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Letters from New England – No. 1

Lucian Minor

From the Fredericksburg Arena.

LETTERS FROM NEW ENGLAND.—NO. I.

BY A VIRGINIAN.

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And you will positively "excommunicate" me if I do not send you "some *first impressions*" of Yankee-land? Have at you then; though, really, my time has been so filled with seeing and hearing, that hardly a scrap remains to write down a hundredth part of the curious or striking things that meet my eyes and ears.

Unusual opportunity has been afforded me for seeing various lights and shades of Yankee character. In stage and steamboat, in jersey wagon and on foot, on highways and by-ways, in farm houses and city palaces, I have seen and chatted with all sorts of people, from the * * * of the * * * down to the tavern porter and the country laborer. Five days I have spent in a pedestrian stroll, calling often at the country houses to get a draught of water, rest myself, and talk with the farmer or his wife. These gossipings, you may well suppose commonly produced amusement and frequently solid information, at least solid materials for reflection; and, considering that it is only a little more than three weeks since my entry into New England, methinks I have a pretty exact measure of Jonathan's foot. Yet for all this preface, do not expect any very astounding revelations. From the thousand incidents that, unitedly, make my tour extremely interesting to myself, it is not certain that any one, or any dozen can be selected, which will materially interest another person.

In the *visible* face of Massachusetts and Connecticut, the features which, by their novelty or beauty, most strike a Virginian eye, are the small farms, usually of from fifty to two hundred acres; the small fields in proportion, there being sometimes fifteen or twenty in one farm; the stone fences, rendered necessary and numerous in many places by scarcity of timber, and by the troublesome superabundance of stone; the universality of *hay* crops, on hills as well as in meadows; the almost *entire absence of wheat*, (the only grains generally cultivated being corn, rye and oats,) the clustering of habitations together in villages, instead of having them dispersed at intervals of a mile over the country; the white painted village churches, all with stately spires, visible for miles around, having gilt vanes, and clocks of hands so large and stroke so loud, that I have repeatedly seen and heard the hour half a mile off.—The country is more hilly, or *rolling*, as our farmers would say, than the lower half of Virginia; and the hills have, generally, a smaller base and a more gracefully swelling, dome-like top, than our hills. These rotundities, with their concomitant hollows, traversed by numberless stone fences, with here and there patches of woodland and detached white farm houses, half imbosomed in elms and fruit trees; while, perhaps, two

or three villages, with steeples piercing the sky, are at once within the view, exhibit everywhere landscapes of a beauty unknown to eastern, or indeed, to western Virginia. Here is not a hundredth part of the appearance of abject, squalid poverty, that our state presents. I have not seen a log house in New England; and nine-tenths of the ordinary farm houses are painted. Brick and stone buildings are not common, except in the cities. This village, the most lovely to the eye in all the north, and Worcester, (take care to call it *Wooster*) having respectively, 3000 and 4 or 5000 inhabitants, contain, both together, hardly more than one hundred and fifty brick and stone houses.

But the *morale* of New England, the character of her people, their tone of thought and feeling upon some important subjects, their social and political institutions, regulations, and usages, have interested me far more than her physical lineaments.

Would that time and space were mine to explain the road, pauper, and school systems of Massachusetts and Connecticut. (They and Rhode Island are the only states of New England which I have visited.) But that would require too much detail. Their felicitous organization may be inferred from their effects.

The common roads are all, or nearly all, *ridged up*, turnpike fashion, and fully as good as our turnpikes. I do not mean such as a certain one not far from ———, which the traveller knows to be a turnpike only by the tolls and the jolts, but those in the valley, and near Richmond.

There is probably not a beggar by trade (except solicitors for pious charities and subscriptions) in New England. The needy are sent to a poor house, having a farm attached to it, on which they work for the parish, or are let to the lowest bidder for their maintenance, as the people of each township choose. In different townships (or *towns*, as the provincial dialect hath it,) the number of paupers greatly varies. I have been told of five, ten, twenty, and even thirty, or more, upon the list; and, as there are many "towns" in a county, perhaps the number of such pensioners here, equals ours. But mark! the expense here is next to nothing—sometimes absolutely nothing: nay, some "towns" actually derive a revenue from the labors of their parish poor. Salem has thus gained several thousand dollars in a year. All who are able render a fair equivalent, sometimes more, for the relief they receive.

Every person in this state, above four years of age, is entitled to instruction, at the charge of the "town," in the useful common branches of knowledge; and a man or woman who cannot read, is here a prodigy.—Nine-tenths, at least, of the whole population take, or read newspapers. (In Virginia not more than half the white population does so.) Here seems to be not a fourth of the tippling that we have; gambling is even far more rare: there is not a race course in New England; and, considering the density of the population, (eighty to the square mile, ours is only nineteen,) I do not believe there is a fourth so much vice and crime as with us. In moral science, and not least in that branch of it which investigates the texture of a people's character, it is hard to ascertain causes and effects with precision.—What was *effect*, by a sort of reaction frequently becomes *cause*; they give each other reciprocal impulses, like the mutual aid of parent and offspring; sometimes various causes mingle their operations, in unseen, perhaps invisible degrees,—and there is no laboratory, no apparatus for resolving the inscrutable compound into its elements. The moral chemist should, therefore, diffidently ascribe the order, industry, sobriety, thriftiness, and intelligence, which characterise these people, to any one cause, or to any set of causes. But general consent, and the reason of the case, leave little doubt that much, if not most of these virtues, must be attributed to the system of COMMON SCHOOLS. Yet it may be questioned if, in producing social good, the school system has not in these states a *co-efficient*, of equal or superior influence. The road and poor systems—nay, the school system itself, it seems to me, owe nearly all their virtues to the TOWNSHIP SYSTEM.

Each county is subdivided into districts, of no uniform shape or size, though usually four, five, or six miles long and broad. By an impropriety, too fast rooted ever to be eradicated, these are called *towns;* which word is never understood here in its English sense, as opposed to *country*, and meaning an assemblage of houses, but always as signifying one of the *districts* I have mentioned. Protesting against its lawfulness, I shall yet use it now in the New England sense. Each town is a sort of republic. Its people, in full town meeting, elect a representative, or representatives, in the legislature, *selectmen*, (nearly equivalent to common-council-men) assessor, and collector; decide how the poor shall be kept, schools organized, or roads altered or repaired, and what amount shall be raised by taxes for these and other purposes. A town meeting is held statedly, in the spring, for elections; and two or three others, whenever ten voters request it of the selectmen, in writing. At deliberative meetings, a chairman (here called "Moderator,") is chosen by the assembly; great decorum prevails, and earnest debates arise. The town, as a corporate person, is liable for any damage sustained through neglect to keep a road in repair; and damages have frequently been recovered. It is obliged by law, to support schools enough to educate all its children in the manner prescribed. It is bound to maintain its own poor. And the near interest, the direct agency which every citizen has in the performance of these duties, cause them to be attended to with an exactness and an efficacy which a government less *local*, never would attain. This is the very system which it was the leading wish of Mr. Jefferson's life to see established in Virginia.* No one can see its admirable effects without owning that wish to have been one of the wisest which his wise and patriotic mind ever cherished. Such an organization is not only a nursery of statesmen,—it diffuses among the multitude habits of reflection and of action about public affairs,—makes them feel often and sensibly, the dignity of self-government,—and fits them better and better for the exalted task. It is, morally, what a *well disciplined* militia would be physically. Not the wretched militia that, by our own disgraceful neglect, has now become our own scorn, but that which our forefathers recommended to us as a main "bulwark of our liberties," and "the best defence of a free state."

All the direct taxes in this state are laid by the towns. The state government is maintained entirely by the

* See his letters to Kercheval, in 1816.

interest on some accumulated funds, and by a tax of half of one per cent. on the capital of the state banks. By the by, there are at least one hundred of these in Massachusetts, having a capital altogether, as is computed, of about thirty millions! And this for a state of 7,800 square miles, and 610,000 people. Verily "*incedit per ignes suppositos cineri doloso:*" or, in English, "she *sits* upon a mine of gunpowder." Perhaps sailing through the air in a car buoyed by bubbles, might be as apt an illustration.

The *common* schools (so those supported by taxation are called) are not the only ones, for even elementary instruction. Many wealthy persons, unfortunately for the public weal, prefer sending their children to teachers of their own employing: and thus numerous private schools of various grades, and some of these of great merit, are planted over the state. *Unfortunately* I say, because such persons are often those whose *interested* countenance and supervision are most essential to the good management of the *common* schools,—which, deprived of them, lose half their usefulness. Female education is well attended to. Good schools for females, (reputedly so, I have not entered one of them) seem much more numerous than with us, allowing duly for population. And a judgment of the trees by their fruits, would confirm that belief; for in my casual and diversified intercourse, I have met, I think, with a larger proportion of well taught women than would occur in a similar range through our own society. Yet such a comparison is very fallacious, and perhaps not worth making. Of one thing I am satisfied, by personal observation; that the additional work rendered necessary to ladies in New England, by the imperfect and unservant-like "help" which they hire, is not at all incompatible with refined delicacy of mind, manners, and person. That it *is* so, however, is a leading argument with some of our *philosophers* for slavery. If memory served me, I would quote for their benefit, a caustic passage from the "Three Wise Men of Gotham," to the effect that "a *genuine philosopher* is never at a loss for *facts* to support any theory, however absurd or ridiculous. Having constructed *that* according to the most approved principles, and upon the most ingenious plan, he goes to work, and either *makes* all the facts needful to uphold it, or distorts actual facts to suit his purpose."

It has been my good fortune to meet with some admirable female minds in New England. Since the spells of romance were shaken from me, I have never hoped to see more happily exemplified, that trait of a capital heroine of our favorite Miss Edgeworth: "you could discover that the stream of literature had passed over her mind, only by the verdure and fertility you saw there." (I mar the quotation, doubtless, but that is its substance.) No pedantic harping upon books, and authors, and sciences; some cross-examination would be requisite, to find out that she knew their names. But let a subject be tabled, calling for ideas, or for exertions of intellect, to which a conversancy with books, authors and sciences was indispensable—and you might see that she knew them well. Then too she knew much that they—but for fear you should think I am about to fall in love, (which however is impossible,) I will suppress the rest of my encomium.

Abolition, if not dead here, is in a state too desperately feeble to give us an hour's uneasiness. Of the many intelligent men with whom I have conversed on this subject in Massachusetts, Rhode Island and Connecticut, there is but a single one who does not reprobate the views of Messrs. Tappan, Cox, Garrison and Co. as suggestions of the wildest, most pernicious fanaticism. Tappan has two brothers in Boston, both ardent colonizationists, and decidedly opposed to his mad notions. Not only do the persons I have talked with, themselves reprobate interference with that painfully delicate and peculiar concern of the south: they testify to the almost entire unanimity of their acquaintance, in the same sentiment. And such multiplied and decisive proofs have I, of the sound state of the public mind on that subject, as leave me not a doubt, that *nine-tenths* of the votes, and ninety-nine hundredths of the intellect of the country, are for *letting us wholly alone*. You have little idea of the contempt in which Garrison, and his will-o'-the-wisp, the *Liberator*, are held here. I have heard him spoken of as a "miserable fanatic," and "a contemptible poor creature," in companies so numerous and mixed, as to demonstrate—none gainsaying it—that the speakers but expressed the public thought. "There is in this, as in other communities," said a Cambridge Professor to me, "always afloat a certain quantity of moral *virus*, or noxious *gas*, ever and anon imbodying itself in some such form as this, of abolitionism. Not long ago, it was anti-masonry. In two years, abolitionism will be as prostrate as anti-masonry is now. It may, meanwhile, spread fast and boldly: it may create disturbances and alarms: it may prevail so far, in some districts, as to have representatives in Congress, who will there bring forward some scheme of emancipation: but triumph finally, or even extensively, in the north, *it never can*." And all that I saw, or heard, convinced me that Mr. G****** was not widely mistaken.

At Worcester, last year, an apostle of abolition from "some where away down east," delivered a lecture, in the Baptist Church, against slavery; depicting its wrongs and evils, and insisting upon its extirpation. He was heard patiently; but when he closed, the pastor of the church arose, and, to the satisfaction of a numerous audience, completely answered every argument; vindicated the southern slaveholders from all wilful injustice in being such; shewed the impracticability of any but the most cautiously gradual emancipation, and the madness of attempting even that, by officious intermeddling from the non-slaveholding states. Our apostle wanted to lecture again the next day; but the excitement against his doctrine had grown so strong, that he was refused a further hearing, and admonished, by some of the leading citizens, that if he remained longer, he was in danger of tar and feathers. Among the warmest of his reprobators, were the late and the present governors; both residing there. He wisely decamped; and has had no successor in Worcester. The manner in which the New York riots have been spoken of in New England, strikingly shews the bad odor of abolition here. Instead of the leaning towards that side, which I feared would result from sympathy and indignation at its being made the object of a mob's fury, the abolitionists seem to be regarded by the majority as most chargeable themselves, with all the mischief that has been done. It is the common sentiment, that they deserved the treatment they received; and the censure thrown upon the mob is very *gentle roaring* indeed. I find almost

every New Englander readily assenting to the positions,—That two millions of slaves could never be turned loose amongst us and live, while *we* lived: that the existence of the two *castes* in the same country, in a state of freedom and equality, is morally impossible: that emancipation, without removal, therefore, is utterly chimerical: that, unjustifiable as slavery is in the abstract, rights of property in slaves have been acquired, which, sanctioned as they are by the constitution, and by a claim prior and paramount to the constitution, cannot be violated without an outrage, destructive at once of our social compact: that, let slavery be ever so wrong, abolition ever so just and easy, it is a matter which concerns *us alone;* and as to which, we are so sensitively jealous of extraneous interposition, that every agitation of the subject in other states is calculated to weaken our attachment to them, and bind faster the chains of slavery.

In a word, the south may be assured, that on this point, New England is sound: at least the three states which I have visited. Colonization is popular here—with those, I mean, who know or reflect at all about it. The majority (like the majority with us,) are without either knowledge or thought on the subject. The abolitionists find fault with colonization, because, say they, its aim is to postpone or prevent emancipation. Our southern *illuminati* oppose it, on the ground that it *favors* emancipation! Do not these inconsistent objections neutralize each other, like opposite quantities in Algebra, or opposite simples in Chemistry?