

Chase Letter. (1.)

Roncador Reef,
Caribbean Sea.

June 14, 1865

My dear Governor:

In your last brief note to me at New York, you were kind enough to add a line inviting me to write you from time to time thereafter. It was as little in your mind as in mine that I should write first from a desolate reef in the Carabeau Sea. Very wonderful, and always to be reverently studied, are God's dealings with us. Mr. Leighton and myself, are families being with us, sailed from New York on the 22d of May in the steamship Golden Rule. There was every assurance of a prosperous voyage. It was in the pleasant weather of Summer Calms. The ship was new, of 3000 tons burthen and was believed to be the best result obtainable from abundant capital, skill and the best materials. At a quarter before ^{four} on the morning of June 30th we were startled from sleep by a loud crash and sprang on deck to find we had struck on a reef with the momentum of ten knots an hour. The great ship had opened at the stem and was filling slowly. Fortunately all efforts of our half crazed captain to back her off were useless. — At every blow of the great breakers we were driven ^a farther on the rocks, which the ship first struck at an oblique angle, and she finally swung around so that one side lay on the edge of the reef and the other, at an angle of little less than 45 degrees, lay exposed to the pitiless sea. Had the ship been backed off, as attempted, hardly a soul of the 680 on her ^{board} could have been saved as she would have gone down almost immediately in deep water. Seven boats were lowered and got through the surf more or less damaged and made fast to the small rocks, a score of which just projected above high tide on the inside reef on which for

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half a mile in width by ^{is even} 6 or 7 in length the water was ^{shallow} ~~shallow~~ from (2) feet to (8) and (10). The masts and smoke stacks were cut away. This materially relieved the ^Pfoundering of the ship and made moving about more practical. The upper deck, saloons, cabins and in fact most of the wood work above the main deck was cut away and ⁴ thrown over board to wash ashore on the reef where they were rapidly reconstructed into a ^{huge} ~~large~~ raft to hold 200 persons. Upon this the women and children were safely, though bruised and drenched, landed by midnight. At noon the ^{1st} ~~first~~ officer had been dispatched with ⁶ ~~six~~ men in a life boat to the Mosquito Coast for assistance. Just before dusk of the first day, to our unspeakable joy, a "Cay" (a head of the reef where the sand and rocks, to the extent of ³ ~~three~~ or ⁴ ~~four~~ acres are entirely above high tide) was discovered some five miles ⁶ ~~eastward~~. Here, there was a chance of life as long as our bread and water would last. After the ladies and children had been placed in the raft my first care, with Mr. Leighton, was the safe containing Government funds of which we were in charge. Its size had precluded the possibility of its going into either of our state rooms or into the specie locker, ^S so the ^{harser} ~~power~~ had it put in a secure place in the baggage hold, aside from the other baggage and freight. All efforts to induce the captain to allow me to unlock the hatch to go into the hold--now half or two thirds full of water, failed. He declared that neither treasure nor baggage should be looked after until the provisions and water were landed. This was well enough, if one work had interfered with the other, which was not the case.

On the second day all the balance of the ^{passengers and} ~~crew~~ were landed except the captain and ^{3d} ~~third~~ mate, ^Pporter (light keeper) and myself.

(no comma)

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I finally persuaded the captain to allow me to organize a small gang of working men ^Y to make an effort to save the ^Y treasure. It should be noted here that Mr. Leighton at this time, and all others, was willing to take the risks of remaining with me on the wreck, but his state of health and defect in sight made it unreasonable as useless for him to remain. By cooperating with me from ^{on} the ^{raft} reef and afterward from the "Cay" he was able to render as much service as anyone could. At about 3 P. M. of the second day we got the hatch off the hold and signalled for the gang of working men (pre-engaged for this purpose) ^{raft} On the reef to come on board by swimming along ^{the} two hawsers ~~in~~ stretched from the Engine frame for that purpose. At this moment, unfortunately, the captain of the ship-- a weak and vacillating man, changed his mind and declared the men should not ^{come} go on board, that it would soon be dark, unsafe etc. ^Y C. If allowed to work at this time I feel confident the safe could have been recovered. I ^{myself} must have got within 15 ~~feet~~ ^{ft} of it-- lateral or horizontal distance. My own and wife's baggage, which we could not replace for \$450⁰⁰, was in ~~the~~ easy reach, but I decided to postpone or rather ~~abandon~~ ^{that} for the sake of concentrating every ^{effort} force on the Government treasure. I remained in the wreck that night ^Y and the next day. The third night we spent on the ^{raft} ~~wreck~~ ⁺ All the Passengers and crew having been transferred with provisions and water to the "Cay", ⁺ and returned to the wreck in the morning with a force of picked men and got to work in the hold. The water was now so deep--as the ship settled more and more on the outside of the reef, and the accumulation of debris, floors, stanchens, ⁰ crushed baggage, ship stores ^Y etc., ^Y etc., that two days were spent cutting holes in the deck and clearing away before we could commence diving.

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You must understand that the floors and bottom of the ship had now been worn through by the sharp coral rocks, so that all heavy articles lay on the bottom. From that time to the present we have done what it seemed possible, but have not found the box. On the 5th day after the wreck I visited the "Cay" for the first time and found all doing well on hard bread and salt pork with brackish water, very little complaining. After an hour with wife and children I returned to the reef, going upon the wreck whenever practicable and remained on the reef, where I have a very comfortable shelter--until yesterday. The ship is now a total wreck, nothing left standing but her huge black engine. My tent is now on the "Cay" in sight of the wreck, which I visit every other day. On the 8th inst. there was the wildest expressions of joy on the reef for plainly though faint on the horizon were two sails--the first officer was returning with two fishing schooners of 20 tons each. This would be a communication with the world. On the next day, just as the schooners were setting sail for Aspinwall with 120 souls crowded on the deck of each two American boats--the "Huntsville" and "State of Georgia" hove in sight. These had been secured by the second officer of the Rule who had been dispatched in the second boat three days after the first. The half starved and parched and half clothed (for all escaped with only the clothes they stood in) passengers were quickly got on board. Now came the trying question as to what was my duty. Life is sweet and the certainty of escape was before me. On the other hand a great trust had been confided to me. We read our instructions carefully; we were directed to make every possible effort at rescue and in case of shipwreck--or to make sure of the destination of the notes. Every plan for rescue had not been

I could not satisfy my conscience that it was right to go. I resolved to remain, taking the chances of escape hereafter. The

I could not. I Mr. Leighton acted as you would infer from his character. He was ^{very} willing to remain with me. But this seemed an

beside, it was necessary Mrs. Leighton should go on to the nearest port and so make ^{use of} some ~~communication~~ ^{ing} directly and officially with

for any compensation that I judged the Department would or ought to sanction. P At 7 in the evening of the 9th inst, the commander of

Of the steamers disappeared in the Southern Cross. ^{Under} These heavy ^{even} fishing schooners, having completed the wrecking of what remained of the

Golden Rule, sailed for the Island of "Grand Cayman", a dependency of Jamaica, where they belong.

I avail ~~of~~ the opportunity to send you this letter. From tonight I shall be alone on the ^Reef. My condition, however, is by no means wretched. My supply of hard bread is abundant and probably, enough water with careful use. We had constructed a comfortable sort of tent out of an old sail. My larder(³three poles in pyramidal shape and smooth, so as to defeat the climbing of land crabs and other insects) is ~~as~~-opulent with ²two hams, a little coffee, sugar and a case of preserved plums. Our wealth is comparative--how ^Prich am I compared with Crusoe? ^PI have no doubt but that the Secretary of the Treasury will make such interest with the Navy Department as will secure at the proper time the calling in here of some naval vessel, cruising in or near this sea--as they always are. ^PAt this season of the year a Southerly trade wind, blowing fresh, prevails here, so that the tropical heat is tempered. Scarcely any rain falls. Great numbers of sea fowl, gulls, an ungainly bird called by the Sailors "Boobies" frequent the ~~Cay~~ who in my loneliness really seem companionable. I have found several of their eggs, about one third the size of ordinary hen's eggs^s and, singularly enough, mottled precisely the color of the spotted corals. Query, ^Pdoes this color~~of~~ the coral, which is all the birds see, aside from water, have the same physiological effect in the incubating bird that Jacob's speckled rods had on the gestating herds? of his greedy fatherⁱⁿ law? There are plenty of fish, but alas! I did not foresee the need of fishing hooks and lines before leaving New York. Occasionally a green ^{sea}turtle glides out in the shallow water, but they are ^{too}very shy and too quick, albeit so clumsy. Now my heart is set in capturing one of these turtles. It is an exploit that must ~~be~~, somehow, be accomplished, could I but catch one

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+ and "corral" him until some ship arrives so that he might be forwarded to Mrs. Sprague, for one of her petitessoupers, which should make Roncador, ^{to his} for once, well spoken of. ⁿⁿ With a tolerable supply of water, plenty of bread, good weather (the taping process will not hurt) and the welcome wail of the sea birds, I feel that my comforts are so much plus any annoyances that the latter should hardly be remembered. Among the few inconveniences, however, are a rascally species of crab amphibious and a torment ^{inf} but not dangerous ^{reptile} ~~reptile~~ called by the Jamaicans "Soldiers." These crawl over me by night--a most unwelcome mode of being awakened. However, I am getting my bed(?) arrayed on smooth poles, oar handles ^{tc} etc., and may in time defy the intruders. ^{ny} The ship has so thoroughly broken up in the surf, which brings all the wooden pieces to the leeward side of the reef, that I am satisfied the Safe has gone down into the deep water outside the reef, ~~and~~ the windward and consequently the surfward wall of ^{which} ~~it is~~ quite steep. The correctness of this theory will be demonstrated by a few weeks of careful watching, for if the ^{weight of the} ~~wood~~ safe (1 ¹/₄ inch boiler iron enclosed in a wooden box) has not been sufficient to carry it down with the boiler, ^{chore + c + c} chains, and irons, etc., etc., into the deep water, It will certainly come ashore, ~~and~~ be driven ashore by the surf when the debris that may be still atop of it, has washed off.

⁶² ⁶³ ^{can} I have taken the liberty of writing a letter to Mr. McCulloch--who is scarcely acquainted with me--urging the importance of changing the mode of sending funds to the Pacific side. I still think that my plan, which gained your approval in '62 and '63 is the best; viz/ the notes sealed up in tin or zinc cases to be fitted inside of common travelling trunks that ~~could~~ ^{can} be taken into the Agent's state room. Perhaps you will take the trouble to send the

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letter to Mr. McCulloch with such brief endorsement as may secure its reading and an examination into its merits as a plan for the safer transfer of the Public Monies.

I should be glad to be remembered to your daughter and to Mr. Sprague.

Very respectfully, ever your friend,

Victor Smith

Hon. S. P. Chase
Washington D.C.

This Reef is in Lat. $13^{\circ}34'$ Lon. $79^{\circ}59'$