

THINGS AS THEY ARE IN AMERICA

BY WILLIAM CHAMBERLAIN

RICHMOND, IN VIRGINIA.

When don't the carriage leave the door for the

steamer down the Potomac? I asked the book-

keeper of Willard's Hotel in Washington.

'At six o'clock in the morning, and nine in the

evening,' was the reply.

I preferred setting off in the morning, and

readily accordingly. Mr. Willard being up at the

early hour, and considerably providing for

me at his departure with a cup of coffee (with

charge.)

The ride on the leading line of the steamer

seems an odd sort of thing, compared with

half an hour, and on my arrival, I found that a

number of persons who had just come by the

northern train, were going on board a steamer,

which was lying at the wharf of a wooden

pier. Scarcely anything was adjusted. A very

drill-looking negro lad, in a kind of coat, hat,

and boots pulled over a pair of ragged pants,

drew in the rope, and we were off.

The Potomac, more like an inland sea than a

river, and here a mile in length, the connect-

ing-link between the northern and southern

railways. The line, as yet, stopped at Washing-

ton; and to get again upon the track, it was

necessary to descend the Potomac fifty-five miles,

to a place called Aquia Creek, where the railway

to Richmond commences. An English traveller

has said such sort of things on the steamer on the

Potomac, that I did not feel quite at ease in

making so long an excursion in one of them; but

I am bound in justice to say, that so far as my

experience went, there was nothing to complain

of. For a company of about fifty persons, two

tables were prepared for breakfast in a manner

that would have done no discredit to a first-class

hotel. A good-humoured negro barber piled his

vacation in his little apartment. And the toilet

apparatus comprehended no wooden bowls—such

articles having utterly vanished, if they ever

existed anywhere but in the imagination.

In fine weather, the sail down the Potomac

from Washington must be exceedingly pleasant;

for the river though broad, is not so wide as to

give indistinctness to the scenery on the banks.

On the right, we have the woody heights of

Virginia, and on the left, the hills of Maryland,

with frequent glimpses of villa-residences and

farm-settlements on both sides. At the distance

of six or seven miles below Washington, but on

the Virginia side, we come abreast of Alexandria,

a town of 10,000 inhabitants, with a good deal of

shipping at its quays, and signs of manufacturing

industry on a considerable scale. Eight miles

further down, on the same side, is seen upon a

green knoll among the picturesque woody emi-

naires, an object of interest which, cold as the

morning in streets nearly all the passengers from

the well-warmed cabin. This is Mount Vernon,

once the residence of General Washington, and

where, in a vault amidst the grounds, the remains

of the great man were interred. It is a neat

country residence, with a tall tower in front,

changed in no respect from what it was sixty

years ago; but a local authority speaks of the

grounds, which were kept in the greatest trimness

by Washington, being now in a deplorable

state of disorder—a circumstance which, if true,

unfortunately, the spot is not easily reached by

land, otherwise I should have gladly made it the

object of a pilgrimage.

As the day advanced, the chilliness of the

atmosphere were off, and on arriving at Aquia

Creek, the air felt mild and agreeable, although

it was the 1st of December. The train was in

waiting on a long pier, and in less than ten

minutes it had received its freight of passengers

and baggage, and was under-way. A few

entrance into Virginia—that fine old state, settled

by English gentlemen of family, and whose

any six of them, and do the work, too, in a greatly

superior manner.

In the course of the journey, a number of

passengers were set down at different stations,

leaving so few in the train, that at length another

gentleman and myself, found ourselves alone in

one of the cars. My companion was a man of

probably forty years of age, stout made, with

brandy hair and whiskers, and had I seen him in

any other place, I should have said he was a work-

ing man, probably a stone-mason, dressed in his

Monday clothes, and out on a holiday. I am

particular in referring to his appearance, in order

to be able, if possible, to throw some light on the habits

and which preceded such an incessant torrent of

expectations, that as best the foot beyond him

presented a most ungrateful spectacle.

I think travellers, generally, in their descrip-

tions, exaggerate the chewing and spitting of the

American. It is, in reality, only habit with these

you meet a person who abstains himself of the

noxious practice, while to the mass of the more

ignorant people in the States, they are probably

as inextinguishable as to any well-bred European.

The inveterate, however, directed against the

American on this score, dispose me to believe

that the English who visit the United States, and

pick out as many faults, are either ignorant or

negligent of the manners of their own country.

Among the less-instructed classes in Great

Britain, spitting in the streets, and other places,

is exceedingly common; and since young gentle-

men took themselves to smoking pipes, the vice may be said to have

become fashionable in the junior departments of

high-life—at any rate, we do not see that it meets

with public censure. Now, if it be considered

that in the United States, the rise from one

condition of life to another is astonishingly rapid,

and that all classes travel together in the same

cars, and live together in the same hotels, it will

not be difficult to understand how certain obnoxious

practices should obtrude themselves on the

notice of the more polished class of travellers.

The train arrived at Richmond about two

o'clock in the afternoon; and by an omnibus in

attendance, I was transferred to a hotel, which

proved to be very inferior to the establishments

in the States further north. The whole of the

waiters were negroes, in white jackets; but among

the female domestics I recognised one or two

Irish girls—the sight of these helping to make

good what I had everywhere heard stated, that

the Irish disseminating the coloured races. At

Willard's Hotel, in Washington, all the waiters,

as well as the female domestics, were Irish, and

here, also, they will probably be so in a short

time.

Situated on a high and sloping bank on the

left side of the James River, Richmond is much

less regular in outline than the greater number

of American cities. Its streets, straggling in

different directions on no uniform plan, are of an

old-fashioned appearance, with narrow streets,

and numerous public buildings. Besides the

principal thoroughfares, there are many narrow

streets or lanes of a dismal, half-deserted ap-

pearance, generally dirty, and seemingly ill

drained and ventilated. Everywhere, the number

of black faces is considerable; for in a population

of 27,000, as many as 9000 are said to be slaves.

The dwellings occupied by the lower classes of

coloured people are of a miserable kind, resembling

the worst brick-houses in the back-lanes of

English manufacturing towns. In the upper

part of the city there are some rows of handsome

villas, and in this quarter is a public square, with

the Capitol, or seat of legislature, in a central and

conspicuous situation. In walking through this

public edifice towards dusk, I observed that it

was guarded by an armed sentinel, the sight of

whom had almost the startling effect of an

apparition; for it was the first time I had seen a

bayonet in the United States, and suggested the

eminent reflection, that the large infusion of

slaves in the composition of society was not

unattended with danger.

A fine view is obtained from the front of the

Capitol, overlooking the lower part of the city,

the river with its falls, and the country in the

distance. The falls of the James River appear

to have determined the situation of the town.

These falls unite to amount to a descent of eighty

feet, and are made available for turning a number

of large mills for grinding flour, and other pur-

poses. The occurrence of such falls is only one

of a series of similar phenomena, along the east

coast of America, where, by successive of the

sea, a terrace-range crosses the rivers at a less

or greater distance from the ocean, causing an

abrupt descent, which is valuable as a water-

power. The falls of the James River cease in

front of the city, where there are several rocky

and wady falls, and at this point two long

wooden bridges afford communication with a

manufacturing suburb on the right bank.

Although, in many respects, inferior in point

of appearance as compared with the smart New-

England cities, Richmond showed various sym-

ptoms of prosperity and progress. A species of

excavation was in progress of excavation

of adjoining the bridges, and several large con-

trades in this lower quarter, there was an active

trade in the packing and sale of tobacco, quan-

tities of which, like faded woods, were being

carried to the factories by negroes. The cotton

manufacture is carried on in several large

establishments, and will soon be extended, but

principally, I was told, by means of northern

capital, and the employment of hired white

labourers, who, for factory purposes, are said to

be preferable to persons of colour.

Richmond is known as the principal market

for the supply of slaves for the States—a circum-

stance understood to originate in the fact that

Virginia, as a matter of husbandry, breeds great

labourers for the express purpose of sale, being

heard that such was the case, I was interested in

knowing by what means and of what price slaves

are offered to purchasers. Without introduction

of any kind, I was thrown on my own resources

in acquiring this information. Fortunately,

however, there was no impediment to my accom-

plishing my object. The expense of ordinary goods

in a store is not more open to the public than are

the sales of slaves in Richmond. By consulting

the local newspapers, I learned that the sales take

place by auction every morning in the office of

certain brokers, who, as it understood, had the

terms of their advertisements, purchased or

received slaves for sale on commission.

Where the street was in which the brokers

conducted their business, I did not know; but

the discovery was easily made. Rambling down the

main street in the city, I found that the subject

of my search was a narrow and short thorough-

fare, of four or five yards in width, and termi-

minating in a similar cross thoroughfare.

Both streets, lined

with brick-houses, were dull and silent. There

was not a person to whom I could put a question.

Turning off to the left, and terminating in a

narrow passage, and into it I stepped. Concealing

myself behind a door, I saw a man and a woman

in a large shop with two windows, and a

door between; one shading or covering inside; the

interior a spacious, dismal apartment, not well

lighted, and a bench at one side of the shop,

three feet high, with two steps to it from the

floor. I saw, concealing the idea of this dismal

shop, of four or five yards in width, and termi-

minating in a similar cross thoroughfare.

Both streets, lined

with brick-houses, were dull and silent. There

was not a person to whom I could put a question.

Turning off to the left, and terminating in a

narrow passage, and into it I stepped. Concealing

himself, I observed the subject of sale

from the back of the shop, whence, as the day

was chilly, they edged themselves towards the

fire, in the corner where I was seated. I was

not between the two parties—the white man on

the left, and the black and young negro on the

right, and I could see what would take place.

The sight of the negroes at once attracted the

attention of Wide-awake. Chewing with vigour,

he lay heavily on the pair, as if to see

what they were doing. Under this search-

ing gaze, the man and boy were a little abashed,

but said nothing. Their appearance had little

of the repellence which we are apt to associate

with the idea of slaves. They were dressed in a

grey woolen coat, pants, and waistcoat, a

coloured cotton neckcloth, clean shirts, coarse

woollen stockings, and stout shoes. The man

wore black hair; the boy was black-headed.

Moved by a sudden impulse, Wide-awake left

his seat, and rounding the back of my chair,

began to grasp at the man's arms, as if to feel

them more exactly. He then examined his

hands and fingers; and last of all, told him

to open his mouth and show his teeth, which

he did in a submissive manner. Having finished

these examinations, Wide-awake resumed his

seat, and chewed on in silence as before.

I thought it was but fair that I should now

make my turn of investigation, and accordingly

asked the older negro what was his name. He

said he did not know. I next inquired how