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978-1-108-06685-3 - Notes on the Late Expedition Against the Russian Settlements in Eastern Siberia: And of a Visit to Japan and to the Shores of Tartary, and of the Sea of Okhostk

Bernard Whittingham

Excerpt

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NOTES

ON

THE LATE EXPEDITION,

&c. &c.

CHAPTER I.

Object of the Writer in joining Naval Expedition. — Its Prospects. — Leave Hong Kong. — Mildness of this Winter in Southern China. — Sail along Shores of Formosa. — Currents found in the Pacific. — Aerolite of extraordinary Brilliancy seen. — Approach Straits of Corea. — First Whale Ship seen. — Drift past Japanese Island. — Its Cultivation. — Appearance of the Habitations. — Man overboard. — Commodore's former saving of a Seaman's Life. — Enter Sea of Japan. — Gradual cooling of Sea-water. — Reach Straits of Sangar. — Snow on the Hills. — Excitement consequent on entering Japanese Port for first time.

IN the month of March of this year, the gradual increase in the number of the English and French frigates lying in the fine harbour of Hong Kong betokened a speedy termination to the inactivity of the allied squadrons

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2 OBJECT IN JOINING THE EXPEDITION.

in the Eastern Seas, and once more awakened the sentiments of pride and hope which, since the declaration of war last year, the apparently aimless movements and ill success of our naval forces on the north-eastern shores of Asia had repressed.

I was then on the eve of relinquishing the command of the Royal Engineers at Hong Kong; and recollecting the circumstances of the disastrous repulse at Petropaulowski in the preceding autumn, I considered it my duty to offer my services, with the concurrence of the officer commanding the troops, to the admiral. His Excellency stated that he had no idea of attacking any of the Russian ports in the East; and I should have given up all thoughts of joining the squadron, had I not received a kind invitation from Commodore the Hon. C. Elliot to take a cruise with him, and had I not been convinced that it was incompatible with our interests and our honour to allow a second summer to pass away without an attempt to discover the progress of Russian aggrandisement in North-eastern Asia, and to ascertain how far the reports of her successful encroachment

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SCANTY SOURCES OF INFORMATION. 3

on the sea frontiers of China and Japan were true.

On the latter point the information was most meagre; so much so, that the slight and clever article in Fraser's Magazine of January or February last was read with avidity by the chief officers of the squadron: the other sources of information were the scanty records of missionary visits, and conversations with the plenipotentiary and diplomatic officers of the United States. From the intercourse which had lately been held between the American minister and the Russian envoy to Japan, Vice-Admiral Puniatin, it was evident that there had been no very careful concealment of the position and prospects of Russia in the East, and it was occasionally possible to elicit some striking facts indicative of the rapid consolidation of her conquests along the fertile valley of the Amùr, which stretches nearly 2000 miles in the temperate zone into the heart of Asia.

Elate with hope, and looking forward confidently to successful service, I embarked, on the 7th April, on board H. M. S. Sibylle as a visitor, and found that an advanced squa-

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4 WINTER IN SOUTHERN CHINA.

dron, consisting of that frigate, the steam corvette *Hornet*, and the brig *Bittern*, were to sail that day for the North. The pleasure of leaving the tropics, the delight of being soon employed on active service, and the certain distinction to be gained under their popular commander, was visible in the radiant countenances and zealous activity of the officers and men of the *Sibylle*, — every omen seemed auspicious, and, with a fresh breeze, the frigate and her consorts soon made a recall impossible.

The winter was nearly over, and what a dry, equable, and temperate winter it is! comparable to the same season in Egypt or Malaga. In six months we had rain only on six days, and that in partial non-tropical showers: now every day the sudden change of temperature caused by the conquest of the south-west monsoon over the strong breezes from the North was expected; but we seemed for some days to be on the neutral ground, and lay nearly becalmed, close to the bold romantic shores of the island of Formosa—the Beautiful—so well named by the Portuguese. The aboriginal islanders are supposed to have re-

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FORMOSA. — ABORIGINES.

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sisted the Chinese for centuries, and now still hold the mountains, leaving the lowlands on the western shores to their Chinese assailants: unconquered they descend sometimes from their fastnesses, and devastate the rich crops of their more civilised enemies. The Eastern shores are rocky and precipitous, and the mountains rise abruptly, well wooded and green, and with forms of magnificent outlines.

Emerging from the China Sea, southerly breezes, on the Pacific, with a strong northerly current, gave us a rapid passage along the ever-beautiful coast of this great island, and the genial temperature, ranging from 70° to 78° Fahr., and the never-ceasing interest in watching the varying sailing powers of our consorts, as the winds veered or increased, and as the sea rose or was calm, rendered my first week's cruise in a sailing vessel most agreeable; indeed, for many months the pleasure of looking at the *Hornet*, with her exquisite form and quick sailing properties, and of sharing, as far as a thorough landsman might, the admiration of the seamen for the skill and readiness with which the *Bittern* was handled, never palled. The *Sibylle*, heavily laden with

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six months' provisions, and with as much powder and shot as she could carry, staggering under all sail before the wind, could only keep in advance by her consorts "giving her" royals, and often top-gallant sails likewise.

On the 16th, at twenty-two minutes past seven o'clock, the largest and most brilliant aerolite I have ever seen, very bright, and burning with a clear blue flame around a deep red centre, fell, or seemed to fall, between the Sibylle and the Hornet, which were about 400 yards apart; and the next time "we communicated," we found that from the Hornet it seemed to have fallen near us: I never saw one so near to me before, nor the evidences of combustion so apparently sure.

The following day we saw long low islands, and fancied the nearest to be Koumi, one of the Madjicosima group: an observation at noon proved the islands to be Fia-yusu and Hou-pin-su, eighty miles more to the north. Such are the currents of these seas, that even with a patent log overboard, and before a constant breeze, the want of a couple of daily observations must throw great uncertainty on the whereabouts of a ship; and every one

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CURRENT CHARTS NEEDED.—FOGS.—COLD. 7

must wish “God speed” to Lieut. Maury, of the U. S. Navy, in his persevering and enlightened endeavours to procure good observations on which to found a more perfect system of current charts.

In the afternoon a vessel was seen crossing our path, at a great distance; it was “made out” an American man-of-war, and was conjectured to be the Vincennes, *en route* to the Loo-Choo Islands, which group she was to survey: the only other ship yet seen at sea was an American clipper, which amused itself by keeping near us for some hours on the 11th, and showing off her paces to the overloaded Sibylle.

Continuing to run before light southerly breezes, we ascertained that the temperature of the sea was gradually getting much cooler than that of the air, already somewhat raised by the southerly winds; and on the 19th we ran into the first of the long series of fogs which were to accompany our northern progress.

The fogs chilled our temperature from a range of 70° to 78° Fahr. to a range of 60° to 66°, the latter height being generally attained at noon for many days. The change from the

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clear pure air of the tropics did not seem to affect the health of the crew, to which, from the habits of seamen, nothing seems more obnoxious than a continuance of damp or wet weather. We lost sight of our consorts, and for a few days were dependent on gongs, bells, bugles, and occasional guns for keeping together; a glimpse once or twice a day also aiding the performance of this necessary duty, which was made more difficult by frequent calms of short duration.

On the 22nd the Gotto islands and rocks were in sight; and, as we still continued to steer northwards, the eager desire of seeing Nagasaki, which we supposed was to be our first port, very soon merged into the greater pleasure of there being less delay in our advance.

The air became much cooler and clearer as we approached the Straits of Corea; and, in consonance with the weather, the first whale ship was seen on the same day; and henceforth the eye seldom rested on the water without a searching glance for the traces or spouting of the hotly and far pursued monster of the deep.

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JAPANESE ISLAND.

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A heavy squall at night raised an angry sea, with most phosphorescently illuminated waves. The whole break of the wave consisted of bright sparkling spangles, which seemed to shine, even after the subsidence of the wave, through the foamy surface.

A light northerly wind, "breathing whence it stole those 'icy' sweets," baffled our efforts to get through the Straits on the 23rd. We endeavoured to pass between the island of Tsu-sima (sima means island in the Japanese language, and may, therefore, in future stand for its English synonyme) and the peninsula of Corea; the breeze almost died, and we drifted slowly past the green, fertile, hilly island, cultivated in terraces to the crests of the hills, and which, as the first Japanese scene we had looked on, riveted our attention. Though we were too distant to see the vesture or bearing of the inhabitants, still their thatched cottages and fishing-stations had the appearance of civilisation and some look of comfort.

In the afternoon my host and I were reading in the cabin, when a cry was heard from the deck, with a rushing of feet, and the pecu-

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liar sounds of ropes running fast through blocks and off cleats. I, turning, rose to go on deck; saw my friend in the act of ridding himself of his jacket, and lowering the sash of the stern window preparatory to going out of it. He had not said a word. In a moment we saw the life-buoy floating away from the ship; yet no one was to be seen in the water. Whilst he was thus resting for a second ready to spring as soon as a sight of a man was obtained, we heard from the deck that "two were swimming," and on getting there saw the man who had fallen, and a shipmate who had jumped overboard, swimming with ease to the buoy. They happened to be both good swimmers; and, as the day was not cold, they did not suffer any inconvenience.

The modesty and resolution of the commodore's character struck me much to-day, though I had read the record of his noble daring some months previously at Singapore, where, in a harbour infested by sharks, on hearing the same cry, he at once leapt from his cabin window and saved the life of a fine young seaman who could not swim. I feel that my allusion to these circumstances will