

The Young Aunt with White Hair

By George Washington Cable

The date of this letter—I hold it in one hand as I write, and for the first time noticed that it has never in its hundred years been sealed or folded, but only doubled once, lightly, and rolled in the hand, just as the young Spanish officer might have carried it when he rode so hard to bear it to its destination—its date is the last year but one of our American Revolution. France, Spain, and the thirteen colonies were at war with Great Britain, and the Indians were on both sides.

Galvez, the heroic young governor of Louisiana, had just been decorated by his king and made a count for taking the forts at Manchac, Baton Rouge, Natchez, and Mobile, and besieging and capturing the stronghold of Pensacola, thus winning all west Florida, from the Mississippi to the Appalachicola, for Spain. But this vast wilderness was not made safe; Fort Panmure (Natchez) changed hands twice, and the land was full of Indians, partly hireling friends and partly enemies. The waters about the Bahamas and the Greater and Lesser Antilles were fields for the movements of hostile fleets, corsairs, and privateers. Yet the writer of this letter was tempted to run the gauntlet of these perils, expecting, if all went well, to arrive in Louisiana in midsummer.

“How many times,” says the memorandum of her brother’s now aged great-granddaughter,—“How many times during my childhood has been told me the story of my aunt Louise. It was not until several years after the death of my grandmother that, on examining the contents of the basket which she had given me, I found at the bottom of a little black-silk bag the letter written by my grand-aunt to her brother, my own ancestor. Frankly, I doubt that my grandmother had intended to give it to me, so highly did she prize it, though it was very difficult to read. The orthography is perfect; the difficulty is all owing to the paper and, moreover, to the situation of the poor wounded sufferer.” It is in French:

*To my brother mister Pierre Bossier.
In the parish of St. James.*

FORT LATOUTRETTE,
The 5 August, 1782.

My GOOD DEAR BROTHER: Ah! how shall I tell you the frightful position in which I am placed! I would that I were dead! I seem to be the prey of a horrible nightmare! O Pierre! my brother! hasten with all speed to me. When you left Germany, your little sister was a blooming girl, very beautiful in your eyes, very happy! and to-day! ah! to-day, my brother, come see for yourself.

After having received your letter, not only my husband and I decided to leave our village and go to join you, but twelve of our friends united with us, and the 10 May, 1782, we quitted Strasbourg on the little vessel *North Star* [Étoile du Nord], which set sail for New Orleans, where you had promised to come to meet us. Let me tell you the names of my fellow-travelers. O brother! what courage I need to write this account: first my husband, Leonard Cheval, and my son Pierre, poor little angel who was not yet two years old! Fritz Newman, his wife Nina, and their three children; Irwin Vizey; William Hugo, his wife, and their little daughter; Jacques Lewis, his daughter, and their son Henry. We were full of hope: we hoped to find fortune in this new country of which you spoke with so much enthusiasm. How in that moment did I bless my parents, and you my brother, for the education you had procured me. You know how good a musician my Leonard was, and our intention was on arriving to open a boarding-school in New Orleans; in your last letter you encouraged the project—all of us, movables with us, all our savings, everything we owned in this world.

This paper is very bad, brother, but the captain of the fort says it is all he has; and I write lying down, I am so uncomfortable.

The earlier days of the voyage passed without accident, without disturbance, but often Leonard spoke to me of his fears. The vessel was old, small, and very poorly supplied. The captain was a drunkard [here the writer attempted to turn the sheet and write on the, back of it], who often incapacitated himself with his first officers [word badly blotted]; and then the management of the vessel fell to the mate, who was densely ignorant. Moreover, we knew that the seas were infested with pirates. I must stop, the paper is too bad.

The captain has brought me another sheet.

Our uneasiness was great. Often we emigrants assembled on deck and told each other our anxieties. Living on the frontier of France, we spoke German and French equally well; and when the sailors heard us, they, who spoke only English, swore at us, accused us of plotting against them, and called us Saurkrouts. At such times I pressed my child to my heart and drew nearer to Leonard, more dead than alive. A whole month passed in this constant anguish. At its close, fevers broke out among us, and we discovered, to our horror, there was not a drop of medicine on board. We had them lightly, some of us, but only a few; and [bad blot] Newman's son and William Hugo's little daughter died, . . . and the poor mother soon followed her child. My God! but it was sad. And the provisions ran low, and the captain refused to turn back to get more.

One evening, when the captain, his lieutenant, and two other officers were shut in their cabin drinking, the mate, of whom I had always such fear, presented himself before us surrounded by six sailors armed, like himself, to the teeth, and ordered us to surrender all the money we had. To resist would have been madness; we had to yield. They searched our trunks and took away all that we possessed: they left us nothing, absolutely nothing. Ah! why am I not dead? Profiting by the absence of their chiefs they seized the [or some—the word is blotted] boats and abandoned us to our fate. When, the next day, the captain appeared on deck quite sober, and saw the cruelty of our plight, he told us, to console us, that we were very near the mouth of the Mississippi, and that within two days we should be at New Orleans. Alas! all that day passed without seeing any land, but towards evening the vessel, after incredible efforts, had just come to a stop—at what I supposed should be the mouth of the river. We were so happy to have arrived that we begged Captain Andrieux to sail all night. He replied that our men, who had worked all day in place of the sailors, were tired and did not understand at all sufficiently the handling of a vessel to sail by night. He wanted to get drunk again. As in fact our men were worn out, we went, all of us, to bed. O great God! give me strength to go on. All at once we were awakened by horrible cries, not human sounds: we thought ourselves surrounded by ferocious beasts. We poor women clasped our children to our breasts, while our husbands armed themselves with whatever came to hand and dashed forward to meet the danger. My God! my God! we saw ourselves hemmed in by a multitude of savages yelling and lifting over us their horrible arms, grasping hatchets, knives, and tomahawks. The first to fall was my husband, my dear Leonard; all, except Irwin Vizey, who had the fortune to jump into the water unseen, all were massacred by the monsters. One Indian tore my child from me while another fastened my arms behind my back. In response to my cries, to my prayers, the monster who held my son took him by one foot and, swinging him several times around, shattered his head against the wall. And I live to write these horrors! . . . I fainted, without doubt, for on opening my eyes I found I was on land [blot], firmly fastened to a stake. Nina Newman and Kate Lewis were fastened as I was: the latter was covered with blood and appeared to be dangerously wounded. About daylight three Indians came looking for them and took them God knows where! Alas! I have never since heard of either of them or their children.

I remained fastened to the stake in a state of delirium, which saved me doubtless from the horrors of my situation. I recall one thing: that is, having seen those savages eat human flesh, the members of a child—at least it seemed so. Ah! you see plainly I must have been mad to have seen all that without dying! They had stripped me of my clothing and I remained exposed, half naked, to a July sun and to clouds of mosquitoes. An Indian who spoke French informed me that, as I was young and fat, they were reserving me for the dinner of the chief, who was to arrive next day. In a moment I was dead with terror; in that instant I lost all feeling. I had become indifferent to all. I saw nothing, I heard nothing. Towards evening one of the sub-chiefs approached and gave me some water in a gourd. I drank without knowing what I did; thereupon he set himself to examine

me as the butcher examines the lamb that he is about to kill; he seemed to find me worthy to be served on time table of the head-chief, but as he was hungry and did not wish to wait [blot], he drew from its sheath the knife that he carried at his belt and before I had had time to guess what he intended to do [Enough to say, in place of literal translation, that the savage, from the outside of her right thigh, flayed off a large piece of her flesh.] It must be supposed that I again lost consciousness. When I came to myself, I was lying some paces away from the stake of torture on a heap of cloaks, and a soldier was kneeling beside me, while I was surrounded by about a hundred others. The ground was strewn with dead Indians. I learned later that Vizey had reached the woods and by chance had stumbled into Fort Latourette, full of troops. Without loss of time, the brave soldiers set out, and arrived just in time to save me. A physician dressed my wound, they put me into an ambulance and brought me away to Fort Latourette, where I still am. A fierce fever took possession of me. My generous protectors did not know to whom to write; they watched over me and showed every care imaginable.

Now that I am better, I write you, my brother, and close with these words: I await you! make all haste!

Your sister,

LOUISA CHEVAL.

“My grandmother,” resumes the memorandum of the Creole great-grandniece, “had often read this letter, and had recounted to me the incidents that followed its reception. She was then but three years old, but as her aunt lived three years in her (*i.e.*, the aunt’s) brother’s family, my grandmother had known her, and described her to me as a young woman with white hair and walking with a staff. It was with difficulty that she used her right leg. My great-grandfather used to tell his children that his sister Louise had been blooming and gay, and spoke especially of her beautiful blonde hair. A few hours had sufficed to change it to snow, and on the once charming countenance of the poor invalid to stamp an expression of grief and despair.

“It was Lieutenant Rosello, a young Spaniard, who came on horseback from Fort Latourette to carry to my great-grandfather his sister’s letter. . . . Not to lose a moment, he [the brother] began, like Lieutenant Rosello, the journey on horseback, procuring a large ambulance as he passed through New Orleans. . . . He did all he could to lighten the despair of his poor sister. . . . All the members of the family lavished upon her every possible care and attention; but alas! the blow she had received was too terrible. She lingered three years, and at the end of that time passed peaceably away in the arms of her brother, the last words on her lips being ‘Leonard!—my child!’ ”

So we make way for the bright and happy story of how Françoise made Evangeline’s journey through the dark wilds of Atchafalaya.