

IN THE GRAY CABINS OF NEW ENGLAND.



N Englishman who recently visited this country wrote from Boston to a friend :

As I have so little time in America, I have decided to spend it all in New England. It is the American race that I wish to study, not their scenery nor towns. I have always heard that in New England was the brain of the country, and that the Puritan blood first gave the distinctive character to your people. My friends in Boston assure me that the influence of this section is still dominant throughout the States, and that the leaders of the nation in politics, in literature, and in religious inquiry come now, as they did at first, out of the little gray cabins on these bleak farms of New England. From the stories that they tell me of these Yankee cotters, their poverty, their thrift, and their hungry greed for knowledge, I can readily understand that they still supply much of the intellectual force for the complex mass which makes up the American people. I am going among them. I wish to study the power which moves the machine.

I do not know what was the result of his studies. The opinion of any foreigner about us really matters very little. But it matters a great deal if we are mistaken in our own opinion of ourselves or of the work which we are doing for our country.

When his friends in Boston talked to this stranger of the intellectual energy at work in the gray cabins of New England, they only repeated an old orthodox formula, which was true a hundred or even fifty years ago. They have repeated it so often that it never occurs to them to ask whether it is true now.

Is it?

Nobody who is not made imbecile by prejudice denies the influence of the intellectual life of Boston, and of two or three other cities in New England, upon the thought of the whole country. It is genuine life—that; the generation, birth, and growth of ideas. It is not merely the chafing of old, hackneyed opinions against one another, such as we sometimes find in the literary clubs of newer towns where the creeds and sayings of dead times and dead men, from Aristotle to Browning, are taken out and picked over and over and compared, as a housewife assort the scraps from her rag-bag.

It is the fashion now to gibe at Boston and Boston culture. But if the meanest giber brings a bit of good work into the world, in book or score or picture, he knows that it is from Bos-

ton its first recognition will come, and that promptly and heartily. He will find no grudging jealousy there of his little success, no damning him with faint praise. The past master is not afraid to hold out his hand to the apprentice.

It is because I know so well the liberal, large justice of that class in New England who welcome intelligently the best work and best workers throughout the country that I venture to point out to them certain poor work and unable workers at home. They view the world at long range clearly enough: they take a keen interest in the conditions of life in the Ukraine, and the changes of belief in every Somaj in India; but they appear to be blind to conditions and beliefs in Vermont and Cape Cod. They think, apparently, that the old-time Yankee of Lowell and the Puritan of Hawthorne are still living in their farms and villages, producing brain force for the whole country. They neglect to look into the effect which a century of insufficient food, narrow interests, hard economy, and superfluous education has produced in them.

Perhaps a few scattered facts, if I try to set them down, will show what this effect is more clearly than any labored explanation.

About ten years ago I went for the first time to spend the summer in one of these lonely farming districts. I expected to find the same intellectual aspirations among these people that I had found in the class whom Doctor Holmes calls the Brahmins of New England. I looked at the unpainted little houses with gratitude and respect. Here, no doubt, the Emersons, the Websters, and the Hawthornes of the next generation were now being trained.

The village lay upon a solitary stretch of the Massachusetts coast. It had a picturesque and noble environment. Nature had made a fitting habitat for a high-minded and generous race. Silent, unbroken forests stretched down almost to the sea with countless limpid little pools shining in their recesses. Along the beach huge brown headlands, shaggy with seaweed, rose out of the surf; while the dog-seals crowded up on them to bark defiance at passing vessels—just as their grandfathers, perhaps, had barked at the *Mayflower* when she passed into harbor. For this was the very water up which the Pilgrim Fathers sailed; Plymouth Rock was in sight yonder. In these old farm-houses some of their descendants still dwelt. Here, one felt, if anywhere, was to be found the soul of New England. Nature and blood and circumstance

surely had combined to make the inhabitants of these neat, bare houses the flower of their race in its highest development.

But these inhabitants were, in fact, a few stooped, dull-eyed old men and lean old women. The young men and their wives had gone to Idaho or Kansas. The old people were employed in saving pennies. To that end they starved their cattle and themselves with patience and system. Most of them had been educated; but their only mental food now was the most sensational fiction in a circulating library in Plymouth. They knew, at least, that excitement was the nutriment lacking in their lives. They took no interest in any vital question, not even in the dogmatic theology dear to the hearts of their forefathers, though a few of them looked hazily into spiritualism. Some of them made a fetish of their homes: to pay for the little house, to scrub it, to keep it unaltered in its bare ugliness, took the place of worship in their lives.

One house, bigger, barer, and uglier than the others was the voluntary prison of an old woman who for five years had not allowed a human being to cross the threshold. Nobody thought her conduct odd or remarkable. I saw her once at the gate, and she poured out a flood of meaningless babble in delight at the possession of a listener. Her words were inarticulate, just as sour beer runs, choking itself, escaping from an uncorked cask.

"I've seen you passin' before. There's nobody ever passes but Len Moles goin' to his lobster-pots twicet a week. I locked my doors six year ago come July. The folks tramped on my kitchen floor, and I can't scrub it but once a day. The year afore that I spent at my merried da'ater's on the Cape. She did n't charge nothin' for my keep. To be sure, I chored round an' knitted, reg'lar. But I took it kind in 'Liza, not chargin' nothin'. No board all winter!"

"Do children here usually charge their mothers for board?" I asked.

"No," with a scared look; "they send them to the house."

"You must be lonely."

"Me? No. I've got my cleanin' to do. An' Len Moles goes by reg'lar."

In the old days solitude, fasting, and praying for five years no doubt brought many a hermit very near to God or the devil; but a solitude of five years of scrubbing and watching for Len Moles?

Another village which I know well was once the thriving seat of a great industry. It was abandoned by the capitalists about fifteen years ago. The gray cabins are double, and inside you find now and then a gay carpet or a plush chair bought when the young people lived here and

had high wages. They have gone to the West now, and the old men and women creep silently about with wistful, hungry faces.

Other villages which I could name offer to the eye of the casual visitor an air of cheerful prosperity. He is charmed with their chilly neatness. The grass plats are trimmed as with scissors; the glass in the windows glitters before the white curtains. Inside are the same subdued old men and ashy-faced women. Long ago the sons of the old men who should have married these women went South or West to some new community where food was cheap and the habit of thought broad and kindly. There their shrewdness, thrift, and respect for education usually helped them to success. But it is with the feeble remnant which they left behind that we have to do.

You find this remnant everywhere; in fishing villages from Maine to Rhode Island, in abandoned farms begging for buyers throughout Connecticut, Vermont, and New Hampshire. These people have not enough food for their bodies, or occupation for their minds. The niggardly economy forced upon their forefathers by the barren soil is not bewailed by them as a belittling necessity, but is honored as the chief of virtues. More food goes to the nutriment of a big, energetic Ohioan or Pennsylvanian in a day than would keep his listless, lean brother in these worn-out villages alive for weeks. If the first man is hearty and liberal the credit is partly due to his abounding beef and cider, and the lack of them helps to make the latter both avaricious and morbid. Neither has plain living lifted him into high thinking. He is stingy of love, of friendship, of emotion. Kindly words, enthusiasm, caresses, and laughter, are so much waste in his eyes. Divorces become more numerous with each year. He has given up the lofty Puritan faith, and has kept the objectionable Puritan temperament. He goes about his milking or planting as absorbed and reticent as a Hebrew prophet to whom God told the secrets of coming ages. But he has no secret: he has nothing else to think of but the milk-cans or potatoes. The most hopeless feature in his case is his absolute complacency. He believes his own to be the highest type of man. He is not even alive enough to see how paltry and torpid his life is. I do not deny that beneath this hard, bare exterior his soul is often true and generous and even tender; but it is certain that he has worn the iron armor of self-control bequeathed to him by his ancestors so long that his soul would feel indecently naked without it.

In the cities of New England, and in villages where there are prosperous industries, the condition of the people is in marked contrast to that which I have pictured here. So great is

this contrast that the live New Englander does not see how fast the life is being sapped out of his unlucky brother. When he goes out to the lonely farms or coast places, his esthetic sense is pleased by the somber atmosphere, the gray cabins and gray rocks cropping out of the mat of grass and wild roses. The grim old men and delicate, sad-eyed women are fitting figures for the melancholy background. He does not see that the eventless drama of their lives is not a picture, but the symptom of the decadence of a race.

A significant fact that ought to startle him is that nine tenths of the children and working people whom he meets, even in these outlying districts, answer him with an Irish brogue or a Canadian patois.

Another is that the New England farmer, once the most vehement of sectarians, seldom cares enough for religion now to enter a church. The big meeting-houses are filled, if filled at all, by women. Spiritualism has many disciples; so has the faith-cure; so has Theosophy. Religion, in the descendant of the Puritan, seems to have died down into a feeble flicker of curiosity concerning the unknown world. Really the whipping of Quakers and the hanging of witches argued a better spiritual condition than this apathy. When Cotton Mather declared that "the smell of the roasting flesh of the savages was a sweet savor in the nostrils of the Almighty," he had at least a live faith in—something.

But the class which calls now most urgently for consideration and help is the large surplus of unattached women, widows, and spinsters, in all of these communities. They are educated, almost without exception; they have sensitive instincts, strong affections, and the capacity to do high work in the world. But from the sheer force of a single circumstance,—the majority of their sex in certain States,—they have neither husbands nor children, and there is no occupation for them but household drudgery. Nervous prostration is an almost universal ailment among them, following, as it always does, long self-repression.

I know women of high culture and large wealth who spend the year flying from mountain to coast, from the Isle of Shoals to Florida, in the hope of gaining a night's solid sleep. They will look at you with wide, tragic eyes, and coolly inform you that "as they are descended from a long line of brain-workers—scholars—they can hope for nothing better than cerebral disease. The brain in their race has worn out the body." When it chances that these victims of atavism marry, they inevitably soon grow stout, energetic, and common-sensed: they joke, dote on their children, and skirmish with their servants like ordinary happy women.

One hears no more of hereditary madness. A baby is a cure, as old-fashioned as the days of Eve, for a woman's morbid ambitions.

In the prosperous towns of New England this class of women find an outlet for their strength, if not in marriage, in active work, charitable or literary or social. With their culture, their broad outlook, the aplomb given by secure footing of birth and position, and perceptions usually delicate and *finer*, they are probably the highest type of the American gentlewoman. Friction with the world has kept them healthy in thought. I wish they would consider their sisters in the lonely country places, who for want of work and that friction are overtaken by neurosis, or driven to spiritualism, to Buddhism, or to opium.

One such woman was used to attack a new science or language every year, and, failing, from her lack of teacher or companion, would pile the text-books in heaps until walls of dusty volumes shut in every room of the house. She fell at last into a state of semi-idiocy, and wandered like a ghost around the village, jabbering scraps of foreign tongues which she did not understand.

It is a hereditary habit in certain families for the women who have a grief to shut themselves into a single room, and remain there for ten, twenty, thirty years. Nor are the morbid fancies of these women always gloomy and sad. They live sometimes in an enchanted land of their own.

One whom I know, a woman of sensuous temperament and motherly instincts, refused to marry a man whom she loved because he had gone to live in another town, and she would be forced to leave the old house and half acre which were the center of the world to her. The courtship went on for forty years, but she was true to the house!

Another drove her lover away on the day of the wedding because she could not bring herself to change the name of Wonson for any other. He was rich and she was poor; he remained faithful and ready as long as she lived. She died at seventy, a maiden Wonson still. Could pride of blood go further?

The intellectual training of these women only makes their cramped existence more intolerable. The New Englander is losing the shop and the church out of his life, but he keeps a hard grip on the school. In almost every village there are academies and libraries free to all comers. Education he believes to be the royal road to civilization. But to what does it lead in these villages—in fact, not in theory?

Ball, let us say, is a fisherman; his wife cooks, scrubs, washes, every day in the year. His daughter goes through an academic course, and

learns more or less thoroughly the rudiments of astronomy, philosophy, art, mathematics, chemistry, etc. Nobody, meanwhile, teaches her good manners, or brings her into relations with the outside world. She is unfitted to be a cook or chambermaid, or the wife of any of the Irish or Canadian laborers who come in her way. There is no possible chance for her to be anything else. She remains, *plantée là*, idle, discontented, and useless. When will we learn in this country that the education which a human being can use for his own or his neighbor's benefit is a blessing; but the education which he cannot use is a burden and a curse!

But why do I try to show the emptiness and paralysis of the life of these people? Miss Jewett, Miss Wilkins, and Mrs. Slosson were born among them, and have written the petty tragedy of their lives with a power which has held the whole country attentive, as a breathless spectator of a play. I am afraid that the very power with which the tragedy has been set forth has made the spectator forget to ask why these lives should be either petty or tragic. These genre artists show us the tender, heroic spirit in a famishing woman which makes her boil her last egg for a neighbor nearer starvation than herself. But if the heroic spirit be there, why should it not have a nobler outlet than the boiling of an egg? With the whole big, seething world around us full of God's highest work to do, one grows a little impatient of human souls who make a life-drama out of their hair pictures or muddled kitchen floors.

Heaven forbid that I should have a word of impatience for these thousands of morbid lonely women whom God sent into the world to be busy and happy. "But yet the pity of it, Iago! O Iago, the pity of it, Iago!" Think of the process by which the possible mother in a young girl is starved into one of these dumb human machines! The slow torture of the water-drop is less lingering and sore.

What can be done for them?

One of these single women, after living alone in her little hut on Cape Cod until old age, a reticent, miserly creature, became at sixty suddenly and violently insane. Her physician, wiser than his kind, prescribed no medicine, but procured a huge doll and the clothes of a baby, and gave them to her. She was at once quieted. She treated the doll as if it were alive, fed it, slept with it in her arms, worried over its diseases, ran to the neighbors to tell of its sayings and pretty ways. It was her child; God had given it to her at last. While she lived it kept her occupied and happy.

But we cannot play this kindly trick upon all of these undedicate nuns.

What is to be done for them?

First, it seems to me, recognize the fact that they need help: that these villages offer not only *matériel* for the artist or author, but a problem of wasted human life and force. The cities of New England are full of noble men and women who use their influence and money for the freedman, the Indians, the lepers in India, and Nihilists in Siberian mines. Can they do nothing to free these starved, confined lives at home?

It is not sympathy, but practical help that is needed by these women. First, they should have remunerative work. Establish industries among them. Give them a chance to earn money (and better still, to spend it) as bee-farmers, florists, saleswomen, shop-keepers, trained nurses, librarians, etc., or in any of the lighter handicrafts. Even in the larger towns all kinds of work are now almost monopolized by women from New Brunswick or Ireland. If work cannot be found for them at home, help them to emigrate to the Middle States, or to the West. Let them follow their brothers. They have enough of energy. They are like a steam-engine before the fire is kindled.

A few years ago the Amazons in Barnum's Great Consolidated Show, the riders of his fiery steeds, the Roman Queens who raced in his gilded chariots driving six horses abreast, were all the daughters of New England farmers. They came to him in a body, seeking employment — self-respecting, decent, virtuous girls; and they went back home as they came. These women can be trusted to play any part well if they have the chance.

There is a part ready for them to play. From every town and camp and ranch in the west comes the demand for house-servants, nurses, teachers, and — wives. I heard last spring of a clergyman who collected thirty respectable, modest New England girls, and sent them to a missionary in Montana, who at once found work for them. In six months every one of them was married — making, let us hope, a happy home and a happy life for some honest fellow. The good gospeller, I suspect, saved more souls by his little plan than by many sermons.

Why should not others try the plan?

Why should not the philanthropic women in New England, who form associations to help the Czar take care of his lepers, and the South to settle her negro problem, organize to find employment for these, their neighbors, out in the busy, living world?

And after that? Nothing need be done for them after that. Through wholesome work and intercourse with healthy-minded people they will soon find again what they have now entirely lost — their proper relations to their brother-man and to God.

Rebecca Harding Davis.