

A diary in America: with remarks on its institutions.  
Part 2, Volume 1, Frederick Marryat (1839)  
excerpt

They say that the English cannot settle anything properly, without a dinner. I am sure the Americans can *fix* nothing, without a **drink**. If you meet, you **drink**; if you part, you **drink**; if you make acquaintance, you **drink**; if you close a bargain, you **drink**; they quarrel in their **drink**, and they make it up with a **drink**. They **drink**, because it is hot; they **drink**, because it is cold. If successful in elections, they **drink** and rejoice; if not, they **drink** and swear; — they begin to **drink** early in the morning, they leave off late at night; they commence it early in life, and they continue it, until they drop down into the grave. To use their own expression, the way they **drink**, is " quite a caution."\* As for water, what the man said, when asked to belong to the Temperance Society, appears to be the general opinion, " it's very good for navigation."

So much has it become the habit to cement all friendship, and commence acquaintance by drinking, that it is a cause of serious offence to refuse, especially in a foreigner, as the Americans like to call the English. I was always willing to accommodate the Americans in this particular, as far as I could; (there at least, they will do me justice;) that at times I drank much more than I wished is certain, yet still I gave most serious offence, especially in the West, because I would not **drink** early in the morning, or before dinner, which is a general custom in the States, although much more prevalent in the South and West, where it is literally, " Stranger, will you **drink** or fight ?" This refusal on my part, or rather excusing myself from drinking with all those who were introduced to me, was eventually the occasion of much disturbance and of great animosity towards me—certainly, most unreasonably, as I was introduced to at least twenty every forenoon ; and had I drunk with them all, I should have been in the same state as many of them were—that is, not really sober for three or four weeks at a time.

That the constitutions of the Americans must suffer from this habit is certain; they do not, however, appear to suffer so much as we should. They say that you may always know the grave of a Virginian; as from the quantity of juleps he has drunk, mint invariably springs up where he has been buried. But the Virginians are not the greatest drinkers, by any means. I (was once looking for an American, and asked a friend of his, where I should

find him. " Why," replied he, pointing to an hotel opposite, " that is his *licking place*, (a term borrowed from deer resorting to lick the salt:) we will see if he is there." He was not; the barkeeper said he had left about ten minutes. " Well, then, you had better remain here, he is certain to be back in ten more—if not sooner." The American judged his friend rightly; in five minutes he was back again, and we had a **drink** together, of course.

I did not see it myself, but I was told that somewhere in Missouri, or thereabouts, west of the Mississippi, all the bars have what they term a *kicking-board*, it being the custom with the people who live there, instead of touching glasses when they **drink** together, to kick sharply with the side of the foot against the board, and that after this ceremony you are sworn friends. I have had it mentioned to me by more than one person, therefore I presume it is the case. What the origin of it is I know not, unless it intends to imply, " I'm your's to the *last kick*."\*\*

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\* It was not a bad idea of a man who, generally speaking, was very low-spirited, on being asked the cause, replied, that he did not know, but he thought " that he had been born with *three drinks too little* in him."

\*\* In a chapter which follows this, I have said that the women of America are physically superior to the men. This may appear contradictory, as of course they could not be born so; nor are they, for I have often remarked how very fine the American male children are, especially those lads who have grown up to the age of fourteen or sixteen. One could hardly believe it possible that the men are the same youths advanced in life. How is this to be accounted for? I can only suppose that it is from their plunging too early into life as men, having thrown off parental control, and commencing the usual excesses of young men in every country at too tender an age. The constant stimulus of **drink** must, of course, be another powerful cause; not that the Americans often become intoxicated, on the contrary, you will see many more in this condition every day in this country than you will in America. But occasional intoxication is not so injurious to the constitution as that continual application of spirits, which must enfeeble the stomach, and, with the assistance of tobacco, destroy its energies. The Americans are a *drinking* but not a

*drunken* nation, and, as I have before observed, the climate operates upon them very powerfully.