

## AN AMERICAN SCHOLAR.

THOMAS RAYNESFORD LOUNSBURY.

BY BRANDER MATTHEWS.

IN a London weekly, a few years ago, a scholar of American birth, but now for more than twoscore years a resident of England, published letters in which he held up to the scorn of his British readers the vocabulary and the grammar of certain living American writers; declaring further that the mistakes of these authors were undoubtedly due to the unfortunate fact that they were Americans; and confessing, moreover, that he also, in writing English, felt himself to be writing a foreign language. Whatever might be thought of the taste or of the truth of this scholar's charges against his fellow-Americans, there was no disputing the justice of his self-accusation; for no foreigner ever wrote more pedantic or contorted English than his. In one of these letters he asserted that Americans were necessarily exposed to the influence of expressions which were «not standard English,» and that, «in short, the language of an American is all but inevitably more or less dialectal»; wherefore it behooves us promptly to take measures that the evolution of the English language in America «be controlled by proficients in knowledge and taste, and not by sciolists and vulgarians.»

I have called the man who uttered these sentiments a scholar,—for what else can any one be termed who has given an immensity of toil to the collection of illustrations of usage?—but the theory underlying these sentiments is wholly unscientific. No trained philologist any longer believes that it is either possible or desirable to give the control of the evolution of the language to «proficients in knowledge and taste.» The latest historian of the English language tells us formally that «the history of the language is the history of corruptions,» and that «the purest of speakers uses every day, with perfect propriety, words and forms which, looked at from the point of view of the past, are improper, if not scandalous. But the blunders of one age become good usage in the following, and in process of time grow to be so consecrated by custom and consent that a return to practices

theoretically correct would seem like a return to barbarism.» Later he tells us that «the language can be safely trusted to take care of itself, if the men who speak it take care of themselves; for with their degree of development, of cultivation, and of character it will always be found in absolute harmony.» Finally the same authority, as though intending to answer the strange assertion of the Anglo-American scholar, declares that the language need not fear the attacks of the sciolists and the vulgarians, since «it is in much more danger from ignorant efforts made to preserve its purity.»

It is from the enlarged, revised, and in fact rewritten edition of Professor Lounsbury's «History of the English Language» that I have made these quotations; and in their union of scientific precision of statement with a wholesome common sense, these quotations, brief as they are, seem to me to be fairly typical of the man from whose book they were selected: for in all his writings no one can fail to note the boldness which is based on a complete mastery of the subject.

Thomas Raynesford Lounsbury was born in the State of New York in 1838, and was graduated from Yale College in 1859. He served three years in the army, being taken prisoner at Harper's Ferry, but being exchanged in time to be present at Gettysburg. In 1870 he was called to Yale, where he is now professor of English in the Sheffield Scientific School. In 1879 he published his «History of the English Language,» promptly adopted as a text-book in the leading colleges of the country, and substantially rewritten for the new edition issued in 1894. To the American Men of Letters Series, edited by Mr. Charles Dudley Warner, he contributed in 1883 the biography of James Fenimore Cooper. In 1891 he sent forth, in three solid tomes, his «Studies in Chaucer»; already for The Century Dictionary he had prepared the Chaucer vocabulary; and he is also editing two poems of Chaucer's—«The House of Fame» and «The Parliament of Fowles.» A course of lectures on Shakspeare, delivered in

certain Western and Eastern cities, has not yet been published.

With the increasing specialization of the higher education, most of our colleges wish to rescue the courses of instruction in literature from the hands of the language teachers, in fact restoring the old chair of belles-lettres—of course not as a substitute for philology, but as a supplement to it. While a knowledge of any literature must be based on a certain knowledge of its language, an understanding of linguistic science does not imply an appreciation of literary art. A professor of English is rare who has both philologic training and esthetic perception, as Professor Lounsbury has; and he has also a quality rarer still—the temper of the true scholar.

Accepting our language as a living organism, and thoroughly equipped for its vivisection, Professor Lounsbury is no mere grammarian. Capable of endless and incessant investigation for the settling of disputed points in literary history, he is no mere antiquary. To him research is a labor of love, useful not as an end in itself, but only in the service of a higher cause. He knows the English language as it was and as it is, and he knows English literature, past and present, and he loves them both; and therefore he is able to write about them with the insight and the sympathy of the true critic. Like Lowell, also a teacher of modern literature, Professor Lounsbury has no trace of the pedagogue, no taint of the pedant; and though his wit is less obtrusive than Lowell's, he is none the less certain to relieve a dry subject with dry humor.

Even those who may think that the English language is an arid subject cannot deny that there are many juicy passages in Professor Lounsbury's history of it. Personally I have always agreed with the Scotch gardener to whom an English dictionary had been given, and who reported that it contained "good stories, but unco short." Personally I am always ready for a ramble around the vocabulary; and so I am not an unprejudiced witness, perhaps. But I can affirm, on information and belief, that even those who take little interest in the subject find Professor Lounsbury's "History of the English Language" an eminently readable book. The second part, on the history of inflections, is perhaps of less general interest than the first portion, in which the evolution of English speech is traced; but in both parts the statement is always transparently clear, while the illustrations are delightfully apposite. In

both parts are numberless proofs of Professor Lounsbury's possession of the gift of putting things so that they cling to the memory of the reader; and the temptation to quote abundantly is hard to resist. Here is one needful verity, compactly put: "No tongue can possibly be corrupted by alien words which convey ideas that cannot be expressed by native ones. Yet this elementary truth is far from being universally accepted; for it is a lesson which many learn with difficulty, and some never learn at all, that purism is not purity." And here is another: "It cannot be laid down too emphatically that it is not the business of grammarians or scholars to decide what is good usage. Their function is limited to ascertaining and recording it. . . . It is [the best authors] who settle by their practice what is correct or incorrect, and not the arbitrary pretenses or prejudices of writers on usage or grammar."

It is not a far cry from a history of the English language to a biography of the first American author who gained popularity outside the boundaries of the English-speaking peoples. Irving's "Sketch-Book," begun in 1819, was the earliest book of American authorship to gain acceptance across the Atlantic in Great Britain; but Cooper's "Spy," published in 1821, was the earliest book of American authorship to win fame across the Channel, in France and Germany, in Italy and Spain. When the American Men of Letters Series was planned, no volume was more imperatively demanded than that devoted to Cooper, the more especially as his family, like Thackeray's, interpreted a treasured remark to mean that they must not aid or authorize any official biography. This alleged prohibition made Professor Lounsbury's task at once more difficult and more necessary. In Cooper's case, as in Thackeray's, the biographer has nothing to conceal. A biographer is a trustee for his readers, and he is derelict to his duty if he deprive his *cestui que trust* of one jot or tittle of the whole truth. But he is bound also to spare the reader all insignificant facts. Many recent biographers of authors are mere antiquaries, gathering up the chaff with the wheat, and choking the reader with the dust of their own tedious research. As Carlyle once said, "Rich as we are in biography, a well-written life is almost as rare as a well-spent one." Upon the whole, and despite his petty weaknesses, Cooper's life was well spent; and it has now been well written. Indeed, Professor Lounsbury's "Cooper" seems to me a model biography; for it is founded on documentary investiga-

tion quite German in its thoroughness, and it is written with structural clearness quite French in its delicacy. It presents to us a finished statue of the man, without parading before us the chips and scattered fragments of the studio. And the book is as well written as it is well planned. It is the work of a scholar and a gentleman, honest but courteous, plain-spoken if need be, but civil-tongued always. Professor Lounsbury has something of Cooper's own sturdy Americanism, although he is wholly free from Cooper's pernickety peculiarities, and although he has abundantly the humor of which Cooper was hopelessly devoid.

After writing this account of the career of the man who wrote the first American historical novel, the first sea story, and the first tale of the forest and the prairie, Professor Lounsbury returned to his study of the man Lowell called «the first great poet who has treated To-day as if it were as good as Yesterday.» But the projected work grew on his hands until at last it appeared, at the end of 1891, in three stately tomes. The author was rewarded for his delay by the welcome his work received from the public at large, and from the specialists who could best testify to its excellence. By all it was accepted as the most important contribution yet made by an American scholar to the great unwritten history of English literature.

The three volumes of «Studies in Chaucer» contain eight separate essays. The desire to disentangle the few known facts of the life of Chaucer from the many vague fancies of the legend which has masqueraded as the biography of the poet, the wish to set the brief account of Chaucer's birth and wanderings and death on a firm foundation of scientific research, led Professor Lounsbury to devote his first essay to the actual life of the poet, and his second to the legend which has encompassed it about, tracing every unsupported suggestion to its source, and showing, once for all, upon what slight authority it rests. The next essays consider in turn the text of the poet, the list of his writings, and the question of his authorship of the translation of the «Romaunt of the Rose.» And over this last question there is still waged a battle among experts more fearful than that which raged over the body of Achilles; into it no layman need enter here, but even a hasty reader can see that Professor Lounsbury is well equipped for the fight, and can give a good account of himself when attacked. In the subsequent essays we have a consideration of the extent of Chaucer's learning,

which is shown to be much less than many pretend, just as Shakspeare's is also; for both poets had wisdom and what may be called intuitive knowledge, but neither was remarkable for «book-learning.» They were poets, both of them; they were literary artists; they were neither of them scholars.

It is to a consideration of Chaucer's art that the final essay is devoted, its immediate predecessors being on the poet's relation to the religion of his time and to the English language, and on the history of his literary reputation. Professor Lounsbury shows us that, however much he may have been misunderstood at times, Chaucer has had a continuous popularity, and that he has successfully met «the three tests of enduring fame—the opinion of contemporaries, the opinion of foreign nations, the opinion of posterity.» That the earliest great poet of the English language should have become the prey of grammarians and the sport of critics is odd enough; but it is not as extraordinary as that the author whom Lowell declared to be «one of the world's three or four great story-tellers» should lack adequate recognition for his preëminent merits as an artist for nearly five hundred years after his death. Yet this is the fact. Chaucer was supremely the artist «in the fabrication of his verse as well as in the construction of his plot and the telling of his story. . . . The story of his literary life is, in fact, a story of steady growth, in which he gradually rose superior to the taste of his time, proved all things, found out that which was true, and held fast to that which was good. In the various eulogistic tributes that have been paid to the poet, it is rare that [this technical excellence] has received even cursory notice. In none of them has it ever been credited with its full significance.»

No chapter in Professor Lounsbury's book is more skilfully prepared, or more welcomed by all who appreciate and admire literary art, than this last, in which he proves his assertion that Chaucer is supremely the artist, both in versification and in story-telling. That the poet's supremacy as a story-teller has not been more widely recognized is due perhaps to the general neglect of narrative art in nearly all British criticism. There are great novelists, no doubt, in English literature—perhaps as great as in any other literature; but there are few great story-tellers, few writers who understood the principles of selection and composition, few real masters of narrative. Mr. Howells once wondered how it was that, after we had

seen the refined and delicate fictions of Jane Austen, we could ever allow ourselves to accept the vulgar and violent caricatures of Dickens; and the wonder is greater that the people for whom Chaucer once wrote his shapely and vigorous tales can now tolerate that sprawling invertebrate, the modern British novel. At his best Chaucer was one of the greatest of English story-tellers, as at his best he was one of the greatest of English poets. As a story-teller and as a poet he was straightforward. «What he has to say he says in a thoroughly natural manner, without the slightest attempt to produce an impression.» One other quotation from this chapter I must permit myself: «Poetry has failed of its mission when its language, like that of diplomacy, is used to conceal thought.»

Throughout these «Studies in Chaucer» Professor Lounsbury adopts the spelling of «ryme,» which frees it from the obtrusive *h* foisted into the word most superfluously some time in the seventeenth century; and Professor Lounsbury always performs gladly that duty which lies upon every single student of English speech, to do whatever he can, whenever he can, to bring back our English spelling into the right path. One of the most eloquent passages in these three volumes, and one of the most convincing, is a plea for the simplification of our orthography. Spelling reform has no advocate better equipped than he, or more earnest in the cause. Again and again has he made merry with the amateur philologists who erect their own prejudices into an eternal law, and who profess to detect a subtle beauty in the ridiculous *b* in «debt,» or in the still more absurd *p* in «comptroller.» Although he treats them always with courtesy, he has little patience with the literary men who dabble in linguistics, a class of which Trench and Alford may be taken as types, both of them authors of books about words, narrow-minded originally, and now hopelessly belated. It cannot be easy for a trained student of English to be tolerant toward those who accept the Johnsonian canon of orthography, and therefore shiver at the suggestion of dropping the unjustifiable *u* from «neighbor» or the misleading *g* from «sovereign.» Indeed, to a scientific etymologist the misfit spelling of the modern dialect story is not more ludicrous than the accepted orthography.

It is greatly to be regretted that Professor Lounsbury has not yet gathered into a single volume his scattered essays on linguistic topics, now sunk in the swift oblivion

of the back number. Especially worthy of revival are two sets of papers prepared about fifteen years ago, one set for this magazine, on «Spelling Reform,» and the other for the defunct «International Review,» on «The English Language in America.» To both of these series of papers I am glad to confess my own great indebtedness. In these linguistic essays, as elsewhere, Professor Lounsbury bears his learning lightly; but the critics who come to try a fall with him must needs have practised in the schools, or they will lie with their mother earth. The papers on «Spelling Reform» show that he has not merely learning, but also the rarer quality, wisdom. They reveal, too, his possession of a full share of the humor which is every American's birthright. It is pleasant to be able to record that our English scholars have nearly all of them—Lowell most abundantly, but also Child and Furness—the sense of humor which prevents their lapsing into pedantry. This saving grace is nowhere more needful than in any discussion of the barbarities of modern English orthography, than which, indeed, even the Great American Joke is not more laughter-provoking.

The wholesome humor of the papers on «Spelling Reform» is to be found also in the papers on «The English Language in America,» wherein he faces those who have cast aspersions on our parts of speech. The frequent talk about the degradation of the language, particularly in this nineteenth century, and more particularly in these United States, is, for the most part, as silly as it is shrill. Professor Whitney recorded his opinion that there has been perhaps less change in the English language during the last forty years than in any half-century of its history. Of course the vocabulary is increasing with marvelous rapidity, as we can all see; and though we Americans are not so prone to the pastime as our kin across the sea, it would be as easy for us to decry many a Britishism of recent invention as it is for them to denounce the latest Americanism, especially as the latter often turns out to have a most venerable English pedigree. Upon this subject Professor Lounsbury has written with unfailing humor and with abundant knowledge of the principles which govern the development of the language.

He has as little liking for the silly spread-eagleism which declares that we do not care for abroad as he has for the feebler colonialism which takes all its opinions second-hand from the other side of the Atlantic. His attitude is not unlike Roger Sherman's, who,

when some irate member of the Continental Congress in 1776 moved the abolition of the English language in America, seconded the motion, with the amendment that we compel the British to learn Greek, and keep English for ourselves.

In fact, whether the subject he is treating be linguistic or literary, whether it be spelling reform or the English language, whether it be the prose novels of Cooper or the poetic

tales of Chaucer, Professor Lounsbury handles it with the same firm grasp, with the same understanding and sanity, with the same wholesome good humor. A scholarship as wide as it is deep, a common sense as unusual as it is vigorous, a humor unfailling always, and never obtruded or beyond control—these are characteristics not often found together; and they are to be found in all of Professor Lounsbury's works.

## VITA BENEFICA.

BY ALICE WELLINGTON ROLLINS.<sup>1</sup>

ON softest pillows my dim eyes unclose,  
 No pain—delicious weariness instead;  
 Sweet silence broods around the quiet bed,  
 And round me breathes the fragrance of the rose.  
 The moonlight leans against the pane and shows  
 The little leaves outside in watchful dread  
 Keeping their guard, while with swift noiseless tread  
 Love in its lovelier service comes and goes:  
 A hand I love brings nectar; near me bends  
 A face I love: ah! it is over! this  
 Indeed is heaven. Could I only tell  
 The timid world how tenderly Death sends  
 To drooping souls the soft and thrilling kiss!—  
 And then I woke—to find that I was well!

## PRESIDENT LINCOLN'S VISITING-CARD.

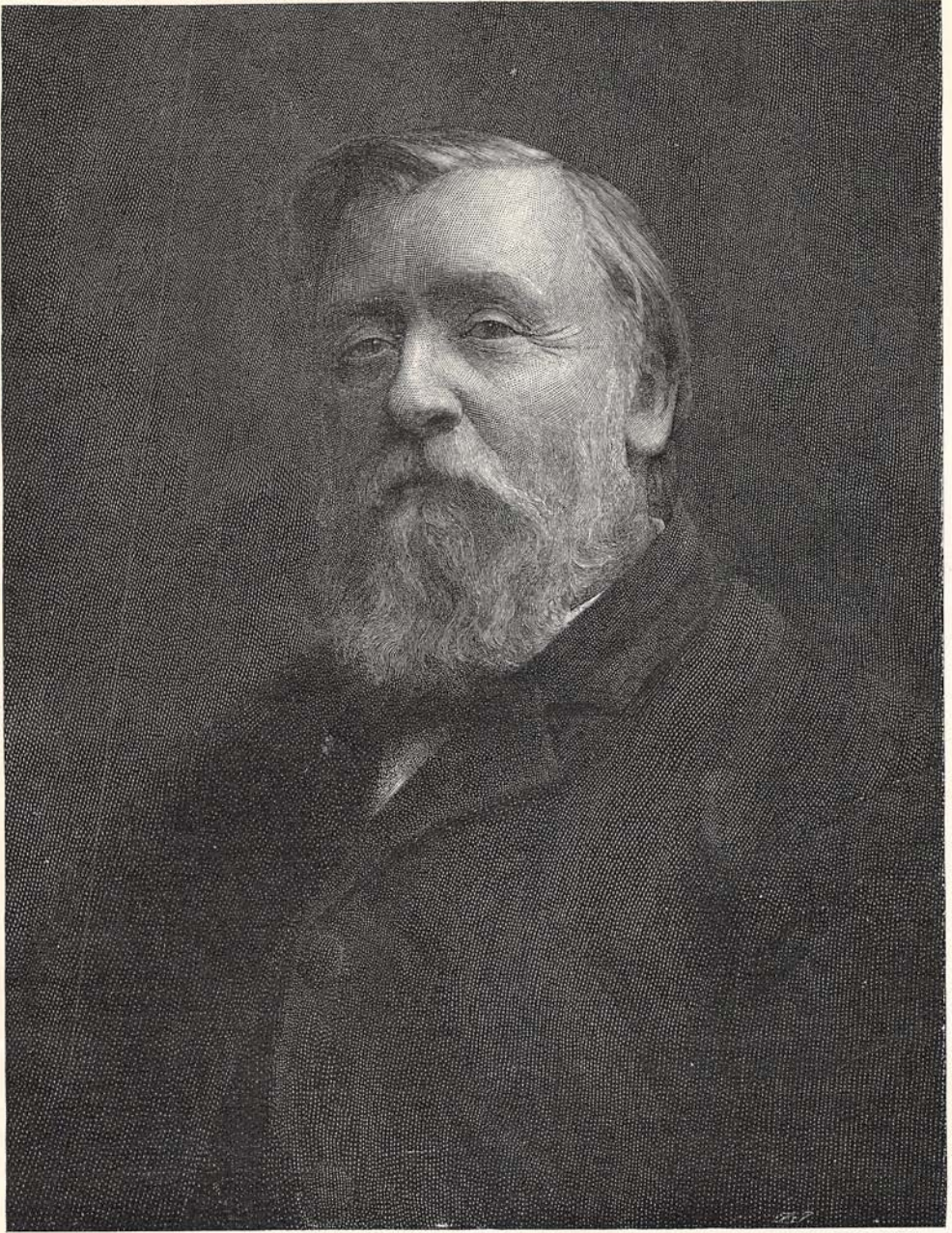
THE STORY OF THE PAROLE OF A CONFEDERATE OFFICER.

BY JOHN M. BULLOCK.

IN the early summer of 1864, my eldest brother, Waller R. Bullock of Kentucky, was wounded and captured while acting as captain of a detachment of General John H. Morgan's dismounted Confederates at Mount Sterling, Kentucky, Morgan's men being defeated by the troops of General Stephen G. Burbridge of the Union army. After having been left for dead upon the battlefield, and finally brought back to life in an almost miraculous manner, he was allowed, through the kind efforts of some of my father's Union friends, to be carried to the home of a relative and cared for until he

<sup>1</sup> This poem was written by Mrs. Rollins in her last illness, at a time when she believed herself recovering. She died on Sunday, December 5, 1897.

was in a condition to be sent to prison at Johnson's Island, near Sandusky, Ohio. After his removal to prison, we often received letters from him, telling us of his daily life of enforced idleness, but nothing regarding his health that caused us any uneasiness until the cold and icy winds of winter had set in. Then it was he wrote of a cough and some slight indisposition, but nothing that could awaken the watchfulness of even a mother's love. Early in February, 1865, Colonel Holliday of Kentucky, a Confederate officer, came through Baltimore on special exchange. My father, the Rev. Dr. Bullock, had left Kentucky at the beginning of the war, and accepted a call to the Franklin Street Presbyterian Church of Baltimore,



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Very Sincerely,  
J. R. Lombard.