

(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* 2, 1886 – 1887 June 5, '86 to May 21, '87)

## Librarians

The interesting paper presented with the last Budget of the Club in which some of the particulars of the remarkable librarian of the Hamilton County Law Library were pictured, has worked up some memories which I shall try to pin down with my pen. The paper read to the Club, and the conversations of several lawyers afterwards bore testimony to the skillful manner in which the Librarian can pounce upon reports of cases &c. which form the contents of the sheepskin coverings of his books. He seemed to know by intuition just where to find anything the lawyer may want. He seemed to possess in the convolutions of his brain were within his cranium somewhere not only a well-arranged index of all that the ponderous books contain, but also a knowledge of the law and the points of importance in the reported cases. Young lawyers and others go to him with blanks as it were, and he fills them out into briefs. The lawyer it seems has meditated upon the eternal principles, and has gathered the facts; and the eye clothier (sic) can supply him with the law, and with the opinions of others as recorded in the books: and yet the Librarian "never reads" as someone has said.

According to common report the Librarian of Congress Mr. Spofford has the same sort of remarkable reputation. A reputation of knowing something about the contents of every volume in that vast library at Washington containing about 600,000 books. "That means" says the Washington Star "that Mr. Spofford has stowed away in a moderate sized brain 600,000 volumes of various sizes and bindings."

We might think that as books are the recorded thought of all wise (and foolish) men who have ever written that a man who had all these thoughts stored up in his memory could be a wise man if he wished; but librarians are not wise men or are not wiser than many another man who has but little association with books. And, librarians do not read books. They handle them, and glance through them, and during this process impressions are made upon their retenae which are transmitted to some registering nervous center in their brains without awakening their consciousness. This is happening to each of us of course all the time; but the librarian forms, little by little the habit of putting his hands upon the images which caused the impressions almost automatically at some future time. It is a reflex nervous movement and is of the same character as any other complex and apparently well-directed voluntary movement of our muscles such as in speaking, walking, writing, etc. which we daily and hourly perform with entire unconsciousness of the methods or modes of action. Tickle a sleeping child's foot and the foot will be suddenly drawn away without awakening the child. Tickle a librarian by asking for printed remarks upon any subject and the nervous discharge or response sends him to the case and shelf and book and page where the thing can be found; and I was about to add, without awakening the librarian. Thirty years ago I was a boy assistant in the Young Men's Mercantile Library of Cincinnati. It was during the time of Mr. Rbt. Stevenson as Librarian, – when Geo. Morris and Charlie Harrison were assistants. In those days the books were not particularly well classified and arranged upon the shelves and it required from three to six months for a new boy to get the "hang of the schoolhouse." And this

meant in that place an intimate acquaintance with the volumes in the library formed through the sense of sight, touch, and smell. None of us were readers. I never saw Stephenson reading a library book. George Morris never sat down comfortably with a book. Charlie Harrison read only the lightest kind of books and I read only religious works and commentaries on the Scriptures; yet each of us knew everything that our library of some 20,000 volumes contained. We handled the books constantly and glanced through them and got the location of the printed ideas and could direct readers or inquirers to these places like animated guide-posts. I can account for this only in the physiological grounds of the power of habit of mind and body and reflex nervous responses.

Curious incidents occasionally happened. Once a student from Miami University applied to me for some work on the life and writings of John Milton: he informed me that he was preparing a college essay or address on this subject and desired a certain work the title of which he had seen in our old catalogue. Now in those days a "Student" a "College Student" was my beau ideal of a young man. The very name Student had a charm for me, and a real live student from a college had a halo about him that distinguished him from all the other young man whom I had seen. No clerk in a downtown wholesale house whether the House happened to be in Groceries, Dry Goods, Books, or Paper, – no teller in a Bank and even no hotel clerk (all mighty in their ways you know) had ever facilitated my youthful imagination as had a college student from a college. The student wore longer hair in those days than did the wholesale clerk and his hair billowed under at the ends with a more pronounced and distinguished style his collars were broader, more Byronic, and laid over with a more graceful negligence than the bank clerk's collars; and his feet, oh, his feet were shorter, more arched, and smaller than even the hotel clerk's feet. He carried a white cane in so many significant ways – there seemed to be a language in his cane as mysterious as the language of a coquette's fan. I had often in secret practiced with this light weapon (the modern substitute for the old beau's small sword), trying to perfect myself in the graceful accomplishment of thoroughbred students. Well, this particular college student was so handsome, so intellectual in appearance, so suave and graceful in his manner so polite in his request for the certain work on the life and writings of John Milton that I hastened to accommodate him. I ran to the book-case in which the volume should have been found. It was not there. I could not remember the volume. I did not know whether it was a great or little book or how it was bound. In fact, while I knew intuitively that it was not "out", I could not find it in and this worried me a little for I felt that the book had been displaced or had disappeared long before from the library. The student said he would call again in a few days. I promised to hunt up the book. A night or two after this occurrence, I dreamed of looking for the book with the handsome student and after a long and labored search I thought that I had found it in the wrong case, and down in an obscure and dusty corner where it had fallen behind a row of books. I saw the book distinctly in my dream. It was a rusty little brown book, very much soiled and somewhat torn. The dream was forgotten I am sure. I never thought of the student again, but went on in our daily routine of getting out and receiving back books, of glancing over these returned books and restoring them to their places on the shelves and doing this hurriedly so that I might have moments of leisure for my religious reading. One day some weeks after the occurrence the student again came to the library and asked for the book. My dream came back to me and I went directly to the alcove where I had seen the book,

pulled out all the volumes in the row, and there in the right corner I found the identical little book of the dream. Several such incidents happened to me while I was in the library, but this was the most striking. We were often called upon to assist authors, compilers, writers, and others in bringing the right kind of grist to the mill, and we generally succeeded. In those days, too, we used to be called upon to assist members of the Literary Club when they were getting ready "to go" with a paper. The Club was only six or seven years old at that time, and original papers were probably not so common as at the present time.

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