WILLIAM DEAN HOWELLS.

It is now a little more than twenty years since Mr. Howells made his first visit to Boston, bringing in his carpet-bag a number of poems, which were soon printed in "The Atlantic Monthly." He had already sent to the East some of his verses, which had appeared in the same magazine. Many of these, by their form, and still more by their deep, cheerless gloom, showed that their author had a great admiration for Heine, the wonderful master of epigrammatic sadness. With years and actual experience the sadness—which was of the willful sort that belongs to youth—wore away, but Mr. Howells's hand retained the neatness of touch which is apparent in even the slightest of these verses. At about the same time he published a few longer poems, in a narrative form, and it is curious to see in these some of the qualities that are familiar to us in his later novels. It was a novelist, for instance, who heard and told the "Pilot's Story" about the man

> "Weakly good-natured and kind, and weakly good-natured and vicious,
> Slender of body and mind, fit neither for loving nor hating,"

who gambled away the quadroon girl, his mistress. In every one of his stories, too, we come across bits of humorous or pathetic insight which might have stood by themselves as the subjects of little poems; and in all his subsequent work we find the poetic flavor which was here asserting itself. It was some time, however, before Mr. Howells tried the more serious business of writing novels. This delay is only natural; views about life are common property, but knowledge of what life really is is a rarer thing and more difficult of attainment.

These poems had been written by Mr. Howells in the scant leisure moments of a busy youth. He was born in Ohio, in the year 1837; his father was editor and publisher of a country newspaper, and it was at a very early age that the subject of this article began to set type and learn the printer's trade. Throughout his boyhood, and in fact until 1859, he worked in his father's printing-office, although for two or three years before that date he had exercised his pen as a legislative reporter, and then as "news editor" of "The Ohio State Journal" at Columbus. What intervals his work granted him were taken for reading and, in time, for writing, and the early fruits of his pen appeared in a volume called "Poems of Two Friends," which was published at Columbus, in December, 1859. The other writer, who indeed was the author of the greater number of the poems, was Mr. J. J. Piatt, who has since written many pleasing verses. These two young poets had worked together in a printing-office, where they spent the years which so many young men waste in college. In the summer of 1861 Mr. Howells wrote a life of Lincoln, a book which had a large sale in the West, and in the autumn of that year he was appointed consul at Venice.

This appointment was one of the sort which, doubtless, the stern civil-service reformer will have to condemn, in public, at least; but in private he will only congratulate himself upon it, as an Englishman might have done for the unsound system which found a place in Parliament for men like Pitt and Burke. Moreover, if the duties of a consul in Venice were slight,—and the *Alabama* was at work beginning the warfare against American commerce which has since been carried on by legislators,—there was the more leisure for the study of this fascinating city. Indeed, the change from an Ohio city to Venice was the most complete that could be imagined. Even Hâvre or Bordeaux, with strictly commercial flavor, would have seemed like a glimpse of paradise to a young, untraveled, poetic consul, but to go to Italy, and of all Italian ports, to Venice! It must have seemed as if life had nothing more to grant to the imaginative young official.

It is with this new life that Mr. Howells's literary activity really begins, and the two volumes, "Venetian Life" and "Italian Journeys," bear witness to the impulse he received from this transplanting. These books are made up of essays and letters which were saved from the swift oblivion of bound magazines and newspapers. They are delightful reading, and they bear the promise of the future novelist in them. When he traveled to Italian towns he was studying human nature, and, fortunately, there have been preserved in these two books a vast number of little studies, minute observations, such as in abundance go to make the outfit of a writer of fiction. Thus:

> "I think some of the pleasantest people in Italy are the army gentlemen. There is the race's gentleness in their ways, in spite of their ferocious trade, and an American freedom of style. They brag in a manner that makes one feel at home immediately. * * * Three officers who dined with us at the *table d'hôte* of the Stella d'Oro, in Ferrara, were visibly anxious to address us, and began not uncivilly, but still in order that we should hear, to speculate on our nationality

among themselves. It appeared that we were Germans; for one of these officers, who had formerly been in the Austrian service at Vienna, recognized the word 'bitter' in our remarks on the *beccafichi*. As I did not care to put these fine fellows to the trouble of hating us for others' faults, I made bold to say that we were not Germans, and to add that 'bitter' was also an English word.

"'Ah! yes, to be sure,' one of them admitted; 'when he was with the Sardinian army in the Crimea he had frequently heard the word used by English soldiers.'"

The officers found out that these foreigners were Americans:

"'Did we think Signor Leencolen would be re-elected?'

"'I supposed he had been elected that day,' I said.

"'Ah! this was election day, then. *Cospetto!*'

"At this the Genoese frowned superior intelligence, and the Crimean, gazing admiringly upon him, said he had been nine months at Nuova York, and that he had a brother living there. The poor Crimean boastfully added that he himself had a cousin in America, and that the Americans generally spoke Spanish. The count from Piacenza wore an air of pathetic discomfiture, and tried to invent a transatlantic relative, as I think, but failed. I am persuaded that none of these warriors really had kinsmen in America, but that they all pretended to have them, out of politeness to us, and that they believed each other."

Or take this account of the "patriarch," the government guide who accompanied Mr. Howells to Capri, and induced him to see the "tarantella" danced for two francs, "whereas down at your inn, if you hire the dancers through your landlord, it will cost you five or six francs. But," Mr. Howells goes on,

"The poor patriarch was also a rascal in his small way, and he presently turned to me with a countenance full of cowardly trouble and base remorse: 'I pray you, little sir, not to tell the landlord below there that you have seen the tarantella danced here; for he has daughters and friends to dance it for strangers, and gets a deal of money by it. So, if he asks you to see it, do me the pleasure to say, lest he should take on *(pigliarsi)* with me about it: "Thanks, but we saw the tarantella at Pompeii."' It was the last place in Italy where we were likely to have seen the tarantella; but these simple people are improvident in lying, as in everything else."

Imagine a touch like that in Addison's "Remarks on Italy"!

These two volumes were not all that Mr. Howells brought back with him to America, when he returned home in the autumn of 1865. They show, however, how rich was the experience he had acquired, and with what a keen eye he had observed this foreign life. If he who knows two languages is twice a man, how much more can this be said of one who knows two peoples!

After doing a little journalistic work on "The Nation" in New York, Mr. Howells was invited by the late Mr. J. T. Fields to take the place of assistant editor of "The Atlantic Monthly," and in 1871 he assumed the full charge of that magazine, a position which he held until the spring of 1881. Much of his time and attention went into the composition of book-notices, a sort of writing which the public often neglects, and which is apparently without influence on writers; but he wrote a number of essays, which he collected into a volume called "Suburban Sketches," published in 1870, and "The Wedding Journey," which appeared serially in the year 1871, showed that he was gradually feeling his way to becoming a novelist. There was all the setting of a novel without a conventional plot; there were plenty of incidents, but they existed solely for their own sake; it was a prolonged sketch, full of all those qualities which readers have learned to associate with Mr. Howells's books.

The first of these to strike the reader's attention is the delightful humor, which is not the derisive horse-play of some of those writers who in foreign parts have acquired a reputation for American humor. Although that term is applied without much discrimination to very diverse ways of arousing laughter, varying from wit to buffoonery, we find in him, rather, a subtle, evasive humor, without geographical limitation, because it is so rare that no country can lay claim to its exclusive possession. Here is one bit, a trifle, to be sure, but a characteristic trifle; while going up the Hudson River there had been a slight accident, and the passengers had gathered on the deck to recount all the horrors which they had ever seen, or just escaped seeing:

"'Well,' said one of the group, a man in a hard hat, 'I never lie down on a steam-boat or a railroad train. I want to be ready for whatever happens.'

"The others looked at this speaker with interest, as one who had invented a safe method of travel.

"'I happened to be up to-night, but I almost always undress and go to bed, just as if I were in my own house,' said the gentleman of the silk cap. 'I don't say your way isn't the best, but that's my way.'

"The champions of the rival systems debated their merits with suavity and mutual respect, but they met with scornful silence a compromising spirit who held that it was better to throw off your coat and boots, but keep your pantaloons on."

Mr. Howells's humor is more noticeable when he is writing about women and their ways. Thus, when the couple whose journey is the subject of the book get to the furthermost of the little islands in the channel at Niagara, the heroine,

"— without the slightest warning, sank down at the root of a tree, and said, with serious composure, that she could never go back on those bridges; they were not safe. He stared at her cowering form in blank amaze, and put his hands in his pockets. Then it occurred to his dull masculine sense that it must be a joke; and he said, 'Well, I'll have you taken off in a boat!'

"'O, *do*, Basil, *do*, have me taken off in a boat,' implored Mabel; 'you see yourself the bridges are not safe. *Do* get a boat.'"

He goes on with his ill-timed pleasantry, and she bursts into tears. He tries sarcasm, then kindness, proposing to carry her.

"'No, that will bring double the weight on the bridge at once.'

"'Couldn't you shut your eyes, and let me lead you?'

"'Why, it isn't the *sight* of the rapids,' she said, looking up fiercely. '*The bridges are not safe.* I'm not a *child*, Basil. Oh, *what* shall we do?'"

Then when he tells her some one is coming, —"'Those people we saw in the parlor last night,'"—she walks calmly back without a word. He asks her why she had so suddenly acted reasonably.

"'Why, dearest! Don't you understand? That Mrs. Richard—whoever she is—is so much like me.'"

Or take that other instance, when "she rose with a smile from the ruins of her life, amidst which she had heart-brokenly sat down with all her things on."

If it is fair to make another quotation from this book, which, however, is wholly made up of these accessories, there is this:

"They were about to enter the village, and he could not make any open acknowledgment of her tenderness; but her silken mantel slipped from her shoulder, and he embracingly replaced it, flattering himself that he had delicately seized this chance of an unavowed caress, and not knowing (O such is the blindness of our sex!) that the opportunity had been yet more subtly afforded him, with the art which women never disuse in this world, and which, I hope, they will not forget in the next."

Laughter at the alleged inconsequence of women is nothing new in literature, but it has not always been accompanied with the kindliness and reverence which Mr. Howells never fails to show. Occasionally, we come across a novelist who detects or fancies a resemblance between a woman and the domestic cat. With this slender stock in trade, he turns off numerous stories swarming with catlike women, who purr, glide over carpets, and, at times, scratch. This amount of lore is commonly taken for profound knowledge of the female heart, and the wrath of women over the analogy is taken for the shame of detection. Women have no cause to be indignant with Mr. Howells's kind comprehension of them; what he feels for them is not the exultation of a man who has found them out, or the pity of a superior being for attractive inferiors, but the sympathy of a man who understands them, and what we are all hungry for is not so much that we may be loved, as that we may be understood. Possibly, at times, we are overhasty in assuming that if we were understood we should be loved. There can be no dark doubt of this kind, however, in the case of Mr. Howells's girlish heroines. Take them in succession, and see their naturalness and consequent charm. The heroine of "A Chance Acquaintance" is not the same person as Lydia, the heroine of "The Lady of the *Aroostook*," or that of "Dr. Breen's Practice." Yet they are alike in their fearlessness before others and timidity before themselves, in their gracious innocence and generosity. No one has drawn such uncontaminated souls more delicately than Mr. Howells, because no one has drawn them more exactly. In the great whirl of life, they would have but little show by the side of intenser people, more practiced plotters, and the victims of fiercer emotions; their kingdom, so to speak, is just out of the busy world, in some quiet corner, whence fancy and poetry are not banished.

Fond as Mr. Howells is of these independent girls with their romance awaiting them, he has also written about another sort of heroine, the full-blown coquette, the mature flirt, and he has made a most thorough study of her antics. The coquettes whom we meet in novels have commonly but one trick, although, to be sure, this is generally irresistible, or said to be irresistible; he has shown us accomplished experts in the gay science, who are not simply arch, or mischievous, or appealing, but much more, for at times they are frank. The art with which he draws his coquettes is most admirable, because here, as everywhere, Mr. Howells describes what he sees, and his eyes are exceedingly sharp. They see not only the grim, decrepit New England village in the brief season when "boarders" assemble, but also the perturbing flirt, the unworthy cause of tragedies, who is not condemned or apologized for, but is simply put before us.

There can be but little doubt that, whenever we are fortunate enough to have a novelist writing for us, we are only too apt to insist that he is not an artist, writing for his own delectation as well as ours, but that he is a political economist, or a patriot, or certainly a moralist, in disguise. To be sure, we are led into this error by the fact that every story, exactly in proportion to its truth to life, carries with it some lesson, just as all experience does; but that, I take it, is as secondary, in all real novels, as instruction in perspective is foreign to a painter's intentions. Yet we go on imagining that a novelist has anything in his mind except a story which exists for its own sake, and we torment one another with wondering what moral we were meant to draw, when the real question before us is: What is the fable? Do the little fishes talk

like whales, or like little fishes? We may be sure of one thing: if the novelist will take care of his story, the moral will take care of itself.

Mr. Howells's novels have not wholly escaped discussion of this sort. Of late years, the American girl has become an object of great public interest, and the opinion seems to be held in some quarters that Mr. Howells has been retained, like a scientific expert, to support the views of one side of a controversy concerning the American young person, whereas it would be fairer to suppose that he chooses a certain sort of girl for his heroine, writes about her, and reads with wonder all the lessons that his critics find in the pages of his story.

And what charming girls they are! There is Florida Vervain in "A Foregone Conclusion," which is, perhaps, the most poetic of Mr. Howells's novels; we have here a distinctively American girl, with her keen moral sense, receiving a declaration of love from an Italian priest. That is the climax of the story, and the reader will recall how beautifully the whole tale is told, and how the girl's pity for the poor man is described. No other feeling would have served the author's purpose. Indignation would have been unnatural; any answer on her part to his affection would have repelled the reader, and her very pity makes his position the more hopeless. It is only the more cruel in its effect on the priest that the heroine, in absolute unconsciousness of what her words conveyed, had given the priest the very encouragement of which he stood most in need, that he should look upon himself as a man.

"'Would you be my friend,' he asked eagerly in lower tones, and with signs of an inward struggle, 'if this way of escape were for me to be no longer a priest?'

"'Oh, yes, yes! Why not?' cried the girl; and her face glowed with heroic sympathy and defiance. It is from this heaven-born ignorance in women of the insuperable difficulties of doing right that men take fire and accomplish the sublime impossibilities. Our sense of details, our fatal habits of reasoning, paralyze us; we need the impulse of the pure ideal which we can only get from them. These two were alike children as regarded the world, but he had a man's dark prevision of the means, and she had a heavenly scorn of everything but the end to be achieved.

"He drew a long breath. 'Then it does not seem terrible to you?'

"'Terrible? No! I don't see how you can rest till it is done! * * * Such a man as you ought to leave the priesthood at any risk or hazard. * * * With your genius once free, you can make country, and fame, and friends everywhere. Leave Venice! There are other places. Think how inventors succeed in America' ——."

When he ventures to take her really at her word, and discloses his long pent-up love, he sees the whole truth. Her cry, "*You? A priest!*" shows him the hopelessness of his passion; and her pity only seals his doom. Nothing could more completely sum up the book than the passage in which the heroine, as she bids farewell to the priest, throws her arms about his neck and kisses him, sealing, as it were, the impossibility of his love for her. With this, the story might well have ended; that the heroine should return to this country and marry an unromantic Yankee was, perhaps, inevitable, but was it not a sacrifice to conventionality?

In "The Lady of the *Aroostook*" we have the young girl, wholly without experience, triple-armed in her innocence, who is thrust fresh from South Bradfield, Mass., into semi-disreputable foreign society in Venice, after crossing the ocean with no other woman on the ship, and two young men—for the little sot need not be counted—for her fellow-passengers. Certainly it would be hard to find a more dramatic contrast, and Mr. Howells is very fond of this plot—of placing an unconventional figure before all the complications of modern society, and letting the new-comer settle everything by her native judgment.

In so many formless English novels we see the frank acceptance of conventional rewards, the bride and the money-bags awaiting the young man who has artificially prolonged a tepid courtship, that the reader grows weary of the implied compliment to wealth and position. There is a truly national spirit in the way Mr. Howells shows the other side—the emptiness of convention and the dignity of native worth. Struggle as we may against it, it is one of the main conditions of American, if not of modern, society, that inborn merit has a chance to assert itself. The quality by which distinction is adjudged is, to be sure, too often unrelenting social ambition in combination with a long purse, but the destruction of old lines is going on, and even if movements of this kind could be stopped, society could not revert to its original condition of rigid divisions. As it is, however, these movements are irresistible—they move in any direction, save backward, and the democratic hero has done much in literature since Rousseau gave him citizenship in his "Nouvelle Héloïse."

After all, what can realism produce but the downfall of conventionality? Just as the scientific spirit digs the ground from beneath superstition, so does its fellow-worker, realism, tend to prick the bubble of abstract types. Realism is the tool of the democratic spirit, the modern spirit by means of which the truth is elicited, and Mr. Howells's realism is untiring. It is, too, unceasingly good-natured. Whether he is describing the Italian officers, or the

wife in "Their Wedding Journey," with her firm devotion to Boston, or country people in "Dr. Breen's Practice," we feel that Mr. Howells is scrutinizing the person he is writing about with undisturbed calmness, and that no name and no person can impose upon him by its conventional value. His country-people are simple, shrewd, unimpassioned rustics; they are neither pastoral shepherds nor boors—they are human beings. In his "Wedding Journey" Mr. Howells introduces a conversation which he overheard in a steam-boat, between a young man who traveled "in pursuit of trade for the dry-goods house he represented," and two girls, "conjecturally sisters going home from some visit, and not skilled in the world, but of a certain repute in their country neighborhood for beauty and wit." I will not quote the details of their romping flirtation, but these words of Mr. Howells deserve attention: "Ah! poor real life, which I love, can I make others share the delight I find in thy foolish and insipid face!"

This is his attitude throughout, and it is the one most fitting the writer who stands as interpreter between the world and his readers, who knows that it is his duty to tell us what he sees, not to pervert the truth according to his whims or prejudices. It would have been easy enough to sneer at these hoydenish girls and their bold admirer, but there is no ill-nature in the few lines devoted to them, and certainly no tendency to exaggerate their importance. This, it seems to me, is a saner way of looking at the world than that which we sometimes notice in "Punch," when "'Arry" comes under public censure. So long as realism gives us what is seen by intelligent eyes, without telling us what the emotions are with which we should dilate, it will have at least the charm of novelty. Although the tendency of modern literature is toward truthfulness, only a few writers dare to be honest, or, even if they dare, know how to be so. We can all sit down and write a very passable essay on the merits of cheerfulness, of punctuality, of patriotism, but how many people have the gift of seeing what goes on about them, and of stating it concisely, impressively, and yet dispassionately? They are few, indeed, and most of them, if they were to write a novel, would be likely to manufacture a story after the accustomed model, which would at least be safe.

After all, the world is very unfair to novelists; we all know that life is made up of disappointments, that the fervor of youth gives way to a chilly content with compromise, that no one carries his ideals far, but exchanges them for maxims of worldly prudence. We know all this, I say, and we tell novelists, above all things, to paint life as they see it; yet the moment one does so and gives us anything but the customary ending,—such as we see on the stage at about twenty-five minutes past ten o'clock, when the actors form in a semi-circle, and the green curtain begins to show signs of animation,—we are enraged, and we denounce the novelist as a foe to his kind. We ask, too, for faithful studies of men, yet it is seldom that a novelist gives us these; for one season the heroes are all consumptive, in the next they are all muscular. We are great sticklers, too, for the social position of the people we may meet in our reading; we do not care to make strange acquaintances.

For all these prejudices Mr. Howells has no patience, and in his pages one finds a tolerably full collection of the amusing figures who go to make up the American public. We pass them in the street without knowing them, and when we get home we groan over the monotony of American civilization; but they have not escaped the eyes of this busy student of his kind. The vulgarest of them he has put before us in their relations to some romantic incident; they are not merely collected and, as it were, pinned on the wall—they are brought into subservience to some romantic story. Of course, the mere accumulation of incidents does not make a novel, any more than the accidental juxtaposition of colors makes a picture: the informing spirit must control the selection and arrangement which go to every work of art. For my own part, I fail to feel the same interest in "Dr. Breen's Practice" that I feel in "A Foregone Conclusion" or "A Chance Acquaintance," or, indeed, in most of the others. But Mr. Howells is himself responsible for making his readers hard to please.

May I say the same thing about his plays, or, as they might be more properly called, his dramatic scenes? A novelist may well be anxious to set his characters on the stage, to see them walking before him, endowed with flesh and blood for at least a few hours' life, for the play promises to be more vivid than the printed page; yet often it is not. The lighter the play, the greater is the demand upon the skill of the actors, and there are but few of them who are capable of giving in the theater those delicate shades and implications which form the setting in which Mr. Howells always lays his scene. Occasionally we see a delicate French piece, such as one of Alfred de Musset's *proverbes*, in an English rendering; but all the graceful ease and finish of the original are evaporated in the removal from Paris, as if they were delicate wines incapable of transport. Mr. Howells's plays suffer from this very lightness, and we miss what are so

noticeable in his novels—his own comments and ingenious side-remarks, which have no weight as stage directions, especially when translated into the ordinary gestures and motions of the stage. What endears his books to us as much as anything is what we see of the author in them; he lets us see through his eyes. Thus, in "The Lady of the *Aroostook*," Lydia is on the deck of the ship, talking with Staniford. He says:

"'I wish I could be with you when you first see Venice!'

"'Yes?' said Lydia.

"Even the interrogative comment, with the rising inflection, could not chill his enthusiasm.

"'It is really the greatest sight in the world.'

"Lydia had apparently no comment to make on this fact. She waited tranquilly awhile before she said:

"'My father used to talk about Italy to me when I was little. He wanted to go. My mother said afterward—after she had come home with me to South Bradfield—that she always believed he would have lived if he had gone there. He had consumption.'

"'Oh!' said Staniford, softly. Then he added, with the tact of his sex: 'Miss Blood, you mustn't take cold, sitting here with me. This wind is chilly. Shall I go below and get you some more wraps?'

Or take this from the same book. Staniford says:

"'But we shall not see the right sort of Sabbath till Mr. Dunham gets his Catholic Church fully going.'

"They all started, and looked at Dunham, as good Protestants must when some one whom they would never have suspected of Catholicism turns out to be a Catholic. Dunham cast a reproachful glance at his friend, but said, simply:

"'I am a Catholic—that is true; but I do not admit the pretensions of the Bishop of Rome.'"

It is in just such scenes as these that Mr. Howells's peculiar power of seeing and putting before us little shades is most clearly marked, and we may be sure that we find these subtle distinctions more clearly presented in the story, with the aid of his lines or half-lines of characterization, than they are likely to be on the stage, where we are accustomed to broader effects and cruder methods. The delicate half-tints in which he works are too nearly indistinguishable in the dazzling, garish blaze of the theater. Such, at least, is one spectator's experience.

The traditions, too, of the stage are obstinate and would be slow in making themselves over, whereas Mr. Howells has made over the American novel, taught it gracefulness and compactness, and, with one predecessor and one or two contemporaries, given it a place in literature along with the best of modern work. That he has delighted us all, we all know. He has shown us how genuine, how full of romance, is the life about us which seems sordid and has a fine reputation for sordidness; and he has proved that realism does not mean groping in the mire. The main distinction, however, does not lie in the subject, but in the character of the man who writes about it. That is what gives the aroma of sincerity, sympathy, respect for what is honorable, or the contrary impression, to literary work. It is the tone of the author's mind that makes the mark upon that of the reader, and who that knows Mr. Howells's work does not feel that he learns new sympathies and gentler judgment from his generosity and careful study? The reader is not moved by eloquence to unknown feelings, which fade away when the book is closed, and give place to a critical reaction; no, he sees things in a new light: Mr. Howells touches his shoulder, and points out the beauty hidden in simple actions, the pathos lurking beneath seemingly indifferent words,—in short, the humanity of life.

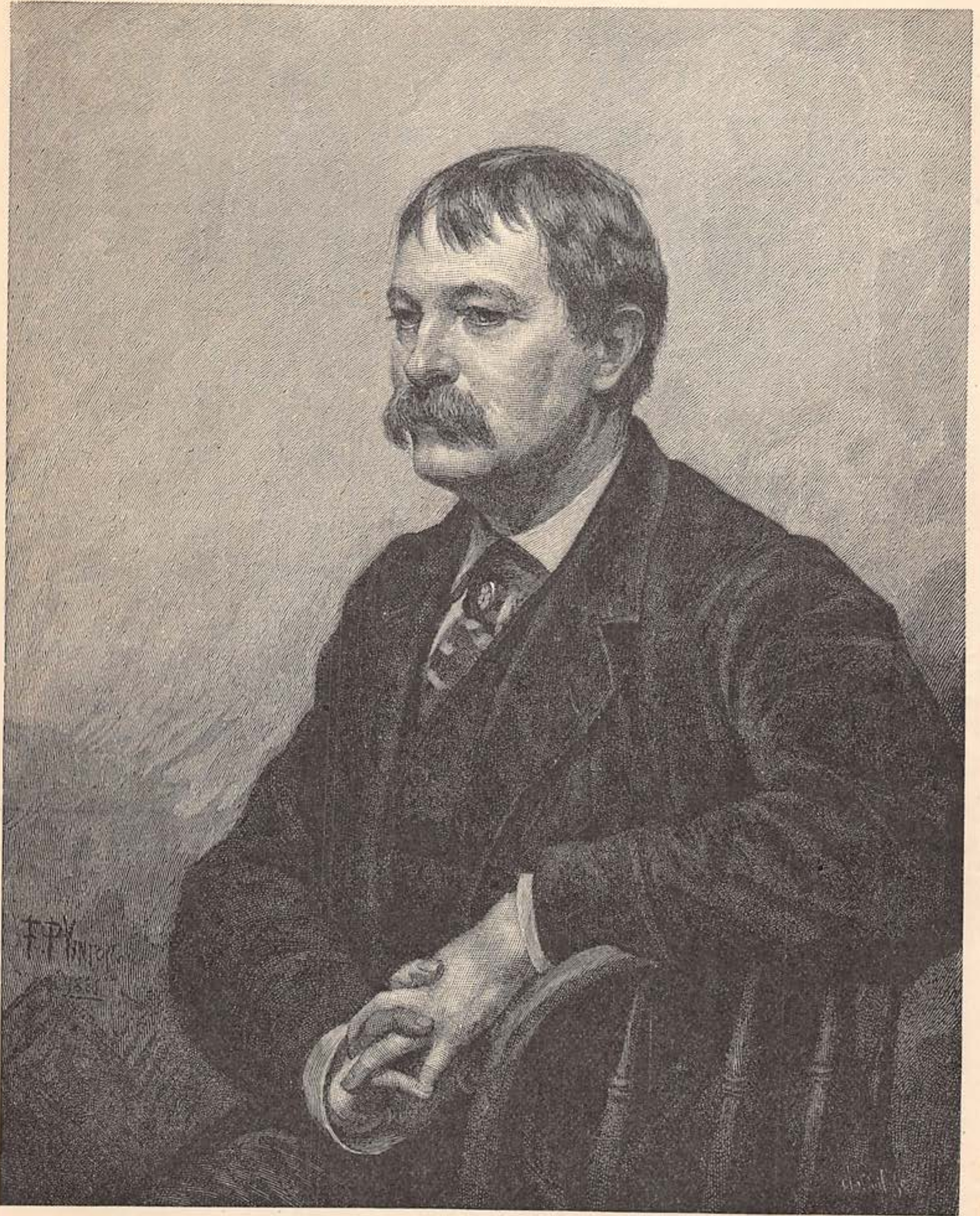
Above all, he does this with reverence, with the sort of regard which science has for small things as well as great. That small things are unimportant is a matter of convention, and, as we have seen, Mr. Howells does not care for conventions. What he cares for is to see and describe things as they are, and he does this with such sympathetic comprehension that our admiration for his books is enriched by a feeling of affection for the writer.

COME, DEATH!

Come, Death, and stretch him on his bier!
He would not linger longer here.
He and the world were long at fight;
He was the weaker and he fell.
Come, Death, and ring his passing bell.

The hound is howling at his door;
Strange fires are dancing on the moor;
The light of the huge blood-red moon
Fills the cold chamber where he lies.
How sound he sleeps! When will he rise?

Hark! hark! the wind is moaning loud!
It drives the snow, the earth's cold shroud;
Hark! how it weeps around the walls!
But let it moan and let it weep,—
It cannot wake him from his sleep.



W. D. Howells.