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978-1-108-06154-4 - Narrative of a Voyage Round the World: In the Uranie and Physicienne Corvettes, Commanded by Captain Freycinet, During the Years 1817, 1818, 1819, and 1820

Jacques Arago

Excerpt

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**NARRATIVE**

**OF A**

**VOYAGE ROUND THE WORLD**

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**PART I.**

**LETTER I. TO LXXXVII.**

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LETTER I.

*Paris, August 15th, 1817.*

I AM just going to set out, my dear friend, on a voyage round the world ; and I, who complained so bitterly of distances, who found such fault with the tardiness of couriers, shall soon be cut off, except in remembrance, from friends and country.

A fine vessel, commanded by Captain Freycinet, is equipping at Toulon. Young men of extraordinary merit, all inflamed with equal ardour, are about to share the labours, the dangers, and the fatigue—I dare not add the glory—of the commander.

What is the object of this expedition? I cannot tell. All I know is, that there are dangers to be encountered, obstacles to be overcome, and perhaps some palms to be gathered. I shall go,—for I am sensible of my own powers, and am sure that I shall acquit myself with zeal of the task committed to me.

How many leisure hours shall I have during a three-years' voyage! How many moments of *ennui*, which must nevertheless be filled up! I will employ them in writing to you, and in conversing with you, the friend of my boyish days. I will relate to you my dangers : I will make you share my emotions, my fears, my hopes : I will associate you in some measure with my ope-

rations: and as I shall give you my route, you will have it in your power to write to me. You will tell me about my country: you will acquaint me with its glory, but, above all, with its prosperity. Do not forget to tell me of the latter; and at the distance of four thousand leagues from home, my pleasures will be the more lively, my researches the more amusing, my zeal the more ardent. Happiness, as you know, is the health of the soul. In my long pilgrimage I shall more than once need consolation; your letters will be my joy, for they will be such as I wish them. Adieu, my friend, I am off.

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## LETTER II.

*Lyons, August 22d, 1817.*

I ARRIVED the day before yesterday at Lyons, and it is with pain that I have traversed this great city. The sacrifices of our king have not been sufficient to raise it from the wretchedness in which it is plunged. My inquiries on this subject have been answered only by an alarming silence. I know not whether at my return this once flourishing city will have risen from its ruins; but the aspect of its present misery forbids even the hope. I cast my eye on those immense workshops, which once gave bread to thousands, but are now deserted. I pity these poor creatures: I turn from the sight, and with a lacerated heart pursue my course to Marseilles.

## LETTER III.

*Marseilles, August 27th, 1817.*

IF the aspect of distress afflicts a heart which is in its right place, how delicious is the pleasure which it derives from the appearance of prosperity! Scarcely had I quitted Avignon, when I met a considerable number of carts laden with corn and other productions, which agreeably surprised me, and gradually removed the gloomy impressions which had accompanied me from Lyons. The scenery, which is dull and monotonous as far as Aix, becomes still more so as you approach Marseilles. You know how far the verdure of the olive is from gay: it attracts, without pleasing the eye; but on the height of La Vista a magnificent prospect rouses the attention, and dispels the melancholy which the aspect of a bare country has excited in the mind of the traveller. An infinite number of small houses, called Bastides, rising at your feet, like so many small cells, detain you but for a moment—the immense sea is before you, covered with a forest of masts, and washing the coast of Marseilles, which it nourishes and fertilizes. I entered the city between a double line of teams, whose drivers, merry as the ancient minstrels of their country, were singing old songs; and with the whip in one hand, and the bottle in the other, they seemed to remind me that cheerfulness is the offspring of labour and industry. An atmosphere almost always serene throws no obstacle in the way of their wonted occupations. Satisfied with his wages, the artisan gaily begins his day's work, and finishes as he commenced it: the next finds him engaged in the same manner, and affords him the same resources and the same pleasures.

I shall say but a few words concerning the city of Marseilles.

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The new town is magnificent ; and I know nothing to be compared with the quarters of Beauveau and La Canebière. On the other hand, there is nothing more filthy and unhealthy than the old town, which in the heat of summer is nearly uninhabitable.

Duty summons, and I fly to Toulon. The nearer the moment of my departure approaches, the more painful it seems to me. The remembrance of my sorrows has not made me forget the agreeable moments which I have spent in the society of a few real friends. Believe me, it is cruel to bid a long farewell to one's country. No, the love of our country is not a chimera : I am quitting mine, and bitter tears start from my eyes!

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LETTER IV.

*Toulon, September 1st, 1817.*

HERE I am, then, on the point of departure : here my long peregrinations are to begin ! I shall leave to our commander the task of explaining, in his way, the causes and the nature of the phenomena we shall meet with. For my part, my friend, with our good La Fontaine,

Je dirai : j'étais là ; telle chose m'advint :  
Vous y croirez être vous-même.

Too ignorant to fathom the secrets of nature, I shall confine myself to the relation of facts as I observe them. But when I tell you *I have seen such a thing*, you may rest assured that I really have seen it. And I shall not, like many a bold ad-

venturer who circumnavigates the globe, without ever quitting his closet, hunt after what is wonderful and romantic, for the purpose of engaging your attention and exciting your curiosity. I know your indulgent friendship so well, as to be satisfied beforehand that whatever shall remind you of me will be dear to you; and that you will prefer a plain but faithful narrative to the crude and ridiculous dreams of so many untravelled voyagers.

Since I have said something concerning Lyons and Marseilles, I shall complete my notes with a few words on Toulon: we ought not to slight any one. The harbour appears to me less spacious than that of Marseilles; but the road is the finest and safest in the Mediterranean. The bottom is in general good, and the beach by no means dangerous. I am sorry to see it empty.

The city, which is small, extends from east to west about a quarter of a league. It is very dirty at night, though clean enough in the day. It is always hazardous to walk in the streets after eight in the evening, on account of the inattention of those whose duty it is to enforce cleanliness. In the morning the city is washed by the streams which run through it, and which are supplied by a considerable number of fountains. I have counted more than fifty, and some of them are of admirable workmanship and elegance. That which is situated in the hay-market is highly picturesque. You must not, however, expect to find at Toulon any other remarkable piece of sculpture than this fountain, and the two cariatides which support the balcony of the *hotel-de-ville* situated by the harbour. They are by the celebrated Pujet, and in good preservation. It is related, that an eminent sculptor, who had come to France for the purpose of inspecting our master-pieces, on landing at Toulon, stopped before these cariatides; and after gazing on them for a long time in ecstasy, went on board again, exclaiming, "I have seen

enough!" This foreigner was certainly in a hurry to get back to his own country.

The streets are in general perfectly straight; and few places in France can produce any thing equal to that called Champ-de-Bataille, which, though small, is adorned by the handsome houses which border it, and by alleys of elms and plantains of prodigious height. The young people give different names to these alleys. In the *Lovers' Alley*, which is next to the gate of France, and opposite to the residence of the admiral, you find scarcely any but youthful swains, sighing forth amorous ditties, and timid, very timid damsels, who contrive to persuade their mammas that the air there is cooler, and the foliage more luxuriant. The *Politicians' Alley* is most frequented: there you are elbowed at every step. I often went thither to read the news in the faces of some individuals with whose opinions I was acquainted. The third is the *Widows' Alley*; where more useless sighs are heaved than tears shed. The fourth, next to the arsenal, is the *Alley of Sighs*, which is an egregious misnomer, for discretion and reason are banished from it.

What a distressing sight is that of the galley-slaves! Their number here is upward of four thousand. They are divided into several classes, according to the nature of their crimes. In very few of their faces can you discover any thing like contrition. There is not a street in which you do not meet some of these wretches; but a fact, which will scarcely be credited, is, that the authorities, so far from exercising a vigilant attention over them, frequently select their servants from among these culprits, who, enjoying liberty in the city, seem to give the lie to justice. Would you believe it, my friend, that there are fathers so hostile to the welfare of their children as to commit their education to these degraded creatures? I have seen young ladies who owed their little attainments solely to the instruction of a galley-slave! Can



you suppose that they have learned nothing but what is calculated to do them credit? Never, I think, could I fall in love with such a female: never should I esteem such a father. Under a liberal and enlightened government, to point out abuses is to reform them. I shall say but a few words of the arsenal: it is superb, and worthy, in every respect, of the magnificence of Louis XIV.

P. S. There are books in the public library of Toulon.

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#### LETTER V.

*Off Cape Creus, September 21st, 1817.*

I HAVE bidden adieu to our beautiful France: some leagues now separate me from it, and I am shedding tears of regret. The heart I know is a citizen of the world; and it is possible that I may meet in other regions with friends, who will rejoice in my joy and grieve at my griefs; but I had rather do without them. Few friends, little ambition, and little wealth,—such are the ingredients of happiness.

We sailed on the 17th, at half-past seven in the morning, with a light breeze, which carried us slowly out of the harbour. I made a drawing of a pyramid, which crowns the hill situated to the south of the road, and a projection of which forms Cape Sepet. How vain is man! That pyramid is a tomb. . . . . General Latouche, an officer not less distinguished for his engaging gaiety than for his extensive attainments, desired, a few hours before he died, that he might be there interred. His monument reminds the French of what they owe to that illustrious warrior.

The night of the 17th was very stormy : I was so ill the whole time that it is not in my power to give you a description of a tempest.

Wherefore, my friend, should a new incident, by increasing my regret, awaken wishes that were scarcely lulled to rest ! . . . . Five days ago I quitted France, and had lost sight of it. A change of wind is now driving us towards land. . . . . There it is still—there is my native land—there it is that you dwell—my family, my friends, are all there! Gracious heaven! I am separated from it by a space of but a few miles, and yet I cannot embrace you! Ah! relatives and friends, receive at least the expression of my feelings, the assurance of my warmest affection. With a contrary wind for but two more hours, and I shall perhaps distinguish objects which are so dear to me. . . . . From the fresh orders that are given, I conclude that the wind has again changed: it is said now to be favourable; it wafts me, alas! from all my hopes! Parents, friends, country, adieu!

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## LETTER VI.

*Off the Balearic Islands, September 22, 1817.*

WE doubled Cape Creus with extreme rapidity, and the coast of Spain began to appear in sight. A few leagues from Barcelona we enjoyed a singularly delightful spectacle, of which I can give you but an imperfect idea. We were but three cables length from a small village, when a luminous spot on the summit of the mountain, which overtops the place, caught our attention. It soon increased with astonishing rapidity, and in a few moments vanished, but again appeared brighter and larger than before.