

The Troopship of Empire

Sailing the Seven Seas, This Missionary of Civilization Pursues the Even Tenor of Its Way in All Climes and Among All Classes of People—A Symbol of the Great World Empire Which Protects All Races and Unconsciously Controls the Destiny of the World—By William D. McCrackan, C. S. B.

Away with a slow song, but throbbing engines, the British troopship leaves for foreign parts. Whither away? Certainly to other climes, curious customs, strange lingo, but wherever it speeds, it will take with it athletic sports, tea, and baths, and that indefinable instinct which commands without seeming to rise, and protects individual rights under the umbrella of precedent.

The English people live, move, and have their being in an unseen, uncodified destiny which they do not understand and the world ignores; yet it pushes them invariably along a path prescribed by destiny. Through much tribulation, stoically or even comically endured, they reach victory.

Of this the British troopship is a symbol. It churns the seven seas, heading, perhaps, for Calcutta, Melbourne, Vancouver, or Hong-Kong, touching possibly at Gibraltar, Malta, Singapore or Fiji, but it does not mix its tea with local beverages, and continues to play outdoor games even at sea.

The point which would be makers of history overlook is that the British Empire is not the outcome of human will power, or an ingenious contrivance for preventing the sun from setting upon itself. Humanly speaking, the British Empire happened. Nobody thought it out. It just grew unconsciously as the flowers grow, obedient to some secret necessity. It cannot be initiated, because it does not know itself how it came into being, and nobody can fathom the modus operandi of untold millions working unconsciously towards a goal hidden by a veil which can only be lifted when the task is finished.

The Tommies throw their pennies to the boys of the foreign port and their shillings to the women who sell them fruit, but never for a moment do they imagine themselves associates of these foreigners. A class system of immemorial origin, all unseen, pervades the ship suffused with a universal kindness, the basic quality of the British people.

Malta.
A distant line like the waving of the clouds grows more distinct. The sharp perpendicular line of a cliff closes one end. The island of Goza is outlined. Then comes a dome, the third largest in the world, defined

above the land; at its foot a darker streak of color is a third little island, where Paul is reputed to have been shipwrecked and to have shaken the viper from his hand. Then by degrees comes the filling in of the picture: a bay, huddled houses, some colonnades, an Italian front bare of trees. Small boats come to greet the troopship, the water is vividly green in their shadows, and so the port of Valletta is reached.

Innumerable British troopships have touched at Malta for the past hundred years, since it became British while continuing to speak Italian. In perfect silence and with great completeness arrangements are carried out for the landing of a battalion. It will be many years before the regiment leaves this port, and although there will be leaves of absence for visits home, headquarters will remain at that little island, so foreign in appearance and customs to England. And so two big black barges filled with khaki-clad soldiers, not forgetting the little group of regimental boys, are towed ashore by a government tug. And who will return?

The boys are a part of the equipment of a true British regiment of regular troops. They enlist at fifteen, but do not become privates on full pay until they reach the age of eighteen. In the meantime they learn to be soldiers, shoemakers, tailors, or to play an instrument in the regimental band. They are apprentices in the trade of war.

Much baggage and accoutrements follow on other barges, and with the waning afternoon permission is granted for the remaining men to take a swim from the ship. Some plunge from the rail, others run down the ship's companion to the water's edge. There is a generous, joyous scramble in the warm water of the bay with its strong briny taste, and with the setting sun the troopship once more leaves the island of Malta. Alexandria is next.

In the meantime army officers pace the deck in pairs, naval men smoke beside the rail, some men on important missions read unobtrusively in deck chairs. A sprinkling of women and a very few children give variety to the deck scene.

Every morning there is parade, which means that all passengers, both of the army and navy, and all civilians in

general, present themselves on deck with their life belts for inspection alongside the troops. The terrible lessons of submarine attacks and floating mines have left their mark in these specific precautions.

The aftermath of the great war pervades the troopship in other respects also, but not openly. It is only seen by degrees under the calm exterior of a people who do not wear their heart on their sleeves. Here is for instance, a lieutenant who was in the first detachment which marched into Jerusalem; a boyish captain who served all through the terrible four years on many fronts, and has seen most of his comrades "go west."

The Tommies sleep on deck. At nine o'clock they come on with their blankets, the deck chairs are piled away, and they lie down in rows, joking and cheerful as ever while the passengers continue to chat and fill up the forward deck spaces. By day awnings give shade to the lounging Tommies. They sing. They have an irresistible desire to punch each other. They joke incessantly in language which an American finds less difficult to follow by reason of Mr. Kipling.

At the stroke of four p.m. without previous notice, but by common consent the whole ship's company has afternoon tea. It would be easier to stop the engines than to stop the instructive trend. Afternoon tea is not a meal. It is an interlude, acting as a national institution.

Every evening the regimental band plays with power and great gusto to the strollers on the deck. American wartime has sporadically its way even into the British army, and light footed officers have learned to fox trot on their leaves of absence in England. Thus the influence of the American Jazzy Hottens the routine of the troopship Empire.

The morning comes when the first faint indications of Africa and Alexandria break the horizon. Alexandria is reached, the home of Cleopatra, the port of call for Julius Caesar, Pompey and Augustus Caesar, the seat of classic learning, and of the greatest library of antiquity—the Levantine gateway to Egypt; and Egypt is something different from Alexandria itself. Here the troopship halts for the return trip. The remaining soldiers disembark, thus forging one more link in the chain which encircles the earth for its good.
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The weavers are weaving most wonderful weaves,
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The wool and the warp are the falling leaves,
And glad are the little wee beasts and bugs.

And they don't forget the violet snail,
Shivering and cold in the damp and the wet,
They wrap them up in a comfy shawl,
Whispering "Darlings, we love you just."

Down in a hollow across the farm,
Of billowy wraps they choose the best,
They spread a carpet that's rich and warm,
To keep the snow from the mouse's nest.

I asked as I watched them work in the glade,
"What is this exquisite thing you make?"
They kept right on at their work, and said,
"It's a log cabin quilt for a garter snake."

The door to the chipmunk's den they screen,
They carefully breathe the bug's abuse,
The handsomest rug I have ever seen
Is meant as a gift for a good old toad.

The Lady's Slipper—come, take a peep,
They wrap a muffler about her throat,
And the Maiden's Hair they cover deep,
And the trillium is proud of his overcoat.

Jack Frost creeps into the bed to woo
Peasant or prince and spoils their rest,
There's one thing sure that he cannot do,
He can't get into a mouse's nest!
The Wigwam, Rushdale, Rockton, Ont.
The Khan.

Who Is Responsible?

(Continued from preceding page.)
keeps prices high and thereby stimulates and encourages the high cost of living; and that until this class has become surfeited with spending or has exhausted its resources, there can be no readjustment to normal values, no great progress will be made if chasing H. C. L. to his lair, investigating committees, prosecuting attorneys and all others to the contrary notwithstanding. Why not tell the public the truth, even if it does reflect somewhat upon its common-sense? Why blame somebody in particular for the fault of everybody in general?

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