

## NOVEMBER BOUGHS

### OUR EMINENT VISITORS

#### Past, Present and Future

Welcome to them each and all! They do good--the deepest, widest, most needed good--though quite certainly not in the ways attempted--which have, at times, something irresistibly comic. What can be more farcical, for instance, than the sight of a worthy gentleman coming three or four thousand miles through wet and wind to speak complacently and at great length on matters of which he both entirely mistakes or knows nothing--before crowds of auditors equally complacent, and equally at fault?

Yet welcome and thanks, we say, to those visitors we have, and have had, from abroad among us--and may the procession continue! We have had Dickens and Thackeray, Froude, Herbert Spencer, Oscar Wilde, Lord Coleridge--soldiers, savants, poets--and now Matthew Arnold and Irving the actor. Some have come to make money--some for a "good time"--some to help us along and give us advice--and some undoubtedly to investigate, bona fide, this great problem, democratic America,

looming upon the world with such cumulative power through a hundred years, now with the evident intention (since the secession war) to stay, and take a leading hand, for many a century to come, in civilization's and humanity's eternal game. But alas! that very investigation--the method of that investigation--is where the deficit most surely and helplessly comes in. Let not Lord Coleridge and Mr. Arnold (to say nothing of the illustrious actor) imagine that when they have met and survey'd the etiquettical gatherings of our wealthy, distinguish'd and sure-to-be-put-forward-on-such-occasions citizens (New York, Boston, Philadelphia, &c., have certain stereotyped strings of them, continually lined and paraded like the lists of dishes at hotel tables--you are sure to get the same over and over again--it is very amusing)--and the bowing and introducing, the receptions at the swell clubs, the eating and drinking and praising and praising back--and the next "day riding about Central Park, or doing the" Public Institutions "--and so passing through, one after another, the full-dress coteries of the Atlantic cities, all grammatical and cultured and correct, with the toned-down manners of the gentlemen, and the kid-gloves, and luncheons and finger-glasses--Let not our eminent visitors, we say, suppose that, by means of these experiences, they have "seen America," or captur'd any distinctive clew or purport thereof. Not a bit of it. Of the pulse-beats that lie within and vitalize this Commonweal to-day--of the hard-pan purports and idiosyncrasies pursued faithfully and triumphantly by its bulk of men North and South, generation after generation, superficially unconscious of their own aims, yet none the less pressing onward

with deathless intuition--those coteries do not furnish the faintest scintilla. In the Old World the best flavor and significance of a race may possibly need to be look'd for in its "upper classes," its gentries, its court, its etat major. In the United States the rule is revers'd. Besides (and a point, this, perhaps deepest of all,) the special marks of our grouping and design are not going to be understood in a hurry. The lesson and scanning right on the ground are difficult; I was going to say they are impossible to foreigners--but I have occasionally found the clearest appreciation of all, coming from far-off quarters. Surely nothing could be more apt, not only for our eminent visitors present and to come, but for home study, than the following editorial criticism of the London Times on Mr. Froude's visits and lectures here a few years ago, and the culminating dinner given at Delmonico's, with its brilliant array of guests:

"We read the list," says the Times, "of those who assembled to do honor to Mr. Froude: there were Mr. Emerson, Mr. Beecher, Mr. Curtis, Mr. Bryant; we add the names of those who sent letters of regret that they could not attend in person--Mr. Longfellow, Mr. Whittier. They are names which are well known--almost as well known and as much honor'd in England as in America; and yet what must we say in the end? The American people outside this assemblage of writers is something vaster and greater than they, singly or together, can comprehend. It cannot be said of any or all of them that they can speak for their nation. We who look on at this distance are able perhaps on that account to see the more clearly that there are qualities of the

American people which find no representation, no voice, among these their spokesmen. And what is true of them is true of the English class of whom Mr. Froude may be said to be the ambassador. Mr. Froude is master of a charming style. He has the gift of grace and the gift of sympathy. Taking any single character as the subject of his study, he may succeed after a very short time in so comprehending its workings as to be able to present a living figure to the intelligence and memory of his readers. But the movements of a nation, the, voiceless purpose of a people which cannot put its own thoughts into words, yet acts upon them in each successive generation--these things do not lie within his grasp.... The functions of literature such as he represents are limited in their action; the influence he can wield is artificial and restricted, and, while he and his hearers please and are pleas'd with pleasant periods, his great mass of national life will flow around them unmov'd in its tides by action as powerless as that of the dwellers by the shore to direct the currents of the ocean."

A thought, here, that needs to be echoed, expanded, permanently treasur'd by our literary classes and educators. (The gestation, the youth, the knitting preparations, are now over, and it is full time for definite purpose, result.) How few think of it, though it is the impetus and background of our whole Nationality and popular life. In the present brief memorandum I very likely for the first time awake "the intelligent reader" to the idea and inquiry whether there isn't such a thing as the distinctive genius of our democratic New World, universal, immanent, bringing to a head the best experience of the

past--not specially literary or intellectual--not merely "good," (in the Sunday School and Temperance Society sense,)-some invisible spine and great sympathetic to these States, resident only in the average people, in their practical life, in their physiology, in their emotions, in their nebulous yet fiery patriotism, in the armies (both sides) through the whole secession war--an identity and character which indeed so far "finds no voice among their spokesmen."

To my mind America, vast and fruitful as it appears to-day, is even yet, for its most important results, entirely in the tentative state; its very formation--stir and whirling trials and essays more splendid and picturesque, to my thinking, than the accomplish'd growths and shows of other lands, through European history, or Greece, or all the past. Surely a New World literature, worthy the name, is not to be, if it ever comes, some fiction, or fancy, or bit of sentimentalism or polish'd work merely by itself, or in abstraction. So long as such literature is no born branch and offshoot of the Nationality, rooted and grown from its roots, and fibred with its fibre, it can never answer any deep call or perennial need. Perhaps the untaught Republic is wiser than its teachers. The best literature is always a result of something far greater than itself--not the hero, but the portrait of the hero. Before there can be recorded history or poem there must be the transaction. Beyond the old masterpieces, the Iliad, the interminable Hindu epics, the Greek tragedies, even the Bible itself, range the immense facts of what must have preceded them, their sine qua non--the veritable poems and masterpieces, of which, grand as

they are, the word-statements are but shreds and cartoons.

For to-day and the States, I think the vividest, rapidest, most stupendous processes ever known, ever perform'd by man or nation, on the largest scales and in countless varieties, are now and here presented. Not as our poets and preachers are always conventionally putting it--but quite different. Some colossal foundry, the flaming of the fire, the melted metal, the pounding trip-hammers, the surging crowds of workmen shifting from point to point, the murky shadows, the rolling haze, the discord, the crudeness, the deafening din, the disorder, the dross and clouds of dust, the waste and extravagance of material, the shafts of darted sunshine through the vast open roof-scuttles aloft--the mighty castings, many of them not yet fitted, perhaps delay'd long, yet each in its due time, with definite place and use and meaning--Such, more like, is a symbol of America.

After all of which, returning to our starting-point, we reiterate, and in the whole Land's name, a welcome to our eminent guests. Visits like theirs, and hospitalities, and hand-shaking, and face meeting face, and the distant brought near--what divine solvents they are! Travel, reciprocity, "interviewing," intercommunion of lands--what are they but Democracy's and the highest Law's best aids? O that our own country--that every land in the world--could annually, continually, receive the poets, thinkers, scientists, even the official magnates, of other lands, as honor'd guests. O that the United States, especially the West, could have had a good long visit and explorative

jaunt, from the noble and melancholy Tourgueneff, before he died--or from Victor Hugo--or Thomas Carlyle. Castelar, Tennyson, any of the two or three great Parisian essayists--were they and we to come face to face, how is it possible but that the right understanding would ensue?