

# ORIENTAL MEMOIRS:

SELECTED AND ABRIDGED FROM

A SERIES OF FAMILIAR LETTERS

WRITTEN DURING

*SEVENTEEN YEARS RESIDENCE IN INDIA:*

INCLUDING

OBSERVATIONS

ON

PARTS OF AFRICA AND SOUTH AMERICA,

AND

A NARRATIVE OF OCCURRENCES IN FOUR INDIA VOYAGES.

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*Illustrated by Engravings from Original Drawings.*

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By JAMES FORBES, F.R.S. &c.

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IN FOUR VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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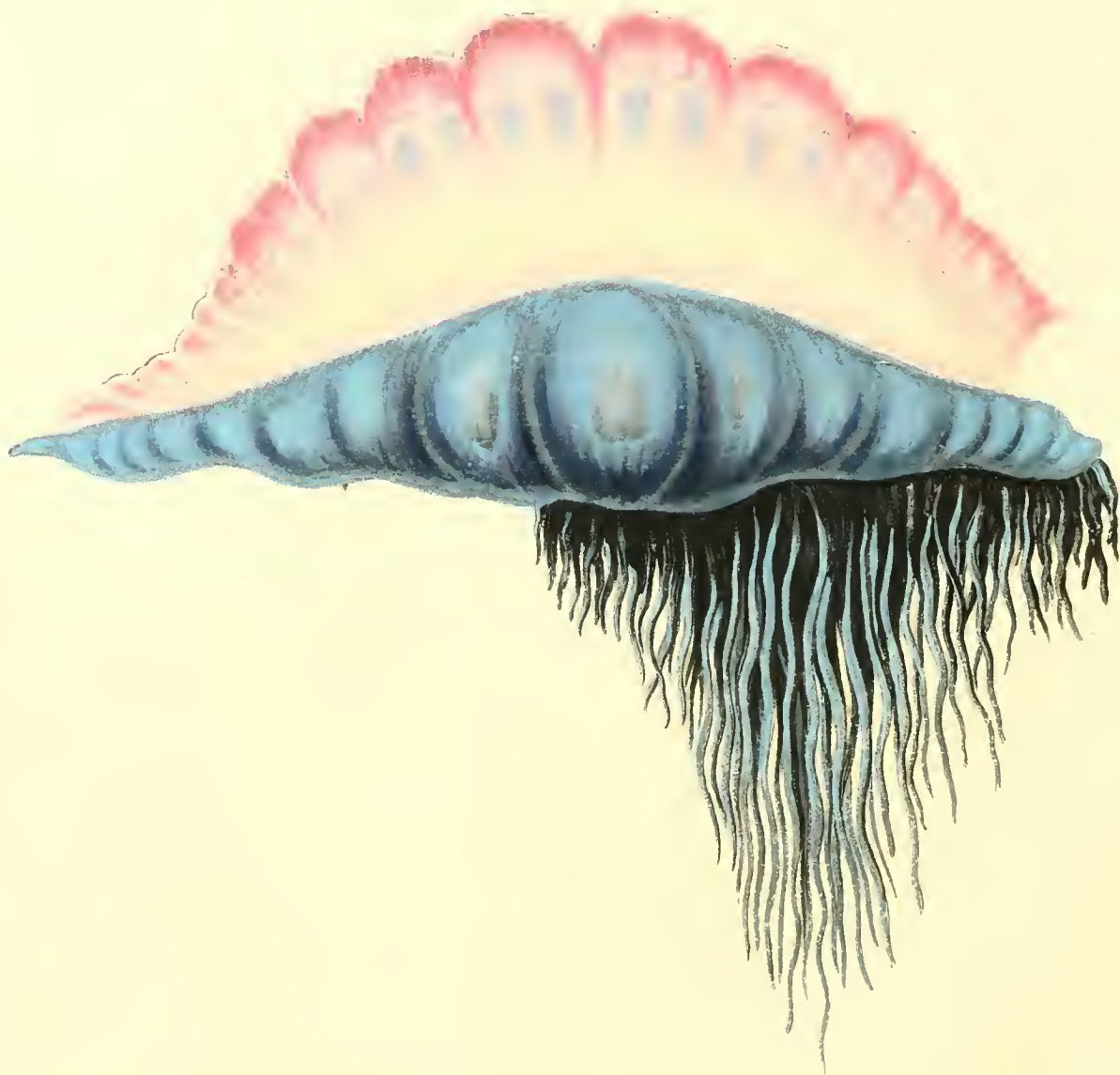
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THE MEDUSA,  
*or Portuguese Man of War.*

*Enslaved 1811*

*Jan. Enslaved 1770.*

Thus we continued in a state of listless apathy for some weeks, when after stealing gently on with a faint land breeze during the night, we were agreeably surprized one morning at day-break with the appearance of a vessel at a few miles distance. Pleased with the novelty, we dispatched a boat, and found her to be a French ship from Mauritius, bound to l'Orient, which had already been a month in these latitudes, amid calms, contrary winds, and southerly currents. We kept company many days, and frequently dining with each other, diverted our ennui; for, notwithstanding their misfortunes, the French captain and passengers were cheerful and volatile.

Among a variety of fish on the coast of Guinea, the most beautiful is the Medusa, or Portugueze man-of-war, which enlivened the surface of the ocean, sailing by thousands before the wind. It appears individually like a large bubble or inflated bladder, perfectly transparent, and varying with the most lovely tints of blue, pink, and violet; it is generally of an oval shape, two or three inches long, with a protuberance at each end, something like a bird's head and beak. I could never discover eyes, nose, or mouth, yet it certainly belongs to the tribe of fishes, with a cartilaginous body, assuming different shapes as it is more or less inflated. On the top of the body it spreads a pink transparent sail, supported by delicate fibres, which enable it to raise or lower the sail at pleasure; with this they scud away before the light breezes, but are seldom seen in a boisterous sea; under the body are suspended several filaments of the most beautiful blue, of unequal length, and always in the water. These appendages are of a pungent caustic quality, and wherever they touch the skin it rises in blisters like a burn, followed by acute pain.

These curious animals are attended by a train of beautiful fish, six or seven inches long, marked with dark stripes over the pale hues of the iris, like the pilot fish, which always accompany the shark, and like them I never saw these little fish but under the Medusa; whose protection they seem instinctively to claim from the bonitos, albacores, and other voracious fish, which are continually pursuing them and the flying-fish; but these have the advantage, for the instant their gigantic enemy approaches, they swim under the Medusa, which is so poisonous that no fish attempts to touch it; and it would be impossible to snap up one without the other, so closely do the little fugitives adhere to their protector; while the unfortunate flying-fish, in endeavouring to escape a watery foe, are devoured by the aquatic birds continually hovering over them.

The sharks on the Guinea coast are of a tremendous size, and often follow the slave vessels from thence to the West India islands; to feast upon the bodies of the negroes, who are so fortunate as to die on the voyage, and escape from christian bondage.

“ Lur’d by the scent  
 “ Of steaming crowds, of rank disease, and death,  
 “ His jaws-terrific arm’d with three-fold fate,  
 “ Behold the direful shark ! he cuts the flood  
 “ Swift as the gale can bear the ship along ;  
 “ And from the partners of that cruel trade,  
 “ Which spoils unhappy Guinea of her sons,  
 “ Demands his share of prey : their mangled limbs  
 “ Crashing at once, he dyes the purple seas  
 “ With gore, and riots in the vengeful meal.”

THOMSON.