

LITORA ALIENA

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Litora aliena by Medicus Peregrinus

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BY
MEDICUS PEREGRINUS

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"Peregrinum ut viseret orbem"
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BOSTON
W. M. LEONARD
101 TARMONT STREET
1911

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FOREWORD.

THE only possible justification there can be for reprinting these letters is that perhaps a physician, traveling on foreign shores, may, from his professional habit of mind, see things there that would not present themselves to other eyes; and the writer's only desire is that perhaps the tale of what he saw may give some professional or lay brother as much pleasure to read as it does him

" Ricordarsi del tempo felice."

To the Editors of the *Boston Medical and Surgical Journal*, in which these letters first appeared, he wishes to express his cordial thanks for the permission of republication.

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THE MULTITUDINOUS SEA.

ON BOARD S.S. ZEELAND, 1 JULY, 1910.

Lat.: 41° 4' N. Long.: 47° W.

It might seem that the mid-Atlantic, especially the "roaring forties," were hardly an auspicious or opportune place for medical observation or improvement. Yet in point of fact, a physician can sit upon the deck of a deep-sea-going ship and view the works of creation with as much pleasure and profit as in his own office ashore. For not only does such a ship afford him nearly all the interesting objects of contemplation that he finds on land, but the ocean itself is as rich with appropriate and unfamiliar suggestion

"As is the ooze and bottom of the sea
With sunken wrack and sunless treasures."

First of all, there is the ever-present and pertinent subject of seasickness, or rather, ship-sickness, nausea, an ailment so ancient and honorable that it has a genuine Greek name, not a hybrid Latin one in *-itis*. Many speculations, popular and scientific, have been made as to the exact nature and cause of seasickness. It seems to affect chiefly women, "the kind of man called a clergyman," and others of a neuropathologic diathesis. It presents itself under several clinical types. First, there is the purely imaginary type, in which the patient, usually a robust chronic invalid with plenty of money, is perfectly sure in advance that she will be sick, takes to her bunk before the ship sails, has all the delicacies of the

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saloon brought to her stateroom by a sympathetic stewardess, and reappears, on landing-day, sleek, plump and rosy, with voluble comments on the horrible voyage. In such cases there is no remedy. Second, there is the bilious type, with headache and some nausea, chiefly affecting the soulful, dyspeptic curate, the fat old lady with gallstones, the thin, sallow co-ed, and other victims of chronic constipation. Here the remedy is obvious. A sub-variety under this group is characterized solely by occipital headache and seems probably due to unwonted eyestrain or ocular fatigue from glare, or possibly to the necessity of unaccustomed and continuous cerebellar co-ordination. The remedy in such cases is, of course, rest and suitable protection of the eyes. The third type is that due solely to excess at table, or in the smoking-room, usually affects men, is accompanied by profuse emesis, and proves self-limited unless a future attack is induced by repeated indulgence. In short, seasickness is not a definite disease, but a symptom-complex, more often central than peripheral in origin, and due to the concurrence of various disturbing factors, often operative separately on land without harm, but capable, when occurring together, of upsetting the gastric equilibrium of persons functionally predisposed to such instability. There are some people who are seasick under all conditions, and some who are never seasick under any conditions. For those who fall in the intermediate class, the chief precautions advisable seem to be discretion in diet, abundance of fresh air and exercise, free catharsis, and great temperance in the use of alcohol and tobacco, rules of hygiene which might well be made general. It is perhaps needless to add that the writer of the present lines has never yet been seasick.

Apart from such medical observations as the above, and other general diagnostic speculations in which a physician is prone to indulge even when contemplating his fellow-men socially, one is dependent for his direct professional converse and pabulum on the ship's doctor. The surgeon on this boat is a shrewd, genial young Irishman who has served in the army, too, and avers that there is no money in the profession on land or sea, but that, like the "tramp royal," and, indeed, like all of us for that matter, he "couldn't quit it if he tried." He took us over the ship with him on inspection, showed us the sanitary and culinary accommodations of the steerage, which are excellent, and finally his surgery, — "a poor thing, but mine own," he apologized needlessly, for the hospital, though small, was admirably equipped, and the instrument case contained almost all the heart could desire. Hopes for a possible appendectomy aboard, however, seem likely to be thwarted, for, as he says, "One is seldom really sick at sea." It is strange how quickly the normal professional reflexes recur; and though one leave shore heartily sick of patients and hospitals, in two days one is hungry for the smell of ether, and gravitates, with the usual clannishness of our kind, to the association of another physician. It is pleasant to walk and talk and smoke with the doctor on the forward deck after dinner, hear his tales of South Africa, learn his opinions of vaccine therapy and medical education, play chess with him, and listen to his comments on people and things in "The States" and elsewhere.

When the doctor is busy, and one is tired of observing one's fellow passengers, or has momentarily exhausted the interest, always keenest on shipboard, afforded by one's own physiology,

one can always revert for solace and occupation to the sea, the oldest, most inscrutable of natural objects, the primal origin and home of all forms of life. Aside from its literary, romantic and esthetic connotations, and its actual, ever-varying beauties of form and color, the ocean is a reservoir of limitless suggestion to speculation in the sciences. As one stands at the prow, watching the rack of clouds above, or the white scud at the parting of the waters beneath, the sun and the passing ships by day, the white sea-horses that rear their manes of flying foam to race alongside, the clustered brilliancy of the stars and the Milky Way at night, the marvel of man's knowledge and dominance becomes almost miraculous. That the high development and exquisite adaptation of his central nervous system have made possible this dominion over the beasts of the field, and the fowls of the air, and whatsoever passeth through the paths of the sea, seems the biologic conclusion. And one is tempted, from his position at the prow of life, to trace his being through known and unknown forms of animate existence, past his cousins that have remained,— the gull that sweeps and circles overhead, whose problems of aviation man has just begun to solve; the dolphins that dive and dash at the bow; the lazy squid that lolls its jelly-like mass and tentacular arms; the phosphorescent animalcules that make the waters glow alongside at night,— back to the ultimate ooze of the sea from which emerged the primordial animal cell. It makes the still marine cells of one's organism rejoice to be thus brought into closer kinship with the past along this perspective of their pelagic ancestry, and one's epidermis and respiratory epithelium are healed by restoration to the normal saline which pervades even the air at sea. Perhaps such speculations are fantastic.

Howbeit, they serve to show that wherever there is life, there is interest and opportunity for the physician, to whom even that which is not human is never alien, for his profession is the application of all knowledge to the problems of human living.

MEDICUS PEREGRINUS.