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978-1-108-04228-4 - Travels of Lady Hester Stanhope: Forming the Completion of Her  
Memoirs: Volume 1

Charles Meryon

Excerpt

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## TRAVELS

### LADY HESTER STANHOPE.

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#### CHAPTER I.

Departure from England—Danger of Shipwreck—Gibraltar—Malta—City of La Valetta—Public Edifices—General aspect of the Island—Commerce—Character of the Inhabitants—Island of Goza—Mansion of the Governor at San Antonio occupied by Lady Hester Stanhope—English Visitors—Lady Hester resolves on an Eastern Tour.

The writer of this narrative had just completed his studies in medicine, when he was engaged, through the recommendation of an eminent anatomist and surgeon, to attend Lady Hester Lucy Stanhope, in the capacity of her physician, on a voyage to Sicily; in which island it was her intention to reside two or three years, for the benefit of her health, that had

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suffered greatly from family afflictions.<sup>1</sup> Her ladyship was accompanied by her half-brother, the Honourable James Hamilton Stanhope, and his friend, Mr. Nassau Sutton.

On the 10th of February, 1810, we embarked at Portsmouth, on board the Jason frigate, commanded by the Hon. James King, having under convoy a fleet of transports and merchant vessels bound for Gibraltar. Our voyage was an alternation of calms and gales. We were seven days in reaching the Land's End; then, having passed Cape Finisterre and Cape St. Vincent, we were overtaken, on the 6th of March, by a violent gale of wind, which dispersed the convoy, and drove us so far to leeward that we found ourselves on the shoals of Trafalgar.

It was for some hours uncertain whether we should not have to encounter the horrors of shipwreck, on that very shore where so many brave sailors perished after the battle which derives its name from these shoals: but, on the following morning, by dint of beating to windward, under a pressure of sail, in a most tremendous sea, we weathered the land, and gained the Straits of Gibraltar, through which we ran.

We anchored in the Bay of Tetuan, at the back of the promontory of Ceuta, facing Gibraltar, on the

<sup>1</sup> These were principally the death of Mr. Pitt, her uncle, with whom she had resided for several years, and of her half-brother, the Hon. Charles Stanhope, who was killed at the battle of Corunna.

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African coast. Mount Atlas, the scene of so many of the fables of antiquity, was visible from this point; but its form was far from corresponding with the shape pictured by my imagination, presenting rather the appearance of a chain of mountains than of one single mount.

The wind abated the next day, when we weighed anchor, and entered the Bay of Gibraltar. As we approached the rock, we were struck with the grandeur and singularity of its appearance. Lady Hester and her brother were received at the Convent, the residence of the lieutenant-governor, Lieut. Gen. Campbell. Mr. Sutton and myself had apartments assigned to us in a house adjoining the Convent, where we occasionally partook of the hospitality of Colonel M'Coomb, of the Corsican Rangers, although we dined and lived principally at the Governor's palace.

I visited the fortifications in company with the Lieutenant-Governor and Captain Stanhope.

As I had never before sailed to a latitude so southern as Gibraltar, I was much struck with the difference of temperature into which we were now transported. There were flowers in bloom, shrubs in leaf, and other appearances of an early spring; and I hastened, the morning after our arrival, to enjoy the luxury of bathing in the sea. These feelings of pleasure at the change of climate were, however, greatly abated by the attacks to which we were daily and nightly exposed from the musquitoes, which entirely destroyed our rest.

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How impartial has Nature been in all her dealings ! Go where you will, if you sum up the amount of good and evil, every country will be found to have about an equal portion of both ; and, in many cases, where Providence has seemed to be more beneficent than was equitable, a little fly will strike the balance.

The French, about this time, had overrun almost the whole of Spain, and parties of their cavalry had approached within three miles of the fortifications of Gibraltar. Our excursions, therefore, beyond the isthmus were exceedingly limited, and the only neighbouring places I saw were St. Roque and Algeziras. Numbers of Spanish fugitives flocked in every day. Those who bore arms were sent to Cadiz, and the rest remained in security at Ceuta, a possession of the Spanish on the African side of the Straits, ceded about this time to the English.

The Marquis of Sligo and Mr. Bruce,<sup>1</sup> both of whom afterwards joined Lady Hester's party, were also at Gibraltar. These gentlemen, with several other Englishmen and many Spanish noblemen and officers, who, with their families, had taken refuge here, constituted the society at the Lieutenant-Governor's house.

Gibraltar seemed to me to be a place where no one

<sup>1</sup> Mr. Michael Bruce will be known to most readers as the gentleman, who, conjointly with Lieutenant-General Sir Robert Wilson and the Hon. Mr. Hutchinson, effected the escape of Lavallette from prison on the eve of his execution.

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would live but from necessity. Provisions and the necessaries of life of all kinds were exceedingly dear. The meat was poor and lean ; vegetables were scarce ; and servants, from the plenty of bad wine, were always drunk. Out-door amusements on a rock, where half the accessible places are to be reached by steps only, or where a start of a horse would plunge his rider over a precipice, must be, of course, but few ; although, to horsemen, the neutral ground, which is an isthmus of sand joining the rock to Spain, affords an agreeable level for equestrian exercise.

Soon after our arrival at Gibraltar, Captain Stanhope, Lady Hester's brother, received an order to join his regiment, the 1st Foot Guards, at Cadiz ; and Mr. Sutton departed for Minorca, whither his affairs led him. Her ladyship, for whom a garrison town had no charms, was anxious to pursue her voyage. Her state of health rendered the civilities, with which she was overwhelmed, irksome to her ; so that she readily availed herself of an offer made by Captain Whitby,<sup>1</sup> of the Cerberus frigate, to take her passage with him to Malta : and, on the 7th of April, we sailed out of the bay, after a double risk, first of the boat's being swamped in getting on board, and then of the frigate's falling on a rock, by missing stays, in going out. We put into Port Mahon on our way,

<sup>1</sup> Captain Whitby was distinguished by his active service in the war of America, and, subsequently, by his gallant conduct in a severe naval engagement up the Adriatic.

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and arrived at Malta on the 21st of April, after a passage of fifteen days.

Few cities are more striking at first sight than La Valetta, the capital of Malta. It happened to be Easter day; and the ringing of bells and firing of crackers and guns, as we entered the harbour, about ten in the morning, together with the varied appearance of English, Moorish, and Greek ships, with their different flags mingled in a most agreeable confusion, and reflected from a green water, transparent to the bottom, at the foot of stupendous fortifications, altogether rendered it one of the most cheerful and animating sights we had ever beheld.

Lady Hester was expected at Malta, and the Governor and some other persons of note invited her to take up her residence at their houses. She accepted the invitation of Mr. Fernandez, the Deputy Commissary-General. We landed in the afternoon. In walking through the streets, I found myself surrounded by buildings, different in style from any that I had yet seen, and jostled by a race of people, sufficiently strange to attract my attention strongly. I now felt that I was fairly out of England; which, while in Gibraltar, where the population is so largely made up of English, and where the English language is so generally spoken, I never could persuade myself to be the case.

The residence of Mr. Fernandez was a large house, formerly the inn<sup>1</sup> or hotel of the French knights: each

<sup>1</sup> As we say Furnival's Inn, Lincoln's Inn, &c.

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nation, as it would appear, having had a separate palace to lodge in. The sleeping rooms were old-fashioned and gloomy, with windows like embrasures, almost twenty feet apart.

Malta contains two principal cities and twenty-two villages, or *casals*, as they are called. The old city, Civita Vecchia, was the only one at the time the knights took possession of the island. It is still called by the natives El Medina (the Arabic word for the *city*.) It has no edifices worthy of notice but the palace of the grand-master and the cathedral, in which are some paintings by Matthias Preti. Its greatest curiosity is the catacombs. They are very extensive, and contain what may be called excavated streets in all directions. From these branch off corridors, wherein are formed apartments containing tombs or sepulchres without number. These catacombs have likewise served as asylums for individuals who fled from religious persecution, and for the inhabitants generally, whenever piratical descents were made on the island.

The modern city, Valetta, was founded in 1566; and, by the enthusiasm of the islanders, who voluntarily aided in the works, it was finished in 1571. It is entirely built of the calcareous stone of the rock on which it stands. A piece of ground was given to each of the nations (or *languages*, as it was usual to style them) for their respective habitations or inns. The streets are built at right angles, and paved with

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flat square stones, and the houses are spacious, lofty, and with regular fronts, most of them having a balcony projecting over the street. The object of the architect seems to have been, besides beauty and strength, to gain shade and coolness. Hence the walls of the houses are generally from six to twelve feet thick, and the floors always of stone:<sup>1</sup> the doors are folding, and the windows down to the ground. In every house of the principal inhabitants, in the summer, there is a suite of rooms thrown open. Thus, by having five or six rooms in a line, great coolness, and, if required, a current of air is obtained, the value of which can be sufficiently appreciated by those only who live in very hot countries. In most of the dwellings, the ground floor is used for warehouses and shops; and the family resides on the first floor, the bed-rooms and sitting-rooms being all on the same level. Every house has a cistern, into which rain-water runs from the roof. These roofs, formed of an excellent cement, are flat. Besides the private

<sup>1</sup> The advantage of these stone walls and floors was exemplified in an accident which occurred whilst I was at La Valetta. I was attending, professionally, on Viscount Ebrington, the present Earl Fortescue, who was indisposed in bed, when his servant, in holding the candle, set fire to the mosquito net. His lordship jumped out of bed, and the net blazed and was consumed, without any other apprehension for the result than the personal inconvenience and danger caused to a sick man by sudden exposure to cold.



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cisterns, there are public reservoirs, and also a fountain, the source of which is at the village of Diar Chandal, twelve or thirteen miles from La Valetta, whither the water is conveyed by a subterranean aqueduct.

The public edifices most worthy of notice are the Palace of the Grand Master, the Hotels or Inns of the different *languages*, the Conservatory, the Treasury, the University, the Town Hall, the Palace of Justice, the Hospital, and the Barracks, all built with great simplicity. Indeed, La Valetta is much more striking from the arrangement of the general mass of buildings than from the details of any particular one.

The palace, once the residence of the Grand Master of the Knights of St. John, is a magnificent edifice, in its general appearance somewhat like Somerset House. It contains many splendid rooms and saloons, hung with tapestry and damask; and there is a spacious hall, the walls of which are curiously painted in commemoration of the naval victories of the christian knights over the Moslems. The grand staircase is of remarkably easy ascent. In one part of the Conservatory is the Library: in 1790, it had 60,000 volumes, although founded so lately as 1760: its rapid increase was owing to a law, whereby the books of every knight, at his decease, wherever he might be, were to be sent to Malta. Adjoining to the library is a museum, which contains many interesting objects.

The Hospital is a spacious edifice, open for the

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sick and wounded of all countries. The knights were formerly bound to attend them, and the utensils employed were almost all of silver, but of quite plain workmanship; so that it might be seen that cleanliness, not ostentation, was the purpose for which they were made.

The Church of St. John is a building, the imposing grandeur of which, when I first saw it, made a strong impression upon me. It consists of an immense nave, from which branch off, right and left, small chapels, each adorned with richly sculptured altars, beautified with everything that superstition can collect. The roof is arched, and painted in fresco by Matthias Preti, the Calabrian. The walls are also decorated with paintings by him and other masters: and the pavement is one uninterrupted piece of mosaic of coloured marbles. Some idea of its effect may be formed by imagining the pictures in the gallery of the Louvre at Paris to be taken from their frames, sewed together, and the spectator to be walking on them. The subjects are less lively, certainly; because, in St. John's church, each mosaic picture covers the tomb of some Maltese knight, and consequently death and his emblems form the principal features in it; but they are not the less beautiful. The church of St. John was built by the Grand-Master, La Cassière: its riches were, before their spoliation by the French, immense, from the donations made every five years by the master and priors of the order, and by the piety of individuals.