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Charles Robert Cockerell Edited by Samuel Pepys Cockerell

Excerpt

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TRAVELS IN SOUTHERN EUROPE AND THE LEVANT

CHAPTER I

LEAVES LONDON FOR PLYMOUTH—THE DESPATCH VESSEL—THEY TAKE
A FRENCH PRIZE—THE PRISONERS—AN ALARM—CADIZ—MALTA
—LIFE ON BOARD—THE DARDANELLES—TAKES BOAT FOR CON-
STANTINOPLE.

“ I STARTED from London on Saturday, April the 14th, 1810, with 200*l.* in my pocket to pay expenses. By the favour of Mr. Hamilton I was to carry out despatches to Mr. Adair, our ambassador at Constantinople, so I had in prospect a free passage in fair security to the furthest point of my intended journey. As my good friend and master in Art, Mr. R. Smirke, accompanied me to Salisbury, we loitered there a little, but for the rest of my journey, night and day, I lost not one moment. Nevertheless I had forgotten that when on Government duty one has no business to stop at all anywhere, and when I was cross-examined as to my journey by the Admiral of the Port at Plymouth, I felt extremely awkward.

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On the morning following my arrival, viz. April 16th, I embarked on board the vessel which was to carry me. She was a lugger-rigged despatch boat, hired by Government, named the *Black Joke*. She was very old, as she had been at the battle of Camperdown in 1797, but I was charmed with her neatness and tidiness. We had ten guns, thirty-five men, one sheep, two pigs and fowls. The commander's name was Mr. Cannady, and we were taking out two young midshipmen to join the squadron off Cadiz.

We did not set sail till the 19th. Once out in the open sea the two young midshipmen were very ill and so was our commander.

On the third day out, Sunday, April 22nd, while we were at dinner the boatswain suddenly sang out, 'Sail ahead!' We ran up to see what it might be, and the ship was pronounced to be a merchant brig. At the same time, to be prepared in case of deception, all things were cleared for action. It was not long before we came up with her, and the master went aboard. Presently we heard the report of two pistols. Great was our astonishment, and the expression of suspense on every face was a study till it was relieved by the voice of the master bawling through a trumpet that she was a British merchantman, the *Frances*, from Fiale (*sic*), laden with cotton, figs, and other things, that she had been captured by a French privateer, and was now our prize. At these words the joy of the sailors

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was such as you cannot conceive. When the master came aboard again we learnt that the two shots came from a brace of pistols which were handed to him by the captain of the *Frances* when she was boarded, and which he discharged for fear of accidents.

The French crew of eight men, all very ragged, was brought on board. As they manifested some unwillingness at first, Cannady thought fit to receive them with drawn cutlasses ; but they made no sort of resistance. With them came an English boy, son of the owner of the *Frances*, and from him we got an interesting account of her being taken. As his father had but a short time before lost another ship, the boy showed a joy at this recovery which was delightful to see, but he behaved very nicely about recommending the Frenchmen to us. They had treated him very well, he said, and were good sailors. It was settled that the prize master should be sent with three or four men, the master's mate at their head, to Plymouth. I took the opportunity of sending a few words home, and off she went. With a fair wind she was out of sight in an hour. As I was the only man in our ship who could speak a word of French, I was made interpreter in examining the prisoners. If the account they give is correct, our sailors, who are entitled to an eighth part of the salvage, will share 3,645*l.* 10*s.* 8*d.* I took an early opportunity, when Cannady talked of our luck and anticipated more, to assure him that the

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only good fortune I desired was a safe and quick passage to Constantinople, for fear he should think I was looking out for prize-money. I don't know what my share would be, if indeed I have any, but if I find I have, I shall consider how to dispose of it in a handsome way.

The poor Frenchmen were very miserable, and I, partly out of pity, and more because I wanted to practise speaking, rather made friends with them. They are very different from our men. They lounge about anyhow in a disorderly fashion, are much dirtier—in fact filthy, so that our sailors complain of them loudly in this respect—and are much livelier. I saw three of them sitting yesterday all of a heap reading 'Télémaque' (fancy that!) with the utmost avidity, and when they see me drawing, they seem to crawl all over me to watch the operation. My special friend is one Esprit Augin, who appears to be superior to the rest and to speak better. We talk together every day till I am tired. In spite of his grief at being a prisoner—and he appeared to feel his position more than any of them—he began the very next day to talk to me of balls, masquerades, promenades, and so on with inexpressible delight, and I even thought at one moment that we should have had a *pas seul* on the deck. He sang me no end of songs. He was as vain as he was lively. I told him I should like to make a drawing of a youth named Jean Requette,

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a handsome, clever-looking boy of the party ; at which he sighed deeply and said, ‘ *Moi je ne suis pas joli.*’

Amongst other things, Augin told us that he had great hopes of being set free again, for that there were two French privateer frigates off Ferrol ; and when we came off that point on Sunday the 29th, and I heard the boatswain sing out ‘ *Two sail ahead,*’ we made sure we had met them. All glasses were out in an instant, and sure enough there were two privateers.

Too proud to alter it, we held quietly on our course, and they came quickly up with us. We made the private signals to them, but as the sun was low and just behind them we could not make out the answer or what colours they flew.

Thereupon orders were given to clear for action. In a moment all was activity. The sailors stripped to their shirts. The guns were run out. Greville and I loaded the muskets and pistols. Every man had his place. Mine was at the stern in charge of the despatches, ready tied to a cannon shot, to sink them in case of necessity, and with orders to make the best use I could of the muskets. We were all ready by the time the first of the privateers came within speaking distance of us. There was a dead silence on both sides for a moment, a moment of intense suspense, then our commander spoke them, and the answer, to our delight, came in English. They were the *Iris* and *Matchless* privateers from

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Guernsey on the look-out for the Isle de France men going into Bordeaux. A boat came aboard us, and I was not sorry that they should see our deck and that I knew how to take care of despatches. It is wonderful how the animation of preparations for fighting takes away from the natural fear. If I had had to look on without anything to do, I should have been in a dreadful fright.

After this false alarm we went on to Cadiz without any event, beyond meeting with occasional merchantmen, whom we always thought proper to board.

I could not go ashore at Cadiz, and I shall never cease to regret it; but the orders of the naval authorities were peremptory that the lugger should proceed immediately with her despatches to Malta.¹ We deposited our prisoners with the fleet.”

The next place the *Black Joke* touched at was Gibraltar, where she delivered letters and despatches. She could only stay four or five hours, but Cockerell was able to go ashore. As it was a market day, the scene Gibraltar, and this was the first time he had ever been in a foreign country, it is not to be wondered at that he was intoxicated with delight. He gushes over it in the style of the very young traveller.

“I like watching the sailors. Many of them are

¹ The British fleet was at this time co-operating with the Spaniards in defending Cadiz against the French.

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very fine fellows, and I have nearly filled my book with drawings of them and the Frenchmen. Self-consciousness had the most ludicrous effect upon them when I was doing their portraits, and great rough fellows who you might think would eat horseflesh would simper with downcast eyes, like a coquettish miss. Their ways of killing time are wonderful. Sometimes you see one whittling a piece of hard wood for some trifling purpose for hours and hours together. At another time, if an unfortunate little bird comes on to the vessel, they run about the rigging damning its eyes till they are tired out. There are some great singers amongst them, who treat us in the evenings. Their taste is to sing about two hundred verses to the same tune. I am told we have one highly accomplished, who can sing a song of three hundred. I only hope we shall never hear him.

We arrived at Malta overnight and awaited despatches, which we have received this morning. Everywhere the authorities are so solicitous that no time should be lost that we are sent on without mercy. I am told the despatches we brought here were of consequence ; but, like all postmen, we know nothing of the contents of the letters we bring. Only we see that all rejoice and wish the commandant, General Oakes,¹ joy. I also hear that the French are advancing on Sicily.

¹ Afterwards Sir Hildebrand Oakes, Bart., G.C.B. Served with distinction in India, Egypt, America, and elsewhere.

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The harbour here is full of prizes. A frigate came in this morning full of shot holes. She had cut out a brig from Taranto in the face of two brigs, a schooner, and a frigate.”

From Malta it took the *Black Joke* over a month to get to Constantinople. Most of the letters written home during the time were sent back by the *Black Joke* on her return voyage. It will be seen why they never reached their destination.

Meanwhile some notes were despatched by other means, and from them I extract the following :

“ We took a pilot from Malta, a decayed Ragusan captain. Had I made but the first steps in Italian as I had in French, I might have profited by this opportunity as I did by the French prisoners ; for the man spoke no other language, and was to direct us through a dangerous sea by signs and grimace as the only means of communication between us.

At first we had a fair wind, but as we got nearer the Morea it became less favourable and blew us nearly up to Zante. Some ancient writer records the saying in his day, ‘ Let him who is to sail round Taenarus (Matapan) take a last farewell of his relations ;’ and it is still dangerous, on account of the eddies of wind about Taygetus for one thing, and on account of the cruel Mainiote pirates for another. We passed it securely ; but the story of an English

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brig of war having been boarded and taken by them while the captain and crew were at dinner, and that not long ago, put us on our guard. We had nettings up at night, and a sharp look-out at all hours.

I shall never forget how we made our entrance into the Hellespont with sixteen sail of Greek and Turkish fruit-boats, all going up to Constantinople.

No yachting match could be so pretty as these boats, tacking and changing their figures, with their white sails, painted sides, and elegant forms, as compared with our northern sea boats. Our superior sailing, however, was soon confessed, and we went past them. As we did so, several goodnaturedly threw cucumbers and other fruits on board.

We cast anchor not far from the second castle near the northern side, and put ashore to water where we saw a spring. It was evening, and under the shade of a fine plane tree, by a pool lined and edged with marble, before a fountain of elegant architecture, sat on variegated carpets some majestic Turks. They were armed and richly dressed. Their composed, placid countenances seemed unmoved at our approach. One of them spoke and made me a sign to draw nearer. I did so, and with an air at once courteous and commanding he signed to me to sit near him and offered me a long pipe to smoke. After some pause he put questions, and smiled when I could not answer them. By their gestures and the word *Inglis* I saw they

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were aware of our nationality. They looked approbation and admired the quality of my grey cloth coat. After some minutes I rose and left them with a bow, enchanted with their politeness, and fancying myself in a scene of the 'Arabian Nights.'

Shortly after we were visited by our consul and his son. We learnt later that they were Jews, but their handsome appearance imposed completely on us, and, in spite of the mixture of Jewish obsequiousness, their Turkish dignity made us conceive a prodigious opinion of them. The consul understood quickly that I was a milordo, and taking from his pocket an antique intaglio he begged my acceptance of it with a manner I in my innocence thought I could not refuse. I was anxious to show my sense of his courtesy by the offer of a pound of best Dartford powder, which, after some pressing, he accepted; but at the same time added, so far as I understood through the interpreter, that he hoped I did not mean to pay him for his intaglio. I was overcome with confusion, shocked at my own indelicacy in giving so coarse an expression to my gratitude, and I would have given worlds to have undone the whole affair. Of course my embarrassment was perfectly needless. A little experience of them taught me that this was only the shallow *finesse* of the Orientals, and looking back I have laughed to think of my ingenuous greenness at that time.