

**THE STORY OF THE CAPTIVES:
A NARRATIVE OF THE EVENTS
OF MR. RASSAM'S MISSION
TO ABYSSINIA**

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The Story of the Captives: A Narrative of the Events of Mr. Rassam's Mission to Abyssinia by
Dr. Blanc

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THE STORY OF THE CAPTIVES.

A NARRATIVE

OF THE EVENTS OF

MR. RASSAM'S MISSION TO ABYSSINIA.

BY DR. BLANC,

ONE OF THE CAPTIVES.

TO WHICH IS SUBJOINED

A TRANSLATION OF M. LE JEAN'S
ARTICLES ON ABYSSINIA AND ITS MONARCH.

FROM THE "REVUE DES DEUX MONDES."



LONDON:

LONGMANS, GREEN, READER, AND DYER.

1868.

Blanc,
BLK

LONDON : W. J. JOHNSON, PRINTER, 121, FLEET-STREET.

ROYAL
SOCIETY
OF
MEDICINE

P R E F A C E.

At the moment when every item of reliable information regarding the Abyssinian captives, or the land of their captivity—its people, resources, physical features, climate, &c.,—possesses extraordinary interest and value, a remarkable paper from one of themselves has been received in Bombay. The paper, dated Magdala, August 31, 1867, is compiled by Dr. Blanc, and contains a graphic account of the fortunes attending Mr. Rassam's Mission, from the 20th of July, 1864, the date of its departure from Aden. The Mission, it will be remembered, consisted of Mr. Rassam, Dr. Blanc, and Lieutenant Prideaux, and was charged with the conveyance of the Queen's letter to Theodorus. Great surprise has been expressed at Mr. Rassam's dilatoriness in staying months at Massowah till Theodorus should signify his readiness to receive him, instead of advancing boldly into the country, as a properly qualified British officer should have done; and this delay has been looked upon as a proof of the unfitness of Mr. Rassam for the mission. When at last Theodorus did grant it permission to proceed, he seems to have treated it with contempt,

for instead of allowing Mr. Rassam to select his own route, or pointing out to him the shortest and best, he required him to go by Metemma (a caravan station, situated on the extreme west of Abyssinia, almost on the Nubian frontier), involving a detour of three or four hundred miles. When such was the treatment experienced by the Mission at its outset, we can express no surprise at its results.

Dr. Blanc's report has been divided by himself into three sections, the first describing the journey from Massowah to Metemma, the experiences of the road, the disposition and habits of the various Arab tribes, and giving a mass of other information entirely new. The second section contains an account of the reception of the mission by the King, and their subsequent treatment. Of their prospects, Dr. Blanc says little, and was plainly unaware that an expedition was on its way to release them, or avenge their death. But for their chains, the condition of the prisoners would seem to have been tolerably comfortable. They knew not, however, what a day might bring forth. The Emperor was rioting in blood, and, as far as his crippled power would admit, satiating his one desire—revenge. The best hope of the Mission seemed to be that they might fall into the hands of some rebel chief who would know their value; and they plainly dread the ignorant and infuriated peasantry, who might regard them as in some way the authors of the misery which they have lately endured at the hands of the Negus. The last section of the Memoir gives a variety of interesting details regarding the physical geography of Abyssinia, its towns

PREFACE.

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and population; the language and customs, and degradation of its people; its flora and fauna; and the personal character, appearance, and history of Theodorus.

Strictly watched as the captives are, and forbidden to write, we may well wonder how it was possible for any of them thus to compile a lengthy report, containing much which, if discovered, would certainly have brought down the Emperor's vengeance upon them. And, indeed, the compilation of the report was no easy matter. Dr. Blanc says on this point—"I was obliged on two occasions to burn my report; first, on being made prisoner in April, 1866, when we thought it advisable to destroy every note, letter, or paper in our possession. At Gaffat I began to write it for the second time, but after the events that occurred there, I seized the first opportunity of making away with it. At Magdala it is exceedingly difficult to write; spies are constantly peeping into our tent on some pretext or other. The risk and penalty are great, as the order is, that any one found writing is to be chained hand and foot." In spite of this risk and penalty, however, Dr. Blanc's report is, according to the *Times of India*, "a marvel of neatness, exhibiting the greatest patience and care. Paper and ink are scarce at Magdala, and he has certainly been careful not to waste either. So closely packed are the letters, words, and lines, that into sixteen sheets of note-paper is compressed material enough to fill three pages of the (London) *Times*—less about a quarter of a column! So thin, likewise, is the paper, that the whole—report,

“ covering letter, envelope, and all—weighs less
“ than an ounce.”

Most of the papers relating to Abyssinia that have recently been published, are either written by Englishmen or filtered by English writers, and it seems to have occurred to the *Times of India* that an interesting side-light might be thrown on Abyssinian affairs, by viewing them through a Frenchman's description. “ Of course,” says that journal, “ we do not mean that a fanatic like M. Bisson, “ whose incoherent declamation recently filled three “ columns of the *Patrie*, can be of any service to “ us ; but in M. Guillaume Le Jean, a gentleman “ not unknown in Bombay, we have a guide who, “ allowing for national peculiarities, is thoroughly “ trustworthy. M. Le Jean, it may be remembered, “ was in Bombay about the close of last year, and “ several besides ourselves will have seen the “ pencil sketch of the Negus, which that gentleman “ had with him at the time. He was in Abyssinia “ as French Envoy in 1863, and narrowly escaped “ becoming a companion of Consul Cameron. About “ three years ago, he contributed to the *Revue des “ Deux Mondes* two lengthy papers on Abyssinia “ and its monarch ; and from these we have selected, “ in tolerably consecutive order, a series of extracts, “ which give the more salient points of both M. Le “ Jean's papers. The translation has been done “ somewhat hurriedly, and the aim has been to give “ a faithful transcript of the Frenchman's state- “ ments and views, rather than a finished rendering

“ of the narrative. Readers will make their own
“ reflections as they glance through the papers, but
“ we must impress upon them that whenever M. Le
“ Jean refers to events and scenes which had only
“ just transpired, it is needful to remember that he
“ wrote three years ago. Notwithstanding this, we
“ think it will be apparent to many, that the writer’s
“ appreciation of the political position of Theodorus,
“ and his estimate of that strange monarch’s cha-
“ racter, are suggestive of some curious, if not im-
“ portant reflections.”

The interest of M. Le Jean’s narrative will, it is believed, be found sufficient to warrant a reproduction of the translation thus made for the Indian public a few weeks ago ; the more so, as that translation is inaccessible in its present shape to persons in this country.