

The Dark Day in New England, in 1780.

BY D. T. TAYLOR.

ON the 19th of May, 1780, the inhabitants of New England and adjacent parts were the trembling witnesses of a phenomenon never seen before or since, and which to this day remains unexplained. The year was celebrated for its numerous auroral exhibitions in this latitude. They covered the midnight heavens with coruscations of red and silver, and streamed out lightning, seeming, says one writer, fairly to flash warmth in the face. The winter preceding was marked with extraordinary severity. Snow lay on the ground from the middle of November to the middle of April. In December and January a storm continued seven successive days, and the snow fell to a depth of four feet on a level in this single storm and with drifts eight and ten feet high. Sheep were buried in the drifts for many days, and even men and animals perished with the cold. Long Island Sound was crossed by heavy artillery on the ice. Narragansett Bay froze over so hard that men traversed the ice from Providence to Newport in skating parties, and from Fall River to Newport loads of wood were conveyed on the ice through Bristol ferry.

Previous to the 19th a vapor filled the air for several days. There was a smell of sulphur. The morning of the 19th was overcast with some clouds, and rain fell over the country, with lightning and thunder. Scarcely any motion was in the air, what wind there was came from the southwest. By nine o'clock in the forenoon, without previous warning, the darkness stole gradually on, with a luminous appearance near the horizon, as if the obscuring clouds had dropped down from overhead. There was a yellowness of the atmosphere that made clear silver assume a green hue. Then a dense, undefinable vapor settled rapidly and without serial movement over all the land and ocean from Pennsylvania to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, the darkness it caused sinking by degrees until the sunlight was effectually shut out. Ordinary cloud it was not. The rapidity with which so large an extent of country was enveloped precludes the possibility of supposing this to have been a natural cloud moving laterally. Besides this, the day was too calm to imagine such a thing. Down came the darkness thicker. By ten o'clock the air was loaded with a thick gloom. The heavens were tinged with a yellowish or faint red; the lurid look increased; few, if any, ordinary clouds were visible. The sun, in disappearing, took a brassy hue. The lurid brass color, spread everywhere, above and below. The grass assumed the color of the sky, and all out doors work a sickly, weird and melancholy aspect,—a dusky appearance as if seen through a smoked-glass. By eleven o'clock it was as dark as night itself, and from this until three in the afternoon the darkness was extraordinary and frightful.

The extent of the darkness was greater than is related of any other similar phenomenon on record, not excepting the celebrated dark days over Egypt and Judea. It reached south to the northern half of Pennsylvania, and from thence along the coast northeast to the wilds of Maine, eastward to the Gulf of St. Lawrence, and out at sea 120 miles east of Boston, and undoubtedly much farther; west to the valleys of Lake Champlain and the Hudson River, and north into undefined regions in Canada. Portland, Boston, Hartford, New York, West Point and Albany were affected by it. But the degree of darkness differed in different places, the deepest night over New England. A tract of land and sea 800 hundred miles in length and 400 miles in breadth, embracing an area of 320,000 square miles, was known to be clouded, and so far as can be ascertained, a population of 700,000 souls sat for a portion of the day and night in a gloom more or less profound and inexplicable.

Just how dark the day was is attested by indisputable evidence. The hour and minute could not be discovered on the face of the clock or watch by persons of unimpaired eyesight. Candles became a necessity both inside and out side of doors, and it was impossible to transact ordinary business without them. Fire on the hearth-stone shone as brightly as on a moonless November evening, and all dinner tables were set with lighted candles upon them as if it were the evening repast. The keenest eyes in doors could not see to read the common print. So far beyond any ordinary fog was the effect that stages on the road either put up at the nearest hotel during the mid day hours, or carried candles or lanterns to enable the perplexed driver to well see his way.

And the brute and feathered creation seemed puzzled and agitated. The birds ceased to fly, and hid themselves in the branches of the trees. As the darkness increased they sang their evening songs as they do at twilight, and then became silent. Pigeons on the wing took shelter of the forest as they do at night. The whip-poor-will, as if they were truly night, cheerfully sang his song through the gloomy hours. Woodcocks, which are night birds, whistled as they only do in the night time. Bats came out of their hiding places and flew

about. The fowls marched solemnly to their roosts as they do only at nightfall, and, after cackling for a while over the mystery of so short a day, became still. Cocks crowed as is their custom at nightly intervals and the early breaking of day. Frogs piped their evening concert, and dogs whined or howled and ran away as on the approach of an earthquake. The herds of cattle on New England's thousands hills, sought the shelter of the shed or barnyard, lowing as they came to the gate, and sheep huddled around the circle with their heads inward—the invariable token of apprehended danger.

On the human family the effect was still more curious and terrifying. The mechanic left his tools in his shop, the farmer his plow in the furrow, and each moved in silent and marveling mood toward the barn or dwelling. On the home threshold they were met by a pale and anxious woman, who tremblingly inquired, "What is coming?" The alarmed traveller, seeking the sympathy of his fellow man as one impressed with a sense of impending peril, put up at the nearest house, and mingled his anxious questions and forebodings with those of the family. Strong men met and spoke with surprise on their countenances and little children peered timidly into the deepening gloom, and then sought the sheltering parental arms. Schools broke up in affright, and the wondering pupils scampered homeward with many expressions of childish fear. The inevitable candle shone out of the windows of all dwellings—every countenance gathered blackness—all hearts were filled with fear of an approaching, unparalleled storm, or the occurrence of a terrestrial convulsion; but it was not the blackness of the storm-cloud, such as sometimes, with frightful agitation, breaks over a single city; it was the silent spreading of the pall-cloth over the earth by strong invisible hands. Many anecdotes of terror are related. In Boston, from the hours of 11 or 1 till 3 o'clock, business was generally suspended and shops were closed. At Groton, a court was in session in a meeting-house full of large windows, as was the old style of worship; at but half-past eleven all faces began to wear a sombre hue, whereupon magistrates and people began to follow suit with New England, and called for lighted candles. Connecticut went totally under the cloud. The journal of her House of Representatives puts on record the fact that "None could see to read or write in the house, or even at a window, or distinguish a person at a short distance, or perceive any distinction of dress, &c., in the circles of attendants. Therefore, at eleven o'clock, adjourned the House till two o'clock, in the afternoon." Amid the deepening gloom that rapped about the city, darkened the rooms of the State House, and set the lawgivers trembling with the apprehension that the day of judgement was at hand, when the motion for adjournment was made. Colonel Abraham Davenport, afterwards Judge of Stamford, Conn., and State Councilor in the Legislative Chamber at Hartford, said: "I am against the adjournment. Either the Day of Judgement is at hand or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause for adjournment. If it is, I want to be found in the line of my duty. I wish candles to be brought."

The darkness of the day having been succeeded an hour or two before evening by a partially clear sky, and the shining of the sun, still obscured by the black and vapory mist this interval was followed by a re-aura of the obscuration with great density, that rendered the first part of the night hideously dark beyond all former experience of probably a million of people who saw it.

A Horse with one Fault.

A lawyer bought a horse from a traveling dealer, and after the sale had been effected the purchaser asked if the animal had any faults.

"As I own the horse now, it will not affect your interest if you state the truth," continued the lawyer.

"You've given me a fair price," said the seller, "and I don't mind telling you that he has one bad fault. He wont enter the inn-yard at Hicksville."

"Oh, that's no fault at all," said the lawyer, "it isn't likely that my business will ever bring me to that town."

A month afterward the lawyer chanced to be passing through Hicksville.

"Now," said he, as the inn came in sight, "I'll see if that fellow told the truth about the horse."

He headed the animal for the yard, and urged him onward. The horse, instead of resisting, hurried forward willingly, and whinnied cheerfully as the owner of the hotel stepped from the stoop and stroked his mane.

"Hello!" exclaimed the inn-keeper "here's my horse Billy back again. Where did you find him?"

"Find him?" ejaculated the lawyer, "I bought him. The man of whom I purchased him told me that he could not be forced to enter this yard."

"You've been sold stranger," said the inn-keeper. "That horse was stolen from me four weeks ago, and the thief told you that yarn to prevent you from traveling with the horse in this neighborhood."

The lawyer used every argument to retain possession, but without avail. He had to give up the horse.

Table Manners of our Ancestors.

OUR Saxon ancestors had some rude customs about their meals, which are in striking contrast with modern refinement. To begin with, they had no table, but, instead of one, a board (board), which was brought for the occasion from some place of storage, laid on trestles, and when the meal was ended, carefully put away again. This was called laying the board, to which our similar expression owes its origin; and from the same source comes our word "boarder"—one who sits at the board to eat.

The guests and family were summoned by a horn, and after they were seated, the cloth was spread; about this they were extremely particular, but of what kind of fabric they were made does not so clearly appear. It certainly was not linen, for that was not introduced into England for such use until the reign of Elizabeth. For a long time carpets and pieces of tapestry did service for coverings for tables.

The use of the carpet for the floor does not seem to have occurred to those easily-satisfied individuals, who were willing to sleep on a straw mat, with a log under their heads, or at best with a sack filled with chaff or straw for a bolster. Floors were strewn with rushes, occasionally renewed as the accumulations of rubbish made it necessary. Among the items at the time of crowning of Isabella, Queen of John, there is a charge of thirty-three shillings for strewing Westminster Hall with herbs and rushes. It is a custom which Shakespeare refers to in "Taming a Shrew"—"Where's the cook? Is the supper ready the house trimmed, rushes, strewn, cobwebs swept?"—and in other plays.

Those were the days in which they had oiled paper or thinly shaved pieces of horn in what they called windows, or the openings were filled with strips of wicker, interlaced in check work; when scarcely a church could boast of a pane of crystal, and when a nobleman, who had thin layers of beryl in his castle windows, was looked upon as very luxurious in his tastes.

After the cloth was arranged the salt-cellar was set on, then the knives (if they were so fortunate as to possess any) were placed, the spoons, the drinking-horns, and trenchers.

The salt-cellar was the most important article of all; very large, and made with a cover. And it is this peculiarity which Shakespeare alludes to, where he makes Launce say:—"The cover of the salt hides the salt, and therefore it is more than the salt." Where the host could afford it, it was of solid silver, elaborately chased; often a very substantial piece of plate, as costly as his means would allow. And this accounts for the greed with which Queen Elizabeth once seized upon one, on occasion of visiting a certain great official; she had already received valuable gifts from him, and before her departure she "took a salt, a spoon, and a fork of a fair gate."

The salt-cellar occupied the place of honor on the table, and the most distinguished persons sat above it. To sit "below the salt," meant to be in the position of an inferior.

The meats were brought in on spits just as they were cooked, and in that way passed around by the servants to the guests, who, in the more barbarous times, tore off a portion as best they could. Afterwards when they had advanced a little in their ideas, there was a carver, who held the meat with one hand while he carved with the other; and the guests helped themselves, using their hands, and after they had devoured what they wished, threw the bones to the dogs and cats that waited under the table and scrambled for their share among the rushes. Naturally enough, every one was expected to wash his hands before coming to the "board," and certainly it was needful afterward.

A few bad knives shaped like a razor, but forks were unknown. Even the great Elizabeth ate with her fingers. In her reign, however, commerce was extended, and luxuries began to appear; porcelain and glasses instead of pewter mugs to drink from, and in her bath-room she had mirrors, and this was considered a great extravagance. Her immense and lofty rooms were meagre and cheerless enough with their scant furnishings, and her table, in spite of many pieces of the plate, was not altogether removed from the rudeness of manners of the early Saxons. At first, two persons ate from one "trencher," as it was called. There were no plates, and these trenchers were made to answer the purpose. They were, in fact, large slices of bread placed before each one, (or two), to accommodate the meat. There were two qualities of bread; one fine, to be eaten; the other of the coarse inferior flour, was made into large loaves, then the outer crust was removed and laid aside for the poor, and the rest cut into very thick and very substantial slices, and thus used instead of plates. In the course of time some ingenious person conceived the happy idea of having real plates; the wealthy furnished themselves with valuable ones of silver, and eventually the common people were provided with such as their circumstances admitted, made of wood or pewter, and finally earthenware came into use.

But in those days they were well content-

with the primitive arrangement of the trenchers. The bread thus used soaked up the gravy, and became quite savory in consequence; and, when the meal was ended each one ate the plate if he chose; otherwise it was put into the alms-basket, which was always kept ready, and into which all the leavings were gathered, and sent out to the poor waiting at the gate—the poor were never forgotten in those old Saxon households.

A Man of one Idea.

IT has been our fortune, more than once, to encounter men whose minds seemed so thoroughly permeated and pervaded by one idea, that, whatever topic might be broached in conversation, they would be strong in their pet notion. We recollect a farmer who may serve as an illustration. His hobby, strange as it may seem, was comprised in the plebeian word "sausage." Of these he used annually to manufacture a large quantity, and with an absence of false shame worthy of all commendation, so far from keeping out of sight the stuff which had aided him to competence, he was somewhat too forward in obtruding it on his acquaintances.

"Good morning, Mr. Jones," said we, on one occasion. "Fine weather we are having just now."

"Yes," said he earnestly, "capital weather we are having; for making sausages. If things turn out well, I shall have a hundred pounds to carry to market. You wouldn't like a few, would you?"

We hastened to inform him that our larder was fully supplied, and not feeling particularly interested in the turn he had given the subject, endeavored to broach another topic.

"The Allies find it a difficult matter to take Sebastopol, Mr. Jones. I suppose you have read the latest accounts from the seat of war?"

"No."

"The Russians have gained a decided victory. It is thought, however, there is a possibility of the supplies being cut off, so that the garrison will be compelled, by fear of starvation, to capitulate."

"You don't say so!" returned Mr. Jones. "I wonder he continued, after a pause, his eyes lighting up with a new and brilliant idea, "I wonder whether it wouldn't be a good speculation to send a cargo of sausages to Sebastopol? There ain't nothing more wholesome, and if they are in danger of being starved out they'd be likely to pay pretty well."

We ventured to suggest that the allied squadrons would be a trifling obstacle in the way of this otherwise feasible plan.

The next time we met Mr. Jones, was after the death of his wife. There was sorrow in his eye, and black crape on his hat. Our sympathies were touched.

"Mr. Jones," said we, "we have heard of your misfortune. It is indeed a heavy cross to bear, but you must summon up all your fortitude."

"You don't know," said he, grasping our hand, "how much. You never can know. Such a treasure as she was," said he, concealing his face in the folds of his red handanna. "I shall never get anybody that can make sausages like her—never!"

Mr. Jones seemed overpowered by his grief and walked sadly away. We felt that we could offer no adequate consolation to one whose sorrow proceeds from such a cause, and did not attempt it.

A Scared Clergyman.

They have a clergyman in Cleveland who has introduced a very effective method of rousing the members of his congregation who sleep during sermon time. He takes up into the pulpit a package of large torpedoes, and when he perceives one of the deacons nodding, he takes aim at the deacon's bald head, and in a minute the slumbering saint wakes up with a jump from a dream 'bout the battle of Gettysburg. This was all well enough for a while. But one of the deacons whose scalp had been successfully bombarded for four consecutive Sundays, determined to organize resistance. So he went out and bought a lot of large torpedoes, and before church he slipped up into the pulpit and placed a torpedo under each leg of the ministers arm chair. Presently the pastor entered. The church was full. He stood a moment and beamed upon the congregation through his spectacles, and then sat down to select a hymn. He sat down hard—with a jerk. There was an explosion—a tearing out as it were beneath the chair, and a venerable divine might have been seen coming suddenly down the pulpit stairs with his hair standing on end. The deacon says that if this does not cure him, he will fire back at the clergyman with a mountain-howitzer located in the gallery.

A traveling Yankee lately put up at a country inn, where a number of loungers were assembled telling stories. After sitting some time and attentively listening to their folly, he suddenly turned and asked them how much they supposed he had been offered for his dog which he had with him. They all stared, and curiosity was on tip-toe to know. One guessed five dollars, another ten, another fifteen, until they all exhausted their patience, when one seriously asked how much he had been offered.

"Not a darned cent!" he replied.

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