Letters from New England – No. 2

Lucian Minor
LETTERS FROM NEW ENGLAND.—NO. 3.

Our readers will participate with us in the pleasure of reading the second letter from New England, by an accomplished Virginian, whose easy and forcible style is so well employed in depicting the manners and character of a portion of our countrymen, separated from us not more by distance, than by those unhappy prejudices which too often spring up between members of the same family. The acute observation of men and things which these letters evidence, will entitle them to be seriously read and considered,—and they will not have been written in vain, if they serve to remove the misconception of a single mind. We repeat what we stated in our last number, that although they were originally published in the Federalist Arena, they have since undergone the revision and correction of the author expressly for publication in the Messenger.


Or Yankee hospitality (curl not your lip sarcastically—you, or any other Buchanin)—or Yankee hospitality—there is a great deal, in their way,—i.e. according to the condition and circumstances of society. Not a little more can be said of Virginia hospitality. Set one of our large farmers down upon a hundred, instead of a thousand, acres; let him, and his sons, cultivate it themselves; feed the cattle; rub down and feed the horses; milk the cows; cut wood and make fires; let his wife and daughters alone tend the garden; wash, iron, cook, make clothes, make the beds, and clean up the house; let him have but ten acres of wood land, in a climate where snow lies three, and frost come for seven, month a year; surround him with a dense population—80, instead of 12, to the square mile; bring strangers, constantly, in flocks to his neighborhood; place a cheap and comfortable inn but a mile or two off; give him a ready and near market for his garden stuffs, as well as for his grain and tobacco—and ask yourselves, if he could, or would, practise our "good old Virginia hospitality?" To us, who enjoy the credit and the pleasure of entertaining a guest, while the drudgery devolves upon our slaves; the larger scale (wastefully large) of our daily routine, too, making the presence of one or more additional months absolutely needful,—hospitality is a cheap, easy, and delightful virtue. But put us in place of the yankees, in the foregoing respects, and any man of sense and candor must perceive that we could not excite them. Personal observation and personal experience, make us "a swift witness" to their having, in ample measure, the kindliness of soul, which soothes and sweetens human life: a kindliness ready to expand, when occasion bids, as well towards the stranger, as towards the object of nearer ties. Now where have I seen equal evidences of public spirit; of manifest charity; of a generous yielding up of individual advantage to the common good. No where, more, or lovelier, examples of domestic affection and happiness—evidenced by tokens, small it is true, but not to be counterfeited or mistaken. And no where have I had entertainers task themselves more to please and profit me, as a guest. Yet, as you know, few can have witnessed more of Virginia hospitality than I have. It would be unpardonable egotism, and more pardonable than I choose to be, even in boasting just praise; besides "spinning my yarn" too long—do more than glance warrant the animosities heresy, of comparing our northern broadcloth with ourselves, in our most prominent virtue. Gentlemen, some of them of advanced years, and engaged in such pursuits, as make their time valuable both to themselves and the public, have devoted hours to showing me all that could amuse or interest a stranger, in their vicinities—accompanying me on foot, and driving me in their own vehicles, for miles, to visit scenes of present wonder, or of historic fame: patiently answering my innumerable questions; and explaining, with considerate minuteness, whatever occurred as needful explanation, in the vast and varied round of moral and physical inquiry. In surveying literary, charitable, and political institutions—in trying to ascertain, by careful, and doubtless, troublesome cross-questionings, the structure and practical effects of judicial, and school, and paper systems—in examining the machinery (human and immaterial) of manufactories—in probing their tendencies upon minds and morals—in 'stumbling over recollections' in Boston, on Bunker's hill, and around Lexington—I found guides, enlighteners, and hosts, such as I can never hope to see surpassed, if equalized, for friendliness and intelligence. A friend of ours from Virginia, who was in the city of Boston with his family when I was, carried a letter of introduction to one of the citizens. "This gentleman, for three days," said our friend, "gave himself up entirely to us; brought his carriage to the hotel, and carried us in it over the city, and all its beautiful environs; in short, he seemed to think that he could not do too much to amuse and gratify us." To enjoy such treatment as this, one must, of course, in general, come introduced, Further reproduction prohibited without permission.

Reproduced with permission of the copyright owner.
by letter or otherwise. Then—may, according to my experience, in some instances without any introduction—the fole of kindness flows as ungrudgingly as that of Virginia hospitality, and for more beneficially to the object: at no expense, too, not only of money, but of time—which here, more emphatically than anywhere else in America, is money. When travelling on foot, I had no less frequently, except of myself. Still, unburoughed civilities, and more than civilities, usually met me. A farmer, at whose house I obtained comfortable quarters on the first night of my walk, refused all compensation, giving me at the same time a hearty welcome and an invitation to stay to breakfast. Next day, a man in a jersey wagon, overtook me, and invited me to ride with him. I did so, for an hour, while our roads coincided: and found him intelligent, as well as friendly. Whenever I wanted, along the road, refreshing drinks were given me—cedar, switchel, and water—the two first always unasked for. One goodwife, at whose door I called for a glass of water, made me sit down, treated me abundantly to cider, and, finding that my object was to see the country and learn the ways of the people, had herself out to impart such items of information as seemed likely to interest me: wishing me ‘great success’ at parting. Many similar instances of kindness occurred. It is true, none of the country people invited me to partake of their meals, except one; but I was not exactly conscious of being slighted; and actually suffering from a fever and ague—told me that he had walked all the way from Bath, in Maine, to the neighborhood of Hartford, where I overtook him, entirely upon charity; and had never asked for food or shelter in vain. A lady that day had given him a clean linen shirt. There was no whining in this poor fellow’s tale of distress: his tone was not a grumble, and his port erect: he seemed, like a true sailor, as frank in accepting relief as if he would be free in giving it.

The result of all my observation is, that the New Englanders have in their hearts as much of the original material of hospitality as we have: that, considering the sacrifices it costs them, and the circumstances which modify its application, they act more purely on the principle of that material as we do; and that, although their mode of using it is less saucy than ours, it is more rational, more salutary—better for the guest, better for the host, better for society. And most gladly would I see my countrymen and countrywomen exchange the vainious profusion—which, to earn, or preserve, a vanglorious name, pneum and stupifies themselves and impoverishes their country, for the discriminating and judicious hospitality of New England: retaining only those freer and more captivating traits of their own, which are warranted by our sparer settlements, ourampler fields, and our different social organization.

Yet, while such praise is due to the general civility and kindness of the New Englanders, it must be qualified by saying, that several times, I have experienced discourtesy, which chafed me a good deal; but always from persons who, in their own neighborhoods, would be considered as vulgar. The simplest and most harm-
less question, propounded in my civilized manner, has occasionally been answered with a gruffness, that would for half a minute upset my equanimity. For example—‘Good morning sir’ (to a hulking, rough, Carter-looking fellow, one hot morning, when I had walked eight miles before breakfast) 11how far to Enfield’—‘Little better than a mile,’—was the answer; in an abrupt, unruly, undetermined tone, uttered without even turning his head as he passed me. Two or three of ‘mine hosts,’ at times, were culpably grudging in their responses to my inquiries about the products, wages, and statistics, of their neighborhoods. For these, however, I at one saw a twofold excuse: they were very busy and my questions were very numerous—besides the irritating circumstance, that answers were not always at hand—and to be paid, in what flesh and blood cannot bear. And it makes me think no wonder, before, either of human nature in general, or of Yankee character in particular, that such slighted occurred, nearly in every instance, whilst I was a somewhat shapeless walking city fool on foot; severely even, while travelling in stages, or steamboat. Such distinctions are made, all the world over; in Virginia, as well as elsewhere.

A Southerner, not accustomed to wait much upon himself, here feels sensibly the sanitiness of the personal service he meets with. Even—I ought for years more than half a Yankee in that respect—missed, rather awkwardly, on first coming hither, the superfluities, and often cumbersome attentions of our southern waiters. Besides having frequently to brush my own clothes, I am put to some special trouble in the best hotels, to get my shoes cleaned. In many village inns, sumptuous and comfortable in most respects, this last is a luxury hardly to be hoped for. This sacredness of manual service arises partly from the nice economy, with which the number of hands about a house is graduated to the general, and smallest possible, quantity of necessary labor; and partly, from a growing aversion to such services among the ‘help’ themselves, caused, or greatly heightened, by the increased demand and higher wages for them in the numerous manufactories throughout the country. Almost everywhere, I am told of their asking higher pay, and growing more fastidious, and intractable, as household servants. ‘Servants’ indeed, they will not allow themselves to be called. A ‘nursery-companion’ too, if not an immediate quitting of the house, is probable on the part of a servant thinking of leaving them. The above, more creditable designation, is that which must be used—at least in their presence. By the by, though the gifted author of ‘Hope Leslie’ may that the singular plural, ‘helps’ alone, is proper, I find popular usage (‘four persons arithmetically’—you know) sanctioning the regular plural form ‘helps,’ whenever reference is made to more than one.

The spirit, and the habits, which oblige one to do so much for himself within doors, produce corresponding effects without. Useful labor is nowhere so much disdained in New England, by any class of society. Proprietors, and their sons, though wealthy, frequently work on the farm, and in the gardens, stables, and barns. Two or three days ago, I saw an old gentleman (Squirt *) * * a justice of the peace, and for several years a useful member of the Legislature, toiling in his hay harvest. Two of the richest men in this village—possessing habitations among the most elegant in this assembly of
elegant dwellings—I have seen busy with hoe and rake,
in their highly cultivated grounds. The wife of a tav-
ern-keeper, in Rhode Island, worth $40,000, prepared
my breakfast, and waited upon me at it, with a brisk-
ness such as I never saw equaled. Similar instances
are so frequent and familiar, as to be unnoticed excep-
ted by strangers. Many of New England’s eminent men
of former days, were constant manual laborers; not only
in boyhood, and in obscurity, but, after achieving dis-
 distinction. Putnam, it is well known, was ploughing
when he heard of the bloody fray at Lexington; and
left both plough and team in the field, to join and hold
in the strife for liberty. Judge Swift, of Connecticut, who
wrote a law book* of some merit, and, I believe, a Histo-
ry of Connecticut, was a regular laborer on his farm,
whilst he was a successful practitioner of the Law. An
amusing story is told (which I cannot
in hoyhood, ind in obscurity, but after achieving dis-
 of the mowing, (where the crop is without equally
 to labor;

It is not

The banana

and southern

and apples,

and the

of the

and

in

and
distinction through the revolution—being in Boston last
week, of kinds which ripened with us

and

of

and

poor

and

of

and

of

of

and

and

and

of

of

of

of

of

of

of

the

of

of

and

of

and

of

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

and

of

and

and

and

of

and

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and

of

and

and
long lines from the dimpling water, forced upon more than one mind that fine passage in a late work of fiction, where the remark, that "no man can judge of the happiness of another," is illustrated by the reflection of moon-beams from a lake. But I am growing back-sinister; and must conclude.

I set off in the stage for Albany, at two o'clock in the morning. Good night.