MY OWN STORY

WITH RECOLLECTIONS OF NOTED PERSONS

BY

JOHN TOWNSEND TROWBRIDGE

ILLUSTRATED

Ne cede malis. — *Heraldic Motto.*

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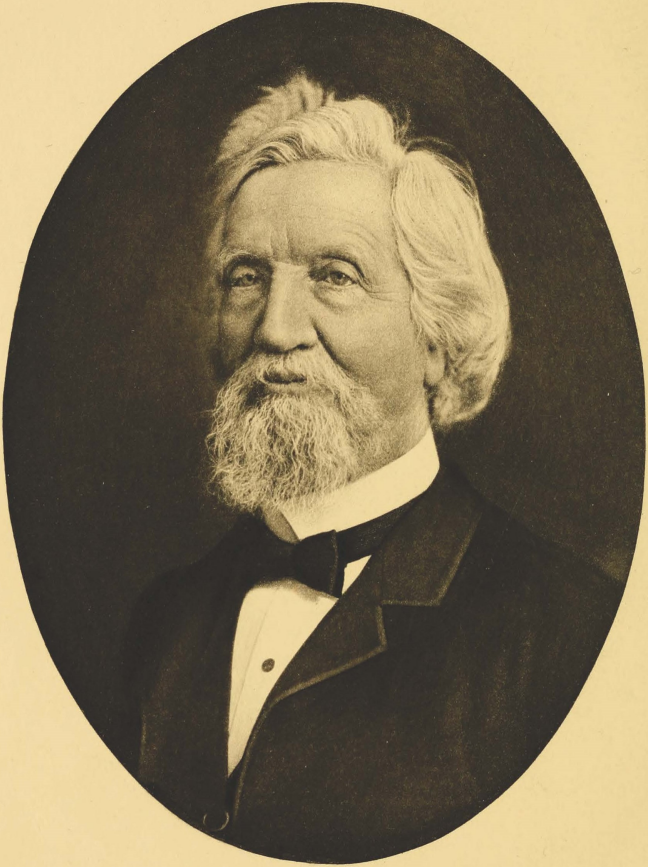

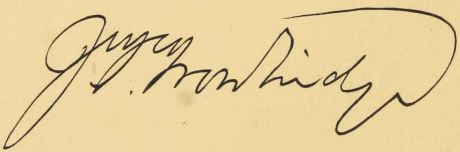

FOREWARNING

THE significance of the saying (Carlyle's, is it not?) that the story of any man's life would have interest and value, if truly told, is recognized, I think, by the most of us; yet each is apt to fancy at least one exception to the rule, namely, his own particular life. This certainly was the case with myself, even up to the time when I was induced — reluctantly for that reason — to undertake these memoirs. I have therefore been not a little surprised at the manner in which the chapters that appeared in recent numbers of the Atlantic Monthly have been received, and can only attribute it to whatever success I may have had in fulfilling the condition that points the saying.

Yet that the story I tell is not the bare, absolute, unveiled verity I hasten to avow, in the interest of the truth which I believe in and would

sincerely serve. Under the purest tones of the violin, persists ever the dry, dreary, accompanying sound of the friction of the bow upon the strings; the player hears it, as likewise do any of his auditors who chance to be too near the instrument; but it is properly no part of the performance, and will not, if he is skilled, mar his musical numbers. Alas, if he be not skilled!

Skilled or otherwise, I have endeavored to hold my audience at a little distance. While aiming always at entire fidelity to the main and minor facts of my record, I have kept out of it as much as possible the ennuis and annoyances, the errors and heartaches, of which my life has doubtless been no freer than yours who peruse these pages, if as free. I say this especially to dispel the illusion in which some, I find, have followed the published magazine chapters, — that, in respect to discouragements and failures, human ills and frailties, mine has been an exception to the common lot. Strange illusion indeed!

I desire also to correct a quite different impression, derived from the same source, that I

have lived what in these later years is termed a "strenuous life." I do not greatly believe in the strenuous life for myself, much as I may admire it in another, and I had no idea that I was living it in the periods of struggle and not over-successful achievement I have portrayed. Our strivings after better things than wealth and power and display, even for complex intellectual acquirements and the accomplishment of the worthiest aims, may be too incessant and intense, and dry up in us the springs of spirit they should feed. We do not often enough rest in the divine passivity that heals the hurts of time and is the restoring bath of our being. Not that I would counsel a purposeless drifting, while choice of direction is left us, with strength of arm for the oar. Only dreams come to us in our sleep. Not alone the great prizes of life, but often the mind's solace and the body's health, wait upon work. The world is for endeavor; the world is the flint, the will of man the steel.

The heraldic motto on the title-page of these reminiscences (given also on a later page with its context in the Sibyl's charge to Æneas) is in

reality the motto of the Trowbridge coat of arms. The coat of arms I have no special interest or pride in, but the motto I deem worthy to be prized, to be cited, and to shape one's life by.

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Tu ne cede malis ; sed contra audentior ito,
Qua tua te Fortuna sinet.

Æneid VI., 95, 96.

Yield not, whatever woeful stroke may be
Thy portion, when befalls the evil day ;
But draw fresh courage from calamity,
And forward press, where Fortune points the way.

CHAPTER XII

WALT WHITMAN — WITH GLIMPSES OF CHASE AND O'CONNOR

I

I FIRST made acquaintance with Whitman's writings when a newspaper notice of the earliest edition of Leaves of Grass reached me, in Paris, in the autumn of 1855. It was the most exhilarating piece of news I had received from America during the six months of my absence abroad. Such vigor, such graphic force, such human sympathy, such scope and audacity in the choice and treatment of themes, found in me an eagerly interested reader of the copious extracts which the notice contained. When I came to see the volume itself, — the thin, small quarto of 1855, — I found in it much that impressed me as formless and needlessly offensive; and these faults were carried to extremes in the second and enlarged edition of 1856. Yet the tremendous original power of this new bard, and the freshness, as of nature itself, which breathed through the best of his songs or sayings, continued to hold their spell over me, and inspired me with

intense curiosity as to the man. But I had no opportunity of meeting him till he came to Boston in the spring of 1860, to put his third edition through the press.

Then, one day, I was stopped on Washington Street by a friend who made this startling announcement: "Walt Whitman is in town; I have just seen him!" When I asked where, he replied: "At the stereotype foundry, just around the corner. Come along! I 'll take you to him." The author of Leaves of Grass had loomed so large in my imagination as to seem almost superhuman; and I was filled with some such feeling of wonder and astonishment as if I had been invited to meet Socrates or King Solomon.

We found a large, gray-haired and gray-bearded, plainly dressed man, reading proof-sheets at a desk in a little dingy office, with a lank, unwholesome-looking lad at his elbow, listlessly watching him. The man was Whitman, and the proofs were those of his new edition. There was a scarcity of chairs, and Whitman, rising to receive us, offered me his; but we all remained standing except the sickly looking lad, who kept his seat until Whitman turned to him and said, "You 'd better go now; I 'll see you this evening." After he had gone out, Whitman explained: "He is a friendless boy I found at my boarding place. I am trying to

cheer him up and strengthen him with my magnetism;" a practical but curiously prosaic illustration of these powerful lines in the early poems: —

"To any one dying, thither I speed and twist the knob of the door. . . .
I seize the descending man, I raise him with resistless will. . . .
O despairer, here is my neck, hang your whole weight upon me!
I dilate you with tremendous breath, I buoy you up,
Every room of the house do I fill with an armed force, lovers of me, bafflers of graves;
Sleep! they and I keep guard all night,
Not doubt, not decease shall dare to lay finger upon you."

The difference between the prosaic fact and the poetic expression was not greater than the contrast between Whitman as I had imagined him and the simple, well-mannered man who stood and talked with us. From his own descriptions of himself, and from the swing and impetus of his lines, I had pictured him proud, alert, grandiose, defiant of the usages of society; and I found him the quietest of men. I really remember but one thing he said, after sending away the boy. The talk turning on his proof-sheets, I asked how the first poems impressed him, at this re-reading; to which he replied, "I am astonished to find myself capable of feeling so much." The conversation was all very quiet, pitched in a low key, and I went away somewhat disappointed that he did not say or do

something extraordinary and admirable; one of the noticeable things about him being an absence of all effort to make a good impression.

II

I got on vastly better with him when, the next Sunday morning, he came out to see me on Prospect Hill, in Somerville, where I was then living (in the later home of the Newtons).

The weather was perfect, — it was early May; the few friends I introduced to him were congenial spirits; he was happy and animated, and we spent the day together in such hearty and familiar intercourse that when I parted with him in the evening, on East Cambridge bridge, having walked with him thus far on his way back to Boston, I felt that a large, new friendship had shed a glow on my life. Of much of that day's talk I have a vivid recollection, — even of its trivialities. He was not a loud laugher, and rarely made a joke, but he greatly enjoyed the pleasantries of others. He liked especially any allusion, serious or jocular, to his poems. When, at dinner, preparing my dish of salad, I remarked that I was employed as his critics would be when his new edition was out, he queried, "Devouring Leaves of Grass?" "No," I said, "cutting up Leaves of Grass!" — which amused him more, I fancy, than the cutting up

did that came later. As the afternoon waned, and he spoke of leaving us, the vivacious hostess placed a book before the face of the clock. I said "Put Leaves of Grass there. Nobody can see through that." "Not even the author?" he said, with a whimsical lifting of the brows.

Much of the talk was about himself and his poems, in every particular of which I was profoundly interested. He told me of his boyhood in Brooklyn; going to work in a printing office at the age of fourteen; teaching school at seventeen and eighteen; writing stories and sketches for periodicals under his full name, Walter Whitman (his first Leaves of Grass was copyrighted by Walter Whitman, after which he discarded "Walter" for "Walt"); editing newspapers and making political speeches, on the Democratic side; leading an impulsive, irregular sort of life, and absorbing, as probably no other man ever did, the common aspects of the cities he was so proud of, Brooklyn and New York. His friendships were mostly with the common people, — pilots, drivers, mechanics; and his favorite diversions crossing the ferries, riding on the top of omnibuses, and attending operas. He liked to get off alone by the seashore, read Homer and Ossian with the salt air on his cheeks, and shout their winged words to the winds and waves. The book he

knew best was the Bible, the prophetical parts of which stirred in him a vague desire to be the bard or prophet of his own time and country.

Then, at the right moment, he read Emerson.

III

I was extremely interested to know how far the influence of our greatest writer had been felt in the making of a book which, without being at all imitative, was pitched in the very highest key of self-reliance. In his letter to Emerson, printed in the second edition of Leaves of Grass, speaking of "Individuality, that new moral American continent," Whitman had averred: "Those shores you found; I say, you led the States there, — have led me there." And it seemed hardly possible that the first determined attempt to cast into literature a complete man, with all his pride and passions, should have been made by one whose feet were not already firmly planted on "those shores." Then there was the significant fact of his having mailed a copy of his first edition to Emerson.

Whitman talked frankly on the subject, that day on Prospect Hill, and told how he became acquainted with Emerson's writings. He was at work as a carpenter (his father's trade before him) in Brooklyn, building with his own hands and on

his own account small and very plain houses for laboring men; as soon as one was finished and sold, beginning another, — houses of two or three rooms. This was in 1854; he was then thirty-five years old. He lived at home with his mother; going off to his work in the morning and returning at night, carrying his dinner pail like any common laborer. Along with his pail he usually carried a book, between which and his solitary meal he would divide his nooning. Once the book chanced to be a volume of Emerson; and from that time he took with him no other writer. His half-formed purpose, his vague aspirations, all that had lain smouldering so long within him, waiting to be fired, rushed into flame at the touch of those electric words, — the words that burn in the prose-poem Nature, and in the essays on Spiritual Laws, The Over-Soul, Self-Reliance. The sturdy carpenter in his working-day garb, seated on his pile of boards; a poet in that rude disguise, as yet but dimly conscious of his powers; in one hand the sandwich put up for him by his good mother, his other hand holding open the volume that revealed to him his greatness and his destiny, — this is the picture which his simple narrative called up, that Sunday so long ago, and which has never faded from my memory.

He freely admitted that he could never have

written his poems if he had not first "come to himself," and that Emerson helped him to "find himself." I asked him if he thought he would have come to himself without that help. He said, "Yes, but it would have taken longer." And he used this characteristic expression: "I was simmering, simmering, simmering; Emerson brought me to a boil."

It was in that summer of 1854, while he was still at work upon his houses, that he began the Leaves of Grass, which he wrote, rewrote, and re-rewrote (to quote again his own words), and afterward set in type with his own hand.

I make this statement thus explicit because a question of profound personal and literary interest is involved, and because it is claimed by some of the later friends of Whitman that he wrote his first Leaves of Grass before he had read Emerson. When they urge his own authority for their contention, I can only reply that he told me distinctly the contrary, when his memory was fresher.

The Emersonian influence is often clearly traceable in Whitman's early poems; seldom in the later. It is in the first line of the very first poem in which he struck the keynote of his defiant chant: "I celebrate myself." And at times Emerson's identical thought reappears with slight change in the Leaves. Two or three instances

out of many will suffice. Emerson wrote: "Suppose you should contradict yourself, what then? With consistency a great soul has simply nothing to do." Whitman says: —

> "Do I contradict myself?
> Very well, then, I contradict myself,
> I am large, I contain multitudes."

Emerson: "Shall I skulk and dodge and duck, with my unreasonable apologies?" Whitman: —

> "I see that the elementary laws never apologize, . . .
> We have had ducking and deprecating about enough."

Emerson: "The unstable estimates of men crowd to him whose mind is filled with a truth as the heaped waves of the Atlantic follow the moon." Whitman: —

> "Surely whoever speaks to me in the right voice, him or her I shall follow,
> As the waters follow the moon, silently, with fluid steps, anywhere around the globe."

Yet the form Whitman chose for his message was as independent of Emerson's as of all other literary forms whatsoever. Outwardly, his unrhymed and unmeasured lines resemble those of Tupper's Proverbial Philosophy; but in no other way are they akin to those colorless platitudes. To the music of the opera, for which he had a passion, more than to anything else, was due his

emancipation from what he called the "ballad-style" of poetry, by which he meant poetry hampered by rhyme and metre. "But for the opera," he declared, that day on Prospect Hill, "I could never have written Leaves of Grass."

Whitman was at that time a man of striking personal appearance, as indeed he always was: fully six feet tall, and large proportionally; slow of movement, and inclined to walk with a lounging gait, which somebody has likened to an "elephantine roll." He wore his shirt collar open at the throat, exposing his hairy chest, in decidedly unconventional fashion. His necktie was drawn into a loose knot, or hung free, with serpentine ends coiled away somewhere in his clothing. He was scrupulously neat in person, — "never dressed in black, always dressed freely and clean in strong clothes," according to his own description of himself; head massive, complexion florid-tawny, forehead seamed with wrinkles, which, along with his premature grayness, made him look much older than he was. Mr. Howells, in his First Impressions of Literary New York, describes a meeting with him a few months later, that same year (1860), and calls him "the benign old man." Whitman was at that time forty-one.

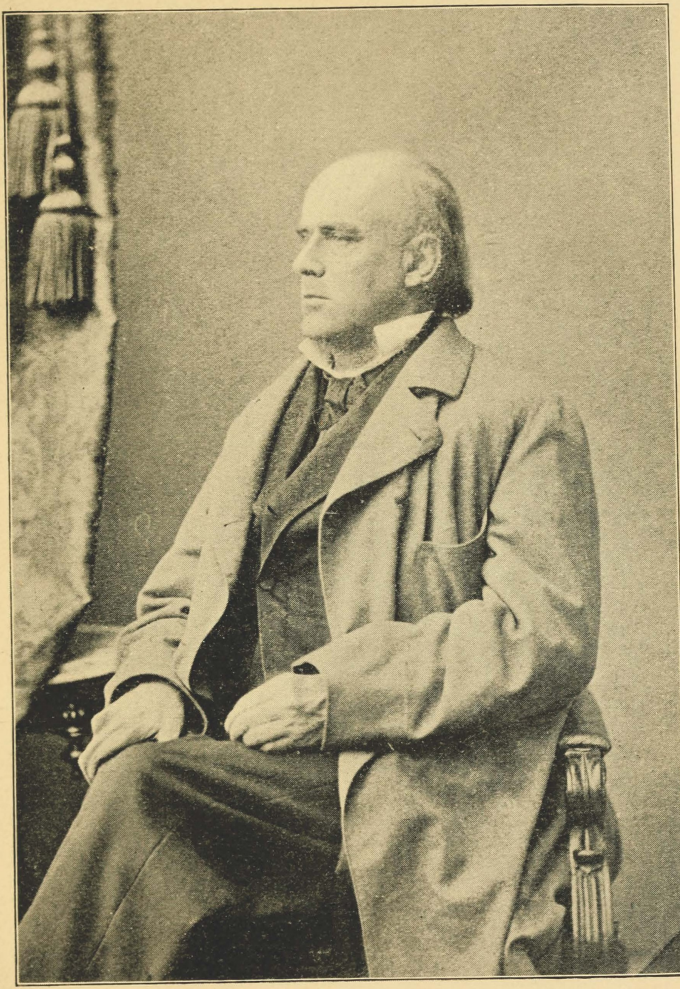
I did not see him again for three years and a half; meanwhile the Civil War was raging, and

in 1862 he went to the front to nurse his brother, Lieutenant-Colonel George W. Whitman, who had been wounded at Fredericksburg. This was the beginning of his hospital work, which became so important an episode in his life.

IV

In the latter part of November, 1863, a fortunate circumstance placed me in friendly relations with Hon. Salmon P. Chase, and I became a guest in his Washington home. He was then at the summit of his fame and power as Secretary of the Treasury, in which office his eminent ability, his integrity of character, and his immense popularity as the father of the "greenbacks" and the successful manager of the Nation's finances in the crisis of its greatest peril, had made him, next to President Lincoln, the most important personage in the government.

In person, the Secretary was a grand specimen of massively compact manhood, perfectly erect, over six feet tall (six feet one, I think he told me); always decorously dressed, his imposing figure commonly set off by a well-fitting frock coat; features full and strong, complexion light, face smooth-shaven, and eyes light and beaming, with that peculiar fullness of the eyeball that denotes near-sightedness. He was august in the



HON. SALMON P. CHASE

true sense, sometimes austere; and I can understand why some who did not know him under favorable conditions should have thought him cold-hearted. He was surprisingly unreserved in his expressions of opinion regarding public measures and public men, not even sparing the President. His frankness of speech was habitual, and undoubtedly gained him some enemies. I remember two of his political friends coming in, one evening, to present to him a young man who had made himself the hero of the hour by writing a partisan article of a particularly slashing character. The Secretary received him kindly, but instead of praising his performance, said of it simply — "I thought it very indiscreet," — with a smile like a flower above a thorn. The thorn pierced, nevertheless, and I noticed that the young man went away with a diminished admiration of the Secretary.

I saw a great deal of him during my stay, — at his own table, where there were often noted guests, in his private office, and at the Treasury Department; and I was frequently his companion in before-breakfast walks. He was not distinguished for wit, but his conversation, always entertaining, was often embroidered with a playfulness which the background of his stately presence set off. At the breakfast table one morning he read

aloud, with an amusement we all shared, a ridiculous newspaper account of his being locked in his office with his report, which he was then writing, and inaccessible even to President Lincoln.

I said, "They should add that when you go to walk you have a guard."

He glanced at my slender goatee and quoted, —

"'A whiskered pandour and a fierce hussar.'"

He strongly disapproved of the President's habit of telling all sorts of stories, to all sorts of people, on all sorts of occasions; yet he himself sometimes repeated a Lincoln story with good effect. One evening (my note-book says Dec. 1) he came in to dinner after attending a cabinet meeting at which the President submitted to his heads of departments the draft of his message to Congress, and having read it, invited their comments. For some time — he said in relating the incident — nobody spoke. Then he broke the awkward silence by suggesting an amendment; whereupon Seward proposed another.

"Governor," said Lincoln, turning to his Secretary of State, "you remind me of a Blue Grass farmer who had a black man and a fine yoke of oxen. One day the black man came running to the house; — 'Massa', says he, 'dat ar off ox, him dead. T'udder too. T'ought I would n't tell

you bofe tuh oncet, fear you could n't stand 'em ! ' "

Among the noted guests I remember meeting at the Chase house that season were Senator Sherman, Speaker Colfax, Beecher, Greeley, and General Garfield, a frequent and familiar visitor. It was during my stay that the Secretary's accomplished daughter, Kate Chase Sprague, of whom he was exceedingly fond and proud, and her millionaire bridegroom, the youthful Senator from Rhode Island, returned from the famous wedding tour that followed their recent brilliant but ill-starred marriage, and took up their abode beneath the paternal roof.

V

I had at that time few acquaintances in Washington. One of the most prized of these was William Douglas O'Connor. He had turned aside from literature, in which we who knew him in the flower of his youthful promise had believed him destined to excel, and entered a department of the government, — one of those vast mausoleums in which so many talents, small and great, have been buried, and brave ambitions have turned quietly to dust. Chase had himself, in his younger days, sought a humble position in the Treasury; and it is quite possible that, had he obtained it, nothing

would ever have turned him out of that tomb, except the necessity of making room for some other incumbent, under the hoary old spoils system, to which, with all its evils, we must also accredit the good sometimes resulting from such enforced liberations. In the day of his greatness the Secretary was not averse to being reminded of this possibility, smiling sternly once, as I recall, when a younger person at his table pictured him as a clerk grown gray in the service, meekly receiving his orders, — "Chase, do this!" "Chase, attend to that!" — in the department where, having reached it by other routes, and by the steps of statesmanship, he was then autocrat.

O'Connor's first employment was in the Treasury; in the Treasury, also, when I first knew him, was that other valiant friend of Whitman's, John Burroughs, who, fortunately for himself and his readers, escaped O'Connor's fate. When O'Connor left the Treasury it was to enter the Lighthouse Board, where he became head clerk, and sat like a spider in the midst of his web, a coast light at the end of each invisible line, hundreds or thousands of miles away. In those useful radiations the beams of his genius became too deeply immersed to shine otherwise than fitfully in what I always deemed his proper sphere. Except to take up now and then the championship of some cause

that appealed to his chivalrous nature, like that of Delia Bacon's Shakespearean heresy, or Elizabeth Akers' authorship of Rock me to Sleep, or Whitman and his Leaves of Grass, at a time when the man and his book were in the lowest depths of that opprobrium from which they were so slow to emerge, — but for occasional efforts of this sort, the most eloquent of pens became subdued to the daily routine of office drudgery. He was not learned, in an academic sense, but he was a rapid and omnivorous reader, with an astonishing memory, which when he wrote became an illumined arsenal of literary allusion. It seemed as if such weapons of language and rhetoric as he possessed should have made him our foremost knight of letters, an American Hugo. Perhaps he was conscious of some defect of temperament that unfitted him for such a career. A certain heat and fury seemed necessary to move his mind to creative activity. There was in everything he wrote a tendency to excess, which marred his remarkable novel, Harrington, and in his polemic papers betrayed him into extravagances of over-statement. He and Burroughs were the two earliest and ablest champions of Walt Whitman's work; but their writings on that theme presented the widest possible contrast: Burroughs's Walt Whitman as Poet and Person being calm, unhurried, candid,

judicial; The Good Gray Poet of O'Connor, all aflame with wit and scorn and passionate eloquence.

O'Connor was then in the prime of his powers, strikingly handsome, with a winning graciousness of manner that gave to his gay volubility an indescribable charm. I knew of his intimacy with Whitman, and when one day I found him at his office, and had answered his many questions, telling him where I was domiciled, one of the first I asked in return was, "Where 's Walt?" — the familiar name by which Whitman was known to his friends.

"What a chance!" said O'Connor, in his ardent way. "Walt is here in Washington, living close by you, within a stone's throw of the Secretary's door. Come to my house on Sunday evening, and I will have him there to meet you."

VI

On seeing him again at O'Connor's, I found Whitman but little changed, except that he was more trimly attired, wearing a loosely fitting but quite elegant suit of black, — yes, black at last! He was in the best of spirits; and I remember with what a superb and joyous pace he swung along the street, between O'Connor and me, as we walked home with him, after ten o'clock.

Diagonally opposite to Chase's great house, on the corner of E and 6th streets, stood one of those old wooden buildings which then and for some years afterwards lingered among the new and handsome blocks rising around them, and made the "city of magnificent distances" also a city of astonishing architectural contrasts. In the fine, large mansion, sumptuously furnished, cared for by sleek and silent colored servants, and thronged by distinguished guests, dwelt the great statesman; in the old tenement opposite, in a bare and desolate back room, up three flights of stairs, quite alone, lived the poet. Walt led the way up those dreary stairs, partly in darkness, found the keyhole of a door which he unlocked and opened, scratched a match, and welcomed us to his garret.

Garret it literally was, containing hardly any more furniture than a bed, a cheap pine table, and a little sheet-iron stove in which there was no fire. A window was open, and it was a December night. But Walt, clearing a chair or two of their litter of newspapers, invited us to sit down and stop awhile, with as simple and sweet hospitality as if he had been offering us the luxuries of the great mansion across the square.

Sit down we did (O'Connor on the bed, as I remember), and "drank delight of battle" over books, the principal subjects being Shakespeare

and Walt's own Leaves of Grass. Over Shakespeare it was a sort of triangular combat, — O'Connor maintaining the Baconian theory of the authorship of the plays, and Walt joining with me in attacking that chimera. On the other hand, I agreed with O'Connor in his estimate of Lear and Hamlet and Othello, which Walt belittled, preferring the historical plays, and placing Richard II. foremost; although he thought all the plays preposterously overrated. Of his own poems ("pomes" he called them) he spoke modestly, listening with interest to frank criticisms of them (which he always had from me), and disclaiming the profound hidden meanings O'Connor was inclined to read into some of them. Ordinarily inert and slow of speech, on occasions like this his large and generous nature became suffused with a magnificent glow, which gave one some idea of the heat and momentum that went to the making of his truly great poems; just as his sluggish moods seemed to account for so much of his labored, unleavened work.

O'Connor was a man of unfailing eloquence, whom it was always delightful to listen to, even when the rush of his enthusiasm carried him beyond the bounds of discretion, as it did in the Bacon-Shakespeare business. Whitman's reasoning powers were not remarkable; he did not im-

WILLIAM D. O'CONNOR

press me, then or at any time, as a great intellect; but he was original, intuitive, a seer, and his immense and genial personality gave an interest to everything he said. In my enjoyment of such high discourse, I forgot the cheerless garret, the stove in which there was no fire, the window that remained open (Walt was a "fresh-air fiend"), and my own freezing feet (we all kept on our overcoats). I also forgot that I was a guest at the great house across the quadrangle, and that I was unprovided with a latch key, — a fact of which I was reminded with rather startling unpleasantness, when I left O'Connor at the foot of Walt's stairs, hurried to the Secretary's door, I know not how long after midnight, and found myself locked out. All was still and dark within, except that I could see a light left burning low for me in my own chamber, a tantalizing reminder of the comfort I had exchanged for the bleak, deserted streets. My embarrassment was relieved when I reflected that in those wild war times the Secretary was prepared to receive dispatches at any hour of the night. I rang boldly, as if I had been a messenger bearing tidings of a nation's fate. The vestibule gas was quickly turned up, and a sleepy-looking colored boy let me in.

VII

Two mornings after this I went by appointment to call on Whitman in his garret. "Don't come before ten o'clock," he had warned me; and it was after ten when I mounted his three flights and knocked at the door of his room, — his terrible room, as I termed it in notes taken at the time.

I found him partly dressed, and preparing his own breakfast. There was a fire in the sheet-iron stove, — the open door showed a few coals, — and he was cutting slices of bread from a baker's loaf with his jackknife, getting them ready for toasting. The smallest of tin teakettles simmering on the stove, a bowl and spoon, and a covered tin cup used as a teapot comprised, with the aforesaid useful jackknife, his entire outfit of visible housekeeping utensils. His sugar bowl was a brown paper bag. His butter plate was another piece of brown paper, the same coarse wrapping in which he had brought home his modest lump from the corner grocery. His cupboard was an oblong pine box, set up a few feet from the floor, opening outward, with the bottom against the wall; the two sides, one above the other, made very good shelves.

I toasted his bread for him on the end of a sharpened stick; he buttered the slices with his jackknife, and poured his tea at a corner of the

table cleared for that purpose of its litter of books and newspapers; and while he breakfasted we talked.

His last slice buttered and eaten, he burned his butter plate (showing the advantage of having no dishes to wash), and set his bag of sugar in the cupboard, along with his small parcel of tea; then he brought out from his trunk a package of manuscript poems, which he read to me, and which we discussed, for the next hour.

These were his war pieces, the Drum-Taps, then nearly ready for publication. He read them unaffectedly, with force and feeling, and in a voice of rich but not resonant tones. I was interested not alone in the poems, but also in his own interpretation of the irregular yet often not unrhythmical lines. I did not find in them anything comparable with the greatly moving passages in the earlier Leaves: they were more literary in their tone, showing here and there lapses into the conventional poetic diction, which he had flung off so haughtily in the surge of the early impulse. They contained, however, some fine, effective, patriotic, and pathetic chants; and were, moreover, entirely free from the old offenses against propriety. I hoped to be able to persuade some good Boston house to publish the volume, but found, when I came to make the attempt, that no firm would

undertake it; and it remained in manuscript until 1865, when Whitman issued it at his own expense.[1]

From that morning I saw him almost every day or evening as long as I remained in Washington. He was then engaged in his missionary work, in the hospitals; talking to the sick and wounded soldiers, reading to them, writing letters for them, cheering and comforting them sometimes by merely sitting silent beside their cots, and perhaps soothing a pallid brow with his sympathetic hand.

He took me two or three times to the great Armory Square Hospital, where I observed his methods of work. I was surprised to learn that he never read to the patients any of his own compositions, and that not one of those I talked with knew him for a poet, or for anybody but plain "Mr. Whitman." I cannot help speaking of one poor fellow, who had asked to see me because Whitman had told him I was the author of one of the pieces he liked to hear read, and who talked to me with tears in his eyes of the comfort Whitman's visits had given him. The pathos of the situation was impressed upon me by the cir-

[1] Some time afterwards I had the satisfaction of engaging a Boston bookseller to permit his imprint to be placed upon the title-page of Whitman's *Democratic Vistas*, which was, however, like the Drum-Taps, published at the author's expense.

cumstance that his foot was to be amputated within an hour.

Whitman always carried into the wards a few fruits and delicacies, which he distributed with the approval of the surgeons and nurses. He also circulated, among those who were well enough to read, books and periodicals sent to him for that purpose by friends in the North. Sometimes he gave paper and envelopes and postage stamps, and he was never without some good tobacco, to be dispensed in special cases. He never used tobacco himself, but he had compassion for those who had been deprived of that solace, as he had for all forms of suffering. He wrote Washington letters that winter for the New York Times, the income from which, together with contributions from Northern friends, enabled him to carry on his hospital work.

VIII

Whitman and Chase were the two men I saw most of, at that time, in Washington. That I should know them both familiarly, passing often from the stately residence of the one to the humble lodging of the other, seemed to me a simple and natural thing at the time: great men both, each nobly proportioned in body and stalwart in character, and each invincibly true to his own ideals and purposes: near neighbors, and yet very antipodes

in their widely contrasted lives, — one princely in his position, dispensing an enormous patronage, the slenderest rill of which would have made life green for the other, struggling along the arid ways of an honorable poverty. Both greatly ambitious: Chase devoutly believing it his right, and likewise his destiny, to succeed Lincoln in the presidency; Whitman aspiring to be for all time the poet of democracy and emancipated manhood, — his simple prayer being, "Give me to speak beautiful words; take all the rest!" One a conscientious High Churchman, reverencing tradition, and finding ceremonious worship so helpful and solacing that (as he once said to me earnestly) he would have become a Roman Catholic, if he could have brought himself to accept the Romish dogmas; the other believing in the immanent spirit and an ever-living inspiration, and as free from all forms and doctrines as Abraham alone with Deity in the desert. For the statesman I had a very great admiration and respect; for the poet I felt a powerful attraction, something like a younger brother's love; and I confess a sweet and secret joy in sometimes stealing away from the company of polished and eminent people in the great house, and crossing over to Walt in his garret, or going to meet him at O'Connor's.

I thought no man more than Whitman merited

recognition and assistance from the government, and I once asked him if he would accept a position in one of the departments. He answered frankly that he would. But he believed it improbable that he could get an appointment, although (as he mentioned casually) he had letters of recommendation from Emerson.

There were two of these, and they were especially interesting to me, as I knew something of the disturbed relations existing between the two men, on account of Whitman's indiscreet use of Emerson's famous letter to him, acknowledging the gift copy of the first Leaves of Grass. Whitman not only published that letter without the writer's authority, but printed an extract from it, in conspicuous gold, on the back of his second edition, — "I greet you at the beginning of a great career;" thus making Emerson in some sense an indorser not only of the first poems, but of others he had never seen, and which he would have preferred never to see in print. This was an instance of bad taste, but not of intentional bad faith, on the part of Whitman. Talking of it once, he said, in his grand way: "I supposed the letter was meant to be blazoned; I regarded it as the chart of an emperor." But Emerson had no thought of acting the imperial part toward so adventurous a voyager. I remember hearing him

allude to the incident shortly after that second edition appeared. Speaking of the attention the new poet was attracting, he mentioned an Englishman who had come to this country bringing a letter to Whitman from Monckton Milnes (afterward Lord Houghton). "But," said Emerson, "hearing that Whitman had not used me well in the matter of letters, he did not deliver it." He had afterwards made a strenuous effort to induce Whitman to omit certain objectionable passages from his edition of 1860, and failed. And I knew that the later writings of Whitman interested him less and less. "No more evidence of getting into form," he once remarked, — a singular comment, it may be thought, from one whose own chief defect as a writer seemed to be an imperfect mastery of form.

With these things in mind, I read eagerly the two letters from Emerson recommending Whitman for a government appointment. One was addressed to Senator Sumner; the other, I was surprised and pleased to find, to Secretary Chase. I had but a slight acquaintance with Sumner, and the letter to him I handed back. The one written to Chase I wished to retain, in order to deliver it to the Secretary with my own hands, and with such furthering words as I could summon in so good a cause. Whitman expressed small hope in the

venture, and stipulated that in case of the failure he anticipated, I should bring back the letter.

As we left the breakfast table, the next morning, I followed the Secretary into his private office, where, after some pleasant talk, I remarked that I was about to overstep a rule I had laid down for myself on entering his house. He said, "What rule?" I replied, "Never to repay your hospitality by asking of you any official favor." He said I need n't have thought it necessary to make that rule, for he was always glad to do for his friends such things as he was constantly called upon to do for strangers. Then I laid before him the Whitman business. He was evidently impressed by Emerson's letter, and he listened with interest to what I had to say of the man and his patriotic work. But he was troubled. "I am placed," he said, "in a very embarrassing position. It would give me great pleasure to grant this request, out of my regard for Mr. Emerson;" and he was gracious enough to extend the courtesy of this "regard" to me, also. But then he went on to speak of Leaves of Grass as a book that had made the author notorious; and I found that he judged it, as all but a very few persons then did, not independently, on its own merits, but by conventional standards of taste and propriety. He had understood that the writer was a rowdy, —

"one of the roughs," — according to his descriptions of himself.

I said, "He is as quiet a gentleman in his manners and conversation as any guest who enters your door."

He replied: "I am bound to believe what you say; but his writings have given him a bad repute, and I should not know what sort of a place to give to such a man," — with more to the same purpose.

I respected his decision, much as I regretted it; and, persuaded that nothing I could urge would induce him to change it, I said I would relieve him of all embarrassment in the business by withdrawing the letter. He glanced again at the signature, hesitated, and made this surprising response, —

"I have nothing of Emerson's in his handwriting, and I shall be glad to keep this."

I thought it hardly fair, but as the letter was addressed to him, and had passed into his hands, I could n't well reclaim it against his wishes.

Whitman seemed really to have formed some hopes of the success of my mission, after I had undertaken it, as he showed when I went to give him an account of my interview with the Secretary. He took the disappointment philosophically, but indulged in some sardonic remarks about Chase and his department, regarding which some choice scandals were then afloat. "He is right,"

he said, "in preserving his saints from contamination by a man like me!" But I stood up for the Secretary, as, with the Secretary, I had stood up for Whitman. Those very scandals had no doubt rendered him cautious in making appointments. And could any one be blamed for taking the writer of Leaves of Grass at his word when, in his defiance of conventionality, he had described himself as "rowdyish," "disorderly," and worse? "'I cock my hat as I please, indoors and out,'" I quoted. Walt laughed, and said, "I don't blame him; it's about what I expected." He asked for the letter, and showed his amused disgust when I explained how it had been pocketed by the Secretary.[1]

[1] A brief memorandum of this interview, which Whitman made in his diary, with characteristic carelessness in the formation of sentences, appears, in facsimile of his handwriting, in a book by Thomas Donaldson, Walt Whitman the Man. The book I have never seen; but a friend sends me a printed copy of the memorandum. It is dated Dec. 11, and is as follows:

"This forenoon Mr. Trowbridge has been with me, — he had a talk yesterday with S. P. Chase, the secretary of the treasury, about me; presented Emerson's letter to Mr. C. — he said some commonplaces about wishing to oblige R. W. E. & Mr. Trowbridge; — then said he considered Leaves of Grass a very bad book, & he did not know how he could possibly bring its author into the government service, especially if he put him in contact with gentlemen employed in the bureaus, — did not think he would be warranted in doing so, — he considered the author of Leaves of Grass in the light of a decidedly disreputable person.

I should probably have had no difficulty in securing the appointment if I had withheld Emerson's letter, and called my friend simply Mr. Whitman, or Mr. Walter Whitman, without mentioning Leaves of Grass. But I felt that the Secretary, if he was to appoint him, should know just whom he was appointing; and Whitman was the last person in the world to shirk the responsibility of having written an audacious book.

Whether the same candor was used in procuring for him a clerkship in the Interior Department, to which he was appointed later, I do not know. He had been for some time performing the duties of that position, without exciting any other comment than that he performed them well, when a new Secretary (James Harlan), coming in under Johnson, and discovering that the grave and silent man at a certain desk was the author of a reprehensible book, dismissed him unceremoniously.

IX

It was this incident that called out from O'Connor his brilliant monograph, The Good Gray Poet, in which Whitman was so eloquently vindicated, and the Secretary received so terrible a scourging.

Mr. T. mentioned to him my employment for a year past among the wounded and sick soldiers, — it did not seem to make any difference."

What seemed for a time unmitigated ill fortune proved to be a very good thing for Whitman. He was soon after appointed to a better place in the office of the Attorney-General, and he himself used to say that it was O'Connor's defense that turned the tide in his favor; meaning the tide of criticism and public opinion, which had until then set so tremendously against him. O'Connor's pamphlet was followed, two years later (1867), by John Burroughs's Walt Whitman as Poet and Person. Countless other publications on the same inexhaustible theme have appeared since, — reviews, biographies, personal recollections, studies of Walt Whitman; a recent Study by Burroughs himself; volumes of eulogy and exegesis, commentary and controversy, wise and foolish; a whole library of Whitman literature, in English, French, German, and other languages. There are Walt Whitman Societies and Fellowships, and at least one periodical is devoted largely to Whitmanana.

I saw Whitman many times in Washington, after that memorable season of 1863; again when he came to Boston to deliver his lecture on Lincoln; and lastly in his Camden home, where the feet of many pilgrims mounted the steps that led to his door, and where an infirm but serene old age closed the "great career" Emerson had been the first to acclaim.

All this time I have watched with deep interest the growth of his influence and the change in public opinion regarding him. To me, now almost the sole survivor among his earliest friends and adherents, wonderful indeed seems that change since the first thin quarto edition of the Leaves appeared, in 1855. If noticed at all by the critics, it was, with rare exceptions, to be ridiculed and reviled; and Emerson himself suffered abuse for pronouncing it "the most extraordinary piece of wit and wisdom America had yet contributed." Even so accomplished a man of letters as James Russell Lowell saw in it nothing but commonplace tricked out with eccentricity. I remember walking with him once in Cambridge, when he pointed out a doorway sign, "Groceries," with the letters set zigzag, to produce a bizarre effect. "That," said he, "is Walt Whitman, — with very common goods inside." It was not until his writings became less prophetical, and more consciously literary in their aim, that Lowell and scholars of his class began to see something besides oddity in Whitman, and his popularity widened.

X

That such a change took place in his writings Whitman himself was aware. Once when I confessed to him that nothing in the later poems

moved me like some of the great passages in the earlier editions, he replied: "I am not surprised. I do not suppose I shall ever again have the afflatus I had in writing the first Leaves of Grass." One evening he was reading to O'Connor and me some manuscript pieces, inviting our comments, when he came to the line, —

"No poem proud I, chanting, bring to thee."

"Why do you say 'poem proud'?" I asked. "You never would have said that in the first Leaves of Grass."

"What would I have said?" he inquired.

"'I bring to you no proud poem,'" I replied.

O'Connor cried out, in his vehement way, "That 's so, Walt, — that 's so!"

"I think you are right," Walt admitted, and he read over the line, which I looked to see changed when the poem came to be printed; but it appeared without alteration. It occurs in Lo, Victress on the Peaks, an address to Liberty, for which word he uses the Spanish "Libertad" — another thing with which I found fault, and which I hoped to see changed. I will say here that I do not believe Whitman ever changed a line or a word to please anybody. In answer to criticism, he would at times maintain his point; at others, he would answer, in his tolerant, candid way, "I guess you

are right," or, "I rather think it is so;" but even when apparently convinced, he would stand by his faults. His use of words and phrases from foreign languages, which he began in his 1856 edition, and which became a positive offense in that of 1860, he continued in the face of all remonstrance, and would not even correct errors into which his ignorance of those languages had betrayed him. In one of his most ambitious poems, Chanting the Square Deific, he translates our good English "Holy Spirit" into "Santa Spirita," meant for Italian; but in that language the word for "spirit" is masculine, and the form should have been "Spirito Santo," with the adjective correspondingly masculine. William Rossetti, who edited a volume of selections from Leaves of Grass for the British public, pointed this out in a letter to Whitman, who, in talking of it with me, acknowledged the blunder; yet through some perversity he allowed it to pass on into subsequent editions.

In these editions Whitman showed that he was not averse to making changes; he was always rearranging the contents, mixing up the early with the later poems, and altering titles, to the confusion of the faithful. Now and then he would interject into some familiar passage of the old pieces a phrase or a line in his later manner, strangely

discordant to an ear of any discrimination. A good example is this, where to the original lines, —

"My rendezvous is appointed, it is certain,
The Lord will be there. and wait till I come, on perfect terms," —

he adds this third line, —

"The great Camerado, the lover true for whom I pine, will be there," —

a tawdry patch on the strong original homespun. The French "rendezvous" in the first line is legitimate, having been adopted into our language because it expresses something for which we have no other single word, and Whitman would be a benefactor had he enriched our vernacular in that way. But "camerado" — of which he seems to have become very fond, using it wherever he had a chance — is neither French (camarade) nor Spanish (camarada), nor Portuguese, nor Italian, nor anything else, to my mind, but a malformed substitute for our good and sufficient word "comrade." "Lover true," like "poem proud," is of a piece with those "stock poetical touches" which he used to say he had great trouble in leaving out of his first Leaves, but which here, as in other places, he went back and deliberately wrote into them.

For another set of changes to which I objected he was able to give a reason, though a poor one.

In the Poem of Faces, "the old face of the mother of many children" has this beautiful setting: —

"Lulled and late is the smoke of the Sabbath morning,
It hangs low over the rows of trees by the fences,
It hangs thin by the sassafras, the wild cherry, and the cat-brier under them."

"Smoke of the Sabbath morning" he altered, after the first two editions, to "smoke of the First Day morning." In like manner, elsewhere, "the field-sprouts of April and May" was changed to "the field-sprouts of Fourth Month and Fifth Month;" "the short last daylight of December" to "the short last daylight of Twelfth Month," and so on, — all our good old pagan names for the months and days, wherever they occurred in the original Leaves, being reduced to numbers, in plain Quaker fashion, or got rid of in some other way. "I mind how we lay in June" became "I mind how we once lay;" and

"The exquisite, delicate, thin curve of the new moon in May" —

a most exquisite and most delicate line, it may be observed in passing — was made to read, not "new moon in Fifth Month" (that would have been a little too bad), but "new moon in spring." I thought all of these alterations unfortunate, except possibly the last; nearly all involving a sacrifice of euphony or of atmosphere in the lines. When

I remonstrated against what seemed an affectation, he told me that he was brought up among Quakers; but I considered that too narrow a ground for the throwing out of words in common use among all English-speaking peoples except a single sect. To my mind, it was another proof that in matters of taste and judgment he was extremely fallible, and capable of doing unwise and wayward things for the sake of a theory or of a caprice.

In one important particular he changed, if not his theory, at least his practice. After the edition of 1860 he became reserved upon the one subject tabooed in polite society, the free treatment of which he had declared essential to his scheme of exhibiting in his poems humanity entire and undraped. For just six years, from 1855 to 1860 only, he illustrated that theory with arrogant defiance; then no further exemplifications of it appeared in all his prose and verse for more than thirty years, or as long as he continued to write. It was a sudden and significant change, which was, however, covered from observation in the reshuffling of the Leaves. In thus reëditing the earlier poems, he quietly dropped out a few of the most startling lines, and would, I believe, have canceled many more, but his pride was adamant to anything that seemed a concession.

XI

No doubt Whitman suffered some impairment of his mental faculties in the long years of his invalidism. He is said to have gone over to the Bacon side of the Bacon-Shakespeare controversy, and even to have accepted the Donnelly cipher. How confused his memory became on one subject of paramount interest is evinced by a passage in his Backward Glance o'er Travel'd Roads, where he says of the beginnings of Leaves of Grass that, although he had "made a start before," all might have come to naught — "almost positively would have come to naught" — but for the stimulus he received from the "sights and scenes" of the secession war. To make this more emphatic, he adds the astounding assertion, "Without those three or four years [1862 to 1865], and the experiences they gave, Leaves of Grass would not now be existing." Whereas he had only to look at his title-pages to see that not his first, nor his second, but his *third* edition, comprising the larger and by far the most important part of his poetic work, was published in 1860, months before the first gun of the war was fired or a single State had seceded. After this, we need not wonder that he forgot he had read Emerson before writing his first Leaves.

When Whitman's genius flows, his unhampered lines suit his purpose as no other form of verse could do. The thought is sometimes elusive, hiding in metaphor and suggestion, but the language is direct, idiomatic, swift, its torrent force and copiousness justifying his disregard of rhyme and metre; indeed, it has often a wild, swinging rhythm of its own. But when no longer impelled by the stress of meaning and emotion, it becomes strained and flavorless, and, at its worst, involved, parenthetical, enfeebled by weak inversions.

There are the same disturbing inequalities in his prose as in his verse. The preface to his first edition exhibits the masterful characteristics of his great poems; indeed, much of that preface made very good Leaves, when he afterwards rewrote it in lines and printed it as poetry. At its worst, his prose is lax and slovenly, or it takes on ruggedness to simulate strength, and jars and jolts like a farm wagon on stony roads. Some of his published letters are slipshod in their composition, and in their disregard of capitalization and punctuation, almost to the verge of illiteracy. Had William Shakespeare left any authentic writings as empty of thought and imagination, and void of literary value, as some of the Calamus letters, they would have afforded a better argument than any we now have against his authorship of

the plays. Perhaps some future tilter at windmills will attempt to prove that the man we know as Walt Whitman was an uncultured impostor, who had obtained possession of a mass of powerful but fragmentary writings by some unknown man of genius, which he exploited, pieced together, and mixed up with compositions of his own.

But after all deductions it remains to be unequivocally affirmed that Whitman stands as a great original force in our literature. Art, as exemplified by such poets as Longfellow and Tennyson, he has little or none; but in the free play of his power he produces the effect of an art beyond art. His words are often steeped in the very sentiment of the themes they touch, and suggest more than they express. He has largeness of view, an all-including optimism, boundless love and faith. To sum all in a sentence, I should say that his main purpose was to bring into his poems Nature, with unflinching realism, — especially Nature's divine masterpiece, Man; and to demonstrate that everything in Nature and in Man, all that he is, feels, and observes, is worthy of celebration by the poet; not in the old, selective, artificial poetic forms, but with a freedom of method commensurate with Nature's own amplitude and unconstraint. It was a grand conception,

an intrepid revolt against the established canons of taste and art, a challenge and a menace to the greatest and most venerated names. That the attempt was not so foolhardy as at first appeared, and that it has not been altogether a failure, the growing interest in the man and his work sufficiently attests; and who can say how greatly it might not have succeeded, if adequate judgment had reinforced his genius, and if his inspiration had continued as long as he continued to write?

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