LETTER THE FIFTY-THIRD


ON BOARD H. E. M. PACKET TYRIAN, 15th.

On the 8th, having taken leave of the family of our friend, Señor Velasco, and of General Bustamante, whom we hope to see again in Havana, we went out in a little boat, accompanied as far as the packet by several gentlemen, and in a short time were standing on deck, looking our last at Vera Cruz and its sandbanks, and sopilotes, and frowning castle, as the shores gradually receded from our view, while the Tyrian was making the best of her time to get clear of reefs and rocks, before the arrival of the norther. We regretted to find, that instead of being one of the new line of English packets, the Tyrian was the last of the old line; small, ancient, and incompromising, and destined to be paid off on her return to England. Captain Griffin, the commander, who looks like an excellent, gentlemanly man, is in wretched health, and in a state of acute suffering. There were no passengers but ourselves, and a young Mexican, guiltless of any acquaintance with salt water, up to this date.

The very next morning out burst the norther, and with loud howling swept over the ocean, which rose and tossed to meet the coming storm. Surely no wind ever had a voice so wildly mournful. How the good ship rolled, and groaned, and creaked, and strained her old timber joints! What rocking, thumping, falling, banging of heads at the low entry of the cabin! Water falling into berths, people rolling out of them. What fierce music at night, as the wind, like a funeral dirge, swept over the ocean, the rain falling in torrents, and the sky covered with one dark, lugubrious pall! And how lonely our ship seemed on the world of waters!

But the next day, the storm waxed fiercer still, and the night was worse than the day. The waves that dashed over the deck made their way into the cabin. At one time, we thought the ship had struck, and even the captain believed that a mast had fallen. It was only a huge wave
that broke over the deck with a sound like thunder, drowning the wretched hens and ducks, who little thought, when they left their comfortable English poultry-yard, they were destined to be drowned off Tampico—and drenching the men. Our little lamp, after swinging to and fro for some time went out, and left the cabin in darkness. Impossible to sleep of course, and for the first time at sea, I confess to having felt afraid. Each time that the ship rolled upon her side on the slope of a huge billow, it seemed impossible that she could ever right again, or that she could avoid receiving the whole contents of the next great watery mountain that came roaring on.

On the morning of the eleventh there was still no abatement of the storm. All was dark and dreary. The norther continued to blow with unrelenting fierceness, and the ship to rock and roll amongst a tumult of foaming billows. The nights in this pitch darkness seemed interminable. The berths being constantly filled with water, we dragged our mattresses on the floor, and lay there wishing for the dawn. But the dawn brought no relief. The wind howled on like a fierce wild beast roaring for its prey. I had made my way every day upstairs, and by dint of holding on, and with a chair tied with strong ropes, had contrived to sit on deck. But this day I retreated under cover behind the helmsman, when, lo! a large wave burst over the ship, found me out in my retreat, and nearly throwing down several stout sailors in its way, gave me the most complete salt-water bath I have had since I left New York. All that night we were tossed about in storm and darkness.

On the thirteenth the wailing of the norther grew fainter, and towards night died away. On the fourteenth it veered round, and the coast of Tamaulipas appeared in sight faintly.

This morning opened with a slight norther; nevertheless they have hung out the packet flag and cast anchor, in expectation of the pilot boat. Meanwhile, all is at a stand-still, morally speaking, for we are rolling so that it is scarce possible to write comprehensively. We see the sad-looking shores of Tampico, long, low, and sandy, though to the south stretching out into gloomy, faintly-seen woods. We can distinguish the distant yellow sand and the white surf breaking furiously over the bar. The
day is gloomy but not cold. A slight rain accompanies the light north wind. Sea-gulls are flying in circles round the ship and skimming the surface of the waves. The master looks impatient and anxious, and prognosticates another week of northerns. Vessels, they say, have been detained here thirty days, and some even three months! No notice is taken of our signal—a sign that the bar is impassable.

16th.—The ship has rolled and pitched all night, and to-day we remain in the same predicament.

TAMPICO, 18th.

Yesterday morning the wind was much lighter, and a pilot-boat came out early, in which the captain set off with his despatches; and we being assured that we might cross the ominous bar in safety, hired a boat for forty dollars, with ten sailors and a pilot, too glad at the prospect of touching the solid earth even for one day. Having got into this boat, and being rowed out to the bar, we found that there the sea was very high, even though the day was calm. The numerous wrecks that have taken place here have given this bar a decidedly bad reputation. Great precaution is necessary in crossing it, constant sounding, and calm weather. It is formed by a line of sandhills under the water, whose northern point crosses that to the southward, and across which there is a passage, whose position varies with the shifting sands, so that the pilots are chiefly guided by the surf.

Perched upon a sandbank was a regiment of enormous white pelicans of thoughtful and sage-like physiognomy, ranged in a row, as if to watch how we passed the bar. Over many a drowning crew they have screamed their wild sea dirge, and flapped their great white wings. But we crossed in safety, and in a few minutes more the sea and the bar were behind us, and we were rowing up the wide and placid river Panuco—an agreeable change. We stopped at the house of the commandant, a large, tall individual, who marched out and addressed us in English, and proved to be a native of the United States.

We stopped at a collection of huts, to let our sailors breakfast, where there is the house of a celebrated character, Don Leonardo Mata, a colossal old pilot, but who was from home at present. We amused ourselves by wandering along the beach of the river and making a collection of beautiful shells, which we left at the old
pilot’s house, to be kept there till our return. A sort of
garden, attached to the house, is appropriately orna-
mented with the figure-head and anchor from a wreck.
We got into our boat again and glided along the shores,
on one side low and marshy, with great trees lying in the
water; on the other also low, but thickly wooded and with
valuable timber, such as logwood and ebony, together
with cedars, India-rubber trees, limes, lemons, etc. On
the bare trunk of a great tree, half-buried in the water,
sat an amiable-looking alligator, its jaws distended in a
sweet, unconscious grin, as if it were catching flies, and
not deigning to notice us, though we passed close to it.
A canoe with an Indian woman in it, was paddling about
at a very little distance. All these beautiful woods to
the right contain a host of venomous reptiles, particularly
the rattlesnake. Cranes and herons were fluttering across
the surface of the river, and the sportsmen brave the
danger of the reptiles, for the sake of shooting these and
the beautiful rose-coloured spoonbills and pheasants that
abound there.

The approach from Tampico is very pretty, and about
two miles from it on the wooded shore, in a little verdant
clearing, is a beautiful ranchito—a small farmhouse, white
and clean, with a pretty piazza. In this farm they keep
cows and sell milk, and it looks the very picture of rural
comfort, which always comes with double charm when
one has been accustomed to the sight of the foaming
surges and the discomforts of a tempest-tossed ship. The
sailors called it “El Paso” (the pass) “de Doña Cecilia;”
which sounded delightfully romantic. The proprietress,
this Doña Cecilia, who lives in such peaceful solitude,
surrounded by mangroves, with no other drawbacks to
her felicity but snakes and alligators, haunted my imagina-
tion. I trusted she was young, and lovely, and heart-
broken; a pensive lay nun who had retreated from the
vanities and deceits of the world to this secluded spot,
where she lived like a heroine upon the produce of her
flocks, with some “neat-handed Phillis,” to milk the cows
and churn the butter, while she sat rapt in contemplation
of the stars above or the snakes below. It was not until
after our arrival at Tampico that I had the mortification
to discover that the interesting creature, the charming
recluse, is seventy-eight, and has just buried her seventh
husband! I accept the account doubtfully, and hence-
forth shall endeavour to picture her to my mind as an ancient enchantress, dwelling amongst serpents, and making her venomous charms of

“Adder’s fork, and blind-worm’s sting, 
Lizard’s leg, and owlet’s wing.”

As you approach Tampico, the first houses that meet the eye, have the effect of a number of coloured bandboxes; some blue, some white, which a party of tired milliners have laid down amongst the rushes. On leaving the boat, and walking through the town, though there are some solid stone dwellings, I could have fancied myself in a New England village. Neat “shingle palaces,” with piazzas and pillars; nothing Spanish, and upon the whole, an air of cleanliness and cheerfulness astonishing to me who have fancied Tampico an earthly purgatory. We afterwards heard that these houses were actually made in the United States and sent out here. There are some good-looking stores; and though there is certainly little uniformity in the architecture of the houses, yet considering the city was built only sixteen years ago, I consider it a slandered place. In 1825 there were but a few Indian huts here, and any little commerce there was, concentrated itself in Pueblo Viejo, which stands on the shores of a lake some miles off. We were taken to the house of a Spanish consul, a fine, airy, stone building with a gay view from the windows;—the very first house that was built in the place.

Its owner, Don Juan de la Lastra, Spanish vice-consul, is not here himself, but we were kindly received by Don José de Gomez Mira, the consul. In the evening all the principal Spaniards in the place came to see C——n; and having arrived here yesterday morning as perfect strangers, without the probability of finding any one whom we knew, we find ourselves surrounded by the most unexpected and gratifying attentions. As to what is called society, there is literally none in Tampico. Those who live here, have come in the hope of making their fortune; and the few married men who are amongst them have been unwilling to expose their wives to the unhealthy climate, the plague of mosquitoes and xins-xins, the intermittent fevers, which are more to be dreaded here than the yellow fever, and the nearly total deprivation of respectable female society. The men, at least the
Spaniards, unite in a sort of club, and amuse their leisure evenings with cards and billiards; but the absence of ladies' society must always make it dull. Riding and shooting in the neighbourhood are their out-of-door amusements, and there is excellent sport along the river, which may be enjoyed when the heat is not too intense.

Our captain, who has paid us a visit this evening, with several Englishmen, expects to get off to-morrow. We staid at home in the morning on account of the heat, and wrote letters, but in the afternoon we made the most of our time, walking about the city, in which there is not much to see. There are many comfortable-looking large houses, generally built according to the customs of the country whereof the proprietor is a native. Were it not for the bar, which is a terrible obstacle, not only from the danger in crossing it, but the detention that it causes, vessels having been stopped outside for months, Tampico would become a most flourishing port. Besides that the depth of water can permit vessels of burden to anchor near the town, there is an interior navigation up the country, for upwards of forty leagues.

The banks of the river are described as being very beautiful, which we can easily believe from what we have already seen; but for its beauties after passing Tampico; its wooded shores dotted with white ranchos, its large cattle farms, and its picturesque old Indian town of Panuco, we must trust to hearsay. The country in the vicinity is described as being a wilderness of rare trees, matted together with graceful and flowering creepers, the wild haunts of birds of bright and beautiful plumage; but our ardour to visit these tangled shrubberies was damped by the accounts of myriads of xins-xins and garrapatos—little insects that bury themselves in the skin, producing irritation and fever; of the swarming mosquitoes,—the horrid caimans that bask on the shore; and worse than all, the venomous snakes that glide amongst the rank vegetation. Parrots and butterflies and fragrant flowers will not compensate for these.

We have just been hearing a curious circumstance connected with poisonous reptiles, which I have learned for the first time. Here, and all along the coast, the people are in the habit of inoculating themselves with the poison of the rattlesnake, which renders them safe from the bite
of all venomous animals. The person to be inoculated is
pricked with the tooth of a serpent, on the tongue, in both
arms and on various parts of the body; and the venom
introduced into the wounds. An eruption comes out,
which lasts a few days. Ever after, these persons can
handle the most venomous snakes with impunity; can
make them come by calling them, have great pleasure in
fondling them; and the bite of these persons is poisonous!
You will not believe this; but we have the testimony of
seven or eight respectable merchants to the fact. A
gentleman who breakfasted here this morning, says that
he has been mainly endeavouring to make up his mind to
submit to the operation, as he is very much exposed where
he lives, and is obliged to travel a great deal on the coast;
that when he goes on these expeditions, he is always
accompanied by his servant, an inoculated negro, who has
the power of curing him, should he be bit, by sucking the
poison from the wound. He also saw this negro cure the
bite given by an inoculated Indian boy to a white boy with
whom he was fighting, and who was the stronger of the
two. The stories of the eastern jugglers, and their power
over these reptiles, may perhaps be accounted for in this
way. I cannot say that I should like to have so much
snaky nature transferred into my composition, nor to
live amongst people whose bite is venomous.

We have just returned from a moonlight walk to the
Gloricta, a public promenade which they are making here,
where there are some stone benches for the promenaders,
close to which some public-spirited individuals had dragged
the carcase of a horse, which obliged us to retrace our
steps with all convenient speed.

As for provisions in this place, if we may judge by the
specimens we have seen in this house, they are both good
and abundant. We had especially fine fish, and a variety
of vegetables. To-morrow, alas! we return to our packet,
much refreshed, however, by two pleasant days on shore,
and consoling ourselves for our prolonged voyage by the
reflection, that had we gone direct to Havana, we should
not have seen Tampico; and, as La Fontaine’s travelling
pigeon says,

“Quiconque ne voit guère
N’a guère à dire aussi. Mon voyage dépeint
Vous sera d’un plaisir extrême.”
Leave Tampico

Je dirai: j'étais là; telle chose m'avint:
Vous y croirez être vous-même.”

Once more on board our floating prison. A norte is expected this evening, but at least it will now be in our favour, and will drive us towards Havana. Our Spanish friends concluded their cordial and disinterested kindness, by setting off with us by daybreak this morning, in a large boat with Spanish colours unfurled, crossing the bar with us, coming on board, and running no small risk in recrossing it, with every prospect of a norther before their eyes. We stopped at the house of the “Marine Monster,” Don Leonardo Mata, before crossing the bar, took up our shells, and had the felicity of making his acquaintance. He is a colossal old man, almost gigantic in height, and a Falstaff in breadth—gruff in his manners, yet with a certain clumsy, good-nature about him. He performs the office of pilot with so much exclusiveness, charging such high prices, governing the men with so iron a sway, and arranging everything so entirely according to his own fancy, that he is a complete sovereign in his own small way—the tyrant of Tampico. He has in his weather-beaten face such a mixture of bluffness and slyness, with his gigantic person, and abrupt, half-savage manners, that, altogether, I conceive him to be a character who might have been worthy the attention of Walter Scott, had he chanced to encounter him. Old and repulsive as he is, he has lately married a pretty young girl—a subject on which he does not brook raillery. One amiable trait the old tyrant has in his character—his affection for his old mother, who is upwards of ninety, and who resides at Mahon, and to whom he is constant in his attentions. At one time he was in the habit of sending her small sums of money; but as they were frequently lost, he sent her five hundred dollars at once by a safe conveyance. The old woman, he said, was so frightened by seeing such a quantity of money in her hut, that she could not sleep, and at length entrusted it to a friend, who carried it off.

1 He who sees little, little can he say;
And when my travels I describe some day,
And say, “That chanced to me—there I have been”—
The pleasure you will feel will be so great,
You will believe, while hearing me relate,
That all these wonders you yourself have seen.
altogether. Since then he has assigned her fifteen dollars a month, upon which the old woman lives in what she considers great luxury.

We took leave of our friends an hour or two ago, but do not expect to set sail till the afternoon, as they are discharging the quicksilver which our vessel brought, and loading the silver which we carry away. Three young Englishmen came on board this morning, to see the packet, and are making a disagreeable visit, being perfectly overwhelmed by sea-sickness.

20th.—Last night arose a furious norther. To-day it continues; but as it is driving us towards our desired haven, and away from these dangerous coasts, we need not complain. As usual on these occasions, I find myself alone on the deck, never suffering from the universal prostrator of landsmen. By way of variety, I have been sitting in the cabin, holding on to the leg of a table, and trying to read Stephens, with as much attention as circumstances will permit. All further attempts at writing must be delayed!

30th.—On the 21st the norther continued with unabated violence, the wild wind and the boiling waves struggling on the agitated bosom of the ocean, great billows swelling up one after the other, and threatening to engulf us; the ship labouring and creaking as if all its timbers were parting asunder, and the captain in such a state of intense suffering, that we were in great apprehension for his life. Horrible days, and yet more horrible nights! But they were succeeded by fine weather, and at length we had the consolation of seeing the moon, smiling placidly down upon us, like a harbinger of peace. On the evening of the twenty-sixth the full moon rose with a troubled countenance, her disk obscured by angry clouds. She shook them off, but still looked turbid and superb. A gloomy cloud, black as night, still stretched over her like a pall, thickly veiling, yet not entirely obscuring her light, and soon after she appeared, riding serenely in the high heavens, mildly triumphant. Of all who sing the praises of the moon, who should love her blessed beams from his inmost heart like the seaman? Then the angry clouds dispersed;—the north wind blew freshly, but not fiercely, as if even his blustering fury were partly soothed by the influence of her placid light;—the studding-sails were set, and the Tyrian bounded on her course eight knots an hour.
Arrival at Havana

The next day the wind died away, and then blew lightly from the opposite quarter. We were about two hundred and fifty miles from Havana, but were then driven in the direction of Yucatan. The two following days we had contrary wind, but charming weather. We studied the chart, and read, and walked on deck, and played at drafts, and sat in the moonlight. The sea was covered with flying fish, and the “Portuguese men of war,” as the sailors call the independent little nautilus, sailed contemptuously past us in their fairy barks, as if they had been little steamers. A man fell overboard, but the weather being calm, was saved immediately. We have been talking about and making our way slowly towards Havana, in a zigzag line. Yesterday evening the moon rose in the form of a large heart, of a red gold colour. This morning, about four o’clock, a fine fresh breeze sprung up from the north-east, and we are going on our course at a great rate, with some hopes of anchoring below the Morro this evening. To-day being Sunday, we had prayers on deck, which the weather had not before permitted;—the sailors all clean and attentive, as English sailors are. Last night they sang “Rule Britannia,” with great enthusiasm.

Havana, 31st.

Last evening we once more saw the beautiful bay of Havana, once more passed the Morro, and our arrival was no sooner known, than the captain-general, Don Geromino Valdés, sent his fahua to bring us to the city, and even wished us to go to his palace; but Don B——o H——a, who gave us so hospitable a reception on our first visit, came on board, and kindly insisted on taking us to his house, where we found everything as elegant and comfortable as before, and from whence I now write these few lines.

In the midst of our pleasure at being once more on dry land, surrounded by our former friends, and at receiving letters from home, we were shocked and distressed to hear of the unexpected death of our friend, the Señora de Gutierrez Estrada, who had followed her husband to Havana in his exile. What a blow to him, to her mother, to all her friends!...

I shall send off this letter by the first opportunity, that you may know of our safe arrival.