

(editor's note: This paper was transcribed from a handwritten cursive copy with various difficulties. There were a large number of obvious errors in the transcription, many of which have been corrected herein. For a perfect rendition, the reader might wish to consult the original, itself a copy, in the volume entitled *Literary Club Papers* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

Scrap Iron

Scrap No. 1. Howells and James.

Where, oh where, is the true American novelist, one who truly portrays the national life and character? Echo gives back the answer Romances are plenty; the book-shelves fairly groan beneath the weight of modern fiction, but there is not a sovereign among them. Take our foremost authors. Howells and James, two types of the genius of common place, belonging to the Lake school of novelists. The true aim of the novel should be to amuse. This should be effected by a happy combination of character and incident, – art reproducing nature. Yet these gentlemen try to make novel-writing purely a mechanical art, in which the movement of the machinery is the chief thing to be admired. Their stories have barely a plot, are almost devoid of incident, and are totally lacking in strong situations. Yet, how could it be otherwise? The authors never write under the spur of strong excitement; their aim is to repress all emotional feelings, their doctrine is the doctrine of repression. We are always surprised, but never totally pleased or satisfied. Thus, heroines are left wedded to worthless husbands. Heroes apart from loving maidens and their future fate designedly left to the vague conjecture: it being a canon of their school to keep the reader always in a state of uncertainty, and to leave him so at the end. Thus the natural is always sacrificed to their ideas of artistic effects.

Neither Howells nor James is capable of feeling or expressing a strong vigorous emotion. Their characters are mere sketches, shadows, pictures in silhouette; we see only their outlines. We have no picture of real-life, no flesh and blood creations, no genuine heroes and heroines, living and acting the true drama of life; but in their places some puppet figures moved visibly by events, speaking set pieces, at appointed times and living in a world of artificial refinement, in which all real emotion and natural feeling are suppressed as something unpleasant, or to be ashamed of. And the authors consider this a true picture of life in the refined circles of American society. It is true the English is pure, the tone is moral, but the style is too calm and placid ever to rise above the common place. All is fine-drawn, attenuated; but the reader soon tires, and his interest finally dies from sheer inanition.

The truth of the matter is that these gentlemen are Americans only by birth. Long residence abroad has de-naturalized them. It is true their stories have American titles; yet they do not appear to be for the American public but to impress the English with the idea that the American type is but a servile imitation of its own upper-class, the class blasé, incapable of taking a living interest in anything. Their works, therefore, are not true specimens of American genius, or genuine contributions to American literature, and we protest against their acceptance as such. Yet as in these views, we find ourselves decidedly in the minority and likely to remain so, we have therefore resorted to the last refuge of the destitute and the foolish, and thus recorded our protest.

Scrap No. 2. A Ghost Story.

He was a tall, thin, dismal-looking man, with eyes as gaunt as famine, his apparel old and mean, his shoes in the very last stages of serviceable use. He sat down at our table, and gasped feebly. It was raining outside, a cold, piercing, dismal rain, and the warmth of the room seemed agreeable to him. He closed his eyes as if in slumber, but not for long. A lynx-eyed waiter had espied him, and, coming to his side, loudly demanded his order. Thus aroused, the dismal man opened his eyes, and stared wildly about. "Your order" again demanded the waiter. Still a pause. Then he croaked out "Bring me a hot Scotch," his voice harsh and guttural, the very act the speech seemed painful. The steam rose from his damp clothes in clouds, and it must be confessed, the odor was far from agreeable. We moved our chairs.

The waiter was not gone long, and returning, placed before him a "smoking scotch." The dismal man fumbled in his pockets for the change but without success: a frightened look appeared in his eyes and his hands began to tremble. The waiter grew impatient. "See here" he cried, "this won't do. I've suspected you from the start. You can't beat your way in here; come, move on, or I'll have you thrown out." The man arose, the picture of woe-begone misery, but uttered never a word. It was almost a pathetic sight. I do not know what prompted me, but I silently beckoned the waiter, and gave him the price of the drink. It proved too much for the unfortunate man; he sank into a chair, and a tear or two fell into the scotch. Then he pulled it to him, and sat for a moment or so, inhaling its aromatic incense. At last he spoke. "Sir, I thank you. Believe me I was not always thus. (Strange to say, at this the bell chimed not) – once I was all life and spirits, a good story-teller, a pleasant companion. But that is long, long past. Who would listen to my stories now?" He stopped to suck his drink, but, yielding to temptation, took it all down at one draught. I was in a melting mood that evening, superinduced, perhaps, by several hot punches, so I ordered the unfortunate another drink, and on his asking me what he could do in return, insisted that he should tell one of his old-time stories. Nothing loath, the dismal man complied, and thus he spoke.

The Tail of the Dismal Man

One winter's night many years ago, I set up with a sick friend. He was convalescing, but was still very weak, requiring constant attention. The doctor had left instructions that his medicine was to be given him every hour. So I sat in the easy-chair, gazing meditatively at the coals and striving to keep awake. The wind outside was howling and moaning, the weather very, very cold. Yet all within was warm and pleasant, made doubly so perhaps by the thought of the discomfort without. What strange fancies come with the night, in the train of its darkness and mystery. I was in effect alone, the hour long past midnight, the very silence seemed oppressive. The heavy, ponderous furniture gave out strange noises, as if agitated by some ghostly presence: the windows rattled in their casements. Suddenly I caught myself listening for something, I knew not what, and a cold shiver ran through my frame. "This is nonsense" I muttered to myself, "dispel these foolish fancies, bestir yourself, and give your friend his medicine. It is certainly time." I rose to look at the time-piece which hung over the mantle. The clock had stopped, at precisely the hour of two. Still nervous, I tried to invent plausible reasons for this occurrence, and, with the medicine in my hand, went to the bedside of the patient. I found him sitting erect, his

eyes wide open, his teeth clenched, moaning inarticulately. I felt his brow. It was covered with a cold, clammy perspiration. My touch seemed to awaken him. He cried out "Oh! father, father," then recovering fuller consciousness he recognized me and said with much agitation "Philip, Philip, it was not a dream; it was true; it was true." "Compose yourself" I said, trying to speak calmly, though my teeth chattered with fear. "Compose yourself; you have been dreaming." "You can not deceive me." said the sick man, "I tell you, it was not a dream, my father is dead. I saw him as plainly as I see you now. I know the very hour of his death. What is the day of the month?" I told him. "Get a pen and paper" he cried with the impatience of a sick man, "and note the day and the hour, as well as all I tell you of the dreadful vision I have seen, now, while it is still fresh in my mind. I know alas, but too well, that the next letter from home to confirm its truth."

I did as he bade me, hoping to quiet him. What he said made such an impression on me that after three years I can repeat it word for word.

The Vision.

"Philip, I well knew that I was in this room, and in this very bed. Yet I saw before me my old home in England. My father's bed-room, he was in his accustomed place by the fireside, but his features were worn and emaciated, his face had the pallor of death. That grim visitor was not afar. His children were around him, receiving his last blessing. I alone was missing. Suddenly, he spoke; and in the act of speaking rose feebly from his chair. Lifting his eyes toward Heaven, he said with indescribable pathos, "God bless my absent son in America, – then fell back a corpse. A neighboring church-bell tolled forth the hour of two. Oh, the anguish of that moment. I endeavored to speak, to make my presence known; but all in vain. The vision slowly faded away, and I awoke."

"Can you doubt now that he is dead?" I did all my power to soothe my friend, though I felt myself but ill at ease. I in a measure succeeded; and after administering to him a sleeping potion, soon saw him sink into a healthful slumber. Four weeks, two months passed by, then a letter from England. The patient had fully recovered, but his face blanched as he opened it. I watched him attentively. His cheek flushed, he turned his head away. "Bad news" said I, my voice trembling. He put the letter in my hand and left the room without a word it was dated the 24th day of November (the very date of the vision). His father was in perfect health, in his own words, never better; and he was about to marry again. The letter was signed by the old gentleman himself and queerer still he was alive twenty-five years later.

Since then, I have had no faith in dreams or visions; I attribute them to morbid imaginations. I ——" here the dismal man broke off abruptly, turned pale, and made a sudden movement for the door, as if himself haunted by a vision. There stood the Corporation's guardian, and there, in his enfolding arms, a prisoner now, the dismal man. They took him away in the patrol, and I saw him no more.

It seemed that in the early evening, becoming attached to an overcoat hanging outside a clothing store, he did a sum in arithmetic; he added one to his figure; hence the arrest.

Moral: Never treat a dismal man.

Scrap No 3. The Poetical Club

“Where are you going to-night?” asked John Griswold. “Oh, nowhere in particular. In fact, I don't know what to do this evening.” “Then come with me to my club. I'll promise you a rich intellectual treat, as well as something for the inner man. Come, put on your coat, and we'll start at once.

Suffering myself to be persuaded, I donned my hat and coat and we were soon in the street. After a brisk walk of about twenty minutes, we arrived at our destination. 'Twas a tall, six-story building; the lights shone from the uppermost windows, and my friend announced that we had six flights of stairs to climb. Well, my physician had recommended exercise, and here was the chance so we started on our journey, and somewhat out of breath arrived at the door of the club room. It had no Guardian, so we entered without knocking, and found ourselves in a large, brilliantly [lit] room. At one end a raised platform with desk and reading-lamp; in front were tables and chairs. Grouped around the stove were twenty-five members of the club. There was no sound of conversation. All was silent. We joined the group. I felt somewhat embarrassed and was about to speak but was at once checked by my companion, who, placing his finger upon his lips, pointed to a large, transparent glass sign which hung from the central chandelier; and upon it I read the word “Silence.”

I had not bargained for this. My genius, if any, was conversational. I felt that evening particularly rich in reminiscence and anecdote, and yet all was to be corked and bottled. The loss was theirs, and they had my sympathy, though I could not express it.

While thus meditating, the sound of a distant music box broke the dead silence. I recognized the air, –“The Siren” waltz. The members paired, waltzed to its music around the room, and then sat themselves down. Feeling somewhat like a stray lamb, I watched them in wonder, and was finally led by my friend to a seat in the rear of the apartment. He whispered in my ear that this was the “Poetical Club,” that the waltz was the opening exercise, and was symbolic of the “Poetry of Motion.” All this was said with much pride, and, seeing that it was expected of me, I looked becomingly pleased. A member then rose from his seat, mounted the platform, and rang a silver bell. He was certainly an intellectual-looking man, for he had a very high forehead, and frowned continually. My friend again whispered “That is Cyrus Cyclone, –our president.”

The president cleared his throat, took from his pocket a bundle of papers, which he proceeded to arrange, preparatory to reading. My attention wandered to the wall behind him, on which was inscribed in golden letters Poe's definition of poetry, in these words: “The manifestation of the real by the ideal in words that of in metrical array.” Beneath him hung a portrait of the “Sweet Singer of Michigan” life-size, in wood-tints. The president read from manuscript as follows: “Fellow poets and kindred spirits, tonight is the reform [all]. It is a part of our mission to reform mankind, to sow the seeds of poetry, to advance the poetic spirit, and especially in the young. The task is a novel one, and we can only learn from experience. I read, therefore, a communication from an ex-member.

Cyrus Cyclone Esq. Prest Political Club

Dear Sir: –Your kind letter received, and cheerfully respond to your wishes. My son Sydney is just eight years of age. A week prior to his birth, having come home rather late, my wife recited, with astonishing emphasis, a passage from Dante's Inferno, and then concluded by giving me “Hail Columbia,” a poem by John Hopkinson, I believe. This poetic fervor so impressed me that I retired without saying a word, though I came then and there to the conclusion that my child if a son, should be a poet. It proved a son, and from the hour of his birth I dedicated him to poetry. Poetic quotations were constantly recited in his presence: his nurse even saying them to him in nursery rhymes, and I have frequently given him lessons in meter, by reading from current gas bills. His first book was a poetical classic, the works of “Mother Goose.” The result was astonishing. At two, with poetic license, he knocked an eye out of a bird. At three, one night while he was composing – composing himself to sleep, he became excited with poetic fancies, and cried for three whole hours in the wildest, weirdest melody. The nurse said it was colic. I discharged her at once; her ideas were too earthy for that infant's sphere. At five he wrote an ode to a cheese-cake, and then ate the cake saying, he wished to have poetic fancies within him. Yesterday on hearing me read aloud an account of a duel between two rival lovers, the death of one and the suicide of the other, he burst into tears, and calling for ink and paper, dashed off following lines.

Two young men loved a maiden fair
With bright eyes and golden hair
With cheeks as roses red,
And each one wanted her to wed.
Upon this they fought a duel
They called each other liar, and fool.
They fought it, and one was shot
And this was his unhappy lot.
Of the wound and love he died,
And the other committed suicide.

He has heard of your club, and wishes to become a member, when he is old enough. As your applicants are so numerous, I know his name will not be reached for a ballot until he attains the proper age. May I trouble you then if living, to propose his name, giving him the usual eulogistic send-off, and believe me to be.

Yours with esteem

Carter Harrison. –

Chicago, Sept 2

This letter was received with great applause; when it had subsided, the president, still reading from manuscript, proceeded.

To Cyrus Cyclone, Esq.

Dear Sir: – some three or four years ago, I read in the Commercial newspaper what was

intended to be a play on that great poet, Poe. The writer said he could prove it to a T, that Poe was only three fourths of a poet. In what quarter the missing fraction would be found, or whether Poe was without a quarter, seemed to be left unanswered. Here is a possible solution. I say solution, for the production is rather weak. The other evening I attended a spiritual séance; a slate, with a small pencil point was placed under the table, the sound of vigorous writing was heard, and when the slate was again produced, the following lines were written upon it. "I am not quite myself," (this may tend to prove that he was only three fourths of himself, as the newspaper had it.) I send you from the spirit world this hitherto unpublished poem of mine. Edgar Allen Poe.

My love at first light.
Though I met her but a minute
Yet her smile spoke volumes in it;
and I swore that I would win it.

To be mine for now and aye.
So the next time that I saw her,
On my knees I fell before her,
And with fervor did implore her
 With me to live and die
As I poured my soul out to her,
In my attempt to woo her,
I said that while I knew her,
 No other love I'd know.
And no harm should ere betide her,
If she'd let me walk beside her,
Through the paths of life to guide her,
 In her journey here below.

So, when my word was spoken,
In silence all unbroken
I waited for a token
 Or expression of her love.
And her cheek was dyed with flushes,
Colored by her own sweet blushes,
As, with voice as soft as thrushes,
 Or the cooing of the Dove,

Answered she, my loved divinity,
Saying: "I would be your affinity
But ties of consanguinity
 Compel me to say nay.
To one husband I'm restricted,
And with that I'm now afflicted
And as more are interdicted,
 I'll bid you now good-day."

Deeming this production somewhat of a curiosity, I send it to you to be read at the "Poetical Club," before it is published in this or the next "Century"

Yours etc.

Henry George

"Gentlemen," said the president, "I have no further communications to place before you this evening. Lunch will now be served."

At this, my eyes began to sparkle. A portly colored gentleman then passed round the driest of all dry edibles Cream Crackers. A rule of the club, rigidly adhered to, required them to be eaten without water, and the members called them "Desert of Sahara" crackers, as typifying the arid waste o'er which the poet has to travel, before reaching the oasis of appreciation. I never reached that oasis even in spirit; for being without water to wash them down, their dry particles so parched and irritated my throat that I choked in the effort to swallow them. This drew upon me the attention of the club in general, and they gazed upon me with infinite scorn and disgust.

Filtered water was then served with straws. My spirits sank, and my countenance, always a tell-tale one, expressed the disappointment I felt. My friend begged me to have patience, assuring me that we would soon have new-laid eggs, and on each egg would be found and appropriate phrase or verse, written or selected by the president. That these often lead their minds into new fields of thought and were much prized on that account. He also said the president was a physiognomist, could tell with a glance the character or mental caliber of a visitor, and that without reserve he communicated his judgment thereon to the visitor, on the eggs served him. It is needless to say I was not reassured, and awaited my egg with some anxiety. The eggs appeared. My companion hastened to obtain them, and returned with one in each hand. He handed me mine. On his I read these words: "What is your excuse for living?" This, contrary to my expectations seemed to please him very much. He said he felt under many obligations to the president for propounding so novel an inquiry. That he regarded it as a most difficult question to answer. And as no excuse readily suggested itself to him, he would take a week to consider it, and then reply in verse. "But what is on your egg. I am much interested to hear it. Read it aloud." I did so. Here the lines:

This world, of fools has such a store
That he who would not see an ass
Must hide at home and bolt his door
And break his looking glass.

So that was the president's judgment: 'twas thus he had written me down. My ire arose. I looked up and met his eye turned full upon me; there was an excellent gleam therein, and he smiled sardonically. I could restrain myself no longer. Raising the egg in my hand, I took deliberate aim, and the next moment a broad stream of vivid yellow coursed down the president's brow, and tinted his immaculate linen and broadcloth.

Justice was not long delayed. Shouts of indignation filled the air. Before I could recover myself and seek safety in flight, I was seized from behind by a dozen irate members, hurried precipitately from the room, and hurled over the lofty winding flight of stairs. I felt myself falling, and strove in vain to save myself. I shrieked aloud, and suddenly awoke, to find myself in my own room, with my friend John bending over me, and shaking me vigorously.

“Well, old fellow,” he said, “you've been making so much noise in your sleep, that I waked you up, fearing the neighbors would complain. You must have been dreaming.” And so it was: men are but mortals after all. That rich mince pie had done its work, and the “Poetical Club” was but a dream.

S. M. Johnson

December 11, 1886

<rev. jnm 12/2011>