

DOMESTIC MANNERS
OF THE
AMERICANS.

CHAPTER I.

Entrance of the Mississippi—Balize.

ON the 4th of November, 1827, I sailed from London, accompanied by my son and two daughters ; and after a favourable, though somewhat tedious voyage, arrived on Christmas-day at the mouth of the Mississippi.

The first indication of our approach to land was the appearance of this mighty river pouring forth its muddy mass of waters, and mingling with the deep blue of the Mexican Gulf. The shores of this river are so utterly flat, that no object upon them is perceptible at sea, and we gazed with pleasure on the muddy ocean that met us, for it told us we were arrived, and seven weeks of sailing had wearied us ; yet it was not without a feeling

like regret that we passed from the bright blue waves, whose varying aspect had so long furnished our chief amusement, into the murky stream which now received us.

Large flights of pelicans were seen standing upon the long masses of mud which rose above the surface of the waters, and a pilot came to guide us over the bar, long before any other indication of land was visible.

I never beheld a scene so utterly desolate as this entrance of the Mississippi. Had Dante seen it, he might have drawn images of another Bolgia from its horrors. One only object rears itself above the eddying waters; this is the mast of a vessel long since wrecked in attempting to cross the bar, and it still stands, a dismal witness of the destruction that has been, and a boding prophet of that which is to come.

By degrees bulrushes of enormous growth become visible, and a few more miles of mud brought us within sight of a cluster of huts called the Balize, by far the most miserable station that I ever saw made the dwelling of man, but I was told that many families of pilots and fishermen lived there.

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For several miles above its mouth, the Mississippi presents no objects more interesting than mud banks, monstrous bulrushes, and now and then a huge crocodile luxuriating in the slime. Another circumstance that gives to this dreary scene an aspect of desolation, is the incessant appearance of vast quantities of drift wood, which is ever finding its way to the different mouths of the Mississippi. Trees of enormous length, sometimes still bearing their branches, and still oftener their uptorn roots entire, the victims of the frequent hurricane, come floating down the stream. Sometimes several of these, entangled together, collect among their boughs a quantity of floating rubbish, that gives the mass the appearance of a moving island, bearing a forest, with its roots mocking the heavens; while the dishonoured branches lash the tide in idle vengeance: this, as it approaches the vessel, and glides swiftly past, looks like the fragment of a world in ruins.

As we advanced, however, we were cheered, notwithstanding the season, by the bright tints of southern vegetation. The banks continue invariably flat, but a succession of planless villas,

sometimes merely a residence, and sometimes surrounded by their sugar grounds and negro huts, varied the scene. At no one point was there an inch of what painters call a second distance; and for the length of one hundred and twenty miles, from the Balize to New Orleans, and one hundred miles above the town, the land is defended from the encroachments of the river by a high embankment which is called the *Levéé*; without which the dwellings would speedily disappear, as the river is evidently higher than the banks would be without it. When we arrived, there had been constant rains, and of long continuance, and this appearance was, therefore, unusually striking, giving to “this great natural feature” the most unnatural appearance imaginable; and making evident, not only that man had been busy there, but that even the mightiest works of nature might be made to bear his impress; it recalled, literally, Swift’s mock heroic,

“Nature must give way to art;”

yet, she was looking so mighty, and so unsubdued all the time, that I could not help fancying she

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would some day take the matter into her own hands again, and if so, farewell to New Orleans.

It is easy to imagine the total want of beauty in such a landscape ; but yet the form and hue of the trees and plants, so new to us, added to the long privation we had endured of all sights and sounds of land, made even these swampy shores seem beautiful. We were, however, impatient to touch as well as see the land ; but the navigation from the Balize to New Orleans is difficult and tedious, and the two days that it occupied appeared longer than any we had passed on board.

In truth, to those who have pleasure in contemplating the phenomena of nature, a sea voyage may endure many weeks without wearying. Perhaps some may think that the first glance of ocean and of sky shew all they have to offer ; nay, even that that first glance may suggest more of dreariness than sublimity ; but to me, their variety appeared endless, and their beauty unfailing. The attempt to describe scenery, even where the objects are prominent and tangible, is very rarely successful ; but where the effect is so subtle and so varying, it must be vain. The impression, nevertheless, is

perhaps deeper than any other; I think it possible I may forget the sensations with which I watched the long course of the gigantic Mississippi; the Ohio and the Potomac may mingle and be confounded with other streams in my memory, I may even recall with difficulty the blue outline of the Alleghany mountains, but never, while I remember any thing, can I forget the first and last hour of light on the Atlantic.

The ocean, however, and all its indescribable charm, no longer surrounded us; we began to feel that our walk on the quarter-deck was very like the exercise of an ass in a mill; that our books had lost half their pages, and that the other half were known by rote; that our beef was very salt, and our biscuits very hard; in short, that having studied the good ship, *Edward*, from stem to stern till we knew the name of every sail, and the use of every pulley, we had had enough of her, and as we laid down, head to head, in our tiny beds for the last time, I exclaimed with no small pleasure,

“To-morrow to fresh fields and pastures new.”

CHAPTER II.

*New Orleans—Society—Creoles and Quadroons—
Voyage up the Mississippi.*

ON first touching the soil of a new land, of a new continent, of a new world, it is impossible not to feel considerable excitement and deep interest in almost every object that meets us. New Orleans presents very little that can gratify the eye of taste, but nevertheless there is much of novelty and interest for a newly arrived European. The large proportion of blacks seen in the streets, all labour being performed by them; the grace and beauty of the elegant Quadroons, the occasional groups of wild and savage looking Indians, the unwonted aspect of the vegetation, the huge and turbid river, with its low and slimy shore, all help to afford that species of amusement which proceeds from looking at what we never saw before.

The town has much the appearance of a French Ville de Province, and is, in fact, an old French

colony taken from Spain by France. The names of the streets are French, and the language about equally French and English. The market is handsome and well supplied, all produce being conveyed by the river. We were much pleased by the chant with which the Negro boatmen regulate and beguile their labour on the river; it consists but of very few notes, but they are sweetly harmonious, and the Negro voice is almost always rich and powerful.

By far the most agreeable hours I passed at New Orleans were those in which I explored with my children the forest near the town. It was our first walk in “the eternal forests of the western world,” and we felt rather sublime and poetical. The trees, generally speaking, are much too close to be either large or well grown; and, moreover, their growth is often stunted by a parasitical plant, for which I could learn no other name than “Spanish moss;” it hangs gracefully from the boughs, converting the outline of all the trees it hangs upon into that of weeping willows. The chief beauty of the forest in this region is from the luxuriant under-growth of palmetos, which is decidedly the

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loveliest coloured and most graceful plant I know. The pawpaw, too, is a splendid shrub, and in great abundance. We here, for the first time, saw the wild vine, which we afterwards found growing so profusely in every part of America, as naturally to suggest the idea that the natives ought to add wine to the numerous productions of their plenty-teeming soil. The strong pendant festoons made safe and commodious swings, which some of our party enjoyed, despite the sublime temperament above-mentioned.

Notwithstanding it was mid-winter when we were at New Orleans, the heat was much more than agreeable, and the attacks of the mosquitos incessant, and most tormenting ; yet I suspect that, for a short time, we would rather have endured it, than not have seen oranges, green peas, and red pepper, growing in the open air at Christmas. In one of our rambles we ventured to enter a garden, whose bright orange hedge attracted our attention ; here we saw green peas fit for the table, and a fine crop of red pepper ripening in the sun. A young Negress was employed on the steps of the house ; that she was a slave made her an object of interest

to us. She was the first slave we had ever spoken to, and I believe we all felt that we could hardly address her with sufficient gentleness. She little dreamed, poor girl, what deep sympathy she excited; she answered us civilly and gaily, and seemed amused at our fancying there was something unusual in red pepper pods; she gave us several of them, and I felt fearful lest a hard mistress might blame her for it. How very childish does ignorance make us! and how very ignorant we are upon almost every subject, where hear-say evidence is all we can get!

I left England with feelings so strongly opposed to slavery, that it was not without pain I witnessed its effects around me. At the sight of every Negro man, woman, and child that passed, my fancy wove some little romance of misery, as belonging to each of them; since I have known more on the subject, and become better acquainted with their real situation in America, I have often smiled at recalling what I then felt.

The first symptom of American equality that I perceived, was my being introduced in form to a milliner; it was not at a boarding-house, under the