



OUR COUNTRY—HER COMMERCE—AND HER FREE INSTITUTIONS.

VOL. IV.

OTTAWA, ILLINOIS, FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 2, 1844.

NO. 33.

From the Democratic Review, January No. 1844.
A RECENT RAMBLE
Among the Peasantry of England.

BY JUDGE CARLETON, OF LOUISIANA.

Most books of travels in foreign countries abound in details about kings and palaces, lords and ladies, but say nothing of the condition of the peasantry; the class of mankind by whose humble labors the rest are fed. Nor can just information be had from citizens casually met in public vehicles, taverns, or steamers. To understand the subject, I was, therefore, compelled to enter their cottages and examine for myself, in all the states of Europe through which I passed, especially in England, where I resided, at intervals, more than twenty months.

When I first saw that beautiful England, its roads, bridges, hedges, hills and valleys, fields and forests; the green earth sprinkled with cottages, to which the still greener ivy clung; here, thought I, happiness has fixed her earthly home. Yet an occasional glance at the interior of their houses on the nearer approach of the vehicle, and the aspect of the ragged children about the doors, filled me with distrust.

Being told that the peasantry, here called laborers, lived in great abundance and content in Somersetshire, thither I set out from London in November, in 1842, by the Southampton railway to Winchester, where I took a seat, about sunset, in a coach for Wincanton.

The interior of an English coach is a prison-house, where a man of ordinary stature cannot stretch his limbs nor look out upon the country through its narrow, and ill-contrived window. The French *Diligence* is greatly to be preferred; though uncouth and clumsy, they are more comfortable and safe, and move with equal speed. The seats are all under cover; whereas the English are perched on the outside upon naked wooden benches, flanked with small iron rods that chafe and cut the flesh, exposed to the unceasing rains and chilly winds of their remorseless climate. Their excursions upon travellers are moreover, so enormous, that the third classes, as they are called, are glad to compound for mere transportation, like the cattle, in their steamers and rail cars, with whom they are often seen in close alliance.

Our progress was suddenly arrested by a wagon sunk to the axle in the soft, chalky earth of newly-made road, through which we waded on foot more than half a mile, leaving the empty vehicle to be dragged by the horses. One of the ladies, a pretty, fragile creature, was so overcome by exposure to the weather, that the guard, touched with compassion, transferred her to the inside, where a kind gentleman and myself restored her to speech by rubbing her hands and throwing our cloaks about her half-frozen limbs.

We arrived at Wincanton at six o'clock in the morning, when the guard presented himself for his usual *bonas*. I followed the example of my neighbor and gave him a half-crown, and two shillings more to the driver, making altogether one dollar and five cents tax upon each traveler, independently of the fare, which is fifty per cent. higher than in any other country of Europe.

At ten o'clock, I hired a carriage, and accompanied by two gentlemen, went three miles to Stoney Stoke and Shepton Montagu, two villages in which the laborers are clustered in considerable numbers. I addressed myself to an elderly woman, one of the principal persons among them, who for eight pence—whichever she said was a day's wages—undertook to be my guide. She was regarded with much consideration wherever she appeared, for she was rich, having a better furnished house than her neighbors, more cups and saucers and plates of crockery, five or six chairs, a good deal table, two beds of dust, that is, oat chaff, a cat and a pig. She was the mother of three children, whose labor brought something to the common stock; her husband received nine shillings a week, and she tasted meat three days out of seven.

In the second cottage we visited, there were six in the family, scantily fed upon potatoes and salt, with an occasional loaf of white bread. The mother's time being bestowed mostly upon her infant children that multiplied rapidly about her, they were maintained by the husband alone, whose inamities prevented him from earning more than six shillings a week.

The floor was of broad ill-assorted stone; the roof of straw; the interior whitewashed and the exterior of a yellowish hue; the walls, as are those of most English cottages, being built of rough stone, having one room below, twelve or fifteen feet square, and another above stairs of the same dimensions, but low and inconvenient from the depression of the

roof. The earth round about looked green and smiling in November, and the roof and sides were half concealed under the voluminous ivy. However beautiful it seemed at the approach, it was, within the abode of poverty and destitution. The children were huddled together in one corner of the chimney striving to kindle a fire with sticks picked up under the hedges, to boil a dinner of turnips; the entire plant being cut up root and top, and seasoned with lard. The mother spoke with some emotion when she alluded to the wants of her children, which she could not relieve. I asked permission to go up stairs; she hesitated; my guide shook her head, and I desisted. She afterwards told me, that the filth and stench were insupportably offensive; but on explaining my motive, she made no opposition to a similar request.

Here, as everywhere else, I purchased a welcome by distributing a few pence among the children, and occasionally putting a piece of silver into the hands of the mothers.

I entered a third cabin. Here the green earth smiled again, as did the modest furze and glossy holly, that felt not the approach of winter. The floor was much like the first. Near the middle sat the mother peeling potatoes, which she threw into a pot at her side half filled with water. I introduced myself on every occasion by saying, that I came from beyond the seas, and wished to inform my countrymen how the laborers lived in England. Sixpence brought forth willing answers to interrogatories which I put without stint.

"How many children have you?" "Eight." "What did they feed upon this morning?" "Potatoes." "What will you give them for dinner?" "These potatoes you see me peeling." "Nothing else?" "No; nothing else." "Have you no meat, no milk, no butter for them?" She made no reply, fixed her eyes upon them and sobbed aloud. But her countenance suddenly brightened into a smile, and she said with a clear voice, "Thank God salt is cheap." But her joy was a transient beam for her eyes again overflowed at she showed me her eldest daughter, fourteen years of age, whom she made rise to her feet. Her tattered garments scarcely concealed her sex; it left her bare to her knees behind, while it dangled to the ground in front. She blushed deeply, for want had not extinguished the modesty of nature, as her mother drew aside the rags that covered her snowy skin. "These," said she, "are all the clothes my child has; she cannot go to school in them; besides, she is obliged to stay at home to take care of the children." This was palpably true, for her wasted form towered under a burden that would soon add another inmate to this abode of misery.

The other children were grouped near the elder sister, sitting on the naked hearth.—Their little hands and feet were cold; their features were set in melancholy; they were not playful, as became their innocent years; no, it has been truly said, that the children of the English poor know no childhood! Sorrow begins with life; they are disciplined to privation from the cradle. From the cradle did I say?—I saw no cradle, and I verily believe that such a luxury was never known by the child of an English laborer.

In the corner of the chimney was an old man, sitting on his haunches, putting faggots to a fire intended to boil the potatoes. "Who is that?" "It is old Mr. —, he has no home and we let him stay with us." He was eighty-three years of age, and partook with the children his portion of potatoes and salt.

I asked one of the little girls, where was the cat? The mother answered they had none, "for a cat must eat." "Have you a dog?" "No, we cannot keep a dog, besides he disturbs the game." "But you have a cock to crow for day?" "No, we have none."

I felt a sort of horror come over me at the absence of these animals, sacred to every household—the cat, the companion and pastime of little children; the dog, the well-tried trusty friend of man; the cock, whose joyous song hails the coming day—yet poverty, that bitter, blighting curse, has expelled even these from the cottages of the English peasant. "Can your husband read?"

"Yes, he can read the easy parts of the Bible."

"Can you read?"

"No, I never went to school."

"How many apartments are there in your house?"

"Two, one below and another above."

"May I go up stairs?"

She was evidently unwilling; my guide gave me a discouraging look; I persevered, and ascended a dirty, rickety flight of steps to a chamber where the whole family slept. Near a narrow, broken

window stood a wooden frame on four legs, on which were laid transverse laths that supported a bed of oat-chaff, sewed up in a dirty, tattered sack, over which was spread a coarse woolen sheet almost black; upon this lay two pillars of straw, and a thick, striped coverlet worn into holes. Another sack of chaff lay on the floor in a corner, over which was stretched a sort of blanket torn to rags. Here slept all the children, except the two youngest who lay with their parents. The fate of the old man at night was not made known to me, nor did I enquire.

The furniture of the apartment below consisted of a stool, on which the mother sat; a box occupied as a seat by the eldest daughter; two broken chairs unsafe for either my guide or myself; fourteen or fifteen articles of crockery of fractured plates, saucers and cups; a tea-pot; two or three small iron vessels for cooking, and a board table, sustained by diagonal bars, fastened with nails. On the wall, under a broken piece of plate glass, hung a white napkin, fringed at the bottom, the only testimonial of neatness that poverty could afford. The whole chattel estate, including the apparel of man, wife, and children could not be sold for ten dollars.

No other building but the cottage in which he lives, is allotted to the English laborer. In America, other houses of some sort appertain to the humblest dwelling of man.—The horse, mule, donkey or cow has its stable, whose loft is well stored with provender. Hard by is a meat-house, where hangs, unprotected by bolt or bar, many a broadside of bacon, ham or shoulder, in reserve for a rainy day or the arrival of a friend, with other eatables of every name and nature, in pot, jar, and pan. Here the good housewife enters, on proper occasions, by a door not much larger than herself, and forth comes an abundance that would feed an entire village of English laborers. The fowls, too, have their house, from whose broad beam the cock flings his joyous notes to the distant hills. Nor is the dog forgotten; being fed to repletion, he dozes all day in his kennel, vigorous and refreshed for the vigils of the night.—There is also a contrivance unknown to architecture, called a *crib*, whence the native maize may be taken without stint; next the modest milk-house, whose floor is dug out of the earth, watered by a fountain and basins and crocks of milk and butter, sheltered and amply secured by a covering of boards, which hunger never drives men to break through and steal. Last and least may be seen, just above the ground, a pyramid of straw and clay, beneath which is concealed a winter's store of that delicious plant, never tasted by our English friends, the sweet potato.

The dwelling-house, for so the proprietor calls the cabin in the West, that shelters his family, is often built of logs, between which the winds whistle, raising clouds of ashes that sometimes expel the inmates; yet the walls are well garnished with wearing and bed apparel: the table is loaded with plenty, and in his right hand is a vote that tells in Congress. He is the owner of the land he cultivates, down to the centre of the earth, and when he grows rich, as he certainly will, he may build his castle *ad celum*, as lawyers say, for he is master also of all above the surface. He sows his fields to eat the fruit thereof, and with the overplus he would gladly feed his hungry relations in England, if their oppressors would permit him. He is a political economist, not according to McCulloch or Say, but practically; for he knows when his industry yields more than he spends, and by applying the same rule to his neighbors and the nation, he ascertains with arithmetical certainty on which side the balance incline. His private interest being linked with the public good, he takes the same part in elections, and the enactment of laws, that he does in the administration of his own household. He lives under institutions for which there is no precedent in history; a social partnership not of money, but of equal rights, in which every one has share and share alike. It is a contrivance altogether new in politics, and as truly American as is the navigation of the seas by fire and steam.

In England there are five millions that cultivate the earth, and six that labor in the manufactories, who have no share in the government, or a hut to shelter them from the winds. Goaded almost to madness by privation and want, they are always ready to overturn that government to which they can owe no allegiance. Every movement is towards revolution; whereas in America the discontent of the people can never proceed to dangerous excesses; men will not lay waste their own possessions, or put violent hands on institutions which they can amend or abrogate at will.

I visited eleven cottages whose condition differed only in the degree of wretchedness. Their wants seemed in every instance, to be aggravated by the number of children. The last I entered bore an impression of comfort and neatness. The couple had not been long married; the wife was at a wash-tub near the fire, on which was a pot containing flesh. She wore a white cap, stood slipshod without stockings, though the weather was humid and cold. The walls were white-washed, and the jagged, uneven floor bore marks of good housewifery. Their cups and saucers, pots, chairs, and table, were sufficient for an humble family of only two. Their bed was of chaff, but clean, and consisted of the only white sheet I saw. The fruits of their joint labor were spent upon themselves, yet they could feed on meat but four days in the week. They had a pig, the second I saw in the village; but neither cat nor dog. Her husband, she said, could read; and as I held out the prayer-book taken from the shelf, she said she read it often.

The wages of the laborer in England are higher in the north, decreasing towards the south until they fall to seven shillings per week. Their writers on statistics fix the average amount throughout the realm, at eight-and-sixpence, of which one-and-sixpence is weekly paid for cottage-rent, leaving a shilling a day for the maintenance, clothing, fuel and education of the entire family. Their destitution is, therefore, no matter of surprise; for, with that sum, it is impossible they could subsist without the charities provided by the care and bounty of the rich.

The appearance of a stranger and the nature of his visit brought me to the acquaintance of the farmers who rent the lands of the proprietors and employ laborers to cultivate them. They hold the middle state, between the lordly great and humbly poor. They received me with great kindness in their houses, which are better supplied with the conveniences, but not as many of the luxuries of life, as are found in a log-cabin in Kentucky.

On their table was usually a joint of mutton or swine's flesh, or sometimes a fowl, potatoes or cabbage, followed by bread and cheese, accompanied throughout by large potatoes of beer, and, on one occasion, gooseberry wine. Their education seemed limited to the history of their own kings, and the reading of newspapers, which they obtain at second hand.

At the return of the season, the struggle is so great among the farmers to obtain lands, that the price of rent is enhanced beyond their ability to pay. One of them told me there were forty-two competitors for those he cultivated; that the proprietors oppressed the farmers, who, in turn, drove the laborers to the verge of starvation, and that half the population would emigrate to America if they could pay their passage across the sea.

A candidate for parliament stated that all the arable lands in England were owned by thirty-three thousand proprietors. I called on the officers of the Statistical Society, in St. Martin's Lane, in London, to ascertain the truth of this statement. At their request, I committed certain interrogatories to writing, which they said should be answered when the results of the census, then in the press, were known. Three months thereafter they told me the statistics of England did not afford the information required. A similar statement was afterwards made by a member of parliament; and, as it was never contradicted, it may be regarded as true, that the cultivable lands from which the English are fed belong mainly to thirty-three thousand persons. The chief among them are the members of parliament and the hereditary nobility, born to power as well as to riches. They have established a code of laws for their own benefit, the most inhuman known in the annals of legislation. Not only are their own estates exempt from general taxation, but the cultivation of them is forced upon the people by prohibiting the importation of every article of food from abroad. The poor laborer is at their mercy; from them he receives his bread; and his wife and children must be fed on terms as they prescribe. There is no escape; ignorant and destitute, he cannot take refuge in foreign countries where his proud oppressor cannot pursue. He is starved to the lowest point of endurance; yet life is spared. Sufficient strength to till the earth is kept up by gmel and potatoes, provided by the poor-laws or the landlords themselves, as oats are given to horses that they may bear the burthens heaped upon their backs. There is policy in oppression; if the corals were drawn too tight the poor peasant would die, and the greediness of the rich would consume themselves.

All communications from lord to tenant are received with the most degrading servility. The poor man is half annihilated;

with cap in hand, body bent, and down cast eyes, he articulates unceasingly, my lord; yes, my lord; no, my lord; your lordship—with an awe due to divinity rather than man.

The slave in the Carolinas is not so humble in the presence of his master. He simply replies, yes, sir; no, sir; often indulges in the free expression of opinion; and, in many families, his communications are on terms of equality. He is, indeed, the property of a master, but is well fed; and even his dogs, Joler and Towser often devour more flesh in a day than an English laborer eats in a week.

He cultivates a patch of sweet potatoes and other esculent plants for himself; keeps fowls in his yard, sells at market, and in the smoke of his chimney hangs a joint of a hog, from which he cuts a slice at the calls of appetite. He wears a smile on his countenance, is fat and saucy among his fellows, laughs with a vacant heart, can dance to a banjo, and freely indulges in his talent for music.

Slavery is a national evil which the Americans deeply deplore. It is against the spirit of their institutions and must have an end. But there is no redemption for the English peasantry; they lie at the bottom of the fabric of society whose pressure, like that of a pyramid, is in proportion to its height. They have not the strength to throw off the incumbent mass, which, like the structure to which I have compared it, seems destined to outlive many generations of men.

The nobility are entrenched behind hereditary wealth and privilege, and are, moreover, the best educated class of men in Europe. More like potatoes than subjects, they have much to lose and nothing to gain by change. They are affable and condescending without the loss of dignity; study to conciliate, and at the same time to inspire a respect for themselves which forms the secret guaranty of their power. There are always orators and statesmen among them, well read and practised in the mysteries of legislation. Wisdom is power; and it is the wisdom of parliament that has raised England to such a pitch of greatness and upheld a constitution which, in any other country, would have long ago fallen into ruins.

Learning in England is confined to a few; knowledge is taxed and cannot be bought by the poor. A single newspaper costs six pence, which would give bread to the hungry. The light of the press, unlike the rays of the sun, shine not upon the cottage thatched with straw. There are millions of poor laborers, operatives and mechanics, who feel the weight of government without comprehending its policy. Their rulers practise upon the system of Mandeville, and think it would be unsafe to instruct such formidable numbers who might become inquisitive, and ask why they were fed on potatoes and salt in sight of a park containing three thousand deer to glut the appetite of a single man. Hence there are no public schools for the instruction of the poor; this is the work of charity and the church; and not of the law. It was not until six years ago, that parliament appropriated thirty thousand pounds for this purpose—but little more than is given by the state of Connecticut, with less than 300,000 inhabitants.

In England the liberty of the press is a mere delusion. The people do, indeed, enjoy the right of complaining, and bitterly do they complain in every morning and evening prints, only to be laughed at and despised. But complaining affords relief as shedding tears assuage sorrow, and this is all they get for their pains. The naked houseless multitude, continue to live and die as their fathers did for ages past. They were expelled from their homes by William the Conqueror, who divided up the island, as a loaf of bread, among his followers; and to this day they have never been restored to the rightful possession of the soil.

When I returned to London and spoke of the destitution I had witnessed among the laborers, I was invariably told that their condition was much better in some places I had not seen. Still trusting to representation, I set out for Devonshire, where, in pursuance of my plan, I passed a month in Exeter and its vicinity.

My first visit was to a cluster of cottages, near the confluence of the Exe with the sea. The principal personage in the village was a matron of fifty, whom I found eating up the flesh of a pig, and converting every atom of it, into testines, feet, blood, and all, into food for the approaching winter.

In the hearth was the first comfortable cottage fire I had seen. Near it sat the children, the eldest of whom wore shoes, and were all, otherwise, comfortably clad. The house was furnished in a style becoming the opulent mistress of a pig; five chairs with rush bottoms, two board tables, a small looking-glass set in a frame,

several little pictures affixed to the wall; a Bible, a prayer book, Goldsmith's abridged history of England, and flower-pots in the window in which the geranium flourished. The whole wore an air of neatness a virtue always found among the English, where extreme poverty does not forbid. At the sight of a shilling, she called in a neighbor to take her place, and set out as my guide among the other cottages. We entered mine in succession, where I beheld the same wretchedness and modes of life that prevailed in Somersetshire, differing only in the quality of food which was here cheaper and consisted partly of fish.

In one of them were three children, a daughter, eighteen, and two small girls under ten years of age; their mother was dead. The father presently entered from his labor in the fields. He was a small man, as most of the English laborers are. His features were swarthy and withered, for he was near sixty; his hands were hard and fingers much contracted; he wore knee breeches of fustian, patched and wore sleek with dirt and grease; a sort of gaiters that covered his legs; shoes of untanned leather with thick soles, studded with projecting nails that left their impression as he walked; a jacket of coarse woolen fabric much tattered at the elbows and sleeves; a shirt of calico, a strip of checked handkerchief about his neck, and a small flat round hat; his whole apparel as well as complexion were colored with the red earth in which he had been at work.

His food was ready at 12 o'clock. He ate, seated on a stool upon the hearth, with a white plate on his lap, on which were potatoes and two ounces of bacon. His children stood by the side of a board table, and dined upon bread and the colic-warts that had been boiled with the bacon.

His wages were seven shillings a week, out of which he paid cottage-rent. He said he could not afford meat for his children, nor for himself every day; "that he took it all to himself that he might have the strength to work."

The eldest daughter wore shoes, but was meagrely dressed; the others were bare-foot and in rags. The whole furniture in the house, including cooking utensils, would not have sold for twenty shillings.

There were other cottages in which still greater wretchedness was visible, and others again, in somewhat better condition; this may be regarded as an average specimen of the whole.

I spent several days five miles from Exeter, at the beautiful mansion of Mr. —, who derives his income from a sugar estate in South America. I was received with the most liberal and enlightened hospitality, and when my object was made known, was accompanied by his excellent and accomplished lady on a visit to no less than fifteen cottages in the immediate neighborhood. The first we entered was comfortable and altogether neat; but there were no children to feed, and I soon discovered that the inmate was indebted to the bounty of Mrs. — for both food and clothing. Then next was inhabited by a widower, an infirm old man, who received only five shillings a week. He was an object of public as well as private charity. He could neither read nor write. His children were dirty and half-naked, and though it was November, he was without fuel or fire. The upper apartment, which I approached by a sort of ladder, contained two filthy beds of chaff, in such a condition, that the stench drove me back as I opened the door.

We next visited a line of cottages that stood immediately on the margin of a little stream that had overflowed its banks and deposited mud on the floors of the houses. In one of them was a mother who had just been delivered of a child. Her feet were raised on a block to protect them from the wet, and the chair in which she sat was the only article of furniture in the apartment. The linen and garments about the child were furnished to her by Mrs. —.

Here I learnt from this good lady, that at the birth of every child among the laborers, she sent the mother a pair of sheets, a change of clothes, and two suits for the infant—to be retained for one month, then to be cleansed and returned in a bag, ready for other similar occasions. This custom, which I found afterwards to prevail in Isleworth and other parts of England, bespeaks at once the charity of the rich and the frightful destitution of the poor.

She communicated many particulars concerning the condition of the laborers on her own extensive grounds and in the neighboring country, affirming, from her own personal knowledge, that they could not subsist on the wages they received, and were it not for relief derived from other causes, they would not have the physical strength to cultivate the earth. The parents were generally unable to