

NOTEBOOK NOTIONS OF NEW YORK, NORTH AMERICA (Being scraps from a journal there kept)

By Samson Davis

"I've been roving" 1842 - 3

NOTES OF AMERICA

Saturday, September 17th, 1842

A severe calamity having almost overwhelmed me, I felt most desirous to destroy all associations connected with it - but those which place cannot affect. To aid this purpose, I determined in my confusion to leave my native land for some time. North America appeared to me the most eligible destination as the transit was moderate and I thought there might be some probability of being able to exercise my profession there to some advantage. Therefore this day I shipped on board the "good ship" Ontario - Bradish master - which was lying in the Saint Katherine's Dock, bound for New York. As N- strongly desired to go there on speculation and as I was anxious to have some companion on my voyage, we went together.

We arrived at Portsmouth on the 19th September. I and N- immediately went on shore in one of the 'bumboats' which crowded around the vessel to sell the steerage passengers various necessities. At Portsea we posted letters home. Portsmouth which adjoins it, is a dirty, slovenly place except in the main street. The harbour is admirable, and strongly fortified. We intended sleeping ashore but about midnight till which time we had been roaming about, I became nervously excited lest our vessel should weigh anchor before we could reach her in the morning. So, arousing up a waterman by the assistance of half a crown, about his fare, we induced him to take us off at once. Our hurry and apprehension was however uncalled for - as the Captain for whom we waited did not arrive 'til the 22nd when we sailed.

We cleared the channel in about a week from the time we started - looked very lingeringly at the Lizard and Seilly lights, bade a hearty farewell to England, and launched into the great western highway of Nations.

I cannot analyse my feelings as I sailed down the noble Thames and through the channel. Indeed I rather seemed void of it all. A stupid apathy succumbed my soul, and seemed to freeze up all but my animal nature. I felt that something very extraordinary in my life's history was transpiring, but I did not appear conscious of what it was. I imagine, that something similar, only immeasurably greater must be the sensations of a malefactor when led out to the consummation of his fate. Once indeed off Blackwell, I well remember I felt an unlicensed teardrop rising - but

The last land we caught sight of was the coast of France, bordering the horizon like a cirrus cloud. Then away we went upon the watery desert - henceforth trusting our lives to a few inches of plank in the hands of providence, and our comforts to the ebony cook and steward, and a brave fellow old Jackson, the sable cook, was! I sometimes chatted with him and he had but one care, which was to save sufficient money to marry some English inamorata (lady with whom one is in love).

I cannot conceive a combination of circumstances better calculated to elicit the real character than those which necessarily occur on a sea voyage. There you are! A little republican community subject only to internal regulations for the common and weak - all on a political and social equality - thereon like so many young Robinson Crusoe's almost entirely on your own resources with numberless minor miseries which patient good temper will smile at and brave - but which the querulous will magnify into mountains of grief which must certainly overwhelm and destroy them. O for the pen of Dickens, or the pencil of Hogarth to paint the soul and stomach moving scenes we had to witness. By a strange and unknown coincidence the pen of Dickens was just so engaged at the very time.

Though civilities were passed between all, yet before many days the passengers were arranged into small coteries as similarity of circumstances, mind or manners, dictated. A line was composed of only three individuals, myself, a person named Bartlett, and a Mr Alfred Marsh. Bartlett was certainly the drollest dog I ever saw. His witticisms and practical jokes kept the passengers in a continual broad laugh wherever he was. It really seemed, as he once told me in his serious opinion, 'that Nature had made him for a 'lark'. Marsh was a very gentlemanly young fellow, a Chemist and Druggist, going out to settle in New York.

We usually whiled away the morning and afternoon in reading light works together, although my favorite amusement was looking over the side of the vessel and musing over the leaping waves. Though many a time my mind was far distant from what my eyes beheld - busy with the past and the coming and my heart was far away too, greeting in Spirit some who have passed from its embraces forever, and others who it might never see more. O it is sublime - this ocean desert - it is the most perfect picture of desolation one can conceive and I sympathised with it for it seemed utterly lonely in its strugglings, and had but one which smiles upon it with benignity and that one was soaring far above its companionship in the heavens.

We eventually had a vocal and instrumental concert in the evenings - not on quite so extensive a scale, or so well executed as many I have heard at the Hanover Square Rooms, but still tolerable. We had a good 'leader' who was a

professor of Music and singing and a Socialist too, going out to try to establish one of Owen's communities on a small scale at Ohio, Cincinnati.

When off the Azores we encountered a very severe gale which drove us back more than three degrees of longitude. But it was a glorious thing! The terrible sublime was here realised in a most magnificent scale - the wind among the blocks and rigging and howling the loudest thunder I ever heard - but different in sound, and continuous - more like the roaring of a steam engine increased a thousand fold - the lightening flashing its vivid blue fire all around, and lighting up a whole hemisphere - the vessel on such an inclination that on the windward side, which was the only place we could occupy, I was obliged to lash a rope around me to keep astanding. She was bedded in the waves on the leeward side and every two or three minutes I was regaled with a shower-bath, or rather a douche by the spray splashing over the side in sheets some tons at a time. Yet after the first fight was abated the sensation was a mad delight which it is impossible to describe be, it inspires a bold-faring devil like feeling, you felt like the Spirit of the Storm controlling the savage elements!

I stayed on deck all that night, and certainly never passed anything like so gorgeous as one before. Next morning the waves were at least thirty feet high, leaping and rolling their huge serpentine volumes about as though their master old Neptune was angered at our daring to invade his dominions and determined to resist to the uttermost. But generally speaking I was deceived in my anticipations respecting the height of the waves. I have sometimes seen the water rougher at London Bridge than it was in the midst of the great Atlantic.

One of the most lovely sights presented to us was the numerous 'irides' produced by the spray of the waves in gracefully falling over. When you stand between them and the sun dozens of small but most brilliant rainbows painted the waves - creating a fairy scene not to be forgotten.

We made good headway to 'that place abroad, where 'sailors gang to fish for Cod' as my ole friend, Burns calls it but he to 'beat' the remainder of the voyages from Newfoundland to 'Sandy Hook' which is the point of land just as you enter the outer harbor of New York. I shall never forget it. We retired to rest one evening as we had for several evenings before, with 'that deferred hope which maketh the heart seek' clouding every countenance with despondency; as we had expected to reach Sandy Hook at least a week before; and many now looked as though they thought the captain had 'lost himself' in the trackless waste.

We were all greatly roused before daybreak however by an unusual hurrying and bustling and on reaching the deck the eye was greeted by an everlasting sight. The grey dawn of the twilight discovered to us our situation in a narrow straight between two lovely lands as what lands would not appear lovely under such circumstances? On our right was "Long Island" stretching far away and on our left was the beautiful little 'Straten Island' The most picturesque scenery embellished its surface and villas in every variety of architectural style peeked from among the trees, in which they were embowered at varying intervals upon its hilly side. Staten Island is a government grant to sailors of the US Navy. The rent collected from it which must be considerable as it mostly contains the country residences of the richer merchants of New York city - supports the rich and invalided American sailors. One of the chief edifices on the isle is the Sailors Retreat. For the same purpose of Greenwich Hospital in England. There is also a fine hospital and opposite this in what is called the 'narrows' is the quarantine ground.

Fortunately for us no quarantine is requisite after the end of September or we should have had to be there for 24 hours. The medical man boarded us at this place as each person accordingly to law has to undergo an examination before he can land. This sounds well, but it is quite farcical in effect. The physician just made us march by him all in a heap like a drove of pigs. The ceremony occupied about two minutes of his precious time. Had half of us been half dead with typhus fever he must have been much more sagacious and penetrating than English physicians to have detected it by the cursory wholesale glance. He vouchsafed us. He was rather full of himself 'I guess'! Here also the customs officer boarded us and took the ships papers ashore. He assuredly was an exquisite of the very first order. He was decked in a complete suit of black velvet even to his fancy cap. Holspurs ? would have been quite 'maunais houte' beside him and would not have dared to present himself 'between the wind and his nobility'!

We passed up the East river by a very small island called Governors Island. It is covered by a low sound fortification of apparently enormous strength and quite bristling with cannon mounts. There is a similar fortification a little further up on the other side. These effectively contain the inner harbour. On anchoring in the stream we had to wait two or three hours for the searcher to exercise his art. For some time he would not pass my medicine chest, though eventually he conceded to do so. But on protestations of mine that they were for my private reading could induce him to pass my chest of books. He chalked the ominous 'public stores' on them. Nelson had gone on shore in a boat an hour before and now returned with my brother John who was quite a 'l'American. I went with them and our luggage on one of their strange looking wagons (not unlike a small brewers dray) to the York house, Washington Street where John was located.

Such was my triumphant entry into that city which 'beats all others into fits'! What a positive luxury it was for one to 'dress' now that those who have been unable to do so for a long month can determine or conceive! At the table d'bote I met a most elegant and fascinating Spanish lady not be forgotten! After a hearty dinner I got John to chaperon me to the Custom House to look after my books. It is a beautiful new building composed wholly of white marble and iron, in a Doric style. I stated to a pettifogging (low tricks) Brother plying there the business I was upon, and by means of my making affidavit and paying him a dollar, after attending at least a dozen official places, I at length obtained a permit and then returned to the vessel and got my chest with much demure.

We landed about noon on the 18th October, 1842 after a fairly average passage of a month.

The following section is also included in his journal – perhaps it is fiction?????????

Travelling in the central mountainous district of Germany I alighted one evening at the only house of entertainment for travellers in a dismal little village - the name of which I have ceased to remember, but which was situated within the gloomy shadows of the Schwarzdald or Black Forest. I had unconsciously beguiled the last half hour of the declining twilight by recalling to memory the various horrid and supernatural legends with which this frightful neighbourhood abounds and I could not avoid confessing that if the malignant spirits of a netherworld are at times permitted to turn awry the order of things and to work foul mischief among the sons of men by means at which nature revolts and shudders - here of all places in the wide world was the fittest scene for their unholy labours. Having partaken of some vile compound with as vile a name, which the landlord assured me was his most savoury dish but which relished amazingly like a lump of old horseflesh made into a soup with stale cabbage water. I lighted my Meuschaum - ordered a bottle of the best Rhenish - and calmly prepared to overcome the first effects of a very fatiguing day before retiring for the night. Here as has so often happened to me in several solitary parts of the globe, my mind reverted to the dear little island which gave me birth and to the many kind hearts and smiling faces which once greeted my approach with gladness but had now ceased to think of me and so I think of me but as of the dead, and I felt in its full force that sinking of the heart that loathing of existence which only the solitary aimless traveller can feel as he wanders and wanders on in pursuit of his vagrant course.

The curling vapours which floated in graceful wreaths about my head at length commenced. Their soothing influence and I was listlessly amusing myself by speculating on the uncouth lumbering furniture which squatted around me, when my attention was attracted by an upright glass case of about three feet high, which stood supported by a sort of bracket in the far corner of the apartment.

It was so begrimed by the accumulated effects of smoke and dust that its contents were but dimly visible and I at first took it for an invalidated time piece but on a closer scrutiny I fancied I could discern within it something like a miniature outline of the human form. My curiosity thus piqued, I arose and walked across the room to examine it and on wiping away the stains from the glass perceived that it was indeed a representation in wax or some other sickly looking material of a small human figure. The general contour was that of a sweet infant apparently a few months old having all the soft swelling graceful curves of that innocent age.

But on carrying my eyes upwards to the face I was astonished and somewhat horror stricken at perceiving it fearfully out of keeping with the rest of the frame. It portrayed the guilt and wickedness of a long life. Indeed so horribly true was every vice delineated in every lineament that it seemed impossible for ought but a lost soul working from within to have traced(?) them there and as I gazed upon it I could almost fancy the features assumed new combinations depicting deeper and deeper depravity.

Minute inspection revealed a deep circular furrow extending round the middle of the head and this added greatly to the hideousness of the physiognomy by resembling a horrid gash athwart the forehead.

On returning to my place by the fire I sat ruminating a long time on the possible meaning of this anomalous production. My busy fancy conjured up at least fifty different conjectures respecting it, each wilder than the last, and each in turn to be rejected as impossible.

At length determined to be satisfied which of them was nearest the truth, I summoned the landlord who after what appeared a lengthy period made his appearance. In answer to my inquiries regarding the figure he very reluctantly and in a deep tone full of mystery and fear detailed the ensuing extraordinary history far surpassing the wildest of my conceptions -

Many years ago the half ruined pile which you may have noticed frowning upon my house from the high peak behind it was tenanted by a dark solitary stranger. No-one here knew who he was or whence he came. He had hired the house for a short time from the proprietors agent avowedly for the purpose of lonely study.

And assuredly he appeared to be a most indefatigable student, for his lamp was always brightly burning through the high casement like some luminous star - wake what hour in the night you would. He had with him as his sole companion and attendant a man of the most revolting and ferocious countenance though silent and mysterious as his master.

These and the subsequent facts are learnt from my grandfather who was then a youth and was occasionally employed in trifling errands for the stranger, though the medium of his taciturn servitor.

Many and cunning were the stratagems of the villagers to penetrate the obscurity which veiled there strange visitor but all were readily foiled by the craftiness and privacy of himself and his valet. As usual their disappointed curiosity soon amply revenged itself for this vexatious ignorance by originating the most horrid and darkest surmises respecting them. He was a wizard and his man his familiar(?) a diabolical necromancer, a dealer in the black arts, a child of the Evil one himself. And very satisfactory reasons were assigned by the propounders for each and all of these flattering opinions.

Too soon however (to make a long story short) their worst suspicions appeared to receive a terrible confirmation. For two days the valet had not made his usual appearance here for there daily rations and on the second evening fearful of some unconscious offence my grandfather was dispatched by his mother to ascertain the cause.