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William Howard Russell

Excerpt

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MY DIARY IN INDIA.

CHAPTER I.

Departure for the East.—Scant time for preparation.—My fellow passengers.—Marine cookery.—Daily life in an oriental steamer.

Not one year home from the Crimea and I am once more on my way to the East—another and a farther East. Landing with the first British soldiers who set foot on the soil of Turkey in 1854, I accompanied the advanced guard of the British army to Gallipoli, then to Scutari, next to Varna, and finally to Old Fort, and only quitted the camp before Sebastopol when I was left alone in the front with the rats and the Cossacks in 1856. Then, after a visit of just ten days to England, I went once more to Russia, witnessed the coronation of the Emperor at Moscow, the “barbaric pearl and gold” of the most magnificent spectacle these later ages of ours have produced, travelled south to the Crimea, revisited the resting-places of our illustrious dead, and, turning westwards to Odessa, traversed the steppes by Bender, and passing through the much-disputed Bolgrad, in the beginning of winter reached Czernovitch, from which my way lay straight before me to London, where I arrived in the spring of 1857. The close of the same year sees me bound

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to the regions of which the "we" of England know so little, and as to which our carelessness has been an equivalent of our ignorance. But our apathy has been rudely disturbed. It was just as our journalists and statesmen were somewhat feebly glorifying our rule in India, and mildly rebuking the neglect which was allowing the centenary of Plassey and the grandeur of Clive to pass away unhonoured, that the day of whose advent Metcalfe had prophesied and Napier had warned dawned in Hindostan, and cast its blood-red light over the land. Hideous massacres of men, women, and children,—compared with which Sylla's proscriptions, the Sicilian vespers, the great *auto da fé* on Bartholomew's eve, or the Ulster outbreak of 1641, were legitimate acts of judicial punishment,—were reported to us with such seasoning of horrors, made by skilful masters in that sort of cookery, as the imagination had never before devised. I had been deeply impressed by those awful scenes. I was moved to the inner soul by the narratives which came to us by every mail, and I felt that our struggle against those monsters of cruelty and lust must be crowned by Heaven with success. But after a time I began, post after post, to seek for evidence of the truth of those disgusting anecdotes, glossed with still more revolting insinuations. I never doubted their authenticity, but I wanted proof, and none was forthcoming. All the stories we heard emanated from Calcutta, and Calcutta was far from the districts where, no doubt, most treacherous and wholesale murder had been perpetrated. And now I was going out to the very country which had acquired such a fearful interest in our eyes, and I hoped to join my

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SCANT TIME FOR PREPARATION.

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countrymen ere their vengeance was consummated, and India was to be restored to the tranquillity, at least, of conquest.

I had but scant time for preparation, and even that was encroached upon by domestic affairs; but thanks to the resources of those who in London are called upon every hour to provide outfits for every portion of the globe, I was in readiness to start within a week, crossed to Calais in a winter gale, managed to arrive in Paris just as the train for Marseilles—the last that could catch the steamer for Alexandria—left it, journeyed express with the officer in charge of the mails, who fortunately was as late as myself, by special engine and carriage till I overtook the mail-train beyond Lyons, and had just a moment at Marseilles to get my permit ere I had to embark on board the Valetta, which was soon, with the lively habits of her class, battling the mistral in the Gulf of Lyons, and plunging through head seas like a cormorant in a tide-way. The number of books on the overland route from time to time which have been “done” by various hands would constitute a library *per se*, but all its incidents have been exhausted by him who made that famous trip from Cornhill to Cairo; and, as I have read from an early age, in reviews and magazines, perpetual remonstrances against the vanity of those who think their eyes are better and their wit brighter than those of others, and who have, therefore, insisted on giving the public their version of the impressions produced by this beaten ground and much-vexed sea, I shall not say one word about the Mediterranean, and but little of the waters which form by far the greater part of what is, by a sort of

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“dry humour,” called the overland route. Our fellow-passengers were, for the most part, either old Indians, returning full of anger, gloom, and vengeance to their former posts, now freed from the enemy, or to others promised to—or to be gotten for—them, by interest and perseverance; or young Indians, of whom one alone was preparing himself for the sphere of his labours by studying the language and history of the people. There were also some Queen’s officers going out to join their regiments, a few younger men, unposted, who expected to be attached to Queen’s regiments, inasmuch as their own corps were fighting, or trying to fight, against us, and some civilians; with a poll of wives going to their actual husbands, and of young ladies going to find, if possible, consorts in that land where they hang like flocks of the golden fleece, which daring argonauts from the schools may pluck as they will. To trace the destinations of our fellow-passengers from Malta would be to cover the East with a wide-spreading fan. There were men for Australia, for China, the dominions of the Rajah of Sarawak, for Penang, Singapore, Hong Kong, Java, Lahore, Aden, Bombay, Calcutta, Ceylon, Pondicherry, and many unknown places beyond the seas. The little steamer was a turbulent microcosm, and at times, when the Mediterranean gave us a taste of its quality, and the great seas came flying over the bows, sluicing the decks with a mimic ocean, our microcosm became sick and querulous. But even then, cigar in mouth, stood stiffly with swaying body, on well-set sea-legs, one bronzed, compact little man, who set an example of appetite, endurance, and good humour, that provoked the invalids and attracted the few who could stand the capers of

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FELLOW-PASSENGERS.

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the Valetta. This was a French medical officer of the navy, who was going back to his duties as Intendant of Pondicherry, a man full of anecdote, resource, and observation, who had two fixed ideas—that all our naval battles were won by mistake, and that it was the mission of *la race blanche* to make India happy by some process which the English were to begin and fail in, and which the French were finally to accomplish. Of him and his theories we shall hear more by-and-by.

Now, excellent Directors of the great Peninsular and Oriental Company! May I say one word to you? Your ships are good, the service of the mails is excellent, but would you be kind enough to send a travelling director now and then, not of too robust a stomach, to journey overland to India? The complaints of the cooking and of the crowding on board those splendid ships of yours are only too well founded. The claret is some sort of rough Rhine wine, and resembles greatly the liquid sold under the name of Tenedos at Gallipoli. The port and sherry must be made on board, as they are never met with out of the ships; and yet I have drunk at the offices in Leadenhall Street very good, pure wine, which I am assured was, and which I am satisfied is there believed to be, the same as that given to the passengers on board ship. The tea and coffee *mihi nullo discrimine agentur*. One cannot expect fat poultry on board ship, but at least some attempts might be made to put a little fowl on their bones by plentiful diet. This, however, would be opposed to the traditions of the ships' cooks, who declare—at least one of them did to me in reply to a remark that the creatures seemed very hungry—a plentiful supply of food would be

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fatal to them. Of the vivacity of the inhabitants of the coops, under the present system, there can be no doubt. They are as lively and discontented as Italians. One curious result of the treatment as it progresses is to give the ships' boys an increase of exercise every morning, for the chickens become so thin that they are able to flutter into liberty through the bars which detained them at first, and they pick desperately at the carpenters' chips or bits of oakum lying about the decks in the early morning. The bill of fare of the passengers, however, is plentiful to redundancy and even coarseness of superfluity; but, making every allowance for the difficulties of the marine Franca-tellis, the cooking is indifferent. It is true that on board the larger ships the number of passengers to be provided for creates another impediment; but if the good Peninsular and Oriental Company would only condescend to take a page out of the book of cookery of the *Messageries Impériales*, they would find, unless one's experience is greatly in error, that they would nearly silence the grumbings which are such an unpleasant substratum of all the dinner and breakfast conversation on board their vessels.

There are two kinds of monopoly—one, that which is conferred by the State; the other, that which is attained by the perseverance and ability of a corporation, sole or aggregate, in supplying the public wants, by which it has accumulated wealth and resources and advantages that place it above all rivalry or competition. In the enjoyment of the latter monopoly the Peninsular and Oriental now confessedly stands, and I for one do not by any means wish to deprive them of it or its emoluments, for the directors have displayed

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MARINE COOKERY.

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extraordinary energy, made large sacrifices, and put forth great exertions to the benefit of the country and of the public service in attaining their present position. All I would venture to suggest is, that there might be a little more delicacy in the *ménage* on board. The pursers are gentlemen, attentive and prompt, but they are so used to insinuation and open rebellion on the subject of accommodation and feeding, and are so callous to round-robins, letters to *The Times* and to the Company, that they regard such courses as the normal state of affairs, or as a result of sea-sickness or disordered liver and bile. Indeed they pleasantly draw comparisons between the average tempers of passengers as they happen to be bound outwards or homewards; and it must be admitted "the confounded public," as that large and respectable body is frequently styled in the privacies of official and monopolitical life, is apt to be very eccentric and unreasonable at times; but at least all just grounds of complaint may be reduced to a minimum without any great trouble. Now, on board the *Messageries* and the Austrian Lloyd's boats in the Mediterranean, the cost of provisions per head and the expense of cooking must be far less than in the Peninsular and Oriental ships, and I am bound to say that, having several times travelled in each of all three, I have heard no grumbling, and I have been much better satisfied, on board the two former. How the English passengers would like to pay extra for every wine, except the *vin de pays* that is placed on the table, and for their ale, porter, and spirits, I cannot say, but I should think that it would resolve itself into a question of fares. Certainly the *dîner à la Russe* might

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be introduced with great advantage. On a hot day the smell of great joints, of liver and bacon, of steaming meat-pies, of roast goose, poultry, duck, and of pea-soup, and its congeners, is most overpowering, and the miseries of the unfortunate gentlemen who preside over favourite dishes, such as an impectoral turkey, the victim of ankylosis in every joint, or a huge plateau of salted beef, are only terminated by a sudden loss of temper, and a hasty aside to the steward—"No! I'm, &c., if I do. Take it away and cut it yourself!"

Could all the pale ale, soda-water, sherry, porter, and *vin ordinaire*, and the feebler bibables, be turned into nectar, and all the heavy garniture of the table assume the taste and form of ambrosia, the Homeric deities could desire no better Olympus than one of the Peninsular and Oriental vessels, presided over by some genial Jove of a great sea-captain. Here is one day's life as I find it in my diary: A pint or so of tea and coffee, either plain or mixed, at any hour from six A.M. to eight A.M.; dress (and a bath if the weather permits); a more or less uncomfortable promenade, during which the ladies begin to develop themselves upon the deck. At nine a bell rings, and an avalanche of hungry passengers descends upon the eatables and uneatables, eggs *au plat*, hot rolls, mutton chops, &c., &c. At ten, the deck, which becomes tolerable under the influences of breakfast, a cigar, and a view of some distant headland, or of a passing sail. At twelve another bell, and with unflagging energy the world rushes below again and proceeds to attack cheese, biscuit, and butter, pale ale, porter, spirits and water, according to its taste. A dreary indigestible interval of some hours, which in bad weather can only be con-

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DAILY LIFE IN AN ORIENTAL STEAMER. 9

quered by incessant smoking or great internal resources. At four or at five, according to the rule of the ship, the bell again, and the great event of the day—dinner—*exoritur clamor virorum et* (I am bound to add) *fœminarum*. The stewards in a noble frenzy scuffle up and down the narrow gangway between the backs of the seats and the cabins with piles of plates, or in rough weather swing to and fro and balance themselves onwards with an air of mild dignity, preserving the equilibrium of the soup or gravy. Heat, clatter, and voracity, the latter produced by the sea-air it is said, distinguish the banquet till it is closed by the fiery enjoyments of the port and sherry with Dodonean nuts and the dessert. Then the company mount to the deck again ; and at seven there is a service of tea and bread and butter ; and at thirty minutes past eight the last bell rings for the day, and all hands make a final charge at the table, and establish themselves before decanters of wine and spirits, whiskey, gin, brandy, and rum, wherefrom they proceed to various brews, and thence work onwards to a round of *vingt-et-un* or a rubber of whist. “Inextinguishable laughter” prevails for a time, which after a time is mingled with less agreeable sounds, and at ten is quite put out by the extinction of the ship’s lights, a process which is never effected without argument on the part of the players, determination on the part of the stewards, and a general expression of opinion that “I never was in such a confounded disobliging ship in all my life.” And so we went on day after day, night after night.

Wintry seas around us, distant views of Corsica and its rugged coast line, backed by mountain ranges,

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covered with snow, like giant waves crested with creaming surf.—Then Sicily blurred by driving clouds of mist and spray, but from time to time revealing the surf-beaten line of its long sea-board, covered with white houses, as one of her own nymphs might have lured on a pursuing faun by glimpses of her snowy feet flickering under her flowing robes.—Then the great, round, unbroken shield of the sea once more, of which our little bark is the boss with its soup-swilling, love and grog-making, eating, card-playing, and smoking.