



PROFESSOR CHILD'S HOUSE

SOME LITERARY MEMORIES OF CAMBRIDGE

BY W. D. HOWELLS

I



BEING the wholly literary spirit I was when I went to make my home in Cambridge, I do not see how I could well have been more content if I had found myself in the Elysian Fields with an agreeable eternity before me. At twenty-nine, indeed, one is practically immortal, and at that age time had for me the effect of an eternity in which I had nothing to do but to read books and dream of writing them, in the overflow of endless hours from my work with the manuscripts, critical notices, and proofs of the *Atlantic Monthly*. As for the so-

cial environment, I should have been puzzled, if given my choice among the elect of all the ages, to find poets and scholars more to my mind than those still in the flesh at Cambridge in the early afternoon of the nineteenth century. They are now nearly all dead, and I can speak of them in the freedom which is death's doubtful favor to the survivor; but if they were still alive I could say little to their offense, unless their modesty was hurt with my praise.

One of the first of these friends was that exquisite intelligence who, in a world where so many people are grotesquely miscalled, was most fitly named; for no man ever kept here more perfectly and purely the heart of such as



FRANCIS J. CHILD

the kingdom of heaven is of, than Francis J. Child. He was then in his prime, and I like to recall the outward image which expressed the inner man as happily as his name. He was of low stature and of an inclination which never became stoutness; but what you most saw when you saw him was his face of winning refinement: very regular, with eyes always glassed by gold-rimmed spectacles, a straight, short, most sensitive nose, and a beautiful mouth with the sweetest smile that I ever beheld, and that was as wise and shrewd as it was sweet. In a time when every other man was more or less bearded he was clean-shaven, and of a delightful freshness of coloring, which his thick sunny hair, clustering upon his head in close rings, admirably set off. I believe he never became gray, and the last time I saw him, though he was broken then with years and pain, his face had still the brightness of his inextinguishable youth.

It is well known how great was Professor Child's scholarship in the branches

of his Harvard work; and how especially, how uniquely, effective it was in the study of English and Scottish balladry, to which he gave so many years of his life. He was a poet in his nature, and he wrought with passion as well as consummate knowledge in the achievement of as monumental a task as any American has performed. But he might have been indefinitely less than he was in any intellectual wise, and yet been precious to those who knew him for the gentleness and the goodness which in him were protected from misconception by a final dignity as delicate and as inviolable as that of Longfellow himself.

We were still much less than a year from our life in Venice when he came to see us at Cambridge; and in the Italian interest, which then commended us to so many fine spirits among our neighbors, we found ourselves at the beginning of a life-long friendship with him. I was known to him only by my letters from Venice, which afterwards became *Venetian Life*, and by a bit of devotional

verse which he had asked to include in a collection he was making, but he immediately gave us the freedom of his heart, which afterwards was never withdrawn. In due time he imagined a home school, to which our little one was asked, and she had her first lessons with his own daughter under his roof. These things drew us closer together, and he was willing to be still nearer to me at any time of trouble. At one such time, when the shadow which must some time darken every door hovered at ours, he had the strength to make me face it and try to realize, while it was still there, that it was not cruel and not evil. It passed, for that time, but the sense of his help remained; and in my own case I can testify of the potent tenderness in him which all who knew him must have known. But in bearing my witness I feel accused, almost as if he were present, by his fastidious reluctance from any recognition of his helpfulness. When this came in the form of gratitude taking credit to itself in a pose which reflected honor upon him as the architect of greatness, he was delightfully impatient of it; and he was most amusingly dramatic in reproducing the pompous consciousness of certain ineffectual alumni who used to overwhelm him at Commencement solemnities with some such an acknowledgment as, "Professor Child, all that I have become, sir, I owe to your influence in my college career."

He did with delicious mockery the old-fashioned intellectual *poseurs* among the students, who used to walk the groves of Harvard with bent head, and the left arm crossing the back, while the other lodged its hand in the breast of the high-buttoned frock-coat; and I could fancy that

his classes in college did not form the sunniest exposure for young folly and vanity. I know that he was intolerant of any manner of insincerity, and no flattery could take him off his guard. I have seen him meet this with a cutting phrase of rejection, and no man was more apt at snubbing the patronage that offers itself at times to all men. But mostly he wished to do people pleasure, and he seemed always to be studying how to do it; as for need, I am sure that worthy and unworthy want had alike the way to his heart.

Children were always his friends, and they repaid with adoration the affection which he divided with them and with his flowers. I recall him in no moments so characteristic as those he spent in making the little ones laugh out their hearts at his drolling, some festive evening in his house, and those he gave to sharing with you his joy in his garden. This, I believe, began with violets, and it went on to roses, which he grew in a splendor and profusion impossible to any but a true lover with a genuine gift for them. Like Lowell, he spent his summers in Cambridge, and in the afternoon you could find him digging or pruning among his roses with an ardor which few caprices



W. D. HOWELLS'S HOME, CONCORD AVENUE, CAMBRIDGE

of the weather could interrupt. He would lift himself from their ranks, which he scarcely overtopped, as you came up the footway to his door, and peer purlblindly across at you. If he knew you at once, he traversed the nodding and swaying bushes, to give you the hand free of the trowel or knife; or if you got indoors unseen by him, he would come in holding toward you some exquisite blossom that weighed down the tip of its long stem like the finial of Adam Krafft's tabernacle.

He graced with unaffected poetry a life of as hard work and as varied achievement as any I have known or read of; and he played with gifts such as in no greater measure have made reputations. He had a rare and lovely humor, which could amuse itself in Italian verse with such an airy burlesque as *Il Pesceballo*; he had a critical sense as sound as it was subtle in all literature; and whatever he wrote he imbued with the charm of a style finely personal to himself. His learning in the line of his Harvard teaching included an Early

English scholarship unrivalled in his time, and his researches in ballad literature left no corner of it untouched. I fancy this part of his study was peculiarly pleasant to him; for he loved simple and natural things, and the beauty which he found nearest life. At least he scorned the pedantic affectations of literary superiority; and he used to quote with joyous laughter an Italian critic who proposed to leave the summits of polite learning for a moment with the swelling exclamation: "*Scendiamo fra il po-*

polo!" (Let us go down among the people.)

II

Of course it was only so hard-worked a man who could take so much thought and trouble for another. He once took thought for me at a time when it was very important to me, and when he took the trouble to secure for me an engagement to deliver that course of Lowell Lectures in Boston which I have said Lowell had the courage to go in town to hear. I do not remember whether Professor Child was equal to so much, but

he would have been if it were necessary; and I rather rejoice now in the belief that he did not seek that martyrdom.

He had done for me, but he had more than enough done only what he was always willing to do for others. In the form of a favor to himself he brought into my life the great happiness of intimately knowing Hjalmar Hjörth Boyesen, whom he had found one summer day among the shelves in the Harvard library, and found to be a poet and an intending novelist.

I do not remem-

ber now just how this fact imparted itself to the professor, but literature is of easily cultivated confidence in youth, and probably the confession was almost spontaneous. At any rate, as a susceptible young editor, I was asked to meet my potential contributor at the professor's two-o'clock dinner, and when we came to coffee in the study looking out upon the garden, Boyesen took from the pocket nearest his heart a chapter of "*Gunnar*" and read it to us. A chapter? It may have been two or three, with a judicious



HJALMAR HJORTH BOYSEN

selection of passages from yet other chapters; but it does not matter. To be again in those dear presences, I would gladly listen to the whole novel!

That young romance still remains the most beautiful thing that Boyesen wrote, though he wrote so much and so well in verse, in fiction, and in criticism. He had then already laid the wide foundations of his future scholarship in the Northern European languages and literatures, but his soul was steeped in the aromas of his native poetry and romance, which all his talk breathed out again.

For the rest of this summer I must have had nearly all his talk to myself; of course I wanted "Gunnar" for the magazine, and this brought us constantly and exclusively together. Boyesen afterwards came to know all Cambridge, and when he went back to Europe he celebrated our literary society with such effect that he inspired Tourguénief with the wish to witness it at first hands. The great Russian of course never visited Cambridge, but he affirmed to Boyesen his belief in it as an ideal situation, which could not be matched in his experience of literary centres elsewhere. I do not know whether it was Boyesen's enthusiasm that brought his great compatriot Björnsterne Jjörnson actually among us; but if it was, it did not suffice, I believe, to realize Tourguénief's ideal to him. He ascertained the Cambridge limitations a little too quickly, a little too keenly, and felt himself cramped in a world where the expansions were upward rather than outward.

However, no alien born more clearly conceived, not only Cambridge, but America, than Boyesen did. His mastery of our character was as extraordinary, as almost miraculous, as his mastery of our language. For full proof of his proficiency in both, he has left his great novel, *The Mammon of Unrighteousness*, which comes within one or two of being the great American novel we shall never have from any single hand. He left other stories of our life which showed how wonderfully well he had conceived it, and he left a volume of poems which testify of the beauty and truth with which he imagined the immeasurable life beyond the nationalities. Po-

etry, indeed, was what his ardent spirit mainly meditated in that happy hour when I first knew him in Cambridge, before we had either of us grown old and sad, if not wise. He overflowed with it, and he talked as little as he dreamed of anything else in the vast half-summer we spent together. He was constantly at my house, where in an absence of my family I was living bachelor, and where we sat in-doors and talked, or sauntered out-doors and talked, with our heads in a cloud of fancies, not unmixed with the mosquitoes of Cambridge: if I could have back the fancies, I would be willing to have the mosquitoes with them. He read me his things, and I read him mine, and he told me about the Hulder, and the Nixy, and the Midnight Sun, and the Fjords, and the Saeters; and that great movement toward nature and the speech of nature, then beginning among the Norwegian novelists and poets, which has since made their nation great while some other nations have grown big. He looked the poetry he lived: his eyes were the blue of sunlit fjords; his brown silken hair was thick on the crown which it later abandoned to a scholarly baldness; his soft red lips half hid a boyish pout in the youthful beard and mustache. He was short of stature, but of stalwart breadth of frame, and his voice was of a peculiar and endearing quality, indescribably mellow and tender when he read his verse.

I have hardly the right to dwell so long upon him here, for he was only a sojourner in Cambridge, but the memory of that early intimacy is too much for my sense of proportion. Our intimacy was renewed afterwards, when I came to live in New York, where, as long as he was in this *dolce lome*, he hardly let a week go by without passing a long evening with me. Our talk was still of literature and of life, but more of life than of literature, and we seldom spoke of those old times. I still found him true to the ideals which had clarified themselves to both of us as the duty of unswerving fealty to the real thing in whatever we did. This we felt, as we had felt it long before, to be the sole source of beauty and of art, and we warmed ourselves at each other's hearts in our devotion to it, amidst a misun-

derstanding environment, which we did not characterize by so mild an epithet. Boyesen, indeed, out-realised me, in the polemics of our æsthetics, and sometimes, when an unbeliever was by, I willingly left to him the affirmation of our faith, not without some quaking at his unsparing strenuousness in disciplining the heretic.

But now that ardent and active soul is Elsewhere, and I have ceased even to expect the ring, which, making itself heard at the late hour of his coming, I knew always to be his and not another's. That mechanical expectation of those who will come no more is something terrible, but when even that ceases we know the irreparability of our loss, and begin to realize how much of ourselves they have taken with them.

III

It was some years before the Boyesen summer, which was the fourth or fifth of our life in Cambridge, that I made the acquaintance of a man very much my senior, who remains one of the vividest personalities of my recollection. I speak of him in this order perhaps because of an obscure association with Boyesen through their religious faith, which was also mine. But Henry James was incomparably more Swedenborgian than either of us: he lived and thought and felt Swedenborg with an entirety and intensity far beyond the mere assent of other men. He did not do this in any stupidly exclusive way, but in the most luminously inclusive way, with a constant reference of these vain mundane shadows to the spiritual realities which project them.

His piety, which sometimes expressed itself in terms of alarming originality and freedom, was too large for any ecclesiastical limits, and one may learn from the books which record it how personal his interpretations of Swedenborg were. Perhaps in that other world whose substantial verity was the inspiration of his life here, the two sages may by this time have met and agreed to differ as to some points in the doctrine of the Seer. In such a case I cannot imagine the apostle giving way, and I do not say he would be wrong to insist, but I think he might now be willing to allow that the exegetic

pages which sentence by sentence were so brilliantly suggestive, had sometimes a collective opacity which the most resolute vision could not penetrate. Yet he put into this dark wisdom a profound and comprehensive faith, and he lighted it up with flashes of the keenest wit and bathed it in the glow of a lambent humor, so that it is truly wonderful to me how it should remain so unintelligible. But I have only tried to read certain of his books, and possibly if I had persisted in the effort I might have found them all as clear at last as the one which seems to me the clearest, and is certainly most encouragingly suggestive: I mean the one called *Society the Redeemed Form of Man*.

James had his whole being in his Belief; it had not only liberated him from the bonds of the Calvinistic theology in which his youth was trammelled, but it had secured him against the conscious ethicism of the prevailing Unitarian doctrine, which supremely worshipped Conduct; and it had colored his vocabulary to such strange effects that he spoke of *moral men* with abhorrence, as more hopelessly lost than sinners. Any one whose sphere tempted him to recognition of the foibles of others, he called the Devil; but in spite of his perception of such diabolism, he was rather fond of yielding to it, for he had a most trenchant tongue. I myself once fell under his condemnation as the Devil, by having too plainly shared his joy in his characterization of certain fellow-men; perhaps a group of Bostonians from whom he had just parted and whose reciprocal pleasure of themselves he dramatically presented in the image of "simmering in their own fat and putting a nice brown on each other."

Swedenborg himself he did not spare as a man. He thought that very likely his life had those lapses in it which some of his followers deny; and he regarded him, on the æsthetical side, as essentially commonplace, and as probably chosen for his prophetic function just because of his imaginative nullity: his tremendous revelations could be the more distinctly and unmistakably inscribed upon an intelligence of that sort, which alone could render again a strictly literal account of them.

As to some other sorts of believers who thought they had a mystical apprehension of the truth, he had no mercy upon them if they betrayed, however innocently, any self-complacency in their possession. I went one evening to call upon him with a dear old Shaker elder, who had the misfortune to say that his people believed themselves to be living the angelic life. James fastened upon him with the suggestion that according to Swedenborg the most celestial angels were unconscious of their own perfection, and that if the Shakers felt they were of angelic condition, they were probably the mock of the hells. I was very glad to get my poor old friend off alive, and to find that he was not even aware of being cut asunder: I did not invite him to shake himself.

With spiritualists James had little or no sympathy; he was not so impatient of them as the Swedenborgians commonly are, and he probably acknowledged a measure of verity in the spiritistic phenomena; but he was rather incurious concerning these, and he must have regarded them as superfluities of naughtiness, mostly; as emanations from the hells. His powerful and penetrating intellect interested itself in all social and civil facts through his religion. He was essentially religious, but he was very consciously a citizen, with most decided opinions upon political questions. My own darkness as to anything like social reform was then so dense that I cannot now be clear as to his feeling in such matters, but I have the impression that it was far more radical than I could understand.

James was of a very merciful mind regarding things often held in pitiless condemnation, but of charity, as it is commonly understood, he had misgivings. He would never have turned away from him that asketh; but he spoke with regret of some of his benefactions in the past, large gifts of money to individuals, which he now thought had done more harm than good.

I never knew him to judge men by the society scale. He was most human in his relations with others, and was in correspondence with all sorts of people seeking light and help; he answered their letters, and tried to instruct them, and

none were so low or weak but they could reach him on their own level, though he had his humorous perception of limits. He told of his dining, early in life, next a fellow-man from Cape Cod at the Astor House, where such a man could then seldom have found himself. When they were served with meat, this neighbor asked if he would mind his putting his fat on James's plate: he disliked fat. James said that he considered the request, and seeing no good reason against it, consented.

He could be cruel with his tongue when he fancied insincerity or pretence, and then cruelly sorry for the hurt he gave. He was indeed tremulously sensitive, not only for himself but for others, and would offer atonement far beyond the measure of the offence he supposed himself to have given.

At all times he thought originally in words of delightful originality, which painted a fact with the most graphic vividness, especially a grotesque fact. Of a person who had a nervous twitching of the face, and who wished to call up a friend to them, he said, "He *spasmed* to the fellow across the room, and introduced him." His written style had traits of the same bold adventurousness, but it was his speech which was most captivating.

As I write of him I see him before me: his white-bearded face, with a kindly intensity which at first glance seemed fierce, the mouth humorously shaping the mustache, the eyes vague behind the glasses; his sensitive hand gripping the stick on which he rested his weight to ease it from the artificial limb he wore.

IV

The Goethean face and figure of Louis Agassiz were in those days to be seen in the shady walks of Cambridge, to which for me they lent a Weimarish quality, in the degree that in Weimar itself, a few years ago, I felt a quality of Cambridge. Agassiz, of course, was Swiss and Latin, and not Teutonic, but he was of the Continental European civilization, and was widely different from the other Cambridge men in everything but love of the place. "He is always an *Europaër*," said Lowell one day, in distinguishing concerning him; and for any one who

had tasted the flavor of the life beyond the ocean and the Channel, this had its charm. He was of a bland politeness in manner, which he made go far in his encounters with New England character.

It was by his real love for that character, also, that he succeeded so well with it. I have an idea that no one else of his day could have got so much money for science out of the General Court of Massachusetts; and I have heard him speak with the wisest and warmest appreciation of the hard material from which he was able to extract this treasure.

The legislators who voted appropriations for his Museum and his other scientific objects were not mostly lawyers or professional men, with the perspectives of a liberal education, but were hard-fisted farmers, who had a grip of the State's money as if it were their own, and yet gave it with intelligent munificence. They understood that he did not want it for himself, and had no interested aim in getting it; they knew that, as he once said, he had no time to make money, and wished to use it solely for the advancement of learning; and with this understanding they were ready to help him generously. He compared their liberality with that of kings and princes, when these patronized science, and recognized the superior plebeian generosity. It was on the veranda of his summer house at Nahant, while he lay in the hammock, talking of this, when I heard him refer also to the offer that Napoleon III. had made him, inviting him upon certain splendid conditions to come to Paris after he had established himself at Cambridge. But he said that he had not come to America without going over every such possibility in his own mind, and deciding beforehand against it. He was a republican, by nationality and by preference, and I was entirely satisfied with his position and environment in New England.

Outside of his scientific circle in Cambridge he was more friends with Longfellow than with any one else, I believe, and Longfellow told me how, after the doctors had condemned Agassiz to inaction on account of his failing health, he had broken down in his friend's study, and wept like an Europaër, and lamented,

"I shall never finish my work!"

Some papers which he had begun to write for the magazine in contravention of the Darwinian theory (it is well known that Agassiz did not accept this) remained part of the work which he never finished.

After his death, I wished Professor Wyman to write of him in the *Atlantic*, but he excused himself on account of his many labors, and then he voluntarily spoke of Agassiz's methods, which he agreed with rather than his theories, being himself thoroughly Darwinian. I think he said Agassiz was the first to imagine establishing a fact not from a single example, but from examples indefinitely repeated. If it was a question of something about robins, for instance, he would have a hundred robins examined before he would receive an appearance as a fact.

Of course no preconception or prepossession of his own was suffered to bar his way to the final truth he was seeking, and he joyously renounced even a conclusion if he found it mistaken. I do not know whether Mrs. Agassiz has put into her interesting life of him a delightful story which she told me about him. He came to her beaming one day, and demanded,

"You know I have always held such and such an opinion about a certain group of fossil fishes?"

"Yes, yes!"

"Well, I have just been reading —'s new book, and he has shown me that there isn't the least truth in it," and he burst into a laugh of pleasure, wholly unvexed by having found himself convicted of an error.

I could come in contact with science at Cambridge only on its literary and social side, of course, and my meetings with Agassiz were not many. I recall a dinner at his house to Mr. Bret Harte, when the poet came on from California, and Agassiz approached him over the coffee through their mutual scientific interest in the last meeting of the geological "society upon the Stanislow." He quoted to the author some passages from the poem recording the final proceedings of this body, which had particularly pleased him, and I think Mr. Harte was as much amused at finding himself

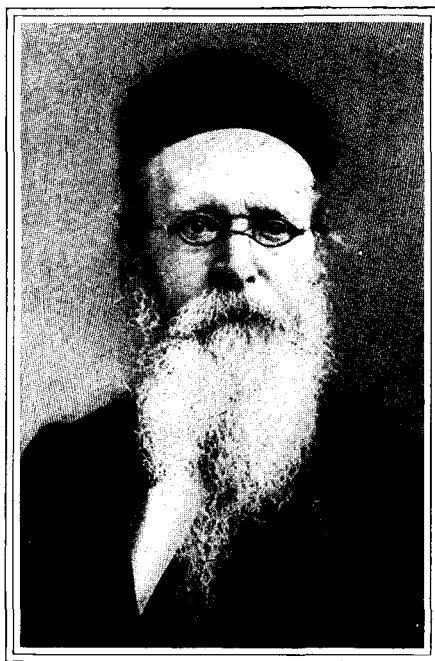
thus in touch with the savant as Agassiz could ever have been with that delicious poem.

Agassiz lived at one end of Quincy Street, and James almost at the other end, with an interval between them which but poorly typified their difference of temperament. The one was all religious and the other all scientific, and yet toward the close of his life Agassiz may be said to have led that movement toward the new position of science in matters of mystery which is now characteristic of it. He was of the Swiss "Brahminical caste," as so many of his friends in Cambridge were of the Brahminical caste of New England; and perhaps it was the line of ancestral *pasteurs* which at last drew him back, or on, to the affirmation of an unformulated faith of his own. At any rate, before most other savants would consent that they might have souls, he became, by opening a summer school of science with prayer, as consolatory to the unscientific who wished to believe they had souls as Mr. John Fiske himself, though Mr. Fiske, as the arch-apostle of Darwinism, had arrived by such a very different road at a trust which with Agassiz was intuitive.

V

Mr. Fiske had been our neighbor in our first Cambridge home, and when we went to live at Berkeley Street, he followed with his family and placed himself across the way in a house which I already knew as the home of Richard Henry Dana, the author of *Two Years before the Mast*. Like nearly all the

other Cambridge men of my acquaintance, Dana was very much my senior, and like the rest he recognized my literary promise as cordially as if it were performance, with no suggestion of the condescension which was said to be sometimes his attitude toward his fellow-men. I never saw anything of this, in fact, but I heard much, and I suppose he may have been a blend of those patrician qualities and democratic principles which made Lowell anomalous even to himself. He is part of the anti-slavery history of



HENRY JAMES THE ELDER

his time, and he gave to the oppressed his strenuous help both as a man and as a politician; his great gifts and learning in the law were freely at their service. He never lost his interest, either, in those white slaves whose brutal bondage he remembered as bound with them in his *Two Years before the Mast*, and any luckless seaman with a case or cause might count upon his friendship as surely as the black slaves of the South. He was able to temper his indignation for their oppression with a humorous

perception of what was droll in its agents and circumstances; and nothing could be more delightful than his talk about sea-etiquette on merchant vessels, where the chief mate might no more speak to the captain at table without being addressed by him than a subject might put a question to his sovereign. He was amusing in his stories of the Pacific trade, in which he said it was very noble to deal in furs from the Northwest, and very ignoble to deal in hides along the Mexican and South American coasts. Every ship's master naturally wished to

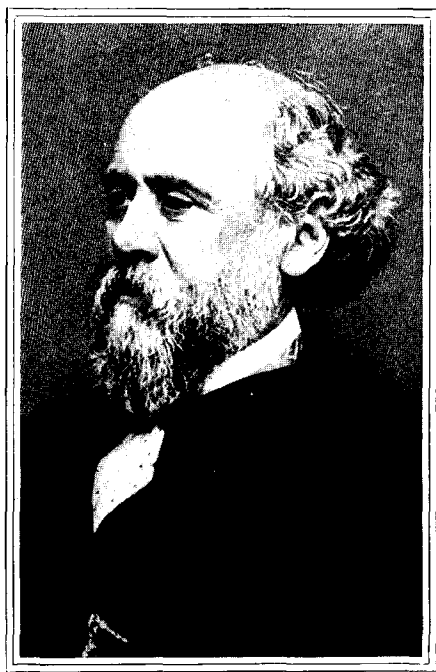
be in the fur-carrying trade, and in one of Dana's instances two vessels encounter in midocean, and exchange the usual parley as to their respective ports of departure and destination. The final demand comes through the trumpet, "What cargo?" and the captain so challenged yields to temptation and roars back, "*Furs!*" A moment of hesitation elapses, and then the questioner pursues, "Here and there a *horn?*"

There were other distinctions, of which seafaring men of other days were keenly sensible, and Dana dramatized the meeting of a great swelling East Indianman with a little Atlantic trader which has hailed her. She shouts back through her captain's trumpet that she is from Calcutta, laden with silks, spices, and other Orient treasures, and in her turn she requires like answer from the sail which has presumed to enter into parley with her. "What cargo?" The trader confesses to a mixed cargo for Boston; and to the final question her master replies, in meek apology, "*Only from Liverpool, sir!*" and scuttles down the horizon as swiftly as possible.

Dana was not of the Cambridge men whose calling was in Cambridge. He was a lawyer in active practice, and he went every day to Boston. One was apt to meet him in those horse-cars which formerly tinkled back and forth between the two cities, and which were often so full of one's acquaintance that they had the social elements of an afternoon tea. They were often abusively overcrowded, of course, and one might easily see a prime literary celebrity swaying from a strap,

or hanging uneasily by the hand-rail to the lower steps of the back platform. I do not mean that I ever happened to see the author of *Two Years before the Mast* in either fact, but in his celebrity he had every qualification for the illustration of my point. His book probably carried the American name farther and wider than any American books except those of Irving and Cooper at a day when our writers were very little known, even at home, and our literature was the only infant industry not fostered against foreign

ravage, but expressly left to strengthen and harden itself as it best might in neglect at home. The book was delightful, and I strongly remember it, from a reading of thirty years ago, as of the stuff that classics are made of. I venture no conjecture as to its present popularity, but of all books relating to the sea I think it is the best. The author when I knew him was still Richard Henry Dana, Jr., his father, the aged poet, who first established the name in the public recognition, being alive, though past



RICHARD HENRY DANA, JR.

literary activity. It was distinctively a literary race, and in the actual generation it has given proofs of its continued literary vitality in the romance of *Esperito Santo* by the youngest daughter of the Dana I knew.

VI

There could be no stronger contrast to him in origin, education, and character than a man who lived at the same time in Cambridge, and who produced a book which in its final fidelity to life is not unworthy to be named with *Two Years*



QUINCY STREET, CAMBRIDGE

THE AGASSIZ HOUSE IN BACKGROUND, OBSCURED BY TREES FORMER LOCATION OF THE JAMES HOUSE IN FOREGROUND

before the *Mast*. Ralph Keeler wrote the *Vagabond Adventures* which he had lived. I have it on my heart to name him in the presence of our great literary men not only because I had an affection for him, tenderer than I then knew, but because I believe his book is worthier of more remembrance than it seems to enjoy. I was reading it only the other day, and I found it delightful, and much better than I imagined when I accepted for the *Atlantic* the several papers which it is made up of. I am not sure but it belongs to the great literature in that fidelity to life which I have spoken of, and which the author brought himself to practise with such difficulty, and some times under so much stress from his editor. He really wanted to *fake* it, at times, but he was docile at last, and did it so honestly that it tells the history of his strange career in much better terms than it can be reported. He had been, as he claimed, in his early orphanhood “a

cruel uncle’s ward,” and while yet almost a child he had run away from home, to fulfil his heart’s desire of becoming a elog-dancer in a troupe of negro minstrels. But it was first his fate to be cabin-boy and bootblack on a lake steamboat, and meet with many squalid adventures, scarcely to be matched outside of a Spanish picaresque novel. When he did become a dancer (and even a *danseuse*) of the sort he aspired to be, the fruition of his hopes was so little what he had imagined that he was very willing to leave the Floating Palace on the Mississippi in which his troupe voyaged and exhibited, and enter the college of the Jesuit Fathers at Cape Girardeau in Missouri. They were very kind to him, and in their charge he picked up a good deal more Latin, if not less Greek, than another strolling player who also took to literature. From college Keeler went to Europe, and then to California, whence he wrote me that he was coming on to Bos-



JOHN G. PALFREY

ton with the manuscript of a novel which he wished me to read for the magazine. I reported against it to my chief, but nothing could shake Keeler's faith in it, until he had printed it at his own cost, and known it fail instantly and decisively. He had come to Cambridge to see it through the press, and he remained there four or five years, with certain brief absences. Then, during the Cuban insurrection of the early seventies, he accepted the invitation of a New York paper to go to Cuba as its correspondent.

"Don't go, Keeler," I entreated him, when he came to tell me of his intention. "They'll garrote you down there."

"Well," he said, with the air of being pleasantly interested by the coincidence, as he stood on my study hearth with his feet wide apart in a fashion he had, and gayly flitted his hand in the air, "that's what Aldrich says, and he's agreed to write my biography, on condition that I make a last dying speech when they bring me out in the plaza to do it: 'If I had taken the advice of my friend T. B. Al-

drich, author of *Marjorie Daw and Other People*, I should not now be in this place.'"

He went, and he did not come back. He was not indeed garroted as his friends had promised, but he was probably assassinated on the steamer by which he sailed from Santiago, for he never arrived in Havana, and was never heard of again. I now realize that I loved him, though I did as little to show it as men commonly do. If I am to meet somewhere else the friends who are no longer here, I should like to meet Ralph Keeler, and I would take some chances of meeting in a happy place a soul which had by no means kept itself unspotted, but which in all its consciousness of error relied cheerfully on the trust that "the Almighty was not going to scoop any of us." The faith worded so grotesquely could not have been more simply or humbly affirmed; few men I think could have been more helplessly sincere.

He had nothing of that false self-respect which forbids a man to own himself wrong promptly and utterly when

need is; and in fact he owned to some things in his checkered past which would hardly allow him any sort of self-respect. He had always an essential gayety not to be damped by discipline, and a docility which expressed itself in cheerful compliance. "Why do you use *bias* for opinion?" I demanded in going over a proof with him. "Oh, because I'm such an ass—such a bi-ass."

He had a philosophy of life, which he liked to express with a vivid touch on his listener's shoulder: "Put your finger on the present moment and enjoy it; it's the only one you've got or ever will have." This light and joyous creature could not but be a Pariah among our Brahmins, and I need not say that I never met him in any of the great Cambridge houses. I am not sure that he was a *persona grata* to every one in my own, for Keeler was framed rather for men's liking, and Mr. Aldrich and I had our subtleties as to whether his mind about women was not so Chinese as somewhat to infect his manner. Keeler was too really modest to be of any rebellious mind toward the society which ignored him, and of too sweet a cheerfulness to be greatly vexed by it. He lived on in the house of a suave old actor, who oddly made his home in Cambridge, and he continued of a harmless

bohemianism in his daily walk, which included lunches at Boston restaurants as often as he could get you to let him give them you, if you were of his acquaintance. On a Sunday he would appear coming out of the post-office usually at the hour when all cultivated Cambridge was coming for its letters, and wave a glad hand in air, and shout a blithe salutation to the friend he had marked for his companion in a morning stroll. The stroll was commonly over the flats toward Brighton (I do not know why, except perhaps that it was out of the beat of the better element), and the talk was mainly on literature, in which he was doing less than he meant to do, and which he seemed never able quite to feel was not a branch of the Show Business, and might not be legitimately worked by advertising, though he truly loved and honored it.

I suppose it was not altogether a happy life, and Keeler had his moments of amusing depression, which showed their shadows in his smiling face. He was of a slight figure and low stature, with hands and feet of almost womanish littleness. He was very blond, and his restless eyes were blue; he wore his yellow beard in whiskers only, which he pulled nervously from time to time.



HOME OF RICHARD HENRY DANA, JR., BERKELEY STREET, CAMBRIDGE

VII

Keeler was a native of Ohio, and there lived at Cambridge when I first came there an Indianian, more accepted by literary society, who was of real quality as a poet. Forceythe Willson, whose poem "The Old Sergeant" Dr. Holmes used to read publicly in the closing year of the Civil War, was of a Western altitude of figure, and of an extraordinary beauty of face in an Oriental sort. He had large, dark eyes with clouded whites; his full, silken beard was of a flashing Persian blackness. He was excessively nervous, to such an extreme that when I first met him at Longfellow's he could not hold himself still in his chair. I think this was an effect of shyness in him, as well as physical, for afterwards when I went to find him in his own house he was much more at ease.

He preferred to receive me in the dim, large hall after opening his door to me himself, and we sat down there and talked, I remember, of supernatural things. He was much interested in spiritualism, and he had several stories to tell of his own experience in such matters. But none was so good as one which I had at second hand from Lowell, who thought it almost the best ghost story he had ever heard. The spirit of Willson's father appeared to him, and stood before him. Willson was accustomed to apparitions, and so he simply said, "Won't you sit down, father?" The phantom put out his hand to lay hold of a chair back as some people do in taking a seat, and his shadowy arm passed through the frame-work. "Ah!" he said,

"I really forgot that I was not substance." I do not know whether "The Old Sergeant" is ever read now; it has probably passed with other great memories of the great war; and I am afraid none of Willson's other verse is remembered. But he was then a distinct literary figure, and not to be left out of the count of our poets. I did not see him again. Shortly afterwards I heard that he had left Cambridge, with signs of consumption, which must have run a rapid course, for a very little while later came the news of his death.

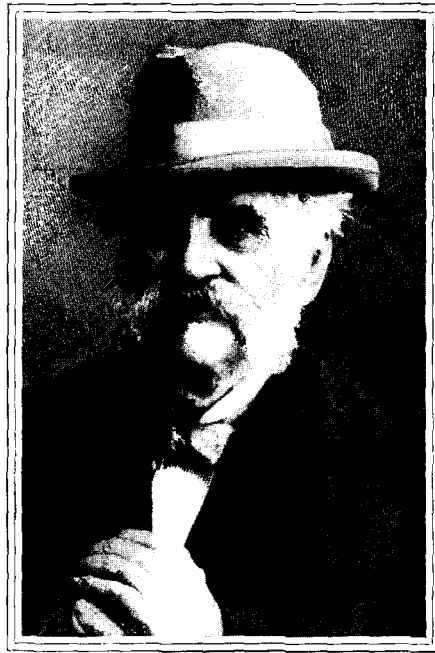
VIII

The most devoted Cantabrigian, after Lowell, whom I knew would perhaps have contended that if he had staid with us, Willson might have lived; for John Holmes affirmed a faith in the virtues of the place which ascribed almost an aseptic character to its air; and when he once listened to my own complaints of an obstinate cold, he cheered himself, if not me, with the declaration, "Well, one thing, Mr. Howells, Cam-

bridge never let a man keep a cold yet!"

If he had said it was better to live in Cambridge with a cold than elsewhere without one, I should have believed him; as it was, Cambridge bore him out in his assertion, though she took her own time to do it.

Lowell had told me of him before I met him, celebrating his peculiar humor with that affection which was not always so discriminating, and Holmes was one of the first Cambridge men I knew. I knew him first in the charming old Co-



JOHN HOLMES

lonial house in which his famous brother and he were born. It was demolished long before I left Cambridge, but in memory it still stands on the ground since occupied by the Hemenway Gymnasium, and shows for me through that bulk a phantom frame of Continental buff in the shadow of elms that are shadows themselves. The *genius loci* was limping about the pleasant mansion with the rheumatism which then expressed itself to his friends in a resolute smile, but which now insists upon being an essential trait of the full-length present to my mind: a short stout figure, helped out with a cane, and a grizzled head with features formed to win the heart rather than the eye of the beholder. In one of his own eyes there was a cast of such winning geniality that it took the liking more than any beauty could have done, and the sweetest shy-laugh in the world went with this cast.

I long wished to get him to write something for the magazine, and at last I prevailed with him to review a history of Cambridge which had come out. He did it charmingly, of course, for he loved more to speak of Cambridge than anything else. He held his native town in an idolatry which was not blind, but which was none the less devoted because he was aware of her droll points and weak points. He always celebrated these as so many virtues, and I think it was my passion for her that first commended me to him. I was not her son, but he felt that this was my misfortune more than my fault, and he seemed more and more to forgive it. After we had got upon the terms of editor and contributor, we met oftener than before, though I do not now remember that I ever persuaded him to write again for me. Once he gave me something, and then took it back, with a distrust of it which I could not overcome.

When the Holmes house was taken down, he went to live with an old domestic in a small house on the street amusingly called Appian Way. He had certain rooms of her, and his own table, but he would not allow that he was ever anything but a lodger in the place, where he continued till he died. In the process of time he came so far to trust his experience of me that he formed the

habit of giving me an annual supper. Some days before this event he would appear in my study, and with divers delicate approaches, nearly always of the same tenor, he would say that he would like to ask my family to an oyster supper with him. "But you know," he would explain, "I haven't a house of my own to ask you to, and I should like to give you the supper *here*." When I had agreed to this suggestion with due gravity, he would inquire our engagements, and then say, as if a great load were off his mind, "Well, then, I will send up a few oysters to-morrow," or whatever day we had fixed on; and after a little more talk to take the strangeness out of the affair, would go his way. On the day appointed the fishman would come with several gallons of oysters, which he reported Mr. Holmes had asked him to bring, and in the evening the giver of the feast would reappear, with a lank oilcloth bag, sagged by some bottles of wine. There was always a bottle of red wine, and sometimes a bottle of champagne, and he had taken the precaution to send some crackers beforehand, so that the supper would be as entirely of his own giving as possible. He was forced to let us do the cooking and supply the cold-slaw, and perhaps he indemnified himself for putting us to these charges, and for the use of our linen and silver, by the vast superfluity of his oysters, with which we remained inundated for days. He did not care to eat many himself, but seemed content to fancy doing us a pleasure; and I have known few greater ones in life, than in the hospitality that so oddly played the host to us at our own table.

It must have seemed incomprehensible to such a Cantabrigian that we should ever have been willing to leave Cambridge, and in fact I do not well understand it myself. But if he resented it, he never showed his resentment. As often as I happened to meet him after our defection he used me with unabated kindness, and sparkled into some gayety too ethereal for remembrance. The last time I met him was at Lowell's funeral, when I drove home with him and Curtis and Child, and in the revulsion from the stress of that saddest event, had our laugh, as people do in the presence of

death, at something droll we remembered of the friend we mourned.

IX

My nearest literary neighbor, when we lived in Sacramento Street, was the Rev. Dr. John G. Palfrey, the historian of New England, whose chimney-tops amid the pine-tops I could see from my study window when the leaves were off the little grove of oaks between us. He was one of the first of my acquaintances, not suffering the great disparity of our ages to count against me, but tactfully and sweetly adjusting himself to my youth in the friendly intercourse which he invited. He was a most gentle and kindly old man, with still an interest in liberal things, which lasted till the infirmities of age secluded him from the world and all its interests. As is known, he had been in his prime one of the most strenuous of the New England anti-slavery men, and he had fought the good fight with a heavy heart for a brother long settled in Louisiana who sided with the South, and who after the Civil War found himself disfranchised. In this temporary disability he came North to visit Dr. Palfrey upon the doctor's insistence, though at first he would have *nothing to do with him, and refused even to answer his letters.* "Of course," the doctor said, "I was not going to stand that from my mother's son, and I simply kept on writing." So he prevailed, but the fiery old gentleman from Louisiana was reconciled to nothing in the North but his brother, and when he came to return my visit, he quickly touched upon his cause of quarrel with us. "I can't vote," he declared, "but my coachman can, and I don't know how I'm to get the suffrage, unless my physician paints me all over with the iodine he's using for my rheumatic side."

Doctor Palfrey was most distinctly of the Brahminical caste, and was long an eminent Unitarian minister, but at the time I began to know him he had long quitted the pulpit. He was then so far a civic or public character as to be postmaster at Boston, but his officiality was probably so little in keeping with his nature that it was like a return to his truer self when he ceased to hold the place, and gave his time altogether to his his-

tory. It is a work which will hardly be superseded in the interest of those who value thorough research and temperate expression. It is very just, and without endeavor for picture or drama it is to me very attractive. Much that has to be recorded of New England lacks charm, but he gave form and dignity and presence to the memories of the past, and the finer moments of that great story he gave with the simplicity that was their best setting. It seems to me such an apology (in the old sense) as New England might have written for herself, and in fact Dr. Palfrey was a personification of New England in one of the best and truest kinds. He was refined in the essential gentleness of his heart without being refined away; he kept the faith of her Puritan tradition though he no longer kept the Puritan faith; and his defence of the Puritan severity with the witches and Quakers was as impartial as it was efficient in positing the Puritans as of their time, and rather better and not worse than other people of the same time. He was himself a most tolerant man, and his tolerance was never weak or fond; it stopped well short of condoning error, which he condemned when he preferred to leave it to its own punishment. *Personally he was without any flavor of harshness; his mind was as gentle as his manner, which was one of the gentlest I have ever known.*

X

Of like gentleness, but of a more pensive temper, with bursts of surprising lyrical gayety, was the poet Christopher Pearse Cranch, who came to live in Cambridge rather late in my own life there. I had already met him in New York at a house of literary sympathies and affiliations, where he had astonished me by breaking from his rather melancholy quiet and singing comic character songs; but again it was with a mixed emotion, for which I was not prepared by my former experience, that I heard him at Longfellow's supper table sing the old Yankee ballad, "On Springfield Mountain there did dwell." The tragical fate of the "young man" who was bitten by a rattlesnake on his native hill took a quality from the pathetic gravity of the singer which still affects me as heart-

breakingly funny. It was a delightful piece of art in its way, and Cranch could not only sing and play most amusing songs, but was as much painter as he was poet. I especially liked his pictures of Venice for their simple, unconventionalized, unsentimentalized reality, and I liked and printed many of his poems.

Troubles and sorrows accumulated themselves upon his fine head, which the years had whitened, and gave a droop to the beautiful face which had once been merry. I recall his presence with a tender regard, and I would fain do my part to keep his memory alive, for I think he did things that merit remembrance.

XI

Cambridge, as separable from Boston, was, I think, socially of a wider mind and finer spirit than Boston.

It would be rather hard to prove this, and I must ask the reader to take my word for it, if he wishes to believe it. The great interests in that pleasant world, which I think does not present itself to my memory in a false iridescence, were the intellectual interests, and all other interests were lost in these to such as did not seek them insistently. People held themselves high; they held themselves personally aloof from people not duly assayed; their civilization was still Puritan, though their belief had long ceased to be so. They had weights and measures stamped in an earlier time, a time surer of itself than ours, by which they rated the merit of new-comers, and rejected such as did not bear the test. These standards were their own, and

they were satisfied with them; most Americans have no standards of their own, but these are not satisfied even with other people's, and so our society is in a state of tolerant and tremulous misgiving. Family counted in Cambridge, without doubt, as it counts in New England everywhere, but family alone did not mean position, and the want of family did not mean the want of it. Money still less than family commanded; one could be openly poor in Cambridge without open shame, or shame at all, for no one was very rich there, and no one was proud of his riches. I do not wonder that Tourguénief thought the conditions as Boyesen portrayed them ideal; and I look back at my own life there with wonder at my good fortune. I was sensible, and I still am sensible this had its alloys. I was young and unknown and was making my way, and I had to suffer some of the penalties of these disadvantages; but I do not believe that anywhere else in this ill-contrived economy, where it is vainly imagined that the material struggle forms a high incentive and inspiration, would my penalties have been so light. On the other hand, the good that was done me I could never repay if I lived all over again for others the life that I have so long lived for myself. At times, when I had experienced from those elect spirits with whom I associated some act of friendship, as signal as it was delicate, I used to ask myself, how could I ever do anything unhandsome or ungenerous toward any one again; and I had a bad conscience the next time I did it.

SONG

BY ROBERT LOVEMAN

I WEEP so often now,
It may be death is near;
A calm is on my brow,
A song within mine ear.

I weep so often now—
Come faith and love and trust,
And teach me humbly how
The valiant go to dust