

Peninsula Diary Mayo Hayes O'Donnell

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Letters From America

The diary of Henryk Sienkiewicz, a Polish writer, kept as he traveled along the coast of California, grows more interesting through the translations of A.S. Koper, a teacher at the Presidio Army Language School in Monterey. The translation is from his letters and reports, which collected, formed two volumes of "Letters from America" written in 1876, during a two years' sojourn in the United States, most of which he spent in California.

After describing his shipmates, the weather the food and other amusing conversational items Sienkiewicz continues his impressions of California: "On the deck there is a change: the sun is setting. The blue and white daylight gradually sucks out the gold and the red. The air is fresh and imbued with the healthy smell of sea vegetation. The ocean which throughout the day was without a rumple became even smoother. Simply it is falling asleep."

After a thrilling and charming description of sharks in the ocean, such as: "the swift exceedingly, quiet movements of the monsters – the fins cut the smooth surface – the monster disappears quietly under the surface of the water and after him, in turn, vanish the others. And then again only the smooth, quiet depth is seen. They swam into the golden, immensely luminous path spread on the water by the setting sun"; the Polish writer wrote of Monterey Bay.

"We are not able to see them (the sharks) on this path because our eyes are blinking because of the excess of that brightness. But the sun will soon set. Only half of its radiant head appears out of the water. After a while only golden tresses remain on the waves, the head slipped already behind the far depth. Another minute: sun set.

What a marvelous moment! A wide streak of water in the direction the sun still shines, glitters, lightens, changes color as if illuminated from beneath. This golden road disappears on the border of the horizon in the sea of purple. I am not able to describe all this. Unexpectedly you ask yourself whether this road leads to a sphere out of the earth where everything is beautiful, immortal; where love is everlasting; where a poetic calm and rapture sway forever. You are not

ashamed of dreaming and exulting poetically. You wanted to sail there pursuing the light as a bird. In that brightness some islands are flashing.

"We are passing by Angel Island. The twilight dies out. On the still purple, but already darkening background appears one star, then another. On the front mast the figure of a sailor is silhouetted in the rigging. After awhile they light up a blue lantern. The engine whistles, we are sailing at a port. The ship moves very slowly, and gradually turns to the shore. Meanwhile night is falling. Once more one can hear a whistle. The coastal rocks open, forming spacious valley sloping to the bay. There are seen clumps of trees, like Polish oak groves. A little further on the white houses, the lights in the windows, a pointed church tower is silhouetted on the dark sky. Closer to us a wharf built of timber posts, and people with lanterns on it.

"The sailors pulling the ropes shout their usual plaintive 'ooo-ho'. One feels concussion; the ship rests upon the palisade. People on the wharf catch a rope and turn it around a pole. Once more, this time much weaker, shock and we are resting."

At this point Henryk Sienkiewicz discovers Monterey: "What is this town, I ask."

"Monterey."

"Soon only two men remain on deck, A Mexican priest and I. The priest paces quietly, and looking at the stars, says his prayers. I am sitting on the bench and looking at the lights twinkling in the distant home windows.

"After finishing his prayers the priest approaches me. 'Bonita Noche!' (A beautiful night), he says in a low voice as if he wanted not to frighten away its charm. I nod my head in affirmation, but I am not disposed to carry on the conversation and the priest returns to his prayers, 'Ave Stella ...'."

"My thoughts turn to my native country. In Poland it is winter now. The dawn rises there may be frosty, but certainly rosy. The farm villages are covered with snow, the roofs are white, and columns of the livid smoke rise vertically to the sky. In gardens, branches covered by the hoar frost remain motionless and silent. In front of houses the frozen well-sweeps creak, the flocks of crows with their usual 'Kra! Kra!' and flutter of wings wake up those who still sleep."

Thus ends the description of the coast of California and a delightful description of the same season's happening

in his native Poland by Henryk Sienkiewicz in 1876, as translated by Stefan Koper of Ord Village, a teacher of the Polish language at the Presidio of Monterey.