



A VISIT TO MEXICO.

LETTER I.

PRELIMINARY.

COURTEOUS READER,

NINE years ago, my brother and I finished and published a Second Series of our travels and adventures in the ex-Colonies of Spain, under the title of "Letters on South America." These letters had been preceded by the first of the series, entitled, "Letters on Paraguay," and "Francia's Reign of Terror." The two brought our personal adventures and historical memoranda down to the close of 1820. We proposed to carry them down to 1834, when we had both finally quitted the great Southern Hemisphere; and, in point of fact, I have still in my possession a

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manuscript volume on Chili and Peru, written by my brother. But I had the misfortune to lose, by his death, towards the close of 1843, the dearest friend I ever possessed; and I then abandoned all thought of again appearing as an author. The usual cares and troubles of life had gradually surrounded me in my native land, and my daily avocations became of too arduous and constant a nature to permit my indulging in literary recreations.

So the travels of both my brother and myself in Chili and Peru—his by death, and mine by strife with the world—were laid on the shelf; and there seemed to be no chance then of my having any *other* excuse than that of South America, for again obtruding myself on the public.

But the course of events brought me to be Consul for Peru, in 1845, and Consul-General of Ecuador in London, in 1847. These nominations led to my becoming a member of the Committee of Spanish American Bondholders; and, in this capacity, I undertook a mission to Mexico, soon after that Republic had concluded a peace with the United States of America. I prepared, accordingly, to proceed to the land of the Aztecs, under the

somewhat pretentious title of Mexican Commissioner. This was in August, 1848.

Parliament having just broken up, and the ministerial vacations commenced, my departure was delayed by an official non-intercourse for nearly three months, throwing it into the dreary winter season. Two days only before the sailing of the packet of the 2nd December, were my arrangements in London concluded; so that eight-and-forty hours were barely allowed to me, and to my daughter, who was my companion, to prepare for the voyage and travels we were about to undertake. So closely were we run, that we only got on board with the mails, on receipt of which the packet got under weigh. All the passengers had preceded us, so that, at any rate, we escaped the jostling and bustle which attend the four-and-twenty hours prior to the sailing of a West India packet, to the discomfort of the passengers at large.

We sailed, however, amid all the confusion consequent on the departure of a large packet from England, crowded with passengers for foreign lands. Our floating habitation, the *Avon*, a fine steamer of 1800 tons measurement, was commanded by Captain Hast; and our start was

in characteristic style. All the passengers, with their friends, who had gone on board with them in the morning, sat down, before our arrival with the mails, to a substantial lunch. From this repast, the last lingering gourmands were hurried away by the ringing of the bell for visitors to leave the steamer; and the deck of our little steam tender was soon thronged with our retiring friends. Our rigging manned, a deafening cheer rose from our ship—a cheer lustily responded to. Then we had a simultaneous cheer, with waving of hats and handkerchiefs, from packet and tender together; and anon the Avon majestically cleaved the waters on her appointed voyage.

Such was the start, dear Reader, that led my young companion and myself into a series of adventures and devious travel, which some of my friends, too partial as the result may prove, have thought of sufficient interest to lay before you; and to make me venture to give you some of my observations “on the way,” and on the various places we visited. I am very dubious myself as to the chance of my pages meeting with even a small portion of public patronage, more

especially as I have allowed my evanescent pages to lie by me for two years, under the worry of a London life; but having at last obtained a little rest and quiet, I have “looked up” my MS. and now submit it to your impartial judgment.

Nearly all the matter which follows was written from time to time, during my year’s absence, in the form of letters, as here represented; written to amuse, without the slightest pretension to either depth or research. The nature of my mission would allow of neither, even supposing I had had time or ability for the task. Besides, I have gone over little or no new ground, and all I can allege is, that I have had good opportunities of seeing what I have described.

With my own letters you will find interspersed, a few extracts from those of my daughter, which, if they have no other merit, possess that of narrative, unadorned for the press, for which they were never intended.

I am, dear Reader,
Your faithful servant,

W. PARISH ROBERTSON.

LETTER II.

THE PASSAGE FROM SOUTHAMPTON TO ST. THOMAS'S.

*On board the Royal Mail Steamer "Avon,"
At Sea, 16th December, 1848.*

WHAT a villanous passage we have had thus far! This is the very first day it has been possible for me to write; and even now we are rolling at such a rate, that I find it a difficult matter to guide my pen.

Fourteen days have we been at sea. I had hoped to devote some part of each to a journalized account of our progress and adventures; but we are constantly reckoning without our host, not only on land, but at sea; and so have I done on the present occasion.

When you gave your last cheer, and our noble vessel set her prow towards the Isle of Wight and "the Needles," her rapid motion was scarcely perceptible; and so long as we kept in the smooth waters of the Solent all looked bravely. We had,

to be sure, a motley crowd on board:—English, French, German, Spanish—governors, consuls, commissioners—traders, gentlemen, "loose fish," nondescripts—old men and young men; misses in their teens, ladies of age unmentionable—squalling children. Then we had dandy Albert ties; bristly beards, fierce moustaches; fast youngsters, grave *employés*. Here we were thrown higgledy-piggledy together, hardly any one as yet knowing his fellow passengers—the faces and figures all strange, with clearly a good sprinkling of both the queer and the uncouth.

We dined while our vessel was yet in smooth water. We retired to our berths, when we had exchanged an unruffled surface for a tempest-troubled sea. That very morning, a gale from the south-west had set in, right in our teeth. Quickly, as it met us, our passengers disappeared; and that night many rendered such an account of their dinner, as to make a suppression of the particulars the most becoming course.

As the gale hourly increased, and the waves rose higher and higher, the pitching and then the rolling of the vessel became very trying. Our commander, notwithstanding, read morning prayers

(Sunday 3rd), in the saloon, when we mustered a good many hearers, although only of the male sex.

The ladies, however, at last began gradually to creep out, as did many of our male passengers; but still the gale neither abated nor slackened for an instant; a dead head-wind, not allowing us, at any time, to get beyond three, and reducing us sometimes to one and a-half knots. The steamer too, being high in the water, rolled and pitched most desperately.

Then the noises we had on board!—the roar of the winds through the rigging, across the decks!—the creaking of the masts!—the thumping of the paddles!—the clanking of the hammers!—the subterranean thunder of the engine-room!—the crashing of plates, dishes, glass, furniture!—the involuntary rushings to-and-fro!—the slidings and tumblings of the unhappy passengers!—What a complication of horrid and incongruous sounds!—what a scene of utter confusion as a whole!

And thus it continued without any abatement, without a moment's lull, from Saturday the 2nd, to yesterday, Friday the 15th, at night, when— heaven be praised!—the south-wester came to a

close. During the thirteen days and nights of the gale, the dead-lights were of course never once opened; and even when shut, the sea forced its way into many of the cabins (H—'s included), and often drenched the luckless occupants, amid the tossings, and through the storm of the dark night.

The proper route was this:—Southampton to Bermuda; thence to Nassau, on to the Havana; from that to Cat Island (New Orleans), on to Vera Cruz (our own place of landing), and finally to Tampico.

To hold the course of the steamer for Bermuda, became, day by day, more difficult, and at length, after eight or nine days, the attempt to get there was given up as hopeless. Where were we to go? To Fayal?—to Madeira?—to Lisbon?—to Cadiz?—to Gibraltar? To Fayal, the most direct, we found we could *not* go—to that proposition the bullying south-wester said "No!" Madeira was next. On the thirteenth day, even to be able to accomplish this became problematical. Then must we have gone to the entrance to the Mediterranean. But the elements, worn out with their opposition to us,

gave way; squalls and heavy rains, and much lightning broke up the south-west gale, and yesterday, 15th, a clear sky dawned upon us—a favourable breeze greeted us—sail was set—and every face beamed with joy. For the first time the deck was crowded by passengers; the rays of the bright sun danced gaily on the waters, and away went the gallant, although now weather-beaten* Avon, for the beautiful ocean speck, Madeira.

You might suppose that so long a continuance of all the wretchedness inseparable from a protracted gale might have soured some of the passengers, depressed others, and led the more pugnacious to quarrel, and even the best-tempered to complain.

Point du tout!—never saw I a merrier set than the company daily assembled in the saloon of the Avon during “the long gale.” Not one quarrel have I witnessed—not one disagreeable

* One of our paddle-boxes was carried away. Our twelve pumps worked by steam, scarcely kept the ship free, such was the constant strain upon her timbers; and altogether no man could well have a more arduous and harassing (nay, at one time *dangerous* task) to perform, than had Captain Hast, during his memorable passage from Southampton to Madeira.

word have I heard among them. They have taken the greatest physical discomforts with the utmost philosophical serenity. At the same time our Commander has kept a good table; and both the cooking and the service, under the trying circumstances of the case, have been something wonderful.

As it may amuse you to have a lady's view of a “gale at sea,” the first in her recollection, I will venture here to give you an extract of one of H—'s letters written from Madeira.

“At last there is some chance and some hope of our seeing land, and being able to give you an account of ourselves. We trust you may not be alarmed by reports of us as ‘missing,’ in a disagreeable newspaper paragraph, as we have been able to signalise one vessel ‘homeward bound.’ But in truth we have had a fortnight of the most dismally bad weather you can possibly imagine. Let us begin from our start.

“—— would tell you that we got a pretty good lodging in this great moving boarding-house, that is, we got one very good berth, which I have been taught to consider a spacious apartment, although at first I thought it a mere closet; and

the other is one of the 'general run,' smaller, and at the after-end of the ship, while mine is 'midships,' as they say here; consequently, the motion is much less felt in it. So here I am really quite comfortable, now that there is a possibility of sitting still.

"As soon as we got out of smooth water, the gale began; and I retired to my berth, not to leave it till the fifth day. Of course, I was sufficiently miserable during that time; and the weather was so bad, with so small a prospect of improvement, that we were quite 'disgusted with life,' the father regretting, over and over again, that he had allowed me to accompany him.

"As I lay in my berth, I overheard the passengers discussing the horrible weather, some indulging in the most gloomy prognostications—machinery giving way, no progress, coals falling short, etc. Then the rolling! almost impossible to keep in bed, while sleep was but little known to any of the passengers. Even *I* could not recover my faculties in that line for some time. I dreaded the pitch-dark nights, the tumbling about or upsetting of everything in my cabin; in fact, such a combina-

tion of troubles, as it is impossible for me to describe.

"Well, on Thursday, I ventured to get up; and after employing *two hours* in the difficult operation of dressing, bumped and bruised, stumbling along, I, at last, got to the saloon. There the father introduced me to a very pleasant family, with whom he had fraternised, Captain and Mrs. F—, one grown-up daughter, and seven younger children. None of the other ladies had as yet made their appearance in public; but, I believe, we have *now*, that is, within the last two days, caught a glimpse of all our fellow-passengers—on the whole, a very good set, and things going on as smoothly in the social department, as they have hitherto gone roughly in the elementary.

"The weather has never been cold, although we have been longer in reaching a warm climate than we had expected. The winds and the waves have changed our route for us; and I am not sorry for it, as we shall thus see more interesting places. We hope to make Madeira to-morrow, and there are many speculations as to quarantine, which we are dreading.

"Yesterday morning every one was beginning

fairly to lose patience, for all the day we hardly progressed a single mile in the right direction. The captain, whom we like very much, looked at last miserable, and few smiles were to be seen on the passengers' faces. The night before had been so boisterous, that no one had been able to sleep, and, consequently, all looked jaded and forlorn. The dinner-table was a scene of confusion, nothing seeming disposed to allow itself to be carved. The soup was not forthcoming, having all been spilt before it reached the saloon; gravies, wine, and 'Bass's' ale streamed over the cloth; whilst, every now and then, some one would suddenly retire from the scene of action, looking round in a scared manner, and not at all confident as to the whereabouts of his landing. All this was accompanied by a confusion of tongues and noises enough to make us doubt whether we had not got to some unheard-of region. It was difficult to continue any longer to view our situation in a ludicrous point of view. No laughter; but 'groans, not loud but deep,' were, on the thirteenth day, the only comments on the clattering fray. In the evening, however, a squall came on, with very heavy rain, which broke up the weather; and

next morning it was quite refreshing to hear the cheerful voices and see the improved looks, which a comparatively good night's rest, change of wind, and bright sky had produced. To-day has been very fine, and on Monday we expect to be cheered by the sight of the island of Madeira."