How Spring Came in New England

Charles Dudley Warner

Table of Contents

How Spring Came in New England **1**
Charles Dudley Warner 1

How Spring Came in New England

Charles Dudley Warner

'74
HOW SPRING CAME IN NEW ENGLAND
BY A READER OF "'93"

New England is the battle−ground of the seasons. It is La Vendee. To conquer it is only to begin the fight. When it is completely subdued, what kind of weather have you? None whatever.

What is this New England? A country? No: a camp. It is alternately invaded by the hyperborean legions and by the wilting sirens of the tropics. Icicles hang always on its northern heights; its seacoasts are fringed with mosquitoes. There is for a third of the year a contest between the icy air of the pole and the warm wind of the gulf. The result of this is a compromise: the compromise is called Thaw. It is the normal condition in New England. The New−Englander is a person who is always just about to be warm and comfortable. This is the stuff of which heroes and martyrs are made. A person thoroughly heated or frozen is good for nothing. Look at the Bongos. Examine (on the map) the Dog−Rib nation. The New−Englander, by incessant activity, hopes to get warm. Edwards made his theology. Thank God, New England is not in Paris!

Hudson's Bay, Labrador, Grinnell's Land, a whole zone of ice and walruses, make it unpleasant for New England. This icy cover, like the lid of a pot, is always suspended over it: when it shuts down, that is winter. This would be intolerable, were it not for the Gulf Stream. The Gulf Stream is a benign, liquid force, flowing from under the ribs of the equator,−−a white knight of the South going up to battle the giant of the North. The two meet in New England, and have it out there.

This is the theory; but, in fact, the Gulf Stream is mostly a delusion as to New England. For Ireland it is quite another thing. Potatoes ripen in Ireland before they are planted in New England. That is the reason the Irish emigrate−−they desire two crops the same year. The Gulf Stream gets shunted off from New England by the formation of the coast below: besides, it is too shallow to be of any service. Icebergs float down against its surface−current, and fill all the New−England air with the chill of death till June: after that the fogs drift down from Newfoundland. There never was such a mockery as this Gulf Stream. It is like the English influence on France, on Europe. Pitt was an iceberg.

Still New England survives. To what purpose? I say, as an example: the politician says, to produce "Poor Boys." Bah! The poor boy is an anachronism in civilization. He is no longer poor, and he is not a boy. In Tartary they would hang him for sucking all the asses' milk that belongs to the children: in New England he has all the cream from the Public Cow. What can you expect in a country where one knows not today what the weather will be tomorrow? Climate makes the man. Suppose he, too, dwells on the Channel Islands, where he has all climates, and is superior to all. Perhaps he will become the prophet, the seer, of his age, as he is its Poet. The New−Englander is the man without a climate. Why is his country recognized? You won't find it on any map of Paris.

And yet Paris is the universe. Strange anomaly! The greater must include the less; but how if the less leaks out? This sometimes happens.

And yet there are phenomena in that country worth observing. One of them is the conduct of Nature from the 1st of March to the 1st of June, or, as some say, from the vernal equinox to the summer solstice. As Tourmalain remarked, "You'd better observe the unpleasant than to be blind." This was in 802. Tourmalain is dead; so is Gross Alain; so is little Pee−Wee: we shall all be dead before things get any better.

That is the law. Without revolution there is nothing. What is revolution? It is turning society over, and putting the best underground for a fertilizer. Thus only will things grow. What has this to do with New England? In the language of that flash of social lightning, Beranger, "May the Devil fly away with me if I can see!"

Let us speak of the period in the year in New England when winter appears to hesitate. Except in the calendar, the action is ironical; but it is still deceptive. The sun mounts high: it is above the horizon twelve hours at a time. The snow gradually sneaks away in liquid repentance. One morning it is gone, except in shaded spots and close by the fences. From about the trunks of the trees it has long departed: the tree is a living thing, and its growth repels it. The fence is dead, driven into the earth in a rigid line by man: the fence, in short, is dogma: icy prejudice lingers near it. The snow has disappeared; but the landscape is a ghastly sight,−− bleached, dead. The trees are stakes; the grass is of no color; and the bare soil is not brown with a healthful brown; life has gone out of it. Take up a piece of turf: it is a clod, without warmth, inanimate. Pull it in pieces: there is no hope in it: it is a part of the past; it is the refuse of last year. This is the condition to which winter has reduced the landscape. When the snow, which was a pall, is removed, you see how ghastly it is. The face of the country is sodden. It needs now only the south wind to sweep over it, full of the damp breath of death; and that begins to blow. No prospect would be more dreary.

And yet the south wind fills credulous man with joy. He opens the window. He goes out, and catches cold. He is stirred by the mysterious coming of something. If there is sign of change nowhere else, we detect it in the newspaper. In sheltered corners of that truculent instrument for the diffusion of the prejudices of the few among the many begin to grow the violets of tender sentiment, the early greens of yearning. The poet feels the sap of the new year before the marsh−willow. He blossoms in advance of the catkins. Man is greater than Nature. The poet is greater than man: he is nature on two legs,−−ambulatory.

At first there is no appearance of conflict. The winter garrison seems to have withdrawn. The invading hosts of the South are entering without opposition. The hard ground softens; the sun lies warm upon the southern bank, and water oozes from its base. If you examine the buds of the lilac and the flowering shrubs, you cannot say that they are swelling; but the varnish with which they were coated in the fall to keep out the frost seems to be cracking. If the sugar−maple is hacked, it will bleed,−−the pure white blood of Nature.

At the close of a sunny day the western sky has a softened aspect: its color, we say, has warmth in it On such a day you may meet a caterpillar on the footpath, and turn out for him. The house−fly thaws out; a company of cheerful wasps take possession of a chamber− window. It is oppressive indoors at night, and the window is raised. A flock of millers, born out of time, flutter in. It is most unusual weather for the season: it is so every year. The delusion is complete, when, on a mild evening, the tree−toads open their brittle− brattle chorus on the edge of the pond. The citizen asks his neighbor, "Did you hear the frogs last night?" That seems to open the new world. One thinks of his childhood and its innocence, and of his first loves. It fills one with sentiment and a tender longing, this voice of the tree−toad. Man is a strange being. Deaf to the prayers of friends, to the sermons and warnings of the church, to the calls of duty, to the pleadings of his better nature, he is touched by the tree−toad. The signs of the spring multiply. The passer in the street in the evening sees the maid−servant leaning on the area− gate in sweet converse with some one leaning on the other side; or in the park, which is still too damp for anything but true affection, he sees her seated by the side of one who is able to protect her from the policeman, and hears her sigh, "How sweet it is to be with those we love to be with!"

All this is very well; but next morning the newspaper nips these early buds of sentiment. The telegraph announces, "Twenty feet of snow at Ogden, on the Pacific Road; winds blowing a gale at Omaha, and snow still falling; mercury frozen at Duluth; storm−signals at Port Huron."

Where now are your tree−toads, your young love, your early season? Before noon it rains, by three o'clock it hails; before night the bleak storm−cloud of the northwest envelops the sky; a gale is raging, whirling about a tempest of snow. By morning the snow is drifted in banks, and two feet deep on a level. Early in the seventeenth

century, Drebbel of Holland invented the weather−glass. Before that, men had suffered without knowing the degree of their suffering. A century later, Romer hit upon the idea of using mercury in a thermometer; and Fahrenheit constructed the instrument which adds a new because distinct terror to the weather. Science names and registers the ills of life; and yet it is a gain to know the names and habits of our enemies. It is with some satisfaction in our knowledge that we say the thermometer marks zero.

In fact, the wild beast called Winter, untamed, has returned, and taken possession of New England. Nature, giving up her melting mood, has retired into dumbness and white stagnation. But we are wise. We say it is better to have it now than later. We have a conceit of understanding things.

The sun is in alliance with the earth. Between the two the snow is uncomfortable. Compelled to go, it decides to go suddenly. The first day there is slush with rain; the second day, mud with hail; the third day a flood with sunshine. The thermometer declares that the temperature is delightful. Man shivers and sneezes. His neighbor dies of some disease newly named by science; but he dies all the same as if it hadn't been newly named. Science has not discovered any name that is not fatal.

This is called the breaking−up of winter.

Nature seems for some days to be in doubt, not exactly able to stand still, not daring to put forth anything tender. Man says that the worst is over. If he should live a thousand years, he would be deceived every year. And this is called an age of skepticism. Man never believed in so many things as now: he never believed so much in himself. As to Nature, he knows her secrets: he can predict what she will do. He communicates with the next world by means of an alphabet which he has invented. He talks with souls at the other end of the spirit−wire. To be sure, neither of them says anything; but they talk. Is not that something? He suspends the law of gravitation as to his own body−−he has learned how to evade it−−as tyrants suspend the legal writs of habeas corpus. When Gravitation asks for his body, she cannot have it. He says of himself, "I am infallible; I am sublime." He believes all these things. He is master of the elements. Shakespeare sends him a poem just made, and as good a poem as the man could write himself. And yet this man−−he goes out of doors without his overcoat, catches cold, and is buried in three days. "On the 21st of January," exclaimed Mercier, "all kings felt for the backs of their necks." This might be said of all men in New England in the spring. This is the season that all the poets celebrate. Let us suppose that once, in Thessaly, there was a genial spring, and there was a poet who sang of it. All later poets have sung the same song. "Voila tout!" That is the root of poetry.

Another delusion. We hear toward evening, high in air, the "conk" of the wild−geese. s the man could write himself. And yet this man−−he goes out of doors without his overcoat, catches cold, and is buried in three days. "On the 21st of January," exclaimed Mercier, "all kings felt for the backs of their necks." This might be said of all men in New England in the spring. This is the season that all the poets celebrate. Let us suppose that once, in Thessaly, there was a genial spring, and there was a poet who sang of it. All later poets have sung the same song. "Voila tout!" That is the root of poetry.

Another delusion. We hear toward evening, high in air, the "conk" of the wild−geese. Looking up, you see the black specks of that adventurous triangle, winging along in rapid flight northward. Perhaps it takes a wide returning sweep, in doubt; but it disappears in the north. There is no mistaking that sign. This unmusical "conk" is sweeter than the "kerchunk" of the bull−frog. Probably these birds are not idiots, and probably they turned back south again after spying out the nakedness of the land; but they have made their sign. Next day there is a rumor that somebody has seen a bluebird. This rumor, unhappily for the bird (which will freeze to death), is confirmed. In less than three days everybody has seen a bluebird; and favored people have heard a robin or rather the yellow−breasted thrush, misnamed a robin in America. This is no doubt true: for angle−worms have been seen on the surface of the ground; and, wherever there is anything to eat, the robin is promptly on hand. About this time you notice, in protected, sunny spots, that the grass has a little color. But you say that it is the grass of last fall. It is very difficult to tell when the grass of last fall became the grass of this spring. It looks "warmed over." The green is rusty. The lilac−buds have certainly swollen a little, and so have those of the soft maple. In the rain the

grass does not brighten as you think it ought to, and it is only when the rain turns to snow that you see any decided green color by contrast with the white. The snow gradually covers everything very quietly, however. Winter comes back without the least noise or bustle, tireless, malicious, implacable. Neither party in the fight now makes much fuss over it; and you might think that Nature had surrendered altogether, if you did not find about this time, in the Woods, on the edge of a snow−bank, the modest blossoms of the trailing arbutus, shedding their delicious perfume. The bravest are always the tenderest, says the poet. The season, in its blind way, is trying to express itself.

And it is assisted. There is a cheerful chatter in the trees. The blackbirds have come, and in numbers, households of them, villages of them,−−communes, rather. They do not believe in God, these black− birds. They think they can take care of themselves. We shall see. But they are well informed. They arrived just as the last snow−bank melted. One cannot say now that there is not greenness in the grass; not in the wide fields, to be sure, but on lawns and banks sloping south. The dark−spotted leaves of the dog−tooth violet begin to show. Even Fahrenheit's contrivance joins in the upward movement: the mercury has suddenly gone up from thirty degrees to sixty−five degrees. It is time for the ice−man. Ice has no sooner disappeared than we desire it.

There is a smile, if one may say so, in the blue sky, and there is. softness in the south wind. The song−sparrow is singing in the apple−tree. Another bird−note is heard,−−two long, musical whistles, liquid but metallic. A brown bird this one, darker than the song− sparrow, and without the latter's light stripes, and smaller, yet bigger than the queer little chipping−bird. He wants a familiar name, this sweet singer, who appears to be a sort of sparrow. He is such a contrast to the blue−jays, who have arrived in a passion, as usual, screaming and scolding, the elegant, spoiled beauties! They wrangle from morning till night, these beautiful, high−tempered aristocrats.

Encouraged by the birds, by the bursting of the lilac−buds, by the peeping−up of the crocuses, by tradition, by the sweet flutterings of a double hope, another sign appears. This is the Easter bonnets, most delightful flowers of the year, emblems of innocence, hope, devotion. Alas that they have to be worn under umbrellas, so much thought, freshness, feeling, tenderness have gone into them! And a northeast storm of rain, accompanied with hail, comes to crown all these virtues with that of self−sacrifice. The frail hat is offered up to the implacable season. In fact, Nature is not to be forestalled nor hurried in this way. Things cannot be pushed. Nature hesitates. The woman who does not hesitate in April is lost. The appearance of the bonnets is premature. The blackbirds see it. They assemble. For two days they hold a noisy convention, with high debate, in the tree−tops. Something is going to happen.

Say, rather, the usual thing is about to occur. There is a wind called Auster, another called Eurus, another called Septentrio, another Meridies, besides Aquilo, Vulturnus, Africus. There are the eight great winds of the classical dictionary,−−arsenal of mystery and terror and of the unknown,−−besides the wind Euroaquilo of St. Luke. This is the wind that drives an apostle wishing to gain Crete upon the African Syrtis. If St. Luke had been tacking to get to Hyannis, this wind would have forced him into Holmes's Hole. The Euroaquilo is no respecter of persons.

These winds, and others unnamed and more terrible, circle about New England. They form a ring about it: they lie in wait on its borders, but only to spring upon it and harry it. They follow each other in contracting circles, in whirlwinds, in maelstroms of the atmosphere: they meet and cross each other, all at a moment. This New England is set apart: it is the exercise−ground of the weather. Storms bred elsewhere come here full−grown: they come in couples, in quartets, in choruses. If New England were not mostly rock, these winds would carry it off; but they would bring it all back again, as happens with the sandy portions. What sharp Eurus carries to Jersey, Africus brings back. When the air is not full of snow, it is full of dust. This is called one of the compensations of Nature.

This is what happened after the convention of the blackbirds: A moaning south wind brought rain; a southwest wind turned the rain to snow; what is called a zephyr, out of the west, drifted the snow; a north wind sent the mercury far below freezing. Salt added to snow increases the evaporation and the cold. This was the office of the northeast wind: it made the snow damp, and increased its bulk; but then it rained a little, and froze, thawing at the same time. The air was full of fog and snow and rain. And then the wind changed, went back round the circle, reversing everything, like dragging a cat by its tail. The mercury approached zero. This was nothing uncommon. We know all these winds. We are familiar with the different "forms of water."

All this was only the prologue, the overture. If one might be permitted to speak scientifically, it was only the

tuning of the instruments. The opera was to come,−−the Flying Dutchman of the air.

There is a wind called Euroclydon: it would be one of the Eumenides; only they are women. It is half−brother to the gigantic storm−wind of the equinox. The Euroclydon is not a wind: it is a monster. Its breath is frost. It has snow in its hair. It is something terrible. It peddles rheumatism, and plants consumption.

The Euroclydon knew just the moment to strike into the discord of the weather in New England. From its lair about Point Desolation, from the glaciers of the Greenland continent, sweeping round the coast, leaving wrecks in its track, it marched right athwart the other conflicting winds, churning them into a fury, and inaugurating chaos. It was the Marat of the elements. It was the revolution marching into the " dreaded wood of La Sandraie."

Let us sum it all up in one word: it was something for which there is no name.

Its track was destruction. On the sea it leaves wrecks. What does it leave on land? Funerals. When it subsides, New England is prostrate. It has left its legacy: this legacy is coughs and patent medicines. This is an epic; this is destiny. You think Providence is expelled out of New England? Listen!

Two days after Euroclydon, I found in the woods the hepatica−− earliest of wildwood flowers, evidently not intimidated by the wild work of the armies trampling over New England−−daring to hold up its tender blossom. One could not but admire the quiet pertinacity of Nature. She had been painting the grass under the snow. In spots it was vivid green. There was a mild rain,−−mild, but chilly. The clouds gathered, and broke away in light, fleecy masses. There was a softness on the hills. The birds suddenly were on every tree, glancing through the air, filling it with song, sometimes shaking raindrops from their wings. The cat brings in one in his mouth. He thinks the season has begun, and the game−laws are off. He is fond of Nature, this cat, as we all are: he wants to possess it. At four o'clock in the morning there is a grand dress−rehearsal of the birds. Not all the pieces of the orchestra have arrived; but there are enough. The grass−sparrow has come. This is certainly charming. The gardener comes to talk about seeds: he uncovers the straw−berries and the grape−vines, salts the asparagus−bed, and plants the peas. You ask if he planted them with a shot−gun. In the shade there is still frost in the ground. Nature, in fact, still hesitates; puts forth one hepatica at a time, and waits to see the result; pushes up the grass slowly, perhaps draws it in at night.

This indecision we call Spring.

It becomes painful. It is like being on the rack for ninety days, expecting every day a reprieve. Men grow hardened to it, however.

This is the order with man,−−hope, surprise, bewilderment, disgust, facetiousness. The people in New England finally become facetious about spring. This is the last stage: it is the most dangerous. When a man has come to make a jest of misfortune, he is lost. "It bores me to die," said the journalist Carra to the headsman at the foot of the guillotine: "I would like to have seen the continuation." One is also interested to see how spring is going to turn out.

A day of sun, of delusive bird−singing, sight of the mellow earth,−− all these begin to beget confidence. The night, even, has been warm. But what is this in the morning journal, at breakfast?−−"An area of low pressure is moving from the Tortugas north." You shudder.

What is this Low Pressure itself,−−it? It is something frightful, low, crouching, creeping, advancing; it is a foreboding; it is misfortune by telegraph; it is the "'93" of the atmosphere.

This low pressure is a creation of Old Prob. What is that? Old Prob. is the new deity of the Americans, greater than AEolus, more despotic than Sans−Culotte. The wind is his servitor, the lightning his messenger. He is a mystery made of six parts electricity, and one part "guess." This deity is worshiped by the Americans; his name is on every man's lips first in the morning; he is the Frankenstein of modern science. Housed at Washington, his business is to direct the storms of the whole country upon New England, and to give notice in advance. This he does. Sometimes he sends the storm, and then gives notice. This is mere playfulness on his part: it is all one to him. His great power is in the low pressure.

On the Bexar plains of Texas, among the hills of the Presidio, along the Rio Grande, low pressure is bred; it is nursed also in the Atchafalaya swamps of Louisiana; it moves by the way of Thibodeaux and Bonnet Carre. The southwest is a magazine of atmospheric disasters. Low pressure may be no worse than the others: it is better known, and is most used to inspire terror. It can be summoned any time also from the everglades of Florida, from the morasses of the Okeechobee.

When the New−Englander sees this in his news paper, he knows what it means. He has twenty−four hours'

warning; but what can he do? Nothing but watch its certain advance by telegraph. He suffers in anticipation. That is what Old Prob. has brought about, suffering by anticipation. This low pressure advances against the wind. The wind is from the northeast. Nothing could be more unpleasant than a northeast wind? Wait till low pressure joins it. Together they make spring in New England. A northeast storm from the southwest!−−there is no bitterer satire than this. It lasts three days. After that the weather changes into something winter−like.

A solitary song−sparrow, without a note of joy, hops along the snow to the dining−room window, and, turning his little head aside, looks up. He is hungry and cold. Little Minnette, clasping her hands behind her back, stands and looks at him, and says, "Po' birdie!" They appear to understand each other. The sparrow gets his crumb; but he knows too much to let Minnette get hold of him. Neither of these little things could take care of itself in a New−England spring not in the depths of it. This is what the father of Minnette, looking out of the window upon the wide waste of snow, and the evergreens bent to the ground with the weight of it, says, "It looks like the depths of spring." To this has man come: to his facetiousness has succeeded sarcasm. It is the first of May.

Then follows a day of bright sun and blue sky. The birds open the morning with a lively chorus. In spite of Auster, Euroclydon, low pressure, and the government bureau, things have gone forward. By the roadside, where the snow has just melted, the grass is of the color of emerald. The heart leaps to see it. On the lawn there are twenty robins, lively, noisy, worm−seeking. Their yellow breasts contrast with the tender green of the newly−springing clover and herd's−grass. If they would only stand still, we might think the dandelions had blossomed. On an evergreen−bough, looking at them, sits a graceful bird, whose back is bluer than the sky. There is a red tint on the tips of the boughs of the hard maple. With Nature, color is life. See, already, green, yellow, blue, red! In a few days−−is it not so?−−through the green masses of the trees will flash the orange of the oriole, the scarlet of the tanager; perhaps tomorrow.

But, in fact, the next day opens a little sourly. It is almost clear overhead: but the clouds thicken on the horizon; they look leaden; they threaten rain. It certainly will rain: the air feels like rain, or snow. By noon it begins to snow, and you hear the desolate cry of the phoebe−bird. It is a fine snow, gentle at first; but it soon drives in swerving lines, for the wind is from the southwest, from the west, from the northeast, from the zenith (one of the ordinary winds of New England), from all points of the compass. The fine snow becomes rain; it becomes large snow; it melts as it falls; it freezes as it falls. At last a storm sets in, and night shuts down upon the bleak scene.

During the night there is a change. It thunders and lightens. Toward morning there is a brilliant display of aurora borealis. This is a sign of colder weather.

The gardener is in despair; so is the sportsman. The trout take no pleasure in biting in such weather.

Paragraphs appear in the newspapers, copied from the paper of last year, saying that this is the most severe spring in thirty years. Every one, in fact, believes that it is, and also that next year the spring will be early. Man is the most gullible of creatures.

And with reason: he trusts his eyes, and not his instinct. During this most sour weather of the year, the anemone blossoms; and, almost immediately after, the fairy pencil, the spring beauty, the dog−tooth violet, and the true violet. In clouds and fog, and rain and snow, and all discouragement, Nature pushes on her forces with progressive haste and rapidity. Before one is aware, all the lawns and meadows are deeply green, the trees are opening their tender leaves. In a burst of sunshine the cherry−trees are white, the Judas−tree is pink, the hawthorns give a sweet smell. The air is full of sweetness; the world, of color.

In the midst of a chilling northeast storm the ground is strewed with the white−and−pink blossoms from the apple−trees. The next day the mercury stands at eighty degrees. Summer has come.

There was no Spring.

The winter is over. You think so? Robespierre thought the Revolution was over in the beginning of his last Thermidor. He lost his head after that.

When the first buds are set, and the corn is up, and the cucumbers have four leaves, a malicious frost steals down from the north and kills them in a night.

That is the last effort of spring. The mercury then mounts to ninety degrees. The season has been long, but, on the whole, successful. Many people survive it.