

OF THE

VERY REVEREND SUPERIOR-GENERAL

TO THE

Congregation of the Holy Cross.

ON BOARD THE VILLE DE BREST.

December 17, 1875.

REV. FATHERS AND BELOVED CHILDREN IN JESUS CHRIST:—It is now a week since I could write anything, owing to the violence of the winds and the roughness of the sea. This morning, the Octave of the Immaculate Conception, the elements seem to be more quiet; the rays of the sun once in a while pierce through the clouds, and cheerfulness brightens every countenance, as though we could almost see some long-wished-for port in the east. May it soon be a blessed reality! But, at best, we cannot land before five or six days. Then you will know that we are safe; and well may I say that your relief will be a heavy burden removed from my poor mind, and still more from my aching heart. It might be wiser to wait a little longer, until we shall have reached the shore, before addressing you these few lines, which for weeks yet may not be mailed to their destination. But I cannot stand any more the longings of my soul: I must convey you, without any further delay, the boundless gratitude I feel for the precious and unceasing prayers you have offered in my behalf; for I must tell you with unfeigned sincerity that the cruel pains I have caused you have actually formed the bitterest part of my chalice in our severe trial. The tears that blind my eyes bear me witness that I say the truth when I declare that I had never known before what love God has deposited in my heart for those He has entrusted to my care.

The fervent and heartfelt pleadings of so many pious souls, (to which, I freely confess, we owe our salvation,) which I fancied to see from here ascending by day and by night to the throne of God, again and again revealed to me a Religious Family whose worth and loveliness in the sight of Heaven I had never realized or truly appreciated; and as apprehensions grew stronger around me in proportion as clouds thickened over us and dangers multiplied, my confidence on the contrary took every day more clearly the shape of a deep conviction that in His own time and way our Blessed Lord would show that He was neither deaf nor insensible to such supplications. More than anything else, our Perpetual Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament confirmed me in this unshaken confidence and trust.

On my part, these long weeks of affliction have not been, I hope, a waste of time. They may prove one of the richest portions of my life; for I had occasion, as never before, to meditate and pray. Since the 8th especially, I have been in spirit before our Blessed Mother with my beloved children, presenting them one by one to her maternal heart, as the most acceptable offering I could make; begging of her to bless them, to shield them and save them; and that, if such was her Divine Son's will for us not to meet any more in this world, at least—oh, at least, we might all meet at her feet in eternal peace; and that I might say, after Jesus Himself: "Of those Thou hast given me, I have lost none." Thus I have tried to make every day my little returns for all the blessings of which I felt I was the constant recipient.

When Divine Providence shall have been pleased to bring this severe ordeal to a close, we shall all acknowledge that this trial has been like a crucible in which our mutual sentiments have been purified and intensified, and that our souls, having learned from deep emotions how to commune in earnest with God, will continue to dwell on high, and there alone seek for comfort and relief.

But I owe you, at least a brief sketch of our ever memorable journey. We left New York on Saturday, Nov. 13, at 2 p. m., on the splendid steamer *Amérique*, with 153 passengers and a personnel of 170. The *Amérique*, originally, known under the name of the *Impératrice Eugénie*, is unquestionably one of the best of the line. She measures 126 metres in length, or 415 American feet, 6 inches. In comfort and strength she is scarcely second to any on the ocean. For seven days she stood the sea admirably, at an average speed of 14 miles per hour, notwithstanding a continued head wind from the southeast. At the same rate we were certain to reach Havre on Tuesday evening, or in ten days, which only superior vessels can accomplish. Although the sea was not smooth, still we were all cheerful, and congratulating ourselves on the fine passage we were effecting. But alas! how sadly and suddenly we were to be disappointed!

Sunday morning, at 3.30, a terrible commotion shook the entire vessel for 20 seconds, as though she was riding over a series of rocky hills. In a few moments we were all on deck inquiring into the cause of our mutual fright. Five minutes

later the captain walked into the sitting-room and stated to five or six of us there present that the machinery was irreparably injured, the main piece or shaft reaching from the centre to the wheel being broken: that we were left to our sails, and any steamer we might meet.

The sad information spread in an instant, and at 4 o'clock nearly all the passengers had retired in dismay to their respective quarters. At 9 the same morning a steamer was sighted in the west, and signalled. She promptly returned the signals, and came directly to us. She was the *China*, of the Cunard Line, on her way to Liverpool. A side-boat was immediately sent to her, and returned within one hour. Then our Captain announced, in a few words, that anyone wishing to go to the English steamer might do so. At once twelve passengers, from various cabins, declared themselves ready, and were transferred on board the *China*. But the operation—the passage from one boat to the other—was far from attractive, or even safe. We had among the passengers in the first cabin, four aged and experienced captains of the French and American Navies, and the Chief Engineer of the U. S. Navy. None of them showed any disposition to move. Their example more than anything else fixed the rest in the same resolution.

At three P. M. the *China* moved off, and soon disappeared. Towards 5 the same evening the wind blew stronger from the southeast, and the next morning we learned to our general dismay that our ship was totally beyond control, and that we were literally left to the mercy of the winds and the waves, the sails being entirely too insignificant of themselves to direct, against the wind, such a huge mass to any given point. Meanwhile, the sea was increasing in roughness, and the vessel, hitherto so steady, was now rolling fearfully. The atmosphere was cloudy, dark and chilly; and the wind kept blowing almost a gale during the whole week. To the terrific noise of the elements outside was frequently added, within, the rolling of trunks and every piece of furniture, the breaking of lamps, of dishes and of plates, keeping poor inexperienced travellers in a sort of continual agony of mind. Nor could we console ourselves by the thought that at least we were approaching our objective point; for on the following Sunday, when a temporary clearance permitted the usual maritime observations, it was ascertained that we had been thrown off 115 miles from our course, and that much farther from Havre. A calm, however, came on, and lasted full five days. Nothing was gained by it but a temporary rest; but even this little relief was highly appreciated, for it was much needed.

Meanwhile we were all on a perpetual *qui vive*, looking day and night, and in every direction, for a vessel, confidently expected from Havre. But this precious boon was to be denied us for a while longer, and purchased with more prayers. The following Wednesday, Dec. 1st, towards 6 o'clock, P. M., we perceived a light directly ahead of us, but so far away that it was difficult to decide if it was the light of a steamer or a star. Three rockets brought an answer, and in less than an hour she was by our side. It was the *Moselle*, a Bremen vessel, bound to Southampton, and thence to some German port. She was promptly boarded, but could not assist us with any provisions or information. She had left New York only four days after we did. She took the captain's despatches for Paris, and moved away without any excessive demonstration of sympathy. The poor thing was not, likely, either, in a very humorous mood. Thus our forlorn *Amerique* was left again in the dark, completely ignoring when she could renew her communication with the exterior world. The weather continued moderate, and we went on increasing our prayers for the blessed sight of the coming help. The "1,000 Hail Mary" devotion was started among half a dozen pious souls; and in proportion as every hope was reaching a lower ebb among the crowd, these few chosen ones, hoping against all human hope, visibly showed on their countenances they had laid their anchor deeper than the superficial multitude can ever do, and when it had become a common phrase that no boat had been sent from Havre, they persisted in their declarations that the expected steamer would soon be seen. And the event finally justified their expectations.

On Sunday night, 2d of Advent, Dec. 5, at 11.30, a rocket, far away in the southeast, went up. In a few instants the same signal was repeated from our side, and in less than 30 minutes both steamers were within speaking distance. It was the *Ville de Brest*, sent after us, and searching for us since the 24th of November. On the broad ocean the largest vessel is but a speck. To de-

scribe the scene which followed the announcement of the arrival of the long-looked-for help would be simply impossible. To me it appeared better calculated than anything I have ever seen to give us some idea of the unspeakable joy of a meeting in heaven. Then and at once all past troubles were forgotten; no further danger was dreamed of; all was to be smooth; sunshine was to accompany us to the port. Thus in a few moments the darkest forebodings had been replaced by the brightest golden anticipations. But few, on that happy night, returned to their rest; who could have slept on such joy?

Early in the morning, the *Ville de Brest* sent us the provisions she had brought, and by 9 o'clock she tried to make connection with enormous cables and chains; but the sea was beginning to raise its waves, and the attempt resulted in a failure. The chain broke like a wire. No new attempt could be made before the following Wednesday forenoon. But no better success attended the effort; two large cables, 6 inches in diameter, tied together, broke like a common rope under the violence of the waves. The balance of the week reminded us of the worst days of our wanderings and tossings on the bosom of the angry ocean. Thus far, every Sunday had brought a change; the fifth one was no exception to the rule. Very early in the morning word was sent to every cabin that in a few moments the *Ville de Brest* would take on board all the passengers desirous of going. Ninety made ready, and at 11.30 all found themselves safely transported. The operation was executed without accident, but certainly not without difficulty and danger. A side-boat, 26 feet in length, was in waiting alongside, the large steamers towering 20 feet above. A perpendicular rope ladder was the only means for men and women to pass from the big ship to the little moving thing below, rising and lowering 8 or 10 feet 2 or 3 times a minute.

At 2 o'clock p. m. chains and cables had all been laid out successfully between the two steamers, at a distance of 600 feet from each other. Scarcely had we commenced our towing course than the wind blew afresh, with strong breezes from the S. E. The two ships moved under great difficulty and very slowly. When we rose in the morning, the cable had disappeared; it was promptly replaced by a second chain, and as the sea became gradually more quiet, we moved on more smoothly and rapidly.

Although we felt more secure on the *Ville de Brest*, our situation was far from being pleasant or comfortable. Everything in our new quarters was moist and chilly, and not one of us had a change on hand, our trunks having been left behind. Still, as we had made up our minds to feel better on the *Ville de Brest*, we bore bravely with these little shortcomings, and prayed only the more fervently for a final end of the same. Very few men or women know how much they could bear. May the love of duty give us all the same endurance which necessity sometimes imposes! There is a pleasure in remembering past trials, that have tested and revealed the heart.

On the whole I cannot regret this long and painful voyage, with which Divine Providence has been pleased to afflict us in loving designs. Most undoubtedly some great good has already come out of the trial. May the holy and adorable will of God be praised forever!

One more remark, and I close. Much as I have travelled in my life, no journey has left on my mind such consoling impressions. Since our accident I have dwelt at leisure on serious considerations; not only did I pray more, but I have actually felt day after day the sensible effects of the many prayers offered to Heaven in my favor; and before I lose faith in prayer I should certainly lose my mind. It seems that I have commenced here to know and love our Blessed Mother. The daily recital of the 1000 "Hail Marys," accompanied with meditation on the invocations of her Litany, has proved to me a source of unspeakable consolation and joy. A sea-voyage begun on the Feast of her Patronage and possibly to end on that of the Expectation of her Deliverance, covering her Immaculate Conception, with its entire octave, could not allow the forgetfulness of the Star of the Sea. Not a day could pass without bringing us nearer to the Mother of the Saviour. My confidence in her was great before; now it is boundless. May her sweet name be forever on our lips and in our hearts! Once more I thank with my whole soul every one who has prayed for me; may the same mercy accompany me till I reach the port of eternity.

H. SORIN, C. S. C.,
Superior General.