

GEORGE WILLIAM CURTIS.

MR. CURTIS is known to the American public as author, journalist, and statesman,—for, although he has never held a political office, he has made a profound study of statesmanship, and possesses a knowledge of public affairs second to that of no other man in the country; but his greatest and best work has been achieved in the field of journalism. Starting out on his youthful career as the author of several charming books of travel, and afterward drifting into literary engagements with the New York "Tribune," "Harper's Weekly," and other journals, he was at an early age, and in common with thousands of earnest young men in the North, driven by conviction to take part in the great moral revolution which culminated in the war for the Union and the abolition of slavery in the United States; and throwing himself with fervor into this new field of activity, he abandoned a profession, in which he might have attained high honors, for the one in which he has achieved his great reputation as a leader and teacher of men. It will be interesting to trace the steps by which he came into his chosen career of work.

Mr. Curtis was born in Providence, Rhode Island, February 24, 1824, but he was partly of Massachusetts descent, his father having been born in Worcester, in that State, of which an ancestor was the first settler. His mother was the daughter of James Burrill, Jr., at one time Chief Justice of Rhode Island, and afterward United States Senator. In 1830 he went to boarding-school at Jamaica Plain, near Boston, where he remained for four years. Pleasant reminiscences of his school-days there are found in the early chapters of his novel, "Trumps," narrated with a freshness and enthusiasm which remind the reader of "Tom Brown at Rugby." Meanwhile he lost his mother; and in 1839, his father, who had married again, removed with his family to New York, and, desirous that his son should pursue a mercantile career, placed him, after a year's study with a private tutor, as a clerk in a German importing house in Exchange Place.

But mercantile life was not agreeable to the youth. His tastes were decidedly literary, and in the course of his reading he became deeply interested in the transcendental movement, in which so many of the best and purest minds of New England were at that time engaged. Accordingly, after about a year of

uncongenial drudgery in the importing house, he went to Brook Farm, in company with his elder brother, who shared in his tastes and aspirations. It is unnecessary to repeat the story of failure and disappointment which led to the breaking down of that amiable experiment; but the incident of his taking part in the endeavor to create an ideal society, is interesting as showing the early tendency of Mr. Curtis's mind. He is still called an idealist by those who use the word as a term of reproach, as though it were folly in the youth to believe that society may, in time and by persistent effort, be organized on a higher and purer basis than at present, and still greater folly in the man to retain such optimistic views. The millennium may be far away; but its coming will not be hastened by deriding the principles whose application in social and political life may make it possible, at some distant period; and men who endeavor to bring society into harmony with those principles are prophets and apostles of the Utopia that is to come.

Mr. Curtis and his brother remained at Brook Farm until 1844, and they then passed two years in Concord, Massachusetts, studying and farming. Here Mr. Curtis became very intimate with Emerson, Hawthorne, and Henry Thoreau, forming warm friendships with them which were broken only by death. In his "Homes of American Authors" he has printed some interesting notes of his intercourse with the philosopher, the romancer, and the hermit.

In 1846, Mr. Curtis determined upon making an extended tour in the old world, which, at that time, was a more eventful and important undertaking than it is now, when the "Atlantic ferry" will take you across in a little more than a week. In August of that year he sailed from New York for Marseilles in a passenger packet. The voyage occupied nearly fifty days. From Marseilles he went by steamer to Leghorn, and from that city to Pisa, where he lingered awhile to admire the wonders of the Leaning Tower, the Cathedral, the Baptistery, and the Campo Santo. From Pisa he passed on through the luscious vintage to Florence. The winter was spent in Rome. In the spring of 1847 Mr. Curtis visited Naples and other portions of southern Italy, then made his way slowly northward, back to Florence, where he remained some time, finishing the summer by a long and delightful

sojourn in Venice, in the congenial society of Kensett, Hicks, and other American artists.

In the autumn Mr. Curtis traveled through Lombardy to Como, and over the Stelvio through the Tyrol and Salzkammergut to Vienna, reaching Berlin in the middle of November. The spring of 1848 found him in Dresden, Prague, and again in Vienna, whence he sailed down the Danube to Pesth, returning to Switzerland for the summer.

Mr. Curtis traveled through Switzerland with all the delight of leisure, and not with the modern American frenzy, which counts as lost time every hour consumed in passing from place to place. In the same manner he studied the cities, the people, and the art of Holland,—who, indeed, could hurry through Holland?—and, in the autumn, sailed from Malta to Alexandria.

Mr. Curtis was fortunate in visiting the land of the Pharaohs when the spirit of modern progress had scarcely begun its devastating work within the shadow of the Pyramids. The destruction of the picturesque is surely not an evil necessarily attendant upon social, political, and industrial progress; but progress is very apt, when suddenly aroused, to play sad havoc with things which might better be preserved than destroyed. Were there not quarries of stone in Egypt that temples old as human traditions must be despoiled to build new cities? Doubtless the railroad and the steam-boat are great conveniences for people who are in a hurry, but they have unmade the Egypt of history and the imagination. They had not done so when our Howadji looked upon the Pyramids and sailed slowly up the Nile to the second cataract. The sacred river still flowed

“through old hushed Egypt and its sands
Like some grave, mighty thought, threading a dream,”

and the effect of that hushed and dreamy life upon his imagination found delightful expression in his “Nile Notes,” which are full of the flavor and perfume of the East. Ten years afterward they could not have been written. Stephens visited the Nile still earlier; but he was a man of merely dry observation. He had no enthusiasm, no imagination, and the record of his journeyings is as dull as a ledger in comparison with the Howadji's dreamy musings and charming descriptions.

A journey across the desert by way of Gaza to Jerusalem, of which he wrote an account in “The Howadji in Syria,” ended Mr. Curtis's Eastern travels. He spent the early summer of 1850 in England, and returned home in August. His pen had not been idle during his wanderings. Besides his journals, he had written letters for the

“*Courier and Inquirer*,” of which Mr. Henry J. Raymond was then managing editor, and for the New York “*Tribune*,” where his friend, Mr. Charles A. Dana, held the same position. On his return, he entered upon an active literary life. He became musical critic and editorial writer on the “*Tribune*,” and wrote out his “*Nile Notes*,” which were published in 1851 by the Harpers. In the autumn of that year he wrote a series of picturesque traveling letters to the “*Tribune*,” from the Catskills, Saratoga, Trenton, Niagara, Newport, and Nahant, which were published in 1852 as “*Lotus-Eating*,” beautifully illustrated by his friend Kensett. In the same year, “*The Howadji in Syria*” was published, and Mr. Curtis wrote some sketches of social life for “*Harper's Monthly*.”

The establishment of “*Putnam's Monthly*,” in 1853, opened a new field to Mr. Curtis, who, in conjunction with Mr. Parke Godwin and Mr. Charles F. Briggs, assumed the editorial management of that periodical, which was destined to a brilliant though brief career. Within the first year of its existence he wrote the papers on Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, and Bancroft, in the series on “*The Homes of American Authors*.” To this magazine Mr. Curtis contributed “*The Potiphar Papers*,” a brilliant satire on certain phases of New York society, and “*Prue and I*,” a series of delightful sketches, rather than a story, which was published in 1857. When the magazine passed into the hands of Messrs. Dix and Edwards, Mr. Curtis and Mr. Frederick Law Olmsted became connected with the firm, and were involved in its failure. Considering himself morally, if not legally, responsible for a portion of the indebtedness, Mr. Curtis refused to avail himself of the technicalities of the law, and set himself to the work of paying the creditors. He devoted himself diligently to literary work. The amount of labor he performed was literally enormous. Besides filling the “*Easy Chair*” of “*Harper's Magazine*,” in which he had just taken his seat, and writing “*The Lounger*” in “*Harper's Weekly*,” he delivered a long series of lectures, sometimes speaking a hundred nights in a season, and traveling, almost without rest, from place to place at the insatiable call of managers and committees. No man was ever more popular as a lecturer. The charm of his manner was irresistible; he had not only something to say which the people wanted to hear, but knew how to say it with the grace and ease which belong to the true orator. One of the most popular of his lectures was that upon the perfect soldier of chivalry, Sir Philip Sidney. Scarcely less popular were his Lowell lectures upon the

modern English novelists, which were repeated in New York, Brooklyn, and other places. The physical and mental strain involved in this labor was so excessive that many people wondered that he was willing to undergo it. A few only of his immediate friends knew that the proceeds of all his lectures during a period of almost ten years, and a part of his salary as editor, were devoted to the liquidation of the debt from which the law, but not his high sense of moral responsibility, would have absolved him.

During these years the slavery question had gradually absorbed public attention, and had become the paramount theme in the press, the pulpit, and the lyceum. In his Newport loungings Mr. Curtis had noted the effect produced upon Northern society by the slave power, and his attention had been called to the necessity of combating the evil influence by every popular means. Accordingly in all his lectures, like many of the lyceum speakers at that time, he discussed the subject with great freedom and force. The lecture lyceum, indeed, did much to arouse and enlighten public opinion on this vital question, and to prepare the way for the great revival of anti-slavery feeling in the North which followed the personal assault upon Charles Sumner in 1856. It is necessary to recall these times in order to form a just estimate of Mr. Curtis, and his career in public affairs. He was one of a large number of young men who felt, when that assault took place, that there were more imperative duties than the delights of dalliance in the primrose paths of literature. In the year just mentioned he delivered a college address at Middletown upon the "Duty of the American Scholar to Politics and the Times," in which the situation and the impending crisis were discussed from an anti-slavery point of view. He went upon the stump for Fremont, in that year, speaking in New York, New England, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania, and entered actively into politics on Staten Island, where he lived, and where for many years he was Chairman of the Republican County Committee.

Mr. Curtis was a delegate to the second National Convention of the Republican party, which assembled at Chicago on the 16th of May, 1860. It will be remembered that the construction of a "platform" was a labor of considerable difficulty. There were still many Republicans who wished to conciliate the border states, and when Mr. Joshua R. Giddings moved in convention to add to the first resolution the "life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness" clause from the Declaration of Independence, the opposition was loud and determined. The motion was lost

by a large vote, and Mr. Giddings, who had urged its adoption in the most eloquent and impressive manner, proposed to withdraw from the convention; but Mr. Curtis took an early opportunity to renew the motion in a slightly modified form. There were again loud cries of opposition. Mr. Curtis asked whether the party was prepared at its second National Convention to vote against the great charter of American liberty, and cautioned the delegates to beware how, there in the broad prairies of the West, they receded from the position which the party had occupied at Pittsburg, and refused to repeat the words of the Fathers of the Revolution. His eloquent periods acted like magic on the convention. The amendment was adopted unanimously amid wild excitement, the great multitude rising and giving round after round of applause. "Ten thousand voices," says a contemporary report, "swelled into a deafening roar, and for several minutes every attempt to restore order was hopelessly vain. The crowd of people outside took up and echoed the cheers, making a scene of excitement and enthusiasm unparalleled in any similar gathering." It was a great popular triumph, and was of vital service to the party, not only in retaining the influence of Mr. Giddings and his followers, but in swelling the enthusiasm which greeted the platform and the candidates.

It was a noteworthy event in the history of American journalism when, in December of 1863, Mr. Curtis became the political editor of "Harper's Weekly." He had been conducting a department called "The Lounger," begun in the autumn of 1857, which consisted at first of essays in the lighter vein on social and literary topics, very much in the manner of the "Easy Chair." After the beginning of the war Mr. Curtis frequently introduced subjects of a national and political character in this department; but his field was comparatively restricted. From the moment, however, that he took his seat in the editorial chair, his discussions assumed a wider scope, embracing all the great issues before the country. Thoroughly equipped for his new position by mental training and political experience, and in full sympathy with his audience, he made "Harper's Weekly" a power in the Republican party. He was hampered by no office restrictions. The publishers knew the secret of a real responsibility, and, giving him their confidence, gave it unreservedly. There was, of course, entire harmony of principle and purpose between Mr. Curtis and his publishers; and while there were also, of course, occasional differences of judgment as to men and measures, there was never any

interference with the course pursued by Mr. Curtis, nor any attempt to dictate the tone of the paper. This unrestricted independence gave Mr. Curtis a commanding influence in Republican councils and over his readers. He won, and has kept the enthusiastic personal support and admiration of his audience, as no other editor has succeeded in doing, with the single exception of Horace Greeley. The relations between Mr. Curtis and his readers are, in fact, almost personal in their nature, and he has never seriously entertained proposals, however brilliant and tempting, that would interrupt those relations. Thus, although he could serve as a Regent of the University, and as non-resident Professor at Cornell University for four years, he declined, in 1869, upon the death of Mr. Henry J. Raymond, who had previously asked him to become assistant editor, an invitation to the chief editorship of the New York "Times."

No other man has done more than Mr. Curtis to create and maintain a healthy popular sentiment on the subject of Civil Service Reform. In "Harper's Weekly," and in his public addresses, he has expounded and advocated this important measure with a persistency which has drawn upon him the wrath and ridicule of those who are pleased to style themselves "practical" politicians. "Sentimentalist" and "visionary" are among the mildest names applied to him by his political opponents; and he has been accused frequently of treachery to party allegiance because of the outspoken manner in which he has exposed and denounced obnoxious measures within the party. But Mr. Curtis acknowledges no party allegiance, in the sense that "machine" politicians understand the term; his only allegiance is to right, to high principle, to honor. He has the loftiest conceptions of the duty of the citizen. He holds that it should be the aim of every man, not only to keep himself pure, but to assist in the purification and elevation of politics; that it is the duty of every respectable citizen to take part in civil affairs, and to keep them out of the control of the baser elements of society. Between "sentimental" politics like this, and "practical" politics, which implies pandering to those baser elements, there can be no room for choice. As Charles Sumner once said, in his imperious way, to one who asked him to consider the other side of the slavery question: "Sir, in a matter of this sort there is no 'other' side!"

That the views which Mr. Curtis holds will win in the end admits of no doubt. Many a failure may yet be in store for their advocates, but, unless free institutions are destined to go

under, Civil Service Reform must ultimately triumph. Mr. Curtis was not discouraged by its failure under President Grant's administration. He accepted the Chairmanship of the Civil Service Commission, in 1871, with sanguine hopes of success. The President was sincere and earnest in his desire to thus signalize his administration; but, in 1873, becoming convinced that, yielding to the pressure of "practical" politicians, General Grant had changed his views, Mr. Curtis resigned, and the next year the President formally abandoned the project. It had been well for the President, and for the Republican party, had he listened to wiser counsels. Even those who have always sneered at "Sunday-school" politics begin now to discern the signs of the times; and the President's recent recommendations in his annual message, and the various bills hurriedly introduced in Congress, favoring reform in the Civil Service, show that the views which Mr. Curtis advocates have taken a stronger hold on the public than was dreamed of by his opponents.

Mr. Curtis has never accepted a political office, although often pressed to do so. By Mr. Seward he was offered the Consul-Generalship to Egypt; President Hayes urged him to accept the post of Minister to England, and afterward that of Minister to Germany; but he could not be tempted away from his editorial position. Once he accepted the nomination for Representative to Congress, knowing that his district was hopelessly Democratic, and that there was no prospect of his election. In 1867 he served in the State Constitutional Convention, in which he was chairman of the Committee on Education. He frequently took part in the debates, and made an elaborate speech in favor of the extension of the franchise to women,—a measure of which Mr. Curtis has been for years a consistent advocate.

Mr. Curtis was married in 1857 to a daughter of Mr. Robert G. Shaw, the eminent philanthropist, recently deceased. For many years he has resided in West New Brighton, Staten Island, except during the summer months, when he seeks rest and relaxation in a pleasant, old-fashioned country home in the village of Ashfield, Massachusetts.

His devotion to journalism and political affairs has prevented Mr. Curtis from pursuing authorship as a profession, if we are to regard authorship as the writing of books; but although he has put forth no volume since the publication of "Trumps," the readers of the "Easy Chair" in "Harper's Magazine," and of "Manners Upon the Road" in "Harper's Bazar," will recognize in him the most charming essayist of the day. The delicate,

graceful humor of these papers, the purity of style, the wide range of culture and observation which they indicate, but which is never obtrusive, give them a distinctive character of their own. The "Easy Chair" is the first part of the magazine to which the reader turns. The author of "Trumps," "The Poti-

phar Papers," and "Prue and I," could hardly have failed as a novelist, had he chosen to pursue that path of literature; but we will not regret his choice, for while we have many novelists, where shall we look for another name like his in the field of American journalism?

S. S. Conant.

THE LADY OF THE EAST.

(ON A DRAWING BY JOHN LAFARGE.)

WHO art thou, Lady of the East,
Whose day of eyes and night of hair
The daughter of a king, at least,
Proclaims, so brightly, darkly fair?
Thy life is a perpetual feast,
With but a single shadow there.

What is it, Lady? Some sweet thing
Which once was thine, but now is fled?
Thy lute hath lost its golden string?
Thy rose its freshest odor shed?
The bird thou lov'st has taken wing,
And to another sings instead?

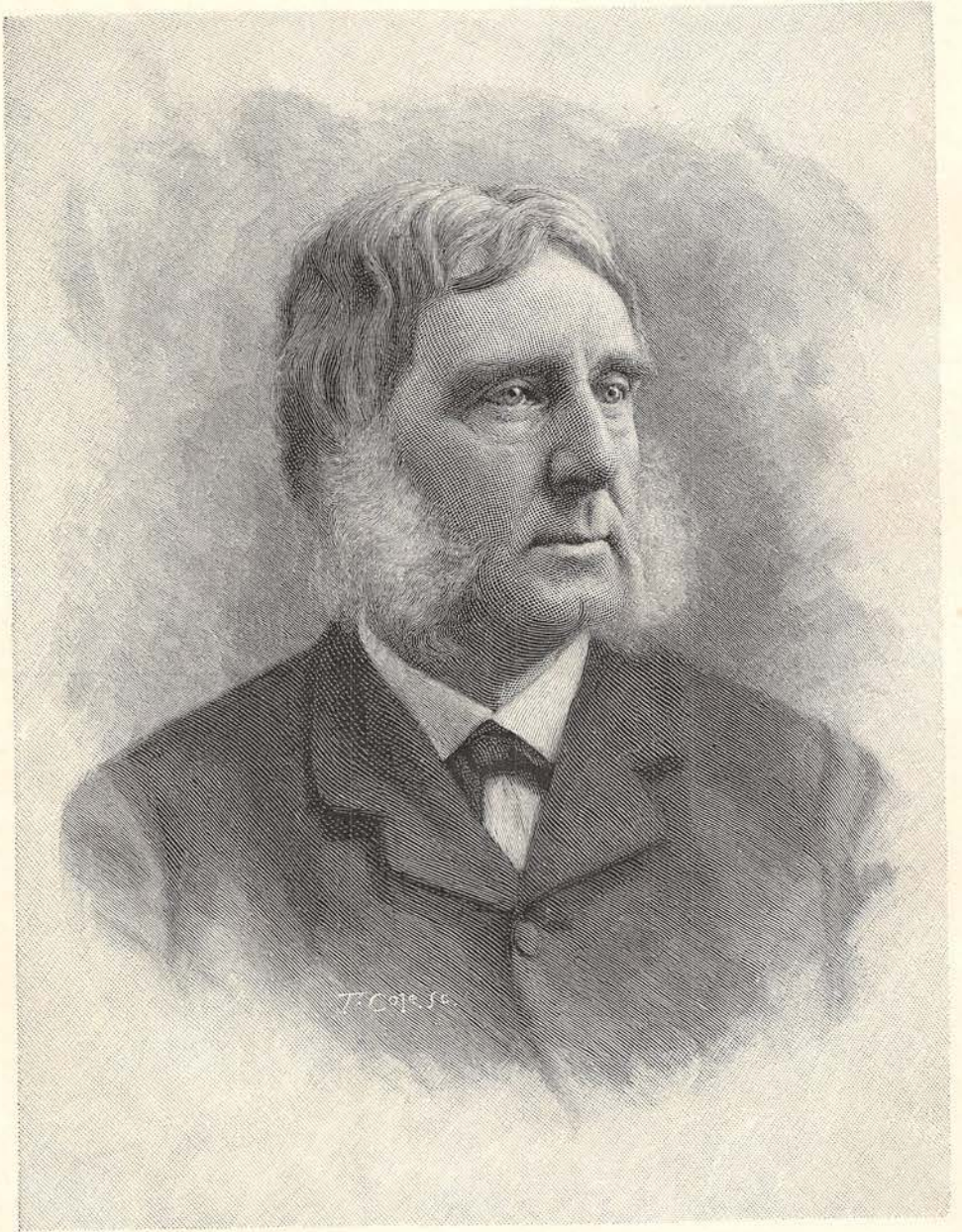
What is it, Princess, that hath cast
This sudden sadness on thy brow?
The shadow of what loving Past?
The memory of what broken vow?
Girlhood hath gone from thee at last,
And thou art perfect woman now.

I see thee as thou standest there
With those mysterious eyes of thine,
And all that midnight length of hair,
Like Dis's pall on Proserpine:
I only know that thou art fair;
I only wish that thou wert mine!

What Earth's first women were, thou art,
Glorious and gracious to behold,
With greater steadfastness of heart,
Though cast in less heroic mold;
And yet with tears that sooner start,
And smiles that were not known of old.

Thou hast no need to wear a crown,
So royal in thyself art thou:
And whether Fortune smiles, or frowns,
Thou hast the same unruffled brow;
Content if only men bow down
And worship thee—as I do now.

Richard Henry Stoddard.



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