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978-1-108-04467-7 - The War, from the Landing at Gallipoli to the Death of Lord Raglan

William Howard Russell

Excerpt

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THE WAR.

MALTA.

CHAPTER I.

Voyage to Malta—Farewell to Old England—The Guards at sea—Perplexing duties and unspeakable sufferings—Pipes and seagulls—The domestic pudding of sea life—Jack Firelock and Jack Tar—"Three cheers for the jolly old whale!"—Arrival and disembarkation of the Coldstreams—Delight of the Maltese—Mismanagement commences—The commissariat and the contractors—Who's to blame?—Arrival of the "Himalaya"—Scarcity of beef and mutton—A seasonable relief—Accumulation of stores—Preparations for the campaign.

MALTA, *March 6, 1854.*

THE ease, celerity, and comparative comfort with which the greater part of the brigade of Guards and the 28th Regiment have been conveyed to Malta, in some measure justify the enormous praise which we have bestowed on ourselves as a great maritime State, with vast steam locomotive power. The 28th Regiment, in the "Niagara," made a remarkably fine passage, and suffered but little discomfort; not any, indeed, beyond that which invariably attends on some 800 "men at sea," who are imprisoned for the time being, with the Johnsonian alternative of being drowned; and the 62nd, who made a run of sixteen days from Cork with the aid of canvas alone, had no reason to complain, even though they were not quite so rapidly conveyed as if they had been impelled by steam. In fact, but for the uncertainty respecting the "Manilla," which has not yet arrived, the whole of the little flotilla may be said to have been very fortunate, and the captain of the former, with her cargo of 300 men, will not be much disappointed, it is said, if he does not reach Malta before the sixteenth day after his departure from Southampton, seeing that his vessel is only of sixty-horse power (auxiliary screw), and has to convey a large freight. Ever since the troops sailed from Southampton, the wind, that great and indomitable friend or foe or progress, according to the quarter from which he has set and to which you want to go, has offered nearly all the opposition in his power to their arrival at Malta. At one time he has toyed with

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them over the beam or quarter, in the hope that unwary skippers would set sail, and next moment he has blown right in their teeth and flapped the figure-head in the face with all his wings. There is this, then, to be said, that had the Guards, who left Southampton-water on Thursday morning, February 23, been stowed on board sailing vessels instead of steamers, they would have met a constant current of baffling winds, which were too light frequently for effective tacking, and were obstinate enough to defeat plain sailing; that they would with these same winds have taken fourteen days to get to Gibraltar alone, and that their further voyage to Malta would have required about as many days more! The "Leander," a 50-gun frigate, has been thirty days going from Gibraltar to Malta ere this under similar circumstances. The only disadvantage attendant on steamers is the heat to which the men on the main deck, about the engine, are necessarily exposed, and the reduction of accommodation *pro rata* in consequence of the space required for the machinery; but this is more than counterbalanced by the certainty of getting through the water in a shorter time.

Never did a set of finer fellows leave Old England for the good and glory of their country than the brigade of Guards which has just arrived. It is not of the *personnel* of the men—great British Anakim as they are—that this is said, but of the spirit, cheerfulness, and good humour they displayed on the passage. Imagine those comfortably fleshy and rather adipose giants, accustomed to the easy indolence of London taps, the unrestrained ease of Winchester bars, and the social military elegancies of Windsor, vying with the police itself in the intensity of their *entente cordiale* with the female servantry of London, living in large, airy, dry barracks, and provided with abundant well-cooked food, suddenly exposed to much discomfort and partial privation of luxuries, condemned to a rupture of all friendly ties—to the abnegation of pleasant Sunday dualities in bearskin cap and full-dress cane at Hampstead-heath or Highgate;—imagine them, too, penned, cribbed, and by no means "cabined," though certainly confined, between decks, so densely that they could scarcely turn when attacked by all the fantastic contortions of the *mal de mer*, with uncertain and not always palatable meals, rendering tribute to their unrecognised monarch Neptune, aiding in pulling at perplexing ropes, obliged to keep unintelligible watches over nothing but the stars and sea-water, mustered and "exercised" on unsteady planks, and debarred from any exercise, except scrambling for their daily bread; and then know that this flight of fancy was short of the truth, and that these "Household troops" suffered and did all this, and more, and you will scarcely refuse the praise bestowed on them by all who witnessed their behaviour and demeanour.

The huge swarm of red-coats which settled on the decks of the "Ripon," the "Orinoco," and "Manilla" on Wednesday, the 22nd of February, and which buzzed and bustled about so actively nearly all that night, after the day of marching, of excitement, of leave-taking, and cheering and hunger, was hived, ere morning,

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THE STEAMERS WEIGH ANCHOR.

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in hammock or blanket for the most part, as the vessels rode quietly amid the heavy rain in the waters of the Solent. They had been accompanied to their moorings off the Leap Buoy by the Guernsey steamer, filled with friends, if not "sweethearts and wives," and when darkness set in they were left alone even by those. Soon after daylight anchors were tripped, and with full steam off dashed the little fleet. The "Ripon" was off by 7 o'clock a.m. Thursday, followed closely by the "Manilla," and soon afterwards by the "Orinoco." They ran past the Needles at 8 15, and were soon bowling along with a fresh breeze on the bow (N.W.), in weather which sailors, by some strange perversity of the usual terms relating to the state of the atmosphere, denominated "moderate and fine," right from the land, and making straight for the Bay of Biscay. The breeze was, with all deference to naval authority, strong and blustering, but, with the excitement and novelty of the situation, the mind ruled the stomach, and the men were not sick, even though there was a long swell from westward, and they evinced the usual degree of anxiety as to the time for eating and drinking, which shows that the nastiest and most anti-gastric of all maladies had not seized them. The crews of the ships busied themselves swinging hammocks for the men. Fourteen inches is man-of-war allowance, but eighteen inches were allowed for the Guards. The hammocks were not strictly luxurious; they consisted of the hammock canvas, one blanket, and the military overcoat if they liked to use it. Knapsack stowing was wondrous work for the time, but even it palled after an hour or so, and there was nothing but looking at seagulls, smoking pipes, watching each other smoke, and "wondering if they were going to be sick." Good beef, the domestic pudding of sea life, consisting of large quantities of flour and infinitesimally small portions of plums, compressed by culinary skill into adamantine hardness, and excellent bread, with pea-soup every second day, formed very substantial pieces of resistance to the keen appetites of the men. The only unpopular article of diet was the pudding, and to the unprejudiced observer it did appear that there was some reason in the remark of an old "salt," who was looking in at the little edible rotundities—"Well, I'm blowed if them plums is within hail of one another!" Half a gill of rum to two of water was served out once a day to each man. On the first day it appeared that, in the fulness of his heart and emptiness of his stomach, Jack Firelock was rather too liberal on board one of the ships to his brother Jack Tar, and gave him an extra allowance. On the next occasion of serving grog the very big and ponderous Sergeant-Major of the Grenadiers, anxious to prevent such a proof of affection from one service to the other, presided over the grog-tub, and is reported to have delivered the following oracular order, "Men served; two steps to the front, and swallow!" Whether it was obeyed or not this deponent says not, but he thinks as to the latter part of the order there were strong *prima facie* proofs that the men were not insubordinate. On Friday, the long swell from the westward began to tell on the troops. The

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figure-heads began to plunge deeply into the waters, and the heads of the poor soldiers hung despondingly over gunwale, portsill, stay, and mess tin, as their bodies bobbed to and fro with the creaking tumbling tabernacle in which they were encamped. It was satisfactory to see that the paroxysms of the complaint were more characterized by resolute torpor and a sullen determination "to do or die," than by the ecstatic misery of the Frenchman, or the prostrate inanity of the German. Even at night they brightened up, and when the bugle sounded at nine o'clock, nearly all were able to crawl into their hammocks for sleep. On Saturday the speed of the vessels was increased from nine-and-a-half to ten knots per hour; and the "Manilla" was left by the large paddle-wheel steamers far away buffeting with the swell and head-winds. On Sunday all the men had recovered to a great extent, and when the ship's company and troops were mustered at half-past ten for prayers, they looked as fresh as could be expected under the circumstances. In fact, as the day advanced, they became as lively as ever, and the sense of joyfulness for release from the clutches of their enemy was so strong that they cheered "a grampus," which blew close alongside, in reply to a stentorian demand for "three cheers for the jolly old whale!" Monday was passed with the usual observances of cleaning decks, cooking, eating, steaming, but at four p.m., in lat. 36° 43', long. 8° 9' west, all hands roused up to look at a strange vessel with a dimasted galliot in tow. The "Ripon," which came close to the stranger, hoisted her ensign, whereupon the stranger, who had lost bowsprit and jibboom, and seemed to have been in collision with the towee, ran up Russian colours. The Guards on board burst into a hearty cheer, but why it would be hard to say, unless that they drew breath at the first sight of the dubious enemy, and continued gazing on her, and the poor log of a Dutch galliot, which she dragged after her, till she was lost in the distance. On Tuesday the "Ripon" passed Tarifa, at fifty minutes past five a.m., and anchored in the quarantine ground of Gibraltar to coal, half-an-hour afterwards. In consequence of the quarantine regulations there was no communication with the shore, and the "Orinoco" passed, without stopping, through the Straits, but the soldiers in garrison lined the walls, and the men of the "Cruiser" manned yards, and as the "Ripon" steamed off at half-past three p.m., after taking on board coals and tents, and tent-poles, they burst into hearty cheers, which were replied to with goodwill by the soldiers. The voyage continued with fine weather but head winds, and on Thursday a target was run up to the fore-top-gallant-stunsail-boom of the "Ripon," for practice with the Minié rifle. By some extraordinary chance it turned out that this target was painted like a Russian soldier, and in half-an-hour it was so thoroughly riddled as to be useless. Running along at the rate of ten knots an hour, the "Orinoco" reached Malta on Sunday morning, at ten a.m., and the "Ripon" on Saturday night, soon after twelve o'clock. The Coldstreams were embarked from the former in the course of the day, and the Grenadiers were all ashore from the

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MISMANAGEMENT COMMENCES.

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"Ripon" ere Monday evening, to the great delight of the Maltese, who made a little harvest from the boat excursions of the "plenty big men" to and from the town.

March 7.

The arrival of the "Manilla" this morning, after her long voyage of eighteen days from Southampton-water, completes the list which will be found at length in another portion of these pages. Tedious as the officers and men of the Guards who were on board may think the passage when compared with that of their comrades on board other ships, it must nevertheless be taken into consideration that, had they been embarked in a sailing-vessel, the odds are they would not have yet set foot on the shores of Malta, and that even the auxiliary screw, which was worked by their little engine of sixty-horse power, enables them to make fair head against adverse breezes for a portion of the time. It were well, indeed, if things on shore were as well managed as they have been at sea; but, strange as it may appear, some of the men left their floating prisons only to relinquish comforts to which they had a right, and have had to "rough it" on *terra firma* with greater patience and endurance than they were called upon to exercise while on board the steamers. To speak the truth, "somebody" is to blame for placing any of Her Majesty's forces in such a position that they have had to endure some of the minor *désagrémens* of warfare before their time. Complaints are made that such a regiment was left without coals—that another had no lights nor candles—that another has suffered from exposure to cold at night under canvas, when they ought to have been under cover of a more substantial nature—that in some cases that terrible calamity, short commons, actually fell upon a portion of the men, and that forage was not to be had for the officers' horses. The commissariat are blamed for these deficiencies, but they are said to declare that they received no proper instructions to prepare for the force. On the other hand, it is argued that the contractors here are bound always to have supplies ready for the fleet, and that had Admiral Dundas come in here some fine morning, he would have brought with him a force greater than that which has been added to the population by the arrival of the military. It is a delicate matter to deal with, particularly as the "authorities" keep the matter very close; but they cannot keep the grumblings of officers and men from the public ear. The despatch of these troops was determined on several months ago; the precise mode and the very time of their arrival could be calculated to a day or two; and therefore, if the complaints to which I have alluded are well founded, serious blame rests in some quarter or other, and there is no use in trying to evade it by shifting it from shoulder to shoulder. Soldiers are apt to make much of petty grievances; and therefore, when the men of the 50th growl good-humouredly about the impropriety of their being compelled to sleep in hammocks in the sailors' barracks in the dockyard, no one pities them very profoundly, but it becomes a more serious matter when they are left without lights, or coal,

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or wood. With great deference, I would suggest that it would have been a very good plan to send out a commissariat officer with each vessel, instead of keeping a number of these useful officers boxed up in a room in Whitehall. As each vessel arrived, the commissary could have acquainted the head of the department on shore with the amount and nature of the articles required for the use of the troops when they landed, and it would not have been possible for any excuse to be made for neglecting such a requisition. As a pendant to this subject, I may add that, acting on the old formula of half a century back, when transports took eight weeks on an average to sail to Malta, the authorities of the Admiralty very liberally supplied the steamers, which make the passage in about as many days, with eight weeks' store of what are called "medical comforts," such as port wine, &c., for the use of the men. As may be readily conceived, there was a large quantity of these articles returned to store here on the arrival of the troops. There is a report current to the effect that the next division from England will not disembark at Malta, but will proceed to the East direct. It is to be hoped the rumour is correct, or that the first division will leave the island before the second arrives. As it is, every regiment that comes in must encamp, and, despite the heat of the midday sun, the month of March in Malta has its bitter cold nights and sharp winds to smite the host with catarrhs and rheumatics, and of all the ludicrous sights to gods or men a rheumatism warrior is, to my mind, the most painfully conspicuous. By a rigid interpretation of orders, the officers of the 93rd were debarred from bringing more than 90lb. weight of baggage per man. Many of them omitted beds, canteen and mess traps; and so they must have been rather horror-struck when they were politely invited, kilts and all, to pitch their tents on the ravelin outside Valetta, and "make themselves comfortable."

The arrival of the "Himalaya" before midnight on the 7th, after an extraordinary run of seven days and three hours from Plymouth, with upwards of 1,500 souls on board, is another striking proof of our resources as a belligerent Power. It would have taken at least six weeks for three ordinary troop ships to carry that mass of men here against the winds which prevailed during the voyage of this steamer, and of course it would have cost the Government a proportionate sum for their maintenance all the time they were idly knocking about on the ocean. The only inconvenience attendant on this great celerity is, as I have hinted, that it throws so many human creatures, with the usual appetites of the species, on one spot, that the supplies can scarcely be procured in time to meet the demand. The vast and sudden increase of meat-consuming animals at Malta has nearly produced the effects of a famine; at least, we had a prospect of being run to a disagreeably low ebb in the current of beef and mutton to the markets. On Monday last there were only 400 head of cattle left in Malta and its dependencies, and, with a population of 120,000—with a brigade of guards and eleven regiments in garrison, and the crews of three frigates to feed, it may easily

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be imagined that "the lovers of flesh" would have been in a bad way at the end of the week. On Tuesday morning, however, the "Vectis," which had been sent over to Tunis, returned with the joyful news that there was a good stock of cattle about the country, and with the still more welcome reality of 188 Moorish oxen on board. Mr. Powell, captain of the "Vectis," finding that the means of transport were not abundant at Tunis, with commendable activity stored his decks with this live provision, and returned here, leaving the "Research" cutter and an officer of the commissariat there to provide for the future supplies. The commissariat have been very active lately; but it may be imagined that their energies are hardly taxed to meet this influx of hungry men. However, the direction to which their efforts tend is not mistakeable. We are preparing our supplies for taking the field in Turkey. On Sunday, March 5, a commissariat officer, who had only arrived the previous night from England, Mr. Deputy Commissary-General Turner, was sent with all haste off to Constantinople, and Messrs. Brownrigg, Mitchell, Darling, and others of the same department, lately arrived from England and Gibraltar, are busily engaged in providing stores for the use of the troops. The biscuit-mills are baking 30,000lb. of biscuit per day. Bills in English and Italian are posted in every street of Valetta, informing "parties desirous of joining the commissariat department under the orders of Commissary-General Filder, about to proceed with the force to the East, as temporary clerks, assistant store-keepers, interpreters, &c.," that they may "freely apply to Assistant Commissary-General Strickland;" and there is this very significant addition,— "those conversant with English, Italian, modern Greek, and Turkish languages, or the Lingua-Franca of the East will be preferred;" and all sorts of warlike mechanics, armourers, farriers, wheelwrights, baggage-waggon equipment and harnessmakers, are in much request.

The Guards commenced the Minié practice March 7; but, as the range was very short, there is no use in doing more than mentioning the fact. They are exercised from 8 A.M. till 2 P.M., at targets placed at 250 yards' distance. Brigadier Bentinck hopes to be able to get a more ample and less disturbed range, and the experiments will be continued till they are able to send a full report to Government. It is most gratifying to state that the conduct of this large body of men has been on the whole very good. Making allowance for the great temptations to which they were exposed on landing, they resisted them like so many St. Anthonies, and, after the first night, have behaved in the most exemplary way, and the line regiments have also exhibited the utmost good order and subordination. The captains and officers of the various ships which served as transports speak in the highest terms of the soldiers while on board, and the most perfect *entente cordiale* reigned between them and their numerous guests. Captain Kellock received on his arrival here a very gratifying address from the officers of the Rifles and 93rd, to which he replied in suitable terms. I am informed that Government is taking

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steps to strengthen the fortifications of Malta. Some years ago it was determined that Gibraltar and this island should be placed in a condition to enable them to meet the increased weight of metal of men-of-war. Gibraltar was, in consequence, rendered all but impregnable. Malta was left untouched for some years, but recently efforts have been made to render the works more suitable to the importance of the place and the improvements in gunnery. The old iron gun-carriages, so apt to splinter or break down altogether if struck by a shot, have been removed from time to time, and wooden carriages have been put in their place. Long 56's have been mounted at St. Elmo and St. Angelo, in lieu of 24 and 32 pounders, and an importation of 76 heavy guns of similar calibre is expected from England. To an inexperienced eye those long lines of white stone curtains—those tiers of bastions, with their huge iron guardians peering above them—those serrated walls, all armed with grinning embrasures, which stretch all around the harbours and town of Valetta, and command the sea in every direction—appear calculated to defy the greatest navy that could be brought against them, but modern science has discovered that they are vulnerable, and is now busy in strengthening that which is weak, and in making that which is strong still stronger. Wherever you go outside the town, the eye of a cannon is gravely and steadily fixed on you. Take a walk down that tempting slab of rock down by the seaside, an 8-inch howitzer is investigating your proceedings from that embrasure, and if you turn round you will face his brother looking at you out of another window directly opposite.

The 33rd Regiment, by the "Emu," and the 2nd Rifles, by the "Vulcan," came into port yesterday.

CHAPTER II.

Arrival of General Canrobert—Inspection of the Guards—Friendly feeling between the French and English troops—Valetta—Hints on military administration—The Zouaves—Arrival of Sir George Brown and Sir John Burgoyne—Embarkation of the troops for Gallipoli.

MALTA, *March 17.*

As the supply of practice-ammunition for the Minié has been exhausted, the daily exercise of the men with the rifle has been suspended for the present, but it is expected that a large quantity of cartridges will be received from England in a few days, and the progress made by the Guards, after a few days' experience, justifies the hope that such a report will be received by the authorities as will justify them in ordering the permanent use of the rifle by a certain number of each regiment for active service. At first the men were rather awkward in loading; but as these mistakes are rectified day after day, and the true nature of the impediments to the rapid handling of the arm discovered and removed, its vast powers are developed and its capabilities understood. The last day's practice of the Guards, at 250 yards, showed

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RECEPTION OF THE FRENCH TROOPS.

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some excellent work, a large proportion of the balls going right through the target. In order to give the rifle fair play, the judicious course of training the men as to distances has been fully carried out. The officers of the Guards take out their men to the broken ground by the sea-shore, and each captain instructs his company in estimating the distance of men who are sent out in front and placed at intervals, so that the soldier may form a tolerably accurate conclusion as to the proper adjustment of the *stadium* in actual service. Thus it is pointed out to them that, at fifty yards, the features of the man, the buttons on his jacket, the band and star on his foraging cap, can be plainly recognized; while at 100 yards the lineaments can no longer be discerned, the buttons seem to form a continuous line; the star is scarcely separable from the band; and at 150 yards the buttons are quite invisible, and the face looks like a whitish ball under the line of the cap. As the *stadium* is only regulated for distances of 100 yards, beyond this distance it is explained how they are to use it at the ranges between the hundreds. A number of military instructors in rifle practice have also joined the army. Drill exercise and parade duty are closely attended to, and the heads of the force are indefatigable in seeing that discipline, even in such matters as the dress of officers in the streets, is preserved. The arrival of the "Orinoco" with the 44th has added to the number of troops under canvas; but, though the nights have been cold, and heavy rains have fallen lately, the men are in excellent health and spirits. The commissariat is well attended to, and complaints are almost unheard of; and therefore, in spite of wet and want of beds, the encampments are healthy.

March 24.

Last night, before dusk, the "Christophe Colomb," French Government steamer, having on board Lieutenant-General Canrobert, Lieutenant-General Bosquet, Lieutenant-General Martimprey, 45 officers, 800 soldiers, and 50 horses, the French transport "Mistral," with 27 soldiers and 40 horses, towing, hove in sight, and ran into the grand harbour of Valetta, about six o'clock. As she passed St. Elmo, the artillerymen and men of the 3rd Buffs and 62nd Regiment manned the walls, and gave a thundering round of cheers, which were returned by their gallant allies. The French soldiers, indeed, continued cheering all the time the vessels proceeded up the harbour whenever a boat with a red-coat in it came in sight, and seemed in excellent spirits. These vessels left Marseilles on the 19th, and conveyed the first portion of the French contingent. It is understood that at least one steamer will arrive here on alternate days till the whole force has passed. General Canrobert, so well known as one of the most dashing and energetic leaders of the *armée d'Afrique*, landed in the course of the evening, and was received by the authorities with all the respect due to his rank and mission. He went to the opera, and was the object of much observation.

The "Kangaroo," with the 77th Regiment (Colonel Egerton) on board, arrived this morning from Liverpool.

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The happy arrival of the "Simoom," after a voyage of sixteen days from Portsmouth, while it eased the anxiety of the timid, deprived many of an interesting subject of censure and speculation; we now learn that her detention was caused by the utter dislocation of her machinery, every bit of which came undone, went wrong, or got out of gear, that could by possibility do so. She came into harbour with the Scotch Fusileer Guards on Saturday night (18th inst.), and the troops were disembarked the following day, and landed at their quarters in the Lazaretto. When one reflects on the passages made by the "Himalaya," the "Orinoco," the "Cambria," the "Ripon," the "Emeu," and even by the little "Manilla"—by every vessel, in fact, which had not the honour of flying Her Majesty's pendant—and compares them with the voyage of the "Simoom," he cannot but lament that the engineers, mechanics, and artisans of the Royal dockyards do not learn a lesson or take a hint from our great public companies. Of course, it is scarcely fair to compare vessels like those above-named with a ship like the "Simoom," which is a man-of-war as well as a transport, carries guns, &c., but there is no sound reason why the engines of a man-of-war transport should be always breaking; nor do the considerations suggested by a reference to the express object for which these vessels were built completely account for the exceedingly great disparity between Her Majesty's ships and those of the Peninsular and Oriental and other companies. More than one screw must be loose to cause all this delay.

The Fusileers disembarked in excellent order, so have all the regiments which form this first part of the expeditionary army. The horses were rather fresher than the men; for, although the accommodations of the "Simoom" were good and spacious, the latter felt the confinement, heat, and want of exercise. The Lazaretto, which is a pile of low stone buildings running along the edge of the waters of the Quarantine Harbour, constructed with all the attention to shade and ventilation required for the end originally intended, and formed with abundance of casements, sheltered terraces, piazzas, and large arched rooms, is now completely filled. The brigade of Guards occupy the Lazaretto, now, happily, used no longer as a plague hospital, and Fort Manoel, close by, while a small detachment holds Fort Tigre on the spit of rock running from Hiema to the sea. All these quarters are excellent; the rooms, built of solid stone, being large and generally well-ventilated, with open spaces and squares between the blocks of buildings, and also between them and the walls and fortifications of these strongholds. The men, in spite of the local derangements caused by their "liberty" carousings in acid wine and fiery brandy on their arrival, enjoy good health, though the average of disease has been rather augmented by the results of an imprudent use of the time allowed to them in London to bid good-bye to their friends.

The inspection of the brigade of Guards, of the 33rd Regiment,