

SHIPWRECK AND ESCAPE IN THE TORTUGAS

A NARRATIVE BY EMMA TALCOTT NORMAN

This narrative was handwritten by Emma Talcott (1819-1890). She was the daughter of Elizabeth Florian (1795—aft 1831) and David Talcott (1783-1843; merchant). Emma was the granddaughter of Jean-Baptiste FLORIAN Jolly de Pontcadeuc (1767-1811; the immigrant to the US, whose letters are preserved in the Library of Congress). Emma was the wife of John Moore Norman (1817-1882).

There is no date on this manuscript, but from the context and the reference to a date of “Saturday (July) 26st” and “Monday...July 14th” it is possible to calculate that the voyage probably took place in 1856. The intended voyage was from New Orleans to Liverpool. It is not clear when the narrative was written, but it appears to have been written soon after the voyage.

The cast of characters includes Emma, her sons Edward Talcott Norman (1844--after 1869), Francis “Frank” Moore Norman (1847-1923), Frederick McBride Norman (1849-1898) and the unknown Margaret (“Peggy”), who may be Emma’s sister-in-law or a friend, or perhaps an unknown daughter. Thus Emma was about 34 and her children about 5 to 10 years old at the time of the voyage. Her husband was not on board.

Descendants of Emma’s children include the families of Shelton, Redden and of course Norman.

The original handwritten narrative is in the possession of Edward Bradford Ladd of Mobile, Alabama, head of the Mobile Carnival Museum, among other papers relating to the Florian family and their descendants. The narrative was typed by Llewellyn M. Toulmin, Ph.D., F.R.G.S. A few very minor editorial additions or corrections were made to make the manuscript more readable; these are marked in brackets.¹

¹ Emma Talcott is the first cousin four times removed of Edward Bradford Ladd and of Llewellyn Toulmin, and the first cousin five times removed of Robert E. DeNeefe IV.

Emma's Narrative

On the 14th of July at sunset we waved our last to poor desolate Papa,² and the tugboat puffed us down the old Mississippi. Then commenced discomfort, plenty of mosquitoes, and no mosquito bars. No sleep for anybody. Next night the Captain had a large one [mosquito bar] put up in the cabin for all. So Mrs. Curtiss, our only fellow passenger, Peggy, Frank and Fred all slept under the bar. Edward and I preferred the society of our tormentors.

We left the Wharf on Monday and on Wednesday morning the tow boat left us at the mouth of the Mississippi. In half an hour after that we were in the blue water and enjoying our first task of a little storm. I laughed at my fellow passengers for crying and enjoyed it myself very much. But I did not enjoy what the Captain told me where the storm was over, i.e. that he had a unusually poor crew and that if he had only known it before the tow boat left he would have sent to town for more men, for they did not know one end of the ship from the other. [A] pleasant prospect to cross the Atlantic with. A day or two after, he told me that he had been questioning his sailors, and found that two of them had never seen salt water before. They were from Ohio and were traveling for the benefit of their health. Another was a Russian soldier who did not know one rope from another and so on. There were only two or three who understood their ship's duty.

At one time we thought we had yellow fever on board. One man was sick, and the Captain pronounced it Yellow Jack. Another pleasant subject of contemplation. However, the sick man got well and it proved to be drink which accounted for his not being able to speak when spoken to, and not his dying condition as the Captain supposed.

A few days after this source of anxiety was over, the Captain began to complain a great deal. It seems he had had dysentery on him for two weeks before leaving New Orleans, and when we were out about a week he began to show how ill he was. He could hardly stand, would sit in his chair and pant for breath, and would lie in his berth the greater part of the day. All this time, he was not paying the slightest regard to his duty. I frightened him into doing so, but he was then so weak that when he went on deck to give his orders, he was too giddy to see anything. I consulted my Doctor's book and found his danger imminent. The Captain might die before we got to Liverpool. [The] Mate was not capable of taking his place. The Steward and I did all we could for him. I printed out recipes in my book. The Steward made him rice water and persuaded him to take it, but with all our care he did not improve. Our prospects were bad indeed.

But that was not all. The Captain told me that his sails got damp and mildewed in New Orleans and consequently rotten, and that with the poor set of men he had on board, he

² Here "Papa" likely refers to her husband, since Emma's father David Talcott died in 1843 in Blakeley, Baldwin County, Alabama. The term could refer to her (unknown) father in law. Why Emma and her children are sailing off to Liverpool alone is not clear.

could not get them taken in quick enough when the wind blew strong, so that he was obliged to get them in every time there was a little wind, or they would be torn to pieces, which would lengthen our voyage. He bet with Mrs. Curtiss that he would beat all the ships we met. I told him to make no such bet, considering he had not a man who knew how to steer, and had to take in sail every time the wind blew.

You imagine possibly that with all this I must have been very much depressed, particularly as I had no one to confide in. My fellow passenger was too dull to comprehend all this. I did not dare alarm Peggy and the children of course. I kept all to myself.

But there is something in the effect of the blue waters, something exhilarating in that restless ocean, something so bracing in those sea breezes that fear and despair had no place. I was never in better spirits. The clumsiness of the sailors was only a subject of merriment, though our lives were in peril in consequence.

We were all pretty good sailors. Frank liked it the least of any. Every time he heard the word squall, and we had sometimes 3 a day, he was off in his berth. I was only seasick half an hour. Oh how we all enjoyed sitting on deck of an afternoon, chatting with our good-humoured Captain, gazing on the water and inhaling the sea breezes. I enjoyed the present in spite of my fearful anticipation of the future. But in a short while our destiny was changed.

On Saturday the 21st [unfortunately, this key date could perhaps be the 26th or the 28th] at about 1 o'clock, just after dinner, a fine day, we ladies were serving . The Captain was sitting in the cabin looking on his chart. I looked over his shoulder and asked him to show me where we were. "Indeed," says he, "I do not know." I pointed at the Florida reefs and said, "I hope we are at respectable distance from those reefs." He laughed and said "Thirty miles at least." The day before he had told me that we were between the Tortugas and Havana. Well, he rolled up his chart and put it in his berth, took out his specs, put them on, [and] opened his book. I sat down to my sewing. That instant our vessel rubbed, and in two minutes she was her whole length upon a shoal.

There we lay, hard and fast, thumping and bumping on the rocks that the Captain had declared were 30 miles north of us. He flew on deck. Peggy says he looked as pale as a ghost—well he might. There we were out of sight of land, and there we lay, thumping harder and harder every moment for seven hours. What did we do? Sat and listened to the ship strike. What else could we do? The Captain was in a perfect agony. I exerted myself to the utmost to comfort him, to soothe his mind and keep myself calm, that the poor dear children might not be frightened. Every now and then I would clasp my hands very tight across my heart, but betrayed no emotion by look or word. Nor Peggy either. When the ship would give an unusually hard crashing thump, Edward would clasp his hands and say, "Oh, Ma! Just hear that." Fred wanted to know if we were going to sink. I stilled all their fears, and told them they must be men.

A wrecking vessel soon made its appearance in the distance, and hoping then that our lives would be saved, I made up a small bundle of clothes knowing that the luggage must go, if the ship went to pieces. [I] dressed myself and the children in strong clean clothes, tied my money round my waist and so waited in patience. We all sat down to tea that evening as usual, but no one seemed much inclined to eat. At 8 o'clock a terrible squall came on, and after a few terrible crashes and scrapes, we were by a merciful providence driven off the rocks.

The ship swung round into deep water and the Captain called out, "She's off." Then we drove before the wind most beautifully. The lightning was incessant and the rain I thought would break every pane of glass in the cabin. The wind was so strong that the Captain's voice could not be heard. Half the sailors were so frightened they hid themselves. While reefing in a topsail the wind carried it off and in two hours our sails were all torn to pieces.

The Men then went to work pumping. In an hour or more the violence of the squall was over and would you believe it, we all went to bed and to sleep.

The next morning the first sound that greeted my ear was the pumping. Oh, that dismal, creaking noise. The flag was put up for a pilot. For through the spyglass from the masthead the Tortuga Lighthouse was visible. By breakfast time the Pilot was on board. And by dinner time, 1 o'clock, we were safely anchored in Tortugas harbour with 7 feet of water in the hold.

Our greatest source of anxiety while lying on the reef was what the fate of us poor defenseless women might be among the wreckers. The schooner was in sight the whole afternoon. We watched it anxiously, but as soon as the squall came up, she was driven back to Tortugas, we heard afterwards. That the wreckers would rob us I had not the least doubt. Our only fellow passenger Mrs. L, a tall, lanky, long-armed Irish would-be lady, was crying the whole afternoon, thinking that the wreckers were pirates.

The Pilot had some difficulty in bringing the ship into the harbour. There was a strong current towards the West, that threatened to carry us off to the Gulf. The Pilot was at the wheel, the Captain was at his side. I listened anxiously to their conversation, and I heard the Pilot say, "I am afraid I cannot do it, sir." But on his third attempt he succeeded, and at 1 o'clock Sunday P.M., just 24 hours after we struck, we were safe, for the ship lay in very shallow water on a soft bottom.

But what business had we on the reef? It was a calm, bright, sunshiny day—hardly wind enough to carry the ship along. The Mate and the sailors [were] all on deck. The shoal water so apparent that Peggy told me afterwards [that] my children were remarking the strange colour of the water. The man at the helm was near enough to hear [what] they were saying to each other about the white water.

But it was a kind Providence sent us on the reef to save us from something worse.

We lay just 3 miles from the Island named Garden Key, one of the Dry Tortugas. The shoal on which we had struck was 18 miles east – one of the Wet Tortugas I suppose. It came near being a very wet one to us, although as we sat on the deck, a calm bright afternoon, listening to the ship thump, everything around us was so still, hardly a ripple on the water, we could not realize the danger. It was only as it grew dark and the wind began to rise that I clasped my hands a little tighter. My voice did falter a little as I said to the Steward (a most excellent young man) as he was lighting the lamps in the Cabin, “Well, Steward, it is a great comfort to feel that we have a Father in heaven who cares for us.” “Yes, indeed, Madam,” he said, “it is.”

The only thing that frightened Peggy was lest some of the wreckers should fall in love with her. It affected her so much she put her money by mistake in a bundle of dirty clothes and threw all overboard.

Now for the prettiest little adventure of all – the going on shore business. That little Island a mile in circumference with its three storey brick house in which the Pilot had told us lived some very nice people who would treat us well, looked very tempting and altogether more agreeable than a leaky ship if she was anchored. So when dinner was over and all quiet I went to the Captain, who was setting on deck bemoaning his hard lot, with his head between his hands (not being insured the loss to him was very great), and asked him what he was going to do with his lady passengers. He said he would send us on shore immediately if we wished it, but that there was no danger for the ship could not sink where she lay.

I told him I was not afraid, but as the weather was fine, and the whole afternoon before us, and the men were doing nothing, we might as well take advantage of the present. He ordered the boat down, and we got the baggage ready, and it was soon all on board. But there was no room for us, so it was agreed that the baggage should go first. The Steward stayed to take care of it, and we took the next trip. It was dusk when the boat returned, but the sky looked bright, and I felt no fear and was the first one to go down into the boat. I suppose you know what it is to go down the side of a ship and drop into a boat dancing on the waves below. The carpenter was close behind me, so that I could only fall into his arms, which I had no idea of doing. Blubbering Mrs. Curtiss followed, the children were carried down, and we started.

We had not gone far before the boat began to rub, rub, rub, and Mrs. Curtiss to cry. I compressed my lips. We got into deep water again, and then rub again. All this time it was getting darker. The carpenter who was steering said, “It was hard enough to find the channel in the daytime, but I cannot now.” I said to him indignantly, “What right had you to bring us out here if you did not know the way?” “I had to obey orders,” said our sturdy scotchman. “No,” said I, “You might have told the Captain.” The Mate had told him, it seems, but the Captain thought they were all too lazy to go and come back, and did not listen.

"My only way now," said our steersman, "is to round that Island," pointing to an island a mile long and a mile off. "No," said I, "You do not know your way round that Island [any] more than I do. Just go back to the ship now as quick as you can."

"Very well," said he, "You would be a great deal better on the ship than rowing out here all night." "Pull away boys for the ship."

We rubbed our way back over the Coral. At one unusually hard rub, the Steersman told Joe at the other end of the boat to feel with his oar. "Oh," says Joe, "It's nothing but a rock." "Well," says the Carpenter, "What more would you have?" But in spite of Mrs. C's cries that the boat would split open and that there was a squall coming, we got back to the ship safe, and climbed her side in high glee. [We] heard the mate mutter "Bad pennies."

The boys enjoyed the row in spite of all. I had my arm tight round Fred the whole time. He soon got tired, put his legs on the bench and his head on my lap, and contemplated the stars.

We had a good appetite for supper that evening, after a row of 5 miles, and were in fine spirits. Now for an amusing dilemma. Our baggage [was] all on shore – no nightgowns for any body. [The] Captain said, "You must put on something." "I've no nightgown," [I said.] "Well," said he, as his whole face looked drollery itself, "What can I do for you?" "Lend me one of your shirts, to be sure, and pick out one with very little starch," [said I.] As he handed it to me he said, "Perhaps you would like to wear the breeches, too?" "No, thank you, I'll borrow neither them nor your toothbrush, but we'll call for your comb in the morning," [said I.]

So we all went to sleep, feeling as if the leaky ship was a strong castle after our romantic row over a bed of coral.

The next morning before breakfast a boat came from the shore, bringing back our Steward who had remained there waiting for us, and informed us that Captain Woodbury and Dr. Whitehurst would bring their boat for us. At 8 o'clock they came accordingly and the sight of two gentleman after anticipating getting among rough wreckers was indescribably agreeable, I assure you.

As they had a great deal to say to the Captain, he did not start for some time, but with umbrellas [we] did not suffer from the heat. I pointed out to Captain W. the route we had taken and told him the idea of going round the Island. He said if we had gone round that Island a strong current would have taken us off to the West!!

We landed at a good Wharf, walked up to the house under the shade of a grove of mangrove trees, [and] admired some beautiful yellow flowers with which the Island was carpeted, and the Cocoa Nut trees overshadowing the residence of the lighthouse keeper. And [we] were received very kindly by Mrs. Whitehurst.

I was especially fatigued and went to bed as soon as possible, but the boys started on an exploring expedition, pulled off their shoes, rolled up their pants, and walked round the Island, coming back loaded with shells. During the week we spent there, they were out the whole time, examining the fort, or rowing with Captain Woodbury to the adjacent Islands. They were never in want of amusement and never enjoyed themselves more.

The Captain took a fancy to them, as he has some in Carolina about the same age. [He] thought them remarkably good children. Mrs. Whitehurst has two boys under six – the eldest a little cripple – he was a pitiable object. Mr. and Mrs. Phillips who occupied the whole of the third story have two little girls. So the boys were well off for company.

As Captain Woodbury is keeping bachelor's hall for the present – his wife being in Carolina – he had his rooms vacant and took upon himself to entertain us, and greater kindness I never met with anywhere.

The three families have each their own kitchen and keep separate tables. In Mrs. Whitehurst I found a charming companion, and I can assure you the week passed away very agreeably. The Ship got her sails mended and men to pump her and went off to New York.

We left our little Paradise in a Government Schooner for Key West, at 6 in the evening, and got to Key West at 9 next morning. When rowing to the Schooner, Mrs. Curiss asked Captain W. if he thought the schooner would start before they got the sails up. I wish you could have seen the curl on the Captain's lip.

The climate and the aspect of Key West are truly tropical – one moment scorched with heat and the next delightfully fanned by a sea breeze. Every house on the Island is embowered with Cocoa Nut trees and surrounded by gardens filled with beautiful flowering shrubs. We spent a week very comfortably at the only Hotel.

I have not told you all that was said and done during the 7 hours we were on the reef. That would be impossible. I took the children into the Stateroom to talk to them, but what was deeply interesting to us at that time might not be so in the repetition.

Edward was for action. Whenever the sailors tired of pumping, he went to work with the assistance of Peggy and the Steward and Chambermaid.

The ludicrous always mingles with everything. In our distress we could not help laughing when the Stewardess asked if we were on the Banks of Newfoundland.

#end of the typed narrative#

Page 1 of the handwritten narrative is shown below

Emma Talbot Norman
daughter of Eliza Flora Kelly de Porte desire
(wife of Douglass Talbot)
of Emma's narrative

On the 14th of July at sunset we waved our last adieu to poor dissolved Papa & the tow boat puffed us down the Mississippi - then commenced discomforts, plenty of Mosquitoes & no Mosquito traps, no sleep for any body - Last night the Captain had a large one put up in the cabin for all - So Mrs. Curtis our only fellow passenger, Peggy, Frank & I all slept under the far Edward & I preferred the society of our tormentors - We left the Wharf on Monday & on Wednesday morning the tow boat left us at the mouth of the Mississippi - in half an hour after we were in the water and enjoying our first taste of a little storm - I laughed at my fellow passengers for crying and enjoyed it ^{myself} very much - but I did not enjoy what the Captain told me when the storm was over - i.e. that he had an unusually poor crew & that if he had only known it before the tow boat left he would have sent to town for more men - for they did not know one end of the ship from the other - Pleasant prospect to cross the Atlantic with - A day or two after he told me he had been questioning his sailors & found that two of them had never seen salt water before - they were from Ohio and were travelling for the benefit of their health - Another was a Prussian soldier who did not know one rope from another & so on - there were only two or three who understood ship duty - At one time we thought we had yellow fever on board - one man was very sick & the Captain pronounced it Yellow Jack - Anot-