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LETTERS WRITTEN BY AN OFFICER, GEORGE CORNISH, OF THE MARINES, 1782-1789.

Edited by COMMANDER LORD TEIGNMOUTH, R.N. (Retd.).

THE writer of these letters had a singular career. At the age of 17, while at the Exeter Grammar School, he obtained an Ensigncy in the Sussex Militia, then quartered in the town; and shortly afterwards was offered a commission in the 25th Regiment, which, however, owing to lack of private means, he was unable to accept. Thereupon, Lord Mulgrave, a friend of the family, commanding a ship of war then lying in Torbay, procured the lad a commission in the Marines. He served first in the "Royal George," only escaping from the disaster that befell this ship at Spithead, August, 1782, by having landed just previously. He then served in the "Ocean," a 90-gun ship attached to the Channel Fleet, under Lord Howe, who had been ordered to throw supplies into Gibraltar, then besieged. It was while employed on this important service that the first letter was written. The situation of the Fleet, therein referred to, was as follows.

After the supply-ships had safely landed their much-needed reinforcements and stores—notwithstanding the presence in the adjacent waters of a combined force of enemy ships greatly exceeding in numbers and strength the Fleet under Lord Howe, the English admiral put to sea, and waited outside the Straits for the enemy, to attack. But the latter showed no particular anxiety to accept battle, until too late in the day to fight a decisive action. Darkness put an end to the contest; and next day, while in momentary expectation of the enemy renewing the battle, the following letter was penned:—

TO HIS FATHER—"MR C., TINGMOUTH,¹ DEVON."

"HOND. SR.— "October 21st, 1788, 'Ocean,' off Cape Spartell.

"I take the opportunity of a ship wh. is going to England, to tell you that I have escap'd unhurt, from those Gasconading Rascals, who were to windward of us, & according to Custom kept a most respectfull distance tho' very superior. The cannonading began at haff past five in the evening & became General at haff past seven, at half after eleven the firing ceas'd, during wh. time the 'Ocean' had twice the honor (with the assistance of the 'Union') of beating off the 'Santissimi Trinidada' & another Three Deck ship who

¹ The spelling, punctuation, etc., are as in the originals. In the family letters, the town of Teignmouth is often spelt Tingmouth—doubtless according to the local pronunciation.—EDITOR.

Bore up twice and attempted to cut off our Rear. I dont recollect a much more awfull or tremendous sight than the fire of the whole Line at one time, particularly at Night. But in General it was merely a Cannonade, as they were too farr off to do much execution. Previous to this, they had attack'd Giberalter but were repuls'd with the Loss of the 'St. Miguel' a seventy Gun ship and about three thousand Men, who were permitted to land & get nearly up the Walls, when our Men very deliberately cut off their hands & let them tumble back again. The Spanish *Gazette* speaks very highly of General Elliott's humanity, who after having destroyed Ten of their (Bumb proofs) Seventy Gun Ships cut down & suppos'd to have been Impregnable, sent out Boats & sav'd about three hundred Men, who must otherwise inevitably have perish'd. The night we landed our Troops and Stores (Three days before our Cannonade) one of the Transports blew up But I do not know yet which, Nor have I yet been able to learn our Loss, but I believe very trifling. We are now in sight of them, and expect to engage again immediately if a Breeze shou'd spring up, I hope to God we shall get the *Wind* of them, or we shall not do much, As from their Artillery Men and the present Calmness of the Weather they will derive greater advantage from engaging at a distance. . . . I believe I have just room enough to beg of you to give my Duty to my Mother & Aunt, believe me to be honour'd Sr.

"Your Dutl. son GEO."

The particular incident of the siege which elicited the enemy's praise of British humanity, is thus described in his despatch by Captain Curtis, of H.M.S. "Brilliant," who had charge of the naval defences:—"At 8 o'clock in the morning of the 13th, the ten battering ships of the enemy lying at the head of the Bay, under the command of Admiral Moreno, began to get under sail, in order to come against the garrison: everything was in readiness for their reception. At ten the admiral's ship was placed about 1,000 yards from the King's Bastion, and commenced his fire. The others were very shortly afterwards posted to the north and south of him, at small distances asunder, and began their cannonade. They were all fixed to the stations allotted to them in a masterly manner. Our batteries opened as the enemy came before them: the fire was very heavy on both sides: the red-hot shots were sent with such precision by the garrison, that in the afternoon the smoke was seen to issue from the upper part of the admiral; and men were perceived to be using fire engines and pouring water into the holes, endeavouring to extinguish the fire. By one o'clock in the morning two were in flames and several others actually on fire. Confusion was now plainly observed among them, and the numerous rockets thrown up from each of the ships was a clear demonstration of their great distress; and they immediately began to take away the men, its being impossible to remove the ships. I thought this a fit opportunity to employ my gun-boats; and I advanced with the whole (12 in number, each carrying a 24 or 18-pr) and drew them up so as to flank the line of the enemy's battering ships, while they were annoyed extremely by an excessive and well

directed fire from the garrison. The boats of the enemy durst not approach; they abandoned their ships, and the men that were in them to our mercy, or to the flames. The day-light now appeared, and the scene at this time before me was dreadful to a high degree: numbers of men crying from amidst the flames, some from pieces of wood in the water, some appearing in the ships where the fire had as yet made but little progress, all expressing by speech and gesture the deepest distress, and all imploring assistance, formed a spectacle of horror not easily to be described. Every exertion was made to relieve them; and I have inexpressible happiness in informing my lords, that the number saved amounts to 13 officers and 344 men. One officer and 29 wounded (some of them dreadfully) taken from among the slain in the holds, are in our hospital, and many of them are in a fair way. The blowing up of the ships around us as the fire got to the magazines, and the firing of the cannons of others, as the metal became heated by the flames, rendered this a very perilous employment; *but we felt it as much a duty to make every effort to relieve our enemies from so shocking a situation, as an hour before we did to assist in conquering them.*¹ (The italics are the Editor's.)

Contrary to general expectation in the British Fleet, the combined enemy force declined battle, whereupon Lord Howe, having accomplished his mission, bore up for England. The British loss in the action was 68 killed and 208 wounded; that of the enemy, 60 killed and 320 wounded. The "Ocean," in which the writer of the letters was serving, suffered no casualties—which says little for the enemy's gunnery. The "Union," which supported her, had five killed and 15 wounded.

A blank of six years now occurs. We next find the writer employed on recruiting service, in a cathedral town:—

ON RECRUITING SERVICE AT SALISBURY, 1788.

"MY DEAR H.—

"Salisbury.

"I have drummed, trumpeted, given the boys halfpence to hollow, and made every description of noise, but not a shadow of a recruit have I seen. Six other recruiting parties belonging to different regiments, sent here since the armament, have infinitely exceeded me in every mode of trapan, but with no better success: no youthful ardour, no breast panting with the spirit, not a bit of glory in this whole town or its neighbourhood: the leaden hand of stupidity seems to have waved its torpid influence over it. Since my arrival here, I have not articulated a single syllable to any one soul. I have eaten by myself, and I had rather starve, drank by myself, and I had rather famish, walked by myself, which makes me sad, read by myself, which makes me stupid, wrote by myself which makes my eyes ache, slept by myself which gives me the horrors: the people stare at me as they would at the Monster; but not a word, no one civil attempt

¹ Compare this with the conduct of German naval officers in the present war—sinking passenger-vessels in mid-ocean, and firing at the survivors in boats, as well as on those struggling in the water, without ever an attempt at rescue.

towards communication: all this affliction and weight of woe I feel, and if you can conceive two members of Parliament elected since I have been here, without my knowing a word of the matter. A melancholy sort of Coffee House that they have here is rendered still more so by the silent automats stuck about in the corners of it: the brutes do not communicate even with each other. Two or three Priests involed in their own fat stalk about it in stately stare which adds to the horror of the scene. If you write my lamentations in verse, or a Satyr (satire?)”

The remainder of the letters are written from the “Pearl,” a 32-gun frigate on the Mediterranean station, commanded by Captain Hon. W. C. Finch.

TO HIS MOTHER.

“Thesalonica [now Salonica],

“MY DEAREST MOTHER—

“June 16th, 1788.

“In the seventeenth Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles you will find an account of St. Paul’s Preaching at this place as his manner was, and I have been just looking at the Pulpit in which he reasoned with them out of the Scriptures, but which now is profaned and belongs to the followers of one Mahomet, it is of one solid block of Verd antique and is of an immense value. Indeed we have lately been performing nearly the same voyage as St. Paul did some few years ago, his description in the twenty-seventh Chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, with a few alterations of circumstances will nearly do for our voyage lately. I acknowledged the last letter, from Naples, since which time we have been wandering about seeking a resting place wherein we might hide our heads. At last we espied out this Port which is scarcely ever afflicted with the Plague and which is now perfectly healthy. We have no apprehensions of the Plague ourselves, but Finch thinks he might as well avoid communication with infectious places as not; and assure yourself our cautions are such that you have not the slightest cause of apprehension. We left Smyrna on this occasion, tho’ the Frigate we relieved had been there five months while the Plague raged violently & with a few precautions received not the slightest injury. We were glad of this excuse to leave Smyrna as by this means we have an opportunity of seeing more of the antiquities of this Country. Since we left Naples last we have been at Palermo in Sicilly, at Agrigentum, at Malta or Melita where the good people shewed us no little kindness, it proved a comfortable haven to us as it did to our friend Paul for we avoided by it a terrible storm. At Palermo we were magnificently entertained by the Vice Roi: at Malta by the Grand *Marshal* not *Master*, the etiquette to an English Officer would not allow of that, we have to thank Harry the Eighth for this. But however he abundantly made up for this by giving us his carriages &c. and feeding us at the Grand Marshal’s instead of his own. The antiquities of this country have led me into the study of them which a man may do without being well acquainted with the learned languages. I begin to grow

fond of it. I shall conceive I have obtained a great point when it takes the place of other pleasures more expensive, if it be not positive pleasure it is an exemption from that mortification which attends the privation of an appetite one has been accustomed to indulge, and as I have more appetites than guineas I must endeavour to exterminate some of them by Philosophy and Study, but I believe if I had the one I should be but inclined to the other, for I have high health and good spirits except now and then a gloomy fit which comes across me. This I attribute to constitution an easy way of accounting for sulkiness or ill humour but I endeavour to stifle it as much as possible. I find four or five dismal lines of Rhyme relieve me frequently on those occasions. I am occupied in the composition for a time and my mind is relieved by it. If this part of my letter does put you to sleep may it be gentle and sweet which I look upon the first blessing the Gods have in store for us. . . . I hope to find you looking well and as handsome as ever. Adieu, adieu my dearest Mother & believe your most affectionate son

"G. C."

TO HIS BROTHER.

"Smyrna, Nov. 12th, 1788.

"We were sent up here in consequence of a petition from the Levant Company, who are in imminent danger from the capricious and cruel disposition of the Turks, who, in warr almost entirely change their nature, attributing any ill-success of their arms to the number of unbelievers who reside among them. A shocking instance of this kind happened in the last Russian warr, on receiving the news of the total destruction, by the Russians, of their fleet, they assembled, and massacred promiscuously all the Christians who were so unhappy as to fall in their way. As the Jannisaries have peculiar privileges, many men get themselves enrolled among them, who do not serve, or receive pay. On the approach of a warr these people arm themselves, neglect their business, and affect the insolence of a Jannisary. A few days ago, these people were extremely riotous, and a few lives were lost; among the number was a French merchant, who was shot at his window. You may suppose that in consequence of these tumults, the English merchants feel themselves very happy and assured at the presence of an English frigate, which will serve them, at the worst, for a refuge. But as the Turks have a respect for the English, and in general are awed at their presence, it will be the means, in a great measure of preventing any of the sort for the future."

The greater part of the letter that follows—and which appears to have been written from Constantinople, early in November, 1788, is missing.

"The Turks at present have an objection to frigates of any nation being at Constantinople; and it was impossible, you know, not to see this wondrous place after being so near it, so I e'en got Mr. Finch to give me leave, and embarked on board a French Brig. On our route we were at Lesbos. The moment I saw the Island, of course I felt everything a man ought to feel upon the sight of such an Island. I began sighing and landed at Mitylene with all the passion of Sapho, but Oh! oh!—*Quid non Græcia mendax audet in historia?*

—which is, being interpreted, ‘what does not lying Greece in history insert’? Instead of the *Æoliis fidibus querentum—innocentis pocula Lesbii*. But here also I was disappointed. I heard nothing but the most barbarous hum strum. We went thence to Lemnos—sea-sickness, *vix est vis ulla relicta*—at Tenedos *notissima fama insula* (Ovid). *Nunc humiles veteres tantumodo Troja ruinas; et pro divitiis tumulos ortendit avorum.* (Tenedos, that island of far-reaching fame—now like Troy, displays only the prone ruins of the ancient city, and for its rich possessions shows only the tombs of its ancestors.”)

TO HIS BROTHER.

“MY DEAR H.—

“Constantinople, 15th Nov. 1788.

“Since my last letters from hence, which I trust you received as they were enclosed in the Ambassador’s Pacquet for the Secretary of State, the ‘Pearl’ received an order from the Commander in Chief brought by the ‘Southampton,’ to go immediately to Gibraltar. In consequence of which an express was immediately dispatched for us with an order for us instantly to join the ship, and recommending us to come by land as the most certain way, we set out bag and baggage and travelled on Horseback about four hundred miles the distance nearly between Constantinople and Smyrna. On our route we crossed the ‘Rhyndacus’ the ‘Asopus,’ passed by the ‘Granicus’ and crossed over those Plains of Magnesia which have so often held those armies which have decided the fate of Asia. We had a Quintus Curtius with us and two or three other fellows that particularly describe those Battles and particularly that part of the Granicus. You have seen thousands of Prints describing Alexander crossing this river, it was a famous fête, but I did it. I mean to draw a comparison after the manner of Plutarch between me and Alexander we were at Pergamos &c. On our arrival at Smyrna, we informed Finch that we had seen some drunken English Sailors rolling about the Streets of Constantinople, and that the Ambassador hardly knew what to do with them. Happy to evade his orders which were cruel and originated in a mistake occasioned by some misrepresentation of Finch’s conduct at Palermo, he wrote to the Ambassador at Constantinople and requested him to obtain admission for the ‘Pearl’ there, that he might take care of the Seamen which belonged to two Frigates which the Merchants sent up there to be sold but as yet are not so. But the Captain Bashaw is expected from O——(?) every day and there is no doubt but he will purchase them. The Ambassador obtained permission but not on this account—though it was twice refused a French Frigate lying at the Dardanelles at the time we were there, commanded by the Viscount D’Orleans. This is another decided preference among the many which the Turks show for us. Walking the streets the other day with some Frenchmen a Turk asked one of the Frenchmen what countryman he was. He told of course, French, upon which the Turk looked at him with the most ineffable contempt and cried—‘whew’! Paget who felt himself hurt at this insult, said ‘English,’ upon which the Turk said ‘Bono’ smiled and tapped him on the Back. I am lodged again in the Ambassador’s house, who,

I suppose has discovered a certain something about me which is irresistible and which I find to be commonly the case, but joking apart, he has certainly treated me with wonderful attention and kindness. The houses are all open to us here as at Smyrna, but as they are here Ambassadors instead of Consuls, consequently everything goes on in a higher stile. Balls and dinners fill up our time; but I have a great weight that hangs over me, which is the voyage of seven hundred leagues from hence to Gibraltar during the whole of which I shall be sea sick which I cannot conquer. Do I beg of you write me. We shall certainly go from hence directly to Gibraltar where we shall stay some time, on the reception of this direct to me there. . . . My dear H.

“Yours affectionately G.C.”

“(Postcrip).—Strange to say I left this place before without seeing St. Sophia the next thing in the world to be seen after the view of Constantinople from the sea but I shall now have an opportunity of doing it. I have been living in an atmosphere in which the thermometer stood in general at 96 sometimes at an 104 and never lower than 82 for the last three months, and I never wish a colder climate. It is now sometimes below the freezing point. I wear 7 flannell waistcoats. . . . I wish to God Charlotte would write me about her little maid and all about herself; all this news after an absence of two years she may easily conceive how interesting.¹ Remember me affectionately to all my Friends at Tingmouth.”

TO THE SAME.

“MY DEAR HUBERT—

“Gibraltar, April 6th, 1789.

“I arrived here panting with the hope of hearing from all my friends, but how am I disappointed! Not a single syllable from any body. This would have been some alleviation for the miseries I experienced during a voyage of seven hundred leagues and of six weeks continuance, the whole of which I was cursed with convulsions from sea sickness; this malady persecutes me, but contrary to the effect of persecution in general I am overcome by it. My health was a good deal impaired when I left Constantinople in consequence of the too frequent use of their baths which I found a superlative luxury, and if my death had been the inevitable consequence I should certainly not have resisted: for the mode of dying was so pleasant that I should not have thought it worth while to have lived. If this resource were within our reach in England, every man must be a fool to suffer the *tedium vitæ* but for two hours, could he attain it. It is a wonderful discovery. I have divested this last convulsive struggle of all its horrors and even think of it now with pleasure. There is a degree of Luxurious langour which unlocks the cells of the brain and sets the imagination afloat; whoever has a talent for Poesy to describe certain scenes should certainly undergo this process. A man dying in this delirium would bring all heaven before his eyes, and might contemplate by what wonderful magic his yellow lank cheeks (which

¹ This refers to her marriage with the Governor-General of India.

are just what mine are at this moment) may be converted into a fine round fair plump little cherubim with blue wings. The desire increases the nearer we are to the attainment of our wishes. I never felt this more strongly as I ardently wish to return to England, though I had but yesterday the narrowest escape of being again trappanned for another three years, in consequence of an order from the Admiral who has lately broke one of his Marine Officers. I am not as yet fairly out of the scrape, but if it happens I most certainly shall have recourse to the Bath—'*Opi nor—Mors ultima linea serum est.*'¹ We were in high expectation to go immediately from hence to England, but it has all vanished. We have seen all worth seeing here. I did not leave Constantinople with much regret, we were near four months there. I began to grow tired of the prating petulancy of the Greeks, and the sulky silence of the Turks, and the insufferable trash of the Corps Diplomatique who are a vile assemblage of all the vagrants on the face of God's earth—except the Ambassadors themselves who are some of them famous especially our own who is truly superbe. I am afraid you will discover the flat third in this, but I cannot help it just now, tho' I never was better in my life and am getting again as fat as a fool—but '*odio*' I expected in the letters I was to receive here all the questions that Horace asks Bullatius. I would have answered them, but I hardly know whether I am writing to the dead or living. Every question would take up a long letter: look at the list of them—

'*Quid tibi visa Chios, Bullatius, notaque Lesbos*'?

'*Quid ioncinna Samos? quid Erasi regia Sardis*'?

'*Smyrna quid, et Colophon? majora minorane fama*'?²

"*Sui Lebedos quid sil*'? I do, and nothing but the idea of what they have been, and if I may be allowed the expression, putting in practice a part of History, can compensate one for the trouble of seeing them. . . . We shall certainly stay here long enough to receive an answer to this. Adieu, adieu, My dear Brother most affectionately yours,

"GEORGE C."

In 1792 the writer married an heiress. Two years later, leaving his wife at home, he undertook to escort a sister to India, where Sir John Shore, to whom she had been married, was Governor-General. Soon after arrival at Calcutta, in order to be able to accept the post of A.D.C. to his brother-in-law, he obtained a commission in the 76th Regiment; and the following year obtained the appointment of Brigade-Major to H.M. troops in the Presidency of Fort St. George. On the retirement of Sir John Shore from the Governor-Generalship, in 1797, he returned home; and became a country gentleman, J.P. and D.L. for the County of Devon. He left numerous descendants.

¹ "I think death is the last good of all things."—Horace.

² "What did you think of Chios, O Bullatius, and of far famed Lesbos? What of beauteous Samos? What of Royal Sardis? Of Smyrna, too? and Colophon? More or less than report had said? Do you know Lebedos?"