The voyage from New York to Panama was difficult, to say the least. In the words of Sister Blandine, “we began to throw up heartily, one after the other, without exception.” Sister Praxedes, being the least seasick, cared for the others throughout the four-day journey in the hot and crowded cabin, filled with the smells of the voyage to reach? The scene was much the same in the Sisters’ cabin, where Sister Praxedes, overcome with fear, kept asking: “Sister Blandine, are you scared?” The terrified Sister Blandine replied lightly, “no, I am afraid of nothing,” joking that if they were all thrown into the sea at least they would arrive “all that much cleaner to celebrate the Immaculate Conception in heaven.” At the same time, she later wrote, she was praying, over and over: “do what you did for St. Peter—stop the storm, Lord.”

By 8:00am the worst was over, and the ship safely entered the mouth of the Columbia. Going up on deck, grateful to be alive, they beheld their new land for the first time. It was December 8—the solemnity of Mary’s Immaculate Conception. The Sisters sang the “Stabat Mater” to the accompaniment of Sister Blandine’s accordion.

Father Rossi, meanwhile, filled with missionary fervor, eagerly scanned the landscape for his first glimpse of Vancouver. He later wrote: “When we arrived in sight of Fort Vancouver I turned towards my bishop and asked him where the town was. ‘There,’ said he to me, pointing towards the northern bank of the river. I looked towards where he was pointing and, seeing nothing, climbed on some trunks, stuck out my neck, strained my eyes almost out of their sockets, still hoping to find something. But there was nothing within sight. I had imagined that I was going to arrive in a place, not, perhaps, quite like the big cities I’d seen and visited, but at least something that had the look of a town or a big village…. I came back to my bishop and again asked him where the town was. ‘There, there… Do you see that house, and the other one over there? Take a good look, that’s the town,’ he replied. I confess that a spontaneous and quite involuntary gesture betrayed my disappointment. Burying my head in my hands, I exclaimed, ‘My God! What have I gotten myself into!’”

Father Rossi, meanwhile, took in the scene with quite different sentiments. “How can I tell you what a joy it was for me?” she wrote. “Soon, she and her Sisters “would have the happiness to begin, in this new country, to exercise the ministry of charity.”

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But on the night of December 7, a storm broke out. The crew, running from one end of the ship to the other, convinced Father Rossi that they were going to sink—he could only lie in his bunk praying, “Oh Holy Virgin, would you allow me to perish in sight of the mission that I have undertaken such a long voyage to reach?” The scene was much the same in the Sisters’ cabin, where Sister Praxedes, overcome with fear, kept asking: “Sister Blandine, are you scared?” The terrified Sister Blandine replied lightly, “no, I am afraid of nothing,” joking that if they were all thrown into the sea at least they would arrive “all that much cleaner to celebrate the Immaculate Conception in heaven.” At the same time, she later wrote, she was praying, over and over: “do what you did for St. Peter—stop the storm, Lord.”

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