEDITION.

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Alexandria. All the work-people and tools that were necessary for the formation and transportation of our collection of antiquities, were demanded for wages by the Khawass given us by the government, under the authority of the firman, from the Sheikh of the next village, and nowhere refused. The monuments from the southern provinces were transported in government barks from Mount Barkal to Alexandria, and to them were added three tombs from the neighbourhood of the great Pyramid of Gizeh, which, with the assistance of the four workmen purposely sent from Berlin, were carefully taken to pieces, and embarked opposite Old Cairo. At my departure from Egypt, a written permission was given me to export the collection, and the articles were formally presented to his Majesty the King of Prussia by the Viceroy.

These peculiar favours, at a time when all private travellers, antiquarian speculators, and even diplomatists, were especially interdicted by the Egyptian government from obtaining and taking away antiquities, did not fail to gain our expedition some unfavourable opinions. We were particularly blamed for having a destructive energy, which, under the ascribed circumstances, would have taken for granted a species of peculiar barbarism among our company. For, as we did not, like many of our rivals, dig out and remove the monuments, which had mostly been hidden below the surface, in haste by night, and with bribed assistance, but at our leisure, and with the open cooperation of the authorities, as well as under the eyes of many travellers—every carelessness with respect to these monuments left behind us, of which they had formed a part, would have been the more reprehensible, the easier such carelessness was to be avoided. But on the value of the monuments, we might esteem ourselves to have a more just judgment than the greater number of the generality of travellers or collectors usually possess; and we were not in danger of allowing it to be dulled by self-interest, as we did not select the monuments for ourselves, but as the agents of our government, for the Royal Museum at Berlin, and therefore for the benefit of science and an inquiring public.

The collection, which, principally by its historical value, may be compared with the most extensive in Europe, was, immediately upon its arrival, incorporated with the royal collections,

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without my being placed in any official connection with it. It is already opened and accessible to the public. A careful examination of it will conduce more than anything to place the remarks of later tourists,—among whom there are even Germans,—in their true light; who have even gone so far, as in the case of a Herr Julius Braun, in the General Augsburg Journal (*Allgemeine Augsburger Zeitung*), to ascribe to us the mutilation of the gods in the temple at El Kab, done 3,000 years ago! Besides, it would show a total ignorance of present Egyptian relations, or that which gives the actual interest to the monuments of antiquity, if any one did not wish to see the as precious as unestimated and daily destroyed treasures of those lands, preserved in European museums as much as possible.