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Letters from New England – No. 3

Lucian Minor
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BY A VIRGINIAN.

Pittsfield, Mass., July 26th, 1834.

One means by which Prussian tyranny sought to break down the spirit and health of Baron von Trenck, during his long and rigorous imprisonment at Magdeburg, was to have him raised by a sentinel, every fifteen minutes of his sleeping hours. You can form a lively conception of the efficacy of the plan, if you have ever been compelled by exhausted nature to woo her "sweet restorer" in a stage-coach, over a very uneven road; but what think you of doing it outside, on the driver's seat? Instead of thee this morning, the waiter called me at one; when I had not slept a single wink—("sleepless myself; to give my readers sleep.") Sickened by the motion of the close and crowded coach, I presently mounted beside the driver; where drowsiness soon overcame me. So, lying one arm with my handkerchief-chief to the iron on the stage roof, I took, for about two hours, such slumber as was permitted by the bearings of our vehicle; on a billy road; such slumber, as one might enjoy while tossed in a blanket, or "on the high and giddy mast," rocking his brains, "in candle of the rude imperious surge." On fully awaking, half an hour before morning, I found we were ascending a mountain (part of the Green Mountains) by a gentle slope of three or four degrees, continuing for six miles. The scenery, (wildly picturesque in itself,) bursting thus suddenly upon the view, was particularly striking. Indeed, no day of my tour has presented a greater number of boldly beautiful landscapes. "That I never try to spread these beauties upon my page, you must ascribe to the fear that they would but "vanish" in the endeavor, and by no mean to any profound contempt--unprecedented, you know according to Dr. Beattie, for

I most devoutly worship them all. But humbler themes hold and demand my pen. It is a New England custom, to bury all the dead of a township, or of a certain subdivision of it, in a common grave yard; usually, not within any village, and apart from any church. This yard is enclosed with a wall; and every grave is marked by a stone (commonly hewn marble,) with a neat and simple inscription of name and years, supplying "the place of fame and elegy." By a sort of tacit consent, each family is allowed to cluster its dead together in a separate portion of the ground; sometimes in a conspicuous vault, marked with the family name. The curious may at any time find an hour's amusement--aside from the more serious thoughts proper to the place--in reading, on the tombstones, the armaments common and peculiar to New England, and the Christian names—mostly scriptural—betokening the original and enduring views of Puritanism. A southerner naturally wonders why the grave yards are without the villages. To an inquiry of mine into the reason, a "safe female (evidently far wiser than her husband, who was also in company,) answered, that it was "to accommodate those who live at a distance." How it did this—or how, if the distant on one side were accommodated, those on the other were not equally inconsidered—my sages in the meeting-house is usually central to the town, for the equal convenience of all. It seems more probable that healthily, and the reader command of space, influences the location of burying grounds.

One of the objects that have struck me most pleasingly, is the Liberty Pole, in almost every village. Its use is to hoist a flag upon, on the Fourth of July, and other festival days. It figures exquisitely in "McFingal"—that best poem, of its length, that America has produced; so often quoted for Huskathins, and so inadequately honored, not only in the south, but here, in its native north. Do take down the book, or, if you have it not, go straight and buy it; turn to the second or third chapter—I forget which—and begrave if you can, while you read how the Tory hero "fierce sallied forth" attended by

"His desperate clan of Tory friends:
When sudden met his angry eye
A pole ascending thro' the sky
The ceremonies of its rearing and consecration; the attack, not scarcely alone, of the hero upon it; his inglorious disconsolation; his wailing flight,

"With legs and arms he worked his course,
Like rider that compasses his horse"

his fall, and decoration with tar and feathers; the hoisting of the Tory constable by a rope fastened to his waistband."

"Tell, like the earth, as stretched on tensor,
He hung, self-balanced, on his centre"

where, as Setonites (according to a witty comical post of his day,) got himself awning in mid air to clear his perceptions,

"Our culprit sits in Peter sky,
With like advantage raised his eye;
And looking forth in prospect wide,
His Tory errors clearly spied,"

I had enjoyed so many a laugh at the whole scene, that when a Liberty Pole was first shown me (at Hartford) by an interesting fellow traveller, it required all my plenitude to refrain from chapping my hands with pleasure.

Albany, July 27.

It was nearly eleven—two hours later than usual—when we arrived last night. A series of little casualties delayed us: a thunder storm, quite as magnificent as most that we have in Virginia, only our thunder and lightning are far superior; a tree, of eight or nine inches diameter, blown across the road by a semi-tornado that accompanied the cloud; and divers other denunciations. The storm met us near the top of a mountain, upon the line of Massachusetts and New York; obliging us to halt, and fend off the rain as best we might, by buttoning down the curtains. The descent hitherward, winds, for perhaps a mile, along the steep mountain sides; commanding a fine view of the splendid village of Lebanon, and its prettier valley. Near Lebanon is a settlement of Shakers. The only incivility I have
yet experienced from a stage driver, was a few miles this side of Lebanon; when, availing myself of a brief halt at a hotel to get some refreshment, I received an inaudible notice that the stage could not wait: and a mince or two after, some one called to me, "you are left, sir!"— On going to the door, sure enough, the horses were in a sweeping trot, twenty or thirty yards (or, as they may here, four or five rods) off. I soon overtook them; and was admitted, the driver surely grumbling at the unreasonable loss of expecting him to wait all day. He was surprised by being so late. And whoever considers how nice a point of honour—"yes, and side of Lebanon; when, availing myself of it,briefly, of duty, and interest—it is with that fraternity to be punctual, will not blame him very severely. They have been civil and obliging to me; the one by whom I slept yesterday morning, was even kind.

So well established is this good character of New England stage drivers, that ladies often travel by stage for scores of miles, with no other protector. And the driver does protect them, vigilantly. Every way, however, the freedom with which females trust themselves abroad there, and in the south, is remarked elsewhere. I have seen handsome young ladies, of refined appearance, driving in a chaise, with no male attendant, to a town seven or eight miles from their home. And such things are of every day occurrence, attracting no especial notice. This freedom arises, I believe, from several causes. It is unquestionably owing, in part, to the sober, honest, and peaceful habits of the people, and to the constancy, that any wrong or insult offered to a female, would be promptly resented and punished; as in Ireland, under the reign of Briton the Brave, a beautiful damsel, richly attired, could walk alone, safe and fearless, from end to end of the kingdom. Contiguity of residences aids this effect. Then, in the country villages of the north, there are many more ladies than gentlemen, from the emigration of the latter westward, and from their resorting to the maritime cities and to the ocean, for trade and seafaring employment. Besides, New Englanders have less time for pleasure than we have; and no Virginian will deny that "to tend the fair" is a pleasure. But the freedom of female movements is partly attributable also to the prevalence, among New England men, of a less tender and obsequious manner at least, towards the fair sex, than southernly habitually show. They do not practise those minute, delicate attentions—that semi-adoration—ingrained in the very constitutions of our well bred men. (Not dandies—I speak of men.) Indeed our claim to superiority may be pushed still further. In affinity to inferior, our northern brethren are decidedly behind us. In their middling and lower classes, may and in the lower tier of their upper classes, this short-coming is particularly discernible: and extends even to their deportment towards equals. Cousins and servants—I beg pardon—"help!"—seem not to expect, or to relish, the courtesy which, in the Old Dominion, every true gentleman pays to the poorest man. Soon after entering the country, I found it necessary, if I would have respect from them, to oblige much of the respectful address, which habit had rendered essential to my own comfort. Can these deficiencies of manner—supposing them to exist—and my belief of them is confirmed by that of others—be sacrificed to the utter proscription of "shuffling—that wanton noise of courtesy? I should rather attribute them to three other causes. First—a dislike to outward displays of emotion; a hard-featured sternness of soul, which, content to feel kindly and deeply, and to act kindly too in things of solid import, forgets or disguises the petty blunders of manner, as idle forms, often the offspring of deceit, and unworthy of a mind bent upon substantial good. This estimable, but unassuming trait—derived purely from his sire, John Bull—makes Jonathan disdained on a superficial view. But those who consider him with cordial attention, and bearing in mind the true saying of honest Kent, that

"They are not empty-hearted, whose low sound
Reveals no hollow sound—"

perhaps find the unsightly iron casted stored with the richest jewels. Second—a less creditable cause; applicable only to the imputed want of courtesy towards inferiors—the employment of whites, as servants. A master cannot treat them as his equals: it is utterly incompatible with the relation. His demeanour towards them, he naturally extends to their kindred, and to their class; that is, to all the poor around him. According to that general principle of divine wisdom and goodness, which, by a counterpart of good and evil, equates every human lot, the blighting curse of slavery seems to carry this mitigation along with it—a more delicate and scrupulous regard, in the face, to even the minute gratification of their fellow-free. Hence—and from their greater leisure to cultivate manner—chiefly arises, we may suppose, the superiority of slave-holders in the several points of politeness. Just so, according to Montesquieu, good-natured characterizes a monarchy. Those who can see in this, a compensation either for a privation of the glorious right of self-government, or for the unmeasured ills entailed by domestic slavery upon a community, are welcome to the consolation. Third—applicable, like the last, only to intercourse with inferiors—the system of electioneering practised in the northern states. U unde and public opinion allow no man to declare himself a candidate for office. His doing so, would be political suicide. He must be nominated by a caucus—or convention, as "sara politico" now requires it to be called. The convention is got up in this wise: One, or two, or three, tolerably influential men, having a friend whom they wish to extoll, call a private meeting of those over whom their influence especially is, and after insinuating his merits into the minds assembled, get a resolution passed, for a general caucus, of the whole party, in the town, or election district. All who were at the private meeting, hasten themselves diligently to congregate at the caucus, such persons, chiefly, as they, or some of them, can control; and in this they are so successful, that a nomination there, of the individual designated by the first movers of the scheme, is almost sure to result. This nomination goes abroad, as made by a meeting of the people; and unless more skilfully conducted or powerfully headed counter movement take place, our candidate may count with reasonable certainty upon his election. Such is the machinery by which aspirants get themselves hoisted into office; as explained to me by one familiar with it—who had actually profited by it more than once—and who owned that it was rather a sleeky

"Rich and rare were the gems she wore."
feature in the politics of his country. All aspirants, therefore, (and in our country, how few are so openly or covertly) lay court not to the people at large, but only to the known leaders of the causes. Contaminating the passive wives and pappies, they regard only the hand that works them. Thus the commonalty, losing their importance in elections, lose their strongest hold upon the civility of their superiors. I need not run out the process. 'Twas well, if depriva-
tion of laws, and smiles, and kind words, were all that the million suffer by the camera system. But, by render-
ing them insignificant in the body politic, that system threatens popular government itself with overthrow.

I wish, I long, to see my fellow Virginians copy our brethren of the north in many things: but this system, may they shun as the cholera! May they always adhere to their own frank and manly plan, of having the children, has so often realized that pleasing trait in the picture of French rural life—

"And the gay grandire, skilful in gentle lore, Has trilled beneath the benediction of those stars," but I saw as great a wonder, in a church last Sunday. The music struck me as particularly fine; I doubted not that it was an organ; till, looking up to the gallery, there sat a gentleman scraping away with might and main upon a violin, and another upon a bass violin; accompanied by a flute, and an admirably tuned choir. Our services are worse in Flanders; but it was nothing to the deep, numbing, abominable abomination with which some "ones guilt" folks of my acquaintance (not of yours) would have beheld this uncommon mode of hymning the great Creator. Even me, it affected very singularly: I thought of the war-lurch-dance in Kirk Alloway; of Auld Nick in shape of "townie tyke, black, grim and large," whose province it was to "gin them music" how

"He screwed the pipes and part them skirt, 
Till roof and rafters o' did din.
White "horns and jigs," strathspeys and reels, 
Put life and mettle in their heels;"

"We and o' horrible and awfu' 
Which even to name was unlawnful;" and I did not know what catastrophes might ensue, from the profanation. Happily, however, none occurred.

In the formalities of piety, the descendencies of the Pilgrims are radically changed from the parlantist strictness of their forfathers. The quaint names, indeed, are retained; but the straight-lacedness they imply is gone: you find Leach, or Mills, or near approach, to be as arch a loss, and Jeremiah, or Timothy, as merry a gig, as any Sally, or Betty, Tom, or Bob, south of the Potomac.

No one in Massachusetts is any longer compelled by law to pay for the support of religion, its temples, or its ministers. The law, requiring the citizen to do so, only letting him choose the sect or the minister to whom his contribution should ensure, was repealed last year.

Each religious society—answering to congregation with us—has a sort of corporate faculty, involving the power to tax its members for church expenses, and to coerce payment by distress if it be withheld. Even this is a strike towards hierarchy from which our forefathers have shrunk ever since 1783; and which our people will probably never permit.

I must say more to you, of the goodly land I have
just left. My having quitted it, need subtract nothing from the credit attached to my observations: for I shall touch no topic, which is not as fresh in my mind, and as susceptible of truthful representation, as if the local scene itself stretched around me. Adieu.