

CHARLES DICKENS IN WESTERN PENNSYLVANIA¹

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WHEN THE thirty-year-old author of the *Pickwick Papers* landed at Boston on January 22, 1842, he found a country almost childishly anxious to please and impress him. Charles Dickens' journey from Boston to Richmond became a triumphal progress punctuated with fetes and receptions, and worshipful and curious throngs blocked the streets and even the corridors of his hotels. "Boz," as he was almost universally called at the time, was thrilled by the spontaneous enthusiasm of his welcome, but he was also irked by the familiarity and the unintentional rudeness of the Americans. He usually succeeded, however, in creating an appearance of equanimity, and it was not until the publication of his *American Notes* that the people of the United States understood his true feelings.

Andrew Lang presents a picture of Dickens' impressions of America: "The Americans are friendly, earnest, hospitable, kind, frank, very often accomplished, far less prejudiced than you would suppose, warm-hearted, fervent, and enthusiastic'; but the men spit, and shoot, and own slaves, and pirate our books, and the women, though beautiful, fade early, and have not good figures. And the Press is terrible. . . . Moreover, the mountain scenery is inferior to that of Glencoe. The prairie, the boundless prairie, is less impressive than Salisbury Plain, and has no Stonehenge."² Dickens meant his strictures to be beneficial, but they were not relished by the Americans of that day, although their thicker-skinned descendants may admit the justice of his criticisms. In

¹ Read at a meeting of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania on March 31, 1936. Dr. Baldwin is assistant director of the Western Pennsylvania Historical Survey. *Ed.*

² Charles Dickens, *American Notes and Pictures from Italy*, x (edited by Andrew Lang—London, New York, 1898).

truth, some part of the bitterness of the *Notes* may have arisen from pique. Dickens had lost heavily in the Cairo City and Canal Company, and his writings had been freely pirated by American publishers.³ He was, moreover, vain of his personal appearance. His attire was foppish and his long, wavy hair hung in girlish locks about his face—personal oddities that the yellow press did not hesitate to note in a disparaging manner. *American Notes*, whatever its merits or demerits, is sprightly reading, however, for Dickens' gift for caricature is readily apparent on almost every page.

The canal voyage from Harrisburg to Pittsburgh afforded the occasion for some of Dickens' most entertaining comments. At that time the Pennsylvania Canal system provided the chief means of transit over the mountains. Over 33 aqueducts and through 111 locks the canal followed the Juniata River most of the way to Hollidaysburg. From Hollidaysburg the Allegheny Portage Railroad crossed the mountains by way of Blair's Gap Summit, 1378 feet above Hollidaysburg, to Johnstown, a total distance of thirty-seven miles. The steep parts of the ascent and descent were traversed by ten inclined planes over which the railway coaches were hauled up and let down by cables operated by stationery engines. On the less abrupt parts of the railroad horses or locomotives were used as motive power. The remainder of the 172-mile journey to Pittsburgh was by canal along the Conemaugh, Kiskiminetas, and Allegheny rivers, and in this part of the system there were seven viaducts, one of them supported by the highest stone arch then built in the United States, and a water tunnel about nine hundred feet long near Johnstown. The journey of "Boz" with his wife, a secretary, and a maid by this means of transportation, new to them, was begun at Harrisburg on Friday, March 25, at three o'clock in the afternoon. Wrote Dickens:

The weather was as unpromising and obstinately wet as one would desire to

³ The Cairo City and Canal Company was organized by Darius B. Holbrook of Boston to promote a mythical city at the junction of the Ohio and Mississippi rivers. Among Holbrook's numerous victims was Dickens, who invested heavily through John Wright and Company of London. See William G. Wilkins, ed., *Charles Dickens in America*, 237-257 (New York, 1911). Information on Dickens' espousal of an international copyright law is in the same book, p. 2.

see, nor was the sight of this canal boat, in which we were to spend three or four days, by any means a cheerful one; as it involved some uneasy speculations concerning the disposal of the passengers at night, and opened a wide field of inquiry touching the other domestic arrangements of the establishment, which was sufficiently disconcerting.

However, there it was—a barge with a little house in it, viewed from the outside; and a caravan at a fair, viewed from within: the gentlemen being accommodated, as the spectators usually are, in one of those locomotive museums of penny wonders; and the ladies being partitioned off by a red curtain, after the manner of the dwarfs and giants in the same establishments, whose private lives are passed in rather close exclusiveness.

We sat here, looking silently at the row of little tables, which extended down both sides of the cabin, and listening to the rain as it dripped and pattered on the boat, and plashed with a dismal merriment in the water, until the arrival of the railway train, for whose final contribution to our stock of passengers, our departure was alone deferred. It brought a great many boxes, which were bumped and tossed upon the roof, almost as painfully as if they had been deposited on one's own head, without the intervention of a porter's knot; and several damp gentlemen, whose clothes, on their drawing round the stove, began to steam again. No doubt it would have been a thought more comfortable if the driving rain, which now poured down more soakingly than ever, had admitted of a window being opened, or if our number had been something less than thirty; but there was scarcely time to think as much, when a train of three horses was attached to the tow-rope, the boy upon the leader smacked his whip, the rudder creaked and groaned complainingly, and we had begun our journey.

As it continued to rain most perseveringly, we all remained below: the damp gentlemen round the stove, gradually becoming mildewed by the action of the fire; and the dry gentlemen lying at full length upon the seats, or slumbering uneasily with their faces on the tables, or walking up and down the cabin, which it was barely possible for a man of the middle height to do, without making bald places on his head by scraping it against the roof. At about six o'clock, all the small tables were put together to form one long table, and everybody sat down to tea, coffee, bread, butter, salmon, shad, liver, steaks, potatoes, pickles, ham, chops, black-puddings, and sausages.

"Will you try," said my opposite neighbour, handing me a dish of potatoes, broken up in milk and butter, "will you try some of these fixings?"

There are few words which perform such various duties as this word "fix."

It is the Caleb Quotem of the American vocabulary. You call upon a gentleman in a country town, and his help informs you that he is "fixing himself" just now, but will be down directly: by which you are to understand that he is dressing. You inquire, on board a steamboat, of a fellow-passenger, whether breakfast will be ready soon, and he tells you he should think so, for when he was last below, they were "fixing the tables": in other words, laying the cloth. You beg a porter to collect your luggage, and he entreats you not to be uneasy, for he'll "fix it presently": and if you complain of indisposition, you are advised to have recourse to Doctor So-and-so, who will "fix you" in no time. . . . There is no doubt that the meal . . . was disposed of somewhat ravenously; and that the gentlemen thrust the broad-bladed knives and the two-pronged forks further down their throats than I ever saw the same weapons go before, except in the hands of a skilful juggler: but no man sat down until the ladies were seated; or omitted any little act of politeness which could contribute to their comfort. Nor did I ever once, on any occasion, anywhere, during my rambles in America, see a woman exposed to the slightest act of rudeness, incivility, or even inattention.

By the time the meal was over, the rain, which seemed to have worn itself out by coming down so fast, was nearly over too; and it became feasible to go on deck: which was a great relief, notwithstanding its being a very small deck, and being rendered still smaller by the luggage, which was heaped together in the middle under a tarpaulin covering; leaving, on either side, a path so narrow, that it became a science to walk to and fro without tumbling overboard into the canal. It was somewhat embarrassing at first, too, to have to duck nimbly every five minutes whenever the man at the helm cried "Bridge!" and sometimes, when the cry was "Low Bridge," to lie down nearly flat. But custom familiarises one to anything, and there were so many bridges that it took a very short time to get used to this.

As night came on, and we drew in sight of the first range of hills, which are the outposts of the Allegheny Mountains, the scenery, which had been uninteresting hitherto, became more bold and striking. The wet ground reeked and smoked, after the heavy fall of rain; and the croaking of the frogs (whose noise in these parts is almost incredible) sounded as though a million of fairy teams with bells, were travelling through the air, and keeping pace with us. The night was cloudy yet, but moonlight too: and when we crossed the Susquehanna river—over which there is an extraordinary wooden bridge with two galleries, one

above the other, so that even there, two boat teams meeting, may pass without confusion—it was wild and grand.

I have mentioned my having been in some uncertainty and doubt, at first, relative to the sleeping arrangements on board this boat. I remained in the same vague state of mind until ten o'clock or thereabouts, when going below, I found suspended on either side of the cabin, three long tiers of hanging bookshelves, designed apparently for volumes of the small octavo size. Looking with greater attention at these contrivances (wondering to find such literary preparations in such a place), I descried on each shelf a sort of microscopic sheet and blanket; then I began dimly to comprehend that the passengers were the library, and that they were to be arranged, edge-wise, on these shelves, till morning.

I was assisted to this conclusion by seeing some of them gathered round the master of the boat, at one of the tables, drawing lots with all the anxieties and passions of gamblers depicted in their countenances; while others, with small pieces of cardboard in their hands, were groping among the shelves in search of numbers corresponding with those they had drawn. As soon as any gentleman found his number, he took possession of it by immediately undressing himself and crawling into bed. The rapidity with which an agitated gambler subsided into a snoring slumberer, was one of the most singular effects I have ever witnessed. As to the ladies, they were already abed, behind the red curtain, which was carefully drawn and pinned up the centre; though as every cough, or sneeze, or whisper, behind this curtain, was perfectly audible before it, we had still a lively consciousness of their society.

The politeness of the person in authority had secured to me a shelf in a nook near this red curtain, in some degree removed from the great body of sleepers: to which place I retired, with many acknowledgments to him for his attention. I found it, on after-measurement, just the width of an ordinary sheet of Bath post letter-paper; and I was at first in some uncertainty as to the best means of getting into it. But the shelf being a bottom one, I finally determined on lying upon the floor, rolling gently in, stopping immediately I touched the mattress, and remaining for the night with that side uppermost, whatever it might be. Luckily, I came upon my back at exactly the right moment. I was much alarmed on looking upward, to see, by the shape of his half-yard of sacking (which his weight had bent into an exceedingly tight bag), that there was a very heavy gentleman above me, whom the slender cords seemed quite incapable of holding; and I could not help reflecting upon the grief of my wife

and family in the event of his coming down in the night. But as I could not have got up again without a severe bodily struggle, which might have alarmed the ladies; and as I had nowhere to go to, even if I had; I shut my eyes upon the danger, and remained there.

One of two remarkable circumstances is indisputably a fact, with reference to that class of society who travel in these boats. Either they carry their restlessness to such a pitch that they never sleep at all; or they expectorate in dreams, which would be a remarkable mingling of the real and ideal. All night long, and every night, on this canal, there was a perfect storm and tempest of spitting; and once my coat, being in the very centre of the hurricane sustained by five gentlemen (which moved vertically, strictly carrying out Reid's Theory of the Law of Storms), I was fain the next morning to lay it on the deck, and rub it down with fair water before it was in a condition to be worn again.

Between five and six o'clock in the morning we got up, and some of us went on deck, to give them an opportunity of taking the shelves down; while others, the morning being very cold, crowded round the rusty stove, cherishing the newly kindled fire, and filling the grate with those voluntary contributions of which they had been so liberal all night. The washing accommodations were primitive. There was a tin ladle chained to the deck, with which every gentleman who thought it necessary to cleanse himself (many were superior to this weakness), fished the dirty water out of the canal, and poured it into a tin basin, secured in like manner. There was also a jack-towel. And, hanging up before a little looking-glass in the bar, in the immediate vicinity of the bread and cheese and biscuits, were a public comb and hair-brush.

At eight o'clock, the shelves being taken down and put away and the tables joined together, everybody sat down to the tea, coffee, bread, butter, salmon, shad, liver, steak, potatoes, pickles, ham, chops, black-puddings, and sausages, all over again. Some were fond of compounding this variety, and having it all on their plates at once. As each gentleman got through his own personal amount of tea, coffee, bread, butter, salmon, shad, liver, steak, potatoes, pickles, ham, chops, black-puddings, and sausages, he rose up and walked off. When everybody had done with everything, the fragments were cleared away: and one of the waiters appearing anew in the character of a barber, shaved such of the company as desired to be shaved; while the remainder looked on, or yawned over their newspapers. Dinner was breakfast again, without the tea and coffee; and supper and breakfast were identical. . . . breakfast was perhaps the least desirable meal of the day, as in addition to the many savoury odours arising from

the eatables already mentioned, there were whiffs of gin, whiskey, brandy, and rum, from the little bar hard by, and a decided seasoning of stale tobacco. Many of the gentlemen passengers were far from particular in respect of their linen, which was in some cases as yellow as the little rivulets that had trickled from the corners of their mouths in chewing, and dried there. Nor was the atmosphere quite free from zephyr whisperings of the thirty beds which had just been cleared away, and of which we were further and more pressingly reminded by the occasional appearance on the table-cloth of a kind of Game, not mentioned in the Bill of Fare.

And yet despite these oddities—and even they had, for me at least, a humour of their own—there was much in this mode of travelling which I heartily enjoyed at the time, and look back upon with great pleasure. Even the running up, bare-necked, at five o'clock in the morning, from the tainted cabin to the dirty deck; scooping up the icy water, plunging one's head into it, and drawing it out, all fresh and glowing with the cold; was a good thing. The fast, brisk walk upon the towing-path, between that time and breakfast, when every vein and artery seemed to tingle with health; the exquisite beauty of the opening day, when light came gleaming off from everything; the lazy motion of the boat, when one lay idly on the deck, looking through, rather than at, the deep blue sky; the gliding on at night, so noiselessly, past frowning hills, sullen with dark trees, and sometimes angry in one red burning spot high up, where unseen men lay crouching round a fire; the shining out of the bright stars undisturbed by noise of wheels or steam, or any other sound than the limpid rippling of the water as the boat went on: all these were pure delights.

Then there were new settlements and detached log-cabins and frame-houses, full of interest for strangers from an old country: cabins with simple ovens, outside, made of clay; and lodgings for the pigs nearly as good as many of the human quarters; broken windows, patched with worn-out hats, old clothes, old boards, fragments of blankets and paper; and home-made dressers standing in the open air without the door, whereon was ranged the household store, not hard to count, of earthen jars and pots. The eye was pained to see the stumps of great trees thickly strewn in every field of wheat, and seldom to lose the eternal swamp and dull morass, with hundreds of rotten trunks and twisted branches steeped in its unwholesome water. It was quite sad and oppressive, to come upon great tracts where settlers had been burning down the trees, and where their wounded bodies lay about, like those of murdered creatures, while here and there some charred and blackened giant reared aloft two withered

arms, and seemed to call down curses on his foes. Sometimes, at night, the way wound through some lonely gorge, like a mountain pass in Scotland, shining and coldly glittering in the light of the moon, and so closed in by high steep hills all round, that there seemed to be no egress save through the narrower path by which we had come, until one rugged hill-side seemed to open, and shutting out the moonlight as we passed into its gloomy throat, wrapped our new course in shade and darkness.⁴

Dickens apparently did not tell the whole story of this journey, for his secretary, George W. Putnam, of Salem, Massachusetts, later wrote that the captain gave up his cabin to the distinguished passenger and his wife. As they approached the Alleghenies, the travelers sat for hours upon the captain's deck at the bow and gazed at the scenery, read, or conversed. Dickens would occasionally spring out onto the towpath and walk some distance for exercise.⁵ He continued, however, to meet the passengers and has left this picture of one of his acquaintances:

There was a man on board this boat, with a light fresh-coloured face, and a pepper-and-salt suit of clothes, who was the most inquisitive fellow that can possibly be imagined. He never spoke otherwise than interrogatively. He was an embodied inquiry. Sitting down or standing up, still or moving, walking the deck or taking his meals, there he was, with a great note of interrogation in each eye, two in his cocked ears, two more in his turned-up nose and chin, at least half a dozen more about the corners of his mouth, and the largest one of all in his hair, which was brushed pertly off his forehead in a flaxen clump. Every button in his clothes said, "Eh? What's that? Did you speak? Say that again, will you?" He was always wide awake, like the enchanted bride who drove her husband frantic; always restless; always thirsting for answers; perpetually seeking and never finding. There never was such a curious man.

I wore a fur great-coat at that time, and before we were well clear of the wharf, he questioned me concerning it, and its price, and where I bought it, and when, and what fur it was, and what it weighed, and what it cost. Then he took notice of my watch, and asked me what *that* cost, and whether it was a French watch, and where I got it, and how I got it, and whether I bought it or had it given me, and how it went, and where the key-hole was, and when I

⁴ *American Notes*, 170-177, 180.

⁵ "Four Months with Charles Dickens. During His First Visit to America (in 1842) by His Secretary," in *Atlantic Monthly*, 26: 592, 593 (November, 1870).

wound it, every night or every morning, and whether I ever forgot to wind it at all, and if I did, what then? Where had I been to last, and where was I going next, and where was I going after that, and had I seen the President, and what did he say, and what did I say, and what did he say when I had said that? Eh? Lor now! do tell!

Finding that nothing would satisfy him, I evaded his questions after the first score or two, and in particular pleaded ignorance respecting the name of the fur whereof the coat was made. I am unable to say whether this was the reason, but that coat fascinated him afterwards; he usually kept close behind me as I walked, and moved as I moved, that he might look at it the better; and he frequently dived into narrow places after me at the risk of his life, that he might have the satisfaction of passing his hand up the back, and rubbing it the wrong way.⁶

The party left Harrisburg on Friday and did not reach Hollidaysburg until Sunday morning. The railway journey over the mountains was a never-ending source of wonder to travelers, and Dickens left an impressionistic pen picture of the delights of the passage:

It was very pretty travelling thus, at a rapid pace along the heights of the mountain in a keen wind, to look down into a valley full of light and softness; catching glimpses, through the tree-tops, of scattered cabins; children running to the doors; dogs bursting out to bark, whom we could see without hearing; terrified pigs scampering homewards; families sitting out in their rude gardens; cows gazing upward with a stupid indifference; men in their shirt-sleeves looking on at their unfinished houses, planning out to-morrow's work; and we riding onward, high above them, like a whirlwind. It was amusing, too, when we had dined, and rattled down a steep pass, having no other moving power than the weight of the carriages themselves, to see the engine released, long after us, come buzzing down alone, like a great insect, its back of green and gold so shining in the sun, that if it had spread a pair of wings and soared away, no one would have had occasion, as I fancied, for the least surprise. But it stopped short of us in a very business-like manner when we reached the canal: and, before we left the wharf, went panting up this hill again, with the passengers who had awaited our arrival for the means of traversing the road by which we had come.⁷

⁶ *American Notes*, 177.

⁷ *American Notes*, 182.

Before the descent of the mountain the passengers had partaken of a breakfast that was not only very scanty and unappetizing but had come at such an early hour that by noon they were nearly famished. The moment the train stopped, wrote Putnam, the passengers hurried into the hotel to eat.

A glance at the table showed what was likely to be the fare. So I managed to find good places near the head of the table for Mr. and Mrs. Dickens, close by what seemed to be a small dish of veal. They succeeded in getting a little of it and a small portion of bread and butter, and were thankful, as indeed they and those near the "veal" had good reason to be, for the mass of hungry passengers got little or nothing. There was a big dish of something on the table, and the long-nosed landlord walked round and round the table, asking the starving passengers, through his nose, if they would "have some of the potpie? some of the potpie?"

The "potpie" was examined and generally refused. A few, however, had the temerity to taste it. It was a mass of bacon-rinds, pork-scraps, bits of gristle, and potatoes, and such odds and ends as usually go into the waste-tub, and which had probably been accumulating for several weeks. The hungry passengers took very little of it, preferring to pay for rather than to eat it. The last I saw of that landlord he was walking round the half-deserted table with the dish in his hands, and asking the guests if they would "have some of the potpie? some of the potpie?"⁸

The gentleman who exhibited so much interest in Dickens' coat of "astrachan goat-skin," as Putnam called it, was not the only peculiar person encountered on the trip. "Boz," with his usual lively sense of the ridiculous, sketched an incident that involved "a thin-faced, spare-figured man of middle age and stature, dressed in a dusty drabbish-coloured suit." There were two lines of canal boats, the Express and the Pioneer; the latter was the cheaper. Passengers on both lines were transported across the mountains at the same time. Wrote Dickens:

We were the Express company, but when we had crossed the mountain, and had come to the second boat, the proprietors took it into their heads to draft all the Pioneers into it likewise, so that we were five-and-forty at least, and the

⁸ "Four Months with Charles Dickens," in *Atlantic Monthly*, 26: 593.

accession of passengers was not at all of that kind which improved the prospect of sleeping at night. Our people grumbled at this, as people do in such cases; but suffered the boat to be towed off with the whole freight aboard nevertheless; and away we went down the canal. At home, I should have protested lustily, but being a foreigner here, I held my peace. Not so this passenger. He cleft a path among the people on deck (we were nearly all on deck), and without addressing anybody whomsoever, soliloquised as follows:

"This may suit *you*, this may, but it don't suit *me*. This may be all very well with Down Easters, and men of Boston raising, but it won't suit my figure no-how; and no two ways about *that*; and so I tell you. Now! I'm from the brown forests of the Mississippi, *I* am, and when the sun shines on me, it does shine—a little. It don't glimmer where *I* live, the sun don't. No. I'm a brown forester, *I* am. I an't a Johnny Cake. There are no smooth skins where I live. We're rough men there. Rather. If Down Easters and men of Boston raising like this, I'm glad of it, but I'm none of that raising nor of that breed. No. This company wants a little fixing, *it* does. I'm the wrong sort of man for 'em, *I* am. They won't like me, *they* won't. This is piling of it up, a little too mountainous, this is." At the end of every one of these short sentences he turned upon his heel, and walked the other way; checking himself abruptly when he had finished another short sentence, and turning back again.

It is impossible for me to say what terrific meaning was hidden in the words of this brown forester, but I know that the other passengers looked on in a sort of admiring horror, and that presently the boat was put back to the wharf, and as many of the Pioneers as could be coaxed or bullied into going away, were got rid of.

When we started again, some of the boldest spirits on board, made bold to say to the obvious occasion of this improvement in our prospects, "Much obliged to you, sir"; whereunto the brown forester (waving his hand, and still walking up and down as before), replied, "No you an't. You're none o' my raising. You may act for yourselves, *you* may. I have pinte'd out the way. Down Easters and Johnny Cakes can follow if they please. I an't a Johnny Cake, *I* an't. I am from the brown forests of the Mississippi, *I* am"—and so on, as before. He was unanimously voted one of the tables for his bed at night—there is a great contest for the tables—in consideration for his public services: and he had the warmest corner by the stove throughout the rest of the journey. But I never could find out that he did anything except sit there; nor did I hear him speak again until, in the midst of the bustle and turmoil of getting the luggage

ashore in the dark at Pittsburgh, I stumbled over him as he sat smoking a cigar on the cabin steps, and heard him muttering to himself, with a short laugh of defiance, "I an't a Johnny Cake, I an't. I'm from the brown forests of the Mississippi, I am, damme!" I am inclined to argue from this, that he had never left off saying so; but I could not make an affidavit of that part of the story, if required to do so by my Queen and Country.⁹

Pittsburgh was reached on Monday evening, March 28; the city was heralded by the glare of furnaces and the clanking of hammers on the banks of the canal. The canal boat crossed the Allegheny River in "a vast low wooden chamber full of water" and emerged upon an "ugly confusion of backs of buildings and crazy galleries and stairs." Dickens described Pittsburgh as very beautifully situated, with the villas of the wealthy scattered about the neighboring heights. The inhabitants of Pittsburgh thought of the city as similar to Birmingham, England, and with the ironworks and the pall of smoke Dickens was willing to admit the similarity, except for "the streets, the shops, the houses, waggons, factories, public buildings, and population."¹⁰

The newspapers of the "American Birmingham" do not seem to have paid much attention to "Boz" and his party. The Pittsburgh *Morning Chronicle* on March 29 printed the following brief note: "*Boz in Pittsburgh.*—Charles Dickens and lady arrived in the city last night about 1/2 past 9 o'clock on their way to St. Louis, and took lodgings at the Exchange Hotel. We understand the Managers have given him an invitation to visit the Theatre tonight." The hotel at which the party stayed was then the best in the city and one of the finest in the United States. It was located at Penn Avenue and Sixth Street and had been renovated only two years before Dickens' visit. It boasted all the modern conveniences: a ladies' dining room, a double reading room, an icehouse, and "a good bathing house at Concert Hall, just opposite, established for the accommodation of guests at the Exchange." The cutlery was stamped with the name of the hotel, and the tables were furnished with French china. The servants, so runs an old account, did not wear wooden or iron-

⁹ *American Notes*, 178-180.

¹⁰ *American Notes*, 183.

bound shoes, and the guests were not disturbed, therefore, during the night by the clatter incident to bringing in the luggage of late arrivals.¹¹

Very little is known of Dickens' stay in Pittsburgh. Probably he walked about the town and attended the theater. He also tried mesmerism on his wife and first "magnetized her into hysterics, and then into the magnetic sleep." There were, of course, callers from among the citizens. Mr. Charles B. Scully, one of the prominent lawyers of the city, has left an entry in his diary for Tuesday, March 29, which is published in William Glyde Wilkins' *Charles Dickens in America*:

At 12 noon a remarkable event, a thing I never expected, happened to-day. Went to the Exchange Hotel and was shown up to room No. 12, and on announcing our name to Mr. Putnam and Mr. D'Almaine [*a local portrait painter*], was introduced to Mr. Charles Dickens, the greatest author of the age. He gave us a cordial hand-shake. I wished him welcome and he thanked me most politely. I was then introduced to Mrs. Dickens, who very easily and in a friendly manner reached out her hand. I took a seat beside her and spoke of her fortune in having such good weather. She said this was a remarkable country of ours and she was delighted with it. I told her she would admire its vastness more when on the broad waters of the Ohio and Mississippi. She said she hoped she would not be too nervous, as she was alarmed at the dreadful accidents on our rivers from boiler explosions. I recommended her to take a boat with Evans's safety valves, and she said she would. She told me Mr. D'Almaine was an old friend of her husband. I told her that Mr. Dickens had as many admirers of his literary productions here in proportion as in the East, although we showed it in a more plain and less extravagant way than our Eastern brethren, and were more democratic. She smiled very graciously.

Mr. Dickens is much like his portrait, or likeness, as published in his works, a full, thoughtful face, a round dark eye, large mouth, wavy hair, and sparse whiskers. I never saw an English woman (Mrs. D.) like her, a modest and diffident demeanour, fair hair, blue eye and round features. Both are very pleasant, in their appearance. Mr. Dickens stood while I was in the room and is very fidgety, as it struck me, and quick. He appears to see everything that is going on: for instance, when I was speaking to Mrs. D., in a low tone, of boats

¹¹ Wilkins, *Dickens in America*, 200; Harris' *General Business Directory, of the Cities of Pittsburgh and Allegheny*, 162 (published by Isaac Harris—Pittsburgh, 1841).

with safety valves, he ran over to the window where I was sitting and said, "What is that you say of safety valves?" We then talked a few minutes about boats, and I bowed and shook hands and left. Afterwards went to the "Exchange" and serenaded Mr. Dickens.¹²

Dickens and his party stayed in Pittsburgh three days and on April 1 departed on the packet "Messenger" for Cincinnati. The *Morning Chronicle* noted that "M. G. Searle, Esq. . . the regular agent for all respectable steamboats coming to and departing from Pittsburgh," attended the distinguished visitors on board. The editor of that paper epitomized the novelist's visit thus:

He was not bespattered with that fulsome praise with which he was bedaubed in the East, and which, we have not the least doubt, was as disagreeable to himself as it was sickening to all sensible men. In the words of the editor of the *Louisville Gazette*, we admired his genius, and were prepared to greet him with warm and friendly hearts, to grasp him by the hand, and give it a good Republican shake, we let him see us as we were, and if he chooses to "write us in his book," it will be no fault of ours, if we are classed among the Dogberries who beset his first arrival. Many of our citizens called upon him, and were delighted with the man whose writings had contributed so greatly to their enjoyment. We doubt not he was better pleased with the quiet hospitality of his reception in Pittsburgh, than he would have been if we had got up a "Boz Ball" or any other "Gnome Fly" to welcome him.¹³

The Dickens' had a lively apprehension of being blown up in a steamboat explosion and so inquired carefully for a boat with a good reputation—presumably one that had never been blown up. The "Messenger" had been recommended, and after making his reservations Dickens was for hurrying on board, as for a fortnight the boat had been advertised to start each day. It was quickly explained to him that this schedule advertising was just an old river custom intended to decoy trade and that the boat would not really leave until April 1. The party accordingly remained in

¹² Wilkins, *Dickens in America*, 16, 202.

¹³ *Morning Chronicle*, April 2, 4, 1842. Reprints of the newspaper notices and of the editorial are in Wilkins, *Dickens in America*, 201, 203.

the hotel until noon of that day and then went aboard. Here let Dickens resume his narrative:

The Messenger was one among a crowd of high-pressure steamboats, clustered together by a wharf-side, which, looked down upon from the rising ground that forms the landing-place, and backed by the lofty bank on the opposite side of the river, appeared no larger than so many floating models. She had some forty passengers on board, exclusive of the poorer persons on the lower deck; and in half an hour, or less, proceeded on her way.

We had, for ourselves, a tiny state-room with two berths in it, opening out of the ladies' cabin. There was, undoubtedly, something satisfactory in this "location," inasmuch as it was in the stern, and we had been a great many times very gravely recommended to keep as far aft as possible, "because the steamboats generally blew up forward." Nor was this an unnecessary caution, as the occurrence and circumstances of more than one such fatality during our stay sufficiently testified. Apart from this source of self-congratulation, it was an unspeakable relief to have any place, no matter how confined, where one could be alone: and as the row of little chambers of which this was one, had each a second glass-door besides that in the ladies' cabin, which opened on a narrow gallery outside the vessel, where the other passengers seldom came, and where one could sit in peace and gaze upon the shifting prospect, we took possession of our new quarters with much pleasure.

If the native packets I have already described be unlike anything we are in the habit of seeing on water, these western vessels are still more foreign to all the ideas we are accustomed to entertain of boats. I hardly know what to liken them to, or how to describe them.

In the first place, they have no mast, cordage, tackle, rigging, or other such boat-like gear; nor have they anything in their shape at all calculated to remind one of a boat's head, stern, sides, or keel. Except that they are in the water, and display a couple of paddle-boxes, they might be intended, for anything that appears to the contrary, to perform some unknown service, high and dry, upon a mountain top. There is no visible deck, even: nothing but a long, black, ugly roof, covered with burnt-out feathery sparks; above which tower two iron chimneys, and a hoarse escape valve, and a glass steerage-house. Then, in order as the eye descends towards the water, are the sides, and doors, and windows of the state-rooms, jumbled as oddly together as though they formed

a small street, built by the varying tastes of a dozen men: the whole is supported on beams and pillars resting on a dirty barge, but a few inches above the water's edge: and in the narrow space between this upper structure and this barge's deck, are the furnace fires and machinery, open at the sides to every wind that blows, and every storm of rain it drives along its path.

Passing one of these boats at night, and seeing the great body of fire, exposed as I have just described, that rages and roars beneath the frail pile of painted wood: the machinery, not warded off or guarded in any way, but doing its work in the midst of the crowd of idlers and emigrants and children, who throng the lower deck: under the management, too, of reckless men whose acquaintance with its mysteries may have been of six months' standing: one feels directly that the wonder is, not that there should be so many fatal accidents, but that any journey should be safely made.

Within, there is one long narrow cabin, the whole length of the boat; from which the state-rooms open, on both sides. A small portion of it at the stern is partitioned off for the ladies; and the bar is at the opposite extreme. There is a long table down the centre, and at either end a stove. The washing apparatus is forward, on the deck. It is a little better than on board the canal boat, but not much. In all modes of travelling, the American customs, with reference to the means of personal cleanliness and wholesome ablution, are extremely negligent and filthy; and I strongly incline to the belief that a considerable amount of illness is referable to this cause.

We are to be on board the Messenger three days: arriving at Cincinnati (barring accidents) on Monday morning. There are three meals a day. Breakfast at seven, dinner at half-past twelve, supper about six. At each, there are a great many small dishes and plates upon the table, with very little in them; so that although there is every appearance of a mighty "spread," there is seldom really more than a joint: except for those who fancy slices of beet-root, shreds of dried beef, complicated entanglements of yellow pickle; maize, Indian corn, apple-sauce, and pumpkin.

Some people fancy all these little dainties together (and sweet preserves beside), by way of relish to their roast pig. They are generally those dyspeptic ladies and gentlemen who eat unheard-of quantities of hot corn bread (almost as good for the digestion as a kneaded pin-cushion), for breakfast, and for supper. Those who do not observe this custom, and who help themselves several times instead, usually suck their knives and forks meditatively, until they have decided what to take next: then pull them out of their mouths: put them in the

dish; help themselves; and fall to work again. At dinner, there is nothing to drink upon the table, but great jugs full of cold water. Nobody says anything, at any meal, to anybody. All the passengers are very dismal, and seem to have tremendous secrets weighing on their minds. There is no conversation, no laughter, no cheerfulness, no sociality, except in spitting; and that is done in silent fellowship round the stove, when the meal is over. Every man sits down, dull and languid; swallows his fare as if breakfasts, dinners, and suppers, were necessities of nature never to be coupled with recreation or enjoyment; and having bolted his food in a gloomy silence, bolts himself, in the same state. But for these animal observances, you might suppose the whole male portion of the company to be the melancholy ghosts of departed book-keepers, who had fallen dead at the desk: such is their weary air of business and calculation. Undertakers on duty would be sprightly beside them; and a collation of funeral-baked meats, in comparison with these meals, would be a sparkling festivity.

The people are all alike, too. There is no diversity of character. They travel about on the same errands, say and do the same things in exactly the same manner, and follow in the same dull cheerless round. All down the long table, there is scarcely a man who is in anything different from his neighbour. It is quite a relief to have, sitting opposite, that little girl of fifteen with the loquacious chin: who, to do her justice, acts up to it, and fully identifies nature's handwriting, for of all the small chatterboxes that ever invaded the repose of drowsy ladies' cabin, she is the first and foremost. The beautiful girl, who sits a little beyond her—farther down the table there—married the young man with the dark whiskers, who sits beyond *her*, only last month. They are going to settle in the very Far West, where he has lived four years, but where she has never been. They were both overturned in a stage-coach the other day (a bad omen anywhere else, where overturns are not so common), and his head, which bears the marks of a recent wound, is bound up still. She was hurt too, at the same time, and lay insensible for some days; bright as her eyes are, now.

Further down still, sits a man who is going some miles beyond their place of destination, to "improve" a newly-discovered copper mine. He carries the village—that is to be—with him: a few frame cottages, and an apparatus for smelting the copper. He carries its people too. They are partly American and partly Irish, and herd together on the lower deck; where they amused themselves last evening till the night was pretty far advanced, by alternately firing off pistols and singing hymns.

They, and the very few who have been left at table twenty minutes, rise,

and go away. We do so too; and passing through our little stateroom, resume our seats in the quiet gallery without.¹⁴

The passage that follows is one of the finest bits of writing in the *American Notes*. Dickens, in spite of his contempt for things American, and particularly western American, seems to have caught a glimpse of the pathos and solitude of western life together with the stark grandeur of the seemingly desolate wilderness. Perhaps the unconscious insight of the true literary artist animated him when he sketched this picture of the upper Ohio River and the scenes along its age-old banks:

A fine broad river always, but in some parts much wider than in others: and then there is usually a green island, covered with trees, dividing it into two streams. Occasionally, we stop for a few minutes, maybe to take in wood, maybe for passengers, at some small town or village (I ought to say city, every place is a city here); but the banks are for the most part deep solitudes, overgrown with trees, which, hereabouts, are already in leaf and very green. For miles, and miles, and miles, these solitudes are unbroken by any sign of human life or trace of human footstep; nor is anything seen to move about them but the blue jay, whose colour is so bright, and yet so delicate, that it looks like a flying flower. At lengthened intervals a log cabin, with its little space of cleared land about it, nestles under a rising ground, and sends its thread of blue smoke curling up into the sky. It stands in the corner of the poor field of wheat, which is full of great unsightly stumps, like earthy butchers'-blocks. Sometimes the ground is only just now cleared: the felled trees lying yet upon the soil: and the log-house only this morning begun. As we pass this clearing, the settler leans upon his axe or hammer, and looks wistfully at the people from the world. The children creep out of the temporary hut, which is like a gipsy tent upon the ground, and clap their hands and shout. The dog only glances round at us, and then looks up into his master's face again, as if he were rendered uneasy by any suspension of the common business, and had nothing more to do with pleasures. And still there is the same, eternal foreground. The river has washed away its banks, and stately trees have fallen down into the stream. Some have been there so long, that they are mere dry grizzly skeletons. Some have just toppled over, and having earth yet about their roots, are bathing their green heads in the river, and putting forth new shoots and branches. Some are almost slid-

¹⁴ *American Notes*, 184-189.

ing down, as you look at them. And some were drowned so long ago, that their bleached arms start out from the middle of the current, and seem to try to grasp the boat, and drag it under water.

Through such a scene as this, the unwieldy machine takes its hoarse, sullen way: venting, at every revolution of the paddles, a loud high-pressure blast; enough, one would think, to waken up the host of Indians who lie buried in a great mound yonder: so old, that mighty oaks and other forest trees have struck their roots into its earth; and so high, that it is a hill, even among the hills that Nature planted round it. The very river, as though it shared one's feelings of compassion for the extinct tribes who lived so pleasantly here, in their blessed ignorance of white existence, hundreds of years ago, steals out of its way to ripple near this mound: and there are few places where the Ohio sparkles more brightly than in the Big Grave Creek.

All this I see as I sit in the little stern-gallery mentioned just now. Evening slowly steals upon the landscape and changes it before me, when we stop to get some emigrants ashore.

Five men, as many women, and a little girl. All their worldly goods are a bag, a large chest and an old chair: one, old high-backed, rush-bottomed chair: a solitary settler in itself. They are rowed ashore in the boat, while the vessel stands a little off awaiting its return, the water being shallow. They are landed at the foot of a high bank, on the summit of which are a few log cabins, attainable only by a long winding path. It is growing dusk; but the sun is very red, and shines in the water and on some of the tree-tops, like fire.

The men get out of the boat first; help out the women; take out the bag, the chest, the chair; bid the rowers "good-bye"; and shove the boat off for them. At the first splash of the oars in the water, the oldest woman of the party sits down in the old chair, close to the water's edge, without speaking a word. None of the others sit down, though the chest is large enough for many seats. They all stand where they landed, as if stricken into stone; and look after the boat. So they remain, quite still and silent: the old woman and her old chair, in the centre; the bag and chest upon the shore, without anybody heeding them: all eyes fixed upon the boat. It comes alongside, is made fast, the men jump on board, the engine is put in motion, and we go hoarsely on again. There they stand yet, without the motion of a hand. I can see them through my glass, when, in the distance and increasing darkness, they are mere specks to the eye: lingering there still: the old woman in the old chair, and all the rest about her: not stirring in the least degree. And thus I slowly lose them.

The night is dark, and we proceed within the shadow of the wooded bank, which makes it darker. After gliding past the sombre maze of boughs for a long time, we come upon an open space where the tall trees are burning. The shape of every branch and twig is expressed in a deep red glow, and as the light wind stirs and ruffles it, they seem to vegetate in fire. It is such a sight as we read of in legends of enchanted forests: saving that it is sad to see these noble works wasting away so awfully, alone; and to think how many years must come and go before the magic that created them will rear their like upon this ground again. But the time will come; and when, in their changed ashes, the growth of centuries unborn has struck its roots, the restless men of distant ages will repair to these again unpeopled solitudes; and their fellows, in cities far away, that slumber now, perhaps, beneath the rolling sea, will read in language strange to any ears in being now, but very old to them, of primeval forests where the axe was never heard, and where the jungled ground was never trodden by a human foot.¹⁵

¹⁵ *American Notes*, 189-192.