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Philip Henry Gosse

Excerpt

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## LETTERS FROM ALABAMA.

## LETTER I.

Mobile, May 15, 18—.

YOUR desire to have some information of the country in which the good providence of God has for the present allotted my residence, shall be gratified so far as my opportunities of observation will admit. I shall communicate it more readily, because from the very hasty and imperfect notion I have yet formed, I think it probable that scenes, circumstances, and manners, differ widely from those to which you and I have been accustomed.

As a preliminary, however, it may not be altogether uninteresting to give a slight sketch of the voyage from Philadelphia. A sea-voyage, under the best circumstances, can scarcely be other than tedious. Even when performed in a stately and commodious vessel, with a skilful, gentlemanly, and obliging commander, a disciplined crew, and agreeable fellow-passengers, the wearied eye wanders from sea to sky, and from sky to sea, in a vain search for some object to break the dreary uniformity: to-day is like yesterday, and to-morrow

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will be as to-day. If the poor occupationless passenger endeavour to beguile his tedium, and indulge his literary propensities, by "keeping a log," so few are the facts that occur, that he is often reduced to debate with himself the propriety of recording such "remarkable events" as that "the cook dropped a pewter spoon overboard," or that "the pig came upon the quarter-deck;" and happy indeed is he when he has an opportunity of announcing, in the words of the north-country mate, "Little wind and less weather; caught a dolphin, and —— lost him!" If, therefore, you find in my letter a tendency to treat of "small deer," I trust you will make charitable allowances, and admit the truth of the Irish proverb, which sets forth the difficulty of extracting blood from a turnip.

It would be needless to waste many words about Philadelphia. My impressions of it were agreeable; there are not many splendid or imposing edifices, but the general character is that of a genteel and respectable middle-class. If there is little to astonish or dazzle, there is perhaps less to displease: an air of chaste and sobered elegance pervades the whole. The streets are straight, wide, and clean, and are rendered peculiarly pleasant by rows of trees on each side, among which the stately plane or buttonwood is conspicuous. The people who walk in them are remarkably few in number for a large city, and their deportment is generally quiet and orderly. One cannot help feeling that William Penn has left the character of his sect strongly, indelibly, impressed on the city which he founded.

The broad and beautiful river on which it stands —the silvery Delaware, with its gently sloping

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banks, green and fertile—is a very great ornament and no less an advantage to the city; for though it can scarcely be called a commercial town, a goodly array of shipping finds its way thither, and a rather dense forest of masts shoots up from the fair bosom of the Delaware.

The men of science I found, as usual, kind and obliging; the venerable Professor Nuttall was pro-



THE SUBVULKILL.

secuting his labours among the dried plants in the herbarium of the Academy of Natural Sciences, and the urbane Peale was as busy in the fine Museum which forms one of the chief attractions of the city. My most prominent idea was that of Wilson the ornithologist. Here was his residence; here he kept

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school ; here I looked upon the birds which he shot and skinned with his own hands ; here are the scenes so often mentioned in his delightful volumes ; the meadows below Philadelphia, the marshy flats of the Schuylkill, the rushy half-submerged islets of the Delaware, Thompson's Point, the quondam residence of the night-heron or qua-bird, and the notorious Pea Patch, the resort of myriads of crows. The recognition of these places gave a charm and an interest to the scenes, which they would not otherwise have possessed, for to me there is always a peculiar pleasure in visiting those spots which have been hallowed (so to speak) by the eminent of bygone days. One old man I met with who had been personally acquainted with the ornithologist ; though the latter had been a constant visitor at his house, he could not remember many anecdotes of him, but one thing he narrated was sufficiently characteristic. "Wilson and I," said he, "were always disputing about the sparrows ; he would have it that the sparrows here were different from those of the old country ; I knew well enough they were just the same, but I could not persuade him of it." It is scarcely necessary to say that the American sparrows are quite distinct from the European species.

With a fine breeze right aft, and bright weather, the little schooner, "White Oak," left the quay of Philadelphia on the 18th of April, and sailed rapidly down the mirror-like river. The numerous flats and sand-bars, however, impeded, and sometimes arrested, our progress, and we had to make a temporary stay at a mean little fishing village, that bears the pompous title of Delaware City, situated on the canal which connects the Delaware with the

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Chesapeake. In the canal a man was taking herring with a dip-net, which he readily sold on the bank at fifty cents per hundred. At length we entered on the widening bay of Delaware. It was so cold that ice a quarter of an inch thick was formed on deck, and this on the 20th of April, in the latitude of Lisbon.

The number of white-sailed craft spotting the river made a lively scene; and the banks being very low and flat caused the land to have a singular appearance, being visible only at a very short distance, and beginning to come into view in small isolated patches, which if one jumped on the taffrail were seen to be connected, and the trees often appearing at first as if growing out of the water. Numerous large fires had been lighted on the shores for the purpose of consuming the old dead grass of the marshes, to afford room for the growth of a new crop, and the smoke and flame being visible both before and after the land was apparent, it seemed as if some "smart" Yankee had realized the achievement of setting the Delaware on fire. But all indications of land soon faded from view, the twinkling lights on Cape May and Henlopen glimmered for a moment through the deepening shadows of night, and long before morning we were on the heaving bosom of the grim Atlantic.

A miserable episode in life is the commencement of a voyage, under such circumstances as those which greeted my returning consciousness on the next morning. The wind was as dead on end as possible, blowing a strong gale, and so cold that it pierced through bone and marrow; a heavy swell with a breaking sea was running, that continually washed the decks from stem to stern; the little

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schooner pitching, and tossing, and diving, as if every dip would be her last. In vain did I seek refuge from the weather by going below; the filthy hole called a cabin, hardly large enough to turn in, and not nearly high enough to stand upright in, was redolent of tar, grease, fusty cloths, mouldy biscuits, and a score other unendurable odours combined, which those only can imagine who, like me, have been the tenants of a little trading craft. The single berth or sleeping place on each side, in dimensions and appearance resembled a dog-kennel more than anything else, the state of the blankets in which, thanks to the grave-like darkness of the hole, was but partially revealed, to sight at least. The agony of sea-sickness, aggravated beyond measure by the closeness and fetor of the confined air below, drives me on deck again, where, shivering as in an ague fit, I endeavour to screen myself by crouching beneath the bulwarks (scarcely knee-high) from the sea, spray, and rain, which the gale is driving across the decks. We sometimes are made to feel how great an intensity of wretchedness can be condensed into a brief space, without any infliction more severe than a combination of what may be rightly termed trivial sufferings.

Those who know the sea only in connexion with the spacious deck and gorgeously-furnished saloon of a packet steamer, can form but a poor notion of the accommodation of a little coasting schooner. Imagine a closet, of no geometrical shape, some seven feet by six, and about a yard and a half high, with huge beams at intervals, against which, until taught to stoop by painful experience, you thump your forehead every time you attempt to cross. In the centre a deal table is screwed to the floor,

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leaving just space enough to squeeze one's body round on each side. A sort of chest running along one side, called a locker, serves the double purpose of a seat, and a box for holding musty sails, flags, balls of spun-yarn, and sundry other articles, the savour of whose presence becomes but too manifest, whenever the little cover of the single square hole is removed, to rummage the contents. On the opposite side to this are two cupboards, also bearing the same name of lockers, though generally innocent of anything like a lock, the doors of which, continually getting unfastened, slam to and fro in the rolling and lurching of the vessel with convulsive violence, revealing, as they open, a jug or two, and some glass tumblers, inserted in round holes cut in the shelves, and perhaps a tea-pot and some cups and saucers similarly secured; but all in the most disgusting state of dirtiness. The remainder of this side is occupied by the door, giving entrance from the foot of the companion-ladder, on the one hand, and on the other by the skipper's "state-room."

The remaining two sides are formed into cells just large enough (and but barely) to allow an adult person to lay himself along, as if in a coffin. Some eight inches of board are the sleeper's protection from rolling out into the cabin, while his ribs chafe against the side of the vessel at every lurch. Careful must he be that he start not up suddenly in the night; for, if he do, a stunning blow on the forehead will remind him that the ceiling is not more than fifteen inches from his face as he lies. Such are the sleeping-berths, one on each side—the cell below each being stowed with all sorts of rubbish, into which the miserable slave of

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a cabin-boy is continually diving, by night and day, to find nobody knows what, to the infinite molestation of the sleepless passenger above.

The same smutty Ganymede ever and anon disappears beneath the cabin-table, presently emerging with a tub of potatoes, a tallow-candle, or something of more dubious character. Stimulated by curiosity, I peeped under the table one day, and saw a ring fixed in the floor, which I pulled, and up came a piece of the plank, uncovering the "lazarette," a dark and musty pit, into which one glance was sufficient for that and all future occasions.

Pleasant society will make amends for many inconveniences, but in my case the skipper was a churlish, vulgar, illiterate fellow, and his crew of the very same stamp as himself. The fact of my being a "Britisher" was quite enough to warrant an incessant display of petty annoyance, which just kept short of actual insult. The conversation was of the lowest sort; and it was not the smallest infliction, that every night I was compelled to hear, as I lay in my wretched berth, the interchange of obscene narratives between the skipper and his mate, before I could close my eyes in sleep. Dirt, dirt, was the rule everywhere; dirt in the cabin, dirt in the caboose, dirt in the water-cask; dirt doubly begrimed on the table-cloth, on the cups and glasses, the dishes and plates that served the food; while the boy who filled the double office of cook and waiter, was the very impersonation of dirt. The only resource was to eat with as little thought as possible, to see as little as possible, and to be upon deck as much of the time as possible; and this last habit was facilitated by



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the glorious weather which speedily set in after we were well off the land.

All minor discomforts were forgotten, or at least felt to be compensated, when I saw that mysterious current, commonly known by the name of the Gulf-stream, or by sailors, more elliptically, "the Gulf;" a strong and ever-running river, if I may so term it, in the sea, whose banks are almost as well defined as if they were formed of solid earth, instead of the same fickle fluid as the torrent itself. It first becomes appreciable on the western coast of Florida, gently flowing southward, till it reaches the Tortugas, when it bends its course suddenly eastward, and runs along the Florida Reef, increasing in force, till it rushes with amazing velocity through the confined limits of the Strait of Florida, and pours a vast volume of tepid water into the cold bosom of the Atlantic. Here, unrestrained, it widens its bounds, and slackens its speed, though such is the impetus with which it has been impelled, that it is distinctly perceptible on the banks of Newfoundland, and may be traced by its effects even to the shores of Western Europe.

Our contact with this wonderful stream was indicated by the increased temperature of the water, as well as by the long strings or ridges of the yellow Gulf-weed, which are commonly to be observed stretching across its course. Sometimes it occurs in immense fields, as it did to Columbus, when the ocean appeared like a vast meadow, and the course of his vessels was impeded by the floating "grass." When I saw these strings and patches I was well pleased, for I knew I should not lack entertainment as long as this singular plant continued abundant. Its own structure is most interesting and surprising;

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for though it may be conjectured to have had an original root, a "local habitation," at some remote age, no connexion with the shores or bottom of the sea subsists now, for it evidently shoots and increases as it floats, free on the surface of the waves. It consists of a multitude of well-formed leaves, with a rib running down the centre, and notched edges, set alternately on angular stems, which bear a great number of little globular, berry-like air-vessels, about as large as currants, the office of which is to float the plant.

But to a voyager glad of any source of amusement, the Sargasso-weed is most welcome, because of the shelter which it affords for hosts of small



THE SCYLLEA.

marine animals. Fishes of various kinds crowd around and beneath it, for the sake of preying on the invertebrate creatures that browse on its leaves, or play among its branches. That curious sea-