



SUNDAY MORNING IN FRONT OF THE ARCH STREET
MEETING HOUSE (1804), PHILADELPHIA

Illustrations reproduced from water colors
by Pavel Petrovich Svinin (1787-1839)
Courtesy of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

ODYSSEY OF A
SANTO DOMINGAN CREOLE

A SPRIGHTLY ACCOUNT OF AMERICAN MANNERS
BY A REFUGEE FROM HAITI

Edited and Translated
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SOME years ago, I knew a delightful old gentleman in New Orleans, Mr. James Amadée Puech, whose distinguished white beard caused him to be mistaken, at times, for Chief Justice Hughes. He was a descendant of a French family of rich sugar planters in Haiti that had fled the bloody slave rebellion of the 1790's, and eventually found haven in Louisiana.

One day he handed me a small black notebook, and said: "This might interest you. It is the manuscript diary of one of my ancestors who fought through the Negro uprising. It is unsigned and nobody remembers his first name, but his last must have been Puech."

It proved a fascinating and exciting document, for he wrote with wit and vivacity, even though, as was the fashion of the eighteenth century, he interlarded his narrative with verse, and peppered the whole with grandiose mythological allusions to display his erudition.

This was natural, for he had just graduated from a college in Paris, and had returned to the family plantation only a few days before the revolution exploded. When news came that white proprietors were being butchered, their wives and daughters ravished, and their little children impaled on bayonets, his family left home and took refuge in Cap François, while he enlisted in the defending forces.

His descriptions of battles and the horrors he saw make the diary a poignant eye-witness account of the crucifixion of Haiti. After fighting bravely and being wounded, he escaped to New York, penniless and ignorant of the language.

Today, however, we will have only time for some slight description of his acute observations, very frank, French, and funny, of life in the United States as he found it in the 1790's.

Puech had a Gallic gaiety and ebullient youthfulness that saved him from despondency in his sad circumstances, and he soon left New York with a party of merry young Creoles, refugees like himself, to give concerts and play at balls in the small towns of New Jersey.

At Newark (spelled New Ark) they stopped for a glass of punch and a few "crokers" (he meant crackers) while the stage horses were being changed, and Puech said he hated to swallow them in the fog of tobacco smoke that is common to all tap-rooms. "Everyone smokes in America," he wrote, "and some chew which gives the teeth a yellow tinge—a fine effect. Perceiving that courtesy demanded that I offer a few swigs to my neighbor, I presented my glass to a gentleman I judged from his dress to be one of the principal persons of the town; for here, more than anywhere else, it's the *habit* that makes the monk.

"He took my glass," continued Puech, "and with two fingers of his left paw, removed his cud of tobacco from his mouth, and put it in his pocket. Then he bowed and drank as the custom of the land demands; and finally replaced the sacred remnant of his 'chaw' under his one great tooth. My glass was returned with a noble ornament—a double imprint of his lips in brown."

At the first concert ever given in Elizabethton, most of the audience mistook the cacophony of tuning for the

overture. However, it was a success, except for the sour notes contributed by Puech, whose eyes strayed from the music to the pretty girls, and by the snores of the men listeners who went to sleep. But they woke up when the ball started and jumped lustily first on one foot then on the other, in a rowdy English dance, dashing up and down the room scattering everything in their path.

"Next came a quadrille," he related, "and how angry my famous dancing-teacher would have been had he seen with what a mocking air the Americans viewed our graceful, though difficult steps! In this country they are firmly convinced that no one but a ninny walks with his toes turned out. I had won the liking of some young ladies, but when they saw me do a pirouette, they adjudged me a fool.

"I had another disaster. A pretty French woman, with whom I was dancing, tried a difficult step and fell. It was my fault. Entirely absorbed in admiring my partner's charms, I forgot to support her with my arm. Imagine my despair! The next day I sent her my excuses in verse." After apologizing profusely, he added—"But you, Madame, graced that lucky fall. Your pretty face and wit have won many conquests, so marvel not at your future successes, for now everyone knows (thank God by an honest accident) that Heaven showered you, from head to foot, with allurements."

After these adventures, Puech returned to New York, but soon went back to Haiti to fight again. Once more in New York he started for Philadelphia to visit his old Colonel, the Chevalier P., who had settled nearby. He sailed for Elizabethton by boat, and gave a vivid description of New York harbor.

"I can see the elegant houses fronting on the Battery," he wrote, "that vast promenade that will become the most beautiful in the world when the Americans acquire good

taste and are less stingy. I can see the pavillion where every day, at high tide, the merchants go, armed with spy-glasses, to watch for incoming ships. I can even distinguish the *rendez-vous* of the newswriters. There are the Federalists who do away with French soldiers by the tens of thousands, and are impatient that the business does not proceed faster. Republicans gather there too, and every now and then they pray for our success, and even refrain from calling us 'French dogs'; whether from friendship or a spirit of contradiction, I cannot tell. To be quite frank, we are generally looked at askance; which surprises me not at all, for everything about us reaches America through an English magic lantern that distorts us.

"Our implacable and eternal enemy, as shrewd as she is ungenerous, neglects no opportunity to destroy us—little or big, vile or noble, every means is good, and the press is employed to the greatest advantage. Defamatory pamphlets are spread to the far corners of the earth, and are distributed free. Historians, poets, novelists, philosophers, and gazetteers compete in painting the French in the worst colors; even the school books are defiled by caricatures, in order to inculcate this groundless prejudice in the minds of the young; so, the Americans who read no other literature but that of the mother country, imbibe these false ideas."

Puech left the joyous city of Elizabethton on July 25th. The cold was excessive and the north wind cut his face, but he wrote that, "the night before was terribly hot, and it is to this constant variation of temperature that the diseases of the lungs that ravage this country are doubtless due. Another cause is the daily use of salt meat, which makes the blood acid, hot, and thick. I also think that uncleanliness has a great deal to do with it, for it causes skin troubles that defeat the quacks that swarm over America.



A PHILADELPHIA ANABAPTIST IMMERSION DURING A STORM



NEGRO METHODISTS HOLDING A MEETING IN PHILADELPHIA

"But to return to my journey: I was saying that I was dying of cold, and that in this country one often encounters all four seasons in a single day. If American women's hearts are as changeable as the weather, I pity the poor husbands and envy the lucky lovers.

"Hardly had we taken our places in the stage for Trenton, than the sky clouded over and a heavy rain forced us to lower the leather curtains. They were meant to protect us, but all they really did was to prevent us from seeing the country. The seats were hard and we bounced about, wet, muddy, and annoyed by the exhalation of twelve people, but we finally reached Mr. R's—formerly a rich merchant of St. Marc, who was now living on the pittance he could make out of a market garden. Such is the fate of some of the refugees from Santo Domingo. One is a gardener, another a school-master, this one has a marionette show, and that one teaches dancing; while still another sells ice cream and little cakes. The cleverest go into commerce, and many have succeeded well enough to be considered important people. Here gold is the best title of nobility.

"As for me, when I come to the end of my army pay, I don't know what I'll do. There is nothing that accords with my previous profession—except to be an apothecary. It's the same whether you kill people with little balls of lead, or little balls of mercury. It is only the metal that differs, and it may very well be that I would have fewer deaths on my conscience from bullets than from pills."

On to Bristol Puech went and, arriving, found at the door of the village inn, a man who must have weighed 500 pounds. Thinking him a living advertisement for its fare, he entered and sat down.

"The first dish served me," he said, "was a newspaper: that is the usual beginning. From President to chimney-sweep, everybody in America reads half a dozen journals

every morning, and about the same number at night. Some of them are Republican and others Federalist, so they abuse each other roundly. At my table was a gentleman of the latter persuasion. He began his conversation with the usual criticisms of France which are to be found in Smollet, Goldsmith, etc. I replied as well as I could, and things were pretty heated when the 500 pound host came in and sat down next to us. He was a hot Republican, so since it was a Federalist who attacked me, he came to my defense. 'By God,' said he, striking the table with his fist, 'You can't say that about the French.'

"I decided my country was in capable hands, so I departed *sans façon*, leaving the two to talk at their ease, about a country neither one knew.

"The lunch was typically American, and I mixed in my stomach a dozen ship's biscuits soaked in butter; a quarter of a pound of smoked beef cut in paper-thin slices, six fresh eggs emptied into a glass and seasoned with salt, pepper and mustard; a few pieces of pickled shad with a plate of cucumber salad; all swimming in at least a pint of feeble coffee. To digest this frightful mess, so inimical in its chemical constituents, I walked around the town. Like all others of second class, it consists of a long wide avenue crossed by a few small streets: and an occasional handsome brick house, scattered among wooden cottages, gives an impression of urban luxury mixed with country simplicity.

"I saw the militia under arms. The officers had complete uniforms of blue and red, with large gilt sabres, shining epaulettes, and a round hat surmounted by a high plume. The privates wore the ordinary clothes of their everyday pursuits, and each carried a gun as he pleased and marched as he liked.

"In a jovial way, the captain said: 'Here are men nourished on bacon who, no joking, can lick your French grenadiers, who live on soup.'

"Peste! that captain denied himself nothing. I've had to read or listen to such modest compliments on many occasions, not only about military art, but about everything else; and they are always followed by jokes about the national vanity of the French.

"From Bristol I went to Burlington, just across the Delaware river. It is one of the little towns in which I'd like to live, both on account of its picturesque situation and its delightful society. I went directly to Mme. D'E, who is just as kind and lovely as she was in Arcahaie. A friend of hers offered to take me to a formal tea given by some rich Americans, promising that it would be amusing, and we would meet the best people.

"At seven o'clock we entered a spacious drawing-room, hung with paintings of British victories, and covered with a superb wool carpet whose very appearance, in view of the season of the year, made me sweat great gobbets.

"Twenty people of both sexes, were seated in a circle, as immobile as the wax figures of Curtius' Musée. Like a victim being led to the altar, I crossed the space that separated me from the mistress of the house, stopped short and made a deep bow; while my conductor, holding me by the hand, said: 'Madame, this is my friend Mr. Puech.'

"From then on, with increasing speed, we voyaged from lady to lady. But that was only part of my exercise that evening. The most painful remained, for my sponsor ordered a half-turn to the right, and without giving me time to catch my breath, he made me retrace my steps and presented me to the gentlemen, as was the custom. In order to prove their good-will, each took my hand and shook my arm until the tears came to my eyes.

"My social voyaging finally came to an end, and I accepted with pleasure the chair offered me. For the next half hour I shared the serious silence of my neighbors. At

last, the conversation began, and finally a neighbor enquired whether it would rain during the evening. To this I wisely replied that I had not the slightest idea.

“After this lively dialogue, a servant placed a round mahogany table in the middle of the room, and it soon disappeared under a large tole tray on which reposed a silver teapot, sugar-bowl, and milk pitcher, surrounded by pretty porcelain tea-cups. Now began the triumph of the lady of the house. She sat before the table with the gravity of a judge, filled the cups and made them circulate, rinsing them in a bowl of hot water when they were returned; sending them out again with great skill and an air of importance. During this operation her eyes surveyed the guests in order to forestall their needs, and her mouth, *sotto voce*, directed the various servants who passed cakes and jam, just as in ancient times Caesar dictated to four secretaries at once. Unlucky the timid or ignorant stranger afraid to cry enough, for he would be filled to his Adam’s apple with Chinese tea! As for me, by chance rather than wisdom, I happened to leave my spoon in the cup after the fourth round, and so saved myself.

“When we finished our tea, the conversation was a little more animated; it sustained itself on light talk for a few minutes, woke up a bit on politics, but ended by going to sleep again on the question of the weather.

“I let it sleep at its ease, and soon went to bed to do likewise. An English tea is an imposing ceremony at which great luxury is displayed—cakes, affected manners, shining appointments, hot water, and an icy atmosphere.”

Our diarist was even more acerb in his remarks about some of the other ladies he met, for he said: “Each morning madame wets her face in a small basin of water, possibly her neck—but never further. She also washes her hands as far as the elbow—but that’s all. And, as for those charms which

custom and modesty decree should be hidden under linen, alas, they die as they were born—hydrophobic.

“In revenge, the American women are strong for ostentatious cleanliness. One can see one’s reflection in the furniture; floors are washed almost every day; and underclothing is dazzlingly white. It must be admitted, however, that everything is changing for the better. The numerous strangers who come to settle in the United States, introduce the customs and habits of Europe. Already public baths are to be found in big cities; the trick of blowing your nose with your fingers is giving way to the pocket-handkerchief; they are beginning to have their teeth fixed; and the present generation do not believe it nice to make vulgar noises in public that make the whole house tremble.

“The next morning I got into a kind of covered wagon to go to visit my old colonel who, happily, was living nearby. Here it is the custom to use the same rustic cart that had carried a dozen sheep or goats the day before to transport a bevy of young girls to tea party or temple. In America, Sunday is the saddest day of the entire week. In France, after attending the imposing ceremonies of our church, one can indulge in innocent amusements to make up for hard work; and the pious priest, who preached the sermon, often presides over the joyous recreation. But here in America, after having been shut up in four walls for half a day, deafened by the music of 500 people all singing in a different key, put to sleep by a monotonous sermon of four hours, the people are permitted no recreation except reading the Bible. Unlucky the person who forgot to buy his provisions on Saturday, because he would die of hunger on Sunday! One can neither laugh, sing, play, or even take a ride in a carriage or on horseback; and if one has a hole in one’s stocking, it would be a sin to mend it. There are as many Catholics as Protestants, so it is permissible to wonder who

is right and who is wrong. Between Rome and Geneva, I cannot decide.

"The less orthodox of these peasants seek relaxation by perching on the rail fences that take the place of our green hedges. Elbow on knee and chin in hand, they yawn at the blackbirds. I saw many on my trip, whose immobility made me take them for scarecrows."

* * *

"Here I am in the great city founded by Penn," Puech continues. "Nothing can equal its cleanliness. They say one lives well here. This may be true, but certainly not in the autumn, for then yellow fever attacks the inhabitants and Crack! in a second one may depart for the other world in spite of the doctor. I am told that this plague will soon show its yellow face; but I shall take the liberty of showing it my heels; for, although so far, it has spared the refugees from Santo Domingo, it might well decide to try one, now that they begin to smell of beer and potatoes.

"Philadelphia is already a big city, and will become the largest in the world if it spreads to the limits laid down by its founder. Its population at present is 80,000 souls, and it grows every day by reason of the amazing fertility of American wives, and the cargoes of foreigners imported from all parts of the world. Indeed Europe pours so much heterogeneous humanity into this nation that it will soon resemble the calf's-head-jelly I often ate at Beauvilliers, in which there was a bit of everything except veal.

"The city is laid out with great regularity, and when you have seen a fourth of it, the rest may be dispensed with; especially as one finds neither public squares nor monuments worthy of mention. Most of the public buildings differ from others only in the number of windows. All the houses are made of brick, and are of the same model. The streets are wide, straight, and provided with excellent sidewalks for pedestrians; the market is vast, clean, and well supplied.

"There is in this town a kind of phantom, called a 'Watchman.' He walks the streets and wakes people up by chanting in a strident voice the time and the weather. I can see no reason for this custom, unless it be to accomplish the purpose of the Turkish muezzin, who awakes the good Moslem husbands in the night that they may work at the multiplication of the faithful.

"The people of this city and of the entire country," Puech continues, "are most sensitive to criticism. They think they have the right to criticize every other nation in the world; but if by chance a stranger dares the slightest retaliation, the whole population gets excited and, with fire in its eye, shouts: 'Jealousy, hate, ignorance, ingratitude!' etc. It's the tip of the English ear that still appears.

"More impartial than the Americans, who only accord the French the virtue of dancing a rigadon well, or of cooking a fine fricassee, I do justice to all their good qualities, the advantages their country offers, the giant strides they are taking towards everything that makes for the glory of empires. I only wish that when they poke fun at our national vanity, they would omit the pompous praise they bestow upon themselves. If one listens to them, their nation is the most enlightened, the most powerful in the universe. Peste! What jabber!

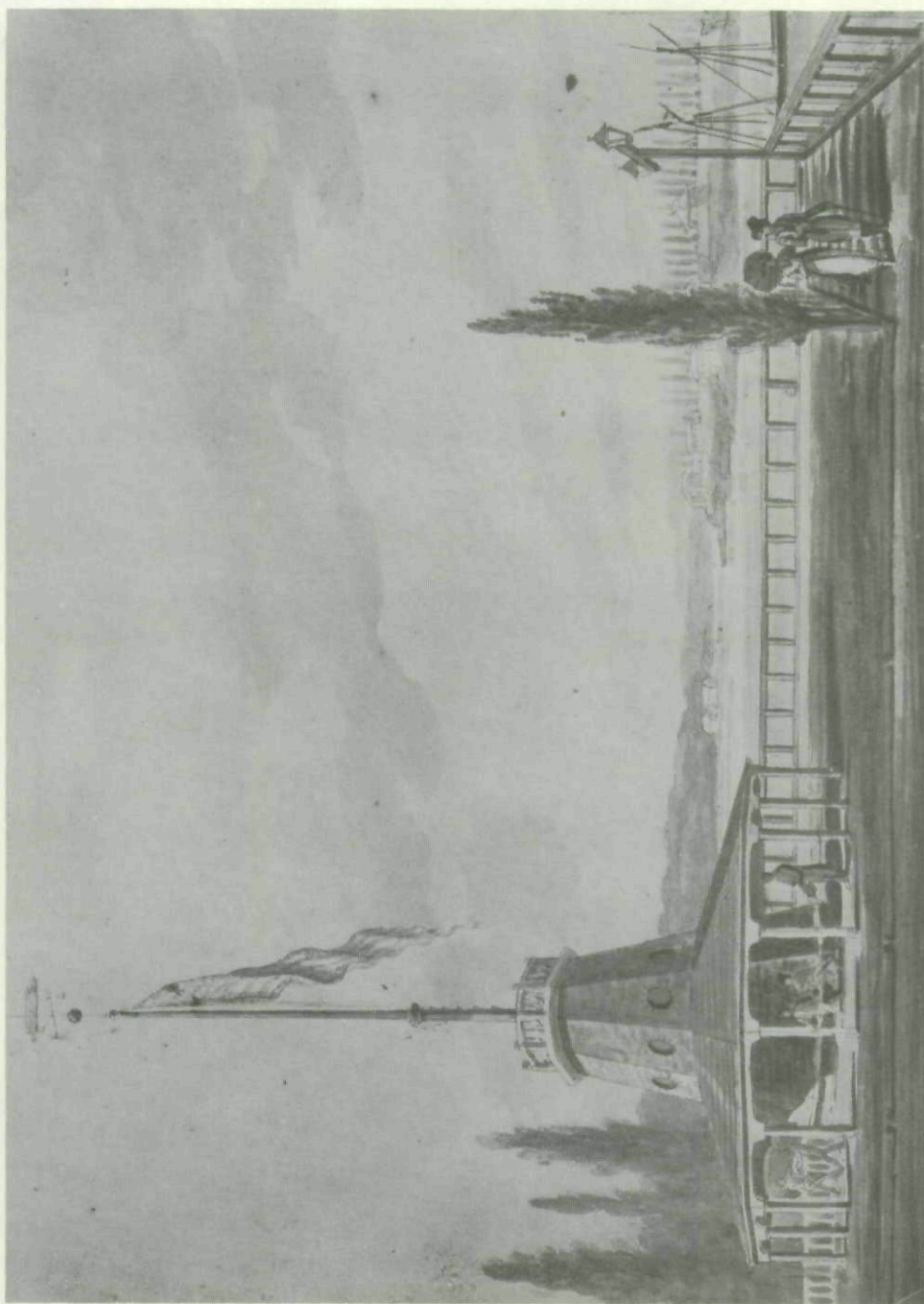
"But gentlemen, that will come; I don't doubt it! But they must have a little patience. A child, clever for its age, is admired, and its first attempts are considered a happy augury. But if he anticipates his future status and, in his pride, wishes to enjoy the rights of a man; then he forfeits esteem and, in spite of his audacity, cutting sarcasm will put him in his place.

"But, one must be honest. If this new state is still an infant, this snotty brat is an excessively precocious one, and it grows under one's very eyes. Already America rivals us in

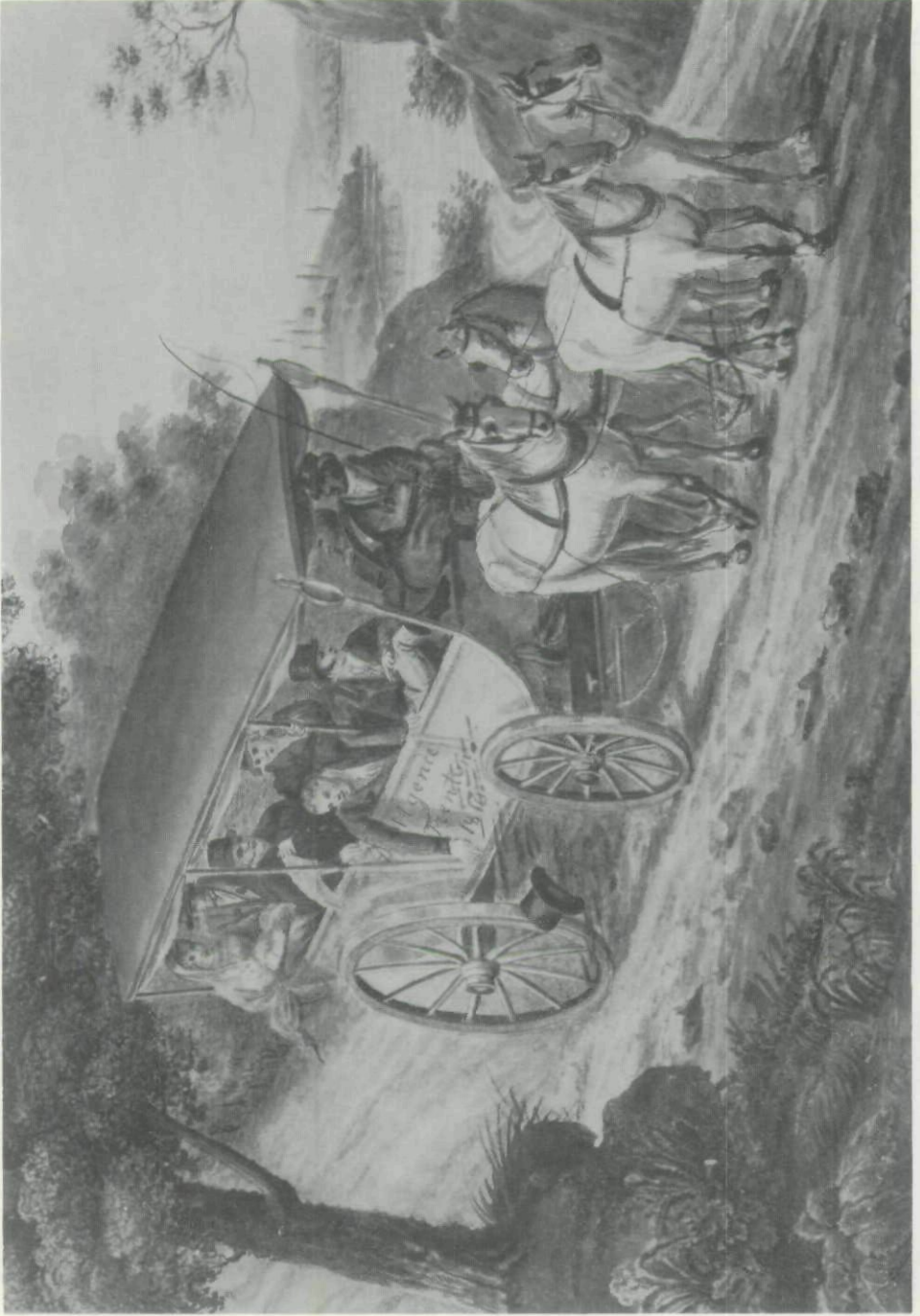
many things. In her great cities, as in ours, one finds virtue, and strength, and vice; good deeds here and there; crimes of every shade; temples and dives; public schools and houses of light women; good manners and bad; foolishness on the first floor and wisdom in the attic; luxury surrounded by destitution; fine clothes beside dirty rags; and opulence riding in a carriage splashes mediocrity afoot. But what one can find nowhere else, is a people who seriously pretend that to go to Heaven, one must wear a gray coat, without buttons or ruffles, and cover one's straight hair with a hat as flat as a plate.

"They say 'thou' in addressing you; they never laugh except sub rosa, they are as infallible as the Pope, and their 'yes' and their 'no' carries more weight before the law than the sworn oath of others. They believe, with the apostles, that all men are equal, but nevertheless I think they have a preference for Congos. It is said they love the dance, when it is inspired by the Holy Spirit; but I guess they make a bad fist of it, for their backbone never consents to bend. Already one meets them by the thousands in this republic and, as their pacific beliefs will not permit them to go to war, this religion will someday rally all the cowards of America. Thus are the Quakers!

"The sect called 'Methodist' has the power to make the Holy Spirit descend on them whenever they wish; but this Holy Spirit, so tranquil and reasonable with the Quakers, makes a devilish noise when it visits the Methodists. Yesterday, as I passed the church of the latter, I thought I was close to a lunatic asylum, so deafened was I by an extraordinary mixture of shouts, songs, sobs, and exclamations. Curiosity made me enter the place and the result on my eyes was no better than on my ears. It was a unique melodrama, that savored of tightrope walking, and I never saw a play in which gestures, words, and dances harmonized more perfectly with the music."



THE TRAVELLER'S FIRST VIEW OF NEW YORK—THE BATTERY AND FLAGSTAFF



TRAVEL BY STAGECOACH NEAR TRENTON, NEW JERSEY

Yellow fever interrupted Puech's visit to Philadelphia, and he gives a vivid description of its progress. "The fatal cart," he said, "like the boat of Charon that ferries the dead to Hades, began its lugubrious journeys yesterday. You should have seen the consternation that paled and lengthened faces at this sad sign. People come and go and pack up their belongings. They rub themselves with alkali, they sniff vinegar, they fill their pockets with camphor, they purge themselves twice a day; some few get drunk in order to forget the death they fear. The town emptied itself into the country. The bonds of nature, of love and friendship, are destroyed; even self-interest is forgotten. To contract yellow fever is to die within three days, without care or consolation. You are lucky if you are not carted away before you have drawn your last breath. The doctors, when they are brave enough to visit you, behave as if they had only come to say, 'Where, sir, do you wish to be buried?' Trembling they feel your pulse and hurry to condemn you, so as not to expose themselves longer; and, like the Trappist monks, you have the satisfaction of admiring your coffin before you are ready to occupy it. In a few days there will be no one here but the poor, the thieves, and the refugees from Santo Domingo. The first cannot afford asylum in the country; the rogues hope to profit by the absence of the owners; and, as for my compatriots, they march with heads high through this pestiferous desert because, poor fools, they think that having experienced death, pillage, fire, and everything else, that Heaven in simple justice will save them from the plague."

Puech stayed over in Philadelphia for a gay dinner given by some of his refugee friends at which they sang, drank, and recited impromptu verses, in spite of the yellow peril that stalked through the city.

The morning after, he left early in a stage with six Anabaptists who were going to Burlington to be baptized.

Staying over to see the ceremony, our young Creole gives a gay and satirical description of what happened, and concluded his account with the truly Gallic observation that, when the women gravely waded out of the river to finish their prayers on the bank, the amused "naturalists" could easily see through their wet and clinging clothes "that, if the double apple that caused our downfall ripens before summer in this boasted country, it also withers before autumn."

When the men's turn came, our Creole frankly lost interest and went to see his friend, Mme. D'E, whose wine he assures us, was not in the slightest degree Anabaptist. The next day he took stage for Trenton.

"It was a dark day," he continues, "the rain fell in buckets, and I stood exposed while my trunk was being loaded. As a result my soaked coat created great consternation, and I profited by this to make myself comfortable. The turned up brim of my big travelling hat held at least a pint of water, and at every jolt I sprinkled the company who, thinking it came from the cracks, kept stuffing them with straw. At last a heavy bump compelled me to make a deep bow, and I spilled the water in the gutter of my hat down the ample kerchief of a fat young farm-wife, who was snoring unceremoniously. As the water ran down the natural path from charm to charm, it was warmed, and left the body of the girl to flow over the captain's seat, who was beside her. He mistook it for an act of nature, and shouted 'God demn (sic) you slut! In future, bring along a thunder-mug instead of using my sock.' The immediate response of the farm lady was a clout in the jaw. The captain fell over backwards on a Protestant who was peacefully smoking and pushed his pipe down his throat. He coughed and spit, making horrible faces, but never noticed that his long hempen hair was aflame until the farmer's wife yelled 'Fire!', and doused him with a pint of molasses she was bringing to

her child. The driver began to swear and turned to see what was happening, when the team ran away and upset the stage.

"At times, fate is most unjust! All we poor innocents were punished, while the irascible captain, the cause of our misfortune, came out safe and sound. He had the good luck to fall on the bottom of the fat farmeress and, although there was room for four of us, he remained alone in possession of that soft and enormous cushion.

"As for me, I was forced to stop in Princeton to rub a wounded leg with camphor.

"Princeton is a pretty enough little town, very rural looking. One sees a large college where students are instructed in the true principles of liberty, for it is said they revolt two or three times a year. None of the undergraduates live on the grounds, as with us, but are lodged and fed by the neighbors, to the detriment of their studies, their morals, and their pocketbooks. There are now a dozen in the room next mine, drinking, laughing, smoking, and swearing as if they were possessed."

Our young explorer went on to New York and ended his impressions of the United States with a trenchant little homily on "The Good Neighbor Policy" that makes interesting reading today. This was his philosophy:

"Reasonable people, through travel, learn about the world, and I have been taught that men of all nations resemble each other closely. Thanks to that profound and novel observation, it doesn't seem worth while for people of different countries to abuse one another. They only become reciprocally ridiculous. If we dance a great deal in France, in America they dance everywhere, and this passion is so prevalent that soon, I think, they'll dance at funerals, where now they only smoke and walk around. The single difference is that the French dance on their toes, while the

Americans jump on their heels. It's only a difference of a few inches and that's not enough to insult each other about. We greet people by uncovering our heads; here they squeeze and shake your hand at the risk of maiming you, or giving you the itch. But that's no reason to detest one another. One can be an honest man and still have the itch, just as one can have a cold in the head and still have good sense. We have our coxcombs, but here one meets them by the hundreds. Because ours smell of musk, lisp their words, and drink *orgeat*; and the 'Bucks' and 'Bloods' here smell of cigars, swear excessively, and get drunk on punch, is that any reason why two nations should declare war? Should we tear out each others' eyes because we like fricassees, and they prefer sirloins here?

"As for me, I have overcome my national prejudices so completely that were it not for those devils of hired slanderers who raise my bile by abusing the French, I would renounce aiming epigrams at any other people; were it even those coal black skins who forced us, so uncivilly, to quit our homes in Haiti at the risk of breaking arms and legs."

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