

Echoes of the Past

A VOYAGE TO BOMBAY.

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THERE are many thousands of people throughout the Empire who have accomplished the journey which gives a title to my paper, and no doubt a large proportion of them have at one time or another written descriptions of it—for publication or otherwise. The subject therefore may well be looked upon as threadbare. And yet it possesses such perennial interest for so many members of the British Empire that I venture to undertake a fresh description of it.

During my active service days it was kismet that I should do the journey between the United Kingdom and Bombay on six occasions. When I look back upon those journeys, nowadays, I feel a strong conviction that we always left England in a heavy snowstorm. It seems scarcely possible that this impression can be correct and yet it persists and becomes intensified as the years roll by. Also, when I meditate on those journeys, as I often do, I think first, if not exclusively, of the original one, which began in November, 1882, no doubt because it has left the most vivid impressions.

On that occasion we left Portsmouth in the dear old Indian troopship "Jumna" on November 18, 1882 in the midst of a fierce snowstorm. At that time four Indian troopships were maintained by Government and were manned by officers and men of the Royal Navy. They were huge unwieldy structures, which towered high out of the water, rolled horribly even in a moderate sea and whose average speed was something less than twelve knots an hour.

As we left the harbour a storm signal was hoisted on shore and we ran down the Channel in a high sea. The Bay of Biscay was true to its reputation, as the weather we encountered there was described by the Captain as the worst he had seen for many years. At the height of the gale, the wife of one of the gunners on board presented her husband with a handsome and vigorous baby boy. He was baptized some days later, the wife of the Officer Commanding the troops on board acting as his godmother. I have never forgotten the Christian names she chose for him, namely, Charles Jumna, and have often wondered what was the ultimate fate of an infant who arrived under such unusual circumstances and who excited such vivid interest amongst all on board.

We were not done with exciting incidents in "The Bay," however. The morning following the arrival of our new passenger, a sailor, whilst fixing a patent lifebuoy at the stern of the ship, fell overboard. It seemed impossible that the man could be saved in such a terrific sea, but in an

incredibly short time a party of bluejackets had lowered the lifeboat and were pulling for dear life in the direction of the man. To the many anxious eyes watching it from the troopship, the lifeboat seemed at one moment to be raised on a mountainous billow and at the next to be plunged into a bottomless abyss. After an hour of almost superhuman exertion it reached and picked up the man. During the time he had been in the water he calmly kept himself afloat without making any attempt to swim in the direction of the troopship and probably owed his life in a great measure to this self restraint. As the lifeboat approached the "Jumna" a huge wave hurled it against the troopship completely stoving in one of its sides. Eventually it was got on board, however, and the occupants were found to be quite uninjured and none the worse for their exertions. The rescued man ran down to his berth, changed his uniform and was back again on deck within half an hour to answer his name at roll-call.

Gibraltar was reached early on Sunday morning, so that some at least of the passengers were able to attend service in one of the Garrison churches. "The Rock," as it is affectionately known to those who have served there, is an isolated mass of calcareous rock which rises 1,408 feet above the sea level and is one of those sights which must always thrill the heart. Apart from its size, its position and its vast military importance it is much less imposing than one might imagine, however. The two towns, north and south, are rather poor, not to say mean, in appearance. The real interest centres in the fortifications, which are, of course, closed to all except specially privileged visitors. It may, however, be said that every spot from which a gun can be brought to bear is occupied by cannon. To those who are permitted to see them the fortifications are marvels of engineering.

The casual visitor, however, can find plenty of interest for a day. There are the Governor's residence, the barracks, the two towns, the ruins of the Moorish Castle, the dockyards, and, above all, the Alameda Gardens to be seen.

Having taken on board artillery drafts for Malta and Egypt we sailed again at sunset. The following morning we woke up to find a dead calm with the sea like glass, whilst the ship was bathed in brilliant sunshine. After the biting cold and the fierce storm we had lately passed through the change was truly delightful. The warmth and sunshine quickly revived the dormant energies of the junior officers. They heralded their return to full vigour by various pranks, amongst others by scrambling up the riggings. The bluejackets promptly captured the acrobats, with the result that the latter had "to pay their footing." Nautical custom had fixed this at a bottle of whisky for each captured officer. Unfortunately four of these found their way into one mess, with the result that the Captain's wrath fell on both the officers and their captors!

As we steamed eastward the temperature rose steadily. The unclouded sky, the brilliant sunshine and the deep ultramarine of the sea were in themselves sources of sheer delight. On board ship every object besides

sky and sea is a source of interest. A passing ship or a school of dolphins, for instance, will draw crowds to watch them. Indeed, in a rough sea, no prettier sight can be imagined than a school of dolphins racing alongside and leaping from wave to wave. There was no band on board, unfortunately, as the troops consisted entirely of drafts going out to join their regiments. We had, of course, the usual deck games, the favourites being quoits and cricket. The evenings were devoted to whist, to the usual promenades on deck and to music, but the musical talent was not of a high order. One of the naval officers propounded a conundrum, which occupied and puzzled the passengers for days. As all know, at sea the day (of twenty-four hours) is divided into a series of watches. Two of these are of half the usual length and are technically known as "Dog-watches." The conundrum was, "Why are these called 'Dog-watches?'" and the correct answer, "Because they are *cur*-tailed."

We reached Malta at 6 a.m. on November 27, and did not leave again until midnight, so that we were able to spend a long and interesting day on shore, and those who spent it in sight-seeing were amply repaid for their exertions. The island is situated on a submarine plateau, which extends from Sicily to the African coast. It is slightly over seventeen miles in length by nine miles in breadth. The south coast consists mainly of steep, rugged cliffs, which act as an ample defence in that direction. The north coast is much less precipitous, and is broken by numerous bays, which are separated from one another by long peninsulas. The island is of late Eocene formation, and to a casual observer appears to be almost wholly composed of drab-coloured limestone. The soil is light, but very fertile, so that two, or even three, crops are produced annually. The surface of the island is diversified by long undulating hills, one or two of which rise to perhaps 800 feet above the sea level. These are separated by deep rolling valleys. The valleys and the terraced slopes of the hills are laid out in tiny fields and gardens, fenced with high stone walls, a feature which was calculated to delight the heart of an Irishman. At the time of our visit there was not a trace of grass to be seen, so that the glare from the drab-coloured soil and rocks was distinctly trying. The only apparent vegetation was some scattered patches of prickly pear. This might lead one to suppose that the scenery of the island is monotonous and unattractive. Nothing could be farther from the truth, however. The constant change of contour in the surface, the quaint villages dotted on the hill sides, the occasional patches of vegetation, and especially the striking contrast between the drab-coloured land and the deep blue of the sea made a picture of singular beauty.

Huge herds of goats were seen in every direction, an interesting fact in view of the researches on Malta fever, which have conferred such enormous benefits not only on the garrison and residents of Malta, but indirectly on the whole human race.

The climate of the island is delightful for the greater part of the year.

The temperature in winter varies from 55° to 60° F., and in summer from 80° to 85° F., or even higher. The sirocco winds, which prevail chiefly in September, are, however, very relaxing, as they come direct from the African deserts.

The history of Malta is replete with interest. It is, of course, impossible to enter on it fully here, but a few of the chief events may be indicated. The island was first colonized by the Phœnicians about 1000 B.C. Under them it rapidly became an important and wealthy commercial centre. During the Punic war it was the scene of many encounters and was surrendered to Rome in 218 B.C. Under the Romans it continued to prosper until A.D. 870, when it was captured by the Saracens, who appear to have held it for nearly three centuries. Subsequently it passed in succession to Normandy, to Germany and to Spain.

In the year 1530 Charles V of Spain granted the island to the Knights of St. John. On March 26, 1566, the first stone of Valetta was laid by Grandmaster La Valette, and the town with its fortifications was finished in five years. In 1798 Napoleon occupied and garrisoned Malta. Two years later its inhabitants appealed to Great Britain for protection, and the island finally passed to her in 1814.

As the "Jumna" glided into the harbour, Valetta was slowly revealed to us in all its beauty and grandeur. The harbour is, indeed, a magnificent one, stretching as it does for a mile and a half inland. It is subdivided by a long, narrow peninsula, the Grand Harbour lying to the east of this promontory, and the Marsa Muscetta or Quarantine Harbour to the west. The town and its suburbs, Florian and Sliema, are built on a steep ridge of rock, Mount Scaberras, which surrounds the harbour. On this ridge the streets run lengthwise and crosswise. They are paved with large rough cobble-stones, and are kept spotlessly clean. At the time of our visit the chief defect in the town was its lighting. Oil lamps, placed at long intervals, were solely used, and these served only to make the darkness more visible. The buildings on the lower parts of Mount Scaberras consist mainly of handsome, flat-roofed warehouses, magazines, an imposing Customs house and police barracks. On every side Valetta literally bristles with fortifications, which remain as enduring monuments to the military and engineering genius of the Knights of St. John. The entrance to the harbour is guarded by Fort St. Elmo, Fort Ricasoli and the Castle of St. Angelo. On the land side the town is surrounded by two and a half miles of fortifications. These are of immense strength, the walls being fully fifteen feet thick, whilst some of them have actually been hewn out of the solid rock. Outside the counterscarp are numerous outworks. It did not surprise us, therefore, to be told that Valetta was universally looked upon as absolutely impregnable.

To reach the town we had to climb many flights of steep stairs. On either side of these were fine, flat-roofed mansions of two or three storeys, which had been built by the various Commanderios. From each mansion

one or more balconies projected. These bore a close resemblance to enormous square boxes affixed to the walls, so that their appearance was scarcely artistic. As a whole, however, the effect of the quaint, old-world architecture was quite delightful. On reaching the town one was charmed by the number and beauty of the public buildings. Chief amongst these were the Church of St. John, the Governor's Palace, the new Opera House and the Auberges of the Knights.

The Church of St. John was built about the year 1576, by Grandmaster La Cassiera, and was enriched by each of his successors. Abutting on the right of the church is the former residence of the priors, and on the left that of their clergy. The exterior, therefore, looks more like that of a huge secular building than of a place of worship. The façade is somewhat heavy and decidedly less graceful than one would have expected. The interior of the church, however, more than compensates for the slight lack of beauty in the exterior. At the entrance to the sanctuary stand the famous silver rails and gate, quite ten feet high, which were saved during the French invasion by being covered with whitewash. The choir is ornamented by an exquisite piece of sculpture in white marble, which represents the baptism of Christ by St. John. The roof is semicircular, and is adorned by a series of lovely paintings after Preti, illustrating the life of the same Apostle.

The mosaic floor of the nave is composed of sepulchral slabs, the monuments of 650 knights, in purest, semitransparent, white marble. At the head of each monument is the coat of arms of the knight who sleeps beneath, and at the foot a panegyric to his memory. These are superbly inlaid, either in jasper, in agate, or in marble of the most exquisite colours. The grand altar stands at the upper part of the nave. It is a work of surpassing beauty in many coloured marble. On each side of the altar is a raised pavement on which stands a chair covered with a rich canopy of crimson velvet.

The chapels of the different languages of the Order run parallel to the nave, three on either side, and form the aisles. They communicate with the nave by magnificent archways. The roofs of the chapels are dome-shaped, and they and the archways are profusely decorated in alto-rilievo. Each chapel contains superb mausoleums to the Grandmasters of the language, and is profusely decorated with paintings illustrating the lives of Christ and of the Apostles. Unfortunately, however, many of the paintings are rapidly falling into decay.

The palace of the Governor in the Strada Reale, which was formerly the residence of the Grandmasters, is a plain but imposing structure. The interior is handsomely fitted up. The Council room contains some fine tapestry of French origin. In the armoury is a fine collection of weapons, armour and documents belonging to the period of the Knights of Malta, and also a series of portraits of the Grandmasters. There is also a fine library, which contains over 60,000 volumes.

A somewhat gruesome sight is the Catacomb, known as the Chapel of Bones. A good sized chapel, situated below the level of the ground, is hewn out of solid rock. The interior is decorated with the bones of 3,000 people, arranged in artistic patterns. A dado runs round the chapel formed of skulls placed eight deep. The idea seems somewhat ghastly, but the bones are arranged so artistically that they do not strike one in this way at all.

As the hour of sailing was uncertain, all officers were ordered to be on board by 5 p.m. This was disappointing, as it did away with any chance of visiting the Opera House. After we had returned on board, however, we were treated to a display of the most indescribable beauty. As the sun slowly sank, the western sky gradually changed to a brilliant orange-yellow; whilst from the horizon long, iridescent streamers, scintillating with every conceivable colour, shot up almost to the zenith. Scattered amidst these were tiny masses of cloud, which blazed with absolutely dazzling colours. As the sun, of fieriest red, and magnified to many times its normal size by vapour, came to within, apparently, some six feet of the horizon, it seemed suddenly to drop from the heavens and disappear as by magic. In a moment the eastern sky was suffused with the softest and loveliest radiance. A few minutes later a gloriously brilliant full moon sailed into view from behind the steep ground on which the town stands, throwing all the buildings to the east of the harbour, and especially a magnificent church with a noble spire, into the most perfect and wonderful relief. Innumerable boats, each lit up by Chinese lanterns, glided over the harbour, from many of which faint strains of weird and enchanting music could be heard; whilst from the Admiral's flagship the notes of a perfect band, mellowed by distance, reached us. It was, indeed, a night and scene of perfect beauty.

We reached Port Said at 5 p.m. on December 1. As the Indian troopships were not then fitted with search-lights, they were not permitted to travel through the canal at night time. We had, therefore, to remain at Port Said until 6 a.m. on the following morning. We were, however, allowed to spend the evening on shore. There are a number of handsome offices running parallel to the wharf, which belong chiefly to the shipping companies. When these are passed, however, the native part of the town is, or at least was at that date, anything but attractive. The houses were flat-roofed, generally of one storey, and were incredibly poor and shabby. The wares displayed in the shops were cheap and tawdry; whilst judging from what we saw and heard, the moral atmosphere was even worse, indeed, very much worse, than the physical. It was, therefore, a relief to all when we left our mooring and entered the canal.

It would, I imagine, be impossible for any European to enter the Suez Canal for the first time without having his feelings deeply stirred by thoughts of the genius, the labour, the colossal sums expended on its construction, and of what its completion meant to the civilization and commerce of the world.

History tells us that in past ages several canals, which connected the Nile Valley and the Red Sea, have been constructed, notably those of Rameses II and Darius I. The idea of connecting the Mediterranean and the Red Sea would appear to have originated with Napoleon, who commissioned an engineer named Lepère to report on the scheme. M. Lepère, however, came to the conclusion that the Red Sea was some thirty feet above the level of the Mediterranean, and that the scheme was, therefore, impracticable. In 1841, however, British officers proved that M. Lepère's opinion was erroneous, and acting on their surveys, M. de Lesseps again took up the idea in 1849, and as we know, carried it to a triumphant conclusion.

The canal is 100 miles in length, and varies in width from 60 yards, where the banks are high, to 110 yards where they are low. At no point do the banks exceed 50 feet above the sea level. The minimum depth in 1882 was 26 feet, but this has since been increased to 28 feet. The width of the canal does not admit of steamers passing one another when both are in motion. Locks are, therefore, placed at intervals of five miles. Ships returning from the east are given right of way, vessels outward bound being tied up so that those homeward bound may pass quickly through the canal. The fates seemed to decree that the dear old "Jumna" should be moored in almost every section of the canal. Our progress was, therefore, of the slowest—indeed very much under five miles an hour. Nor was there much to enliven the monotony of the journey. To westward we saw, in the shallow waters of Lake Menzaleh, huge flocks of flamingos. When at rest these were of a rich creamy white colour, but when they rose, and showed the under surface of their wings and body, they were of a lovely deep pink. When numbers of them rose together, they seemed to form a brilliant pink cloud. Now and then camps of wandering Arabs were passed, the children from which ran along the banks begging for coppers.

Several perfect examples of mirage were seen to the east. At one point a lovely island appeared, the slopes of which were beautifully wooded, whilst the sea rippled gently on its shores. It seemed incredible that the ground was a perfectly level, barren sand, with only an occasional stunted bush or tuft of grass on it, yet such was the case.

It was a pleasure to enter the Bitter Lakes, where a fair speed was again possible. We halted for some time opposite Ismailia to send mails on shore. The town, surrounded by lovely trees and palms, amidst which handsome buildings are scattered, is a spot of beauty in the midst of a sandy desert. Even in the Bitter Lakes, however, our bad luck did not desert us, for, whilst waiting, the "Jumna" drifted on to a sand bank, from which it took several hours to refloat her.

As the result of repeated delays we did not reach Suez until the afternoon of December 4. We only halted there sufficiently long to get our letters and to unship some stores which we had brought out for the

gunboat. Seen from the troopship the town appeared a fine one, but the ground on which it stood seemed to be raised but a foot or two above the waters of the Gulf. The surrounding view was, however, grandly impressive. The rugged, deeply violet heights of Gebel Ataka ran parallel to the Gulf on the west; whilst to the south-east were seen the hills amongst which Mount Sinai stands. At the foot of the latter an oasis of tamarisk and palm trees was seen, the only patch of green along the shores of the Red Sea which is believed to mark the site of Moses' well.

Short as our stay at Suez was, it sufficed for some of the officers to produce a quantity of gigantic tackle, baited with joints of pork, with which they proceeded to fish for sharks. Unfortunately, for some reason, the screw was suddenly and unexpectedly set in motion, the tackle was fouled, and so the experiment ended abruptly before any of the intended victims had put in an appearance.

The voyage through the Red Sea is always monotonous, and very frequently decidedly uncomfortable as well. A fierce sun blazing overhead, an atmosphere saturated with moisture, and a temperature of from 85° to 90° F. in the shade, are not as a rule conducive to enjoyment. When to these are added a stern wind, the voyage very much resembles a five days' continuous residence in a Turkish bath. Nor is there anything to compensate for these decided disadvantages.

One occasionally catches glimpses of barren red-brown cliffs from whose colour the sea, no doubt, received its name. We were exceptionally fortunate, however, as we had a cool, refreshing head wind all the way, so that we did the journey in comparative comfort.

On Wednesday, December 6, we witnessed the Transit of Venus and watched the phenomenon with intense interest as the Navigating Lieutenant informed us that it would not recur for at least a century. It became visible about 5 p.m. When seen through smoked glasses, it appeared as a black spot on the sun's disc nearly as large as a billiard ball.

On December 7 we had athletic sports on board, which were well arranged and well contested. The obstacle race was highly amusing, and was quite the event of the day. The competitors had first to crawl through barrels placed sideways on the deck, in which small paper bags filled with flour were suspended; then through life-buoys hanging some six feet above the deck. The course then passed down a companion ladder, on which several fire-hoses were playing at high pressure, and finally through a series of sails filled with salt water.

Shortly after daybreak, on December 8, we passed the "Deadly Brothers"—two huge masses of rock which rise almost perpendicularly from the sea. A dangerous shoal runs from the mainland to within a short distance of these, the rocks and shoal being separated by a deep, narrow channel. By taking this channel a vessel saves some thirty miles, but the short cut is so dangerous that it is only attempted during daylight and in calm weather. To a landsman on his first long sea voyage the passage

was distinctly thrilling. Reaching deck about 6 a.m. I found the "Jumna" heading straight towards the centre of a precipitous rock which towered from the water. On we went at full speed until it seemed that the ship must inevitably dash into the very centre of the rock. Suddenly the helm was put hard round, the dear old "Jumna" turned at right angles to her previous course and dashed into the channel. As she passed through it we saw a steamer which had run on the reef a day or two earlier from which the passengers and cargo were being unloaded. A little further on the remains of two earlier wrecks were still visible.

On the afternoon of December 9 we passed close to Aden. The peninsula is composed of a mass of volcanic rocks, five miles in length, which are joined to the mainland by a level, sandy isthmus. To the west the rocks are almost perpendicular and rise to a height of 1,776 feet above the sea level. The rain of ages has worn the upper surface into sharp points and scored the perpendicular sides with innumerable deep fissures. From a little distance the effect is grandly impressive, giving the impression of vast columns and pillars crowned with pointed towers. The town is on the eastern side of the peninsula and occupies the crater of an extinct volcano. Seen from the "Jumna" it appeared to be a bustling, prosperous seaport, but its position and aspect must make the climate appallingly hot and relaxing.

Between Aden and Bombay there was little to break the monotony of the voyage. At frequent intervals swarms of flying fish rose in front of the bows and flew forwards for from fifty to perhaps 200 yards. These flights were a source of perennial interest to those of the passengers who were on their first voyage to the East. More than once we passed through vast swarms of jelly fish, extending for many miles, some of which were of enormous size and lovely colouring. As they floated on the surface with their brilliant, many coloured, transparent tendrils projecting downwards they were objects of striking beauty.

As we neared Bombay we caught sight of occasional specimens of the famous catamaran surf boats. They are made very deep and narrow so that the occupants can only sit one behind the other. Two curved arms, apparently fashioned from curved branches of trees, eight to ten feet in length, project at right angles from the starboard side. Lashed to the free end of these is either a large piece of log or a small air-tight barrel. Owing to the leverage of the arms the boat cannot capsize to the port side, whilst owing to the contact of the barrels with the water it cannot do so to the starboard. Catamarans can, therefore, pass safely through the worst surf or the roughest sea. With a favourable wind they can also sail at considerable speed.

We reached Bombay at 6 a.m. on December 16, 1882, and said good-bye to the dear old "Jumna" with feelings of much regret.



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