

THE CUSTOMS OF NEW ENGLAND

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The Customs of New England by Joseph B. Felt

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JOSEPH B. FELT

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OF

NEW ENGLAND.

BY

JOSEPH B. FELT.

CONSUETUDINIS VIS MAXIMA EST.
Cicero

BOSTON:

PRESS OF T. R. MARVIN, 42 CONGRESS STREET.

1853.

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CUSTOMS OF NEW ENGLAND.

INTRODUCTION.

VARIOUS and multiplied are the gifts which have come down from the Father of lights, as our earthly portion. Among these blessings, Curiosity, as the inlet of useful knowledge, entertainment, and edification, holds no low, no trivial rank. Such a faculty is privileged to open its perception on the wonders of the Universe, as well as on the inventions, discoveries, and productions of human genius. Particularly is it favored with looking back on the course of time, and holding communion with objects unseen by that view which is only directed to scenes and concerns of the passing age.

Curiosity, thus employed, has the abundant materials of History gathering in its varied prospect, the more minutely it surveys and plies itself to the task of satisfying its increased and ardent desires. So indulged and so commendably occupied, it meets with topics which invariably hold its high estimation and share in its favorable attention, though they are familiar and at home with it, as friends of long intercourse and acquaintance. There are other subjects, which, from not being often within the circle of its observation, nor without some degree of merit in themselves, are far

from experiencing its rejection, but are invited to approach its presence and participate in its friendship.

A reason why Curiosity thus notices things of greater and less importance is, that it may have a symmetry in its impressions of human customs, actions, and character. It eyes the forest in some paradisiacal portion of the earth, and singles out for its admiring gaze a fair-proportioned tree, crowned with abundance of flowers, even more beautiful and charming than those of the magnolia, in our own adopted Floridas. But were it to notice nothing else, except these ornaments of the landscape, and to throw out from the means of its gratification the roots, trunk, limbs, and leaves, on which they depend for their subsistence and attraction, it would violate the laws of correct taste, indelibly and divinely inscribed on every well-trained and rightly-ordered mind. So would it be at fault, were it to seize only on the most prominent features of the portraiture, which the pencil of truth has drawn to represent men of other years, and, at the same time, pass over the rest of the graphic sketch as if altogether unworthy of a single glance. Its true province is to collect the small as well as the great; to notice the frieze, the cornice, the architrave, and base, as well as the shaft of ancient ages, that it may know the correct proportions of Agrippa's Pantheon.

Thus faithful to its trust, Curiosity furnishes us with the customs of our ancestors as a topic on which we may look and not be altogether unrewarded for our attention. In the accomplishment of this enterprise, we have not always a compass, nor a cloudless polar star, for our guide. Still we may venture in the hope that we may fare better than our fears.

Had the long standing laws of China, which extend to the whole social system of its immense population, been the

rule of our land, we should only have to behold the present and know the past. But more compliant with the fancy of change, which has always prevailed where the air of freedom has been breathed, than with any permanent edicts, the former and latter inhabitants of our communities have imitated their mother country in many of her various alterations in customs, and have thereby enlarged the difficulty of our becoming thoroughly acquainted with the usages of our primitive settlers.

We are told that Apelles, on seeing the picture of a Venus magnificently attired, said to the artist, "Friend, though thou hast not been able to make her *fair*, thou hast certainly made her *fine*." The writer is not ambitious to obtain such a compliment. Though what he has to say may not allow him scope to be *fair*, yet he will endeavor to have it neither tawdry nor repulsive.



PART FIRST.

FURNITURE OR HOUSEHOLD APPURTENANCES.

THESE, however occasionally mentioned and partially described, have never, to the knowledge of the writer, been fully exhibited together in our country. The attempt to do this is neither so easy nor so satisfactory, in point of correctness, as if it had been performed by some master hand. But the execution of it, though deficient as an original, unaided by attractive examples, may have its uses, and occupy a comparatively vacant niche in the temple of history.