

PORTER AND HIS CAMELS.

INTERESTING REMINISCENCES BY THE ADMIRAL OF THE NAVY.

The Experiment Made by the United States Before the Civil War—Insulting Conduct of Some African Potentates—The Peculiarities of Camels.

[Special Correspondence.]
WASHINGTON, Oct. 24.—Admiral Porter occupies one of the most interesting offices in Washington. It is a large room, about 20 by 80 feet, built over the carriage gate at his home on H street. Among the thousands of souvenirs of the admiral's career here preserved, representing every stage of his public services during the past sixty years, none are more interesting than a series of pictures of camels hanging upon the walls amid pictures of ships and guns. Curious to know what a naval officer could have had to do with animals which no stretch of the imagination could associate with the navy, I questioned the old admiral about them while paying him a visit several months ago.



THE UNITED STATES MACHINE GUN BATTERY MOUNTED ON CAMEL.

"That is an old story," said the admiral, lighting another of the little cigars of which he has smoked twenty or more a day for a quarter of a century. "Those pictures recall one of the strangest incidents of my career, an incident in which Jefferson Davis bore a prominent part. In March, 1855, congress appropriated \$30,000 for the purchase of camels and dromedaries to be employed for military purposes. Jefferson Davis was then secretary of war, and if I mistake not the idea was his. At any rate, he entered heartily into the experiment, for of course experiment it was, and detailed Maj. Wayne to go to Asia for camels. I was detailed for a similar service, and Wayne and I sailed together in the steamship Supply, which I commanded. I remember now that we were much laughed at by our brother officers, and they made many jokes at our expense. Yet the novelty of the expedition attracted us, and we went away determined to do all in our power to make the experiment a success. We expected to have some fun, and had it." Here the old admiral laughed heartily, and after procuring another match with which to relight his cigar, proceeded to tell the story of the expedition:

"Early in August we arrived at Tunis, and bought there a camel, which we wanted for the purpose of making a study of the best manner of keeping the animals on board ship. The bey of Tunis, hearing of the purpose of our visit, presented two very fine animals to us. It was at Tunis we first learned that in the orient a camel trade is a good deal like a horse trade in the occident. We bought a camel of a trader. The animal had a fine pedigree, and was warranted sound and free from disease. We had not had him long before we discovered he was diseased, afflicted with the itch and lame. We finally gave him away, and one of those presented us by the bey of Tunis also went wrong, and we sold him for a song. It did not take us long to get our eyes open on the camel business, and before finishing our trip we became pretty sharp traders ourselves.

"An instance of this occurred at Alexandria during our second visit to the orient. While we were in that part we received word from our consul general that the viceroy of Egypt desired to show his esteem for the president of the United States by presenting us with six fine dromedaries. We were naturally much delighted at this, for we knew his highness, the viceroy, had many fine animals, and that he had been engaged in drilling a dromedary corps on the Persian system, each animal to carry two men armed with carbines. We were also aware of the fact that oriental potentates, in making presents, take pride in giving nothing but the choicest. Our joy was, however, soon turned into chagrin.

"When word came that the six fine dromedaries awaited our pleasure in the palace yard I sent an officer for them. He came back in a few minutes and told me the animals were so wretched in appearance and so rotten with



GETTING THE CAMEL ON BOARD.

disease that he would not take the responsibility of accepting them without further orders. I went to look at the animals, and found them infinitely worse than they had been represented. They are not dromedaries at all, but the common street camel of Alexandria, the most ill-used and wretched looking beast in the world. To make matters worse, two of these camels had been purchased by Maj. Wayne at Cairo and let go again at Alexandria because they were diseased. Actually, these two animals which we had already rejected were the best in the lot of six offered us with great flourish of trumpets by his highness the viceroy. "You can imagine how angry I was,"

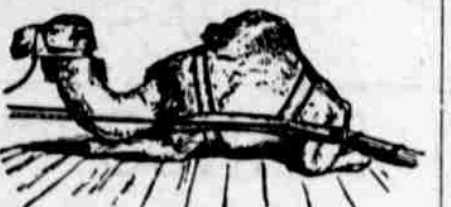
said the old admiral, savagely biting the end off a cigar. "It looked like a studied insult, designed to turn the whole expedition into ridicule. I refused to accept the animals, and sat down and wrote the viceroy a letter which must have made his ears tingle. One paragraph of it, I remember, was like this: 'We have too good a country, my dear sir, to allow any one to depreciate it with such offerings. Crowned heads in their intercourse with each other omit no courtesies, and make no presents that they may blush to show. There is as much due to our intelligence as to any crowned head of Europe, and we will not accept any gift unless made in a proper manner.'

"Perhaps the viceroy was startled to receive such a letter from a young lieutenant of the American navy, but he promptly sent us an apology, and sought to make amends by sending for more animals. The viceroy also said he would severely punish his servants for the shameful manner in which they had executed his orders. He did send us some more animals, which were fairly good ones, though not such as we should have purchased.

"Of course we learned a great deal about camels and dromedaries," added the admiral, "and I must say that my respect for the animal was greatly increased by familiarity. In all my experience I invariably found them the same enduring, uncomplaining, gentle creatures. They labor on from day to day, under brutal drivers, and kneel down at night, after a hard day's work, the pictures of meekness, to chew their small allowance of food, always ready to start at a moment's notice, and rarely exhibiting signs of fatigue. There are two kinds of camels—the Bactrian, or two humped, found in Tartary and the northern portions of Central Asia, and the Arabian, or camel with one hump. The dromedary is simply a one hump camel used as a swift courier, or racer.

"A burden camel can carry more than half a ton of load, though of course not at great speed. I have frequently seen them loaded with 1,500 or 1,600 pounds and moving off at a fair gait. An average load, under favorable circumstances, is about 600 pounds, and this a camel will carry easily, without pushing, twenty-five or thirty miles a day. Col. McMind told Maj. Wayne that in Gen. Napier's campaign against Sindh they had an efficient corps of 1,000 men mounted on 500 dromedaries, two men to each dromedary, both armed with rifles and sabres. In battle the animals were made to kneel in a square, under the charge of 500 of the men, forming a base of operations from which the other 500 operated as infantry.

"In case of extremity the thousand men could find shelter behind the animals, which were prevented from rising by a hobble on the fore leg. This corps frequently marched seventy miles in twelve hours. I have heard some remarkable tales of the speed of dromedaries. An Arab told me he had traveled 600 miles in a week on the back of his delool, but this was simply an example of the oriental habit of amplification. Ah, what liars they are in the east. It is true, however, that while a horse can outrun a dromedary in a short race, the latter will take a load of four or five hundred pounds and make his fifty miles a day for a month.



CAMEL ON BOARD SHIP DURING A STORM.

"An odd thing in camel driving is that they must not be pushed. They will set their own gait, moving slowly where the road is unfavorable and making up lost time of their own volition on the good stretches. The camel has one great advantage over a horse. He can live off anything, like a goat. He browses on every shrub and plant that grows, even the thistle and the prickly pear. He can also travel, in emergency, three, four, even six or seven days without water or food. It is his ugly looking hump that enables him to do this. Composed of gelatinous fat, the animal lives off it by reabsorption. In the east the condition of a camel after a long journey is judged by the size of his hump.

"It is not uncommon to see camels come in, after long and painful journeys, with backs almost straight, their humps having nearly disappeared. I was much surprised to learn that the hump does not seem to be intimately connected with the animal's vitality. Linant Bey told me he had often opened the humps when they became so large from high feeding as to prevent the saddle fitting properly, and taken out large pieces of fat without injuring the animal or affecting his health. It is generally supposed, too, that the camel thrives better in hot than in cold countries, but this is not true. I see no reason why the camel should not do well and be very useful in the climate of Texas and on all of our southwestern plains.

"There is much to commend the camel. He is always gentle and submissive. His only fault is stubbornness, but he is not as bad as the mule. He kneels to get his load, and will carry all he can rise with. He eats little more than the horse. He is so patient that he will march until completely exhausted, then falling, never to rise again.

"As a result of our two voyages," concluded the admiral, "we landed in Texas seventy-five camels. We had some very rough weather at sea, and several animals died, but we actually landed with one more than we had started with. In storms the animals knelt on deck and were washed to a spar. Our experiment in Texas did not turn out successfully. One after another of the animals died for lack of intelligent care and feeding. I believe, and after the war began in 1861 nothing more was heard of the project. But for several years a number of the animals did very well, and their usefulness was put to many tests."

WALTER WELLMAN.

RUSSIAN PEASANTS AT HOME.

An Entertaining Letter from the Pen of David Ker.

[Special Correspondence.]

NEW YORK, Oct. 24.—"These are the men who carry the whole Russian empire on their shoulders," said a noted nihilist leader to me one fine summer evening in the Russian village of Ostashkovo, as we stood watching a passing group of mujiks (peasants), "and the moment they find that out and feel their backs beginning to ache with its weight, down comes the whole concern!"

These prophetic words came back to my memory with ominous force a year later, as I sat in front of my tiny log hut in the hamlet of Bogorodskoe (on one of the tributaries of the Upper Volga) to watch the red sun sink behind the shadowy pines, while the peasants of the little village, men, women and children, came filing past me, some hot and dusty from their labor in the fields, others looking pale and tired after sitting at work all day in their close and unwholesome huts.

There they go, the sallow, bearded, low browed, heavy looking toilers, with hard wooden faces and shaggy hair, who "carry all Russia on their backs." Some of the younger and more well to do men wear red calico shirts outside their other clothes; but the majority keep to the traditional sheepskin frock (swarming with "indigenous creepers") which serves Ivan Petrovitch all the year round, the wool being worn outside in summer and inside in winter.

The short skirted women—many of whom, though barefooted, wear showy earrings—have their sunburned faces tarbed with scarlet handkerchiefs, for the Russian is as fond of bright colors as the negro, and his word for "very beautiful" means literally "bright red." The unmarried women are distinguished from the rest by the peculiar plaiting of their back hair, and among them I notice one young girl (with a light wooden yoke balanced across her left shoulder, and a pail of water attached to either end of it) whose bright face and ringing laugh might well amaze any one who (like myself) was aware that she had been tried only a few months before for the murder of her illegitimate child, and that, although saved by an ingenious legal quibble, she was believed guilty by every one who knew anything about the matter.

Many of the faces show considerable marks of beauty despite their worn appearance, but all alike, whether men or women, are spoiled by the characteristic defect of all Slavonian races, viz., the heavy mouth and broad bulldog jaw—a drawback which marred (in my eyes at least) one of the handsomest women in Russia, a maid of honor belonging to the household of the czar's sister, the present Duchess of Edinburgh.

The houses of the "mujiks" are as queer as themselves. Many of the tiny huts are built wholly with the hatchet, without a nail or iron fastening of any kind, the ends of the logs being jointed into each other, like the corners of a schoolboy's slate. The crevices are filled with a mortar made of clay, moss and dead leaves, and the roof is either shingled or thatched with reeds and dried grass. The ordinary izba (cottage) has two rooms and a loft, but not a few of them (as was the case with the hut which I myself occupied) have only one. The furniture usually consists of an enormous bed covered with a quilt of colored patchwork, which looks like a colossal map of the United States—a huge tiled stove, with a "lejanika" (bed place) on the top of it—a rough deal table, a stool or two, a portrait of the householder's patron saint in one corner, with a tiny lamp burning in front of it, and a pious roach making a laborious pilgrimage around its gilt frame; and last, but not least, a big teapot of brass or copper, known as a "samovar" (self boiler). This last item, indeed, is the most important of all, the Russian peasant being so fond of tea that he even calls a present of money "natchai" (something for tea), and he might fairly assume a tea urn as his heraldic crest, with the motto, "In tea speravi."

I am just beginning my supper when my attention is drawn to a bustle of excitement among a group of peasants, who are having a kind of impromptu tea drinking in front of the next hut, the stir being evidently caused by a tall young fellow who has just joined the party, and seems to have brought some very startling piece of news.

"It's as true as the holy book, brothers," cries the new comer. "I heard with my own ears our starosta (village bailiff) tell it to Feodor Nikeetin just this minute."

"What has happened, then?" asks the host, a scarred Crimean veteran.

"These nihilist dogs are at their tricks again. One of them threw a bomb yesterday at Father Alexander Alexandrovitch (the czar) in the streets of St. Petersburg. However, God saved him from harm; but the man wasn't caught."

"Nor ever will be," growled another; "the police are cleverer at arresting the wrong man than the right one, and you may trust a nihilist to save his own skin!"

"Say what you will, though, brothers, our father, the Gosudar (emperor), seems to be afraid of them."

"Afraid?" echo half a dozen voices. "The emperor afraid?"

"Well, why does he shut himself up in Gatchina and never stir out? And why did he wait two whole years before going to 'mother Moscow' to be crowned lest they should kill him? It's no use talking, brothers—when one is afraid, one is!"

"True," growled the old soldier; "but to think of a Russian czar fearing any mortal man! What would Nikolai Pavlovitch (Nicholas, son of Paul) have said to that? He feared no danger; he made danger fear him! He reigned thirty years, and no one dared touch him. We shall never have such another czar!"

"But didn't he oppress the people, Uncle Meesha" (Michael).

"Perhaps, but he let no one else oppress them."

Volumes could not say more, for, in truth, one tyrant is always more endurable than many.

DAVID KER.

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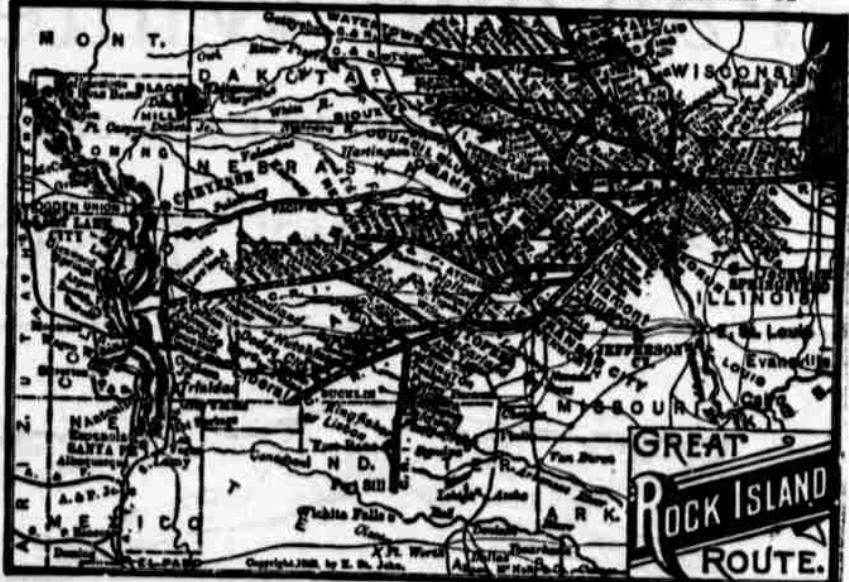
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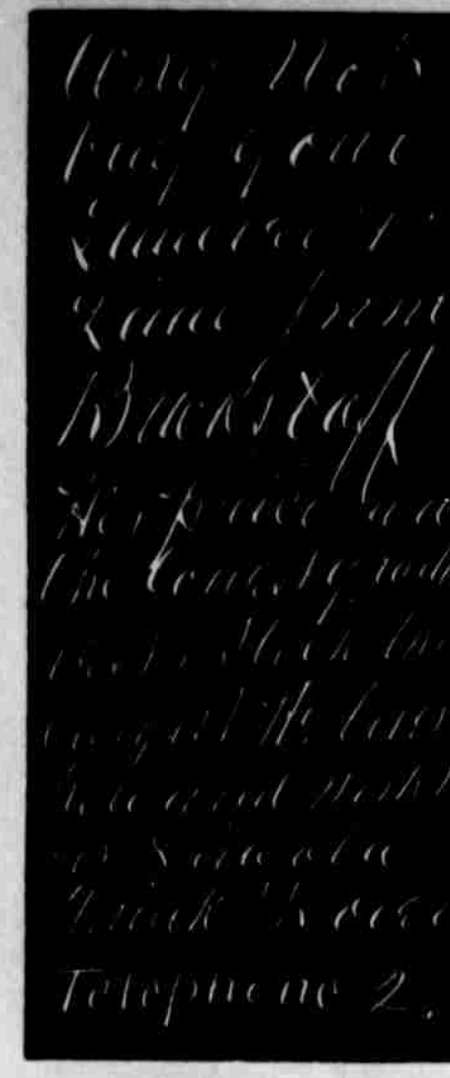
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