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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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Chapter I. London to Alexandria

CHAPTER I.

LONDON TO ALEXANDRIA.

Gerard Rohlfs's Expedition—Exploring the Great Sahara Desert—The Writer's Plans—By Express Trains through France—Steamer Missed at Marseilles and still Missing—The Entrepot of France—Toulon—"Horse Marines"—Nice to Genoa—A Grand Panorama—"Parlez-vous Anglais?"—Doctor Antonio and the Corniche Road—Genoa—"Is he Dead"—Leghorn—Pisa—Naples—False Pretenses—Messina and Sicily—A Wonderful Relic—Oranges by the Basket full—The Sicilia and her Passengers—Young England—The Hurricane and a Lee Shore—We almost touch at Crete—Arrival at Alexandria.



WHEN I bade adieu to America in January, 1874, I had no intention of extending my journey to Bagdad and Persia. My plans were to proceed directly to Egypt, and there, if possible, to join an expedition to explore the great Sahara desert, which was then being fitted out by the Khedive, under Gerard Rohlfs, a distinguished German traveler in Northern Africa. The objects and aim of this enter-

prise were to re-discover those great oases of the Libyan desert which are known to exist, and supposed to contain large tracts of fertile territory and a population of many thousands, but which have never been visited by Europeans. I relied upon my acquaintance with American officers in

the service of the Khedive, and our Consul General in Cairo, whom I had met during my former travels in the East, to obtain permission to join this expedition. That it would be full of danger as well as of exciting adventure I was well aware, and I therefore said very little to my friends at home, as to my proposed plans.

Reaching London about the middle of January, I crossed France on the fastest trains, stopping but a few hours in Paris, and reached Marseilles just twelve hours too late for the steamer to Alexandria. Making the best of the situation, I changed my plans, leisurely taking Nice, Genoa, Leghorn, Naples, and Messina *en route*. When I reached Alexandria I learned that the French steamer I had missed at Marseilles, had not arrived, and was supposed to be lost with all on board.

The old French city of Marseilles, founded by the Phœnicians 600 years B. C., well repaid the day spent there, and, through the kindness of the American Consul, F. W. Potter, Esq., I was enabled to see many things of interest to a traveler. The French colony of Algeria is directly opposite, and its trade, monopolized by this city, has added immensely to its population and commercial prosperity. The silks of Lyons, the wines, olives, and other products of Southern France, here find their outlet to all parts of the world. Its commerce is far more extensive than that of any other port of France, and its trade with America double that of Havre. A line of first-class steamships direct to the United States, would command not only an immense freight, but also a large passenger traffic. By them we could reach in winter the sunny, genial climate of the Mediterranean, avoiding the stormy Northern Atlantic, and one thousand miles additional travel.

Marseilles is the birth-place of Thiers—historian, ex-

premier and ex-president—the son of a blacksmith—and to-day, though out of office, the foremost man in France. At the time of the first revolution, it gave its name to a hymn that has become the tocsin of liberty throughout the world.

I made a few hours' stop at Toulon, forty miles west of Marseilles, one of the greatest naval arsenals in the world. Its batteries, reaching from the shore to the summits of the hills commanding the town, make the place seem impregnable. Here at Toulon, in 1794, young Bonaparte, then a lieutenant of artillery, had the first opportunity to display his great military genius, in planning the batteries that in a few days compelled the British to evacuate the town and put out to sea.

Strolling along the streets crowded with officers and soldiers in bright uniforms, I met two fine looking officers whose elegant dress especially attracted my attention. I supposed that they must belong to the naval service, as the "foul anchor" was embroidered in gold upon collars and cuffs. As they passed me I turned to admire their rich uniform, and noticed, to my great surprise, that both wore spurs attached to their boots. A *gens d'arme* standing near, I touched my hat and asked him to what service they belonged. He courteously returned the salute, and told me that they were officers of marine. I wanted to ask the cocked-hat official, "Why, then, the spurs?"—but for the life of me I could not at that moment remember the French word for spurs. So the mystery remains unsolved, unless we may suppose they are attached to that corps which is generally regarded as a myth, the "Horse Marines."

The railway to Nice winds along the shore, through a country cultivated like a garden. On our right is the blue Mediterranean sparkling in the sun, and on our left the

horizon, bounded by the snow-capped summits of the Maritime Alps. The vineyards cover every hillside, and there is a constant succession of olive groves,—old gnarled trees,—among the dark green foliage of which, the blossoms of



“THE HORSE MARINES.”

early plum trees are brought out in bright relief. Now we pass a pretty villa in a grove of orange trees, roses blossoming in the garden. To one coming from the cold north in “search for winter sunbeams,” it is a picture full of beauty and enjoyment.

Nice detained me but one day. This great sanitarium of Europe, seems made up entirely of hotels and boarding houses. All great watering-places in the height of the season have a similar appearance. The shop windows are

full of fancy goods and knick-knacks, tempting the idler, articles which no one buys at home, and are called by ill-natured people, "rubbish."

The next morning, as I was stepping into the carriage for the railway station to Genoa, 120 miles distant, I asked the *portier* at what hour we should arrive. He replied that near San Remo, one of the hundred tunnels between here and Genoa, had caved in, and we should have to take a carriage to cross the break, but a steamer leaving that morning would reach Genoa the same evening; so I changed my order to the driver from the *Chemin de fer* to the *Bateau-a-Vapeur*. A most fortunate change it proved. I turn to my note-book and find that the record of that day's experience is almost blank. It was one of those days so impressed upon the memory, that no written reminders are necessary, and it seems at the time that no after-experience can ever dim the brightness of the picture. The sky, the air, and the sea were in perfect accord. So pure was the atmosphere, that the island of Corsica was seen that day from the French coast, an event that occurs but few times during the season. The island itself is distant about one hundred miles, but the peaks of its central mountain range loom up eight thousand feet above the sea, and are fully one hundred and twenty miles from the shore of France.

Our little steamer, named after the Prince of Monaco, carried about thirty passengers, nearly all French or Italian; but a gentleman who had a slightly English look, and seemed as hungry as myself for some one to talk to, attracted my attention. We accosted each other simultaneously and in the same words, "Monsieur, parlez vous Anglais?" He proved a most agreeable companion, had traveled all over America, sketching its scenery from the Thousand Isles to the Rocky mountains. His pencil was

busy to-day, and I envied him the wonderful facility of transferring to paper by a few rapid touches, the charming views spread out before us.

We coasted along from one headland to another, where the spurs of the Alpine range push their bold rocky promontories far out to sea, enclosing within their protecting arms many beautiful towns and villages, some close to the shore, bathing their feet in the silvery waves, some stretching up the mountain side like flocks of sheep; here the ruins of some old church or castle crowning the summit of a sea-washed cliff, there a series of marble palaces or painted villas, surrounded by vineyards and groves of orange and lemon trees. We passed the towns of Mentone, San-Remo, and Ventimille, then the little village of Bordighera, its church surrounded by palm trees. For many centuries, this village had the monopoly of furnishing palm branches to Rome for the holy week, but to me it was far more interesting as the opening scene of that charming novel, "Dr. Antonio." The famous Corniche Road winds along the shore, following all the indentations of the coast, sometimes on a level with the sea, then climbing up the mountain side, a narrow shelf, cut from the solid rock. The railway, a modern institution, runs close to the shore, and we see a train of cars, but the next moment it disappears in the base of a cliff, then emerging from the tunnel, it leaps across the valley on a stone arched bridge.

Such was the grand panorama which nature and art united to unfold—the sea in front, the Alps behind, and overhead the splendors of an Italian sky.

We reached Genoa after dark, and were lodged in the palace of one of her old merchant princes, now transformed into a modern hotel. The next day we visited two or three "Palazzios," as many old churches, and the

Campo Santo; the latter, tenanted only by the dead, was by far the most interesting. Of course our cicerone must show us the statue and the old manuscripts of Christopher Columbus. I could only think of Mark Twain's oft repeated question, "Is he dead?"

From Genoa down the Italian coast to Leghorn, famous for its straw braids, and to Pisa, where every tourist must climb the winding stone steps to *lean* over the parapet of the Leaning Tower, thence to Naples to do Vesuvius, Pompeii, Sorrento, and the blue caves of Capri. The bay of Naples is very charming; the lazaroni, eating long strings of macaroni, are picturesque in red caps and rags, but the Neapolitans are proverbially great liars. Every year about this time, they spread abroad the report that old Vesuvius is groaning and smoking frightfully—sure premonitions of a grand "blow out." I had heard as far away as London, that a great eruption was daily looked for, and that already the sky at night was red with flames from the crater, and I expected, of course, to see the molten lava pouring down the sides of the mountain. But there was nothing of the kind on exhibition. Arriving at night, the only lights were the city lamps and the stars overhead. Not a groan could be heard from the old volcano, and the next day one could see only a light whiff of smoke, puffed from his old pipe-bowl. The performance was well advertised, but the principal actor did not put in an appearance. Hundreds of strangers are attracted here watching and waiting. They crowd the hotels, liberally fee the beggars, buy corals and relics of Pompeii, make business lively, and the Neapolitans are gay and happy.

The steamers leaving Naples for Alexandria, pass the second day through the narrow strait that separates the island of Sicily from the main land, and stop for a few.

hours at the quaint old Sicilian city of Messina. We go on shore to mail our last letter for Europe. The city presents a very imposing appearance from the harbor. It is crescent-shaped, and the hills in the background rise in the form of an amphitheatre, covered with vineyards and orange groves. The houses are built of white limestone, and the principal streets paved with square blocks of lava.

The postal arrangements of this city of one hundred and fifty thousand inhabitants, are not very extensive. They consist of a window opening into the street, where the people stand to enquire for letters or buy stamps, and a hole in the wall to drop letters in. We go from the post-office to the old Cathedral, dating back to the twelfth century, to get a sight, if possible, of a wonderful relic which all Messinians are supposed to believe authentic. It is no less than an *autograph letter* written by the Virgin Mary, in which she promises her special care and protection to the inhabitants, and to make the matter doubly sure, she sends a lock of her own hair by the person entrusted with this letter. You may be certain we did not see these remarkable relics; either the priests could not understand our imperfect Italian, or suspected from our dress and language that we were *Anglese*, infidel heretics. The market, however, did not disappoint us. Such splendid oranges, four for a penny! Two shillings bought a basketful, and the boat that took us back to the steamer was loaded down with the golden fruit. Passing out of the Straits of Messina, we saw on the Italian shore a small white monument, erected on the spot where Garibaldi landed with a handful of men and inaugurated a revolution that drove the tyrannical Bourbon from the throne of Naples. Far away to the right, near the center of the island, we could just discern the peak of *Ætna*, nearly eleven thousand feet above the level of the sea.

The distance from Messina to Alexandria is eight hundred and fifty miles, usually taking the steamer four days. The direct course would be fifty miles westward of Crete, or Candia, whose unwelcome acquaintance we were destined to make. Our steamer, the "Sicilia," was a staunch, Clyde-built iron vessel of about eight hundred tons, belonging to the Italian "Rubatinno" line, and its officers had the reputation of being skillful seamen, as well as courteous gentlemen. My experience on a steamer of this line three years ago, from Bombay to Suez, had been very favorable. When we left the straits on Monday afternoon, the weather was rough and the wind blew hard from the south-west. We had a pleasant lot of passengers, only eight in number, all English but myself. They comprised an artist and his wife (the only lady on board) for Egypt, four Englishmen bound for India, one of them, a clergyman, having in charge a young man of eighteen, a kind, good-hearted fellow, full of fun, but as irrepressible as a young bear. The butt of many a joke, he soon became a general favorite, and within two days was familiarly called "Tom" by us all. A young English merchant bound for Bagdad, and myself, completed the list.

On Tuesday the gale increased, but as yet causing no anxiety. Tom's appetite was ravenous, and he would smoke his meershaum on deck, when it was blowing a gale. His call to the waiters, *anchore du figaro*, meaning more figs, made our good natured captain roar with laughter. The first two days he was popping away with his revolver at the sea-gulls and Mother Carey's chickens, until stopped by a protest from the superstitious Italian sailors. On Wednesday night the gale was at its height, and for a few hours it blew a hurricane. We were then off Crete, and the wind was blowing us directly upon a lee shore. For twenty-four hours it had been too rough

to do much cooking on board, or to set the table for a regular meal. The little steamer pitched and rolled awfully, and all that night we sat propped up by cushions and pillows on the cabin floor; chairs, satchels, and personal luggage scattered about in the wildest confusion. The engineer was instructed to put on full head of steam, and the vessel shook and quivered as if she were a living creature straining every nerve to save herself from destruction. A slight break in the machinery, and no human power could have prevented our being dashed to pieces on that rocky coast, which St. Paul found so inhospitable eighteen centuries ago. A hundred life-preservers would have been useless, and no boat could have lived for a moment in such a sea. Once in a while, some one of us would crawl up the companion-way, and try to peep outside, but none of us could stand on deck. The artist, cheerful and sanguine of temperament, would always come back with some encouraging word. But once, when the gale was at its height, he came silently back, and, sitting down beside his wife (a brave lady she was), took her hands in his, while she rested her head upon his shoulder. Then I knew the crisis had come. That last half hour of the unfortunates on the "*Ville du Havre*" came vividly to my mind, and I wished Egypt, the Nile, and the Khedive, all at the bottom of the Red Sea with Pharaoh and his hosts.

We were then trying to bear up against the gale, and get around the north point of Crete, so as to gain a shelter behind the island. If we could only hold on an hour or two longer it could be done. The captain afterwards said that for two hours his hair stood on end. Just at this time, the irrepressible Tom said he was awful hungry, and called out to the steward to bring him some bread and cheese. The idea seemed so ludicrous that it acted as a relief to

our intense mental anxiety. The good ship did hold on, and before daylight we had weathered the point of land, and reached smoother water. Our captain came down, all dripping in his oil cloth suit, and fairly danced as he said in Italian (his English failing him at the moment,) that we were safe. No interpreter was needed, but we all crowded around him and gave him *bravos* more hearty than ever greeted his countryman, Mario, on the stage.

On Thursday we ran down along the east coast of Crete, its high rocky cliffs protecting us from the fury of the gale. The next two days were exceedingly rough, but nothing in comparison to what we had passed through, and on Saturday we reached Alexandria, where we heard of many disasters from the storm.

As we left the steamer for the wharf in a boat rowed by half-naked Arabs, we gave three hearty English cheers for the "Sicilia" and her officers, who were waving their caps to us from her deck, and shouting their *addios*.