

**OUR ISLAND-CONTINENT:
A NATURALIST'S
HOLIDAY IN AUSTRALIA**

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Our Island-Continent: A Naturalist's Holiday an Australia by Dr. J. E. Taylor

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DR. J. E. TAYLOR

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OUR ISLAND-CONTINENT.

CHAPTER I.

OUTWARD BOUND.

A LONG-CONTINUED strain of literary work had rendered it necessary for me to take a long holiday, and get a complete change. Australia was the medically-appointed goal—perhaps because it was at the uttermost parts of the earth. The older generation in England has not yet got over the idea that to go to the Antipodes is like going into banishment. We have not realised the fact that it is only another part of Great Britain, and perhaps the most prosperous part. The terrors of the voyage have been, and are still, unduly magnified; for people have not learned that the first-class steamers are now only floating-hotels, and that there is more risk to life and limb in London streets than there is on board either the P. and O. or the Orient vessels. It is not exaggeration to say that there is more danger on board from the bar-room and card-room than from anything else.

It was a bright, dry, sunny day, early in April, when I left home on my long journey. The train

carried me onwards past hedgerows budding with their first spring greenery ; past hedge-banks masked with clustering primroses ; past the brownish-green meadows, where sprouting willows mark the sinuous courses of streams ; past familiar towns, churches, copses, mansions, and woods, and on to the great Babylon of London.

Away through the picturesque, undulating county of Kent, through the cold, flat clay lands of the Weald of Kent, where the labourers were planting the hop-poles ; through the more broken and diversified parts, where the Wealden Sands and the Lower Cretaceous rocks appear, clad with spring woods, and to where the billowy chalk Downs roll seawards from Folkestone to Dover.

The weather had suddenly changed before I arrived at the latter place. It had become wet and windy, and it soon changed to blustery. The worst old tub of the many bad ones which convey passengers across the Straits of Calais lay bumping and straining at its moorings by the pier, and we had to wait and take our chance of a run or a plunge down the gangway on to the deck, amid a struggle of porters laden with luggage. Beyond the pier the "white horses" were rearing and rolling, and one felt that the Channel passage would be a good introduction to the "Big Ferry" over to Australia.

A school of French lads from Canterbury, accompanied by about a dozen priests, came swarming on board, roaming everywhere, shrieking, chattering, and jabbering like an over-populated cage of young monkeys. They were lively with Gallic liveliness for

about half-an-hour, by which time our old boat was rolling, pitching, and tossing like a barrel, when they were quiet with a great quietness, and "the subsequent proceedings interested them no more!"

The train for Paris lay waiting at Calais pier, and as soon as the passengers had got nicely settled down to the meal they were deluded into paying for first, the guard announced that the train was starting. The weather had brightened up again, and the white chalk cliffs on the French side appeared the very counterpart of those the fond eyes gazed upon to the last about Dover. The fresh whiteness of the scars showed that the process of weathering backwards is still going on, as it must have been going on since the German Ocean breached through what was not long ago (geologically speaking) a continuous and unbroken extension of chalk from France to England. The rapidly-changing character of the rocks seen in the railway cuttings between Calais and Boulogne—passing suddenly from chalk to limestone like that of Derbyshire (for the Carboniferous formation immediately underlies the Cretaceous strata thereabouts)—is represented on the surface by a corresponding change of scenery.

On to Paris, all the way from Boulogne, I did not see as many sheep and cattle as I should have beheld in going a dozen miles through an English agricultural district. The peasants were scratching the ground here and there, where the long strips ran up the hill-sides, but signs of agricultural industry and prosperity were absent as compared with what one sees when travelling by rail in England. The

season was much behind that of England, and the weather also was colder. There was hardly a tree in leaf in Paris, and the boulevards looked very wintry.

I hardly stayed in the "gay city" more than an hour. At 7.15 p.m., I went on by the Rapide, a night train, rightly so called, for it does the whole distance to Marseilles (536 miles) in fifteen and a-half hours. The train was very full of passengers going to Lyons and Marseilles, besides English and Americans going to Cannes and Nice. Four Americans were in the same compartment as myself and my young friend F., who was my *compagnon de voyage* as far as Melbourne. We were soon in the thick of "State" politics, and there was a rush to the buffet at every stopping-place, one of them occasionally bringing away "a five-franc fowl." The Yankees began comparing the various rates of European railway travelling with those in the States, and one of them proceeded to speak of fast travelling generally. There was one State waggon, he said, which went so fast that it could take a man farther in a day than he could travel back again in six months! "Which was that?" inquired one of the greener youths. "Why, it's the waggon that carries the prisoners to the State gaol!" said he.

Away we rushed through the darkness. The hours slowly crept by. Presently we were slipping in and out of tunnels, and the engine-driver was whistling as only French drivers can make their locomotive engines whistle. Then we came to Dijon. A few hours more, and we steamed into Lyons station, where we regaled on hot coffee. The grey morning

began to break, and to contend with the waning moon for possession of the sky, as we passed slowly over the magnificent river Rhone. I looked out eagerly for the old town and bridge, and just got a glimpse of both, whereat I was much delighted, for over the mantelpiece of my study at home I had a famous etching of Lyons in 1783, by Boisseau.

We had left the country bald and bleak the night before; now, as the morning broke, the valley of the Rhone, along which we travelled, appeared as if suddenly clothed with fresh spring greenery. The orchards were pink and white with abundant blossoms, and the white vapours curled upwards from the not-distant Rhone, and so floated among and mixed up with the flowering groves that it was difficult to distinguish one from the other.

Presently the sun broke forth in all its morning glory! The picturesque hills just beyond the river are terraced with vineyards and olive-yards, and they came forth in delightful light and shade. There had been a white frost during the night, and it was some time before the air was warmed—not before we arrived at the fine old city of Avignon, where the Pope's Palace, built more than five hundred years ago, even yet seems as large as all the rest of the town put together.

Thence through a flat plain, occupied chiefly by olive-yards, to Marseilles. On the right hand the snow-capped mountains of Southern Switzerland appeared very crisply and distinctly. Our Yankee friends were glad they had seen Switzerland, they said, for now they would not have to go.

What is that? A glimpse of the Mediterranean. It makes one's heart beat faster, does the first sight of that historic sea, whose very name is so mixed up with the early history of civilisation that we cannot dis sever the two. On its shores Phœnician, Syrian, Greek, and Roman civilisations, religions, and histories were developed.

Marseilles is a wonderful city—a French Liverpool and Portsmouth rolled into one, with a dash of Paris thrown in. The modern town is full of splendid, unpicturesque, solid stone buildings. The streets are wide and flanked with rows of Oriental plane-trees, the roads and side-walks are dirty and holey beyond description. The old town is extremely picturesque, and extremely filthy; and the “bassins” or docks (crowded with shipping of all kinds) were a perfect cesspool, occupied with a thick, pea-soup coloured liquid, which stank, and suggested that it must be a splendid place for bacteria, where they could increase and multiply and deplete the earth. No wonder that cholera takes up its European headquarters at Marseilles.

The place was swarming with French soldiers, dressed in the oddest fashion—from the Zouave who seemed all trousers'-waist, to others whose trousers seemed all legs and loose boots. The costumes seemed very skilfully devised to prevent running away! Fifty thousand soldiers were being sent to China; for, as the host of our hotel told us, it was necessary now that France should “smash up” those rascally Chinese.

I left Marseilles by the *Yarra*, one of the magni-

ficent fleet of Australian steamers owned by the Messageries Maritimes. She was splendidly fitted up, and lighted with electricity, but her passenger-list was very thin.

A strange world is a ship going to the Antipodes. But it would be difficult to find a better representative of ethnological features than were gathered together on board the *Yarra*. It was mainly French, of course, but the sailors, stokers, and general crew included also Arabs, Negroes, Malays, Chinese coolies, Indian half-breeds, and others I could not trust myself to mention. One could hear half-a-dozen languages at once. This strange assemblage of humanity loved to assemble in the bows, surrounded by pens of cows, pigs, sheep, calves, pigeons, guinea-fowl, pea-fowl, barn-yard fowl, &c. The Malays and Arabs delighted in occupying their leisure time in oiling each others' heads, and in a general entomological research in that happy and abundant hunting-ground. There was a wit among the party, but I unfortunately could not understand him. The old cocks soon recovered their sea-legs, and crowed lustily, happily ignorant of the pot; and every morning the smith's hammer made music on the anvil, so that the combined sounds were rural rather than maritime.

Our first-class passengers included a French judge and his wife, who were going out to the little known island of Mahotte, near Madagascar. The former was distinguished by the spurs on his boots, of which he seemed very proud, but to us English it suggested a commission in the Horse Marines—for that is the