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CYRUS H. K. CURTIS

AN ADDRESS TO
COLLEGE STUDENTS



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By

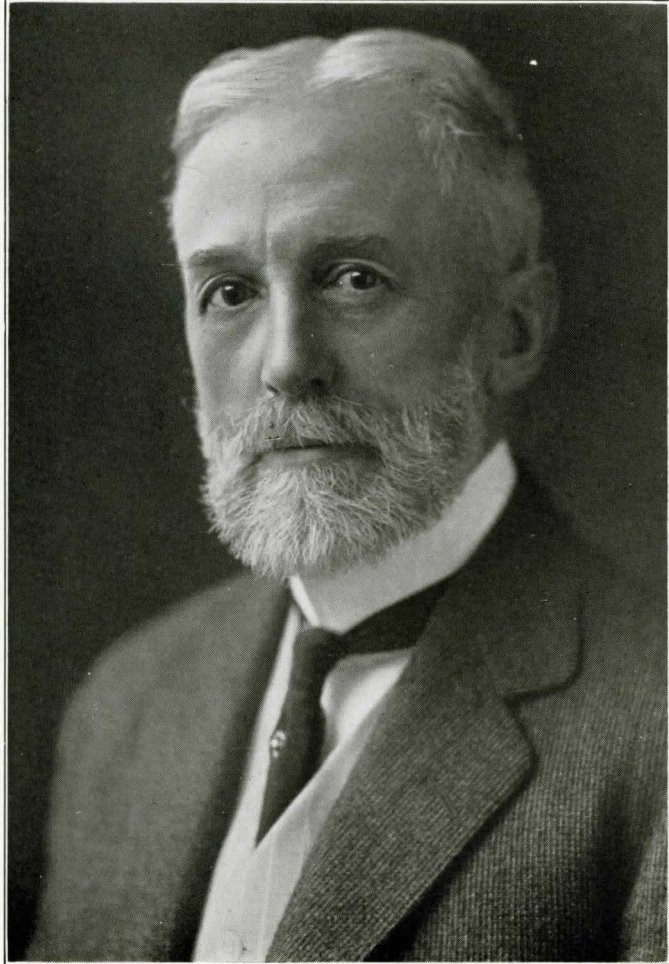
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President of Ursinus College



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Cyrus H. Curtis

Cyrus H. K. Curtis

ON JUNE SEVENTH, last, just two days after the ceremonies marking the dedication of the new Science Building, there passed away in his home at Wyncote, the man who made possible that magnificent addition to our equipment, and who was the main inspiration of the recent extraordinary development of Ursinus College. It is fitting that on this, the first academic occasion following the death of Cyrus H. K. Curtis, we should take account of his life, and observe especially those traits of character which so profoundly influence and inspire all whose privilege it was to know this remarkable man. Especially important is it that those who are to benefit directly from his benefactions to Ursinus—the teachers and students who work here, should know what manner of man he was.

It is a singularly delicate task—one which I approach with hesitation, to portray with justice the career of Mr. Curtis. For more than twenty years he stood at the head of our Advisory Council. In this capacity I came not only to know the man but to respect him with a feeling akin to wonder. As the works of his genius rose higher and higher about him and extended wider and

wider throughout the world, the qualities which differentiated him from the rest of men naturally became magnified, yet they were so hidden in his nature as to baffle identification.

He did not wish to be considered different from his fellow men. Consequently there was in and about him an air of democracy that rendered approach to him on the part of his acquaintances easy and pleasant. This complete avoidance of affectation—the manifest sincerity of his soul, won many warm friends. Yet he was not a seeker of friendships. His circle of friends included only those who by natural contacts and through ordinary channels, he came to know. But even these soon learned to recognize the proof of his friendship in kind deeds and not in effusive speech. Thus when I took the plans of the Science Building to him he did not say—What wonderful plans they are! He did say “I’ll give you One Hundred Thousand Dollars toward the building.” Then a month or two later when he came to make good his promise he doubled the amount. That was the way Mr. Curtis let you know that he was your friend. One could always be sure that he thought and felt much more than was indicated by the laconic statements that crossed his lips. As the years of our acquaintance rolled around my feeling of respect toward him, grew to esteem,

then to admiration, and in the later years, to genuine affection. In his death I shared the feeling of many others—that of irreparable loss. Tonight with thankfulness in my heart so profound as to almost overwhelm my ideas, I shall endeavor to tell you some things about Mr. Curtis, not with a view to paying tribute to him—he needs not that, but rather to set before you certain elements of character and traits of behavior, that will help you shape your lives.

In the first place I would remind you that there was nothing magical in Mr. Curtis's success in life. We see him now a newsboy selling papers on the streets of Portland for a few pennies, and now a publisher in Philadelphia with publications going to the ends of the earth in editions counted by millions; and we think, presto, what magic! But between these two stages in his career lay decades of patient, earnest, painstaking work fraught at times with disastrous set-backs—such as would have deflected many a lesser man from his course. It was a long way from Cyrus Curtis, newsboy, to Cyrus Curtis publisher, civic leader and philanthropist.

“The heights by great men reached and kept,
Were not attained by sudden flight;
But they, while their companions slept,
Were toiling upward in the night.”

Taken step by step, there is nothing really phenomenal in the career of Mr. Curtis. While yet a school-boy he began selling papers with a capital of three cents. For better pay he changed from an evening to a morning paper, and for four long, cold, Maine State winters, rose at a quarter before four o'clock to serve his routes, sell additional papers on his own account, get back to breakfast, and off to school. As he contemplated the pack of papers under his arm, he cherished the ambition of producing himself the papers he should sell. At fourteen he began issuing a paper of his own, *Young America*. For this he went to Boston and bought a second-hand press that had been discarded, for \$2.50. The next year his entire outfit was lost in the great Portland fire. In fact the family was burned out of house and home. At this stage the boy left school and entered upon a full-time business career. He became errand boy in a dry-goods store at \$3.00 a week. Three years passed around and he was a salesman behind the counter.

At nineteen an offer of \$2.00 a week advance took him to a store in Boston. He had not been there long until he secured, on the side, the job of soliciting advertising for a publisher. He used half his noon hour in this way. This soon became the more remunerative and when his contract was

up at the end of a year he left the store and gave all his time to the publishing concern. Soon he moved on to the *Boston Times*. Presently he was running a paper of his own, *The People's Ledger*. Having been disappointed in his partner, he became obliged to take over the paper without a cent of capital. He became involved in a debt to his printer which he was unable to pay until years afterward but which he did pay with interest and more.

At twenty-five he married, and next year, visited the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia where he found that he could save \$1,500 a year in the printing of his paper. He liked Philadelphia and moved to this city. In 1878 he sold the *People's Ledger* and took a position on the *Philadelphia Press* at a salary of \$15.00 a week and 25 per cent. commission on advertising. Soon the paper was filled with advertising. When he was twenty-nine his brother-in-law lent him \$2,000 and he started once more a paper of his own, *The Tribune and Farmer*. He conducted a "Woman's Department" in the paper, which was so ably edited by Mrs. Curtis, that he found it was really selling the paper. This he converted into an independent supplement of eight pages, and here we have the beginning of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. He had a partner whose busi-

ness ideas gave him anxiety and they separated, the partner taking the *Tribune and Farmer* and Mr. Curtis taking the *Ladies' Home Journal*. The *Tribune and Farmer* became lost to the world but not so the *Ladies' Home Journal*. With a clear field ahead, the *Journal* grew from 25,000 copies to 50,000 in six months, in another six months, the circulation was 100,000, then 200,000, then 400,000, and so on up into the millions.

How much Mr. Curtis was indebted to his wife for the success of the *Ladies' Home Journal* can hardly be estimated. Louisa Knapp whom he married in Boston in 1875, had been private secretary to Dr. Samuel G. Howe. She was a woman of intellectuality and refinement. Sometime after the Woman's Department had been started in the *Tribune and Farmer*, she turned her critical eye upon it and told her husband she could produce a better column herself. After that the department was edited by Mrs. Curtis's pen and not with her husband's scissors. When it became the eight-page supplement, she took editorial charge and continued in this capacity during the earlier years of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. She worked hand in hand with her husband. Neither could have met their task alone, but together they completely mastered it. While she thus counselled

and co-operated with her husband, she neglected not the duties of her household, and withal reared a daughter worthy to become the wife of her distinguished successor in the editorial chair of the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and who as Mrs. Edward W. Bok has made a place for herself and achieved a reputation of her own as a civic leader, patron of the arts and benefactor.

The circulation of the *Ladies' Home Journal* was increasing so fast that its owner lacked the means to keep up with it. He was short of money but, as in earlier years, he had the complete confidence of those with whom he had business relations. At times he owed them large sums of money and had borrowed heavily from banks, so that even in middle life Mr. Curtis was yet a hard working business man, hampered with debts, and impeded in progress by heavy interest charges. However, his experience in printing, his knowledge of the publishing business, his skill in securing advertising, his native ability at salesmanship, and his wise choice of assistants far over-balanced the debts and ere long he was on the way to wealth.

The story of the *Saturday Evening Post*, of the *Country Gentleman*, and of the launching out into the newspaper field covers the next twenty years—the years in which he grew rapidly into

wealth and in which he concurrently became Philadelphia's great philanthropist. The last ten years of his life were devoted largely to giving. He exercised the same discriminating judgment in disbursing his wealth as he had employed in accumulating it. He said on one occasion that he was helping Ursinus College because of the kind of students they have there. He had in mind the large numbers who, maintaining high standards of scholarship, have to save and struggle with financial difficulties to get through. At another time, when he was congratulated by a neighbor on one of the gifts he had made to Ursinus, he remarked that he had confidence in the management of the institution. Mr. Curtis enjoyed earning money but he got his greatest pleasure in the benevolent use of it.

A man like Mr. Curtis is no mere accident in this world. His achievements were largely the results of a planned life. He was endowed by nature with valuable elements of character. These were highly potential assets, but uncultivated and unemployed they would have yielded little. He would have been first to give credit to his parents, to his music teacher, and later in life to his wife, and doubtless to others whose identity is unknown to us, yet Cyrus H. K. Curtis was preëminently a self-made man. The significant

choices of his life were made by himself. It can truly be said that he had an eye to business, yet his chosen line of activity had a wide and benevolent objective reference. His publications brought to him material success, but more important than the Curtis fortune is the benefit to American life which has accrued from the wide reading of the Curtis publications. Ursinus College was the first institution of learning to recognize Mr. Curtis's contribution to the improvement of society when, on an academic occasion marking the beginning of the present administration in 1913, he was awarded the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws. One of the reasons for the bestowal of this distinction as given in the speech of presentation by Mr. H. E. Paisley, president of our Board, was "his unparalleled contribution to society in building up the Home."

"Principle before profit" was an axiom with him. He placed such strict requirements on the advertisements that should appear in his publications that he was in position to announce to his readers that "the Curtis Publishing Company would be personally responsible for any loss incurred by any reader through any purchase based upon any advertisement in the *Ladies' Home Journal*." His unalterable position on this matter

led him on one occasion when there was not enough money on hand to meet the pay roll, to return a check for \$18,000 because it was for an advertisement that his rules would not permit him to accept. He once offered Louisa M. Alcott a hundred dollars if she would write a column article for the *Journal*. After much persuasion she accepted the commission, and when the manuscript was received he promptly sent the one hundred dollars. Later when it appeared in print he saw that it occupied nearly two columns, whereupon he immediately sent her another hundred dollars.

In appearance he presented a neat figure. Although modest and unassuming, he dressed with care and exercised good taste in the selection of clothes. On the occasion of the first call I ever made upon him I found him at his desk in an elegant office in the new building of the Curtis Publishing Company. As I seated myself on one side he turned about in his swivel chair, and there before me was a sartorial ensemble that evidenced, even in wearing apparel, the disposition toward good taste so characteristic of its owner. It was a spring morning and he wore a light gray suit of soft texture, white vest and a purple tie which contrasted in pleasing manner the neat beard which adorned his face and which at that

time was already well mixed with gray. I shall never forget the picture. In somewhat similar attire he sat years later for a portrait. In stature he was a little under the average. In the early days a woman canvasser down in Maine sent in a good many subscriptions to the *Ladies' Home Journal* and always addressed them to Mr. Curtis personally instead of to the Company. Years afterward when at his summer home in Maine, he resolved to call on this woman. When he announced who he was she said, "I always thought of you as looking like Abraham Lincoln. If, when canvassing, I had met you and found what a little fellow you are, I do not believe I would have kept up the work." But she would have done so just the same. What Mr. Curtis lacked in avoirdupois he more than made up in personality.

His mind was photographic. His ideas were instantaneous and he acted upon them almost as quickly. Those who knew him well say he was absolutely unargumentative. In board meetings he sat silent. When he did speak it was to state his mind in briefest terms and in positive statements. When a matter was concluded he dismissed it and turned to something else. "That's settled" was one of his familiar expressions. He relied with complete confidence on his own intuitions. He carried about in his own mind gigantic

plans without discussing them with anybody. If perchance he did get another's judgment he was little influenced by it if it did not agree with his own. When he bought the old and decrepit *Saturday Evening Post* and projected it along the lines so familiar to all, everybody said he was making a mistake. They told him men did not want a weekly and that they would not read business stories. But from his boyhood days in Boston he remembered a type of business story written by one Richard B. Kimball, and he was satisfied in his own mind that articles and stories reflecting modern business ideals and methods would fill a need. He went ahead with his own ideas, and the result is even beyond what constituted his own mental picture.

Another fact worth noting in this connection is that he thought in large terms and projected his achievements on a large scale. Seldom, if ever, did he recede from a position nor did he counsel others to do so. When the Alumni built the Memorial Library on this campus, the Committee became discouraged. They feared they could not raise enough money to build the building as originally planned, and were about to leave off the wings with the thought of possibly adding them later. I consulted our Advisory Council about such a procedure and Mr. Curtis said, "No,

the building is not large enough to put it up in parts. I'll send you \$5,000 toward it." That was his first gift to Ursinus, and the Library did not have its wings clipped. His reaction was similar when we came to erect the Science Building. When bids were gotten on the specifications there was such a wide gap between the amount required and the sum in hand, that I had to inform Mr. Curtis that our Board did not see its way clear to go ahead. He had already contributed largely toward the project, but instead of writing back that we should cut down the plans, he wrote that he would send another hundred thousand dollars. As a result we have not a curtailed and contracted science building, but one that measures up to the ideas of our benefactor, and will be a fitting monument to his friendship and generosity.

Of Mr. Curtis's interest in church, in music, art and literature, in golf and yachting, his fondness for home, his travels in this country and abroad, I have not time to speak. He cultivated an interest in these activities as he passed up through the crowded years of his business career, so that when at length he turned over to his younger associates the chief responsibilities for the large interests he had established, he was not lacking in enjoyable recreation. Marked by his

physician for a serious breakdown at fifty, he brought himself, including his over-worked nervous system, under such complete discipline, that he lived in comparative health and comfort to the ripe age of more than four score years. A few days ago I asked the young woman who had been his secretary for the last ten years what she considered to be the outstanding characteristic of Mr. Curtis. She answered thoughtfully but without hesitation, "His simplicity."

In this narrative I have not labelled for your adoption the very evident elements of character which brought success to this man, nor have I moralized as I have set forth his inescapable virtues. His life as a whole challenges every worthy ambition. To this and to all succeeding generations of Ursinus students the name of Cyrus H. K. Curtis, now permanently enshrined in this College, will be an ever present admonition to achieve the best things in life.

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