

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01928-6 - Retrospect of Western Travel, Volume 1

Harriet Martineau

Excerpt

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RETROSPECT
OF
WESTERN TRAVEL.

THE VOYAGE.

“ When the sun dawned, gay and glad,
 We set the sail and plied the oar ;
 But when the night-wind blew like breath,
 For joy of one day’s voyage more,
 We sang together on the wide sea,
 Like men at peace on a peaceful shore ;
 Each sail was loosed to the wind so free,
 The helm made sure by the twilight star,
 And in a sleep as calm as death
 We the voyagers from afar
 Lay stretched”

Paracelsus, Part iv.

THE packet-ship in which my passage was taken, the United States, Captain Nathan Holdrege, was to have sailed from Liverpool on Friday the 8th of August, 1834, at eleven o’clock. At half-past ten, my fellow-traveller and I, with our friends, were on the way to the dock, in some doubt about our departure, from the wind being directly against us, when we met a gentleman interested in the sailing

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[More information](#)

of the vessel, who told us that we might turn back, as the Captain had given up all hope of getting out of port that day. This was uncomfortable news enough. We had bidden farewell to many friends, half the pain of parting was over, and there was little pleasure in having it all to go through again.

We resolved to proceed to the dock, to put our luggage on board, and see for ourselves the true state of affairs. It was not very agreeable. The deck was encumbered with water-casks and chests; the Captain was fidgetting about, giving his orders in a voice rather less placid than ordinary; a great number of inquiring persons, who had come down to see us off, had to be told that we were not going to-day, and why; and several of the American passengers were on the spot, looking very melancholy. They had entered the 8th in their journals as the day of sailing, brought down their portmanteaus, paid their bills at the hotel, and taken leave of Boots and chambermaid. Here they were left with four-and-twenty dreary and expensive hours upon their hands—and who knew how many more than four-and-twenty? One declared that the wind appeared as if it had set in against us, and he should not be surprised if it was a week before we sailed. Their fate was so truly mournful, that I was ashamed of feeling any discomfiture on my own account, domesticated as I was in the nearest and dearest of homes,

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE VOYAGE.

3

next to my own. Our disconsolate acquaintance among the passengers were invited to dispose of their evening with us ; and we returned, to tell the children, and everybody whom we met, that we were not gone, and wherefore. Of course, we presently recollected several reasons why it was well that we had another day. There were two letters which it was highly desirable I should write from Liverpool rather than from New York ; and the children had never before found leisure to show me the cupboards and shelves where they kept their playthings ; so that if the wind had been fair, I should actually have gone away without seeing them.

We sauntered all the afternoon in the Zoological Gardens, and as we returned, caught each other looking up at every weathercock we passed. In the evening, our visitors dropped in, each ready with a speculation as to how the wind would be to-morrow.

On the morrow, the weathercock told no better news ; and a note was on the breakfast-table which informed us that there was no chance of our sailing that day. I was now really sorry. It was Saturday ; and I feared my host would write no sermon if I remained to keep his household in an unsettled state. Our sea dresses, too, would not serve for a Sunday in Liverpool, and our books and work were all on board, with our wardrobes. The tidings were therefore welcome which were brought early

B 2

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[More information](#)

in the forenoon, that the Captain had engaged a steam-boat to tow us out to sea. By eleven o'clock the carriage of a friend was at the door, with bouquets of flowers, and baskets of grapes and other acid refreshments, which it was thought might be welcome at sea.

“Have you *no* misgivings?” asked an intimate, before whose imagination the Western World now rose tremendous in its magnitude. “Have you *no* misgivings now?” I had none, and it was well. If I had had such as would have made me draw back at the last moment, what a world of good should I have foregone! Not only what knowledge,—but what a store of imagery! What intense and varied enjoyment! and, above all, what friendships! When I now look back upon what I have gained, and at how small an expense of peril and inconvenience, I cannot but regard my setting foot on board ship as one of the most fortunate acts of my life.

When we arrived at the dock, we found there was really to be no further delay. The knots of friends, the crowds of gazers were gathering; the steamer was hissing and puffing in the river, and the song of the sailors was heard, as they were warping our ship out of the dock. In a few minutes, we and the other passengers were requested to step on board. I first carried my flowers down to my state-room, intending to hide them there till we should be out

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE VOYAGE.

5

of sight of land, when an apparition of fresh flowers upon deck might be more than commonly welcome. I then took my station by a window of the round-house, whence I could see all that passed on shore, without being much seen. Thence I could observe my brother and sisters speaking to each other, and pointing out things which I could easily interpret. It occurred to me that I could send them one more token, by means of the little waves which rolled away from the sides of our ship, and washed the pier on which the crowd was standing. I threw out a rose at a moment when I caught a watchful eye; and I saw it borne, after many vagaries, directly under their feet. Suddenly I missed them from the spot where they were standing, and supposed that they were quite tired, (as they well might have been,) and had gone home. But it was not so. They had withdrawn only in order to secure front places at the extreme end of the pier, whence they might watch us yet longer than from their former station. There they stood, as long as we could distinguish any forms from among the crowd. Then three cheers were exchanged between the crew and the shore, and the passengers strained their eyes no more.

The greater number then went below, to make arrangements in their state-rooms; and afterwards ensued the ceremony of introducing the company

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to each other on deck. Our number was twenty-three, six of whom formed the party to which I belonged: or rather so it seemed to ourselves before we went on board. The distinction was afterwards forgotten, for the company assembled was, with two or three exceptions, so exceedingly agreeable, and so wonderfully congenial, considering how accidentally we were brought together, that we mingled completely as one party. We had among us a Prussian physician; a New England divine; a Boston merchant, with his sprightly and showy young wife; a high-spirited young South Carolinian, fresh from a German University; a newly-married couple, whose station was not exactly discoverable while on board, but who opened a public-house soon after their arrival in New York; a Scotch major, whose peculiarities made him the butt of the young men; an elderly widow lady; two amiable young ladies; and a Scotch lady, "of no particular age," but of very particular placidity and good humour; and a youth out of Yorkshire, who was leaving his parents' roof for the first time alone, and who was destined never to return to it. The number was made up by English and American merchants—young men so accustomed to pass between Liverpool and New York, that the voyage was little more to them than an expedition to Primrose Hill is to a cockney.

The cold dinner, and drinking of healths, cus-

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE VOYAGE.

7

tomary on the day of sailing, succeeded. Then there was the library to look over, and trial to be made of a seat on the rail, whence we could see the dim shores, as we glided smoothly along in the wake of the steamer. By the time it was dusk, the latter had performed her engagement. We saw the payment handed over, and the shaking of hands of the two captains, and then she disengaged herself from us, and began ploughing her way to the north coast of Ireland. We felt very helpless when she was gone, the little wind there was being unfavourable. There was so little, however, as to allow us novices a night of sound sleep at the outset.

On Sunday, we crept along in almost a calm, having a glimpse of the dim outline of the Isle of Man in the morning, and being still in sight of Holyhead in the evening. To me, it was a day of luxury; for, jaded as I had been with business and novelty, there was no circumstance of the voyage that I valued so highly as the impossibility of receiving letters or news for three weeks or a month. The gliding on thus in a calm, with time to think and be still, was all that I wanted: but the Americans, who had home on the horizon before them, and longed to be at rest there, looked grave on this inauspicious beginning of their transit. On Monday, however, they felt, from another cause, a good deal worse. The wind had freshened; but I believe

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nobody cared which way, or how fast, it blew us. The only meal at which I was not present was that Monday's dinner. I can testify to the breakfast and tea being quiet and sad enough, with a sprinkling of languid passengers at table, and a knowledge of how wretched all the rest were in their rooms.

On Tuesday began my experience of the pleasures of the sea. The wind had freshened to a strong breeze, which had so rocked us in our berths that I rose miserably ill. I was strongly persuaded of the necessity of exertion in sea-sickness, of having fresh air, and of getting out of the way of the sights and sounds of the cabin; and I therefore persevered in dressing and going up to the deck. There was the captain, with only one passenger to talk with, and heartily glad at the prospect of another being convalescent. He seated me on the rail, where I kept my eyes away from the helpless invalids who were strewed about the deck: and in half an hour I was quite well. We were careering along in most exhilarating style. The wind was so strong as to put the wearing a bonnet out of the question. I had happily been furnished with a sort of cap which no lady should go to sea without;—a black silk cap, well wadded. With the head thus defended, and a large warm cloak, a lady may abide almost any weather, and avoid the *désagrémens* and unwholesomeness of the cabin. My eye was never

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE VOYAGE.

9

weary of watching the dashing and boiling of the dark green waves, from the grey horizon to the ship's side; and I know of no motion so gladsome as that of riding the high billows in a brisk breeze. The captain pointed out to me the first of the monsters of the deep that I ever saw;—a large black-fish, tumbling about joyously by itself in the stormy sea, now throwing its thick body forward in ungainly gambols, and now rearing its forked tail perpendicularly, as it prepared to dive.

My flowers did not disappoint my expectations. They were still quite fresh on the Wednesday, when, as we were out of sight of land, I carried them up to the deck, and gave each passenger one,—that being precisely my supply. I never saw flowers give so much pleasure before, except in cases of long confinement from illness. Truly they were very like a message from home.

In two or three days more, all but two ladies and one gentleman had settled themselves into the routine of sea life. It was very desirable that they should do so, as on the 15th we were still little more than 500 miles from Liverpool. It would have been dismal to add idleness and unsettledness to the discouragement caused by such a beginning of our voyage. Our mode of life was very simple and quiet: to me, very delightful. I enjoyed it so much that I delayed beginning my letters home till we

B 3

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[More information](#)

had been a week at sea, lest I should write some extravagance which I should afterwards have to qualify or retract. None of my subsequent experience, however, has altered my feeling that a voyage is the most pleasant pastime I have ever known.

The passengers showed themselves upon deck some time between seven and nine in the morning. Each one either made his way to the binnacle, to see for himself what course we were upon, or learned the important intelligence from some obliging individual who held the fact at the general service. We all asked the captain at first: but soon discontinued the practice, when we found that favourable answers were likely to be rare, and how it must vex him to tell us every morning that we were scarcely getting on at all.

After a brisk morning's walk upon deck, no one was sorry to hear the breakfast bell. Breakfast was the most cheerful meal of the day. If ever there was any news to tell, it was then. The early risers could sometimes speak to the sluggards of a big fish, of a passing sail, of a frolic among the sailors. I was asked once by a passenger, in a tone whose laziness cannot be conveyed on paper, "What, did ye see the whale this mornin'?"

"No. It came at four o'clock, when I was asleep: but the captain promises to have me called next time, whatever the hour may be."