

## OLD PORTSMOUTH PROFILES.

I DOUBT if any New England town ever turned out so many eccentric characters as Portsmouth. From 1640 down to about 1848 there must have been something in the air of the place that generated eccentricity. At the close of the first half of the present century the introduction of the railway between Boston and Portsmouth brought about conditions not favorable to the development of individual singularity in the hitherto sequestered little town. The spell of its seclusion was broken.

In recently turning over the pages of Mr. Brewster's entertaining collection of Portsmouth sketches,<sup>1</sup> I have been struck by the number and variety of the odd men and women who appear incidentally on the scene. They are, in the author's intention, secondary figures in the background of his landscape; but they stand very much in the foreground of one's memory after the book is laid aside. One finds one's self thinking quite as often of that squalid old hut-dweller up by Sagamore Creek as of General Washington, who visited the town in 1789. Conservatism and respectability have their values, certainly; but has not the unconventional its values also? If we render unto that old hut-dweller the things which are that old hut-dweller's, we must concede him his picturesqueness. He was dirty, and he was not respectable; but he is picturesque — now that he is dead.

If the reader has five or ten minutes to waste, I invite him to glance at a few old profiles of persons who, however substantial they once were, are now leading a life of mere outlines. I would like to give them a less faded expression, but the past is very chary of yielding up anything more than its shadows.

The first who presents himself is the ruminative hermit already mentioned — a species of uninspired Thoreau. His name was Benjamin Lear. So far as his craziness went, he might have been a lineal descendant of that ancient king of Britain who figures on Shakspeare's page. Family dissensions made a recluse of King Lear; but in the case of Benjamin there were no mitigating circumstances. He had no family to trouble him, and his realm remained undivided. He owned an excellent farm on the south side of Sagamore Creek, a little to the west of the bridge, and might have lived at ease, if personal comfort had not been distaste-

ful to him. Personal comfort entered into no plan of Lear's. To be alone filled the little pint-measure of his desire. He ensconced himself in a wretched shanty, and barred the door, figuratively, against all the world. Wealth — what would have been wealth to him — lay within his reach, but he thrust it aside; he disdained luxury as he disdained idleness, and made no compromise with convention. When a man cuts himself absolutely adrift from custom, what an astonishingly light spar floats him! How few his wants are, after all! Lear was of a cheerful disposition, and seems to have been wholly inoffensive — at a distance. He fabricated his own clothes, and subsisted chiefly on milk and potatoes, the product of his realm. He needed nothing but an island to be a Robinson Crusoe. At rare intervals he flitted like a frost-bitten apparition through the main street of Portsmouth, which he always designated as "the Bank," a name that had become obsolete fifty or a hundred years before. Thus, for nearly a quarter of a century, Benjamin Lear stood aloof from human intercourse. In his old age some of the neighbors offered him shelter during the tempestuous winter months; but he would have none of it — he defied wind and weather. There he lay in his dilapidated hovel in his last illness, refusing to allow any one to remain with him overnight, and the mercury four degrees below zero. Lear was born in 1720, and vegetated eighty-two years.

I take it that Timothy Winn, of whom we have only a glimpse, and would like to have more, was a person better worth knowing. His name reads like the title of some old-fashioned novel — "Timothy Winn, or the Memoirs of a Bashful Gentleman." He came to Portsmouth from Woburn at the close of the last century, and set up in the old museum-building on Mulberry street what was called "a piece goods store." He was the third Timothy in his monotonous family, and in order to differentiate himself he inscribed on the sign over his shop-door, "Timothy Winn, 3d," and was ever after called "Three-Penny Winn." That he enjoyed the pleasantry, and clung to his sign, goes to show that he was a person who would ripen on further acquaintance, were further acquaintance now practicable. His next-door neighbor, Mr. Leonard Serat, who kept a modest tailoring establishment, also tantalizes us a little with a dim intimation of originality. He plainly was without literary prejudices, for on one face of

<sup>1</sup> "Rambles About Portsmouth." By Charles W. Brewster, 1st and 2d Series, 1859-69.



DRAWN BY GILBERT GAUL.

THE HERMIT.

ENGRAVED BY R. C. COLLINS.

his swinging sign was painted the word Taylor, and on the other Tailor. This may have been a delicate concession to that part of the community—the greater part probably—which would have spelled it with a *y*.

The building in which Messrs. Winn and Serat had their shops was the property of Nicholas Rousselet, a French gentleman of Demerara, the story of whose unconventional courtship of Miss Catherine Moffatt is pretty enough to bear re-telling, and entitles him to a place in our limited collection of etchings. M. Rousselet had doubtless already made excursions into the *pays de tendre*, and given Miss Catherine previous notice of the state of his heart, but it was not until one day during the hour of service at the Episcopal church that he brought matters to a crisis by handing to Miss Moffatt a small Bible, on the fly-leaf of which he had penciled the fifth verse of the Second Epistle of John:

And now I beseech thee, lady, not as though I wrote a new commandment unto thee, but that which we had from the beginning, that we love one another.

This was not to be resisted, at least not by Miss Catherine, who demurely handed the volume back to him with a page turned down at the sixteenth verse in the first chapter of Ruth:

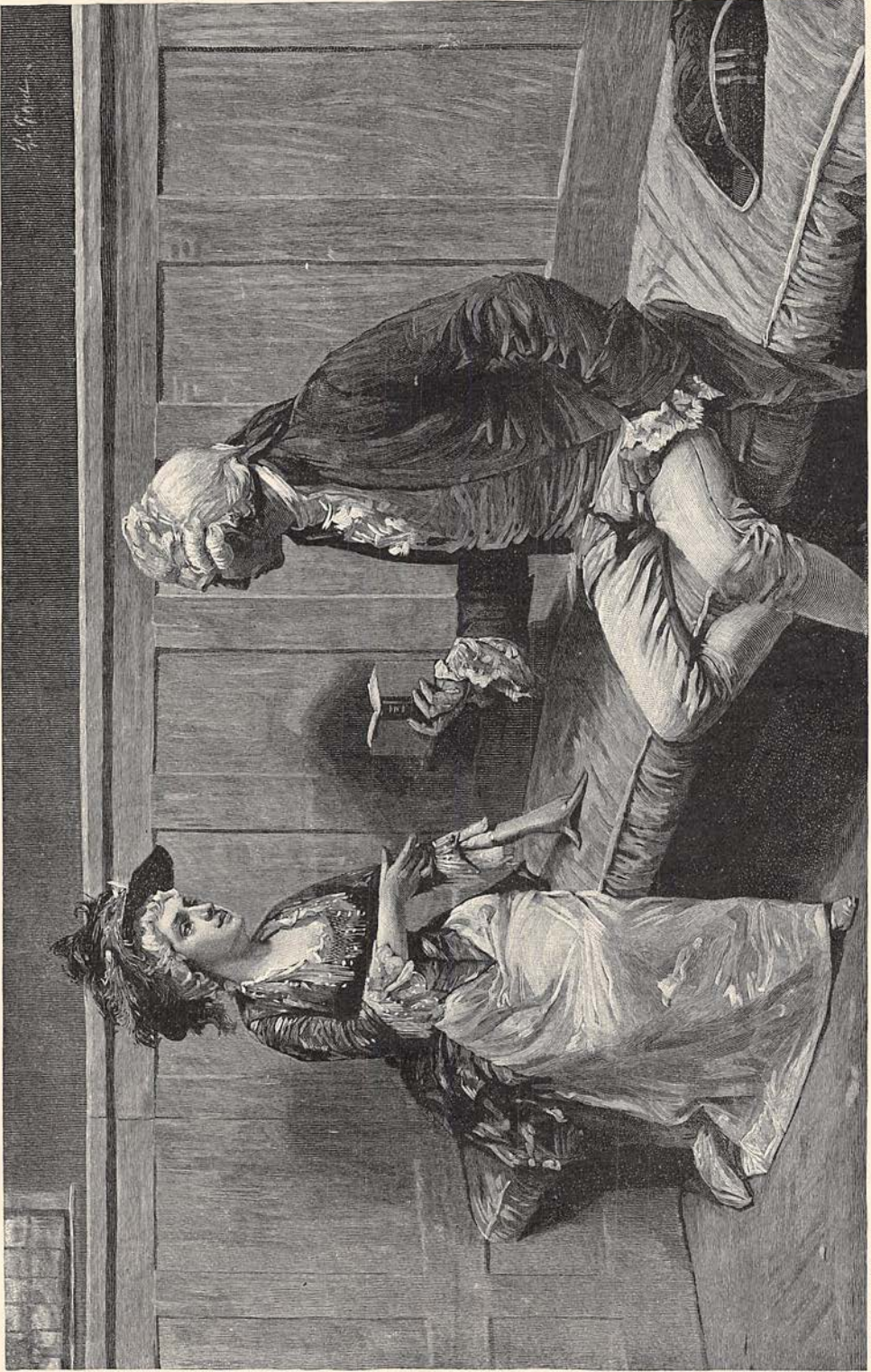
Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be

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my people, and thy God my God. Where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me.

Aside from this quaint touch of romance, what attaches me to the happy pair—for the marriage was a fortunate one—is the fact that the Rousselets made their home in the old Atkinson mansion, which stood directly opposite my grandfather's house on Court street, and was torn down in my childhood, to my great consternation. The building had been unoccupied for a quarter of a century, and was fast falling into decay, with all its rich wood-carvings at cornice and lintel; but was it not full of ghosts, and if the old barracks were demolished, would not these ghosts, or some of them at least, take refuge in my grandfather's house just across the way? Where else could they bestow themselves so conveniently? While the ancient mansion was in process of destruction, I used to peep round the corner of our barn at the workmen, and watch the indignant phantoms go soaring upward in clouds of colonial dust.

A lady differing in many ways from Catherine Moffatt was the Mary Atkinson (once an inmate of this same manor-house) who fell to the lot of the Rev. William Shurtleff, pastor of the South Church between 1733 and 1747; from the worldly standpoint, a fine match for the Newcastle clergyman—beauty, of the eagle-beaked kind; wealth, her share of the family plate; high birth, a sister to the Hon.



ENGRAVED BY H. DAVIDSON.

M. ROUSSELET'S PROPOSAL.

DRAWN BY GILBERT GAUL.

Theodore Atkinson. But if the exemplary man had cast his eyes lower, peradventure he had found more happiness, though ill-bred persons without family plate are not necessarily amiable. Like Socrates, this long-suffering divine had always with him an object on which to cultivate heavenly patience, and patience, says the Eastern proverb, is the key of content. The spirit of Xantippe seems to have taken possession of Mrs. Shurtleff immediately after her marriage. The freakish disrespect with which she used her meek consort was a heavy cross to bear at a period in New England when clerical dignity was at its highest sensitive point. Her devices for torturing the poor gentleman were inexhaustible. Now she lets his Sabbath ruffs go unstarched; now she scandalizes him by some unseemly and frivolous color in her attire; now she leaves him to cook his own dinner at the kitchen coals; and now she locks him in his study, whither he has retired for a moment or two of prayer, previous to setting forth to perform the morning service. The congregation has assembled; the sexton has tolled the bell twice as long as is the custom, and is beginning a third carillon, full of wonder that his Reverence does not appear; and there sits Mistress Shurtleff in the family pew with a face as complacent as that of the cat that has eaten the canary. Presently the deacons appeal to her for information touching the good doctor. Mistress Shurtleff sweetly tells them that the good doctor was in his study when she left home. There he is found, indeed, and released from durance, begging the deacons to keep his mortification secret, to "give it an understanding, but no tongue." Such was the discipline undergone by the worthy Dr. Shurtleff on his earthly pilgrimage. A portrait of this patient man—now a saint somewhere—hangs in the rooms of the New England Historic and Genealogical Society in Boston. There he can be seen in surplice and bands, with his lamb-like, apostolic face looking down upon the heavy antiquarian labors of his busy descendants.

Whether or not a man is to be classed as eccentric who vanishes without rhyme or reason on his wedding-night is a query left to the reader's decision. We seem to have struck a matrimonial vein, and must work it out. In 1768 Mr. James McDonough was one of the wealthiest men in Portsmouth, and the fortunate suitor for the hand of a daughter of Jacob Sheafe, a town magnate. The home of the bride was decked and lighted for the nuptials, the banquet-table was spread, and the guests were gathered. The minister in his robe stood by the carven mantelpiece, book in hand, and waited. Then followed an awkward interval; there was a hitch somewhere. A strange silence fell upon the laugh-

ing groups; the air grew tense with expectation; in the pantry, Amos Boggs, the butler, in his agitation spilt a bottle of port over his new cinnamon-colored small-clothes. Then a whisper—a whisper suppressed these twenty minutes—ran through the apartments, "The bridegroom has not come!" He never came. The mystery of that night remains a mystery after the lapse of a century and a quarter.

What had become of James McDonough? The assassination of so notable a person in a community where every strange face was challenged, where every man's antecedents were known, could not have been accomplished without leaving some slight traces. Not a shadow of foul play was discovered. That McDonough had been murdered or had committed suicide were theories accepted at first by a few, and then by no one. On the other hand,—he was in love with his *fiancée*, he had wealth, power, position,—why had he fled? he was seen a moment on the public street, and then never seen again. It was as if he had turned into air. Meanwhile the bewilderment of the bride was dramatically painful. If McDonough had been waylaid and killed, she could mourn for him. If he had deserted her, she could wrap herself in her pride. But neither course lay open to her, then or afterward. In one of the "Twice-Told Tales" Hawthorne deals with a man named Wakefield who disappears with like suddenness, and lives unrecognized for twenty years in a street not far from his abandoned hearthside. Such obliteration of one's self was not possible in Portsmouth; but I never think of McDonough without recalling Wakefield.

Some time in the year 1758 there dawned upon Portsmouth a personage bearing the ponderous title of King's Attorney, and carrying much gold lace about him. This gilded gentleman was Mr. Wyseman Clagett of Bristol, England, where his father dwelt on the manor of Broad Oaks, in a mansion with twelve chimneys, and kept eight or ten servants and a coach. Up to the moment of his advent in the colonies Mr. Wyseman Clagett had evidently not been able to keep anything but himself. His wealth consisted of his personal decorations, the golden frogs on his lapels, and the tinsel at his throat; other charms he had none. Yet with these he contrived to dazzle the eyes of Lettice Mitchel, one of the young beauties of the province, and to cause her to forget that she had plighted troth with a Mr. Warner, then in Europe, and destined to return home with a disturbed heart. Mr. Clagett was a man of violent temper and ingenious vindictiveness, and proved more than a sufficient punishment for Lettice's infidelity. The trifling fact that Warner was dead—he died shortly



DRAWN BY GILBERT GAUL.

THE REV. WILLIAM SHURTLEFF AND HIS WIFE.

ENGRAVED BY H. WOLF.

after his return—did not interfere with the course of Mr. Clagett's jealousy; he was haunted by the suspicion that Lettice regretted her first love, having left nothing undone to make her do so. "This is to pay Warner's debts," remarked Mr. Clagett, as he twitched off the table-cloth and wrecked the tea-things.

In his official capacity he was a relentless prosecutor. The noun Clagett speedily turned itself into a verb; "to Clagett" meant "to prosecute"; they were convertible terms. In spite of his industrious severity, and his royal emoluments, if such existed, the exchequer of the King's Attorney showed a perpetual deficit. The stratagems to which he resorted from time to time in order to raise unimportant sums remind one of certain scenes in Molière's comedies. Mr. Clagett had for his *âme damnée* a constable of the town. They were made for each other; they were two flowers with but a single stem, and this was their method of procedure: Mr. Clagett despatched one of his servants to pick a quarrel with some countryman on the street, or some sailor drinking at an inn; the constable arrested the sailor or the countryman, as the case might be, and hauled the culprit before Mr. Clagett; Mr. Clagett read the culprit a moral lesson, and fined him five dollars and costs. The plunder was then divided between the conspirators,—two hearts that beat as one,—Clagett of course getting the lion's share. Justice was never administered in a simpler manner in any country. This eminent legal light was extinguished in 1784, and the wick laid away in the little churchyard at Litchfield, New Hampshire. It is a satisfaction, even after such a lapse of time, to know that Lettice survived the King's Attorney sufficiently long to be very happy with somebody else. Lettice Mitchel was scarcely eighteen when she married Clagett.

About eighty years ago a witless fellow named Tilton seems to have been a familiar figure on the streets of the old town. Mr. Brewster speaks of him as "the well-known idiot Johnny Tilton," as if one should say, "the well-known statesman Daniel Webster." It is curious to observe how any sort of individuality gets magnified in this parochial atmosphere, where everything lacks perspective, and nothing is trivial. Johnny Tilton does not appear to have had much individuality to start with; it was only after his head was cracked that he showed any shrewdness whatever. That happened early in his unobtrusive boyhood. He had frequently watched the hens flying out of the loft window in his father's stable, which stood in the rear of the Old Bell Tavern. It occurred to Johnny, one day, that though he might not be as bright as other lads, he certainly was in no respect inferior to a hen. So he placed him-

self on the sill of the window in the loft, flapped his arms, and took flight. The New England Icarus alighted head downward, lay insensible for a while, and was henceforth looked upon as a mortal who had lost his wits. Yet at odd moments his cloudiness was illumed by a gleam of intelligence such as had not been detected in him previous to his mischance. As *Polonius* said of *Hamlet*,—another unstrung mortal,—Tilton's replies had "a happiness that often madness hits on, which reason and sanity could not so prosperously be delivered of." One morning he appeared at the flour-mill with a sack of corn to be ground for the almshouse, and was asked what he knew. "Some things I know," replied poor Tilton, "and some things I don't know. I know the miller's hogs grow fat, but I don't know whose corn they fat on." To borrow another word from *Polonius*, though this be madness, yet there was method in it. Tilton finally brought up in the almshouse, where he was allowed the liberty of roaming at will through the town. He loved the water-side, as if he had had all his senses. Often he was seen to stand for hours, with a sunny, torpid smile on his lips, gazing out upon the river where its azure ruffles itself into silver against the islands. He always wore stuck in his hat a few hen's feathers, perhaps with some vague idea of still associating himself with the birds of the air, if hens can come under that category.

George Jaffrey, third of the name, was a character of another complexion, a gentleman born, a graduate of Harvard in 1730, and one of his majesty's council in 1766—a man with the blood of the lion and the unicorn in every vein. He remained to the bitter end, and beyond, a devout royalist, prizing his shoe-buckles not because they were of chased silver, but because they bore the tower mark and crown stamp. He stoutly objected to oral prayer, on the ground that it gave rogues and hypocrites an opportunity to impose on honest folk. He was punctilious in his attendance at church, and unflinching in his responses, though not of a particularly devotional temperament. On one occasion at least his sincerity is not to be questioned. He had been deeply irritated by some encroachments on the boundaries of certain estates, and had gone to church that forenoon with his mind full of the matter. When the minister in the course of reading the service came to the apostrophe, "Cursed be he that removeth his neighbor's landmark," Mr. Jaffrey's feelings were too many for him, and he cried out, "Amen!" in a tone of voice that brought smiles to the adjoining pews.

Mr. Jaffrey's last will and testament, in spite of the Honorable Jeremiah Mason, who drew up the paper, was a whimsical document. It had been Mr. Jaffrey's plan originally to leave his



DRAWN BY GILBERT GAUL.

ENGRAVED BY C. SCHWARZBURGER.

“HE LOVED THE WATERSIDE.”

possessions to his beloved friend, Colonel Joshua Wentworth; but the colonel by some maladroitness managed to turn the current of Pactolus in another direction. The vast property was bequeathed to George Jaffrey Jeffries, the testator's grandnephew, on condition that the heir, then a lad of thirteen, should eliminate the name of Jeffries, reside permanently in Portsmouth, and adopt no profession excepting that of gentleman. There is an immense amount of Portsmouth, as well as of George Jaffrey, in that final clause. George the fourth handsomely complied with the requirements, and, dying at the age of sixty-six, without issue or assets, was the last of that particular line of Georges.

This modest exhibition of profiles, in which I have attempted to preserve no chronological

sequence, ends with the silhouette of Dr. Joseph Moses.

If Boston in the colonial days had her Mather Byles, Portsmouth had her Dr. Joseph Moses. In their quality as humorists the outlines of both these gentlemen have become rather broken and indistinct. “A jest's prosperity lies in the ear that hears it.” Decanted wit inevitably loses its bouquet. A clever repartee belongs to the precious moment in which it is broached, and is of a vintage that does not usually bear transportation. Dr. Moses,— he received his diploma not from the college of physicians, but from the circumstance of his having once drugged his private demijohn of rum, and so nailed an inquisitive negro named Sambo,— Dr. Moses, he was always called, has been handed



DRAWN BY CHARLES H. WOODBURY.

THE OLD WARNER HOUSE, PORTSMOUTH.

down to us by tradition as a fellow of infinite jest and of most excellent fancy; but I must confess that I find his high spirits very much evaporated. His humor expended itself, for the greater part, in practical pleasantries,—like that practised on the minion Sambo,—but these diversions, however facetious to the parties concerned, lack magnetism for outsiders. I discover nothing about him so amusing as the fact that he lived in a tan-colored little tenement which was neither clapboarded nor shingled, and finally got an epidermis from the discarded shingles of the old South Church when the roof of that edifice was repaired. Dr. Moses, like many persons of his time and class, was a man of protean employment—joiner, barber, and what not. No doubt he had much pithy and fluent conversation, all of which escapes us. He certainly impressed the Hon. Theodore Atkinson as a person of uncommon parts, for the Hon. Secretary of the Province, like a second Har-

oun Al Raschid, often summoned the barber to entertain him with his company. One evening—and this is the only reproducible instance of the doctor's readiness—Mr. Atkinson regaled his guest with a diminutive glass of choice Madeira. The doctor regarded it against the light with the half-closed eye of the connoisseur, and, after sipping the molten topaz with satisfaction, inquired how old it was. "Of the vintage of about sixty years ago," was the answer. "Well," said the doctor, reflectively, "I never in my life saw so small a thing of such an age." There are other *mots* of his on record, but their faces are suspiciously familiar. In fact, all the witty things were said eons ago. If one nowadays perpetrates an original joke, one immediately afterward finds it in the Sanskrit. I am afraid that Dr. Joseph Moses has no very solid claims on us. I have given him place here because he has long had the reputation of a wit, which is almost as good as to be one.

*Thomas Bailey Aldrich.*

## THE MOCKING-BIRD.

**L**IST to that bird! His song—what poet pens it?  
 Brigand of birds, he 's stolen every note!  
 Prince though of thieves—hark! how the rascal spends it!  
 Pours the whole forest from one tiny throat!

*Ednah Proctor Clarke.*