

WITH
WALT WHITMAN
IN CAMDEN

(March 28—July 14, 1888)

HORACE TRAUBEL

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TO READERS

My story is left as it was originally written. I have made no attempt to improve it. I have taken nothing off and put nothing on. I know that it has defects. I am not ashamed of defects. I know that it has virtues. I am not proud of virtues. Here is the record as it virginally came from my hands in the quick of the struggle it describes. It might have been made more literary. It might have been made more precise. Its loose joints might have been tightened. Some commas might have been put where colons are. Phrases might have been swung about. The formal grace of the recital might have been improved. I have preferred to respect its integrity. To let it remain untouched by a censorship. To let it continue, for good or bad, in its then native atmosphere. I do not want to reshape those years. I want them left as they were. I keep them forever contemporary. I trust in the spontaneity of their first inspirations.

Did Whitman know I was keeping such a record? No. Yet he knew I would write of our experiences together. Every now and then he charged me with immortal commissions. He would say: "I want you to speak for me when I am dead." On several occasions I read him my reports. They were very satisfactory. "You do the thing just as I should wish it to be done." He always imposed it upon me to tell the truth about him. The worst truth no less than the best truth. He did

not ask to have his failings paraded but he did ask that they should not be hid. He knew that imperfection is a part of perfection. He knew that our blood runs black as well as red. He did not like evil talked about as if it was fatal. But he knew that a place must be provided for it in any portrait of a person or in any portrayal of an event. So I have let Whitman alone. I have let him remain the chief figure in his own story. This book is more his book than my book. It talks his words. It reflects his manner. It is the utterance of his faith. That is why I have not fooled with its text. Why I have chosen to leave it in its unpremeditated arrangement of light and shade. Why I have not attempted to make it conform to any arbitrary humors of the bookmaker. It was not my purpose to produce a work to dazzle the scholar but to tell a simple story. Or, rather, in the main, to let a certain story tell itself. I have done nothing negatively to disguise any poverty in the portrait and nothing affirmatively to falsely enrich it. I have had only one anxiety. To set down the record. Then to get out of the way myself. To give the observer every privilege of vision. I do not come to conclusions. I provide that which may lead to conclusions. I provoke conclusions.

A number of the collateral documents quoted are from Whitman himself. These are printed without repair. They are kept to his own text without elision and without change. The same thing may be said of the letters from others to Whitman. Nothing has been done to sophisticate the text. It occurs here in the rude dress natural to the incidents that produced it. I had no time then to polish. I have had no

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disposition since to do what I had no time to do then. The record begs no questions. Never makes worse of better or better of worse. Tries to explain away no sin. Tries to lug in no virtue. Whitman was not afraid of the man who would make too little of him. He was afraid of the man who would make too much of him. He knew that it was easier to survive some kinds of enemies than to survive some kinds of friends. Whitman did not insist upon his faults. But he wanted them all counted in. The last fault with the first fault. He would rather have been thought too little of than too much of. I have never lost sight of his command of commands: "Whatever you do do not prettify me."

HORACE TRAUBEL

Camden, February, 1906