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Travels and adventures in Egypt, Arabia and Persia

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London [u.a.], [1875]

Chapter XXVIII. From Bassorah to Europe

CHAPTER XXVIII.

FROM BASSORAH TO EUROPE.

Our Last Night at Marghil—Song and Story—My “Younger Brother’s” Farewell—A Dilapidated Blockade Runner—Good-Bye to the Euphrates—In the Persian Gulf—Life at Sea—Bushire—The Persian Cat and the Buhl-Buhls—Narrow Escape for Both—The Example of Sinbad—For us no Roc’s Eggs, nor Valley of Diamonds—In the Indian Ocean—The Monsoon—Dangerous Currents—We Strike at Night on the Arabian Coast—Darkness and Confusion—The Scene from the Deck—The Maltese Steward—He Suddenly Becomes Devout—“Scrap Iron in Half an Hour”—Life Preservers of Little Use—“Get Ready to Pass In Your Checks”—The Ship Draws Off—We are Saved—The Life Boats—Our Chances of Escape Discussed—Recklessness of Sailors—Short Supply of Coal—We Reach Aden—The “Deerhound”—A Rebel Tender Turned Smuggler—Up the Red Sea to Suez—Across Egypt in Summer—Venice to London—Adieu.



THE “Mesopotamia” was to sail at six o’clock the next morning. In honor of our departure the whole English population of Bassorah, numbering but *two persons* outside of those attached to Lynch & Co.’s establishment, were invited to dine and spend the night at Marghil. Captain Carter had given his steward a *carte blanche* for an entertainment of unusual brilliancy.

His harmonium had been taken up on the terraced roof,

for the night was to be made joyous with song and festivity. The dinner was served in elegant style, and my last night in Arabia was one long to be remembered. Our genial host seemed equally at home in the serious, the sentimental, and the comic. He played the accompaniment to his Negro melodies, Irish songs, and Scottish ballads, and the fun never flagged for a moment. I had seen him the day before scouring over the plain like the wind, mounted on a full blooded Arab mare given to him by the young Sheik Jarbah; and now he sung "My Arab Steed" with unaffected pathos and feeling. His experience as a sailor and officer in all parts of the world furnished an inexhaustible fund of anecdotes, some of which were located in New York, Savannah, and New Orleans. Nor were his guests far behind in story and jest. The hours of the short night sped rapidly away, and before we were aware of it the morning light streaked the eastern horizon. We adjourned to the garden below, and in the wide reclining chairs once more enjoyed our coffee under the spreading branches of the great mulberry tree. Then came the hour of parting. Captain Phillips, of the *Mesopotamia*, to whose care I had been commended more as a guest than an ordinary passenger, gave the signal to throw off the hawsers, the English flag was hoisted to the peak, and with ringing cheers, in which a crowd of Arabs joined with the Europeans on ship and shore, the stately vessel swung round into the stream, and we were off for Europe. While the white walls of the *Khan* remained in sight I watched through a glass the waving handkerchief of my friend Finnis, my "younger brother," with whom I had been intimately associated for so many months, signaling his good bye. His parting injunction was, "Now don't fail to go and visit my father's family when you reach England—they know all about you and will surely expect you." I

need scarcely add that I fulfilled the promise then made, and met the cordial welcome and generous hospitality of an Englishman at home.

As we passed at full speed the Turkish gunboats off Basorah we dipped our ensign, and the salute was promptly returned. Among them was a long, narrow, side-wheel steamer, with three raking funnels, very sharp in the bows, and evidently built for speed. She was a famous blockade runner during the rebellion, and made several successful trips between Nassau and Wilmington. At the close of the war she was sold to the Turks, and now looks old, dilapidated, and rusty. I was told that she was much out of repair, and no longer seaworthy. Before dark we passed the fort and telegraph station at the mouth of the river, and exchanged the yellow, turbid Euphrates for the clear blue waters of the Persian Gulf.

I was the only passenger on the "*Mesopotamia*," and the whole ladies' cabin was assigned to my use. If she had been my own private yacht Captain Phillips and his officers could not have treated me with more civility and attention. A double awning protected the deck, and although the sun was intensely hot, the motion of the ship produced an agreeable breeze. In a few days everything settled down to the usual routine of life at sea. The cabins were so hot that all my time was passed on deck. Fortunately no elaborate toilet was required, and, of course, the thinnest possible clothing was brought into requisition. Out of deference to the well known prejudice of Englishmen in regard to dinner costume, I once ventured to add for that occasion a collar and a black neck ribbon; but the captain good naturedly chaffed me about "putting on style." At night the steward spread my mattress on the skylight where I always slept. We stopped one day at the Persian port of Bushire, but I was glad to exchange the

stiffing heat of the shore for the cooler and purer air on board our ship. While here I was urged to buy a white, long-haired Persian cat, which a native brought off to the ship. These animals are highly esteemed in Western lands by *cat fanciers*; but when I tested her temper, I found that she would spit, snap, and bite most savagely; so I concluded that the snarling, half wild brute would be a troublesome traveling companion before I reached America. But without my knowledge one of the sailors bought her to take home as a speculation. I had on board many valuable curiosities, antiques and relics, which I had secured at Bagdad—including bricks from Babylon and Nineveh, old coins, Persian and Arab costumes, etc. As a *souvenir* of Marghil, Yusef Marini had presented me with a pair of *buhl-buhls*, or Persian nightingales, which I found plenty of leisure during the voyage to make very tame. I kept them on deck in a date stick cage near the skylight on which I slept. Soon after leaving Bushire I awoke one morning and saw stretched out alongside the cage that white Persian cat. At one bound I “went for” the animal, but she was too quick for me, or the sailor’s private venture would have gone overboard. Some feathers scattered on the deck was all that remained of one of my pets, and in a few minutes more the other would have shared the same tragic fate. But “Dickey” has survived all perils by sea and land, as well as change of climate, and reached America in safety.

We had seven days of smooth sea and fair weather from the head of the Persian Gulf to the straits connecting that sea with the Indian ocean. But here our trials began. In each of those memorable voyages of “Sinbad the Sailor,” it is related that he started from Bagdad and sailed from Bassorah, after which he had a few days of fine weather. Then came the wrecks and the roc’s eggs, the desert is-

lands and the diamond valleys. My story is not an "Arabian Nights" tale, so that the most interesting part of Sinbad's adventures cannot here be narrated. But fate had in store for me an experience so near a wreck, that for a pocket full of diamonds I would not be willing to try my chances again.

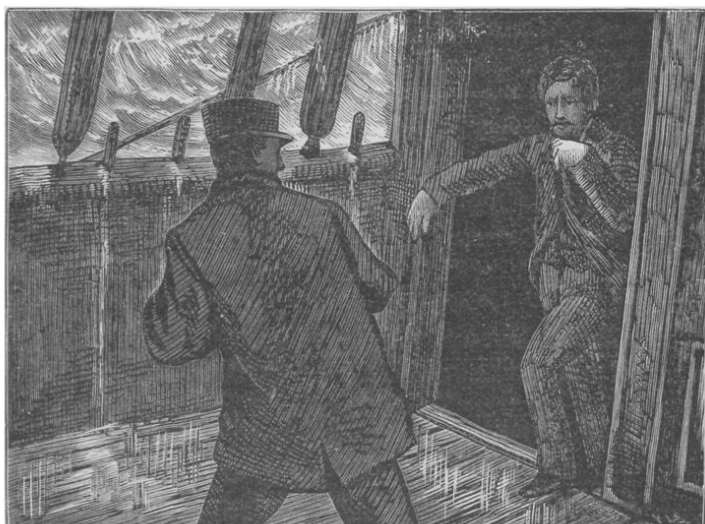
We passed Ras al Hât, a bold promontory extending out from the coast, then shaping our course to the south-west, the monsoon struck us with full force. For the next twelve days until we arrived at Aden, it blew steadily ahead, and raised a heavy sea. The square sails were unbent and the yards sent down, as all useless rigging impeded our progress. The effect of the monsoon, which in these seas blows during so many months in one direction, is to produce surface currents, the force of which cannot be calculated. These variable currents often throw a ship off her course, and cause serious difficulties in navigation. My intimate relations with the captain gave me an opportunity of studying the charts, and knowing at all times the location of the ship. The observation at noon on the third day after passing Ras al Hât gave our exact position, which the captain pointed out to me on the chart. He said at our present rate of speed, five miles an hour by the patent log, we should pass about midnight Ras Madraka, another headland jutting out from the Arabian coast, giving it at least forty miles leeway.

That night when the twelve o'clock watch was called I was awake, and the first officer as he passed me after hauling in the log, said that we had made twenty miles during the last four hours. The sea was quite rough, and sometimes a dash of spray would reach my bed on the skylight. So I rolled up my mattress, and for the first and only night while on board, I went below and crawled into one of the berths in my cabin. Three hours later I was awakened

by a rude shock, and knew, almost instinctively, that *the ship had struck*. Slipping out of my berth I was quickly on deck, and there clinging to the door of the companion way, a scene met my view that would have appalled the stoutest heart. All was darkness and confusion. Our gallant ship was thumping heavily with every receding wave, and looking ahead I could dimly see high rocky cliffs looming up through the thick haze. Both on our right and left, but a few hundred yards away, the white breakers were dashing over rocks, while astern the rough sea seemed to cut off all retreat. When the ship struck, Captain Phillips was asleep in the chart-room under the bridge, but at the first alarm he was on deck, and now I could hear his ringing voice issuing orders in loud and excited tones. Neither the officer in charge nor the look-out on the forecastle had seen the land until too late ; and the ship struck at full speed. An unknown current had carried us more than forty miles off our course since noon the day before, and we had struck on the projecting Cape of Ras Madraka. On the charts this part of the coast of Arabia is marked as inhabited by inhospitable and barbarous tribes, who would rob and murder every shipwrecked mariner whom the sea might cast upon their shores. It needed but a single glance around to show the imminent danger of our situation.

I went down to my cabin, struck a match, slipped on a light overcoat, unlocked my trunk, put a roll of gold into one pocket and my watch into the other, and again made my way on deck, holding by the balusters, while the ship thumped and rolled, as if struggling to free herself from impending destruction. The Steward, a Maltese, came up to me, and with chattering teeth asked whether I thought we should go to pieces. I told him that it seemed quite likely ; and he dropped on his knees, devoutly crossed

himself, and muttered some prayers—the first he had said, I fancy, for a long time. When I reached the deck the second time there seemed no improvement in our condition. Fortunately we had struck on a spit of sand—a short distance on either side were rocks, the first thump on which would have punched a hole in the bottom of our ship, and, as Captain Phillips expressed it the next day, "the *Mesopotamia* would have been *scrap iron* in half an hour." In the meantime everything that experience and good seamanship could suggest was done. Soundings were taken on all sides to ascertain the depth of water, the engines reversed, and all steam put on. I looked about me for something that would float if worst came to



"GET READY TO PASS IN YOUR CHECKS."

worst, and started towards a life preserver lashed to the rail near by. But it then occurred to me how little use it would be, with the gale blowing off shore, as I

should be carried out to sea, and have not one chance in ten thousand of being picked up on this lonely ocean.

Of course, no one paid the least attention to me, but I recognized and hailed the second officer with the remark that it looked very bad—"D—d bad" was his emphatic reply. "I advise you to get ready to pass in your checks," and he disappeared in the darkness. But there was a better fate in store for us than his expressive, but somewhat profane remark indicated. It was now about twenty minutes since the first alarm,—the ominous pounding ceased; the ship slowly drew off from the land, and turning her head towards the open sea, the rocks and breakers disappeared from sight. The pumps were sounded and it was found that no seams had started, nor any serious damage been sustained by the ship. At daylight no land was in sight, everything had resumed its usual routine, and the perilous night's experience seemed but a wild dream.

During the remainder of the voyage we often discussed the possibilities of a different result. The Captain said that for fifteen years he had been master of a ship on these seas, and never before had he come so near losing his vessel. He said if she had gone to pieces he should have launched the two life boats, and sailed back before the monsoon, five hundred miles, to Muscat. These boats are of wood and rest upon skids in the waist of the ship. They have never been in the water, and having for three years been exposed to a tropical sun, I doubt very much whether they would float. To clear them out, launch, provision, and equip them with sails, charts, and instruments for such a voyage, would be the work of hours in daylight, with a smooth sea. To accomplish this in darkness, amid the confusion of storm and wreck, would be next to impossible. Life at sea is surrounded with peculiar perils. Sailors are proverbially reckless of danger, and when the sudden

emergency comes they are often found unprepared to meet it.

With the monsoon blowing directly in our teeth the average speed of the vessel was lessened from seven and a half to five miles an hour. Before we reached Aden some anxiety began to be felt about our supply of coal. Besides filling the bunkers, fifty tons had been stored on deck before leaving Bassorah. The chief engineer had each day's consumption carefully weighed, and close calculations were made as to how long it would hold out. To be caught a hundred miles from port, with the fuel exhausted, and a head wind, would be disastrous. A large steamer of the "Peninsular and Oriental Line" from Bombay, was not long ago obliged to burn all her extra spars and the mahogany wood work of her elegant cabins to reach Aden. But when the Mesopotamia sighted the high cliffs of Aden we had still about fifty tons of coal on hand.

In that harbor we found the steam yacht *Deerhound*, which rescued Captain Semmes after the destruction of the Alabama. I was curious to see this famous vessel, and was courteously shown over her by the officers in charge. She is a beautiful craft of about two hundred tons, but since the event that associated her name with the rebel pirate, she has been very unfortunate, and has several times changed owners. She was seized in attempting to smuggle arms from England to the Carlists in Spain, and is now on her way to Zanzibar, the owner expecting to sell her to the Sultan of that country. She started from this port a month ago for her destination, but being unable to make headway against the wind, she has returned to Aden to wait until the monsoon is over.

After two days stay to coal our ship, we steamed towards the entrance of the Red Sea. This last part of our voyage was especially dreaded; but though the midsummer's

heat was oppressive, it was not so uncomfortable as I had anticipated. Seven days of clear weather brought us to Suez, where I bade adieu to the Mesopotamia and her kind officers, as they were bound to London, *via* the Suez Canal and the Mediterranean. I proposed to take the shorter route across Egypt to Alexandria, and thence to Europe. Although this country during the summer months is considered decidedly tropical, I found it so much cooler than the climate from which I had come, that colored clothing took the place of white linen, and when, after a week at Cairo and Alexandria, I crossed to Brundisi and Venice, woolen garments were not uncomfortable. From Venice across Italy and France to Paris, and thence to London, is so common a journey as to require no description.

Oriental countries have their especial charms and fascinations; but life surrounded by the superior comforts of Western civilization seems never so attractive as when the traveler returns from a long journey through the East. My experiences in the "Land of the Arabian Nights" will always form some of the pleasantest pictures in my recollections of foreign travel. The happiest faculty that the wanderer in strange lands can possess, is that of making the best of everything and looking only on the bright side. And I trust the reader will see no cause for regret that the more sombre tints and the darker shadows have not been brought out with more prominence.