

W. B. R. by

NOTES ON AMERICA.

CHAPTER I.

GOING AWAY.

I SHALL never forget the one fourth serious and three fourths comical astonishment with which, on the morning of the third of January, eighteen hundred and forty-two, I opened the door of, and put my head into, a "stateroom" on board the Britannia steam-packet, twelve hundred tons per register, bound for Halifax and Boston, and carrying her majesty's mails.

That this stateroom had been specially engaged for "Charles Dickens, Esquire, and Lady," was rendered sufficiently clear, even to my scared intellect, by a very small manuscript announcing the fact, which was pinned on a very flat quilt, covering a very thin mattress, spread like a surgical plaster on a most inaccessible shelf. But that this was the stateroom concerning which, Charles Dickens, Esquire, and Lady, had held daily and nightly conferences for at least four months preceding: that this could be any possibility be that small snug chamber of the imagination, which Charles Dickens, Esquire, with the spirit of prophecy strong upon him, had always foretold would contain, at least, one little sofa, and which his lady, with a modest yet most magnificent sense of its limited dimensions, had, from the first, opined would not hold more than two enormous portmanteaus in some odd corner out of sight (portmanteaus which could now no more be got in at the door, not to say stowed away, than a giraffe could be persuaded or forced into a flower-pot): that this utterly impracticable, thoroughly hopeless, and profoundly preposterous box, had the remotest reference to, or connexion with, those chaste and pretty, not to say gorgeous little bowers, sketched by a masterly hand, in the highly varnished lithographic plan hanging up in the agent's counting-house in the city of London: that this room of state, in short, could be anything but a pleasant fiction and cheerful jest of the captain's, invented and put in practice for the better relish and enjoyment of the real stateroom presently to be disclosed: these were truths which I really could not, for the moment, bring my mind at all to bear upon or comprehend. And I sat down upon a kind of horsehair slab, or perch, of which there were two within; and looked, without any expression of countenance whatever, at some friends who had come on board with us, and who were crushing their faces into all manner of shapes by endeavouring to squeeze them through the small doorway.

We had experienced a pretty smart shock before coming below, which, but that we were the most sanguine people living, might have prepared us for the worst. The imaginative artist to whom I have already made allusion, has depicted, in the same great work, a chamber of almost interminable perspective, furnished, as Mr. Robins would say, in a style of more than East-

ern splendour, and filled (but not conveniently so) with groups of ladies and gentlemen, in the very highest state of enjoyment and vivacity. Before descending into the bowels of the ship, we had passed from the deck into a long, narrow apartment, not unlike a gigantic hearse with windows in the sides; having at the upper end a melancholy stove, at which three or four chilly stewards were warming their hands, while on either side, extending down its whole dreary length, was a long, long table, over each of which a rack, fixed to the low roof, and stuck full of drinking-glasses and cruet-stands, hinted, dismally at rolling seas and heavy weather. I had not, at that time, seen the ideal presentment of this chamber, which has since gratified me so much, but I observed that one of our friends who had made the arrangements for our voyage, turned pale on entering, retreated on the friend behind him, smote his forehead involuntarily, and said, below his breath, "Impossible! it cannot be!" or words to that effect. He recovered himself, however, by a great effort, and after a preparatory cough or two, cried, with a ghastly smile, which is still before me, looking at the same time round the walls, "Ha! the breakfast-room, steward—eh?" We all foresaw what the answer must be; we knew the agony he suffered. He had often spoken of the *saloon*; had taken in and lived upon the pictorial idea; had usually given us to understand, at home, that to form a just conception of it, it would be necessary to multiply the size and furniture of an ordinary drawing-room by seven, and then fall short of the reality. When the man in reply avowed the truth; the blunt, remorseless, naked truth; "This is the saloon, sir," he actually reeled beneath the blow.

In persons who were so soon to part, and interpose between their else daily communication the formidable barrier of many thousand miles of stormy space, and who were, for that reason, anxious to cast no other cloud, not even the passing shadow of a moment's disappointment or discomfiture, upon the short interval of happy companionship that yet remained to them—in persons so situated, the natural transition from these first surprises was obviously into peals of hearty laughter; and I can report that I, for one, being still seated upon the slab or perch before mentioned, roared outright until the vessel rang again. Thus, in less than two minutes after coming upon it for the first time, we all by common consent agreed, that this stateroom was the pleasantest and most facetious and capital contrivance possible; and that, to have had it one inch larger, would have been quite a disagreeable and deplorable state of things. And with this, and with showing how, by very nearly closing the door, and twining in and out like serpents, and by counting the little washing slab as standing-room, we could manage to insinuate four people into it, all at one time; and entreat-