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"THE END OF EVERY GOVERNMENT SHOULD BE THE WELFARE OF THE PEOPLE."

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MISCELLANEOUS.

From the Magnolia, the New York Annual for the year 1837.

The Creole Village.

A SKETCH FROM A STEAMBOAT.

BY WASHINGTON IRVING.

In travelling about our motley country, I am often reminded of Ariosto's account of the moon, in which the good paladin Astolpho found everything garnered up that had been lost on earth. So I am apt to imagine, that many things lost in the old world, are treasured up and perpetuated in the new, having been continued from generation to generation, since the early days of the colonies. A European antiquary, therefore, curious in his researches after the ancient and almost obliterated customs and usages of his country, would do well to put himself upon the track of some early band of emigrants, follow them across the Atlantic, and rummage among their descendants on our shores.

In the phraseology of New England might be found many an old English provincial phrase, long since obsolete in the parent country; with some quaint relics of the roundheads; while Virginia cherishes peculiarities characteric of the days of Elizabeth and Sir Walter Raleigh.

In the same way, the sturdy yeomanry of New Jersey and Pennsylvania keep up many usages fading away in ancient Germany; while many an honest, broad-bottomed custom, nearly extinct in venerable Holland, may be found flourishing in pristine vigour and luxuriance in some of the orthodox Dutch villages, still lingering on the banks of the Mohawk and the Hudson.

In no part of our country, however, are the customs and peculiarities, imported from the old world by the earlier settlers, kept up with more fidelity than in the little, poverty stricken villages of Spanish and French origin, that border the rivers of ancient Louisiana. Their population is generally made up of the descendants of those nations, married and interwoven together, and occasionally crossed with a slight dash of the Indian. The French character, however, floats on top, as, from its buoyant qualities, it is sure to do, whenever it forms a particle, however small, of an intermixture.

In these serene and dilapidated villages, art and nature seem to stand still, and the world forgets to turn round. The revolutions that distract other parts of this mutable planet, reach not here, or pass over without leaving any trace. The inhabitants are deficient in that public spirit which extends its cares beyond the horizon, and imparts trouble and perplexity from all quarters in newspapers. In fact, newspapers are almost unknown in these villages, and as French is the current language, the inhabitants have little community of opinion with their republican neighbors. They retain, therefore, their old habits of passive obedience to the decrees of government, as though they still lived under the absolute sway of colonial commandants, instead of being part and parcel of the sovereign people, and having a voice in public legislation.

A few aged men, who have grown gray on their hereditary acres, and are of the good old colonial stock, exert a kind of patriarchal sway in all matters of public and private import; their opinions are considered oracular, and their word is law.

The inhabitants, moreover, have none of that eagerness for gain, and rage for improvement, which keep our people continually on the move, and our country towns incessantly in a state of transition. There the magic phrases, 'town lots,' 'water privileges,' 'railroads' and other comprehensive and soul-stirring words, from the speculator's vocabulary, are never heard. The residents dwell in the same houses in which their forefathers dwelt, without thinking of enlarging or modernizing them, or pulling them down and turning them into granite stores. They suffer the trees, under which they have been born, and have played in infancy, to flourish undisturbed; though, by cutting them down, they might open new streets, and put money in their pockets. In a word, the almighty dollar, that great object of universal devotion throughout our land, seems to have no genuine devotees in these peculiar villages; and unless some of its missionaries penetrate there, and erect banking houses and other pious shrines, there is no knowing how long the inhabitants may remain in their present state of contented poverty.

In descending one of our great weastern rivers in a steamboat, I met with two worthies from one of these villages, who had been on a distant excursion, the longest they had ever made, as they seldom ventured far from home. One was the great man, or grand signior of the village; not that he enjoyed any legal privileges or power there, every thing of the kind having been done away when the province was ceded by France to the United States. His sway over his neighbors was merely one of custom and conviction, out of deference to his family. Besides, he was worth full fifty thousand dollars, an amount almost equal, in the imagination of the villagers, to the treasures of king Solomon.

This very substantial old gentleman, though of the fourth or fifth generation in this country, retained the true Gallick stamp of feature and peculiarity of deportment, and reminded me of one of those provincial potentates, the important man of a petty arrondizement, that are to be met with in the remote parts of France. He was of a large frame, a gingerbread complexion, strong features, eyes that stood out like glass knobs, and a prominent nose, which he frequently regaled from a gold snuff-box, and occasionally blew with a coloured handkerchief, until it sounded like a trumpet.

He was attended by an old negro, as black as ebony, with a huge mouth, in a continual grin. This was evidently a privileged and favourite servant, and one that had grown up and grown old with him. He was dressed in creole style—with white jacket and trousers, a stiff shirt collar, that threatened to cut off his ears, a bright madrass handkerchief tied round his head, and large gold ear rings. He was the politest negro I met with in a wide western tour; and that is saying a great deal, for, excepting the Indians, the negroes are the most gentlemanlike personages one meets with in those parts. It is true, they differ from the Indians in being a little extra polite and complimentary. He was also one of the mertiest; and here, too, the negroes, however we may deplore their unhappy condition, have the advantage of their masters. The whites are, in general, too free and prosperous to be merry.—The cares of maintaining their rights and liberties, and of adding to their wealth, engross all their thoughts, and dry up all the moisture of their souls. If you hear a broad, hearty, devil may care laugh, be assured it is a negroe's.

Beside this African domestic, the signior of the village had another no less cherished and privileged attendant. This was a huge dog, of the mastiff breed, with a deep hanging mouth, that gave an heir of surly gravity to his physiognomy. He walked about the cabin with the air of a dog perfectly at home, and who had paid for his passage.—At dinner time he took his seat beside his master, giving him a glance now and then out of a corner of his eye, that bespoke perfect confidence that he would not be forgotten. Nor was he—every now and then a huge morsel would be thrown to him, peradventure the half picked leg of a fowl, which he would receive with a snap that sounded like the springing of a steel trap—one gulp, and all was down; and a glance of the eye told his master that he was ready for another consignment.

The other village worthy, travelling in company with this signior, was of a totally different stamp. He was small, thin, and weazen-faced, such as Frenchmen are apt to be represented in caricature, with a bright, squirrel-like eye, and a gold ring in his ear. His dress was flimsy, and sat loosely on his frame, and he had altogether the look of one with but little coin in his pocket. Yet, though one of the poorest, I was assured he was one of the most popular personages in his native village.

Compere Martin, as he was commonly called, was the factotum of the place—sportsman, schoolmaster, and land-surveyor. He could sing, dance, and, above all, play on the fiddle, an invaluable accomplishment in one of these old French creole villages, for the inhabitants have an hereditary love for balls and fetes; if they work but little, they dance a great deal, and a fiddle is the joy of their heart.

What had sent compere Martin travelling with the grand signior I could not learn; he evidently looked up to him with great deference, and was assiduous in rendering him petty attentions; from which I concluded that he lived at home upon the crumbs which fell from his table. He was gayest when out of sight; and had his song and joke when forward among the deck passengers; but altogether Compere Martin was out of his element on board of a steamboat. He was quite another being, I am told, when at home, in his own village.

Like his opulent fellow-traveller, he too had his canine follower and retainer—and one suited to his different fortunes—one of the civilest, homebred, most unoffending little dogs in the world. Unlike the lordly mastiff, he seemed to think he had no right on board of the steamboat! if you did but look hard at him, he would throw himself upon his back, and lift up his legs, as if imploring mercy.

At table, he took his seat at a little distance from his master; not with the bluff, confident air of the mastiff, but quietly and diffidently his head on one side, with one ear dubiously slouched, the other hopefully cocked up; his under teeth projecting beyond his black nose, and his eye wistfully following each morsal that went into his master's mouth.

If Compere Martin now and then should venture to abstract a morsel from his plate, to give to his humble companion, it was edifying to see with what diffidence the exemplary little animal would take hold of it, with the very tip of his teeth, as if he would almost rather not, or was fearful of taking too great a liberty. And then with what decorum would he eat it! How many efforts would he make in swallowing it, as if it stuck in his throat; with what daintiness would he lick his lips; and then with what an air of thankfulness would he resume his seat, with his teeth once more projecting beyond his nose, and an eye of humble expectation fixed upon his master.

It was late in the afternoon when the steamboat stopped at the village which was the residence of my fellow voyagers. It stood on the high bank of the river, and bore tracts of having been a frontier trading-post. There were the remains of the stockades that once protected it from the Indians, and the houses were in the ancient Spanish and French colonial taste, the place having been successively under the domination of both those nations prior to the cession of Louisiana to the United States.

The arrival of the signior of fifty thousand dollars, and his humble companion, Compere Martin, had evidently been looked forward to as an event in the village. Numbers of men, women and children, white, yellow and black, were collected on the river bank; most of them clad in old fashioned French garments, and their heads decorated with colored handkerchiefs, or white nightcaps. The moment the steamboat came within sight and hearing, there commenced a waving of handkerchiefs, and a screaming and bawling of greetings, and salutations, and felicitations, that baffle all description.

The old gentleman of fifty thousand dollars was received by a train of relatives, and friends, and children, and grandchildren, whom he kissed on each cheek, and who formed a procession in his rear, with a legion of domestics, of all ages, following him to a large, old fasioned French house, that domineered over the village.

His black valet de chamber, in white jacket and trousers, and gold ear rings, was met on the shore by a boon, though rustic companion, a tall negro fellow, with a long, good humoured horse face, which stood out in strong relief from beneath a narrow-rimmed straw hat, stuck on the back of his head. The explosions of laughter of these two varlets on first meeting with each other, and exchanging compliments, were enough to electrify the whole country round.

The most hearty reception, however, was that given to Compere Martin. Everybody, young and old, hailed him before he got to land.—Everybody had a joke for Compere Martin, and Compere Martin had a joke for every body.—Soon his little dog appeared, to partake of his popularity, and to be caressed by every hand. Indeed he was quite a different animal the moment he touched the land. Here he was at home; here he was of consequence. He barked, he leaped, he frisked about his old friends, and then would skim round the place in a wide circle, as if mad.

I traced Compere Martin and his little dog to their home. It was an old ruinous Spanish house, of large dimensions, with verandas overshadowed by ancient elms. The house had probably been the residence, in old times, of the Spanish commandant. In one wing of this crazy but aristocratical abode was nestled the family of my fellow traveller; for poor devils are apt to be magnificently clad and lodged in the cast-off clothes, and abandoned palaces, of the great and wealthy.

The arrival of Compere Martin was welcomed by a legion of women, children, and mongrel curs; and, as poverty and gayety generally go hand and hand among the French and their descendants, the crazy mansion soon resounded with loud gossip and light hearted laughter.

As the steamboat paused a short time at the village, I took occasion to stroll about the place. Most of the houses were in the French taste, with casements and ricketty verandas, but most of them in flimsy and ruinous condition. All the wagons, ploughs, and other utensils about the place were of ancient and inconvenient Gallick construction, such as had been brought from France in the primitive days of the colony. The very looks of the people reminded me of the villages of France.

As I passed by one of the houses, the hum of a spinning-wheel came issuing forth, accompanied by a scrap of a song, which a girl was singing as she sat at her labor. It was an old French chanson, that I have heard many a time among the peasantry of of Languedoc; and the sound of it brought many a bright and happy scene to my remembrance. It was doubtless an old traditional song, brought over by the French emigrants, and handed down from generation to generation.

Half a dozen young lasses emerged from the adjacent dwellings, reminding me, by their light step and gay costume, of scenes in ancient France, where taste in dress comes natural to every class of females. The trim bodice and colored petticoat, and little apron, with its pockets to receive the hands when in an attitude for conversation; the colored kerchief wound tastefully round the head, with a coquettish knot perking above one ear; and then the neat slipper and tight-drawn stocking, with its braid of narrow riband embracing the ankle where it peeps from its mysterious curtain. It is from this ambush that Cupid sends his most inciting arrows.

While I was musing upon the recollections thus accidentally summoned up, I heard the sound of a fiddle from the mansion of Compere Martin, the signal, no doubt, for a joyous gathering. I was disposed to turn my steps thither, and witness the festivities of one of the very few villages that I had met with in my wide tour, that was yet poor enough to be merry; but the bell of the steamboat summoned me to re-embark.

As we swept away from the shore, I cast back a wistful eye upon the moss grown roofs and ancient elms of the village, and prayed that the inhabitants might long retain their happy ignorance, their absence of all enterprise and improvement, their respect for the fiddle, and their contempt for the almighty dollar. I fear, however, my prayer is doomed to be of no avail. In a little while, the steamboat whirled me to an American town, just springing into bustling and prosperous existence.

The surrounding forest had been laid out in town lots; frames of wooden buildings were rising from among stumps and burnt trees.—The place already boasted a court house, a jail, and two banks, all built of pine boards, on the model of Grecian temples. There were rival hotels, rival churches, and rival newspapers; together with the usual number of judges, and generals, and governors; not to speak of doctors by the dozen, and lawyers by the score.

The place, I was told, was in an astonishing career of improvement, with a canal and two railroads in embryo. Lots doubled in price every week; everybody was speculating in land; everydody was rich; and everybody was growing richer. The community, however, was torn to pieces by new doctrines in religion and in political economy; there were camp meetings, and agrarian meetings; and an election was at hand which, it was expected, would throw the whole country into a paroxysm.

Alas! with such an enterprising neighbor, what is to become of the poor little creole village?

MR. BIDDLE'S SECOND LETTER.

Philadelphia, Nov. 11, 1836.

To the Hon. J. Q ADAMS:

My Dear Sir—I proceed to the second subject of our conversation—the present state of the currency—which I shall treat dispassionately as an abstract question of mere finance.

Our pecuniary condition seems to be a strange anomaly. When Congress adjourned, it left the country with abundant crops and high prices for them with every branch of industry flourishing—with more specie than we ever possessed before—with all the elements of universal prosperity. Not one of these has undergone the slightest change, yet after a few months, Congress will re-assemble and find the whole country suffering under intense pecuniary distress. The occasion of this, and the remedy for it, may well occupy our thoughts.

In my judgment, the main cause of it is the mismanagement of the Revenue—mismanagement in two respects: the mode of executing the Distribution law, and the order requiring specie or the Public Lands.

1st. The Distribution Law.

In July, 1836, Congress declared that the surplus in the Treasury on the 1st of January, 1837, should be divided among the States. That it might be done as gently as possible, the payments were to be made, not at once on the first of January, but quarterly throughout the whole year 1837; and as the aggregate sum to be distributed is from thirty-six to forty millions, we may assume the first payment in January to be be about nin millions. To prepare for this, the Treasury has had in hand forty or fifty millions—it would receive in the course of the operation thirty or forty millions of revenue more—and as there was probably money in every State, the operation was so simple and easy that it ought not to have occasioned the slightest pressure either on public or private interests; and the whole might have been accomplished without any derangement of trade and without the movement of a single dollar in specie. That this not only could be done but has actually been done, you will find in the public documents of 1829.

In that year the new administration of Mr. Jackson, anxious to appropriate every disposable dollar of the revenue to the reduction of the public debt, sought and obtained the aid of the Bank of the United States. Notice was accordingly given on the 31st of March, 1829, that on the 1st of July, the debt and interest, amounting to $8,715,462 87, would be paid. At the period of the notice, the whole available means of the Treasury were only six millions, scattered throughout the United States, and these, with the accruing revenue in the interval, were, at a notice of ninety days, to be collected, to pay nearly nine millions. So closely was the government pressed, that after paying these sums, the actual balance in the Treasury throughout the United States, was reduced to $164,365 04. The Bank, however, undertook the arrangement, with what success may be seen in the following part of the message of Mr. Jackson to Congress, in December, 1829: "The payment on account of the public debt, made on the 1st of July last, was $8,715,462 87. It was apprehended that the sudden withdrawal of so large a sum from the banks in which it was deposited, at a time of unusual pressure in the money market, might cause much injury to the interests dependent on bank accommodations. But this evil was wholly averted by an early anticipation of it at the Treasury, aided by the judicious arrangement of the officers of the Bank of the United States." The respective shares of the Bank and the Treasury may be conjectured from the Secretary's letter of the 14th July, 1829, in which he takes occasion to express "the great satisfaction of the Treasury Department in the preparation of the heavy payment of the public debt on the 1st instant—which has been effected by means of the prudent arrangement of your board, at the time of severe pressure on all the productive employments of the country, without causing any sensible addition to the pressure, or even visible effect upon the ordinary operations of the State Banks."

If, then, nine millions, being almost the last dollar in the Treasury, could be thus distributed, two millions of it to foreigners, at a time of unusual pressure—how happens it that with funds equal to fifty millions, and with six months notice, nine millions cannot now be distributed, exclusively among our own people, at a time of great abundance, without hazarding a convulsion? The answer is to be found in the different mode of conducting the operation. This may be seen by contrasting what the Secretary might have done, with what he has done.

The distribution law assigned to him two duties, both simple and both easy—the division of the funds among the Banks and the division among the States. As to the first, he was to "select as soon as may be practicable and employ as the depositories of the public money of the United States, such of the Banks as may be located at, adjacent or convenient to the points or places at which the revenues may be collected or disbursed"—"provided that at least one such bank shall be located in each State or Territory"—"and that no bank shall have on deposite more than three-fourths of its capital.

Here is no authority whatever to distribute the money from the banks of one State to the banks of any other State. On the contrary, by the twelfth section, all transfers for "any other purpose whatever except to facilitate the public disbursements, and to comply with the provisions of this act, are hereby prohibited and declared to be illegal," and "in cases where transfers shall be required for purposes of equalization under the provisions of this act in consequence of too great an accumulation of deposites in any Bank—such transfers shall be made to the nearest deposite banks which are considered safe and secure;" and although the supplement says that nothing shall prevent him from making transfers from State to State, "when required to prevent large and inconvenient accumulations in particular places, or in order to produce a due equality and just proportion according to the provisions of this act," the general policy of the law to keep the deposites together, unless under peculiar emergencies, remains unchanged.

Under this law his duty was as clear as possible. He was to see that no bank should have a deposite of more than three fourths of its capital. The revenue in the great cities, then, should be divided among the banks in those cities,—there being in each of them solvent banks enough to receive it. There was no necessity for sending a dollar of it out of those cities. In New York alone, says he, "the operation will require the transfer of something like eight millions of dollars from the old deposite banks to new ones, either in the State or out of it." But why out of it at all? Why could not the revenue already received in New York and falling due in New York, be divided among the New York banks, to support the trade of New York? Why not let it remain active there up to the last hour when it was payable to the States? But the law required that there should be at least one deposite bank in each State. Be it so. Then make a deposite bank in each State, if there be not one already, and give it a deposite, which, while it satisfies the law, will not carry away into inactivity funds that might be useful in places of business. There was then no necessity to send a dollar from New York, or the other commercial cities, merely for the purpose of preventing any one bank from having more than three fourths of its capital. That is clear.

Nor was it more necessary for the purpose of distribution among the States. The law says: "That the money which shall be in the Treasury of the United States, on the 1st of January, 1837, shall be deposited with such of the several States as shall by law authorize their Treasurer or other competent authorities to receive the same—and the Secretary of the Treasury shall deliver the same to such Treasurer or other competent authorities, on receiving certificates of deposite therefor." This is the whole law. Now what does it contemplate?

The money must be in the Treasury on the first of January, 1837, because up to that time it is not known whether the States will take it. Technically and legally, the Treasury is at Washington—practically, the Treasury is wherever the deposites of the public moneys are. But the Secretary of the Treasury is an official person, whose only official residence is Washington. Accordingly, a Treasurer of a State goes to the Secretary at Washington, and presents to him the certificates of deposite. The Secretary thereupon "delivers" to the Treasurer his State's quota. But how does he deliver it? By an actual manual counting out of these dollars? No. By a check on the deposite bank at Washington? No. But he delivers to the State Treasurer, as he does to any other person receiving money, a draft for the amount, on some one or more of the depositories which compose the Treasury. Is not such a draft the usual and proper mode of making public payments? Undoubtedly. And then we come to the real question. Was it necessary to make in advance any transfer of funds whatsoever into the several States, merely because they had the option, on certain conditions, of receiving them? If there was no such necessity, then the 12th section of the law makes these transfers illegal. Now there is clearly no such necessity. The money was to be deposited WITH the States, not IN them. It was not necessarily paid in Washington, by drafts on other places. If you say that the Secretary must pay it into the State Treasury, it is not enough to bring it into the State—he must take it in to the seats of government. Pennsylvania must have her share—not in Philadelphia, but in Harrisburg. New York must be paid—not in the city of New York, but in Albany. If the place be not fixed by law, the mutual convenience of the parties will designate it. Now there is no individual and no State in the Union that would not prefer payments in New York or the north Atlantic cities, to payments any where else; and for this obvious reason—that money is worth more there than any where else. If the State of Ohio, for instance, had a draft on New York, it could sell it to its citizens, usefully to them, and profitably to the Treasury. It does not want the money brought to Ohio. Every mile it comes on the road lessens its value. We may safely conclude, then, that there was no necessity for sending a dollar of public money from New York or the commercial cities, for the purpose either of equalizing funds among the banks, or distributing them through the States.

The true theory of the case, therefore, was simply to let the excesses of revenue in the several States be transferred, in the course of trade, to the great commercial points, and then to pay the States by drafts on those points. The deposite banks at those points, knowing what they had to pay, would have been ready to pay,—and up to the hour of payment would have employed the funds usefully; so that in every stage of that progress, business would be assisted, commercial activity stimulated, and all parties be gainers.

Even supposing these transfers at all necessary, the funds should have been remitted by bills to the points of accumulation—blending these operations so insensibly with the business of our country, as to be unfelt except in their benefits.

But what has the Secretary done? Instead of gradual preparations to provide funds at the distant points, the whole science of the Treasury seems to have consisted in drawing warrants—in taking up the columns of the returns, and directing drafts from the banks throughout the United States, without necessity, without reference to the wants or the business of the different sections of the Union, the season of the year, or the course of trade—and thus making the whole revenue of the country work against the whole industry of the country.

His secret is thus revealed, in the letter to Messrs Griswold and Swan: