



THREE
VILLAGES

W. D. HOWELLS

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LEXINGTON.

THE Bostonian spring being more than usually embittered against mankind the year 1882, we left our quarters in town very early, and went to pass the month of May in the pretty and historic village of Lexington. It lies ten or twelve miles inland; it is not only a little beyond the worst of the east wind, but is just a little too far from Boston to be strictly suburban in aspect; and thanks chiefly to an absence of water-power (a clear brown brook, that you may anywhere jump across, idles through the pastures unmolested by a mill-wheel), Lexington has not yet been overtaken by the unpicturesque prosperity which has befallen so many New England villages. It has no manufactures of any sort, neither shoes nor cotton, nor boxes, nor barrels, nor watches, nor furniture; it is still a farming-town, such as you find in the Massachusetts or New Hampshire hills, and is not yet a market-gardening town like those which lie nearer the city. The ancestral meadows are still mown by the great-great-grandchildren of those who cleared them of the primeval forest, and who, having begun to build into fences and bury in the earth the granite bowlders plentifully bestrewing its surface, invented rather than discovered their reluctant fertility. In many parts of New England the Western jokes about sharpening the sheep's noses for their greater convenience in getting at the herbage between the rocks, and about firing the seed-corn into the ground with a shot-gun, do not seem so grotesquely imaginative. More than once at nightfall, as I drove along country roads, the flocks and herds, lying under the orchard trees, have turned on nearer inspection to companies of bowlders; in the hill towns I

have seen stone walls six feet wide, titanic barriers thrown up in the farmer's despair of otherwise getting rid of the stones scattered over his fields; and these gifts of the glacial period are often interred by the cord in pits dug for the purpose. It is said that the soil thus twice conquered from the wilderness is very rich and strong, and Lexington was by no means so barren originally as some other towns; but its fertility must once have been greater than it now is, or else people must once have been satisfied with less fertility to the acre than contents them at present, for I could not see any agricultural reason why Lexington should first have been known as Cambridge Farms. Doubtless the name did not imply that it was the fittest part of the township for farming; Beverly Farms and Salem Farms and Cambridge Farms must have all been so called because they were hamlets remote from the principal village. At any rate Lexington once formed part of our university town, but was set off long before the revolutionary days in which it achieved a separate celebrity.

In New England the "town" is the township, and there are some "towns" in which there is no village at all; but at Lexington there was early a little grouping of houses; and for two hundred and fifty years the local feeling has been growing more and more intense, until it can be said at last to be now somewhat larger than the place. This is not an uncommon result; as Dr. Holmes has remarked, American cities and villages all like to think of themselves as the "good old" this and that; but at Lexington more than anywhere else out of Italy I felt that the village was to its people the patria. With us the great Republic is repeated and multiplied in several smaller and diminishing republican governments, each subordinate to the larger, all over the land; and ever since its separation from Cambridge, Lexington has, like other New England towns, had its little autonomy. Twice a year the citizens convene and legislate in town meetings; and three Selectmen

annually chosen see that the popular will is carried out and transact the whole business of the town government. This microcosm of democracy is the more interesting in Lexington because it is in many things an image of what the New England town was a hundred years ago, — a sufficiently remote antiquity with us. The Irish have their foothold there as everywhere; but they have not acquired much land; and though they remain faithful Catholics, they have Americanized in such degree that it is hard to know some of them from ourselves in their slouching and nasal speech. As for the Canadian French, who abound in the valley of the Connecticut, and in all the factory towns, I saw none of them in Lexington, and there are no Germans.

It is because of the typically New England character of Lexington village, as well as its historical note, that I ask English readers to be interested in it; and as we Americans are some times grieved by our cousins' imperfect recollection of family troubles, I make haste to remind them that at Lexington the first blood was shed in the war of American Independence. It has a powerful hold upon the American imagination for this reason; it has therefore overloaded the gazetteer with namesakes in every part of the Union, and its celebrity is chief part of the first historical knowledge imparted to American school-boys. But the village has such a charm for me from its actual loveliness and quaintness, that I should be sorry to bring that bloody spectre of the past into the foreground of any picture, and I shall blink it as long as I can.

It was a shrewish afternoon late in April when we arrived from Boston at the odd but very pleasant hotel where we spent our month of May. The season was very dry, and the bare landscape showed scarce a sign of spring. At that time there is usually a half-scared, experimental-looking verdure on our winter-beaten fields; but except where a forlorn hope of grass cowered in some damp hollow, the meadows were now as brown and haggard in aspect as they are

when the great snows leave them in mid-March, and they lie gaunt and wasted under a high, vast blue sky, full of an ironical glitter of sunshine. The wind was sharp, and for many weary weeks yet there would be no buds on the elms that creaked overhead along the village street.

Further north, in Maine and Canada, the spring comes with a bound after the thaw; but the region of Boston seems to me the battle-ground of all the seasons when the spring is nominally in possession. On the 18th of May this year we had a soft, sunny morning, which clouded under an east wind; a cold rain set in before noon, with hail; it snowed the greater part of the after noon, and we had an Italian sunset to the singing of the robins. This was excessive; but usually after the first relenting days the winter returns, and whips the fields with sleet and snow, storm after storm; and this martyrdom follows upon a succession of frosts and thaws, which began before Thanksgiving in November. Finally the east wind comes in, fretting the nerves and chilling the marrow, throughout April and May; even when it does not blow it remains in the air, a sentiment of icebergs and freezing sea. It is worst, of course, on the shore, and delicate people who cannot live in it there are sent to Lexington, and thrive. The air is very dry and pure, and that is perhaps the reason why even the east wind is tolerable. Lexington Common, they say, is as high as the top of Bunker Hill Monument in Boston; and the locomotive pants with difficulty up the heavy grade of the road near the village. Perhaps there is something in the grouping of the low hills — in the embrace of which the village lies on an ample plain — that gives it peculiar shelter; it is certain that beyond the eastern range there is practically another climate. This is not saying that the winter is not long and dreary there; the snows lie deep in the hollows of those hills for months, and clog the long street on which the village houses are chiefly set.

Streets branch off from this thoroughfare to the right and left; but it is the newer houses which are built on these, and the more characteristic dwellings, as well as the old-fashioned shops, face the westward road along which Major Pitcairne's red-coats marched in the early April morning a hundred years ago to destroy the Provincial stores at Concord. Here and there before you reach the village is a large old mansion rambling with successive outhouses a hundred feet back from the road or beside it, all the buildings under one roof, and having a comfortable unity and snugness; but the dwellings in the village are small and very simple, generally of but two stories, and placed each in its separate little plot of ground. Where they pretend to the dignity of mansions, they stand

“Somewhat back from the village street,”

like the old-fashioned country-seat in Longfellow's poem, and have stately elms and burly maples about them; but they are mostly set close upon the road, as seems to have been everywhere the early custom in New England. They are all of wood, — there are but two brick buildings in Lexington, — and here and there one is still painted saffron, with Paris-green shutters and white window casings, — the color of Longfellow's house and the other colonial houses in Cambridge. When the paint is not too freshly renewed, they have a suggestion of antiquity which is pleasing and satisfactory in so new a world as ours. There is no attempt at ornamentation in these unassuming houses at Lexington; that is left to the later carpentry which has produced on the intersecting streets various examples, in one story and a half, of the mansard architecture so popular in our wood-built suburbs. There is also at one point of the principal street a wooden “block,” in emulation of the conventional American city block of brick or stone; but otherwise Lexington has escaped the ravages alike of “tasliness” and of enterprise, and is as plain and sober a little town as it was fifty years ago. There