

HUMOR



Washington Irving

(1783-1859)

from A History of New York from the Beginning of the World

to the End of the Dutch Dynasty (1809)

Chapter 5

IN WHICH THE AUTHOR PUTS A MIGHTY QUESTION TO THE ROUT,
BY THE ASSISTANCE OF THE MAN IN THE MOON--
WHICH NOT ONLY DELIVERS THOUSANDS OF PEOPLE FROM GREAT
EMBARRASSMENT, BUT LIKEWISE CONCLUDES THIS INTRODUCTORY BOOK

...It was truly a sight that might well inspire horror, to behold these savages, stumbling among the dark mountains of paganism, and guilty of the most horrible ignorance of religion. It is true, they neither stole nor defrauded, they were sober, frugal, continent, and faithful to their word; but though they acted right habitually, it was all in vain, unless they acted so from precept. The new comers therefore used every method, to induce them to embrace and practice the true religion--except that of setting them the example.

But notwithstanding all these complicated labours for their good, such was the unparalleled obstinacy of these stubborn wretches, that they ungratefully refused to acknowledge the strangers as their benefactors, and persisted in disbelieving the doctrines they endeavoured to inculcate; most insolently alleging, that from their conduct, the advocates of Christianity did not seem to believe in it themselves. Was not this too much for human patience?--would no one suppose, that the foreign emigrants from Europe, provoked at their incredulity and discouraged by their stiff-necked obstinacy, would forever have abandoned their shores, and consigned them to their original ignorance and misery?--But no--so zealous were they to effect the temporal comfort and eternal salvation of these pagan infidels, that they even proceeded from the milder means of persuasion, to the more painful and troublesome one of persecution--Let loose among them, whole troops of fiery monks and furious bloodhounds--purified them by fire and sword, by stake and

faggot; in consequence of which indefatigable measures, the cause of Christian love and charity was so rapidly advanced, that in a very few years, not one fifth of the number of unbelievers existed in South America, that were found there at the time of its discovery.

Nor did the other methods of civilization remain unenforced. The Indians improved daily and wonderfully by their intercourse with the whites. They took to drinking rum, and making bargains. They learned to cheat, to lie, to swear, to gamble, to quarrel, to cut each other's throats, in short, to excel in all the accomplishments that had originally marked the superiority of their Christian visitors. And such a surprising aptitude had they shown for these acquirements, that there is very little doubt that in a century more, provided they survive so long the irresistible effects of civilization; they will equal in knowledge, refinement, knavery, and debauchery, the most enlightened, civilized and orthodox nations of Europe....

Let us suppose...that the aerial voyagers, finding this planet to be nothing but a howling wilderness, inhabited by us, poor savages and wild beasts, shall take formal possession of it, in the name of his most gracious and philosophic excellency, the man in the moon. Finding however, that their numbers are incompetent to hold it in complete subjection, on account of the ferocious barbarity of its inhabitants; they shall take our worthy President, the King of England...the mighty little Bonaparte...and returning to their native planet, shall carry them to court, as were the Indian chiefs led about as spectacles in the courts of Europe. Then making such obeisance as the etiquette of the court requires, they shall address the puissant man in the moon...

"Most serene and mighty Potentate, whose dominions extend as far as eye can reach, who...useth the sun as a looking glass and maintaineth unrivalled controul over tides, madmen and sea-crabs. We thy liege subjects have just returned from a voyage of discovery, in the course of which we have landed and taken possession of that obscure little scurvy planet, which thou beholdest rolling at a distance. The...uncouth monsters, which we have brought into this august presence, were once very important chiefs among their fellow savages; for the inhabitants of the newly discovered globe are totally destitute of the common attributes of humanity, inasmuch as they carry their heads upon their shoulders, instead of under their arms--have two eyes instead of one--are utterly destitute of tails, and of a variety of unseemly complexions, particularly of a horrible whiteness--whereas all the inhabitants of the moon are pea green!

We have moreover found these miserable savages sunk into a state of the utmost ignorance and depravity, every man shamelessly living with his own wife, and rearing his own children, instead of indulging in that community of wives, enjoined by the law of nature, as expounded by the philosophers of the moon. In a word they have scarcely a gleam of true philosophy among them, but are in fact, utter heretics, ignoramuses and barbarians. Taking compassion therefore on the sad condition of these sublunary wretches, we have endeavoured, while we remained on their planet, to introduce among them the light of reason--and the comforts of the moon. We have treated them to mouthfuls of moonshine and draughts of nitrous oxide, which they swallowed with incredible voracity, particularly the females; and we have likewise endeavoured to instill into them the precepts of lunar Philosophy. We have insisted upon their renouncing the contemptible shackles of religion and common sense... But such was the unparalleled obstinacy of these wretched savages, that they persisted in cleaving to their wives and adhering to their religion, and absolutely set at naught the sublime doctrines of the moon--nay, among other abominable heresies, they even went so far as blasphemously to declare, that this ineffable planet was made of nothing more nor less than green cheese!"

At these words, the great man in the moon...shall fall into a terrible passion, and possessing equal authority over things that do not belong to him...shall forthwith issue a formidable [order]... "That--whereas a certain crew of Lunatics have lately discovered and taken possession of that little dirty planet, called *the earth*--and that whereas it is inhabited by none but a race of two legged animals... [who] cannot talk the lunatic language...are destitute of tails; and of a horrible whiteness, instead of pea green--therefore and for a variety of other excellent reasons--they are considered incapable of possessing any property in the planet they infest, and the right and title to it are confirmed to its original discoverers. And furthermore, the colonists who are now about to depart to the aforesaid planet, are authorized and commanded to use every means to convert these infidel savages from the darkness of Christianity, and make them thorough and absolute lunatics."

