Letters from New England – No. 2

Lucian Minor
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by letter or otherwise. Then—say, according to my experience, in such instances without any introduction—
the rudest kindness flows as ungrudgingly as that of
Virginia hospitality, and far more beneficially to the ob-
ject: at an expense, too, not only of money, but of time—
which here, more emphatically than anywhere else in
America, is money. When travelling on foot, I had no
little patience: a little introduction, except of myself. Still,
unbought civilities, and more than civilities, usua-
ally met me. A farmer, at whose house I obtained com-
fortable quarters on the first night of my walk, refused
all compensation, giving me at the same time a hearty
welcome, and an invitation to stay to breakfast. Next
day, a man in a jersey wagon, overtook me, and invit-
ted me to ride with him. I did so, for an hour, while
our roads coincided: and found him intelligent, as well as
friendly. Whenever I wanted, along the road, re-
freshing drinks were given me—clider, sweetcheek, and
water—the two first always unsought for. One gate-
wife, at whose door I called for a glass of water, made
me sit down, treated me abundantly to cider; and, find-
ing that my object was to see the country and learn the
ways of the people, had herself out to impart such useful
information as seemed likely to interest me: wish-
ing me ‘great success’ at parting. Many similar instan-
tes of kindness occurred. It is true, none of the
people invited me to partake of their meals, ex-
cept my first host just mentioned—an omission, howe-
ver, for which I was prepared, because it arose natural-
ly from the condition of things here. One testimonial
more you shall have, to New England benevolence, from
a third person. A deserter from the British navy—men-
usely, shoeless, with only yarn soles on; foot blister-
ed—and actually suffering from a fever and ague—told
me that he had walked all the way from Bath, in Maine,
to the neighborhood of Hartford, where I overtook him,
entirely upon charity: and had never asked for food or
shelter in vain. A lady that day had given him a clean
linen shirt. There was no whining in this poor fellow’s
tale of distress: his tone was mufty, and his port erect:
he seemed, like a true sailor, as frank in accepting re-
lief, as he would be free in giving it.

The result of all my observation is, that the New En-
 glanders have in their hearts as much of the original
material of hospitality as we have: that, considering the
sacrifice it costs them, and the circumstances which
modify its application, they supply to us so much of that
material as we do; and that, although their mode of
using it is less serviceable than ours, it is more rational,
more salutary—for the guest, better for the host, better
for society. And most grossly would I see my country-
men and countrywomen exchange the generous profusion
which, to earn, or preserve, a vunglorious name, pun-
ish, and stultify themselves and impoverish their
country, for the discriminating and judicious hospitality
of New England: retaining only those freer and more
extraordinary traits of their own, which are warranted by
our sparsely settled, ourampler fields, and our dif-
f rent social organization.

Yet, while such praise is due to the general civility
and kindness of the New Englanders, it must be quali-
ﬁed by saying, that several times, I have experienced
discourtesy, which unless na a good deal; but always
from persons who, in their own neighborhoods, would
be considered as vulgar. The simplest and most harm-
less question, propounded in my simplest manner, has oc-
casionally been answered with a gruffness, that would
for half a minute upset my equanimity. For example—
‘Good morning sir’—(to a walking, rough, Carter-looking
follower, one hot morning, when I had walked eight
miles before breakfast)—how far to Enfield? ‘Little
better than a mile,’—was the answer; in an abrupt,
unconsonant tone, uttered without even turning his head as he passed me. Two or three of ‘mine
hosts,’ at times, were curiously gratifying in their re-
sponses to my inquiries about the products, wages, and
salaries, of their neighborhoods. For these, however,
I at once saw a twofold excuse: they were very busy
and my questions were very numerous—besides the
irritating circumstance, that answers were not always at
hand—and to be paid, in what flesh and blood cannot
bear. And it makes me think no worse than before, either of human nature in general, or of Yankee char-
acter in particular, that such slight errors occurred, nearly
in every instance, whilst I was a somewhat disdainfully
looking way-farer on foot; scarcely ever, while travel-
ing in stage, or steamer. Such distinctions, made all
the world over: in Virginia, as well as elsewhere.

A Southerner, not accustomed to wait much upon him-
self, here feels sensibly the sameness of the personal
service he meets with. Even—I, though for years more
than half a Yankee in that respect—missed, rather
awkwardly, on first coming hither, the superior, and
often cumbrous attentions of our southern waiters. Be-
side having, frequently to brush my own clothes, I
am put to some special trouble in the best hotels, to get
my shoes cleaned. In many village inns, sumptuous
noyces, shoefellers, with only yarn socks on; feet listless,
and comfortable in most respects, this last is a luxury
hardly to be hoped for. This scarcity of personal service
arises partly from the nice economy, with which the
number of hands about a house is graduated to the gen-
eral, and smallest possible, quantity of necessary labor:
and partly, from a growing aversion to such services
among the ‘help’ themselves, caused, or greatly
heightened, by the increased demand and higher wages
for them in the numerous manufactories throughout the
country. Almost everywhere, I am told of their nash-
ning higher pay, and growing more fastidious, and in-
tactable, as household servants. ‘Servants’ indeed,
they will not allow themselves to be called. A ‘nur-
ry—come-up-in-late’ tells, if not an immediate quitting
of the house, a probable trial of his fortune among
them. The above, more creditable designation, is that
which must be used—at least in their presence. By
the by, though the gifted author of ‘Hop Leslie’ says
that the singular plural, ‘helps’ alone, is proper, I find
popular usage (‘pour peace arbitrem’—you know)
sanctioning the regular plural form ‘helps,’ whenever
reference is made to more than one.

The spirit, and the habits, which oblige one to do so
much for himself within doors, produce corresponding
effects without. Useful labor is no where disinherited
in New England, by any class of society. Proprietors,
and their sons, though wealthy, frequently work on the
farms, and in the gardens, stables, and barns. Two or
three days ago, I saw an old gentleman (Squire * * *)
a justice of the peace, and for several years a useful
member of the Legislature, toiling in his hay harvest.
Two of the richest men in this village—possessing habi-
tuations among the most elegant in this assembly of
food it is for many; and give it to their pigs. The hay-harvest lasts from four to six weeks; it has been going on ever since the 1st of July. Of course, the hay cut at such different periods must vary greatly in ripeness; and here they confirm me in a long standing belief, which I have striven in vain to impress upon some Virginia hay farmers—that the hay, cut before the seeds are nearly ripe, is always best. The earlier part of the mowing, (where the crop is about equally forward) is most juicy, sweet and tender. The corn is now in tassel, having attained nearly its full height: the height of about live feet, on rich land! It is a not diffusing from ours: small in grain and ear, as well as in stalk; and very yellow grained. It ripens in less time than ours; adapting itself to the shorter summers of this latitude. The plant grows very thick: three or four stalks in a hill, and the hills but three feet apart.

With many vegetables and fruits, the season is five or six weeks later here than in Virginia. Thus, garden peas are still, every day, on the tables: I had cherries in Boston last week, of kinds which ripened with us early in June; and it is but a fortnight, since strawberries, both red and white, were given me in Connecticut—by the way, it was at breakfast.

On the margin of this village, is a curious agricultural exhibition. It is a large tract of flat land upon Connecticut river, of great fertility and value (one hundred and fifty or two hundred dollars an acre), containing altogether several thousand acres. With one or two trifling exceptions, it has no houses or dividing fences upon it, though partitioned among perhaps two hundred proprietors. Nearly an opulent, or middling wealthy man in Northampton, but owns a lot of five, ten, twenty, or fifty acres, in this tooming expanse. The lots are all in crops, of one kind or other; and being mostly of regular shapes (oblongs, or other four sided figures,) the various aspects they present, accordingly as the crop happens to be deep green, light green, mowed, or unmown—afford a singular and rich treat, to an eye that can at once survey the whole. Most opportunity, Mount Holyoke (the great lion of western Massachusetts, to scenery-hunters,) furnishes the very stand, whence not only this lovely plain is seen, but Henequen, & c. incomparable curiosities—reminds you of a gay bed-quilt. A lady of our party (we ascended the mountain this afternoon, and stood till after sun-set,) aptly compared it to a Yankee comfort; the crags and fruit trees scotched over the surface, and shrank and softened in the distance, representing the tufts of wool which besprinkle that appropriately named article of furniture. The whole landscape, seen from Mount Holyoke, it would be presumptuous in me to try to describe. I have said, twenty or thirty miles around. Nearly a thousand feet below you, and not quite a mile from the foot of the mountain, the low ground, fantastically encroached into lots so variously sized and colored—dwindling too, by the distance, into miniatures of themselves—reminds you of a gay bed-quilt. A lady of our party (we ascended the mountain this afternoon, and stood till after sun-set,) aptly compared it to a Yankee comfort; the crags and fruit trees scotched over the surface, and shrank and softened in the distance, representing the tufts of wool which besprinkle that appropriately named article of furniture. The whole landscape, seen from Mount Holyoke, it would be presumptuous in me to try to describe. I have said, twenty or thirty miles around. Nearly a thousand feet below you, and not quite a mile from the foot of the mountain, the low ground, fantastically encroached into lots so variously sized and colored—dwindling too, by the distance, into miniatures of themselves—reminds you of a gay bed-quilt. A lady of our party (we ascended the mountain this afternoon, and stood till after sun-set,) aptly compared it to a Yankee comfort; the crags and fruit trees scotched over the surface, and shrank and softened in the distance, representing the tufts of wool which besprinkle that appropriately named article of furniture. The whole landscape, seen from Mount Holyoke, it would be presumptuous in me to try to describe.
long lines from the dimpling water, forced upon more than one mind that fine passage in a late work of fiction, where the remark, that "no man can judge of the happiness of another," is illustrated by the reflection of moon-beams from a lake. But I am growing lack-a-daisical; and must conclude.

I set off in the stage for Albany, at two o'clock in the morning. Good night.