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UP THE INDUS

Three years ago, I received orders to proceed from Kurâchee to Roree by the river route, for the purpose of joining the siege-train then assembling for the reduction of Mooltan. Subsequent events caused my final destination to be changed to Sukkur. Although my journey was thus not so long as I had both expected and wished, yet I had an opportunity of seeing some three or four hundred miles of a river that the records of the past, and the anticipations of the future, alike combine to render interesting, and which in itself differs in many respects from the other rivers of India. My position in life—that of a non-commissioned officer of the ordnance department—has prevented me from gleaning information on the subject, either from books or official sources; but it may be that a narration of what I merely *saw*, will not prove altogether without interest for those who must run while they read—who have neither time, nor perhaps inclination, to acquire any more than a superficial knowledge of distant countries.

Having been provided with a passage in one of the steamers of the Indus flotilla, and informed that the vessel was to start at daybreak on the following morning, I hastened to procure the necessary documents to authorise my obtaining ten days' sea-rations from the commissariat department. The following was the proportion of food for each day, and I may remark, that I received it from government gratis, with the exception of the spirits, as I was proceeding on field-service:—1 lb. of biscuits, 1 lb. of salt beef or pork, 1-4th of 1 lb. of rice, 1 oz. and 2-7ths of sugar, 5-7ths of 1 oz. of tea, and 2 drams, or about 1-4th of a bottle of arrack, 24 degrees under proof. Having secured the provant, my mind was now perfectly at ease, and I leisurely set about completing my arrangements for the voyage. These consisted mainly in locking my only box, and tying up in a cotton quilt a blanket and the thick sheet of goat's-hair-felt that served me for a bed. It was dark before I left camp; and as I was detained a considerable time at the *bunder* or landing-place, waiting for a boat to take me off to the steamer, it was late in the night when I got on board.

The steam-boat was about the size of the largest of those that ply above bridge on the Thames. When I had scrambled on deck, I found that the forepart of the vessel was crowded with the bodies of natives, every one of whom was testifying the soundness of his repose by notes both loud and deep. Having selected the only spot where there was room even to sit down, I began, in a somewhat high key, to warble a lively strain calculated to cheer the drooping spirits of such of my neighbours as had that evening undergone the pang of parting from their friends. This proceeding soon had the effect of drawing all eyes upon me, and, indeed, not a few of the tongues also; for the now thoroughly awakened sleepers—with great want of taste—growled out, at the expense both of myself and of my performance, sundry maledictions, with a fervency peculiar to the country, until at length I may say I was clad with curses as with a garment. At this juncture, I took out of my provision-bag a remarkably fine piece of pork, and began to contemplate it by the light of the moon with the critical eye of a connoisseur. The reader is no doubt aware, that among the natives of India the popular prejudice does not run in favour of this wholesome article of food; and perhaps to this fact I must attribute it that the surrounding Mussulmans and Hindoos became wondrously polite all on a sudden, and left a wide circle vacant around me, so that I had ample room to make down my bed; nor was I disturbed from a hearty sleep till the morning.

At daybreak, I was aroused by the crew getting up the anchor: in a few minutes, the head of the 'fire-boat,' as my dusky neighbours termed it, was turned down the coast, and on we went, steaming, smoking, and splashing, after the most orthodox fashion of fire-boats in general. I had now time and opportunity to look around me. Every available spot of the deck and paddle-boxes of the small, flat-bottomed iron steamer, was crowded with as motley a set of passengers as ever sailed since the days of Captain Noah. Sepoys returning from furlough to join their regiments; lascars, or enlisted workmen belonging to the different civil branches of the army; and camp-followers in all their varieties, were everywhere squatted on their haunches, and although muffled up to their eyes in wrappers of cotton-cloth, were all looking miserably cold from the sharpness of the morning breeze. The crew consisted of about twenty sailors—half of whom were Europeans, and evidently picked hands. Under the influence of good pay, fresh provisions without stint, sleeping all night in their hammocks, and constant change of scene, they were as healthy-looking and good-humoured a lot of seamen as I had ever met with. Their principal employment seemed to be to take their turn at the wheel; and as the natives performed most of the little work that was to be done in a vessel of this description, carrying no sails, I presume they were entertained only with the view of manning the two small howitzers and half-a-dozen swivel-guns, in case our little craft should find it necessary to shew her teeth. The remaining portion of the men were even finer specimens of humanity than the Europeans. With the exception of two tall, bony Scindians, they were all Seedies, or negroes, and there was not one among them that might not have served as a model for a Hercules. Their huge bodies presented an appearance of massiveness and immense strength; and the enormous muscles had even more than the prominence we find in some statues, but so seldom meet with in men of these effeminate times. These particulars were the more easily noted, as their style of costume, in the daytime at least, approached very closely to nudity. But their size was as nothing to their appetites; and deep and vasty as their internal accommodations must have been, it remains a matter of perplexity to me to this day to determine by what mysterious process they managed to stow away one-half of what they devoured. I have repeatedly watched one of these overgrown animals seat himself before a wooden trencher, some three-quarters of a yard broad, and clear from it, as if by magic, a mess piled up to the greatest capacity of the vessel, and consisting of rice, garnished at the top with a couple of pounds or so of curried meat or fish; after which, glaring around him in a hungry and dissatisfied manner, calculated to raise unpleasant sensations in a nervous bystander, he would sullenly catch hold of the hookah common to the party, and seek to deaden his appetite by swallowing down long and repeated draughts of tobacco-smoke, until the tears came into his eyes, and he was forced to desist by a paroxysm of coughing.

Among the passengers, there were two or three persons of my own standing, and on the quarter-deck a small group of officers, one of whom was accompanied by his wife. The lady had certainly no reason to grumble at the inattention of her companions. The fair sex, although much more plentiful at the time I speak of than ten years ago, was still rather scarce in these parts, ladies being few and far between in the stations beyond Kurâchee. With a praiseworthy desire to make the most of the honour, the skipper was bustling about, giving all sorts of orders that might in any way conduce to the comfort of his fair passenger, and apparently in a state of mental agony when a momentary turn of the vessel would render the awning and screens ineffectual in preserving her from a chance ray of the sun. Two young subalterns were tumbling over one another in the anxious endeavour to be the first to bring a footstool; a couple of their seniors were standing by, rubbing their hands and smiling blandly, to keep their minds in a fit state for the perpetration of a compliment on the first possible occasion; while even the grim old major was trying very hard to unbend: not that it was a part of his principles to be particularly gallant to the ladies, but as he was going to a place where he might not have the advantage of seeing any of them for some years, and would thus run the chance of growing rusty, he thought he might as well keep his hand in while he had the opportunity.

After running down the coast till the sun became so uncomfortably hot as to render an awning over the whole vessel an indispensable necessity, we suddenly struck into one of the many creeks with which the Delta of the Indus is everywhere interlaced. The vessel did not answer her helm well; and as the breadth of the stream did not much exceed her length, we were for some time running ashore, first on one bank, and then on the opposite one. However, as the banks were steep, and composed of a mixture of sand and mud, we were not so much delayed by these accidents as might have been expected; for after grounding with a shock sufficient to floor any one unused to the navigation of the Indus, the tough little craft would slide back of her own accord into her proper element, and go ahead again as if nothing had happened. The first time this took place, I was sent on my beam-ends, and was not a little alarmed into the bargain; but the crew seemed to take it as a matter of course, and in reply to my anxious inquiries as to the extent of damage that had been occasioned, they informed me that she had only brushed the cobwebs off her keel. On entering the creek, we startled large flocks of wild geese and ducks; and here and there a pair of pelicans, after gazing at us for a few seconds, would slowly wing their way to some more sequestered stream, unprofaned by noisy, smoky civilisation.

As we continued on our course, the landscape—a level plain, that stretched away for miles till it met the horizon—was covered with camels grazing upon tamarisk-bushes, which, with a few mangostans, an occasional specimen of acanthus, and a coarse and scanty herbage, were the only specimens of the vegetable kingdom that met our gaze. The scene during the remainder of the afternoon was the same, the monotony being relieved only when we stopped for half an hour to take a supply of wood from a large pile collected on the bank for this purpose, and thus had an opportunity of stretching our legs on *terra firma*. At dusk, the steam-boat was run ashore, the steam blown off, and here we were to remain for the night. The natives immediately rushed on shore, and began preparing fires to cook their provisions. The ship's cook had already supplied me with a cup, or rather a tin pot of tea; but as the growing coolness of the evening, and the example of my neighbours, rather encouraged my appetite, I resolved to make a second edition of my evening meal, and accordingly took under my arm the copper canteen which formed the sum-total of my culinary apparatus—the lid being my only plate or dish—and furnished with a supply of tea, sugar, cold meat, and biscuit, made my way to a spot a short distance off, where I might take my food on the solitary system, according to the custom that we Englishmen most delight in. When I had lighted the fire, and put the water on to boil, I cast myself on the ground, and complacently puffing away at my pipe, gazed at the wild but picturesque scene before me. The position of the river was marked out by a semicircle of some fifty or sixty fires, before which dark and ill-defined figures were ever and anon flitting like phantoms; while, in the midst, the funnel of the steam-boat loomed tall and black above the veil of smoke that hung around—like some dark and horrid object Of heathen idolatry surrounded by its sacrificial fires. The sounds that met my ear, however, dispelled this somewhat fanciful idea; for in the stillness of the night voices grow distinct, while forms are indebted to the imagination for filling up their outlines.

The native passengers, who had remained, silent and dull, in a constrained position during the whole of the day, felt a load taken off their spirits as soon as they set foot on dry land; and in a trice the silence that had hitherto reigned was broken by a very Babel of tongues, among which could be distinguished the guttural jargon of the Scindian, the bastard dialect of Mahratti, of the Hindoo from the Deccan, and the ungrammatical *patois* of Hindostani, which—although, when exclusively used, it marked out the Mussulman—was yet the *lingua franca* of the whole party; but amidst the unceasing torrent of words, little could be distinguished, save when the ear was saluted with an outburst of nature's universal and unvaried language in the shape of a light-hearted laugh. By and by, my attention became directed, by an occasional shout of merriment, to a group of Seedies clustered round a fire near me. Negroes in this country are much the same as in other parts of the World—a happy, easily-contented race, forgetful of the past, and careless of the future. After keeping up their noisy confabulation for some time, they removed to a level spot close to where I was lying: one of them squatted down on the ground, and commenced singing to the music of a sort of tambourine, that he

beat with the flat of his hand; and the others at once formed a circle, and commenced a rude dance, which had probably been brought by themselves or their fathers from the shores of Eastern Africa. The air was at first low and monotonous, the time seeming to be more studied than any variation of the tune; but after some minutes a few notes in a higher key were occasionally introduced, giving the music a strangely wild and melancholy character. The dance consisted principally of low jumps, each foot being alternately advanced in strict time with the music. Sometimes the dancers joined hands; again they would pass into one another's places, until they had made the circuit of the ring; and every now and then, in going through these movements, they would leap completely round, apparently without an effort, but as a natural consequence of the momentum produced by the celerity of their motions, and the weight of their huge bodies. The whole affair was gone through in a serious and business-like manner, unusual in the negro. How long I watched them I cannot say; but it seemed to me as if they went on for hours without slackening the pace, or moving one muscle of their countenances, until my eyes became heavy with looking at them. At length, the figures appeared to grow dim, and among them I thought I recognised faces of friends then many thousands of miles from me, and forms that the earth had long before covered over. A death-like chill came over me: by a sudden impulse, I rushed forward, and awoke. With bewildered feelings, I rose on my elbow, and gazed around. The moon had risen; her cold, clear light making every object near me either startlingly distinct, or else a mass of dark shade, while a deep and solemn silence reigned around. All had vanished—the singer and the dancers—the flaming, sparkling, roaring fires, and the noisy groups around them; and I might have imagined that I had awaked to find myself in another world, had it not been for the heap of black ashes beside me, and the dark outline of the steam-boat in the distance. I arose, stiff, cold, and drowsy, and tucking my kitchen under my arm, slowly wended my way on board.

However, there must be an end to all things; and on the third day, we emerged from the dreary net-work of creeks, and entered into the open Indus. The scenery still remained much the same. Here and there, beacons were erected, but they were only of temporary use, for the channel of the river alters almost every year. The breadth of the stream varies with the rise of the water consequent on the melting of the snow on the distant mountains, among which it takes its source. At Sukkur, it is as broad as the Thames at Blackwall; and nearly two hundred miles lower down, it is sometimes found of no greater breadth; while in other spots it spreads into a lake some two or three miles across, depending upon the level of the surrounding country and the rise of the river. Scinde has been called Young Egypt, from the general resemblance of the physical features of the two countries, and the fact, that the existence of an only river in each is the sole cause of an immense tract of territory being prevented from becoming throughout a parched and unprofitable desert. In Upper Scinde, there are very rarely more than three or four showers in the year, and the cultivator has to depend entirely upon the overflow of the river for the growth of his crops, in the same way as the fellah of Egypt is saved from famine by the annual inundation of the Nile. In Fort Bukkur, there is a gauge on which the height of the river is registered, in a similar manner to that of the celebrated one in Egypt; and the news of the rise or fall of a few inches, is received by the Scindians with an eager interest, not a little strange to those who are unaware that such petty fluctuations determine whether a nation shall feast or starve for the next twelve months. It is pleasing to add, that there are hopes of a change for the better in this state of uncertainty of obtaining the necessities of life, which, in a case like this, where so little depends upon the energy of single members of the community, acts as a sure check upon the progress of civilisation. Canals, excavated at a time when all India was one vast empire, but since choked up and fallen into ruins, have been cleaned and repaired, and new ones projected. A late order of government has led the way to the Indus being constituted, instead of the Ganges, the highway from Europe to the fertile and important provinces of North-Western Hindostan. Commerce, in the pride of her prosperity, grows nice about her roads, and she will soon take the Indus in hand, and put a stop to its little irregularities. Mere art, perhaps, could do but little to remove the impediments to the navigation of this immense river. This end could only be obtained by taking advantage of the

natural causes which have made a deep channel in one part and a shoal out a few yards lower down. Dame Nature, like dames in general, may be easily led if we can only persuade her that she is acting of her own accord.

On we went, steaming, and smoking, and splashing more than ever, buffeting against the muddy-looking stream, which, however, was sometimes too much for us, so that we were fain to take advantage of the still waters or back-current near the banks. The river being low at this season, we ran aground, in spite of all the care of our Scindian pilot and the Seedic leadsman, often enough to have wrecked a moderately-sized navy. The leadsman was a rather pompous individual, duly impressed with the importance of his position, in having charge of the deep-sea line, which was something short of two fathoms in length. He was stationed at the bows, and ever and anon proclaimed aloud the depth of water in language that he fondly believed to be English. As we dashed along in one fathom water, he seemed perfectly at his ease, and drew the small lead from the river, and again tossed it before him with a studied grace, turning round occasionally, with an air of affected indifference, to read admiration in our eyes. As the water shoaled to four feet, his brow contracted and his motions were quickened; when it became three feet, he hurled the lead into the water, as the gambler dashes down his last dice; and at last, as we grazed on the tail of a hank, it was almost with a shriek that he yelled out, '*Doo foots!*' But our hour had not yet come; and as the water deepened to beyond the four yards that formed the extent of his line, he assumed his former dignified ease, and leisurely made known that there was 'No bot-t-a-a-m!'—an announcement which, although gratifying in one respect, was yet somewhat startling.

But we did not always escape in this manner. Not to speak of minor mischances, on one occasion we stuck hard and fast for twenty-four hours, in spite of every attempt to extricate ourselves. Here was a predicament for the captain! He had received instructions to make the greatest speed on his trip; his passengers were all burning with impatience lest they should be too late to acquire glory and prize-money—the prize-money at all events; the military stores on board were urgently required at Mooltan; and, worse than all, the lady began to pout! This was the climax of his misfortune; and the skipper, growing desperate, swore a mighty oath that if the obstinate little craft would not swim through the water, she should walk over the land, and we should see who would get tired of it first. Accordingly, an anchor was carried forward to a spot some forty yards off, where the water was deeper; the greater part of the passengers were made to jump overboard, without even going through the formality of walking the plank; while the remainder manned the capstan-bars. The chain-cable tightened, the capstan creaked, and the paddles dashed round; but we did not stir an inch till the natives, who had been so unceremoniously turned overboard, began to apply the pressure from without, when, amidst shouts and yells, and curses in a dozen different languages, we slid along the surface of the bank until we reached a deeper channel. The outside passengers then scrambled on board, and again we darted on; while the captain took snuff with the triumphant air of a man who was not to be trifled with, and informed the lady confidentially that she (the steam-boat) was not a bad little craft after all, but it did not do to let her have her own way altogether.

Let it now suffice to say, that the amphibious steam-boat carried us to Sukkur in rather less than three weeks—our voyage in some respects resembling the midnight journey of the demon horseman

'Tramp, tramp across the land we ride;
Splash, splash across the sea!'

Glad we were when a bend of the river shewed us the island and picturesque fort of Bukkur, apparently blocking up all further progress; the left bank being studded with the white bungalows of Sukkur, half-hidden in clumps of date-trees; while the right was clothed to the water's edge with the bright green foliage of the gardens of Roree.

HELPS'S ESSAYS

In an age of many books, there must needs be some, highly worthy of attention, with which the general reading-public will be but imperfectly acquainted. Though probably known to many of our readers, we think it likely that the writings of Mr Helps are yet unknown to many others, who might profit by the study of them, and more or less appreciate their excellence. Under this conviction, it is proposed to notice them in the present pages; and we have little doubt of being able to substantiate their claims to consideration. To readers who require of a book something more than mere amusement, or a passing satisfaction to their curiosity; who have any regard or relish for independent thinking—for an enlarged observation of human life—for the results of study and experience—for practical sense and wisdom, and a general understanding and appreciation of the varied motives, ways, and interests of men and of society—these volumes cannot fail to prove delightful and profitable reading.

All Mr Helps's writings have been published anonymously; and it is only within the last two years that he has become known, out of his own circle, to be the author. His earliest publications were, *Essays written in the Intervals of Business*, and *An Essay on the Duties of the Employers to the Employed*, otherwise entitled *The Claims of Labour*. He has also published a work in two volumes under the title of *The Conquerors of the New World and their Bondsmen*; a historical narrative of the principal events which led to negro slavery in the West Indies and America. But the books from his pen with which we are best acquainted, and which have obtained the largest measure of public attention, are a series of essays intermixed with dialogues, called *Friends in Council*, and a supplementary volume, somewhat different in plan, which he calls *Companions of my Solitude*.¹ As the whole of his characteristics as an essayist are displayed with a more perfect effect in these two latter works than in the others, and as they will afford us as much extract as we shall have space for, we propose to confine our remarks to them exclusively. Matter enough, and even more than enough, will be found in them for illustrating whatever we may find to say respecting the author's powers and attainments.

The *Friends in Council* purports to be edited by a clergyman named Dunsford, who was so obliging and laborious as to set down the conversations in which he, Ellesmere (the great lawyer), and Milverton (the author), had engaged on various occasions, when the last read to his companions a number of short essays which he was writing. We have a page or two of introduction, informing us of this circumstance, and of a few other particulars needful to be mentioned; and then, after a little talk among the friends, an essay is read, followed by the interlocutors' comments, and a discussion of its merits. These conversations form a very agreeable portion of the work, and exhibit a fine mastery of dialogue. They are exactly like the discourse of intelligent and accomplished men, and therefore very much unlike the ordinary run of book-reported talk. A few sentences may be not unfitly quoted, by way of exhibiting their quality. We take the following, on so common a matter as friendship; not because it is the best we might select, but because it seems one of the passages which is most readily extractable:—

'*Ellesmere*. I suppose all of us have, at one time or other, had a huge longing after friendship. If one could get it, it would be much safer than that other thing.

'*Milverton*. Well, I wonder whether love—for I imagine you mean love—was ever so described before, "that other thing!"

'*Elles*. When the world was younger, perhaps there was more of this friendship. David and Jonathan!—How does their friendship begin? I know it is very beautiful; but I have forgotten the words. Dunsford will tell us.

¹ 1. *Friends in Council: a Series of Headings and Discourse thereon*. New Edition. Two vols. 2. *Companions of my Solitude*. Pickering. London: 1851.

'*Dunsford*. "And Saul said to him, Whose son art thou, thou young man? And David answered, I am the son of thy servant Jesse the Bethlehemite. And it came to pass, when he had made an end of speaking unto Saul, that the soul of Jonathan was knit with the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul."

'*Elles*. Now that men are more complex, they would require so much. For instance, if I were to have a friend, he must be an uncommunicative man: that limits me to about thirteen or fourteen people in the world. It is only with a man of perfect reticence that you can speak completely without reserve. We talk together far more openly than most people; but there is a skilful fencing even in our talk. We are not inclined to say the whole of what we think.

'*Mil.* What I should need in a friend would be a certain breadth of nature: I have no sympathy with people who can disturb themselves about small things; who crave the world's good opinion; are anxious to prove themselves always in the right; can be immersed in personal talk or devoted to self-advancement; who seem to have grown up entirely from the *earth*, whereas even the plants draw most of their sustenance from the air of heaven.

'*Elles*. That is a high flight. I am not prepared to say all that. I do not object to a little earthiness. What I should fear in friendship is the comment, and interference, and talebearing, I often see connected with it.

'*Mil.* That does not particularly belong to friendship, but comes under the general head of injudicious comment on the part of those who live with us. Divines often remind us, that in forming our ideas of the government of Providence, we should recollect that we see only a fragment. The same observation, in its degree, is true too as regards human conduct. We see a little bit here and there, and assume the nature of the whole. Even a very silly man's actions are often more to the purpose than his friend's comments upon them.

'*Elles*. True! Then I should not like to have a man for a friend who would bind me down to be consistent, who would form a minute theory of me which was not to be contradicted.

'*Mil.* If he loved you as his own soul, and his soul were knit with yours—to use the words of Scripture—he would not demand this consistency, because each man must know and feel his own immeasurable vacillation and inconsistency; and if he had complete sympathy with another, he would not be greatly surprised or vexed at that other's inconsistencies.

'*Duns*. There always seems to me a want of tenderness in what are called friendships in the present day. Now, for instance, I don't understand a man ridiculing his friend. The joking of intimates often appears to me coarse and harsh. You will laugh at this in me, and think it rather effeminate, I am afraid.

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