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978-1-108-07718-7 - Notes During a Visit to Egypt, Nubia, the Oasis, Mount Sinai,
and Jerusalem

Frederick Henniker

Excerpt

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VISIT
TO
EGYPT, NUBIA, THE OASIS,
MOUNT SINAI,
&c. &c.

CHAPTER I.

VOYAGE FROM MALTA—PILOT BOAT—ALEXANDRIA.

DEAR W—

As your accident on Mount Vesuvius is also my misfortune, depriving me of your company to Egypt, I shall alleviate part of my own at least, by occasionally sending you an extract from my journal.

October 6th, 3 P. M.—Took the good wishes of my friends at Malta, and went on board the brig *Costante*, already under weigh for Alexandria, and at 3 P. M. commenced my unceasing wish, that the voyage was over—wind fresh but fair—and fair but fresh—the sun in setting appeared particularly red; the captain and myself looked at it with very

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different sensations—I admired it: the captain applied the word “Capote” as an epithet, and sent for his great coat—it soon came on a violent gale; however it was very well, *when over*—we had run two hundred miles in twenty-four hours.

Eighth—9th.—Time passes on as it usually does at sea; “how far have we come, how far have we to go, at what rate are we going, when do you think we shall arrive, only guess,”—no mile-stones—no land—no ships—not even a straw for a drowning man to catch at—“*nil nisi pontus et aër*,” as the Latin grammar says.

In so long a traject as from Malta to Egypt, a landsman has a right to expect a weather adventure, but not when the stars are unusually bright and beautiful. “All that glisters is not gold;” the breeze that removes the clouds from Heaven, ruffles the surface of the deep. About midnight I found my head knocking itself against either side of my berth, as if was not my own, an awful bell was summoning all hands upon deck—“hear it not Duncan”—pumps going, brandy going, and so was my breath, no “*æs triplex*” to keep my heart in its proper place, the pitching of the vessel had the same alarming effect, as descending the *mountains of pleasure* in the jardin Beaujon at Paris; I shall never again call Saint Peter coward, and I repent of having with you, in the straits of Messina, abused Virgil for exaggerating Scylla

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and Charybdis; I now think Homer more unpardonable for attempting to express the threats of the sea in one word.

Fourteenth.—Wind little, and none, there is a feather vane near the steersman, it droops: I put lighter feathers, but it wo'n't do; we are however near land, a heavy mist that falls at the moment of sunset warns us of our approach to Egypt.

Fifteenth.—The sea is brown and brackish, this is owing to the influx of the Nile, and yet we are probably forty miles from the mouth of the river—the night is so dark and the coast so dangerous, that we bear away from the object of our wishes.

Sixteenth.—Day break, hail to the gardens of Rosetta, we have overshot our mark and tack back for Alexandria—a low white streak scarcely rising above the level of the sea; compared by Denon to a riband stretched along the horizon—Pompey's pillar looks like a light-house and answers the purpose of a land-mark.

Alexandria has two ports, the old and the new; the latter is exposed and not frequented, the former is not easy of access, it has a mouth like that of a mad dog, rocks like teeth, protruding, foaming, and threatening; still a chance of commencing my adventures with a shipwreck like many travellers in this quarter; a boat-load of screaming pilots give a horror and interest to the scene; the

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dresses of these men, unlike that neat uniformity which pervades our seafaring class, are as gay and diversified as the changes of fancy, colour, and embroidery can make them; turbans, poniards, red shoes, no stockings, mustaches extending on either side the face like a cat's feelers—a grey bearded fellow who seems old enough to have been pilot to Noah, and clothed in Joseph's garment, his legs crossed, his arms folded, with a pipe in his hand, is perpetually screaming out " Hay-lay-essah, Hay-lay-essah," (God help us, God ——) and now that we have cleared the rocks, and that there is no more danger, old grey-beard comes on board for payment, he asks also, " becksheesh," a regalo, a present; his coming on board is worth something, for it is a sign that the plague does not at present exist in Alexandria. It is nearly the moment of sun-set and gate-locking, so that I cannot yet make my escape from this moving jail, nor can I at present discover any thing to tempt me on shore except a few palm-trees, and what will also defy my curiosity, a large white building at the extremity of a tongue of land, far removed from man; it is the Harem belonging to the Cleopatras of the Pasha.

We have run nearly a thousand miles in ten days, a rate I should be most happy to compound for with Neptune and his unholy allies.

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17th.—I have been on shore ; the very stepping stones at the water's edge are a mass of antiquities, about to quit their native country, with strong letters of recommendation from Messrs. — and —, to the respective governments of England and France ; defaced hieroglyphics and noseless statues sent for no visible reason, unless for ballast. Who would imagine that such things are to be paid for? If such are the pieces of the gorgeous palaces that are worth carrying away, there will scarcely be left a wreck behind ! I may return to Rome to look at obelisks, and to London and Paris for all else of Egyptian labour.

Conducted to the house of the English consul ; streets narrow, winding, and filthy ; houses low, unfinished and unfurnished ; where there ought to be glass, is a closely reticulated wooden grating, like the screens of a nunnery, and to answer the same purpose ; the women here are born in a prison, they live in a prison, and they die in a prison, if they escape being tied in a sack and drowned. Contrasted with the vile appearance of the town are the gaudy habiliments of the people ; one might imagine the place to be wealthy—but there are also such a number of half clothed and half starved, that Alexandria appears to be a national poor-house. Coffies and smokies are as frequent and as frequented as gin-shops and ale-houses in London. In lieu

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of silver-smiths and confectioners, are tobacco-cutters and barbers; at length we enter the only street that boasts a pane of glass; this is inhabited by Francs. The term Franc is applied to every head that has a *hat* on it; and here forgetting all national and religious differences, they flock together, as Jews do in London, and Turks in Venice.

Arrived at the consulate—no one knocks at Mr. Lee's doors without experiencing disagreeable sensations, *till within them*. They are evidently constructed as a defence against either plague or mob; being double and having a small aperture for caution's sake.

In the town is an inn and a *table d'hôte*, the table being covered with oil-skin, which is an anti-plague; here are also lodgings to let, but I retain my birth on board the brig; there is a wide difference between being in a ship when at sea, and when it cannot run away with you; we have a minor plague on board, musquitoes and flies, they boarded us yesterday as busy as custom-house officers; the flies are wading incessantly through this scrawl, following my pen as crows do the plough. What trouble, not sport, Domitian would have had here! Sir R. Wilson states that he used to kill such quantities at a time that it "appeared as if a cask of currants had been spilt." It is surely no harm to kill a musquito, and I know not which are our

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greatest enemies, the flies or the musquitoes, they hold divided sway—half sting by night, the others sting by day.

Yours,

P. S. Whenever I make use of Arabic terms, I shall write them as my ear dictates to my pen.

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CHAPTER II.

PLAGUE—DOGS—OBELISKS—POMPEY'S PILLAR—
CANAL—CATACOMBS—FLIES.

ALEXANDRIA, 21ST OCTOBER.

THE camel with our luggage is gone, and the donkeys that are to carry ourselves are ready; they do not appear so anxious to proceed as our guide, who says that if we turn out of our way to look for where Canopus *fuit*, it will be dark ere we reach the half-way house.—But to my mem.—Concerning the plague, nothing certain is known of it except its dreadfulness—fear, as in all other countries, and other diseases is a conductor; if so, I run great risk. A merchant here at the commencement of the late plague shut up his house, and would allow no one to answer the door but himself; he caught the plague, and died: all the other inmates escaped. Among curious cases there is one on record at Malta. A tailor, who had procured some silk from an infected house, passed the evening with a soldier and his wife: the tailor went home, and the soldier and his wife to bed; on the following morning the woman found her husband

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dead by her side, and covered with tumors : she was put into the lazaretto, as was also the tailor : at the end of three weeks the infection manifested itself upon the latter, and he died ; the woman escaped altogether. There is no calculating upon safety—till after the 24th of June. *Then*, even the Turks, who are fatalists, have a feast, under the idea that the plague ceases on that day—it usually about that time goes out of town for the season, or remains incog.

Walked towards the obelisks of Cleopatra, they are situated at the edge of the new port. Within a few yards of the town, the butchers were drawing and quartering buffaloes : the sands fetid with entrails : sharks and dogs are the only scavengers. Here commences a wall, which is supposed to be a defence, and is called the city wall ; under it are frequent mounds of rubbish, such as are seen in the purlieu of London, where retiring citizens placard “ Belle vue ” upon a cottage. Attempting to pass the first of these filth hills, a pack of brindled wolf dogs rushed down upon us, barking furiously as if they knew me to be a Christian. I had almost determined, Actæon-like, to fly, but stood at bay, and at length backed out of their dirty territories, the dogs following till we approached a second mound. Here a second kennel was let loose upon us, and the former, having handed us over to strict watch, retired. They have a method in their

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madness ; and I would match them for frightening strangers against double the number of geese of the Capitol.

The town wall runs between the water's edge and the obelisks : fragments of pillars and architectural remains, probably once connected with them, are visible under the neighbouring waves. Encountered the dogs once more, and entered the town.

Met a crowd of Roman Catholics returning from mass : they have a neat chapel, which is not only tolerated by the government, but even surmounted by the Turkish flag to preserve it from insult. In Bucharest, the capital of a Turkish province, every religion is tolerated—except the Mahommedan—strange inconsistency. The Pope also has an armed force, and having an armed force has the word Peace inscribed upon his standard. Near the chapel stand three plain granite columns, that *may have been* part of a portico, or any thing else. I really cannot make them interesting : Denon has made a pretty picture of the subject ; but the beauties of it do not exist. Nearly opposite is a ruined mosque, in which was found a noble sarcophagus, it was packed up cleverly by the French for the Louvre, but *il se trouve* in the British Museum ; the *cross* is still evident on some of the stones used in this Turkish temple—but even the eagle is not obliterated from all the public build-