

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers*, May 30, 1891 to February 6, 1892)

The college experience

It was in my junior year at Yale that the following incident happened to me. I had been working very hard all the year, attending to the numerous duties which devolved upon one who has from the first been active in college affairs and now the time had arrived when the essays were due from those who were to enter the competition for a place on the Junior Exhibition Eight.

These eight essays were afterward to be spoken in the chapel by their authors, and to win the first prize was an honor which every earnest man desired to obtain, as the position which it gave him among his fellows was most desirable.

Being very ambitious I had taken plenty of time for my subject, so that I might feel that my chance of failure would be lessened; and for a month or more, I had worked some six hours each day, aside from my regular duties. The subject I had chosen was: "The Influences of Woman." My friends laughed when they heard my intention, for I had always posed as a quasi-misogynist, and my stinging remarks about the wiles of that sex, its insincerity and falseness had often amused those who were my boon companions. I suppose I prided myself on the reputation; certainly I did not seek to change it; so it was well understood if I succeeded in getting on the Eight, there would be lively interest on the speaking day. However, I must say that in this particular my bark was worse than my bite. I had never had any experience with women to lead me to such an opinion; on the contrary at home I had seen a great deal of "the girls," but having grown up with them from boyhood I rarely thought of them as real women. They had never shown their claws, so to speak and I did not think they had any.

In my heart of hearts I worshiped woman as an ideal. She embodied to me all that was fair, true and noble, and many was the time I could catch myself in wandering dreams of a blessed union with some rare creature. But they were mere dreams. When the idea of writing on woman's influence came to me, I had thought to strengthen the impression I had made in college by delivering a sharp and pungent fling at the sex in a joking way; but maturer reflection convinced that if I were to succeed I must speak my best and deepest thoughts. However crude they might be, they were certainly honest and were far better than those I had been credited with. So I worked away steadily at my essay, always holding before me that ideal which was so perfect and as the work grew under my hands I was convinced that I had struck the right chord in my nature. At last the work was finished and handed in, as I walked back to my room with a great weight rolled off my mind and, it occurred to me that a flying trip to New York would tone me up. I knew I had needed it, especially after such hard work, and the men at

the club all remarked how pale and thin I was. They said I had put too much time and strength on a bad cause, that the judges were married man, would not look with favor on a young chap who so maligned the fair sex, and tho they hoped I would succeed they thought I was pretty certain of failure. I bore their jibes very calmly, laughing to myself to think how they would change countenance if they knew the truth.

I nodded to a few fellows, talked a bit about the base ball game on the morrow, and then walked over to my room to pack my portmanteau, for I had fully decided to get away for a few days to rest. In about three hours afterwards my train rolled into the S. C Depot and I drove to the Brunswick took a room and put on my evening dress. Somehow I had improved wonderfully in the last half-hour.

The excitement of the city at night was to me perfect intoxication. The thought of the thousands bent on pleasure, the strange faces, the metropolitan air of the hotels and streets, the lights streaming from the cafés and restaurants, suggestive of neat linen and cut class carried me away in perfect ecstasy. I felt that I could work for years if only to gain a heaven where sites and sounds were such an elixir. With such thoughts I strolled into Del's at about 11 o'clock, took a seat in a retired corner and ordered a bird and a nicely tempered bottle of "Pommard." There were quite a number of guests in the room; some young bloods with gross faces and faultlessly attired persons, were trying to demolish a case of champagne; an old staid party was seated alone over his late supper, and from behind me I heard the ringing laughter of a young girl's voice. These were all that impressed me at the time.

I cannot explain how restful it seemed to be in the midst of pleasure and activity, but sharing it as a passive spectator. As I sat there eating my well-prepared meal the room was gradually filled by others of the pleasure seekers, fresh from the opera box. The young women with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, full of good spirits, the men well groomed with impassive faces as they sipped the champagne and concealed their feelings.

I had finished eating, and ordered another bottle. The clean linen before me on which stood the Crystal glasses and a bottle of my favorite "Pommard" gave to my mind a peculiarly satisfying effect, an effect of comfort, security and rest. I suppose I showed my satisfaction for I had a good-humored look which wandered from face-to-face in the room, trying to picture to myself the life of each one; wondering how many were spending their time and money on thoughtless, thankless women, for the sake of a smile. How many were seeking to keep up appearances among their set on a miserable monthly salary. How many wicked thoughts or uncharitable feelings were masked by the conventional stare or remark. I was away from my little world now, enjoying another life.

For a long time I sat there dreaming as it were, carried away by my thoughts into places far beyond sea, into other nations, races, cities, to whom I was unknown, to whom my struggles and ambitions meant nothing, after all what was all this work worth – Why struggle alone in a narrow place for a name, which would be unknown forever over the most of the world? Why not give up to pleasure - high and elevated pleasure to be sure. The pleasure of seeing the world - of tasting the sweets which so many were tasting, of loving and being loved.

My imagination was running riot I knew. It was not safe or expedient, but the wine was good and the sensations delightful. I shifted my seat after a while to see the rest of the room. There was the same scene. But my eyes did not wonder for now long for the same soft laugh I had heard when I entered attracted my attention. Seated at the table before me was a young girl of about 20, as I judged. Her gown was of some dark stuff plain and simple as a Quakers and showing her young figure to perfection. Her face was of the oval type, her eyes blue. She had a mass of light hair, with small ringlets clustering about her ears and temples, while her smile was perfectly divine. I could not take my eyes from her. My speculations were suddenly arrested and all my interest centered upon her. She was talking with a woman of about 35, and a cavalier like gentleman with gray hair, whose sweeping mustache and erect bearing gave me the impression that he was a military man.

They were not talking loudly, but now and then the young woman would smile at something, showing a row of beautiful teeth, and giving that low and catching laugh that seemed to thrill me through and through. I had never seen such a creature. Everything about her gave the impression of good-breeding, of gentle manners, of kind thoughts.

You can readily imagine how I felt. For two months past I have been thinking and writing about such a person, an ideal whose incarnation as far as I could judge now sat before me. I seemed to have new life. The room and its other occupants were gone, from my vision. I had eyes but for her alone. I fancy she noticed my attention, as she looked at me several times in a curious way, but only by a glance. Gradually the room became vacant, as the guests departed, the hum of voices and movements of the waiters subsided and I caught a few words of the conversation. It was enough to let me know that she was to sail for Liverpool on the Umbria the next day.

The next day” I thought why that is today: “what time does the boat sail” in a moment I had called for a daily, and looking up the sailings found the hour was 5 A.M. and she was to go on board in a few minutes, already I saw the three preparing to leave the room. By sun rise we would be separated, my ideal gone. What I did comes back to me now only as a recollection. At that time I was beside myself. The operations of the mind are swift and unnoticed.

But I remember that I hurried across to the Brunswick gathered my things together, dashed off a note to my chum, telling him to write me at the Brunswick if I had been chosen one of the eight, and before another hour had passed I was standing on the Umbria's deck in the shadow, my passage paid to Liverpool watching the late arriving passengers. It was not long before I saw my fair one cross the gangway, bid goodbye to the gentleman friend in a formal way that made my heart bound, and descend to her cabin with her friend. I turned in a minute later. When I awoke and went on deck next morning we were out of sight of land, and I was lost to my country and friends and parents for a week at least. This was my first thought. What have I done. Had I been so weak as to forsake my duties to work and the responsibilities of my position for the sake of one I did not know, whose name I had not even heard? I confess I felt ashamed of myself, but the fact that my actions were a revocable, made me assert my independence and I determined to find out who this girl was and whether she fulfilled my ideas.

I fancied that the wine had been too much for me. Yet I was not conscious of having lost my head. On the contrary I realized that I had acted with determination born of conviction. Perhaps my nervous excitement had impaired my judgment and prudence, but I was in for it now. My chief anxiety was the thought that my parents would be crazed with worry and apprehension.

With some little manipulation I discovered the state room which she occupied and by the aid of a steward, found out her name. It was down as Miss Elizabeth Gray on the passenger list. My next move was to get the chief steward to seat me next to her at the table; then I waited. I remember distinctly how she looked when I came into the dining saloon late at luncheon, and the steward showed me to the seat at her side. A glance of recognition shot between us, but with great care I said nothing at the meal, merely seeing that she was well cared for in every way. On the other side of me was an English officer with whom I formed a pleasant acquaintance & together we chatted continually, tho all the time I was listening to her conversation – eager to catch her voice and watch the play of her features. Her every word was well chosen, there was nothing course in her actions or behavior – I was becoming convinced.

The voyage was a beautiful one. It was during the full moon, and each evening the deck was filled by the passengers. I had of course had a few words with Miss Gray after the first few meals, and by the second day I had found that she did not object to some attentions I could show her on deck. In fact the life we were leading was quite calculated to ripen acquaintance of the sort I desired. Through the mornings we were together playing at rings or shuffle board, or proming the wide deck, and in the evening after dinner we would walk for an hour and then sit out the long evening in close conversation. She with a light wrap over her shoulders, reclining in a steamer chair, and I seated at her side on a low chair,

where I could catch the full effect of her face as the moon shone upon it. I was in love with her from the first, and every day only confirmed this feeling. So witty, so modest. I had never seen her like before. Here at last I have found my match and her companion too was not in the way, for I soon saw that my friend of Her Majesty's service could play the gallant as well as I. So from the first I was virtually alone with Miss Gray. The trip was all too short, but it did not take long for me to tell her what I felt, to say that I had come over to be near her, that I had been conquered from the first. She did not make a great many professions, but gave me her word that she had never been so interested in any one before.

She said she was to be in school in Berlin for the winter, after spending the summer in travel. And when I urged I could not do without her, she smiled in such a tantalizing way that I felt she meant to encourage me. The night before we reached Liverpool I asked her to be my wife and she consented. I was so happy. What did I care about college, or even parents. Was I not of age? Did I not have money? And could I not be my own master in the matter of love at least?

My fears of the beginning of the voyage had given place to confidence. She was so good, so talented, and she had consented to be my wife. Well, we parted in London only for a day. I remember she went to the Metropole with her aunt and I took my room and Morley. I had formed no plans. I did not dare write or cable to the family. I was so uncertain of myself. I merely waited and fed on hope. I was so anxious to make her mine and sail for home. On Monday night I called to take her to the theater and little did I think it was the last evening I should see her. She sat through the play without knowing what it was. For I could think of nothing save her presence, while she was equally affected as far as I could see.

We adjourned to the Criterion afterwards, where I had had a delicious little supper prepared with pink settings and delicate wines, and I knew it would please her. As we passed up the staircase at about 12 o'clock I noticed a tall, dark complexioned man standing low in the vestibule – who eyed us with a malign look, but as he was evidently an Italian I thought nothing of it, for I knew there were plenty of such chaps in London, with their devilish looking eyes. I cared only for Elizabeth and my pleasure when she was with me.

We had been seated for about an hour, talking and laughing – having such a heavenly time, when I heard voices in the hallway. Our waiter was expostulating with someone who was trying to get into the room. The voice of the stranger was deep and course, and as Elizabeth heard it I noticed she turned pale as death. The next moment that black eyed Italian burst into the room, shouting “I want my wife.” I made a motion to grasp him, but as I did so my eye fell upon Elizabeth. Her little hand was outstretched with an appealing gesture, and I stopped motionless. By this time the stranger had seized her arm. Elizabeth I stammered, what is it. “What does this mean.” Who is this fellow. Her great blue eyes were

now open wide staring through me. Her wealth of light hair had fallen about her shoulders, tumbled into confusion by her nervous gestures.

“Don't touch him” she cried he is my husband”. With these words ringing in my ears I fled. In a few moments I was in the cable office writing a message to my father and 9 days later I landed in N. York and with tears in my eyes and shame on my countenance I shook his hand. He asked a few questions. Looks told him more than words. At the Brunswick I found a note we called telling me of my success: two weeks after I spoke from the platform of the chapel on the “Influence of Woman.”

I suppose my experience had put new meaning into the words I have written. I know I spoke from a full heart. I spoke of the same ideal which had eluded me tho so near. But my belief had not been shaken. There was a melancholy in my voice that my friends could not account for, nor did they ever know. But strange to say the judges gave me the prize, and that night in my room, my chum who thought much but said little, said “Well Jim I knew you were a queer chap, but I never thought you could speak like that.

Walter DeCamp
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