

# CHRONICLE AND COMMENT

By ARTHUR BARTLETT MAURICE.

LAST week this department discussed Mr. Maurice Baring's bird's-eye view of the literary London of the 1890s, given in his "The Puppet Show of Memory." Although there were no *Yellow Books* here, from the American point of view, the literary New York of the same decade was very much more interesting. The city itself was in a state of transition, as it always has been and probably always will be. In the '90s it was throwing off the garments of an overgrown, unwieldy town. If the New Yorker of to-day could see it as it was then the spectacle would amaze him as much as do the prints in early numbers of *Valentine's Manual*. In its literary aspect that old New York of twenty-five or thirty years ago may be summed up as passing through the "velvet jacket stage." The phrase is owed to the late Richard Harding Davis.

NINE years ago Mr. Davis and the writer of these paragraphs were at the former's Mount Kisco home talking of the literary New York of the "golden '90s." "You mean the 'velvet jacket' days," said Mr. Davis. "Do you remember the velvet jacket of Robert Louis Stevenson?" The writer confessed that it was somewhat before his time, that he could not claim personal acquaintance, but that it was familiar enough through the old portraits. "We had our own men then, Mr. Howells, Mr. Stockton, Mr. Aldrich and the rest," Mr. Davis went on, "but Stevenson was the magnetic, the dominating literary figure. Just as he himself had played the 'sedulous ape' to others, so it was the fashion of the young writers of the early '90s to imitate him. He came to us and he brought with him his velvet jacket. It was a famous jacket, and it became a kind of oriflamme of the literary calling."

"SOMETHING like Balzac's white monk's robe in the 1840s" was the suggestion. "Only Stevenson's jacket was destined to become the father of an illustrious line of jackets," Mr. Davis continued. "We were young then, and we had other ideals. It was before the day of literary commercialism. What we were paid for a story did not matter much. It was enough that *Harper's* or *Scribner's* printed it. With elation we told our friends about it and they read it and liked it or criticized it. Many of the stories could be traced to the velvet jacket. The young man sitting down at his writing table to construct a masterpiece had to have his pad, his pen and his ink bottle. Sometimes an idea was needed. But to achieve the proper mood of inspiration, to rouse himself to heights of creative frenzy, he needed the jacket—just like that of R. L. S. Sacrifices were made in Bohemia in those days for that jacket; privations were endured."

ACTUALLY Bohemia, in its literary sense, is a state of mind, a period of ardent youth and of aspiration, rather than a material background or environment. If you are young enough you can find Bohemia to-day in Greenwich Village, or for that matter in any country town in the land. But there have always been definite places associated with the idea of Bohemia. There was the Cafe Momus of Henry Murger's time. There was the "Cider Cellar" of which Thackeray told in "The Newcomes." In the '60s of the nineteenth century men of letters in New York were in the habit of gathering nightly at Pfaff's, a beer cellar on Broadway near Bleecker street. In the '70s and '80s the favorite meeting place was Oscar's, near the old Academy of Design, where, as was told in this department a few weeks ago, gathered such men as Thomas Bailey Aldrich, Edgar Fawcett and Frank and Edgar Saltus.

IN the '90s the original Marla's had a certain literary flavor. It was on the north side of Ninth

street just west of Fifth avenue, there was a Franco-Spanish-American hotel where a certain literary Bohemian atmosphere was to be found. William Dean Howells dined there occasionally, thereby giving the establishment a tone of dignity. Thomas Janvier lived there at one time and used it as the background of a number of his stories, calling it the "Casa Napoleon," which of course was not its real name. Richard Watson Gilder was seen there from time to time, and Frank R. Stockton and James Huneker. In the late '90s it became the headquarters of a group of the younger writing men, conspicuous among them the late Josiah Flynt Willard, the "Cigarette" of "Tramping with Tramps," and "The Autobiography of Josiah Flynt."

IN the '90s Washington Square was the center of the writing activity of New York. The picturesque contrast between the Belgravia of the north side and the proletaria of the south side was a favorite theme of the story spinners of the day. About the time that the decade was passing out Frank Norris was living in the Judson, working on "The Wolf," which was to complete his Trilogy of the Wheat—the earlier books having been "The Octopus" and "The Pit"—but which he did not live to finish. Also in the Judson Jesse Lynch Williams lived in the middle '90s. About the dawn of the decade Robert W. Chambers was living in the old Benedict, on the east side of the square, and used the building as the background for "The King in Yellow," a book which has apparently been forgotten but which for sheer delightful terror has few equals in American literature.

ANOTHER aspect of the literary New York of the '90s: What were the books that were being read and discussed as a month or so hence people will be discussing Mr. Lewis's "Babbitt" and Mr. Hutchinson's "This Freedom" and Mrs. Wharton's "Glimpses of the Moon" and Mrs. Burnett's "Robin" and Mr. Bachelier's "Poor Richard" and the rest? It was not until late in the decade that the American novel began to swing into its own. In the early years of the period people were awakening to Rudyard Kipling and were talking about some really very clever detective stories that were being written by a young Englishman by the name of Conan Doyle. In the middle of the decade overshadowing all other books was George Du Maurier's "Trilby." Other novels have subsequently achieved far greater sales, but no other book within memory ever created such a furore as the old *Punch* artist's tale of the Paris of the last years of the Second Empire. The hypnotic Svengali caught the popular imagination, and as a term became a part of everyday speech, and occasionally on Fifth avenue one saw young men walking arm in arm dressed to real or imagined resemblance to Taffy, the Laird and Little Billee.

THOSE were the years when people were also reading Ian Maclaren's "The Bonnie Brier Bush"—the kallyard school was then in high favor—and Hall Caine's "The Manxman" and Anthony Hope's "The Prisoner of Zenda," which, itself an heir to Stevenson's "Prince Otto," and remotely to Eugene Sue's "The Mysteries of Paris," was to father any number of romances dealing with imaginary kingdoms or principalities in the Balkans. In the middle of the '90s the American note was being sounded with James Lane Allen's earlier tales of the blue grass region of Kentucky, and incidentally any one who cares to turn back and reread "The Kentucky Cardinal" and "Aftermath" and "Flute and Violin" and "The Choir Invisible" will find them just as charming as they were when the world was young. Perhaps the first of the American historical novels which were so soon to become the

rage was Stinson's "King Noanett." Apparently entirely forgotten to-day, it was written in prose so beautiful that whole pages of it could be read as blank verse.

IN the early '90s Mark Twain was still a young fellow in his fifties, and in the late '90s the writers we have with us to-day who had then been heard of were regarded as no more than precocious children. In the '90s Frank R. Stockton and F. Marion Crawford and Richard Harding Davis were in full stride, the last named trying hard to live down the charge of youth. Booth Tarkington was "sitting on a rail fence in Indiana" for six or seven years to emerge from his obscurity just as the decade was ending with "Monsieur Beaucaire" and "The Gentleman From Indiana." Winston Churchill was trying his prentice hand with "The Celebrity" before launching "Richard Carvel." Stewart Edward White was blazing trails in the northern woods. Irving Bachelier was writing "Eben Holden," with the vague hope that he might succeed as a novelist. George Barr McCutcheon was finding time between newspaper assignments for the composition of "Graustark."

TO revert to the early '90s and Richard Harding Davis, who was one of the most picturesque figures of the period. There was a time when a good many persons were inclined to disparage Davis's work as trivial and superficial. Carpers emphasized his haziness in the use of "will" and "shall" as a capital crime. His Cortlandt Van Bibber was held up to mild ridicule. But those who criticized him lightly or dismissed him with a shrug were not the writing men. The professional might not personally like him, but he recognized the sincerity, the capacity for hard work and the genuine talent. "Davis is the only man of our time," said one of them, "who has never written a dull line."

RICHARD HARDING DAVIS'S first conspicuous success was with "Gallegher," and behind that story there is a story. In the late '80s there was in the employ of the Philadelphia *Press* an office boy by the name of Tommy Gallegher. One day Gallegher went to the city editor of the paper and informed him that there was a young man outside who wanted to see him. The young man was Davis, then a tall stripling, wearing a long yellow ulster with light green stripes. He wanted a position, and told of a brief experience on the Philadelphia *Record*, where they had given him twenty assignments a day and \$7 a week. He confided to the city editor of the *Press* his firm belief that the city editor of the *Record* had regarded him with disfavor because he had worn gloves.

DAVIS was employed, started in that day, and proceeded to

make good. A gang of burglars was making trouble for the police and city officials. The new reporter donned a sweater, cap and overalls, and adopted the name of "Buck" Meiley. The makeup was copied from that of "Boss" Knivett of "The Romany Rye" as played by Henry E. Dixey. Davis went to the saloon that was known to be the headquarters of the gang, was accepted in the assumed role, and included in the plans to commit a robbery at a certain house on a certain night. He then notified the police to be on hand, and went with the burglars, was arrested with them and had them all sent to prison.

THE Gallegher who had ushered Davis into the presence of the city editor was the Gallegher of the story. He was a precocious youth whose mind was a ragbag filled with odds and ends of all kinds of information. Those were the last days of the old London prize ring rules calling for bare knuckle fights, and many of them were held in the neighborhood of Philadelphia. One of these battles was between Jack Dempsey, the Nonpareil of New York, and Mike Mallon of Pittsburgh. Davis was assigned to cover the fight for the *Press*, and what he saw he later described in several vivid pages of "Gallegher." He took Gallegher with him.

THE Dempsey-Mallon fight took place by night in a stable in one of the city suburbs. Mallon was a heavy favorite in the betting, but Dempsey proved a stunning surprise, and was on the point of delivering the knockout blow when the stable doors were smashed in by the police, who proceeded to arrest principals, seconds, and all the spectators. The protests of the newspaper men that they were there not of their own will but as a matter of business were unheeded. Davis slipped his account of the battle to Gallegher, who, on account of his youth and slight figure, was able to make his way through the cordon that had been drawn about the stable and reach the *Press* office with the story in time for the morning edition.

IN 1890 Davis left Philadelphia for New York, and sought a position on THE EVENING SUN. The city editor of the *Press* had been impressed by the long yellow ulster with the green stripes. The city editor of THE EVENING SUN later recalled that the young man calling upon him was carrying a hat box. At that period of his career Davis was going through life clinging to the hat box. It accompanied him everywhere. When Mr. Davis died, in 1916, among the many anecdotes related was one to the effect that his application was rejected by THE EVENING SUN, and that he had promptly won the desired place by going out into the street and rounding up a gang of green goods men.

Actually, that episode took place later.

DAVIS'S first assignments with THE EVENING SUN were of the ordinary routine nature. Most of his associations were in Philadelphia, and he was in the habit of spending his Sundays in that city, leaving New York by the Saturday noon train, and returning early Monday morning. One Saturday morning about eleven he approached the city editor to ask for the usual permission to leave. "You may go," was the answer, "if you will write a story and turn it in Monday morning." "What shall I write about?" asked the reporter. "Describe what you see and call it 'New York to Philadelphia from a Car Window.'" Davis did so. In later years he wrote "The West from a Car Window."

IT was after one of the week end visits to Philadelphia that Davis fell in with the green goods men. He had left the ferry at Cortlandt street and was making his way across City Hall Park when he was approached by the persuasive stranger. The reporter listened to the tale and looked for a policeman. There being no policeman in sight Davis himself took a firm grip on the man's coat collar and delivered him into custody. Then he went to his desk in THE EVENING SUN office and wrote the story of the capture. To his intense disgust it was printed under the flippant heading of "Our Green Reporter." The would-be swindler was sent to Blackwells Island, not so much on account of his professional practices as because he had been idiotic enough to select a New York newspaper reporter as his victim.

BUT it was not that exploit nor the writing of the Van Bibber stories that won for Davis his first EVENING SUN promotion. That came, his fellow reporters used to say, from "bawling out the boss." The Yale-Princeton football game of 1890 was played at Eastern Park, Brooklyn. Davis was assigned to cover it, with a ticket entitling him to a place on the side lines. The managing editor of THE EVENING SUN, Mr. Arthur Brisbane, went to the game and took a friend. Having no ticket for the friend, Mr. Brisbane sought to requisition that of the young reporter. The latter refused, neither gently nor diplomatically. He was there to cover the game and he would not give up the ticket. That night Mr. Brisbane went to the office and wrathfully related the incident. "What shall we do?" was asked. "Do?" retorted Mr. Brisbane, "Why, raise his salary."

IN THE EVENING SUN office when Davis first became associated with the paper there was a youth of 14 or 15 years of age, known as "Daddy" Reaper, who was one of the "copy boys," who, before the use of the telephone became general, were sent with the reporter going out on an assignment to bring back the first part of the copy. From the beginning "Daddy" took possession of the young man from Philadelphia. Everywhere the wizened, undersized boy followed the large young man with the hat box. But his devotion did not extend to the Van Bibber stories. Anybody, he scornfully maintained, could write one. One day Davis challenged him to make good the boast. Without the slightest hesitation "Daddy" sat down and wrote the tale, in which Van Bibber, performing a noble deed, was rewarded with a dinner of chicken and rice pudding, that representing "Daddy's" conception of a material heaven.

LITTLE, BROWN & CO. have announced for early autumn publication "Skippy Bedelle," another Owen Johnson tale of life at the Lawrenceville School, John C. Green Foundation. That is also an affair of the eighties-nineties, for the heroes who gambol in these pages, as they gambled in the pages of "The Prodigious Hickey" (originally published as "The Eternal Boy"), "The Tennessee Shad," "The Varmint" and "The Humming Bird"—the Triumphant Egghead, Brian de

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## Famous Poems of Books or Bookmen

LINES ON THE MERMAID TAVERN.

By JOHN KEATS.

Souls of Poets dead and gone,  
What Elysium have ye known,  
Happy field or mossy cavern,  
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?  
Have ye tipped drink more fine  
Than mine host's canary wine?  
Or are fruits of Paradise  
Sweeter than those dainty pies  
Of venison? O, generous food!  
Dressed as though bold Robin Hood  
Would, with his Maid Marian,  
Sup and bowse from horn and can.

I have heard that on a day  
Mine host's signboard flew away  
Nobody knew whither, till  
An astrologer's old quill  
To a sheepskin gave the story,  
Said he saw you in your glory,  
Underneath a new-old Sign,  
Sipping beverage divine,  
And piddling with contented smack  
The Mermaid in the Zodiac!

Souls of Poets dead and gone,  
What Elysium have ye known—  
Happy field or mossy cavern—  
Choicer than the Mermaid Tavern?