

(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*, Dec 20, 1890 to May 30, 1891)

Out Out Brief Candle

Among all the Kentucky boys belonging to our colony in New York City some twelve years ago, not one gave promise of a future more useful and conspicuous than our dear friend and companion, Herbert Frost.

In a recent letter Prof. Tyndall says, "Many years ago, when occupying a small position as district doctor in the neighborhood of Breslau, I predicted the coming greatness of Koch," and our feeling in regard to Frost was of the same prophetic nature; (knowing as we did, the work he was doing and his unceasing ambition to master his profession). A wide separation as to place and profession (and absorption in the work we each had to do) naturally prevented me from keeping up closely with his work, but occasionally letters from him relating advance in the medical world, (that [I] knew from other sources, he took personal part in) satisfied me that he was fulfilling our predictions, and the conviction that he would achieve marked success had become such a settled one that I was totally unprepared for the announcement of his death, gathered from a stray copy of his Kentucky home paper, picked up [at] a railway station one night last January. The strange fate that took him away from the scene, just as he was surmounting the severest trials of poverty and obscurity, has puzzled his friends ever since and a sketch of his brief but beautiful life may prove of interest to the Club.

Some thirteen years ago, standing upon his father's doorstep and saying to them "I have a long day's work before me," he bade them all goodbye and started out to that day's work. Surrounding him at that moment was the beautiful landscape of the choicest section of the Blu Grass, and it made an indelible impression upon his memory; in fact he often reverted to it in conversation and recalled it in the delirium of his last days. Amiel has said, "Great men are the men in whom nature has succeeded," and certain it was that the natural beauty of our friend's country surroundings had a potent influence over his life.

He was born in 1855 and was descended from a Virginia family, whose founder in this country was a Cavalier, who, failing in the attempt to rescue Charles I from his prison in the Isle of Wight and learning of his decapitation, sailed away to the New World and being wrecked in the Chesapeake Bay finally found the haven of Old Point Comfort, where he settled and stoutly aided Sir William Berkeley to resist the troops of Cornwall when they attempted to subdue the "Fifth" Kingdom". Frost had a careful home training, but did not get a Collegiate education, a fact that he always regretted. In talking on the subject, he used a quote John Bright, who deploring a similar loss in his own case said, "I feel as if I have all my life been passionately doing nothing."

(He expressed a preference for a diploma from Yale, but, failing in this, I believe would have accepted one from Harvard.) Despite this drawback, when he came to New York in 1875, he was well-equipped, by virtue of his extensive reading of English and American literature and acquaintance with the ancient classics anything he undertook. He immediately entered College and taxed every faculty in mastering his profession. We often found him in his room utterly exhausted from work, and carried him off to the

country for rest and recuperation; for some of us were fortunate enough to have great country homes in marked contrast to the dingy quarters, that, for a economy's sake, he was compelled to occupy, and a description of which may serve to give you some idea of what a poor young man has to endure in order to succeed.

His quarters were in one of those old houses in the North Side of Washington Square, once occupied by the wealthiest Knickerbocker families, when that portion of New York was "uptown", but now used as boarding, and in some instances, tenement houses. This small cheerless room was in the fourth floor, very poorly furnished, having three chairs, table etc., so that when our crowd called in force, those of us that could wedge into the room sat on the table and dad, or anywhere we could find a perch.

As further means of economy he cooked, on an oil stove that he kept concealed in the closet, his breakfast and supper, taking lunch near the College. This was before the days of "Alladdin Hash" and therefore, Frost could not get the nutritious food he required at the figures he was able to pay, so that unquestionably, his health was impaired to some extent by the preparations he was forced to endure.

Once a week, on Sunday, we all met up town and enjoyed a liberal Table D'Hote dinner, it is not too much to say that for some of us, this dinner tided over the week. Frost bore it all very well, however, and if the sting of poverty left any bitterness in his heart, as it often does, we could not detect it, if at times when all alone, he became despondent. "Hope painted an iris upon the two-year that poverty forced upon his cheek," and we found him always cheerful and brave. We soon became accustomed to the strongest contrasts between wealth and poverty, for just across the street from Frost's room there was a fellow student of his and member of our Colony, who had apartments that were furnished at the cost of not less than \$10,000.00 although this contrast did not affect the friendly relations of Frost and the millionaire, the latter knew what the future had in store for his friend. The one thing that seemed to affect him most was the indifference and actual ribaldry of a great many of his fellow students. Being of a highly imaginative, sensitive nature and worshiping his profession as almost divine, carrying in his heart this fixed love for it, the lack of sympathy, with his motives, from a great bulk of his fellow students, depressed him, for he was not the person to look with cold disdain upon one who was, in a measure, certainly below him. On the other hand, any expression of faith in his profession transported him. Well do I remember the effect upon him of Henry Ward Beecher's great address to his class, in which Matt Devine told them that "their profession, if possible, was more sacred even than his own."

After graduating he competed successfully for a position in the Charity Hospital on Blackwells Island, and it was then that the most interesting period of his life began. In the practice of his profession, the practical side of this character developed (very) rapidly. It seems a paradox that such a dreamer as he was should do so quickly adapt himself to the real work at his hands found to do, and yet it actually happened that his previous life and high imagination peculiarly fitted him for contact with the class of people and diseases that drift into a Charity Hospital. He needed such an equipment of faith to live through it without becoming a cynic. In talking on one occasion about the poor and unholy creatures that exist on the earth, he said, "that nature must have raw material to work upon" and the Christian dictum, that "the poor ye have with you always," meant in one of

its phases that the scheme was infinite.

Frost matured very rapidly under these experiences, that far off strain from the cavalier ancestor flashed out and he became in a very short time one of the most interesting men I have ever known. His conversation was, at times luminous. Stirred, as if by an ecstasy of knowledge, he would talk far into the night, concerning all the momentous questions that were pressing upon his mind and upon the scientific world for solution. Under the influence of his conversation we felt the truth of Kant's "Limit Concept" and that under other conditions and another species of sensation than ours, these questions would be solved. Our friend has now, without doubt, passed into that state.

After leaving the Charity Hospital, Frost entered the Hospital of Ruptured And Crippled where he spent several years of "hard study in Surgery, and after that he began the practice of his profession and continued until his death. (There was of course another side to his character that has not been touched upon, nor is it necessary to stay more than allude to the fact that all young men indulge in the vices that Thackery was candid enough to mention and has sufficiently portrayed in Pendennis.)

The life that a young student leads in New York must be, to some extent, Bohemian, but after getting into the practice for himself, Frost grew tired of it and taking the eudemonistic view of life married happily and proceeded earnestly with his work. That said, views were absolute with him, I have reason to doubt, but that he was happier than before there can be no question. There were times when the small duties of the married state were irksome, but the soft hand of one who "darkly felt him great" brushed them away.

Soon after marriage we parted company and what he accomplished afterward was hearsay to me. His constructive work began after his marriage. He established a Hospital and began investigations as to the nature and cure of Consumption. His work was receiving recognition. He had been sent abroad by his associate physicians as their representative, and was preparing to go again for a special study of the Koch discovery, over which he was very enthusiastic, when he contracted pneumonia and died.

Hardly had the handmaid of science guided him into her wonderful temple and disclosed some of its beauties, ere her sable sister firmly took him by the hand and led him away into the realm that is without limitation of knowledge. There is not human hypothesis by which his friends can explain away the crushing disappointment of his early death, save as say in the words of Goethe, "Mari was not going to solve the problem of the Universe," or better still, believe that he had crowded into the short time that was allotted to him

A long life,

Distilled to a mere drop, falling like a tear – Upon the world's cold cheek to make it burn,
Forever"

Sydnor Hall

May 30th 1891