

## AN EARLIER AMERICAN.\*

BY W. D. HOWELLS.

NEXT to writing one's own autobiography, there is probably no pleasure literature can give greater than reading that of some one else. If this forms a study of one's own period, country and condition, then the pleasure is heightened to the level of the rapture which comes from seeing one's likeness in any form. The resemblance need not be very close; one readily ekes it out in the good points with a little imagination, and frankly disowns it where it is unflattering. In fact, one prefers, in the autobiographer, the sort of general similarity such as suggests itself through contemporaneity and parity of circumstance, and rather likes the difference of personal experience.

### I.

There was a far greater parity of circumstance among the Americans of Mr. William J. Stillman's time than exists among Americans now; but few even of his time could compete with him in the range of his experience, and fewer still, perhaps, could know his life without feeling akin to him in the traditions which formed a type of American now past, or rapidly and irrevocably passing. He was of a New England stock, in which the inherited Puritanism was condensed and intensified by the narrowness of a minute sect. He was born and bred a Seventh Day Baptist, and nurtured in the fear of God by parents who feared His exacting jealousy so much that they distrusted themselves in their natural love of their children, and crucified it in the unsparing severity of their family discipline. They were poor; the father was a ship-carpenter and fisherman, and the mother, of somewhat gentler origin, was of the same

\* "The Autobiography of a Journalist." By William James Stillman. In two volumes. Houghton, Mifflin & Co. 1901.

condition; and when they left Rhode Island and settled in eastern New York, they escaped neither from their poverty nor from their piety. There could be nothing more pathetic than the study of this in the mother by the youngest of her sons, whom it was her anguish to chasten in the fear of her awful God. But at Schenectady the boy was at least near to the heart of primitive nature. He began to know the woods, and to find there the sympathy which he returned with passion. He began to find himself there, a dreamer and, later, a painter; and after rebelling against the iron rule of his home by running away from it, he came back to comparative freedom from the rod. He went to school, and to the local college, and then he taught school; but all the time, before he had yet fairly conceived of art, he felt the artistic instinct stirring within him. An elder brother had prospered, and the means of sending the boy for study abroad were found. He saw London and Paris, and when he returned to America, he took up his life as a painter of the woods he knew as intimately as a trapper or hunter, and which he portrayed with absolute fidelity in a fanatical acceptance of the Preraphaelite superstition. He left painting a while to conduct an art journal, famous in its day; and when *The Crayon*, which had done as much for letters as the arts, came to its inevitable end, he found himself launched as a journalist, and got back to his painting only to convince himself that he was not an artist.

In the first years of the Civil War, after in vain offering himself as a soldier, he went as consul to Rome, and was later removed from that post and sent to Crete, where he arrived at the beginning of the revolt against the Turks in the latter eighties. He was at home in revolution; he had already indulged its wildest romance on a mission from Kossuth to the Hungarian patriots; and now he served the Cretans so well, within the bounds of duty to his own government and good faith with the Turks, that these offered him employment in their service after his consulate passed from him. He had taken up his sojourn in Athens, where, when his wife died, the city made the funeral a public function, as a sign of the honor and love in which the Greeks held him and his, and the Turkish service was impossible to him. He remained poor through all, and dependent on the work which so often failed him, and in search of which he passed back and forth between Europe and America, till the London *Times* recog-

nized the unique value of his talent and knowledge, and made him its controlling representative in Italy. There he remained till he felt himself superannuated, when he resigned his office to pass the leisure of his age in England, where he still lives, an eager witness of results, complete and incomplete, which were part of his experience while they were still causes and processes.

## II.

I shall probably not persuade many of the young and innocent (I will not say ignorant) people, who are presently giving their fresh minds to the absorption of our annals in the form of fiction, that this story of a peculiarly American life has all the charm of romance and all the value of history. But if I could only attract a few of them to it—say half a million or so—I should feel surer of my usefulness as a critic than I am always able to feel. I myself prefer that part of the story which relates to the earlier life of the author, and which is mainly psychological in its interest; but the whole book has the attraction of a comprehensive intelligence, an inflexible conscience, and an unsparing frankness concerning both the author and others, which find expression in a transparent and unaffected style. This characterizes the work throughout, and so does the curious union of personal intensity and intellectual detachment with which the book is written, and which relates itself equally to his private and his public career. By means of it, the status at Rome in the last years of Pius IX., or the last years of King Humbert, is as vividly presented and as clearly analyzed as the Turkish conditions during the author's Cretan consulship, or the facts of his childhood and youth in Schenectady, or those of his art study in London and Paris. The episode of his subjection to Ruskin and his emancipation from Ruskin's influence is told with neither more nor less fervor than that of the oppression of his home and his escape from it. Which is cold and which is hot, his heart or his head, it would not always be easy to say; the reader cannot immediately be sure of the author's impartiality, but finally of his justice he can be tolerably sure. Events and persons are shown in that mixture of mean and great, good and bad, which forms the complexion of reality, and may be pretty safely trusted, when all is said and done, as a fair likeness, though there might be likenesses quite as fair, which would be

quite different. It seems to me that the glimpse of Kossuth, in his willingness to use the young enthusiast for his purposes, and then to disown his action, is a case in point.

But, of course, the main thing in autobiography is the author's portrait of himself; and Mr. Stillman cannot be said to flatter his own. He lets his errors and defects be seen; and, in the record of his life of struggle, he is fair to the friends who made themselves his allies and helped him to win the fight. It is no easy matter to do so, for the man who is content with little is peculiarly tempted to mistake his willingness to go without much for an ability to go without anything. But Mr. Stillman, who seems to have an ideal indifference to the objects of sordid ambition, does not make this mistake. Some of the most inspiring records of his varied past bear witness to the practical sympathy which an ideal life appeals to in those unable to live it themselves. He found this again and again in those of his own home, and in those of that home of the race, the world. His friends he recognizes as frankly as his foes; and, since these foes of his are all dead, and cannot be offended by his remembrance, there is something even amusing in the mediæval immortality of his rancor. He recalls Benvenuto Cellini in his rancor, and his whole sincerity as a man and as an autobiographer is probably attested by nothing so much.

We are sometimes apt to put on an hypocrisy concerning those no longer alive to injure us, which we mistake for a magnanimous relenting; but Mr. Stillman does not fall into any such error, though he may possibly have overdone justice in the case of some obscure offenders, who would now be forgotten if they could have been forgiven. Still, there is no great harm, and the effect is one which could not well be spared in his self-portraiture. The picture is Preraphaelite in its fidelities, as Preraphaelite as those transcripts from nature, from which, when he found them taken for mechanical representations of the fact, he paused in his artistic ambition with question whether he was or was not an artist, and in the persistent doubt, finally relinquished his art altogether. It is for the critic of art to decide from his paintings, whether he was right or wrong; but I think there can be no question of the historical value of the study he has made in himself of an American type which is one of the most distinctive contributions to the gallery of national types.

## III.

Next in value to the self-portraiture of the author are the portraits of his father and mother, Americans shaped by influences which now seem extinct among us, but not more extinct than those which shaped the author himself. His mother, as happens, or used to happen, so often with us, was the intelligence, which operated itself through the character of the father as well as her own; but they were powers strictly co-ordinate, and his will was as often law over her. He could say to his son, and mean it, that he would rather see him in his grave than in a dancing-school, and that he would not have him "eat the bread of idleness," as he seemed to be doing when the mystical forces at work in the boy were moving him to ends unimaginable to the hard-headed carpenter. She was even more austere, but it was she who battled for his future with the father, and won for the boy such chance as he had in school and college. The anguish which underlay her austerity, and which was the effect of the continual struggle between her tender affection and her cruel religion, could not hide itself from her son. He knew that she suffered with him in the punishments she inflicted, and he drew from the deep sources of her piety a lasting trust and belief in Providence: a providence different, indeed, from that she worshipped, but as constant to human need. He affirms this again and again with the mysticism which is one of the fascinations of his story.

The America which he typifies was the reaction from a yet earlier America, which apparently came to an end in such character as that of his parents. But a reaction is never a complete severance: it is oftener an affirmation of identity, and the America of 1850-60 had far more in common with that of 1800 than with that of 1900. Between 1850 and 1900, events have fixed a gulf toward which the uninterrupted course of evolution in the earlier half century did not even seem tending. The America of that time, now obscured by a wholly different ideal, was a growth from the still earlier time; and though it had escaped the terrible religiosity of the past, and had set its heart upon beauty as it understood beauty with an ardor we no longer know, it was still with a wish to realize truth, if not faith, in conduct.

It was very small, very remote, very provincial and almost comically earnest, that America which such a story as Mr. Stillman's rehabilitates for the imagination. It wished to cultivate itself, to refine itself; it believed that there was a moral government of the universe, and that it had a soul which should live after death, and might return here to haunt terrestrial chairs and tables. It wished to go to Italy and see the old masters, to London and meet the great poets and novelists, to Germany and study philosophy, to Paris and learn the world. Its ambitions and aspirations were such as prevail now with the lower middle classes, and which permeate the basis of society, but do not rise to its superstructure. The case is not so much that it has passed away, that old America, but that it has escaped from us to the alien and the stranger, as it seems at least to the elderly reader in whose consciousness this most suggestive book has reanimated its presence. It exists still for the American of Irish, Italian, Polish, Hungarian, Russian race, it will always exist while there is adversity in the world; and the type may be merely passing from us to those other peoples who are economically and socially subject to us, and in whom it may be varied through their traditions beyond our recognition, but will remain essentially the same. It will be varied also by the want of the earlier elbow-room, in which the American who failed at one thing could turn his hand to something else, and was often overtempted to do so merely because he tired of the first thing. In our modern conditions, it will be increasingly difficult for a man to leave being a painter to become the editor of an art journal, and then to leave that and become a consul with diplomatic duties of delicacy and importance, and then represent different great newspapers at high events, and accomplish a "beat" with the zeal and nerve of a young man; and after sundry reversions to his own country; to end his many activities as the correspondent of the first journal of Europe, at the most important centre of news in Europe. But through the flexibility of our past conditions, this could be the experience of an American of Mr. Stillman's make in Mr. Stillman's day; and it, or the like of it, was so often the experience of the former American, that the versatile and adventurous type, as often constant to a generous ideal as not, was the national type.

It is a type which you may like or you may not like; our

author is concerned only with imparting the sense of it, and I think he will freshly interest the reader in it. I am not so sure that I shall make the reader agree with me in my fancy that it became obsolescent in the immediate past, or, say, that epoch which ended beyond recall in the Spanish War. The events that have followed that war seem to imply the close of the peculiar mission of America to mankind. We shall probably be richer and we shall be stronger even than we are now, but the American shall hardly again be the son of the morning, toward which the struggling peoples turned their eyes with the hope at least of sympathy. There is a logic as relentless for nations as for men; the tree brings forth fruit after its kind; so long ago as 1850, when Kossuth came, crazily hoping for help from us in the Hungarian revolt against Austria, he found himself denied by the slaveholding South which ruled the non-slaveholding North. Wealth and power can sympathize only with wealth and power, and freedom, so far as it remains ours, will never again shriek when Kosciusko falls.

But will the Americans of the future be men of as eager initiative as the Americans of the past? Was there some virtue in early privation and struggle and long adversity, more vital than the incentive from what we call advantages; and was a man more fitted to fulfill himself, or to get the most out of his gifts, by being born poor, and bred a Seventh Day Baptist, under the rigor of the unsparing and unsparing rod, and forced to rend from life the chance of art? Cannot we, except upon some such terms as these, live or long to live in the ideal; and what then is the ideal? Largely speaking, it is the heart's desire, the thing one would give up everything else for and willingly lose the world. It is the love of a cause, an art or a science. But need we any longer give up everything else for any of these? Have we not reasonably the hope that the heart's desire may now be attained at less cost, at no cost at all? If we have relegated to Americans of other race, religion, tradition, the old American ideal, have we therefore forbidden ourselves to live in the ideal, after some new fashion? *Must* we live hard, in order to think high? Study by the fire of the cabin hearth, snow through the roof, washing at the pump, breakfasting on corn bread and pickled pork, bare feet in summer and chilblains in winter, formed the prefatory incidents in the history of so many great



Americans that they have established themselves in the imagination as the conditions of greatness; but a careful scrutiny of the context might not find them so. They have now their versions mainly in the experiences of the foreign tenement-house dwellers, and if they are the conditions of American greatness we must look to the tenement houses for our future distinction, or else we must more and more accept the sort of distinction which does not proceed from achievement.

## IV.

It is a curious effect of adversity, or privation, or downright destitution, that those who have known it, if they no longer know it, look back upon it with a tenderness which turns to indignation when any sort of discredit seems cast upon it. Many Americans of the generation when poverty seemed the whole condition of living in the ideal, must have felt personally wounded when, a little while ago, an American admiral advised a shipmate of low degree against promotion, because whatever his achievement, he was liable some time to find himself in circumstances, especially in alien waters, where his early want of social advantages might embarrass him among better-born or better-bred officers of other navies. Napoleon's ideal of *la carrière ouverte aux talents* was apparently not so much this American's but that he could see some difficulties in its realization; but though his reasoning logically impugned the efficiency of Franklin in the atmosphere of a court so different as that of Louis XVith's from the air of a printing office, and implied that Lincoln would have been more adequately a president if he had not grown up a farm-hand and a flat-boatman, yet one could not blame the admiral for want of sincerity or, finally, for want of right. He really was right in the point he made, and not the less right because a man of more tact might not have made it. The question remains, however, whether the point was important enough to be urged, or, in other words, whether the realities or the unrealities are the ideal thing. If the ideal thing for all officers of our navy is to meet the officers of other navies on the plane of an equal social past, then we had better not open the career to the talents there; but if the ideal is being able to blow inimical officers out of the water in a sea-fight, then a promoted gunner might very fitly be in command. The admiral could answer, of



course, that the ideal thing was for an American officer to be socially the equal of his brother-enemies, and also to be able on occasion to blow them out of the water.

Most Americans of a past generation would insist that the ability to blow your enemies out of the water was the essential, and equality in the exchange of international civilities a matter of no great moment. They might be right and they might be wrong; but, if wrong, it is up to the American of the newer order to show how one may have had all the advantages, and not lost touch with those who have had all the disadvantages. That, in the large way and in the small way, was once supposed to be the meaning of America. If it is no longer her meaning, and if she has become like unto the thrones, principalities and powers which deny the unity of men, then it is up to her younger children to prove that she has gone forward and not backward, or that it is as practicable to live in the ideal under the new conditions as under the old.

It will not do to insist that it is wholly impracticable; and the philosophical observer will guard himself against any sort of hasty conclusion from premises which may be significant to others of quite different things. His duty in this will not be less because his difficulty will be great in overcoming in himself the generous dread each passing generation feels that the next is not going to be like it. While we really must put trust in the moral government of the universe, there is nothing that gives us more anxiety than the order of an all-wise Providence. The world is in its keeping, and yet the world, in the apprehension of every man who has lived to be sixty years old, has apparently always been going to the bad. It is very droll as well as very sad, to reflect that at this very moment, doubtless, the great majority of Americans who have reached their grand climacteric are desolated by the bleak conviction that they are the last of the true Americans; and the worst of it is, they have only too much reason to think so, if the writer may, without sharing their impiety, make an admission that so clearly gives away his epoch. Once in our national consciousness, at least, to the mystification of the unbelieving and impenitent world outside, we stood for something different from anything a people had stood for before. Call it universal liberty or instinctive justice, or even by the tedious name of humanity, it was something novel and brave and gen-

crous, and it differenced us from all the monarchies limited and unlimited, the conquerors, the oppressors. Of course, there were very obvious breaks in our celestial panoply, such as a matter of six or eight million slaves, but as long as we went confidently about convicting other nations of sin and teaching the straight and narrow way by precept, if not altogether by practice, it was imputed to us for righteousness in their muddy imaginations, and we were able to keep a very fair sort of conscience; not perfectly clean, but reasonably easy. The illusion, if it was an illusion, was what Ibsen would have called our national life-lie, but it fostered our self-respect; it honored our origin, at once so high and so humble, and was favorable to the ambition of such of us as meant noble achievement, while keeping faithfully to the tradition of poverty and its implication of self-denial.

## V.

Perhaps we can still trust in Providence to be true to responsibilities not rashly assumed in the creation of the world. All the good in the world did not perish with our fathers who had such admirable sons; and have we been so wasteful of our patrimony as to have none of it left to hand down to the next generation? It may be allowed that to live in the ideal is increasingly difficult, but it is always possible. Once it implied privation and distasteful toil; but it may not have necessarily implied those things; and the good time may now have come when it implies them no longer. It may be practicable now to live in the ideal amidst all the comforts and luxuries with which the average man has nowhere so richly surrounded himself as in America. This ideal life, like that of the past, must be a life of self-denial, but why should not one lead it by crossing one's selfish impulses for good? If one hated, say, fashion and play and show, and loved simplicity and work and quiet, one could as truly deny one's self by going in for the things one hated, as if they were virtues; and there may already be many martyrs of this sort in the world. One might like to be friendly and equal with everybody and yet oblige one's self to a stiff hauteur. One might wish to give away one's millions, and yet hold on to them in the face of all sorts of worthy charities. One might be ashamed of one's superfluities in conditions where there is so much want, and yet not abate them. All this would not be exactly the old life in the

ideal, but it might be the highest kind of self-denial, which was the beginning of that life.

One of the most delightful chapters of Mr. Stillman's book is that dealing with the Adirondack Club, which he formed of Emerson, Lowell, Agassiz and other lights of New England literature and science, and led into the wilderness so intimately known to him; and one of the most delightful episodes of this chapter is that recounting the greeting which the Adirondack backwoodsmen gave their adoptive fellow citizen. They ignored the poets and philosophers, but they compared Agassiz with a photograph they had of him, and when their leader had identified him beyond mistake, they each silently shook hands with him and so welcomed him to the wilderness, not because he was the greatest living scientist, but because he had refused Louis Napoleon's splendid offer of a senatorship if he would come to Paris, and had chosen to abide with America in the love of freedom.

Possibly if some idealist of the type which I have not, I am afraid, been very successfully forecasting, went to the backwoods now he might receive a like welcome. The difficulty would be in finding any such idealizing backwoodsmen to give it; and this may be the saddest part of it all.

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