LIFE IN MEXICO

LETTER THE FIRST


Packet Ship "Norma,"

Oct. 27th, 1839.

This morning, at ten o’clock, we stepped on board the steamboat Hercules, destined to convey us to our packet with its musical name. The day was foggy and gloomy, as if refusing to be comforted, even by an occasional smile from the sun. All prognosticated that the Norma would not sail to-day, but "where there’s a will," etc. Several of our friends accompanied us to the wharf; the Russian Minister, the Minister of Buenos Ayres, Mr. ——, who tried hard to look sentimental, and even brought tears into his eyes by some curious process; Judge ——, Mr. ——, and others, from whom we were truly sorry to part.

The Norma was anchored in one of the most beautiful points of the bay, and the steamboat towed us five miles, until we had passed the Narrows. The wind was contrary, but the day began to clear up, and the sun to scatter the watery clouds.

Still there is nothing so sad as a retreating view. It is as if time were visibly in motion; and as here we had to part from ——, we could only distinguish, as through a misty veil, the beauties of the bay; the shores covered to the water’s edge with trees rich in their autumnal colouring; the white houses on Staten Island—the whole gradually growing fainter, till, like a dream, they faded away.

The pilot has left us, breaking our last link with the land. We still see the mountains of Neversink, and the
lighthouse of Sandy Hook. The sun is setting, and in a few minutes we must take our leave, probably for years, of places long familiar to us.

Our fellow-passengers do not appear very remarkable. There is Madame A——, returning from being prima donna in Mexico, in a packet called after the opera in which she was there a favourite, with her husband Señor V—— and her child. There is M. B—— with moustaches like a bird’s nest; a pretty widow in deep affliction, at least in deep mourning; a maiden lady going out as a governess, and every variety of Spaniard and Havanero. So now we are alone, C——n and I, and my French femme-de-chambre, with her air of Dowager Duchess, and moreover sea-sick.

28th.—When I said I liked a sea life, I did not mean to be understood as liking a merchant ship, with an airless cabin, and with every variety of disagreeable odour. As a French woman on board, with the air of an afflicted porpoise, and with more truth than elegance, expresses it: “Tout devient puant, même l’eau-de-cologne.”

The wind is still contrary, and the Norma, beating up and down, makes but little way. We have gone seventy-four miles, and of these advanced but forty. Every one being sick to-day, the deck is nearly deserted. The most interesting object I have discovered on board is a pretty little deaf and dumb girl, very lively and with an intelligent face, who has been teaching me to speak on my fingers. The infant heir of the house of—— has shown his good taste by passing the day in squalling. M. B——, pale, dirty, and much resembling a brigand out of employ, has traversed the deck with uneasy footsteps and a cigar appearing from out his moustaches, like a light in a tangled forest, or a jack-o’lantern in a marshy thicket. A fat Spaniard has been discourse upon the glories of olla podrida. Au reste, we are slowly pursuing our way, and at this rate might reach Cuba in three months.

And the stars are shining, quiet and silvery. All without is soft and beautiful, and no doubt the Norma herself looks all in unison with the scene, balancing herself like a lazy swan, white and graciously. So it is without, and within, there is miserable sea-sickness, bilge-water, and all the unavoidable disagreeables of a small packet.

31st.—Three days have passed without anything worthy of notice having occurred, except that we already feel the
difference of temperature. The passengers are still enduring sea-sickness in all its phases.

This morning opened with an angry dispute between two of the gentlemen, on the subject of Cuban lotteries, and they ended by applying to each other epithets which, however much they might be deserved, were certainly rather strong; but by dinner time, they were amicably engaged in concocting together an enormous tureen of gaspachos, a sort of salad, composed of bread, oil, vinegar, sliced onion and garlic—and the fattest one declares that in warm weather, a dish of gaspachos, with plenty of garlic in it, makes him feel as fresh as a rose. He must indeed be a perfect bouquet.

The opening of morning is dramatic in our narrow cabin. About twenty voices in Spanish, German, Italian, and broken English, strike up by degrees. From a neighbouring state room, Nid d’oiseau puts forth his head. “Stoar! a tooomlar! here is no vater!” “Comin, sir, comin.” “Caramba! Stooard!” “Comin, sir, comin!” “Stuart? vasser und toel!” “Here, sir.” “Amigo! how is the wind?” (This is the waking up of el Señor Ministro, putting his head half suffocated out of his berth.) “Oh steward! steward!” “Yes, miss,” “Come here, and look at this!” “I’ll fix it, miss,”—etc.

1st November.—A fair wind after a stilling night, and strong hopes of seeing the Bahama Banks on Sunday. Most people are now gradually ascending from the lower regions, and dragging themselves on deck with pale and dejected countenances. Madame A—has such a sweet-toned voice in speaking, especially in her accents of her bella Italia, that it is refreshing to listen to her. I have passed all day in reading, after a desultory fashion, “Les Enfants d’Edouard,” by Casimir Delavigne, Washington Irving, D’Israeli’s “Curiosities of Literature,” etc.; and it is rather singular that while there is a very tolerable supply of English and French books here, I see but one or two odd volumes in Spanish, although these packets are constantly filled with people of that nation, going and coming. Is it that they do not care for reading, or that less attention is paid to them than to the French or American passengers? One would think Cervantes, Lope de Vega, Calderon, or Moratin, better worth buying than many commonplace novels which I find here.

3rd.—Yesterday the wind blew soft as on a summer
morning. A land-bird flew into the ship. To-day the wind has veered round, but the weather continues charming. The sea is covered with multitudes of small flying-fish. An infantile water-spout appeared, and died in its birth. Mr. ——, the consul, has been giving me an account of the agreeable society in the Sandwich Islands! A magnificent sunset, the sight of which compensates for all the inconveniences of the voyage. The sky was covered with black clouds lined with silver, and surrounded by every variety of colour; deep blue, fleecy, rose, violet, and orange. The heavens are now thickly studded with stars, numbers shooting across the blue expanse like messengers of light, glancing and disappearing as if extinguished.

It is well to read the History of Columbus at sea, but especially in these waters, where he wandered in suspense, high-wrought expectation, and firm faith; and to watch the signs which the noble mariner observed in these latitudes; the soft serenity of the breezes, the clear blue of the heavens, the brilliancy and number of the stars, the sea-weeds of the gulf, which always drift in the direction of the wind, the little land-birds that come like harbingers of good tidings, the frequency of the shooting stars, and the multitude of flying-fish.

As the shades of evening close around, and the tropical sky glitters with the light of innumerable stars, imagination transports us back to that century which stands out in bold relief amidst other ages rolling by comparatively undistinguished, and we see as in a vision the Discoverer of a World, standing on the deck of his caravel, as it bounded over the unknown and mysterious waste of waters, his vigilant eyes fixed on the west, like a Persian intently watching the rising of his god; though his star was to arise from whence the day-god sets. We see him bending his gaze on the first dark line that separated the watery sea from the blue of the heavens, striving to penetrate the gloom of night, yet waiting with patient faith until the dawn of day should bring the long-wished for shores in sight.

6th.—For three days, three very long and uncomfortable days, the wind, with surprising constancy, has continued to blow dead ahead. In ancient days, what altars might have smoked to Æolus! Now, except in the increased puffing of consolatory cigar-smoke, no propitiatory offerings are made to unseen powers. There are indeed many
mourning signs amongst the passengers. Every one has tied up his head in an angry-looking silken bandana, drawn over his nose with a dogged air. Beards are unshaven, a black stubble covering the lemon-coloured countenance, which occasionally bears a look of sulky defiance, as if its owner were, like Juliet, "past hope, past cure, past help."

7th.—This morning the monotony of fine weather was relieved by a hearty squall, accompanied by torrents of rain, much thunder, and forked lightning. The ship reeled to and fro like a drunken man, and the passengers, as usual in such cases, performed various involuntary evolutions, cutting right angles, sliding, spinning round, and rolling over, as if Oberon's magic horn were playing an occasional blast amidst the roaring winds; whilst the stewards alone, like Horace's good man, walked serene amidst the wreck of crockery and the fall of plates. Driven from our stronghold on deck, indiscriminately crammed in below like figs in a drum; "weltering," as Carlyle has it, "like an Egyptian pitchet of tamed vipers," the cabin windows all shut in, we tried to take it coolly, in spite of the suffocating heat.

There is a child on board who is certainly possessed, not by a witty malicious demon, a **diable boiteux**, but by a teasing, stupid, wicked imp, which inspires him with the desire of tormenting everything human that comes within his reach. Should he escape being thrown overboard, it will show a wonderful degree of forbearance on the part of the passengers.

8th.—The weather is perfect, but the wind inexorable; and the passengers, with their heads tied up, look more gloomy than ever. Some sit dejected in corners, and some quarrel with their neighbours, thus finding a safety-valve by which their wrath may escape.

9th.—There is no change in the wind, yet the gentlemen have all brightened up, taken off their handkerchiefs and shaved, as if ashamed of their six days' impatience, and making up their minds to a sea-life. This morning we saw land; a long, low ridge of hills on the island of Eleutheria, where they make salt, and where there are many negroes. Neither salt nor negroes visible to the naked eye; nothing but the gray outline of the hills, melting into the sea and sky; and having tacked about all day, we found ourselves in the evening precisely opposite to this same island. There are Job's comforters on board, who
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assure us that they have been thirty-six days between New York and la “joya mas preciosa de la corona de Espana.”

For my part, I feel no impatience, having rather a dislike to changing my position when tolerable, and the air is so fresh and laden with balm, that it seems to blow over some paradise of sweets, some land of fragrant spices. The sea also is a mirror, and I have read Marryat’s “Pirate” for the first time.

Thus then we stand at eight o’clock, P.M.; wind ahead, and little of it, performing a zigzag march between Eleuthera and Abaco. On deck, the pretty widow lies in an easy chair, surrounded by her countrymen, who discourse about sugar, molasses, chocolate, and other local topics, together with the relative merits of Cuba as compared with the rest of the known world. Madame A—— is studying her part of Elizabetta in the opera of Roberto Devereux, which she is to bring out in Havana, but the crying of the Norma is sadly at variance with harmony. A pale German youth, in dressing-gown and slippers, is studying Schiller. An ingenious youngster is carefully conning a well-thumbed note, which looks like a milliner’s girl’s last billet-doux. The little possédé is burning brown paper within an inch of the curtains of a state-room, while the steward is dragging it from him. Others are gradually dropping into their berths, like ripe nuts from a tree. Thus are we all pursuing our vocations.

9th.—Wind dead ahead! I console myself with Cinq-Mars and Jacob Faithful. But the weather is lovely. A young moon in her first quarter, like a queen in her minority, glitters like a crescent on the brow of night.

Towards evening the long wished for lighthouse of Abaco (built by the English) showed her charitable and revolving radiance. But our ship, Penelope-like, undoes by night what she has performed by day, and her course is backward and crabish. A delicious smell of violets is blowing from the land.

10th.—A fair wind. The good tidings communicated by the A——, toute rayonnante de joie. A fair wind and a bright blue sea, cool and refreshing breezes, the waves sparkling, and the ship going gallantly over the waters. So far, our voyage may have been tedious, but the most

1 The most precious jewel in the Spanish crown, the name given to Cuba.
Berry Islands

determined landsman must allow that the weather has been charming.

Sunday a. sea; and though no bells are tolling, and no hymns are chanted, the blue sky above and the blue ocean beneath us, form one vast temple, where, since the foundations of the earth and sea were laid, Day unto day uttereth speech, and night unto night showeth knowledge.

This morning we neared the Berry Islands, unproductive and rocky, as the geography books would say. One of these islands belongs to a coloured man, who bought it for fifty dollars—a cheaply-purchased sovereignty. He, his wife and children, with their negro slaves! live there, and cultivate vegetables to sell at New York, or to the different ships that pass that way. Had the wind been favourable, they would probably have sent us out a boat with fresh vegetables, fish, and fruit, which would have been very acceptable. We saw, not far from the shore, the wreck of a two-masted vessel; sad sight to those who pass over the same waters to see

"A brave vessel,
Who had, no doubt, some noble creatures in her,
Dashed all to pieces!"

Who had, at least, some of God’s creatures in her. Anything but that! I am like Gonzalo, and “would fain die a dry death.”

We are now on the Bahama Banks, the water very clear and blue, with a creamy froth, looking as if it flowed over pearls and turquoise. An English schooner man-of-war (a boy-of-war in size) made all sail towards us, doubtless hoping we were a slaver; but, on putting us to the test of his spy-glass, the captain, we presume, perceived that the general tinge of countenance was lemon rather than negro, and so abandoned his pursuit.

This evening on the Banks. It would be difficult to imagine a more placid and lovely scene. Everything perfectly calm, all sail set, and the heavens becoming gradually sprinkled with silver stars. The sky blue, and without a cloud, except where the sun has just set, the last crimson point sinking in the calm sea and leaving a long retinue of rainbow-coloured clouds, deep crimson tinged with bright silver, and melting away into gray, pale vapour.

On goes the vessel, stately and swanlike; the water of the same turquoise blue, covered with a light pearly froth,
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and so clear that we see the large sponges at the bottom. Every minute they heave the lead. "By the mark three." "By the mark three, less a quarter." "By the mark twain and a half," (fifteen feet, the vessel drawing thirteen,) two feet between us and the bottom. The sailor sings it out like the first line of a hymn in short metre, doled out by the parish clerk. I wish Madame A—— were singing it instead of he. "By the mark three, less a quarter." To this tune, the only sound breaking the stillness of the night, I dropped to sleep. The captain passed the night anxiously, now looking out for lights on the Banks, now at the helm, or himself sounding the lead:

"For some must watch whilst others sleep;
Thus wags the world away."

11th.—Beautiful morning, and fair wind. About eight we left the Banks. Just then we observed, that the sailor who sounded, having sung out five, then six, then in a few minutes seven, suddenly found no bottom, as if we had fallen off all at once from the brink of the Bank into an abyss.

A fellow-captain, and passenger of our captain's, told me this morning, that he spoke the ship which carried out Governor and Mrs. McLean to Cape-Coast Castle—the unfortunate L. E. L. It does not seem to me at all astonishing that the remedies which she took in England without injury, should have proved fatal to her in that wretched climate.

We have been accompanied all the morning by a fine large ship, going full sail, the Orleans, Captain Sears, bound for New Orleans. . . A long semicircular line of black rocks in sight; some of a round form, one of which is called the Death's Head; another of the shape of a turtle, and some two or three miles long. At the extremity of one of these the English are building a lighthouse.

12th.—We are opposite the Pan of Matanzas, about sixty miles from Havana. Impatience becomes general, but the breeze rocks up and down, and we gain little. This day, like all last days on board, has been remarkably tedious, though the country gradually becomes more interesting. There is a universal brushing-up amongst the passengers; some shaving, some with their heads plunged into tubs of cold water. So may have appeared Noah's ark, when the dove did not return, and the passengers prepared
for terra firma, after a forty days’ voyage. Our Mount Ararat was the Morro Castle, which, dark and frowning, presented itself to our eyes, at six o’clock, p.m.

Nothing can be more striking than the first appearance of this fortress, starting up from the solid rock, with its towers and battlements, while here, to remind us of our latitude, we see a few feathery cocos growing amidst the herbage that covers the banks near the castle. By its side, covering a considerable extent of ground, is the fortress called the Cabaña, painted rose-colour, with the angles of its bastions white.

But there is too much to look at now. I must finish my letter in Havana.

Havana, 13th November.

Last evening, as we entered the beautiful bay, everything struck us as strange and picturesque. The soldiers of the garrison, the prison built by General Tacon, the irregular houses with their fronts painted red or pale blue, and with the cool but uninhabited look produced by the absence of glass windows; the merchant ships and large men-of-war; vessels from every port in the commercial world, the little boats gliding amongst them with their snow-white sails, the negroes on the wharf—nothing European. The heat was great, that of a July day, without any freshness in the air.

As we approached the wharf the noise and bustle increased. The passengers all crowded upon deck, and we had scarcely anchored, when various little boats were seen making for the Norma. First boat brought an officer with the salutations of the Captain-General to his Excellency, with every polite offer of service; second boat brought the Administrador of the Yntendente (the Count de Villa Nueva), with the same civilities; the third, the master of the house where we now are, and whence I indite these facts; the fourth, the Italian Opera, which rushed simultaneously into the arms of the A—i; the fifth, prosaic custom-house officers; the sixth, a Havana count and marquis; the seventh, the family of General M—o. Finally, we were hoisted over the ship’s side in a chair, into the government boat, and rowed to the shore. As it was rather dark when we arrived, and we were driven to our destination in a volante, we did not see much of the city. We could but observe that the streets were narrow,
the houses irregular, most people black, and the volante, an amusing-looking vehicle, looking behind like a black insect with high shoulders, and with a little black postilion on a horse or mule, with an enormous pair of boots and a fancy uniform.

The house in which, by the hospitality of the H—a family we are installed, has from its windows, which front the bay, the most varied and interesting view imaginable. As it is the first house, Spanish fashion, which I have entered, I must describe it to you before I sleep. The house forms a great square, and you enter the court, round which are the offices, the rooms for the negroes, coal-house, bath-room, etc., and in the middle of which stand the volantes. Proceed upstairs, and enter a large gallery which runs all round the house. Pass into the Sala, a large cool apartment, with marble floor and tables, and chaise-longues with elastic cushions, chairs, and arm-chairs of cane. A drapery of white muslin and blue silk divides this from a second and smaller drawing-room, now serving as my dressing-room, and beautifully fitted up, with Gothic toilet-table, inlaid mahogany bureau, marble centre and side-tables, fine mirrors, cane sofas and chairs, green and gold paper. A drapery of white muslin and rose-coloured silk divides this from a bedroom, also fitted up with all manner of elegances. French beds with blue silk coverlids and clear mosquito curtains, and fine lace. A drapery divides this on one side from the gallery; and this room opens into others which run all round the house. The floors are marble or stucco—the roofs beams of pale blue wood placed transversely, and the whole has an air of agreeable coolness. Everything is handsome without being gaudy, and admirably adapted for the climate. The sleeping apartments have no windows, and are dark and cool, while the drawing-rooms have large windows down to the floor, with green shutters kept closed till the evening.

The mosquitoes have now commenced their evening song, a signal that it is time to put out the lights. The moon is shining on the bay, and a faint sound of military music is heard in the distance, while the sea moans with a sad but not unpleasing monotony. To all these sounds I retire to rest.