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WINTER AND SPRINGTIME: THE PASSING OF A LITERARY GENERATION IN 1901

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If any trend was discernible in letters among the elderly literary lights at the turn of the century, it was social progress, tinged with bewilderment and frustration. A general literary pattern is always hard to determine, because as John Borroughs, the famous naturalist, expressed it, "every writer of genius expresses a truth of his own, because he sees things from a particular, individual point of view."¹ The literary production of this elder generation varied from historical novels, such as Lewis Wallace's Ben Hur to books criticizing the current economic conditions, illustrated by William D. Howells' A Traveller From Altruria. Likewise, Yankee humor was best expressed by Samuel L. Clemens' books such as The Adventures of Tom Sawyer and Innocents Abroad.

In addition to keeping step with a changing social scene, the older writers also had the problems of illness and approaching death, and the age-old rivalry with the younger writers who were trying to replace them on the literary stage. In 1901, however, a number of the elderly group still had a firm grasp on their pens. The dean of the ancients was William D. Howells. In 1900 he had acquired the editor's "easy chair" of Harper's Monthly, and from this turret he exercised a wide influence on literary public opinion. Howells' influence, however, had a slightly changing emphasis. In 1886 when he moved from Boston to New York, he had also revised his philosophy. Prior to that time he had written a realistic type of literature with romantic overtones characteristic of Jane Austen and Alphonse Daudet. In New York he moved to the left socially and politically, first to Leo Tolstoy and Thomas Hardy, and then to Henry George and Edward Bellamy. As a result, his writing assumed a new tone. A Traveller from Altruria and Through the Eye of a Needle were illustrative of his changed philosophy. In these novels, Howells portrayed a society harrassed by the irresponsibility of acquisitive capitalism, the evils of industrialism, and the disintegration of traditional standards of morality. His break with the past was philosophical rather than material, but he did set the stage for the younger social reformers like Hamlin Garland, Stephen Crane, Frank Norris, and Jack London.²

¹Clara Barrus, The Heart of Borrough's Journals (Boston and New York, 1928), 214.

²Henry S. Commager, The American Mind: An Interpretation of American Character Since the 1880's (New Haven, Connecticut, 1950), 59-60.

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Although Howells in 1901 continued to champion these reform writers, his ardor was cooling in his later years. He was still a socialist but continued to wear a fur-lined overcoat and live in luxury. In 1900 he published Literary Friends and Acquaintances, a reminiscent work, recalling how he had liked Hawthorne, misunderstood Thoreau, and disagreed with Emerson. On November 20, Howells wrote to the noted poet, Thomas B. Aldrich of Boston, that he was always longing for the solitude which the latter described, but he seemed unable to leave New York. Howells confessed that his wife and he had decided that they were too old to live in the country. They had lost their teeth and felt the increasing need of a dentist nearby. The elderly New Yorker added that he was reading Horace E. Scudder's Life of Lowell with a constant dull ache for the days that were no more.

One of Howells' closest friends, Samuel L. Clemens, was living at Riverdale-on-the-Hudson, a short distance from New York. The aged cynic was far enough away to be beyond the reach of all socials he did not wish to attend. Samuel L. Clemens was relatively content among his palisades and steamboats.³ Howells visited his old friend often, and they had great times denouncing everything, especially the Boer and Filipino Wars. The Harper's Monthly editor said that the former Mississippi River pilot was receiving some hard knocks from people for his righteous fun with President William McKinley's attempt to colonize the Philippines, but was gaining firm friends also. On October 23, both Clemens and Howells were awarded an honorary Doctor of Literature Degree from Yale.⁴

Like Howells, Mark Twain was old; but age, instead of mellowing him, made him increasingly bitter. In one of his last books, The Mysterious Stranger, begun in 1898, Clemens had the hero say that there was no God, no universe, no human race, no earthly life, and no hell. Life was a dream, said the mysterious stranger, grotesque and foolish. Nothing existed but the person, and he was a vagrant, useless, homeless thought wandering forlorn among the empty eternities. The American humorist had reasons for bitterness. His child, "Susy," had died, his wife was an invalid, and he had lost most of his money. To complete his pessimism, he was by na-

³Oscar W. Firkins, William Dean Howells: A Study (Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1924), 17; William D. Howells to Thomas B. Aldrich, November 20, 1901, Mildred Howells, ed., Life in Letters of William Dean Howells (Garden City, New York, 1928, II, 150).

⁴Howells to Miss Aurelia Howells, February 24, 1901; Howells to Samuel L. Clemens, October 15, 1901, Howells, ed., William D. Howells, II, 142, 148.

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ture a worrier. Clemens had made a fortune from his writings, but the wealth had evaporated. His dream of becoming a millionaire by a stroke of luck had never forsaken him. Thus, bonanza fever made him a life-long victim to gold bricks and dazzling inventions. He lost hundreds of thousands of dollars on the Paige typesetting machine, and in a publishing firm which went bankrupt under the management of his son-in-law, Charles L. Webster.⁵ In order to pay his debts, Clemens had to go on a lecture tour.

As a result of years and worry, Mark Twain in 1901 appeared shockingly old. He had become a small, hesitant, white-haired gentleman. Many of his western qualities had been planed away or softened by quiet city life.⁶ As a final indication of Mark Twain's mental depression, he was complaining that when one was young a dollar would buy a hundred exquisite pleasures. But when one became old and had the dollar, one could find nothing worth buying. On this comment, the Bedford, Indiana, Daily Mail remarked that the trouble was not in the dollar but in Mark.⁷

Another dissatisfied, elderly literary man was Henry Adams. A thorough scholar, his best historical effort was an eight-volume work on the administration of Jefferson and Madison. His most controversial studies, Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres, and The Education of Henry Adams, displayed his disillusionment with the "so-called" progress of civilization. His theories ended in futility. He applied science to history and arrived at the conclusion that culture would eventually be destroyed through the second law of thermo-dynamics, namely, the dissipation of energy. In the thirteenth century, he saw unity; while in the twentieth, he saw multiplicity and ultimate decay. He concluded that the harnessing of natural energy was putting men in chains rather than setting them free. Men in the twentieth century, he said, were being educated by bombs which doubled in number and power each decade.⁸

Traveling in Europe in September 1901, Adams thought that even social customs were declining. Formerly, when he had gone abroad the people on board ship had been sociable and friendly. On this trip, the old cynic complained that the only people he talked to were

⁵Ralph D. Blumenfeld, In the Days of Bicycles and Bustles: The Diary of R. D. Blumenfeld, 1883-1914 (London, 1930), 168; Albert B. Paine, Mark Twain, A Biography: The Personal and Literary Life of Samuel Langhorne Clemens (New York and London, 1912). III, 1140.

⁶Hamlin Garland, Companions on the Trail: A Literary Chronicle (New York, 1931), 52, 56.

⁷Bedford, Indiana, Daily Mail, September 9, 1901, p. 2, c. 1.

⁸Henry Adams, The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography (Boston and New York, 1927), 434-35.

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stewards and hotel managers.⁹ Like Mark Twain, the fault was probably not to be found in the other passengers, but in him.

The father of the western local color stories, Bret Harte, was also abroad, on an extended visit in London, England. There were several reasons why he lived in England. His residence in London was partly due to the fact that he was able to obtain more for his writings there. Also, he did not wish to live with his wife, and his residence in England gave him an excuse for not being with her.¹⁰ In addition, he liked the soothing effect of the climate. He ate more, worried less, and became a happier "animal." However, Harte's sojourn abroad did not help his writing. His inspiration dried up, and he spent his final years imitating himself in copious fashion. During 1901 Bret Harte suffered from cancer of the throat, but he kept at his work. From his headquarters at Seventy-Four Lancaster Gate, he carried on an ordinary life. His habits were regular and simple. He smoked a lot, drank a little, and took exercise everyday. Occasionally, he would make pilgrimages to Macbeth's country in Scotland and to Charlotte Bronte's home in Yorkshire. Although he belonged to various clubs, the Beefsteak, the Rabelais, and the Kinsmen in his declining years, he frequented only the Royal Thames Yacht Club. When asked why he did not attend the literary clubs, he replied that he only went to a club when he got tired of writing. If he went to a literary club, he had to answer questions on literature. At the Yacht Club, he was not expected to say anything, just listen to yacht conversation. Thus, he could come away feeling refreshed. In May of 1902, far from his native America, he died, at the age of sixty-five, in the home of Madame Arthur Van de Velde at Camberley in Sussex.¹¹

The Indiana sage, James Whitcomb Riley, also felt he was suffering from the weight of years. He had two desires. He wanted to build a complete, true book, as a mason would construct a stone wall, and he yearned to be young again. In neither was he successful. Rhymes of Childhood and The Book of Joyous Children were two of his attempts to edit a sterling volume of his poems. But his work was slipshod, and he became a target for the critic. "He has bound together in a book," said the literary expert, "the pebbles and the pearls on one string, and the author seems to have a perverse affec-

⁹Henry Adams to Elizabeth Cameron, September 28, 1901, Worthington C. Ford, ed., The Letters of Henry Adams (Boston and New York, 1938), II, 355.

¹⁰They had four children, two boys and two girls.

¹¹Henry C. Merwin, The Life of Bret Harte: With Some Account of the California Pioneers (Boston and New York, 1911), 279, 281, 283.

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tion for the pebbles."¹²

During 1901 he rested from lecturing and spent his time writing in his home at Indianapolis. He had visions of turning out a complete edition of his works. On September 23, he wrote to Joel C. Harris that if he ever finished the Complete Edition, he would like to have a ten or eleven year holiday with Harris, at which time they would become young again.¹³

In September another elderly Indiana author was in the news. This was General "Lew" Wallace. A request had recently come from Egypt to General Wallace and his publishers for permission to translate Ben Hur into Arabic. Since the Bedouins and their horses played such an important part in its pages, it seemed fitting to the Terre Haute Evening Gazette that this great book should become known to the Arabians. Although the General had written several books after retiring from the army, his greatest fame rested on Ben Hur, published in 1880.¹⁴

Deep in the heart of the Southland at Atlanta, Georgia, lived Riley's favorite friend, Joel Chandler Harris. In spite of frequent attacks of influenza, Harris was a modest, cheerful fellow. In answer to Howell's request that a group of authors collaborate on a literary set, the Georgian told the literary dean what a poor author he was: "If you think you can give a cornfield hand a showing and you are not afraid to fish a cold dumpling out of the potliquoer with your fingers, perhaps I can meet your wishes. . . . You know of course that so far as literary art, I am poverty stricken, and you know too that my style and methods will cause you to pull your hair."¹⁵

The Southerner's cheerfulness was demonstrated in a letter to Riley on September 30: "Down here we're moseying along towards fall. The roses are fine, and, occasionally, I hear a young mocking bird practicing his tune in the bushes."¹⁶

During 1901 Harris' major literary enterprise was One Mile to Shady Dale, later rechristened Gabriel Tolliver. Appearing serially

¹²Marcus Dickey, The Maturity of James Whitcomb Riley: Fortune's Way with the Poet in the Prime of Life and After (Indianapolis, 1922), 337, 341, 382.

¹³James W. Riley to Joel C. Harris, September 23, 1901, William L. Phelps, ed., Letters of James Whitcomb Riley (Indianapolis, 1930), 253.

¹⁴Terre Haute, Indiana, Evening Gazette, September 12, 1901, p. 6, c. 5.

¹⁵Joel C. Harris to William D. Howells, June 1, 1900, Julia C. Harris, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris (Boston and New York, 1918), 451.

¹⁶Harris to James W. Riley, September 30, 1901, Harris, Joel C. Harris, 460.

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in a Philadelphia magazine, Era, during 1901 and 1902, the novel was published in book form in 1902 by the McClure-Phillips Company. The book was dedicated to his dear friend, James W. Riley. Although the setting of the book was in Georgia during the latter half of the nineteenth century, not a single Civil War battle was described in it. The Ku Klux Klan made an appearance but very fleetingly. Gabriel Tolliver was basically an autobiography of Joel C. Harris.¹⁷

Harris' foremost achievement, his picture of the Georgia Negro, had its origin in 1877, when the Atlanta author was editorial assistant on the Atlanta Constitution. At that time, he had introduced the "Uncle Remus" tales and songs to the Constitution's readers. When asked if any particular Negro had suggested his quaint and philosophic character, he replied: "He was not an invention of my own, but a human syndicate, I might say, of three or four old darkies whom I had known. I just walloped them together in one person and called him 'Uncle Remus.'" As for the stories, they were tales that Harris had heard all his life. He said that he had just collected them so other people might enjoy them. Of these stories gathered over a period of twenty-five years, the "Tar Baby" legend was probably the best loved.¹⁸

In 1901 the famous New Orleans author of Old Creole Days, George W. Cable, was no longer in the South. To be closer to his literary market, and because of southern resentment to his outspoken criticisms, he had moved to Northampton, Massachusetts. From this headquarters, he travelled extensively and wrote copiously. Early in 1901 he published The Cavalier. Immediately he began work on Bylow Hill, the story of jealousy's disastrous effects, based on an actual medical case. After serial publication in the Atlantic Monthly, this story was brought out in book form by Scribners in 1902. Meanwhile, in August 1901, there appeared in the Century Magazine "Pore Raphael," a sequel to his former "Posson Jone." Cable liked realism, and unlike his Southern contemporary, Joel C. Harris, he was brutal in its portrayal. Many of his characters were overdrawn and his smash endings poor, but he did display the Southern Negro and Creoles well.¹⁹

The most optimistic writer of the elderly authors, John Fiske, was dead. As in tribute to his American historical research, he died on July 4, 1901, at East Gloucester, Massachusetts.²⁰ Although he was a popular lecturer and a lucid, sparkling writer, he was not

¹⁷Harris to Riley, April 1, 1901, Harris, Joel C. Harris, 448.

¹⁸Harris, Joel C. Harris, 144.

¹⁹Lucy L. Cable Bikle, George W. Cable, His Life and Letters (New York and London, 1928), 249-52; George W. Cable, The Cavalier (New York, 1901), 307-11.

²⁰American Historical Review, VII (October, 1901), 187.

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a thorough scholar. The historians maintained he was a philosopher, and the philosophers countered that he was a historian. At least, one fact was certain; he was a thorough going evolutionist, who enjoyed explaining the marvelous growth of America in evolutionary terms. Although he talked of a guiding providence and an Anglo-Saxon racial stock that had made the United States great, in the final analysis, he explained these factors as only part of the cosmic validity of science and dynamic natural evolution.²¹

By the turn of the century, the younger writers had as yet been unsuccessful in their attempt to unseat the old literary masters.²² However, the writings of the younger writers were gaining in general popularity. Winston Churchill's The Crisis, Frank Norris' The Octopus, Hamlin Garland's Her Mountain Lover, and Finley P. Dunne's Mr. Dooley in the Hearts of His Countrymen were high on the best-seller list.²³ Hamlin Garland summed up the situation in a letter to Henry Fuller. He wrote that Howells was an old man and Charles D. Warner already gone. "When Howells and Gilder pass," he continued, "our generation will be the dominant force in letters. We cannot be called 'our younger writers' any longer."²⁴

²¹John Fiske to Henry Holt, December 2, 1890, Ethel F. Fisk, ed., The Letters of John Fiske (New York, 1940), 584.

²²Other elderly authors of note in 1901 included Henry Van Dyke of Princeton, New Jersey; Frank R. Stockton, of Charleston, West Virginia; Thomas B. Aldrich, of Boston; and Joaquin Miller, the Hoosier who had gone to Oakland, California.

²³Nation, LXXIII (September 7, 1901), 280.

²⁴Garland, Companions, 51.