A voyage to the Cape, 1812-13

By Ensign R. H. Dingley, with drawings by the Author.

A vessel has arrived here, and I received my orders for embarkation on the 17th to proceed on board the "Stately," a fine new ship built for the Transport Service, carrying 10-32lb. Carronades, and 2 long twelves, laying at Gosport under orders for the Cape with troops and passengers. This you may be sure was very agreeable intelligence to me after my long and anxious delay at this place, where I have been for the most part extremely uncomfortable.

The day after I got the order I went to see the "Stately." The troops, consisting of detachments and recruits for different Regiments at the Cape, were embarking. Among the latter, who were mostly boys fresh caught from Ireland, there was confusion enough. I did not envy the officer who had charge of them I assure you, for I never saw a wilder set. One of them, quite a boy, came up to the officer with "Plase your Honor dear, the Sargent is very saucy; would your Honor give me lave to fight him?" Another young gentleman strutting with all the glee and consequence of going abroad was assailed by an ale-house keeper for a debt of a few shillings. The young soldier, looking at him with a most cordial indifference, replied "Shure my good man haven't I been telling you I have no money at all, but ye know I am going to the Indies, where I shall get plenty, and I'll transmit it ye. Shure I wouldn't chate ye, man." This promise, however, not proving satisfactory, and a threat from mine host following, Pat caught up his Musket and putting on an indignant face rejoined "Ye may just go to the Devil now: didn't I offer ye fair enough, man? Plase to walk off and give me no more impertinence or I'll pay ye wid the butt end of the gun."

I lost no time in getting my things on board and on the 20th repair'd thither. The next evening we weighed again but ran on a shoal before daylight midway between the harbour and Spithead. This was owing to the ignorance of the pilot, and had it come on to blow from the westward we should probably have beaten our bottom out. The next full tide, however, we floated and anchored at Spithead between Kicker Gill and Ryde.

Our passengers now amounted to 32 officers and private persons and five ladies. Very few had ever been to sea before, and we had for the most part very severe frost and snow with only one small fire-place in the after Cabin. The Steerage, or centre part of the ship, was also fitted up for passengers, as the Cabin could not contain a third part of them. This was parted off in small strips of four bed places, each 6 feet long, 3 feet wide and 3 feet in height, of rough sawn deal boards, and not even having a door to look to the cleanliness of the vessel, no birth that we could engage to keep, and no messing in any kind of regularity. On the 25th we unmoor'd, when most of the passengers came on board. We, however, made but short progress, being obliged to anchor again a few hundred yards below our former birth for want of water. The next evening we weighed again but ran on a shoal before daylight midway between the harbour and Spithead. This was owing to the ignorance of the pilot, and had it come on to blow from the westward we should probably have beaten our bottom out. The next full tide, however, we floated and anchored at Spithead between Kicker Gill and Ryde.

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the passengers and troops, cooking in the Caboose or ship’s Cookhouse being at the option of the Master of the Vessel, who would not allow any being done there except that of the Cabbin. I therefore waited on Capt. Batten, the Agent of Transports, and happening to stand well with him I got another grate sent on board for the use of the Steerage.

Whatever is done by the ship’s owners in the way of accommodation is always done well, and whatever is afterwards alter’d by the under strappers of the Transport Board is scandalous—in the store-room, from which an intolerable stench arises from the articles kept there, candles, train oil, salt fish, etc., etc., dark. To this also joins the Steward’s room with so little preparation.

As we had received orders to take in part of Genl. Meade’s baggage at Madeira for the Cape we eagerly anticipated the pleasure we should enjoy ashore, as well as to replenish our fresh stock and get some wine. In standing off during the night the stupid brute of a Skipper somehow got us bedevilled so as to be all the next day trying to fetch in without effect, and the Comr., standing in alone, made signal for us to lay too. On the night of the 3rd all the Indiamen gave signal for us to lay too, but after long expectation she sailed to another destination. Next day the “Dedalus,” Frigate, was appointed to take us, but after long expectation she sailed to another destination. The “Tweed,” Sloop of War, was appointed to take us, but after long expectation she sailed to another destination. Next day the “Dedalus,” Frigate, was appointed convoy, and she being then only fitting at Deptford we concluded we were to undergo a seasoning at Spithead. At last the “Venus,” Frigate, 32, came in and hoisted signals for the Cape, six. Indiamen having arrived a few days before, in company with whom and a S.S. whaler we weighed on the 24th and stood down Channel with a fine breeze, having the pleasure to find the “Stately” a capital sailor but subject to much motion from her lightness.

After as merry a Christmas as circumstances would allow we had some very strong weather, altho’ the wind was fair, and having passed the Lands End at a few leagues distance we lost sight of Old England. For some days we had much rolling, and many were the fractures amongst the glass and crockery-ware as well as tumbles, wry faces and sea sickness among the living articles, many of whom were found dead every morning from cold and wet, and consigned to the deep with very little ceremony. I am, however, happy to inform you that these serious accidents were confined to the four-leg’d and feather’d tribes, the bipeds not deeming it advisable to make room with so little preparation.

January 1st, 1813. New Year’s Day. A Lascar, of whom we had 16 on board, died of the cold he had previously suffered. His comrades almost immediately washed the body, and having covered him with a new piece of muslin he was lowered overboard together with every article belonging to him. This caused no diminution in the number of our crew, for a soldier’s wife of the 60th was brought to bed the same day.

On the 2nd we had charming weather and great change of climate. Towards evening we ran down Madeira. The island lays very high and appeared most beautifully laid out with cascades falling down the rocks in many places. I should conceive it must abound in fine romantic scenery.

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twice, and as he had not had even the civility to take our letters in we were all enraged to a comfortable pitch. However, it was now too late for anything beyond a plentiful allowance of hearty curses on his behalf.

About ten the same night a large vessel was discovered bearing down upon us. We consequently repair’d to Quarters and no small confusion as well as consternation was the result. There were neither cartridges nor wads to be found for the guns, and the Skipper was beastly drunk. However, we were in tolerable readiness when she laid herself alongside in capital style. At this moment if at any we might expect the delightful salute of a broadside. However, we were instantly relieved by finding it to be the Commodore. He had been nearly out of sight at sunset and after dark we had observed him making rocket signals which induced us to suppose he was in chase of a strange sail; it however appear’d it was the Indiamen but they were not choosing to shorten sail for him. He had put about to join us who he had likewise mistaken for a strange sail when he bore down. We highly enjoyed his loss of his convoy and thereby a further loss of £500 which he would have been entitled too had he taken them throughout, for his dirty trick at Madeira.

On the 9th the Frigate made a signal to lay too and send a boat on board. This was done in a tremendous high sea and was to say he was going to leave us, and would lay too for letters for England via Jamaica and in an hour a Lieut. came on board with some for the Cape.

The Lieut. informed us that it was entirely owing to the Indiamen running away that we did not remain a week or ten days at Madeira as it was Captain MacLinsie’s wish. This however we thought devilish poor consolation and not vastly worthy of credit, and so we wished Mrs. Venus good day.

Being now left to ourselves with every chance of falling in with American Cruizers, everything was done in order to be in readiness. The artillery, of whom we had a strong detachment, were constantly exercised at the guns, small arms to their stations and all ready if required. We saw a few bonitos occasionally but they would not take a hook or come near enough to be stuck with a harpoon. It is observed few fish come near a newly coppered vessel.

On the 10th made St. Nicholas, one of the Cape Verde Islands. On the 11th lay too off the island of Nogo, between it and Brava, when a boat was sent off to see what the place afforded. In about an hour a boat came alongside, as we supposed from the island, but which to our utter astonishment proved to be an English boat with seven of our countrymen in her, who had been pulling hard for three days and nights without food or water. They belonged to the “Neptune” of London and had been taken six days before by an American Brig who had plundered them of nearly everything and turned them adrift in the jolly boat without sail or compass and only a small keg of water and few biscuits. They consisted of the Master, the 2 mates and 4 seamen, the rest of the crew, foreigners, ran below and immediately entered with the Captors.

After having plenty to eat and drink they were supplied with what they required from the Master of the “Stately” and proceeded in their boat for the island. They told us that they learned that “there were thirty stout American brigg between Madeira and the Cape” — news we did not exactly relish. While we lay too a couple of Turtles were seen and a boat sent after them but they were too cunning for us and went down.

Shortly afterwards a small boat came after us with a pilot to take us in with a note from the commanding officer who was ashore, to say there was a good watering place, the island well supplied and the Governor had promised to give us every assistance in his power. This intelligence put us in high glee but the wind was against us. Evening came and being a dead calm we volunteered to tow the vessel in but the rascally Skipper refused and at last sent off the pilot. Late in the evening our boat came on board bringing nothing but two half starved goats and a few fowls. They spoke in the highest terms of the hospitality of the Governor and people who had feasted them almost to suffocation. The Town being very small, nothing could be got except on market days but the Governor had despatched people in all directions to send in provisions of all kinds the next day when he invited us all to a grand entertainment and also provided a number of horses to enable us to see the island.

The next morning to our great astonishment the brute of a Master refused to go in and after a famous uproar in which I thought the command would have been taken from him he proceeded on his voyage amidst a hearty volley of diri implications.

We now stood our course for some time, occasionally seeing a number of Bonitos, Porpesses and flying fish. However, we took only now and then three or four of the latter when they flew aboard.

**January 19th**: We were going pretty smartly through the water when the ship struck a young whale as he lay asleep on the surface and no doubt astonished him a little. I saw him rise to blow just alongside the Quarter. He appeared about 40 feet long and he rose several times after.

**January 21st**: We caught a young shark about 8 ft. long. I had some slices off the tail boiled which I did not think so bad, it somehow resemb’d coarse veal; I also had a piece boil’d the following day, and tho’ several thought it, with anchovy sauce, very good, I deem’d it very indifferent. There was a very disagreeable sub-acid taste in it. During the night a second was caught. He was rather less. The sailors usually eat the tail end only, the rest seem’d a great treat to the Lascars.

We kept on with a fine fair wind, and on the morning of the 24th were all roused out at daylight to repair to Quarters, as a large brig was bearing down on us: after waiting an hour in expectation, guns shotted, and all ready for an engagement she came alongside, and being hailed, proved to be a Liverpool brig bound to Rio Janeiro.
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Fresh provisions were now all out and we were obliged to shift upon the King's Own entirely, which however I must say were extremely good, which is not always the case; still salt beef and pork without vegetables, beer, or wine are but sorry stuff.

On the 5th there was a row with the brute of a Skipper. He placed a cask of stinking provisions of his own under the ladder going down to the Cabbin, and on being desired to remove it he refused. When Captn. Owen the C.O. ordered a party to take it away the Skipper then said the command of the ship was taken away from him and immediately laid her too, (altho' we had a fine fair wind) and was extremely insolent. A Committee was ordered to sit and take down every proceeding and it was notified to the Skipper that if he did not immediately proceed on the Voyage the Command would be given to the Mate, and if he was insolent or unruly he would be placed in irons, when he thought proper to proceed.

Indeed the whole concern was at this period extremely unpleasant as many of our Gentry were of a very bad sample and were constantly quarrelling and making parties. I therefore kept pretty close to my own Cabbin, which, having the half port open and being on the windward side, was very comfortable.

Still you may be sure I was anxious enough to reach our destination, for the delightful accounts we received of the Cape from Officers who were returning thither contrasted with our present miserable condition.

On the 20th a large shark was taken, 18 feet long, which caused much fun. Among the animals in this Noah's Ark of ours we have a Mr. Charles De la Cinque. Imagine him to be about 20, tho' he has nothing manly about him, being a most ignorant coxcomb of a boy. He is going to India, I believe, under promise of patronage from Lord L—who he calls his Uncle. This relationship is however assumed, I know, tho' he may be some distant connection. However my gentleman manufactures great relations and acquaintance with vast facility, talks very high and dresses in Dandy style. His unfortunate name has caused much fun among the sailors, who have distorted it into De la Stink, Devil's Stink, and half a hundred more.

Next we have a Dr. Andrew McGregor, a gawky red-headed Scotch Hospital Assistant, as proud and stiff as if he was head of the College of Edinburgh. Of his professional knowledge I of course can say nothing, but in other respects he is an ignorant, opinionated pedant.

Thirdly comes Mr. Claudius Mahony, who is going to fill some situation in the Naval Department. With all the native drollery of an Irishman he has read a good deal while in Colledge at Dublin, and really formed a very fair knowledge of things in general. He is extremely good natured and the first to promote any fun. De la Cinque and the Dr. form a capital hold for his quizzical abilities. The Dr. retires in the sulks but the other gets angry and would be saucy, but I rather think he stands as much in awe of Mahoney's fist, as his jokes, for Pat is six foot and stout in proportion.

It was just about dinner time when this shark was hauled in at the bows. From his violent struggles no effectual cut could be made at the tail, and he lay floundering in the forecastle at a furious rate. Most of us ran forward to have a sight of him, and amongst the rest the above trio, who were all crowded close to each other, the Dr. anxious to procure the heart for dissection, when the shark, with a side blow of his tail knocked down De la Cinque, who was full dressed for dinner, and Mahony on the top of him, covering them with blood and dirt; at the same time the end of the tail coming right athwart McGregor's face completely staggered him and set his nose in a full stream of blood over the other two.

Mahoney gave a tremendous roar and jumping up declared upon his soul and conscience he thought the big baste had got him in his mouth and joined in the laughter. Mr. Dandy, who was almost crushed by Mahony falling on him and viewing the blood, which he fancied was...
his own, was half dead with fright and declared himself seriously hurt, and limping off to his birth turned in for the rest of the day to moan over his new ball coat, which Mr. Shark had effectually put out of dancing trim. McGregor, after a plentiful bleeding, swearing and grumbling in broad Scotch, attacked his dinner with as good appetite as usual, notwithstanding Mahony's humourous questions about a shark's heart, which subject will probably last for the rest of the voyage.

On the 27th had the pleasure of seeing land. We stood off during the night and the next morning were enveloped in so thick a fog as scarcely to be able to receive anything on the forecastle from the stern of the ship. The lead was love and at one time we were in 3 fathom water, and as we drew 15 feet, we were comfortably near the bottom. However this was all of a piece. I believe they had let the ship go during the night entirely her own way, for had the log been hove they must have made a pretty near rolling our teeth out, the brute attempted to make St. Hellena, which, not being able to do, we got a foul wind, and then a calm. On the 4th there was a light baffling wind and thick horizon. It however cleared in the evening, when we found ourselves at the back of Table Mountain, stood off during the night and next morning fetch'd in to Table Bay, coming to anchor about 10 o'clock. All except six went ashore, and we who remained aboard, having got off plenty of fresh provisions, vegetables and good wine, enjoyed ourselves amazingly.

About 2 p.m. next day we bid adieu to the "Stately" putting off in the Long boat which, as well as the Cutter, was full of baggage. We lay about 3 miles from shore, and when we had got within a mile of the beach, a S.W. wind came in and after pulling for upwards of an hour and not gaining one yard, they were obliged to pull back again. The current now running extremely rapid, our ship being farthest to leeward, and having to pull directly across the sea, so as to expose the boats to every sea that broke on them, they were glad to make the Cape packet lying at anchor, which we effected about 5 o'clock.

The Crews who had been ashore in the morning were fatigued, drunk and turbulent, and the 2d Mate, of the same stamp as his Master, could do nothing with them. Two Dragoon Officers insisted on being taken ashore in the jolly boat, which from her lightness was practicable enough, but as I knew the least to be expected was a thorough ducking, and having no change ashore, I declined the trip; added to which we were received on board the packet with the greatest possible politeness by the Master (Capt'n. Agnew being ashore) and much prefer'd to stay till the jolly boat should come to take us to our own ship where we could stay till morning.

In about four hours they did return, with the Boatswain and four boys, all drunk, and these were to tow the long boat full of luggage across the run of the sea for a mile in a dark night and a gale of wind blowing, with a small boat; added to which had they missed the "Stately" the tide would have sent them out to sea. Altogether a very pretty prospect. The Officers of the packet, under these circumstances, would on no account allow us to leave the vessel.

The two following days it blew so hard, no boat could live, and we were thus unavoidably quartered on their bounty. They did everything in their power during our stay, to make us as comfortable as possible, and feasted us most sumptuously. Altho' a summer month at the Cape and roasting hot on shore it was so cold on board the packet, that when I went on deck for a few minutes I was glad to get down below again as fast as I could, and the sand came off in quantities altho' we were full a mile and half from shore.

Next day coming fine we landed about midday. The conduct of the Skipper was reported when he was deprived of his comm and and the ship taken out of the Transport Service. So far good, but such ignorant brutes, brought up in the North Coal Trade, and who have scarcely ever been out of sight of a Light House, should not be allow'd to have such Vessels, without at least having sail'd one voyage as Mates.