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Harriet Martineau

Excerpt

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RETROSPECT  
OF  
WESTERN TRAVEL.

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MADISON.

“ For, neither by Reason, nor by her experience, is it impossible that a Commonwealth should be immortal; seeing the people, being the materials, never dies; and the form, which is motion, must, without opposition, be endless. The bowl which is thrown from your hand, if there be no rub, no impediment, shall never cease; for which cause the glorious luminaries, that are the bowls of God, were once thrown for ever.”—*Harrington's Oceana*.

WHILE I was at Washington, I received a kind invitation from Mr. and Mrs. Madison, to visit them at their seat, Montpelier, Virginia. I was happy to avail myself of it, and paid the visit on my way down to Richmond. At six o'clock, in the morning of the 18th of February, my party arrived at Orange Court House, five miles from Montpelier; and while two proceeded to Charlottesville, where we were to join them in three or four days, a friend and I stopped, first to rest for a

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few hours, and then to proceed to Mr. Madison's. After some sleep, and breakfast at noon, we took a carriage for the five miles of extremely bad road we had to travel. The people at the inn overcharged us for this carriage, and did not mention that Mr. Madison had desired that a messenger should be sent over for his carriage, as soon as we should arrive. This was the only occasion but one, in our journey of 10,000 miles in the United States, that we were overcharged: while, I suspect, the undercharges, where any literary reputation is in the case, are more numerous than can be reckoned.

It was a sweet day of early spring. The patches of snow that were left under the fences and on the rising grounds were melting fast. The road was one continued slough, up to the very portico of the house. The dwelling stands on a gentle eminence, and is neat and even handsome in its exterior, with a flight of steps leading up to the portico. A lawn and wood, which must be pleasant in summer, stretch behind; and from the front there is a noble object on the horizon,—the mountain-chain which traverses the State, and makes it eminent for its scenery. The shifting lights upon these blue mountains were a delightful refreshment to the eye after so many weeks of city life as we had passed.

We were warmly welcomed by Mrs. Madison and a niece, a young lady who was on a visit to her;

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and when I left my room I was conducted to the apartment of Mr. Madison. He had, the preceding season, suffered so severely from rheumatism, that, during this winter, he confined himself to one room, rising after breakfast, before nine o'clock, and sitting in his easy chair till ten at night. He appeared perfectly well during my visit, and was a wonderful man of eighty-three. He complained of one ear being deaf, and that his sight, which had never been perfect, prevented his reading much, so that his studies "lay in a nutshell;" but he could hear Mrs. Madison read; and I did not perceive that he lost any part of the conversation. He was in his chair, with a pillow behind him, when I first saw him; his little person wrapped in a black silk gown; a warm grey and white cap upon his head, which his lady took care should always sit becomingly; and grey worsted gloves, his hands having been rheumatic. His voice was clear and strong, and his manner of speaking particularly lively,—often playful. Except that the face was smaller, and of course older, the likeness to the common engraving of him was perfect. He seemed not to have lost any teeth, and the form of the face was therefore preserved, without any striking marks of age. It was an uncommonly pleasant countenance.

His relish for conversation could never have been

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keener. I was in perpetual fear of his being exhausted; and at the end of every few hours I left my seat by the arm of his chair, and went to the sofa by Mrs. Madison, on the other side of the room: but he was sure to follow, and sit down between us; so that when I found the only effect of my moving was to deprive him of the comfort of his chair, I returned to my station, and never left it but for food and sleep,—glad enough to make the most of my means of intercourse with one whose political philosophy I deeply venerated. There is no need to add another to the many eulogies of Madison: I will only mention that the finest of his characteristics appeared to me to be his inexhaustible faith,—faith that a well-founded Commonwealth may, as our motto declares, be immortal; not only because the people, its constituency, never dies; but because the principles of justice in which such a Commonwealth originates never die out of the people's heart and mind. This faith shone brightly through the whole of Mr. Madison's conversation, except on one subject. With regard to slavery he owned himself to be almost in despair. He had been quite so till the institution of the Colonization Society. How such a mind as his could derive any alleviation to its anxiety from that source is surprising. I think it must have been from his overflowing faith; for the facts were before him

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that in eighteen years the Colonization Society had removed only between two and three thousand persons, while the annual increase of the slave population in the United States was upwards of sixty thousand.

He talked more on the subject of slavery than on any other, acknowledging without limitation or hesitation all the evils with which it has ever been charged. He told me that the black population in Virginia increases far faster than the white; and that the licentiousness only stops short of the destruction of the race; every slave girl being expected to be a mother by the time she is fifteen. He assumed from this, I could not make out why, that the negroes must go somewhere; and pointed out how the free States discourage the settlement of blacks; how Canada disagrees with them; how Hayti shuts them out; so that Africa is their only refuge. He did not assign any reason why they should not remain where they are when freed. He found, by the last returns from his estates, that one-third of his own slaves were under five years of age. He had parted with some of his best land to feed the increasing numbers, and had yet been obliged to sell a dozen of his slaves the preceding week. He observed that the whole bible is against negro slavery; but that the clergy do not preach this; and the people do not see it. He became ani-

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mated in describing what I have elsewhere related\* of the eagerness of the clergy of the four denominations to catch converts among the slaves, and the effect of religious teaching of this kind upon those who, having no rights, can have no duties. He thought the condition of slaves much improved in his time, and, of course, their intellects. This remark was, I think, intended to apply to Virginia alone; for it is certainly not applicable to the south-western States. He accounted for his selling his slaves by mentioning their horror of going to Liberia, a horror which he admitted to be prevalent among the blacks, and which appears to me decisive as to the unnaturalness of the scheme. The willing mind is the first requisite to the emigrant's success. Mr. Madison complained of the difficulty and risk of throwing an additional population into the colony, at the rate of two or three cargoes a year; complained of it because he believed it was the fault of the residents, who were bent upon trading with the interior for luxuries, instead of raising food for the new comers. This again seems fatal to the scheme; since the compulsory direction of industry, if it could be enforced, would be almost as bad as slavery at home; and there are no means of preventing the emigrants

\* "Society in America," vol. ii., p. 160.

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being wholly idle, if they are not allowed to work in their own way for their own objects. Mr. Madison admitted the great and various difficulties attending the scheme; and recurred to the expression that he was only "less in despair than formerly about slavery." He spoke with deep feeling of the sufferings of ladies under the system, declaring that he pitied them even more than their negroes; and that the saddest slavery of all was that of conscientious Southern women. They cannot trust their slaves in the smallest particulars, and have to superintend the execution of all their own orders: and they know that their estates are surrounded by vicious free blacks, who induce thievery among the negroes, and keep the minds of the owners in a state of perpetual suspicion, fear, and anger.

Mr. Madison spoke strongly of the helplessness of all countries cursed with a servile population, in a conflict with a people wholly free; ridiculed the idea of the Southern States being able to maintain a rising against the North: and wondered that all thinkers were not agreed in a thing so plain. He believed that Congress has power to prohibit the internal slave-trade. He mentioned the astonishment of some strangers, who had an idea that slaves were always whipped all day long, at seeing his negroes go to church one Sunday. They were gaily dressed, the women in bright-coloured cali-

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coes ; and when a sprinkling of rain came, up went a dozen umbrellas. The astonished strangers veered round to the conclusion that slaves were very happy ; but were told of the degradation of their minds,—of their carelessness of each other in their nearest relations, and their cruelty to brutes.

Mrs. Madison's son by a former marriage joined us before dinner. We dined in the next room to Mr. Madison, and found him eager for conversation again as soon as we had risen from table. Mrs. M. is celebrated throughout the country for the grace and dignity with which she discharged the arduous duties which devolve upon the President's lady. For a term of eight years she administered the hospitalities of the White House with such discretion, impartiality, and kindness, that it is believed she gratified every one, and offended nobody. She is a strong-minded woman, fully capable of entering into her husband's occupations and cares ; and there is little doubt that he owed much to her intellectual companionship, as well as to her ability in sustaining the outward dignity of his office. When I was her guest, she was in excellent health and lively spirits ; and I trust that though she has since lost the great object of her life, she may yet find interests enough to occupy and cheer many years of an honoured old age.

Mr. Madison expressed his regret at the death of



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Mr. Malthus, whose works he had studied with close attention. He mentioned that Franklin and two others had anticipated Malthus in comparing the rates of increase of population and food; but that Malthus had been the first to draw out the doctrine;—with an attempt at too much precision, however, in determining the ratio of the increase of food. He laughed at Godwin's methods of accounting for the enormous increase of population in America by referring it to immigration, and having recourse to any supposition rather than the obvious one of an abundance of food. He declared himself very curious on the subject of the size of the Roman farms, and that he had asked many friends where the mistake lies in the accounts which have come down to us. Some Roman farms are represented as consisting of an acre and a quarter; the produce of which would be eaten up by a pair of oxen. The estate of Cincinnatus being three times this size, he could scarcely plough, after having lost half of it by being surety. Either there must be some great mistake about our notion of the measurement of Roman farms, or there must have been commons for grazing, and woods for fuel; the importation of grain from Sicily and other places not having taken place till long after. He asked by what influence our corn laws, so injurious to all, and so obviously so to the many, were kept up, and

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whether it was possible that they should continue long. He declared himself in favour of free-trade, though believing that the freedom cannot be complete in any one country till universal peace shall afford opportunity for universal agreement.

He expressed himself strongly in favour of arrangements for the security of literary property all over the world, and wished that English authors should be protected from piracy in the United States, without delay. He believed that the utterance of the national mind in America would be through small literature, rather than large, enduring works. After the schools and pulpits of the Union are all supplied, there will remain an immense number of educated sons of men of small property, who will have things to say; and all who can write, will. He thought it of the utmost importance to the country, and to human beings everywhere, that the brain and the hands should be trained together; and that no distinction in this respect should be made between men and women. He remembered an interesting conversation on this subject with Mr. Owen, from whom he learned with satisfaction that well educated women in his settlement turned with ease and pleasure from playing the harp to milking the cows.

The active old man, who declared himself crippled with rheumatism, had breakfasted, risen and was