

## LETTER X.

## THE WRECKERS' ISLAND CONTINUED.

DURING our short stay at the island of the wreckers, we all (with the exception hinted at) did our best to amuse each other; and, in this way, Doctor Rowland shone out as the most successful. His philosophic bearing, his quaint and happy humour, running in a vein of unostentatious wit, made him deservedly a favourite with the great majority of his co-unfortunates.\*

The owner of the barge-canoe and his men were wreckers, not professedly, but certainly *de facto* wreckers. The Bella Isabel—although with a decent little skipper—was also employed on the fatal, but profitable Arrecifes de los Alacranes; so

\* With unfeigned sorrow, I have to record here (in 1852) the death of Doctor Rowland, about two years and a half after these pages were written. His two shipwrecks having given him a distaste to sea life, he succeeded in establishing himself in good practice in Fulham. There, alas! he departed from this life, quite a young man, in June, 1851.

the crews, being of a somewhat unscrupulous character, many robberies were perpetrated. Large sums of money, and articles of value, were abstracted (we suppose during the nights) from the wreck. Among our own men, too, we had some bad fellows; and there is every reason to believe that some the robberies were committed by them. My great, and, to a large extent, irretrievable loss was that of a tin box, containing every letter, paper, and document I had with me. I had, unfortunately, placed with them my money (in sovereigns), and some valuables; and to this, of course, I must trace the loss of the box and its whole contents. To secure the money from any future discovery, the box and papers, I doubt not, were thrown overboard. Captain Sturdee, Lieutenant Molesworth, and the officers of the ship equally exerted themselves to recover the little package—so valuable to me; but all in vain. It had disappeared from my cabin, and had never been seen or heard of more. Consider the awkwardness of going to a new country, in an official capacity, without even a line either to authenticate my mission, or to identify myself!

But whenever I found myself inclined to regret

that I had not saved "my little tin box," on leaving the Forth, in a moment my conscience accused me of an unseasonable worldly-mindedness, which could balance in the scale, for a moment, a comparatively petty loss, with the enormous debt of gratitude which I owed to Providence.

To return to our short abode at Perez. While others were lounging about, my friend H— and I were busily engaged, under a tropical sun, in making such collection as we could of the natural curiosities of the wreckers' island. They consisted principally of shells (we cleared the island of the best), beautiful sea fans, fine specimens of coral, fossils, etc. We were very proud of our collection, for no one else had been able to find anything worth gathering. But we went more closely and methodically to work, assisted by two or three sailors, and, in fact, we spent a whole forenoon over the operation. The result of our labours was the admiration of all, and we anticipated no small pleasure from one day or other exhibiting our "Perezian Museum" in London.

One boat was left on the island on Tuesday morning, for the purpose of gradually getting our stock and effects on board the Isabel. The other

boats, when they returned from the wreck, assisted us, and by the still unflagging exertions of Captain Sturdee, the loading of the brigantine with her heterogeneous cargo was completed before eight o'clock in the evening, that is, the last man was on board by that hour. At a much earlier one, all the ship's stores, live stock, water and provisions, with an incongruous mass of luggage (including our Museum), were on board. What seemed to fill the Island of Perez, when spread over its surface, was suddenly condensed into the hold of a leaky little Campeachy brigantine, of about a hundred tons burthen. The luxury and profusion; the space, order, and gallant bearing of the mighty Forth; her commodious cabins, ample berths, and splendid saloons, had dwindled down, in three days, to the narrow dimensions, the rude disorder, and the rough appointments of a leaky, wrecking Campeachy craft, with her hundred and twenty-six passengers, gentle and simple, huddled together in a close, pestiferous, and dirty hold! And then, instead of the abundance of dainty viands offered to the fastidious palates of the "lady and gentlemen" passengers on board the Royal Mail packet, we had the bare necessities of

life dealt out with a frugal hand, coarsely cooked and roughly served (yet devoured with the keenest appetite), in the crowded little smack of the Yucatan wreckers. But we had all just escaped from the jaws of death! Of a hundred and twenty-six souls placed on the verge of eternity, it had pleased God that not one should perish; and he must have been a selfish sinner indeed, who, under such circumstances, could find fault with anything about our opportune deliverer—the Bella Isabel.

I must confess, however, that one small misery overtook two of us, during our passage, which sorely tried our equanimity. Mr. Strutt, our purser, while laboriously arranging the stores, after the Bella Isabel had got out to sea, stumbled upon the box which held our museum. On being told that it contained shells, he asked to whom they belonged? And being told, by mistake, that they were the property of one or two of the officers, he, having little spare room, ordered it to be thrown overboard, observing, naturally enough, that officers ought to have had something else to do than to burthen the hold with "shells." Some one hearing what was going forward, hastened to find me out. It was too late. Ere I could rush to save our precious

treasure, it had been consigned to the deep, where, for aught I know to the contrary, our beautiful shells and fans and coral may now be adorning the submarine grotto of some Naiad of the Mexican Gulf.

My placid partner in the museum shrugged his shoulders, and Mr. Strutt\* apologised too handsomely to allow a word to be said. We resigned ourselves to this new mishap. We tried to banish from our minds the loss which Natural History had suffered, by the tossing into the sea of the Perezean Museum.

At two A.M., the 17th, we began to warp away from the reef, the channel in which the Bella Isabel lay being too narrow to allow of our beating out. At eight we got into deep water; and at two P.M., a fair, though light breeze was wafting us towards Campeachy. Our crazy barque, now deeply laden, leaked so terribly, that day and night her pumps were kept going. The greatest danger, however, to be anticipated, was from a "norther" springing up; but, happily, any such new danger we escaped.

\* This unfortunate officer, I grieve to say, was another of those who perished in the Amazon.

We were on board the *Bella Isabel* from Tuesday evening till Thursday afternoon at five, when we anchored in the roadstead of Campeachy. The Tuesday night in the hold was terrific. I think I would at one time have given all my worldly goods on board the brig, to escape from the corner to which I was pinned, after I had *sat* there, instead of slept, for two hours. But a proper precautionary measure, with such a crowd of people on board, had extinguished every light; and to move, in utter darkness, over human bodies closely packed, and amidst broken stowage, would have led to broken limbs; so, like many others similarly situated, I was obliged to wait the dawn, half stifled and bruised as I was. Wednesday, we had a delightful day, when we made the *Travesia*, or passage across to the Yucatan coast. The only inconvenience arose from the crammed state of our deck. We managed the sleeping better the second night; fewer went into the hold; and Captain Sturdee and I got *one* good berth between us, watch and watch, each four hours in bed and four hours on deck alternately, wrapped in a blanket.

Early on Thursday (about two A.M.), we made the small port of Sibal, and later in the morning,

all was bustle in the hold, as we found we should land that afternoon at Campeachy. The officers, and others, one after another, were busy at the hatchway, with a small looking-glass and borrowed razor or two, shaving. Mr. Wilson dexterously took off, not only his own beard, but that of one of his comrades, offering to operate on me, if I chose. Dr. Rowland came out quite spruce; his wit, while he shaved, being somewhat sharper than his razor. The Admiralty Agent, having a very rough, grizzly beard, got hold of a razor which drew tears from his eyes and much blood from his chin, amid many jokes of a somewhat cutting kind also. All rigged themselves out as they best could, on their knees, or squatting on the cargo, and by ten A.M. our deck was crowded by comparatively well-dressed people. The ladies had had the little cabin to themselves, and therefore they were able to *faire la toilette* a little more at ease.

The coast along which we sailed was uniformly low, and the only remarkable object which we saw, was a ruin called *Jaina*, having the appearance, at a distance, of an old abbey. It was said to be of three or four centuries standing.

The appearance of Campeachy, as we approached

it, was picturesque. The land, so long flat, here rises into a hilly character. The town stands prettily in the centre of the bay, the surrounding woods and palm-trees coming out in agreeable relief; while the wall round the well-fortified city, the vessels riding at anchor, and the white-washed extramural buildings running along the sea side, altogether rendered Campeachy a much pleasanter looking place than we had expected to find it.

At five P.M., we dropped anchor; and as soon as the visit-boat came off, Captain Sturdee, Lieutenant Molesworth, M. Adoue, the Admiralty Agent, the purser, H—, and myself, were rowed by four of our best men to the Mole, where, as the sun went down, and amidst a concourse of people attracted by so unlooked-for an arrival, we thankfully put foot once more on *terra firma*.

## PART II.

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CAMPEACHY TO THE CITY OF MEXICO.