

Chapter 11

Additional Americans; New Orleans, Paddle-Steaming up the Mississippi River (1835)

On the day of Martineau and Louisa's visit to Jackson's battlefield they heard the river was rising, that "the eddies would be filled" and their voyage expedited. After packing hurriedly in late afternoon of 6 May, they were carried to the landing along with the Porters, Henry Clay and Clay's son-in-law, in a carriage filled "with magnolia, honeysuckle, and roses." Their steamboat, the *Henry Clay*, had made "ninety-six trips without accident," a rare feat on the dangerous river.¹ Porter asked Martineau if she had a life preserver, which she did not, but "Mr. E.," a man of gigantic strength and "an excellent swimmer," promised to save her in case of an emergency. "On the evening of the first day," Martineau recalled, "Mr. E. told me of the imminent danger he and his lady had twice been in, on board steamboats." Martineau quickly learned of "*snags*," "*planters*" and "*sawyers*," terms for the deadly tree fragments that lurked in the river. Before leaving her, New Orleans friends introduced the captain and fellow travelers Mr. and Mrs. Charles Greeley Loring of Boston, who became "intimate friends." (Frighteningly, while the ladies were inspecting the books and prints in the ladies' cabin, a peril unknown to most of the passengers arose: among the deck passengers who thronged on board to work their way up the river by carrying wood at the "wooding-places," one man lay down immediately and during the night died of cholera.)

Looking back at the city, the travellers could see the "lofty Cotton-press . . . amidst the windings of the river" but were soon summoned to supper and to meet additional fellow passengers. Unusually for Martineau she could remember only a few of the "multitude that surrounded the almost interminable table in the cabin--New Yorkers, elderly travelers, a family with squalling children and "long trains of young men." As they steamed up the Mississippi, she looked with curiosity at the "plantations of cotton and sugar," the groups of "nearly naked" slaves and the "level and rich-looking [fields] invariably bounded by the glorious forest." Sparkles of light along the shore at night bewildered her until she learned they were fireflies. Owing to the heat, Martineau rose early and spent the mornings reading in a gallery outside her window, hidden behind wet washing.

She was to disparage accounts by visitors like Trollope and Dickens that Americans "in stages and steam-boats" bolted down their food. Americans ate no faster than the English, she declared, when they had only ten or fifteen minutes for dining. Yet the manners of some American ladies "on board steam-boats [were] repulsive . . . bristling self-defense [and] cool pushing to get the best places . . . without the slightest trace of trust or cheerfulness." Indeed, by the first Friday the scanty supply of milk on the *Henry Clay* had begun to be fought over. As for the men, if their ubiquitous chewing of tobacco and spitting did "not sicken the Americans into a reform," she would say no more about "the nauseous subject."

In Jane Austen manner, Martineau described a usual day's travel on a Mississippi river boat. Conversation consisted chiefly of complaints of the heat or the glare -- of the children, or of the dullness of the river; varied by mutual interrogation about where every body was going. Few ladies looked out of the boat at "such scenery as we were passing!" Seated on the hurricane deck, Martineau liked to watch "the beauty of the evening stealing on . . . till the deck

passengers appeared with their blankets." At Baton Rouge they saw holiday makers enjoying themselves in a "summer-house, perched on a rising ground." Farther along, they went on shore where the height of the trees -- locust, cottonwood, elm, maple and live oak -- seemed incredible. Thick creepers kept passengers from penetrating the forest, and Martineau felt relieved she could not be *lost* in the woods. Picturesque flatboats passed them on the river, and she admired trim settlements. When the *Henry Clay* ran over a log, causing the yawl to be pierced, they stopped at a "wooding-place" to repair it. Martineau lost her feather fan in the fierce wind. At Natchez, the steward warned passengers to lock cabin doors before going ashore as townspeople would swarm on board. Yet Martineau admired the handsome buildings in the "beautifully situated" city, especially the "Agricultural Bank, the Court House, and two or three private dwellings." Night temperatures now dropped, and "next day there was a fire in the ladies' cabin." Amazing quantities of driftwood whirled by. At Vicksburg, the captain allowed time to walk through three or four streets of the "raw-looking, straggling place," Martineau noting "the steeple of the Court House magnificently overlooking a large expanse of wood and a deep bend of the river." A rough town, Vicksburg was full of gamblers; three months later following a disorder, twenty men were said to have been executed by lynch law.

One Sunday entry in Martineau's journal recorded a family of spoiled children who "roared as usual," "black damsels . . . dressed for the Sabbath" and a sermon by a bigoted young clergyman. Next day, the *Henry Clay* towed a disabled steamer to a settlement and amid a forest of wild and tangled cottonwoods, passengers briefly set foot in Arkansas. On 12 May, Memphis appeared "bare and hot" and the captain begged passengers not to go ashore as "the cholera was raging." At night Martineau was awakened by a tremendous noise, "like ploughing through a forest." They learned in the morning that the *Henry Clay* had been hit by enormous hailstones, both pilots temporarily blown from the helm by a squall.

A young student training to be a lawyer chatted with Martineau one morning, and she "thought he would never tire of analyzing Bentham" and of dissecting the "philosophy and politics" of Bulwer. She was relieved when breakfast was announced for "I thought we had earned it." More flatboats appeared, "sometimes floating down the very middle of the river; sometimes gliding under the banks." Martineau failed to spot an alligator but saw terrapins, wood pigeons and "the beautiful blue jay." Of "fearfully light and frail" canoes crossing the river, one was managed by a woman. Martineau pondered the feeling of "being alone on that rushing sea of waters, shut in by untrodden forests." Unlike the surging Atlantic waters that attracted her, the primitive woods seemed to make her feel strangely vulnerable.

As the *Henry Clay* approached Missouri, the weather turned colder, and Martineau occasionally played a rubber of whist in the evening. An article in a St. Louis newspaper about a lynching in Missouri caused grief at the terrible lesson of "the results of compromise!" In *Retrospect*, Martineau sneered that Missouri might now be "a peaceful and orderly region" rather than "a nest of vagabond slave-dealers, rapacious slave-drivers and ferocious rioters."²

Disappointingly, the *Henry Clay* passed the junction of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers during the night. The Ohio proved "as turgid as the Mississippi," and "junctions became frequent." Huge willows hung over the boat, beech trunks of "translucent green" conjuring up "a palace of the Dryads." Finally, after nearly five months in slave territory, Martineau's spirits rose at the sight of the Illinois shore.

Passing the junction of the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers on 14 May, Martineau, Louisa and the Charles Lorings decided "to ascend to Nashville without delay." Their luggage was brought out, they paid their fares of fifty dollars each and enjoyed "cold beef and negas" in the ladies' cabin. After "Smithland, at the mouth of the Cumberland river appeared," the *Henry Clay* landed. Standing in the rain waving their handkerchiefs, they saw the boat plough away upstream. Martineau was to declare in *Retrospect* that, in spite of various discomforts: "If there be excess of mental luxury in this life, it is surely in a voyage up the Mississippi, in the bright and leafy month of May".³

¹ Mississippi Voyage," *RWT* 2: 161-98 (Henry Clay had engineered the Missouri Compromise which allowed slavery in the territory of Missouri).

² *RWT*, 2: 161-98.

³ *RWT*, 2: 196-98.