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 Excerpt  
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CAPE ST. VINCENT.

## A RIDE IN EGYPT.

### CHAPTER I.

#### ON THE VOYAGE.

The P. and O.—The Bay—The Company—Gibraltar—An Orange Tree—The Sieges—The Signal Station—Approaching Malta—The Fear of Quarantine—What Quarantine is—Gozo and Malta from the Sea—Valetta—*Pratique*—The Government—The Palace—A Debate in Parliament—The Old Nobility—The Dome of Mosta—How not to get from Malta to Naples—A Night between Scylla and Charybdis.

It is quite impossible to winter out of London—so one thinks rebelliously, when the doctor's doom has been pronounced. But there is no appeal—go you

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must. When you have gone, when you have tasted of the pleasures of a climate in which the air is not damp, in which the sun is warm at Christmas, in which you are strong and happy, able to breathe and see, able to go about, to work and play, to learn and teach, to take long walks and join pic-nics, all at a season in which you would at home be confined to one room, artificially heated and lighted: even the charms of the village of St. Marylebone, near London, cease to prey upon your memory.

Another thing which mitigates the terror of wintering abroad is to find that people at home get on very well without you. There are of course two sides to this aspect of the subject. It is a little mortifying to observe that the charitable or the learned society which, as you thought, you were carrying on by your own strivings with recalcitrant committees, and which was prospering solely through your constant tact and management, prospers even more swimmingly when you are away. It is not altogether pleasant to hear when you are abroad that one who, &c., is able to enjoy an evening party or a run through the old Masters at the Grosvenor, just as well with that silly fellow Blank, who fortunately for him possesses the art of making her laugh, as she ever did with you. But after a time even these memories lose their poignancy, and you reflect, perhaps wisely, that to breathe her name you must retain the use of your lungs, and that rheumatism will give you worse beatings of the

heart than she can ever cause, be she never so beautiful or so cruel.

But apart from the question of health, I confess the prospect of spending four or five months in Egypt had no charms for me. True, I had read half a dozen books about that ancient land, and, like everybody else, had my own theory of the Exodus. I knew that some pre-Adamite kings had heaped up cairns at a place called Gheezeh, and that little boys in the streets of Cairo were but scantily clad, and had eyes full of flies. I was also acquainted with the use of the word *backsheesh*, and had so far progressed in Oriental languages that I knew it came, like *khedive*, from the Persian, and that both words were looked upon as disagreeable by people who love Egypt. Hieroglyphs, too, like all the things “which no fellow can understand,” had a certain fascination for me, but I was not competent to distinguish between a determinative and a cartouche.

Under these circumstances, it was with no lively feelings that on a miserable morning in November, 1876, I commenced my first journey to Egypt—a journey repeated every winter since. I drove to Waterloo Station as the sun was going through what must be called, for want of a fitter term, sunrise. It only consisted, on this sad morning, in making more visible the dinginess of closed shop-fronts and deserted streets, followed by a rapid retirement as the regular midday darkness set in. I

loved the fog : would that it had loved me in return. What are the golden sands of Libya, or the crimson peaks of Cush, to one who knows the mud of Regent Street and the ruddy vapours of Hyde Park ?

It does not take many hours to reach Southampton ; and the journey, once we were in the open country, was not exactly unpleasant. I was rather curious to make my first acquaintance with actual life on board a great mail steamer.

The French say, with some truth, that Englishmen can express about half their ideas by the use of two words—namely, “fast” and “board.” To be on board a fast mail steamer is an experience very common with Englishmen ; but the actual feelings of those who travel in this way must vary in every case, not only according to a man’s mind, but according to his stomach. To be lodged with some hundreds of people in a great floating hotel, cut off from all the disagreeable excitements of civilised life, the postman’s knock, the afternoon visitor, the telegram—to be face to face with nature in one of its grandest aspects, as we are constantly reminded by the sentimental portion of our fellow-travellers—is to see life, it might be thought, under very favourable conditions.

But the reality is not so sweet. As we float down the Solent on a calm sea, a lovely view of the Isle of Wight in front, the sun setting behind the trees of the New Forest, and nothing to disturb the peaceful beauty of the scene but the long and hideous redness of Netley

Hospital and the sound of the dinner-bell, we are likely to anticipate more enjoyment than will really fall to our share. The first interruption to our dream of happiness is probably caused by seeing the visitors leave by the little Southampton steamer. Husbands parting from wives, parents from children, lovers from lovers, are an interesting sight, but one which we do not care to see twice. The comic aspects are so mixed up with the tragic, the kisses with the tears, that the indifferent looker-on is doubtful whether to laugh or cry. Here is a man coming on board in a state of semi-intoxication, not drunk enough to be happy, and evidently struggling with the imperfect recollection of some secret which he wishes to impart before he and his friend are finally separated ; or a father and mother bidding their son farewell with the look of being heartily glad to get rid of a prodigal, and the young man weeping while even the mother's eyes are dry. There may be a trace of repentance in his face, and he has probably found life at home too pleasant to be willingly given up. A bride with floods of tears, a red nose, and redder eyes, parts from her sisters with frantic embraces, her husband looking on helplessly and but half pleased. But a great rush of steam, a groan and a fizzle combined, and we are off ; the little steamer disappears in a cloud of waving handkerchiefs, and those of us who have suffered no bereavement are at leisure to observe with disappointment that the prettiest face has departed, and that the

ladies who remain have almost all the appearance of suffering from colds in the head. Such are my first impressions.

Presently I begin to take stock of my surroundings. The sleeping-cabin is very small for four. My large portmanteau can only be crushed under the sofa, and a surgical operation may be needful for its extraction. The washing appliances seem very deficient. The bed is very hard, and as narrow as a coffin. It suddenly dawns on my memory that a favourite cigar-case is at the bottom of the box under the bed, and my mind is disturbed by the thought that, of the companions of my cabin, one is sure to be sick, and at least one to snore.

Before rough water is reached the dinner-bell rings, and there is a contest, not altogether good-tempered, as to a seat near the captain. By degrees, however, settlements take place; those who cannot get near the captain endeavour to sit opposite a pretty face, or near the door, or where there is a chair, and so on, until everybody is satisfied, or at least, seated. But dinner is not a success. A pallor attacks my next neighbour's countenance. In the middle of my best anecdote he smiles at me vacantly for a moment, then hardly pausing to mutter an excuse, he rises, and disappears to return no more. One by one, about half the guests at table leave it before the conclusion of the banquet, and the survivor feels a sense of personal injury when ominous sounds, as of a human being in

distress, reach him from the neighbouring cabin. Perhaps his turn follows, perhaps he escapes; but, next to being ill yourself, it is worst to witness the sufferings of others, even if sympathy has no place among your moral qualities; and your first evening at sea closes in gloom. My own sufferings at sea have always been slight, but the motion of the ship causes qualms. For the first two days I have a feeling of being subjected to indignity as the rolling rudely shakes me from my seat, or takes my feet from under me. There is something humiliating in running down the deck and staggering up again as if you were very drunk indeed. Of this first voyage my chief recollection is that we had a gale in the Bay of Biscay. I had long wished to see the great waves of which I had heard so much, but it is a question whether it is worth going through a gale to see them. In other respects, for I must not attempt to describe great waves, one voyage is much like another.

As the days pass, and calmer latitudes are reached, the whole company of passengers meet again, and various phases of sea-going character present themselves. Some pace the deck in solitary meditation. Some seat themselves in a shady corner and observe what goes on around them with sleepy eyes. The ladies lie back on the chairs with which the quarter-deck is crowded, and make oft-repeated remarks on the sea and sky. A smoking-tent has been rigged up, and there the men assemble to talk as they take

tobacco, and give their opinions to the little world on things in general. It is there that the universal traveller holds forth, he who has surveyed the world from China to Peru, and who has apparently brought back only a knowledge of the iniquity of the British Government, the discomfort of foreign hotels, the loss of money by exchange, and the comparative venom of different breeds of mosquitoes. You ask him if he has been in Ceylon, or Norway, as the case may be, and he tells you of the price of wine at Colombo, or the bad tea they gave him at Christiana ; or you ask him about the latest revolution among the South American States, and he replies with the remark that all Portuguese settlers are rascals, and proves it by an account of how a Spaniard cheated him about a horse. If you inquire as to the customs of the Dyaks of Borneo, he begins a series of criticisms on the steam-boat arrangements of Rajah Brooke. To him travelling in itself is an end. He does not boast of the lands and cities he has “done,” but talks as if doing them had been an unmitigated annoyance to him. He complains of the world because it is too easily exhausted, and laments that there are so few regions left to be traversed. He can tell you nothing about any place he has visited, except how to get there and how to get away again, and if you devote an evening to cross-examining him in the hope of obtaining some information, you are continually disappointed, and find in the end that you have lost the time you might



have much more profitably devoted to reading a geography book.

Beside him is a gentleman whose brogue, coupled with his irregular use of will and shall, betrays his origin, who informs you in five minutes of all the particulars you care to hear of his birth, parentage, and education, of his relationship to Lord So-and-so, and the name of his wife's first husband. He allows to having been born in Dublin, but vows he never set foot in it since. If in return you think to shame him by saying that you also are an Irishman, he only tries to startle you by confessing that he was convicted of Fenianism, and soothes you again by an interminable anecdote, told to show you that he was or is a man of property, and that in a hand-to-hand fight he can lick all before him. He knows every celebrated author in the three kingdoms, despises most of them, and wonders how any one can read their works, for he cannot. It is indeed soon evident that in the last particular he tells the truth. How far his other stories are to be believed you cannot easily decide.

On the whole, however, he is a more agreeable companion than the argumentative voyager, a man who always takes the other side, whatever may be your view, who invariably breaks down in the main point of his argument, and seldom fails to forget before he has done which was the side he originally undertook to support. Then there is

the serious traveller, who makes it a business to go abroad, who would not visit any country without an object, who sighs deeply as he tells you he has to get to Japan before the middle of January as it is his duty, evidently a painful one, to investigate the history and practice of Go Bang in its native country. You cannot play chess with him because he knows every gambit and opening, and tells you when you have made three moves that he must checkmate you in twenty-one or twenty-two more as the case may be. He has also made whist a special study, and informs you that when he lived in India he hired a pundit at so much a month to play double dummy with him.

This man of serious purpose, who takes his pleasure *moult tristement*, contrasts in my recollections with the young lady who travels for no earthly purpose or reason, who does not know whence she is coming or where she expects to go: who begins the *Last Days of Pompeii* on the first day of the voyage, and is well into the second chapter by the time she lands, under the impression that she will be able to get up the Bay of Naples from its pages, and so combine amusement with instruction. As a rule, however, she does not read much, nor, though she looks constantly at the sea, does she seem to see much. She admires the coast of Portugal, thinks Cintra very romantic, has never heard of the Convention, and forgets whether it is Madrid or Lisbon which lies at the mouth of the Tagus. On