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978-1-108-06098-1 - Narrative of a Voyage to Patagonia and Terra del Fuego: Through the Straits of Magellan, in H.M.S. Adventure and Beagle, in 1826 and 1827

John Macdouall

Excerpt

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NARRATIVE OF A VOYAGE  
TO  
PATAGONIA AND TERRA DEL FUEGO,  
IN 1826 AND 1827.

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His Majesty's surveying vessels, Adventure and Beagle, left Plymouth Sound on the 22d May, 1826, destined to survey a part of the great continent of South America, not only comprising the unfrequented part of Patagonia and Terra del Fuégo, but more particularly to determine the practicability of a passage through the Straits of Magellan: a voyage which had hitherto nearly baffled the skill and calculations of the preceding navigators, Bourgainville, Cordoba, and Wallis, and proved so fatal to a part of the ship's company of H. M. S. Wager, on their voyage homeward through these desolate and cheerless straits. Such had been the

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extreme hazard in passing the various terrors encountered between the rugged shores of Patagonia and Terra del Fuégo, that most commanders had been intimidated from proceeding homeward through these famous straits; and they had been generally considered as presenting too formidable a prospect for attempting, and looked upon almost as unnavigable.

After a fine voyage of eight days we made the Island of Madeira, a place not requiring much description at the present day; and well known, from the salubrity and genial temperature of its climate, to be much resorted to by the sickly and consumptive. If a Portuguese merchant has occasion to be absent from Madeira for a short period of time, he hurries his loving and weeping wife to an institution, remarkable for its dreary appearance and barred windows, where she is secreted and watched, much against her opinion of the propriety of it, until his return; and, like the maid servant in many good worldly families, is not allowed any followers. She is to be seen as the evening sets in with a pale melancholy face at the grated

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windows, casting many a wistful look upon the Plaza, and sighing, like Yorick's starling, "I can't get out." If the ladies of this island are accused or suspected of entertaining too great an inclination to gallantry, does not the restraint laid upon them by their husbands in a great measure contribute to it?

"Danae, though shut within a brazen tower,  
Felt the male virtue of a golden shower;  
But chaste Penelope, left to her own will,  
And free disposal, never thought of ill."

An instance tending to illustrate this position occurred during our stay at Madeira, which shows that they sometimes, on their release, sufficiently revenge themselves for their rigorous punishment, but with such peculiar secrecy and cunning as seldom to subject themselves to the unwelcome intrusion of their suspicious husbands; although it generally happens that there is some well-wishing person ready to whisper to the husband the tricks of his pretty wife, otherwise he is generally the last to know it. A lady of some consideration in the island took it into her head to make an Irish gentleman, a

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resident there likewise, the object of her better choice ; now, as it is one of the whims of a Portuguese lady to possess, at any risk, what she admires, provided she is not slighted, she soon contrived to convince this person of her partiality, and he, being a gallant man, treated her with a becoming politeness. The lady suddenly grew very religious, and was so fond of going to mass and to implore the protection of “Nossa Senhora,” that the husband—good, unsuspecting man—secretly congratulated himself on possessing a lady so sensible and good, and who made him the happiest man in the world. It was one of those *whisperings* before alluded to that startled him, and made him ask the lady, on her return, the reason of her quitting home so very often. “I go,” said she, with much humility in her look, “to kneel before Nossa Senhora.” However, the next time she went out, he followed the palanquin and the steps of his tripping wife, not to the cathedral, but to a house in the suburbs of the town—he gained admittance, approached the room *à tâtons*, and found that the *religieuse*, instead of performing a genuflexion

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before “Nossa Senhora,” was encircling the brawny neck of a broad-shouldered Irishman, who seemed perfectly content in his temporary imprisonment in the delicate arms of this Portuguese lady. Contrary to the custom of a Portuguese, he did not stab the Hibernian, but he sent his wife off the island. No doubt the *dénouement* did not turn out so agreeable as she anticipated, but the place of her exile and penance was never discovered. The people of this island are certainly fond of music and revelry, for even at midnight the sound of the guitar and piano salutes the ear from the houses in every quarter. They have no lunatic asylum, although many persons have the appearance of being dangerously insane; and as for the halt and the lame, I never beheld such a grievous heap of leprous beggars, dragging their bodies after them, with their paralysed legs and arms dangling in the most artless manner by their sides. Some, indeed, there are, notwithstanding their being doomed to crutches, who amble along very stoutly, reminding you of the answer of *Le Diable Boiteux*, Asmodeus, to Don

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Cleophas : “ *Tout estropié que je suis je ne laisse pas d’aller bon train.*” The prisoners in the gaol or receptacle for felons and murderers (and it is generally well filled) have no resource while incarcerated to keep themselves from starving, as there is no gaol allowance, but a precarious dependance upon eleemosynary aid ; and you may see many uncouth and malignant visages protruding through the gratings of the prison, holding in their hands a string, to which is attached a small bag to receive donations from the charitably disposed. In this manner the smallest coin is quickly drawn up, and instantly descends with the deafening outcry of “ *Misericordia hum pobre Portuguez :*” occasionally a regular scramble takes place among them when one receives a larger contribution than another.

The monasteries are grey and venerable edifices ; but were I to mention the disgraceful and infamous conduct pursued by the priests and monks on this island, a person could not but feel exasperated at these “greasy rogues,” who in reality commit more sin than all the rest of the inhabitants put together. Much might be said

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in praise of the surrounding country and scenery, which is delightful, but Madeira has been so fully and frequently described, that it would be superfluous in me to detain the reader with any further comment, now we are about to bid adieu, in feeble imitation of Byron's Adieu to Malta, (the Hibernian must pardon me) to this gem of the ocean.

Adieu, Madeira, sunny island,  
 Alas! I can no longer spy land :  
 Adieu, the narrow dirty town ;  
 Adieu, to monk and shaven crown ;  
 Adieu, *chaste* Nun; whose thoughts are given  
 To find the nearest way to heaven ;  
 Adieu, those monasteries grey,  
 Where innocence is led astray ;  
 Adieu, the Friar's salacious chuckle—  
 How surely ye do swill and guttle ;  
 Adieu, the bower and orange grove,  
 In which intriguing lovers rove ;  
 Adieu, each saintly glittering thing,  
 Pride, vermin, fish, and palanquin ;  
 Adieu to gloom and convents dreary,  
 Rosary, cross, and Virgin Mary,  
 To " Clementina, \* " placid, pale,  
 A victim to the sacred veil ;

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\* Clementina, the youngest, and one of the most amiable of a Portuguese family, was, by the decree of her parents, forced to take the veil. She appears to be so reconciled and devoted to her fate, that a removal now from the seclusion of the monastery would

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Adieu, cool mountains, valleys, *fonte*,  
 And “Nossa Senhora da Monte \* ;”  
 Adieu, those vineyards, which so cool are,  
 Leprous beggars, wilful “Mula†,”  
 Confession-box so neatly built,  
 Stern Abbess, yielding nuns, and guilt.  
 Adieu, those stories nuns can tell,  
 By friars shrived in lonely cell;  
 They think the task that he imposes  
 A tumble on a bed of roses;  
 To see the kisses they can number,  
 And merely check them when they slumber,  
 Amusement for their lips and fingers,  
 A small rebuke when virtue lingers;  
 O, blousy friar! O, padres mine!  
 Perhaps my best wish you ’ll decline—  
 It is to have ye on the line—  
 Not that of hemp—but Neptune’s brine,  
 There for a time to change our station,  
 That we might grant *you* dispensation,

---

be even more painful to her mind than the feeling she experienced at her entrance on her noviciate.

\* “Our Lady of the Mountain.” A church so called, and situated on a mountain about three miles from the town. This church is plainly to be perceived long before you enter the Bay of Funchal.

† “Mula.” All persons who have been at Madeira must recollect this cry. The swarthy muleteers have a long pole with which they beat and drive on these obstinate animals, and at every bang they loudly cry out “mula,” and unless these sounds are repeated every ten paces, the mules will not move at all—unless the stick accompaniment compels them.



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For much I'd rather you than we  
Should duck'd, and tarr'd, and feather'd be ;  
But, " I must onward, doom'd to sail,"  
Whence these unhappy things prevail,  
So fare thee well, sweet isle prolific  
In sins, to suit these *strains pacific*.

In a few days we weighed anchor, and shaped our course for Teneriffe, which we made after a very short run, and came too in Santa Cruz roads on the morning of the 8th June. This island is likewise well known, so famous for its majestic peak. There is a good cathedral, and the town from the harbour is pretty enough. Sunday (as is the custom in most countries where the Roman Catholic religion prevails) is set aside for displaying the " Mantillas," and the pretty feet of the young Donzellas. The Spanish women are unquestionably very superior to the Portuguese, both in general *naïveté* of manner and elegance of person, and their dispositions are more liberal and free than those of the females of Madeira. Perhaps the idea of elegantly dressed ladies chatting familiarly on the Plaza with the low Spanish soldiery may be thought incompatible with the Spanish pride, yet custom here

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does not forbid it, and it is of frequent occurrence. The soldiers, by the by, have great good manners, and show themselves worthy of the compliment. These Spanish ladies, I believe, cannot boast of their mental acquirements, for as long as they can revel in all the splendour of dress and equipage, and give you a volley from a pair of black eyes that would warm the heart of an anchorite, they are regardless about them, paying much more attention to the study of the fan \*, and its expressive movements, than devotion to the chaste instructions of the aya or governess, or the gentle and soothing whispers of their pious padre.

The general habit and character of the Spaniards is manifested even on this small island in that inseparable hauteur so habitual to them, and their actions partake of the gross superstition so common among the inhabitants of Old Spain, and some instances of which may be considered as absurd enough, such as crossing

\* It is well known that the Spanish ladies have a perfect language with the fan, and can convey, by their manner of using it, their sentiments either of esteem or dislike.