

**FAMILIAR LETTERS TO
HENRY CLAY OF
KENTUCKY, DESCRIBING A
WINTER IN THE WEST INDIES**

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Familiar letters to Henry Clay of Kentucky, describing a winter in the West Indies by Joseph John Gurney

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JOSEPH JOHN GURNEY

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BY
JOSEPH JOHN GURNEY.

"Magna est veritas et prævalabit."

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FAMILIAR LETTERS,
&c.

LETTER I.

VOYAGE FROM NEW-YORK, AND ENTRANCE ON THE TROPICS.

Flushing, L. I. Sixth-month (June) 1st, 1840.

MY DEAR FRIEND,

I seize the first day of leisure that has fallen to my lot, since I left Washington, in order to commence a narrative of my late tour in the West Indies; and I gladly avail myself of thy obliging permission, in addressing a series of letters, on the subject, to Henry Clay of Kentucky. Sure I am, that the present state of the West India Islands, in a pecuniary, political, and moral, point of view, cannot be a matter of indifference to any American statesman. I know that thy feelings of interest in the great experiment which is now developing its results, in that part of the world, are deep and lively; and I venture to believe that thou wilt give no severe reception to the familiar incidents—the trifling descriptions, whether in verse or prose—with which my story may probably be interwoven.

I must however premise, that I undertook this journey, neither in the pursuit of pleasure, nor for the specific purpose of ascertaining the effects of emancipation; much less as the agent or representative of any body of philanthropists, either in England or America; but in the character of a minister of the gospel. My primary object was to preach the glad tidings of peace and salvation to my fellow men, and from persons of every class, condition, and party, in the West Indies, I have met with a cordial welcome, and the kindest attentions.

In company with MAHLON DAY, a highly respectable citizen of New-York, and a young friend, who kindly undertook to act as our attendant and helper, I sailed from that city on the 22nd of last Eleventh-month, (November,) in the *Camilla*, Captain Watlington. Our ship's company consisted of about twenty individuals, (mostly in search of a warmer climate and better health) who had taken their passage, in this accommodating little ship, for Santa Cruz. The fine, but cold, frosty day, on which we left your shores, gave them a sufficient warning, that the season was at hand, when the rigor of a North American winter would become dangerous. At the same time, it afforded such of us as were in good health a delightful opportunity—as we swept along under full sail—of observing, under the brightest aspect, the rare beauty of the harbor of New-York, the bay, and the neighboring islands.

We had not continued our voyage more than three days, before we found ourselves in a genial climate. The thermometer stood at 70, and light clothing gradually came into requisition. The change was almost magical, and certainly it was no small luxury thus insensibly to glide into warmth, and as it were, to catch summer again by the skirts. We were now crossing "the Gulph Stream," where it is said to have a breadth of two hundred and fifty miles, and the temperature of the air was probably heightened by the heat of the waves below. To account for this enormous current of warm water which runs up from the Gulph of Mexico, in a north-easterly direction, to so great a distance, seems to be nearly impossible. What the causes are which occasion the magnitude of the current, and the heat of the water, seems to be mere matter of conjecture ; but its beneficial effect in melting the ice, and unlocking the harbors, of North America, affords one evidence among ten thousand, that even the wildest sports of nature are subservient to good and wise purposes, in the order of a benevolent Providence. Boisterous weather and a strong adverse gale, were our portion as we crossed "the Gulph." The foaming waves, with tops of a light transparent blue, rose to

an unusual height, and were in beautiful contrast with the troughs below, of a deep dull lead color.

CAMILLA, whilom swift of wing
 Can now no longer fly,
 In vain her gallant sailors sing ;
 She faints and longs to die.
 The waves o'er which she loved to dance,
 Now horrid in her eye,
 In awful alpine forms advance,
 And curl their snows on high.
 O, were it not for sore affright,
 They might have charmed her view,
 Dappled and marbled o'er with white,
 And tipped with azure blue.
 But the vales and pits that yawn below
 Are dull and dark as lead ;
 They bid her every hope forego—
 Fit chambers for the dead !
 But quail no more thou blithsome maid,
 Beneath the howling blast,
 Sunshine alternates still with shade,
 Such fury cannot last.
 Thy guardian sylphs shall soon prevail,
 To dry those tears of sorrow,
 A smiling sky, a favoring gale,
 Await thee for the morrow.

This prediction was verified ; for on the following day, the wind was favorable, the weather fair, the sea of the finest ultramarine blue, and nothing could be more delightful than our voyage. We were particularly pleased with our first sight of the flying fishes, which we observed scudding along with wonderful agility, over the surface of the water. Our Captain assured us, that he had watched one of them which flew for the full distance of half a mile, before alighting. One of them winged its way on board our ship ; and a more exquisitely beautiful creature I have seldom seen, about eight inches in length, his eye black, his back of the brightest dark blue, pure silver below, his wings fibred like a leaf, and perfectly

transparent. The creature bears not the touch of man—he quivered, and presently died, in my hand. At night, the phosphoric illumination around the ship, as she flew before the wind, was wonderful. Though there was no moon visible, one might easily have supposed that it was moonlight, and the waves sparkled, and almost blazed. The following lines are graphically true, without poetic licence.

The moon beneath the waters sleeps,
 The stars are veiled with clouds,
 The vigorous breeze o'er Ocean sweeps,
 And swells the rustling shrouds.
 Regardless of the gale, the storm,
 CAMILLA flies ahead,
 And, lo, around her angel form
 A mystic glare is spread.
 The foam she dashes from her side,
 Dispels the gloom of night,
 And seems diffusing far and wide,
 A supernatural light.
 The myriad sparks of liquid fire
 Dance to the virgin's fame ;
 And the billows from her brow retire,
 All flickering with flame.

As we found our way into the tropics, we observed that the atmosphere became clearer and clearer; no mists were perceptible; the sun seldom obscured, and the appearance of the sky and stars, at night, peculiarly bright and clear. The moon, in these latitudes, often assumes an almost vertical position; and many of the stars which belong to the southern hemisphere, are visible. Before day light, one morning, the Captain called me upon deck, to look at the southern cross, which is certainly a constellation of rare beauty. One of the five stars which form the cross, however, is of inferior magnitude, and not in the true position, which somewhat mars the image. When I turned towards the east, I enjoyed a still finer spectacle. The horn of an almost expiring moon, Venus, and Mars, were in all their splendor; and the profusion of azure, lilac, ultra-

marine, pea-green, orange, and crimson, which mantled the sky, about half an hour before sun-rise, I never before saw equalled.

The sunset in these warm regions, is also remarkable for mellow beauty, but not as I imagined, of a splendor equal to the sun-rise. One evening, a "golden edged cloud" suggested a few lines of consolation to one of the ladies on board, who with much sorrow and anxiety, was nursing her interesting little boy, evidently sinking by degrees into the arms of death.

A dark cloud was skirting the edge of the sea,
 A frown on the brow of the west,
 And nature was shrouded with sadness to me,
 As she sank in the ocean to rest ;
 But the sun that was wrapped in that mantle of woe,
 His radiance begins to unfold,
 And the veil that was darkening the billows below,
 Is fringed and embroidered with gold.
 The scene is a signal for mental relief,
 While it charms and refreshes the sight ;
 It bids me believe that the cloud of my grief,
 Shall soon wear a border of light.
 The gilding of hope, and the beaming of love,
 Victorious o'er sorrows and fears,
 Are heralds of mercy from heaven above
 To illumine this valley of tears.

No one needs to lack amusement during a voyage; especially within the tropics;—nature is constantly presenting objects of interest, and the sea, in its ever varying phases, is a sight which never tires. We were amused, one morning, by watching the motions of a great shark, called, from its known discernment and cunning, the "Sea lawyer." His broad head, agile body, and flopping green fins, with the numerous little myrmidon fishes which accompanied him on his journey, formed a striking spectacle. At another time, a dolphin followed our bait—a much more taper and active fish than I had imagined; his fine blues and greens quite glittered through the waves. On a third occasion, the sea was seen sparkling with myriads of minute blue fishes, speckled with silver. The "man of war