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Howells at Belmont: The Case of the “Wicked Interviewer”

Ginette de B. Merrill and George Arms

I

Two Unprinted Letters and a Scandalous Interview

Ginette de B. Merrill

“NEVER mind the wicked interviewer!” J. T. Fields wrote W. D. Howells on 21 January 1880 from Boston. The note continues:

His shadow will keep growing less until he (or she?) could hide behind a toothpick or one of D^r. Holland’s novels; but, after the advice of Charles Lamb, I will *damn him at a venture*, to save time! We are very sorry to learn y^r. wife has been ill, and right glad to learn she is mending.

See ‘tother side for a [wisely?] postscript or card. always yours, inside & out,
J. T. F.

And on a different page:

The Play is most powerful & will last. I did not see it before. It holds its audience by the heart-strings. Many thanks for the tickets.

J. T. Fields.¹

This puzzling note in the Howells Papers at the Houghton Library came to hand during the course of research on Redtop, the house in

¹ Two-page A.I.s. (Harvard). Printed here by permission of the Houghton Library. Unless otherwise mentioned, this and all other letters quoted are at Harvard.

Josiah G. Holland (1819-1881), author of sentimental novels, rival editor-owner of *Scribner’s*, and on-and-off friend of Howells’s. *Yorick’s Love*, Howells’s translation and adaptation from Manuel Tamayo y Baus’s *Un Drama Nuevo*, had opened at the Park Theatre in Boston the night before. An earlier version entitled *A New Play* had been produced in Boston in February 1879; see Walter J. Meserve, *The Complete Plays of W. D. Howells* (New York: New York University Press, 1960), pp. 110-114.

Belmont, Massachusetts, where Howells had moved from Cambridge with his family in July 1878.²

Newspaper and magazine articles on the popular and genial novelist, occasional playwright, and editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* appeared regularly. Those written in the Belmont years, 1878-1882, held particular significance for the new owners of Redtop eager to find information on original architectural details and interior decoration as a guide to restoration. And now Fields's note indicated a *recent* interview of Howells. Could it have taken place at Redtop? Would it describe Howells's home? And why had Fields called the anonymous interviewer "wicked"?

The Gibson-Arms *Bibliography* revealed the existence of an unsigned piece entitled "'Howells at Home,' *New York Tribune*, Jan. 25, 1880, p. 3. Descriptive. First printed in *Boston Herald*." Listed also in Woodress, it appeared in Halfmann and Smith as #6 with the notation "H is a very accessible man and kind to young writers but 'does not go much into society.' Rpt. from *Boston HERALD*."³ The article follows:

HOWELLS AT HOME.

From the Boston Herald.

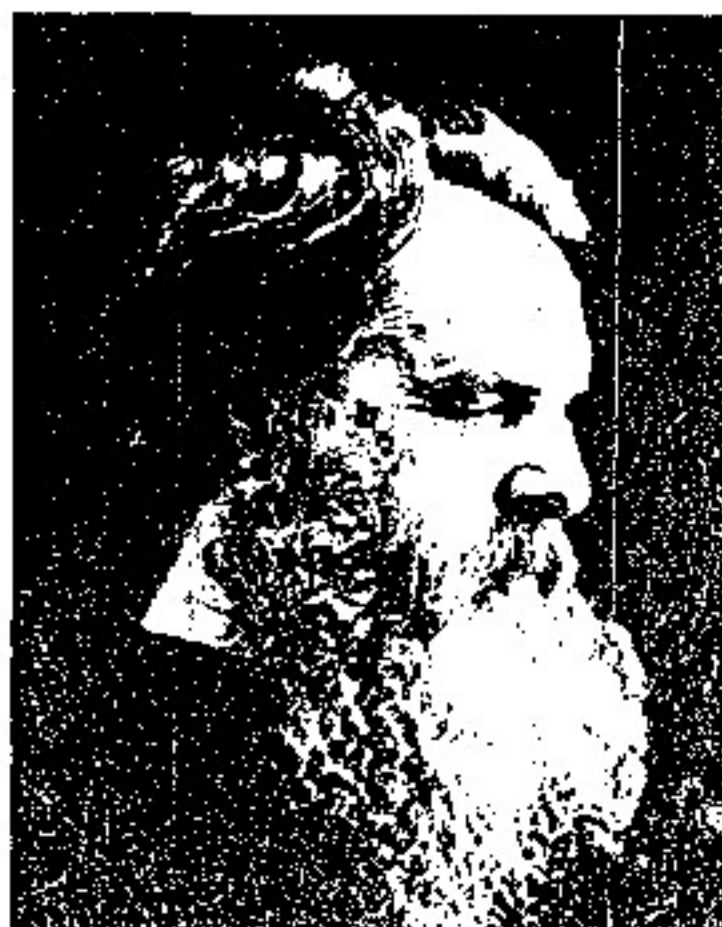
Mr. Howells is a very accessible man, as the phrase goes. He never assumes a lofty editorial demeanor, and he treats young and unknown writers with a simple cordiality and kindness that seldom miss appreciation, though now and then youthful heads may be turned by it. The simplicity of his manner sometimes leads self-confident people to imagine they can impose their plans and ideas upon him without much trouble. But, for all his good nature, he is a shrewd and careful business man in editorial matters, and these people soon discover their mistake. As he comes into the room, you notice that he is small of person, stooping slightly in the shoulders, but of pleasant presence. He wears his hair parted in the middle, as his photographs show him, but somehow one feels that this is merely a matter of convenience, and not a concession to the fashion which descended upon the heads of sundry feeble-minded youth of this country, twenty years ago, and is still known to influence their successors. His whole appearance and manner are perfectly free from affectation. His thick moustache, which now begins to feel the first frost of

² "Redtop and the Belmont Years of W. D. Howells and His Family," *Harvard Library Bulletin*, XXVIII (January 1980), 33-57.

³ William M. Gibson and George Arms, *A Bibliography of William Dean Howells* (New York: New York Public Library, 1948; rpt. New York: Arno Press, 1971), p. 160; James Woodress, "A Bibliography of Writing about William Dean Howells: Part One: 1860-1919," *American Literary Realism*, Special No. (1969), p. 7; Ulrich Halfmann and Don R. Smith, "William Dean Howells: A Revised and Annotated Bibliography of Secondary Comment in Periodicals and Newspapers, 1868-1919," *American Literary Realism*, V (1972), 92.



Howells in the 1870s
Harper's, February 1881



James T. Fields about 1870
Literary Friends and Acquaintance

life, and his square, resolute jaw, would give him almost a belligerent look, were it not for a peaceful and slightly preoccupied air about him, that indicates the man of letters, the author busy watching his own thoughts and classifying his impressions. His eye lights up at once on seeing us, and his smile at all times, especially at any stroke of wit or description of a comical situation, is one of such thorough enjoyment and sympathy that it is difficult not to stop and watch it as being in itself equal to a good conversation.

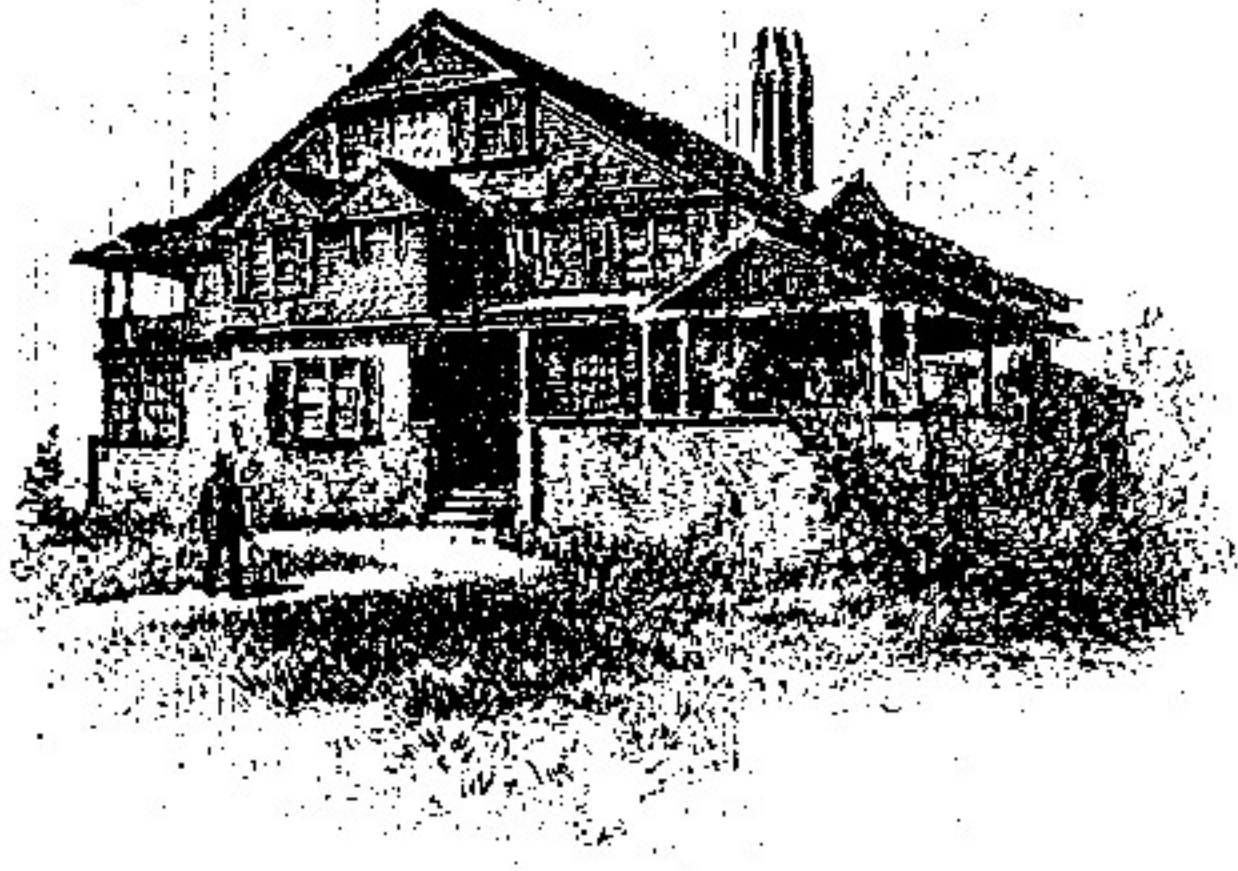
Possibly it is a knowledge of his Venetian residence and his various writings on Italy that leads us to fancy something Italian in the effect of his face, with its slight brown tint and joyous smile. Yet he could scarcely be taken for anything but an American. In spite of a sedentary and bookish life he shows the youthfulness, vigor and intensity which belong to the faces of Western men. While we are chatting his children come in, two girls and a boy, who seem to have free entrance to the study. The eldest, a daughter, fourteen or fifteen years old, already shows decided literary talent, and has published some of her poetry in the *St. Nicholas* magazine. They flit in and out as naturally as bees about the hive. Probably there are moments or hours when the key turns in the lock, and the author confines himself to the society of his imaginary men and women, but in general the children enter into their father's life very wholesomely and easily. This is always a good sign of the freshness of a man's heart.⁴ It is impossible to describe Mr. Howells's conversation.

⁴ Winifred Howells (1863-1889) was thirteen when her sonnet "The Deserted House" appeared in *St. Nicholas*, IV (1877), 572. In 1880, when this interview came out, Winifred was sixteen, her brother John was eleven, and Mildred, the youngest, was seven. Could the anonymous reporter have been speaking figuratively? There are no locks in the sliding doors of the Redtop library-study.

It is as light, facile and often as witty as his style in writing, but everything is said without effort to impress. There is no straining to keep up a reputation, as in the case of some literary men. It has been complained of that Mr. Howells does not put deep thoughts into his books, and avoids the seriousness of great passions. Sometimes the same thing may be noticed in his talk. Not by any means that he is frivolous, but he turns off serious discussion with a light foil of kindly cynicism or laughter. It is not the attitude of a man who does not think, but more like that of one who does not care always to think aloud. In general he reserves his deeper meditations for himself, as every one has a right to do. The plane on which he oftenest meets people is one of sensible, considerate, well-balanced reflection on life and books, enlivened by humor and averse to the tediousness of argument. In society, he is one of the most charming and profitable of talkers, but, strange as it may seem in a describer of contemporary life, he does not go much into society.

A nice piece it is — favorable to Howells and generally accurate — but, as it contained no description of Redtop and obviously did not qualify in any way as “wicked,” the search went on.

Another sketch of Howells during his Belmont residence turned up. Elinor Howells must have fancied it, since she pasted it on page forty-three of her scrapbook (also at the Houghton Library), identifying it



W. D. HOWELLS'S HOUSE AT BELMONT.

Redtop
Harper's, February 1881

as a clipping from the *New York Times*. This evidently corresponds to Eichelberger's item #123: "[Untitled.] *New York Times*, 24 Feb 1880, p. 4. Brief mention. A paragraph profile of Howells' appearance and manner."⁵ It begins: "A newspaper scribe has been visiting WILLIAM D. HOWELLS at his home near Boston, and cannot refrain from giving his impressions of the editor of the *Atlantic* to the public." After the first sentence, the *Times* editor has apparently rewritten the earlier *Tribune* piece. Both use the same material and outline, and in some places the wording is identical, while in other places phrases have been slightly changed: for instance, "he does not go much into society" (*Tribune*), as compared with "he goes little into society" (*Times*). In the last eight lines the *Times* editor has introduced biographical detail on Howells's family and early career in Ohio, though even with these additions at beginning and end, the *Times* story is less than half the length of that in the *Tribune*, the most significant difference being the quoted sentence.⁶ Unlike the previous one, the *Times* profile suggests that an interview had indeed taken place recently, and that the scene, "his home near Belmont," must have been Redtop. But there was still no description of the house, no mention of Fields, nor any sign of wickedness here. Quite the opposite, the anonymous reporters gave a warm account of Howells's appearance, personality, and conversation, and depicted him with understanding. Neither article gave any clue to the reasons for Fields's reassuring note to his successor at the *Atlantic*. Since more pressing research on Redtop took precedence at the time, however, any further thought of the "wicked interviewer" mentioned by Fields was abandoned.

Some months later, though, during a quest for manuscript letters of Elinor Mead Howells, the following unprinted note from W. D. Howells unexpectedly came to light, providing the missing piece of the puzzle and leading directly to the once-sought "wicked" interview.⁷

⁵ Clayton L. Eichelberger, *Published Comment on William Dean Howells through 1920: A Research Bibliography* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1976), p. 19.

⁶ Except for the meeting place of Will and Elinor, the *Times* is accurate. Actually, as Elinor had written to a Venetian friend in the early years of their marriage — and she ought to know — they had met in Columbus, Ohio, at the home of her cousin, Laura Platt (Mitchell). See Elinor Mead Howells to Miss Przemysl, 26 November 1865.

⁷ Two-page A.l.s. (Collection of William White Howells). I am greatly indebted to Professor Howells for calling to my attention this note from WDH written at Redtop, and for allowing me to publish it. I am grateful also for being permitted to quote from the letters of W. D. and Elinor Mead Howells cited in this essay. Republication of this and all manuscript material used here requires the same permissions.

Belmont, Jan. 20, 1880

Dear Mr. Fields:

Whoever interviewed me in the Boston Sunday Herald — and I have no idea *who* or *when* he was — did me no pleasure in his allusion to you. If the MS. of Venetian Life came to me as parts of it came to the Atlantic in your time, so blotched, illegible and repulsive in appearance, I should not trouble myself with it, and I have never resented its rejection. I have nothing but kindness to remember of you, and I am always

Affectionately yours
W D Howells.

Here was at last the very message that had prompted Fields's gracious reply of the next day. The exchange of notes was now complete.

And it left no doubt that the Boston *Sunday Herald* article — Howells's first interview — must contain additional inflammatory material and some disparaging allusion to Fields and his relationship with Howells. Would it have also information about his Belmont home? As the family plans called for departure the next day on a month's vacation in Europe that was to include, this time, visits to some favorite haunts of Will and Elinor in Italy and on the French Riviera, a hurried trip to the Boston Public Library produced the precious document on microfilm, from which a photoprint was obtained a few seconds before closing time.

Listed in the bibliographies only as the source of the New York *Tribune* profile, this *unsigned* "interview" turned out to be quite a piece of journalism. Unlike the two New York notices (both excerpted from it) which had suppressed any local details or allusions, it yielded not only the most complete and generally accurate description of Redtop on record, but it threw fascinating light also on the complex relationship between Howells and Fields and on the contemporary literary scene and atmosphere in and around Boston. And a sensationalistic piece it is, for what starts out as an innocuous and laudatory portrait of the popular author at his country retreat suddenly changes in tone and quickens in pace, degenerating into an insulting depreciation of Fields as editor and a bizarre speculation about editorial practice of the *Atlantic*. This scandalous article, which fully explains the previously unprinted exchange of notes between Howells and Fields about the "wicked interviewer," is reprinted here in its entirety for the first time since its appearance in the Boston *Sunday Herald* of 18 January 1880.⁸

⁸ This article is printed on p. 5, cols. 1 and 2. Since the one copy available, at the Boston Public Library, is slightly cropped in places, the few missing letters from the beginnings of lines in the first column have been supplied wherever possible.

HOWELLS AT HOME:

A Veritable Literary Retreat at
Belmont.

Domestic and Social Traits
of the Author.

His Habits and His Manner
of Doing Work.

The tendency of writers in England or France is toward London or Paris — toward the metropolis, the centre of things. In this country, outside of New England, there is a good deal of similar feeling about New York; but in New England our authors scatter in small cities or country places, to a larger extent. Witness Whittier at Newburyport and Danvers, Emerson and Thoreau at Concord, Higginson, formerly at Newport, Mark Twain and Warner at Hartford, Longfellow and Lowell at Cambridge. Even Cambridge has become too large, and its social distractions have grown too numerous to suit all tastes; and we find that Mr. Howells, who has spent most of his literary career there, and had built a house in the pretty university town, moving out to Belmont. At the latter place he has a veritable literary man's retreat. Approaching by the Fitchburg Railroad, we disembark where — as the writer himself remarks in one of his *Suburban Sketches* — it gurgles through a glen at the bottom of the hill. This is Wellington hill, one of the boldest heights in the chain of hills around Boston. To get to the top involves an unwonted climb even for people inured to the stubborn steeps of Beacon Hill, but the exertion is rewarded with a superb view over all the lower land, where Boston lies by the sea, with the surrounding towns. Arlington, Medford, Cambridge, Tufts College (which Dr. Holmes, in allusion to its prominence, once said he should expect to see the first thing on opening his eyes the morning after landing in Europe); all these are included in the panorama, with Charlestown and Brookline closing in the ends, and a strip of sea visible beyond the capital. The gilded State House dome, shining in golden silence with

A SORT OF REBUKE

to the silver (not to say leaden) speck frequently heard inside of it, glimmers through the haze. Boston itself, at this distance, is usually wrapped in more or less of scriptural smoke by day, which resolves itself into the fire of gas lamps by night. To watch the long line of the illuminated city at night, from Mr. Howells' broad windows, must be agreeably stimulating to the imagination. Getting up the steep hill by Concord Avenue, we can approach the house along the grounds of Charles Fairchild, Esq. (of S. D. Warren & Co.), by an irregular grassy path, or we can ascend from Arlington street by an arduous lane not far from the railroad. In either

case, we come to a moderate-sized house or cottage of odd appearance, which at the time it was built, about two years ago, was entirely unique, but has since been imitated. The lower story is of brick, with slightly ornamental courses, and the second of wood, entirely sheathed in California redwood shingles, except for certain posts and cornices painted very dark green. This circumstance, together with some association with a kind of grass abundant, I believe, in Ohio, whence Mr. Howells comes, has given the place an informal name — Redtop — which distinguishes it in a sufficiently practical way. The style of architecture, if it have any fixed style, is quaint, being a mixture of Queen Anne and Swiss chalet. I am not sure that I would not throw in the word Elizabethan, to make the thing complete, and allow a margin of American to cover any discrepancies. The design was furnished and the work supervised by a firm of New York architects, of which the sculptor Larkin Meade, Mr. Howells' brother-in-law, is a partner.⁹ The windows are large, and have a flat look about the top, though in good proportion, and one or two small ones of a different shape peep out in unexpected places. In summer, when vines run up over the brickwork, the affect is very pretty. The front door opens in halves, crosswise, or may be opened altogether. Applying at it, we are

ADMITTED TO THE INTERIOR.

Here is a spacious hall, having a floor of inlaid wood and heavy panelled wainscoting around the walls.¹⁰ The hall turns a corner and we then see a broad flight of stairs leading to the second story, with a stained-glass window letting in light upon the half-way landing. The stairs are uncarpeted, but, with their heavy-carved balustrade, produce an effect of even greater elegance than if covered with the work of the loom. The library, or study, into which we pass from here by a door on the left, is, as it should be, the most important room of the house. It is large, airy and extremely well lighted, the whole of the side formed by the house-wall being occupied by a window in three divisions. A second side and good part of a third are devoted to permanent book shelves, [built?] in a style conforming to that of the rest of the room. They are compactly filled with an ample library of plainly-bound volumes, forming, evidently, the collection of a man who reads his books. In one corner stands a simple, but well designed desk of light-colored wood, which the caller is very likely to find filled with manuscripts, books and memoranda, or — if he come upon the novelist at an unguarded moment — with a double heap

⁹ The New York architectural firm was McKim, Mead & Bigelow, at the time Redtop was built in 1877-78; by 1880, it had become McKim, Mead & White. However, the reporter erred in mentioning Larkin G. Mead, Jr., the noted sculptor, in connection with the Howells house in Belmont. The architect was the younger brother, William Rutherford Mead; he was McKim's partner and one of the architects of the house. The letters of Elinor to her brother concerning the construction of Redtop are in the W. R. Mead Papers at Amherst College.

¹⁰ The specifications of the contractor do not call for an inlaid floor in the hall. Could the interviewer have confused the floor with the elaborately designed ceiling? Except as noted above (n. 4), the remainder of the description of the house is remarkably accurate, and so perhaps the floor needs further investigation.

of small white pages, one blank, the other closely written in a fine, running hand. The white heap is destined to supply material for the written heap. In short, these form the substance and potentiality of some popular work of fiction not yet given to the public.

About opposite the table, on the other side of the room, is a large and very picturesque open fire-place of brick, with a broad hearth extending into the room, and with carved and corniced wood work covering the chimney and climbing up to meet the wood work of the ceiling. On one side of the fire-place, which is really placed in a sort of recess from the main part of the room, is a comfortable seat, a modern version of the old-fashioned settle, where one is able to enjoy the delights of the "ingleside," to which poverty and tradition give an agreeable warmth, as well as the blazing logs on the andirons. But even this is not the final charm of the unique apartment, for, on the same side with the fire-place, a glass door opens into what is called a "Hartford conservatory." By that is meant a small apartment protected by glass from the outer air, and filled in with earth nearly to the level of the adjoining rooms, so that plants and shrubs may be set in and grow at will. It affords a pleasant glimpse of greenery

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW

of the author's customary seat, even in the depth of winter. Lastly, it should be said, the ceiling is divided into compartments by flat beams that traverse it, and all the wood in the room, excepting the polished floor, is painted white, which gives it a bright, cheerful look. The reception room, opening from the conservatory on another side, is finished in California redwood again, thus bringing the warm coloring of the roof into the interior.

Mr. Howells is a very accessible man, as the phrase goes. He never assumes a lofty editorial demeanor, and he treats young and unknown writers with a simple cordiality and kindness that seldom miss appreciation, though now and then youthful heads may be turned by it. The simplicity of his manner sometimes leads self-confident people to imagine they can impose their plans and ideas upon him without much trouble. But, for all his good nature, he is a shrewd and careful business man in editorial matters, and these people soon discover their mistake. As he comes into the room, you notice that he is small of person, stooping slightly in the shoulders, but of pleasant presence. He wears his hair parted in the middle, as his photographs show him, but somehow one feels that this is merely a matter of convenience, and not a concession to the fashion which descended upon the heads of sundry feeble-minded youth of this country, 20 years ago, and is still known to influence their successors. His whole appearance and manner are perfectly free from affectation. His thick mustache, which now begins to feel the first frost of life, and his square resolute jaw, would give him almost a belligerent look, were it not for a peaceful and slightly preoccupied air about him, that indicates the man of letters, the author busy watching his own thoughts and classifying his impressions. His eye lights up at once on seeing us, and his smile at all times, especially at any stroke of wit or description of

is one of such thorough enjoyment and sympathy that it is difficult not to stop and watch it as being in itself equal to a good conversation. Possibly it is a knowledge of his Venetian residence and his various writings on Italy that leads us to fancy something Italian in the effect of his face, with its slight brown tint and joyous smile. Yet he could scarcely be taken for anything but an American. In spite of a sedentary and bookish life he shows the youthfulness, vigor and intensity which belong to the faces of western men. While we are chatting, his children come in, two girls and a boy, who seem to have free entrance to the study. The eldest, a daughter, 14 or 15 years old, already shows decided literary talent, and has published some of her poetry in the *St. Nicholas* magazine. They flit in and out as naturally as bees about the hive. Probably there are moments or hours when the key turns in the lock, and the author confines himself to the society of his imaginary men and women, but in general the children enter into their father's life very wholesomely and easily. This is always a good sign of the freshness of a man's heart. It is impossible to describe Mr. Howells' conversation. It is as light, facile and often as witty as his style in writing, but everything is said without effort to impress. There is no straining to keep up a reputation, as in the case of some literary men. It has been complained of that Mr. Howells does not put deep thoughts into his books, and avoids the seriousness of great passions. Sometimes the same thing may be noticed in his talk. Not by any means that he is frivolous, but he turns off serious discussion with a light foil of kindly cynicism or laughter. It is not the attitude of a man who does not think, but more like that of one who does not care always to think aloud. In general he reserves his deeper meditations for himself, as every one has a right to do. The plan on which he oftenest meets people is one of sensible, considerate, well-balanced reflection on life and books, enlivened by humor and averse to the

TEDIOUSNESS OF ARGUMENT.

In society, he is one of the most charming and profitable of talkers, but, strange as it may seem in a describer of contemporary life, he does not go much into society.¹¹ Being a member of that fortunate circle known as the Saturday club, he may occasionally be seen going into the Parker House at the times appointed for their meetings, and in Cambridge he was in constant demand at receptions and dinners; but his retirement at Belmont enables him to give more exclusive attention to his work. He is a most industrious writer. In addition to his novels, comedies and other dramatic writing, he has upon his hands the editorial management of the *Atlantic Monthly*, comprehending a large amount of detail which the general public hardly dreams of. The work of one number is not wholly done, when that of the next begins. Proof-reading, writing, business correspondence and book reviewing all go on uninterruptedly. There is a magnificent popular notion extant that the editor does not condescend to read any great number of manuscripts; but

¹¹ "Mr. Howells . . . society." This corresponds to the profile of the *New York Tribune*. The 77 line, 2 paragraph *New York Tribune* piece is evidently a small excerpt from the 445 line *Boston Sunday Herald* article, the only differences being in a few accidentals.

Mr. Howells is much too conscientious to gratify the holders of this theory by giving it a foundation of fact, and manuscript reading is added to his burdens. Moreover, he takes the minutest pains in writing to many contributors, or would-be contributors, about their work. To get through this mass of labor, steady application is indispensable. But, beside the results which become visible to all, there is a great deal of actual hard work in the composition of Mr. Howells's novels, which is never seen. He writes quickly, and the polish of his style is in it from the first: it is not applied with afterthought. But there is an inevitable proportion of work that, so far as the world sees, is lost. Hundreds of pages of a new book are sometimes written and then wholly discarded, as unsatisfactory to the author. In other cases, he has gone through careful readings with some new literary scheme in view, filling his mind with raw material, the statistics of fiction, as Thackeray used to do, and has afterward

GIVEN UP THE PROJECT.

This should not be attributed to fickleness. It is a thing inseparable from the artistic imagination, which must continually be building upon something, even if it be only an experiment.

In a quiet way, Mr. Howells has, of late years, made a fair success as a dramatist, and we are likely to see him make more. He now has in contemplation a drama on the story of Miles Standish (in which it has been incorrectly rumored that the poet Longfellow would collaborate with him) which, it is to be hoped, he will carry out.¹² He is probably capable of writing the most finished American plays of the time. And here it is worth while to note that, although he has written so much of Europe and has placed some of his stories there, Mr. Howells (unlike Henry James, Jr.) entertains a strong national spirit. Having but little time to occupy himself with politics, he is still deeply interested in the condition of the nation and the government. Applying this interest in literature, he believes that American writers should stay at home, and has great confidence in the sufficiency of native subjects for our novelists and dramatists.¹³ The habits of literary men, and the manner in which they do their work, are always matters of interest. Mr. Howells's habits are very simple, and the routine of his life is seldom interrupted. Notwithstanding the vast amount of labor accomplished by him, he takes but little exercise, and appears to have no desire for it, thus upsetting, so far as his example goes, the current theory as to what is necessary for sustaining a brain-worker's strength. He does a moderate amount of walking, but prefers driving to other modes of out-

¹² Lawrence Barrett (1838-1891), the actor-producer of Howells's *A Counterfeit Presentment* and *Yorick's Love*, had urged him to dramatize Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's "Miles Standish." On this embarrassing affair, see Howells's notes of 22 and 27 October 1879 to Longfellow, printed in *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*, ed. Mildred Howells (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, Doran & Co., 1928), I, 277-279 (hereafter referred to as *LinL*). Howells's two notes and Longfellow's two-line cordial reply of 8 November 1879 are also at the Houghton Library. According to Mildred Howells, Barrett's records show that he never acted in Howells's dramatization.

¹³ James had lived in London since 1876.

door diversion. With the exception of Bryant, our authors do not seem to exercise with much system, and perhaps our climate is not favorable to the development of athletic writers, like Sir Walter Scott, Christopher North and Dickens. Wordsworth carried his inspiration in his legs. Our poets confine it to the brain. Our prose writers do likewise, and perhaps the difference of habit explains the less muscular and more nervous quality of their imaginations. Mr. Howells does the bulk of

HIS MAGAZINE WORK

at home, in the delightful study already described, but is at the office of the publishers in Boston one day in every week, in the same way that George William Curtis arranges his work for the Harpers.¹⁴ In his own house the morning is almost invariably devoted to writing, the afternoon, and sometimes the evening, being reserved for editorial tasks, with, of course, some intermission for outdoor or other recreation. Though you may find him with pen in hand at almost any point in the three divisions of the day and night which form our waking time, he always stops and talks agreeably. He seems to have a fortunate faculty of mingling work and relaxation, in the latter of which the other members of his household share, with such skill that neither operates against the other. Perhaps something of this is due to the early formation of industrious habits while engaged, as a very young man, in the office of his father's newspaper in Ohio. At one time he was a compositor there, but, probably, also did some writing for the paper. The position of consul at Venice, which he held under Lincoln, and, after his marriage, also gave him opportunities for learning how to combine work and leisure. While the son has retired from consular service and entered the larger publicity of literature, Mr. Howells senior has reversed this order, and, after being for many years an editor in Ohio, was appointed United States consul at Quebec, where he now is.¹⁵

In recalling these associations of an eminent author with the press, it is pleasant to observe that the newspaper press first recognized Mr. Howell's genius, and gave him his earliest encouragement. When the volume on "Venetian Life," that began his fame, was ready, he offered it to the *Atlantic Monthly*, then edited by James T. Fields. Mr. Fields, who has a lively appreciation of genius after it has become rewarded,

REJECTED THE MANUSCRIPT.

It was then published in the columns of a Boston daily, under the guise of letters, and speedily made an audience for itself. But even after this the young author's difficulties were not over. So unpretending were the sterling qualities of his volume that the publishers who issued it in book form printed only

¹⁴ George W. Curtis (1824-1892), editor of *Harper's Weekly*, also wrote the "Editor's Easy Chair" in *Harper's Monthly*.

¹⁵ Actually, William Cooper Howells was then the U.S. Consul at Toronto where he had moved in June 1878, shortly before his son left Cambridge for Belmont; see *Selected Letters of W. D. Howells*, ed. and annotated by George Arms et al. (Boston: Twayne-Hall Publishers, 1979), II, 196, n. 5 and 200-202 (hereafter referred to as *SL*).

A MODERATE-SIZED EDITION

from type, which was immediately distributed. In a fortnight the whole 1500 copies had been sold, and the book had to be reset and stereotype plates made to supply the steady demand. From that moment reputation and prosperity were secured to Mr. Howells, and, in a very short time, the editor who had refused his book came in eager haste to engage him as an assistant on the magazine.¹⁶ Should Mr. Howells be in a confidential mood, at the moment of our attack on his privacy, he could reveal some very amazing and surprising correspondence which he has received during his own chief editorship in the past ten years. It is really to be regretted that choice specimens of this could not be given to the world, for the improvement as well as entertainment of mankind. If human nature could once see itself in the silly aspect under which it freely presents itself to a magazine editor's eyes, it would be startled at the disclosure of its own weakness, and the evolution of good sense might be expected to make rapid strides. A supplement to every number of the *Atlantic*, containing irate, sentimental or acidulated letters, growing out of the articles therein appearing, would doubtless be lively reading, and have a great sale, if we may believe those who know the inside history. But such documents are sacred, excepting when the contributor publishes them, as Mr. Linton, the engraver, did a few months ago, in a towering rage, and considerably to his own damage.¹⁷ So the blood-thirsty young man from Kentucky, who offers a poem of 2000 lines for as many dollars, and threatens "war to the knife" if it is not paid; and the maniac in Canada, who sends a string of rubbish, and, on receiving it back again, bids the editor beware, and threatens him with an awful, but mysterious retribution; also, the cultivated writer, who (as some of the best of them will) insists upon retaining misquotations, grammatical errors and misstatements of facts, which have been printed out in the proofs, and foams at the

¹⁶ For Fields's rejection of the manuscript of *Venetian Life*, see WDH to J. R. Lowell, 21 August 1864, *LinL*, I, 85; rpt. *SL*, I, 194. On the publication of the book, see Gibson-Arms, *Bibliography*, pp. 19-20. Much of *Venetian Life* initially appeared as separate "Letters from Venice" in the *Boston Advertiser*, from September 1863 to July 1864. The London firm N. Trübner & Co. printed 1,000 copies, and in June 1866 bound up 500 for sale under its imprint. WDH was obliged, under the terms of his contract with Trübner, to find an American publisher willing to take on the remainder, and was fortunate in gaining the cooperation of Hurd & Houghton, of New York (*SL*, I, 227, 228). They issued the book, with some corrected sheets, in August 1866, and followed with a newly set second edition in early 1867. Fields offered Howells the job of assistant at the *Atlantic* on 11 January 1866. Howells accepted the post on 6 February. I am indebted to David J. Nordloh, of Indiana University, for substantially contributing to this note.

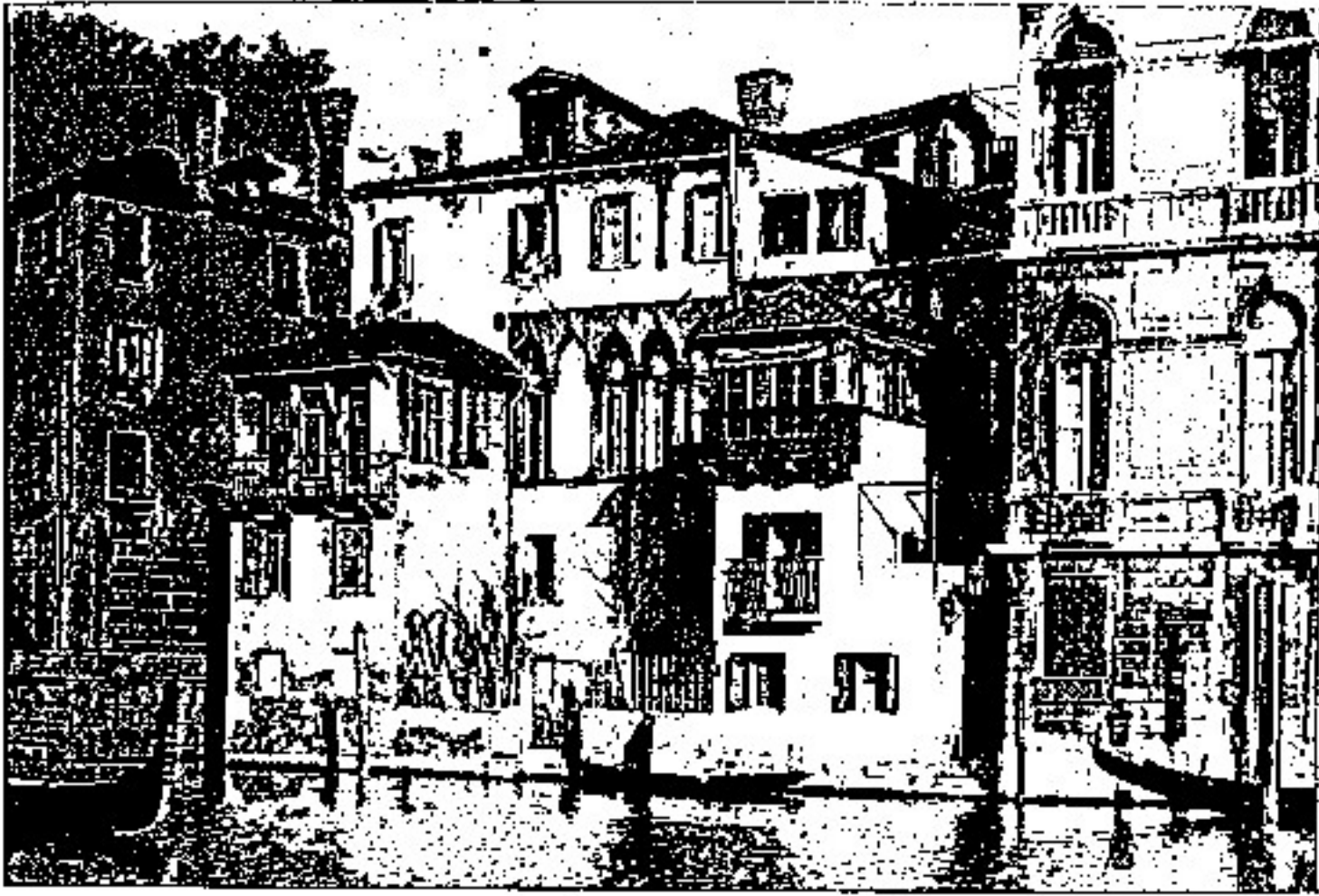
¹⁷ William J. Linton (1812-1897) engraver and author. Resenting alterations to proofs of his article in the *Atlantic*, he had published two letters from Howells in a pamphlet on editorial rights. See WDH to Charles Dudley Warner, 20 June 1879, *SL*, II, 229 and 230, n. 5. The other irate contributors listed here have not been identified. The anonymous "Contributors' Club" series on the relation of editors and contributors, though inside stories of magazine editing, have no bearing on this paragraph. The series appeared in the *Atlantic*, XLII (August-October, 1878), 238-250, 367-376, 497-510; see Ellen B. Ballou, *The Building of the House* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1970), pp. 212-213, 602.

mouth, or rather at the pen, when this insistence is disregarded; all these will go down to posterity or oblivion with their foibles unrecorded. One singular fact about these squabbles is the wonderful gentleness with which incensed authors meet the editor afterward. The whole trouble, in nine cases out of ten, passes off in ink, and is forgotten. The subject of this sketch is capable of as much determination and sharp reprimand as the most warlike of his contributors, but he is also willing to forget, and has no taste for quarrels. Suave, energetic, kindly and reasonable, he succeeds in holding his trying position with a very small percentage of enmity from others. On the whole, whatever preconceptions one may have about him from reading his books, no one is likely to be disappointed in Mr. Howells as a person. Naturally shy, though not outwardly so, he constantly improves upon acquaintance, and shows an inexhaustible fund of good humor. Like all genuine people, however gifted, he is himself even better than his writings.

This so-called interview raises a number of interesting questions. And in view of the general accuracy with which the interviewer described not only Redtop but also Howells — his difficulties in getting published and the *Atlantic* editors' tribulations — one wonders about the nature of the connections between Howells and Fields and the "wicked interviewer." What had motivated Howells's apologetic note to Fields, almost congratulating him on his refusal of *Venetian Life* for the *Atlantic*? "I have never resented its rejection. I have nothing but kindness to remember of you." Just how candid was Howells when he wrote this to Fields? Had things always gone smoothly between the two men? What *were* the facts about their relationship? From the first meeting with Fields in 1860, though it was somewhat marred by Howells's discovery of an egregious proofreading mistake in a poem of his that necessitated reprinting the signature of the *Atlantic* in which it had appeared, things had mostly gone pleasantly enough. When Howells prematurely offered himself as assistant editor of the *Atlantic*, Fields seemed genuinely to regret that an assistant had just been appointed;¹⁸ and less than six years later Howells accepted without much hesitation when Fields did ask him to fill that post. But when Fields succeeded Lowell as editor in the spring of 1861, he rejected all of Howells's contributions, except for one poem, including the Venetian sketches;¹⁹

¹⁸ *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, ed. David F. Hiatt and Edwin H. Cady (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), pp. 33-44 (on the mistake in "The Pilot's Story") and p. 60 (on the conversation about the assistant editorship).

¹⁹ "Louis LeBeau's Conversion" was accepted by the *Atlantic* between February and June 1862, but other poems were rejected (*SL*, I, 111, 112, 124-125). The Venetian sketches, rejected in a letter by Ticknor, were later printed in the *Boston Advertiser* (*SL*, I, 162-164).



Casa Falier, where Howells worked on *Venetian Life*
Literary Friends and Acquaintance

and as Howells recalled the *Atlantic* appointment, his experience as a practical printer was decisive: "Somewhere in life's feast the course of humble-pie must always come in; and if I did not wholly relish this bit of it, I dare say it was good for me, and I digested it perfectly."²⁰

Though the interviewer had his facts wrong about Fields's offering the assistant editorship after *Venetian Life* was published and about the size and circumstances of the "MODERATE-SIZED EDITION," he is right in saying that Fields "REJECTED THE MANUSCRIPT" for the *Atlantic* and comes close to being right in adding that Fields also refused the book.²¹ Yet Fields did publish a few parts of *Italian Journeys* in the magazine, on one occasion urged by Howells as written by "the most difficult gent to suit" among contributors, to which Fields nicely countered that Howells was "a man for us to look well after."²² Apparently the relationship between both the Fieldses and the Howellses was friendly and happy, with the Fieldses frequently entertaining the

²⁰ *Literary Friends and Acquaintance*, p. 97.

²¹ See note 16 on the time of the offer, the size of the edition, and the circumstances. Howells had hoped for book publication by Fields or at least for Fields to act as agent (*SL*, I, 224-225; *LinL*, I, 96-97).

²² *SL*, I, 279.

Howellses in town and inviting them to their country house in Manchester. As Howells recalled to Mrs. Fields for her 1881 memorial volume, "in all the years I was with him, I had nothing but delicate kindness from him."²³

Yet undoubtedly tensions developed between the junior and senior editors. A little before the exchange on the *Italian Journeys* papers, Howells had written to Norton: "I set the trap of my poem [possibly 'Forlorn'] for Mr. Fields, and temptingly baited it with your praise and Mr. Lowell's, but Mr. Fields after nibbling cautiously about it, refused to go in. I must say that the affair was managed beautifully on both sides, and I hardly know which to admire more: myself or Fields."²⁴ To rebuffs like these Howells perhaps was responding in his letter of 24 August 1869 when he admonished Fields, who was then in Europe: "I don't think it pays at all to take English stuff unless it's first chop: Minor Shows of London and Mrs. Lynton's paper are *not* first chop," though both of them were later printed.²⁵

Some of these contretemps may well have been on Howells's mind when he wrote his note of 20 January 1880. At least one other instance of his defense of Fields's reputation had occurred, when on 18 December 1874 Howells wrote a public letter to the editor of the *Boston Evening Transcript* to withdraw a "jesting allusion to Mr. Fields" that "took another color from what I meant it to have." At an *Atlantic* dinner Howells had been praised for rejecting his own contributions and in his response had added that though Lowell had accepted his first contributions, "Mr. Fields uniformly rejected everything he sent." In the letter he now commented, "I ought to have added that in the vastly greater number of cases, he was quite right in sending back my contributions."²⁶ Though a public letter, in effect this is a personal apology to Fields, just as his private letter of 20 January 1880 is. Yet even after Fields's health had begun to fail in May 1879 and after the January apology, Howells could reject a literary reminiscence by Fields on 12 August 1880: "I like the matter of this . . . but I think the manner of

²³ Quoted by James C. Austin, ed., *Fields of the Atlantic Monthly* (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1953), p. 163; see also Howells, "Recollections of an Atlantic Editorship," *Atlantic*, C (November 1907), 594.

²⁴ *SL*, I, 257. Actually, Howells had deeply resented those rejections. For expressions of his bitterness, see, for instance, *SL*, I, 86, 172-173, 187, 194-195, and 224.

²⁵ *SL*, I, 335.

²⁶ *SL*, II, 82-83.

it is against it — a little too daringly fancied.”²⁷ At the very least there was some uncasiness between the two men in their editorial relationship.

It was the “wicked interviewer” who raised the subject in 1880. Did the interviewer write out of personal animosity towards Fields? How could Howells not have known “*who* or *when*”? Would not Fields have guessed? And who was the interviewer — “he (or she?)” anyway?

In 1980, hastily copied at the last minute, the interview was sent to a Howellsian friend who almost certainly would not let it fall into oblivion again. And sure enough the author of this part — who had barely begun to relax on the sunny shore of the Riviera with nothing more in mind than deciding on the next restaurant or choosing the site of the next fossil hunting expedition in the Alps — received in the mail an enthusiastic response from her friend back home. He had immediately started to speculate on who had written the interview. After some general specifications (an intimate of Howells if not a friend, someone who knew the *Atlantic* well, someone who either disliked Fields or made an unfortunate faux-pas, someone who could turn out good newspaper copy), he produced a string of names, “a spur of the moment list,” he confessed: T. B. Aldrich, who had also worked for Fields as editor of *Every Saturday*; Sylvester Baxter, who was a reporter on the *Boston Herald* and whom later in the year Howells had sent to Hartford to interview Clemens and Warner; Louis Dyer, a young family friend, Greek instructor at Harvard — no newspaperman, though in October Howells did suggest him to Whitclaw Reid as a Boston correspondent for the *New York Tribune*; and G. P. Lathrop, assistant editor of the *Atlantic* under Howells from 1875 to 1877 and editor of the *Boston Sunday Courier* from 1877 to 1879: “an attractive candidate . . . as author. Very slick . . . A Bartley Hubbard type.” “Lots of possibilities,” he added cheerfully.

And so the search was on, and letters flew back and forth across the ocean, as new names were tossed into the hat and heatedly debated, each rooting for his own favorite suspect. This transatlantic dialogue came to an end when the vacationers returned, and the investigators pursued their search with renewed vigor from these shores. The following is their joint account of “the case of the ‘wicked interviewer.’ ”

²⁷ Austin, p. 162.

The "Wicked Interviewer"

George Arms and Ginette de B. Merrill

Between the two of us, we had put together quite a list of suspects, some of them too preposterous to be cited here. Of the more plausible ones, we dropped a couple: Aldrich liked fun of a more subtle sort; about Dyer we couldn't find very much, and besides, from a "thorough gentleman" (Harvard plus Balliol) even an unwitting deflation of Fields seemed unlikely. For a while Baxter looked promising. Probably he would soon help Howells with the newspaper background of *A Modern Instance* as he did later with that of *The Quality of Mercy*. Though it seemed odd that Howells would send him to interview Clemens and Warner less than five months after Baxter *might* have written on Howells with that awful slip, probably they had resumed easy terms and perhaps Howells was less upset than he pretended. At least Howells took the precaution of reading what Baxter wrote, though at Clemens's request.²⁸ But when we secured a copy of Baxter's "'Mark Twain.' Samuel L. Clemens' Home in Hartford," *Boston Sunday Herald*, 20 June 1880, Baxter had to be dropped from the list. No barb here, no crescendo, no fireworks. The whole thing is tame and unimaginative and flat. No wonder that Clemens complained to Howells: "Well, old practical joker, the corpse of Mr. B. has been here . . . A kind-hearted, well-meaning corpse was this Boston young man, but lawsy bless me, horribly dull company."²⁹

But with Baxter crossed out, a new entry took his place — Mark Twain himself. Clemens certainly had the newspaper background, could write in almost any style to suit the occasion, knew Howells better than anyone else outside the family and along with that something of his work in the *Atlantic* office. Since Clemens and Warner took the Boston train together on 2 December 1879, they might well have discussed Howells's move and the new house about which Susie Warner had raved to Livy in her letter opened by Clemens in Paris in April 1879.

²⁸ For Howells on Dyer, see *SL*, II, 269; for the letter to Baxter, see *SL*, II, 255.

²⁹ *Mark Twain-Howells Letters*, ed. Henry Nash Smith and William M. Gibson (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1960), I, 311 (hereafter referred to as *Twain-Howells*). Later, Baxter and Clemens became friends.



Thomas Bailey Aldrich
Literary Friends and Acquaintance



Sylvester Baxter
New England Magazine, 1898

They also would probably have talked about Howells's renewed invitation to speak at the Holmes breakfast (the acceptance of which Warner had urged), and this event would inevitably have recalled Clemens's "hideous mistake" of two years earlier at the Whittier birthday dinner, an event exhibiting his underlying antagonism to the Boston literary establishment. Though Fields had not appeared in the Whittier speech along with the half-drunk imposters who pretended to be Emerson, Longfellow, and Holmes, he was after all their publisher who had been faithful to them when he was rejecting the manuscripts of Clemens's friend, and the interview could have given him a chance to pay off that score too (Fields attended the Holmes breakfast though not the Whittier dinner), while at the same time Clemens extolled Howells as novelist, editor, and exemplary husband and father. "Had an awful good time at Belmont, but it was intolerably short," he had written on 9 December after his visit.³⁰ Part of his "good time" may well have meant his anticipation of what he planned to write within the next six weeks, which may have prompted in turn Howells's decision to send Baxter to Hartford for an interview, in effect saying that he had received the message a little earlier and now countered with this oblique reply.

³⁰ For the Holmes speech and the trip to Boston, see *Twain-Howells*, I, 282-285; and 259, for Susie Warner's letter to Livy. This was Mark Twain's first visit to Redtop, as the house was under construction when the Clemenses had left for Europe in April 1878.



Louis Dyer about 1882

Courtesy of Harvard University Archives



Mark Twain in 1874

By permission of W. W. Howells

As the two of us discussed this at Redtop in the fall, inspired perhaps by their "ghosts flitting . . . about [the] hearth fire" (Howells to Fairchild, 15 March 1883), we could easily imagine — even hear — their wild conversation and visualize Clemens ensconced in that part of the inglenook still called "Mark Twain's corner." All these intertwining circumstances persuaded one of us enthusiastically to proclaim Mark Twain the culprit, while the more skeptical partner patiently voiced some reservation, though admitting that the possibility was a fascinating one. After some debate, we finally agreed to turn to our second major suspect, George Parsons Lathrop.

Although Lathrop's well known "Literary and Social Boston" had appeared in *Harper's Monthly* in February 1881, a year later than the *Sunday Herald* interview, it had, given the lag in magazine appearances, been written less than six months after the earlier sketch. At first, it seemed to negate the possible common authorship of the two articles. Both are highly favorable to Howells, who indeed does receive top billing in *Harper's*, since a portrait of him heads the article, along with illustrations of the interior and exterior of Redtop. But James T. Fields's portrait also appears, though on the eleventh page, along with a picture of his study four pages later; and Fields is treated nearly as handsomely

as Howells, with an air of implied coziness between him and the author ("Mr. Fields also tells me"), and his acquaintance with British and American authors is celebrated ("the graceful hospitality" of Fields and his wife). On the Belmont house there are a couple of echoes of the earlier article, but so faint as to be inconclusive. The strongest common elements in the *Herald* and *Harper's* pieces are the truculent passages toward the end; the attack on Fields in the former matches the remarks on Boston clubs in the latter, especially the foreboding that "it is to be feared that a benumbing frost will creep into even the [recently formed] St. Botolph's house."

Such a breakout of hostility in an otherwise benign article (a little earlier in it Lathrop had written an ironic paragraph on upperclass Boston's snubbing of its artists) seemed telling enough to warrant examining Lathrop more closely. Best known today for his Hawthorne connection — he had married Hawthorne's daughter and was to edit the Riverside edition of her father's *Works* — by the early 1880s Lathrop (1851-1898) was well established as a man of letters.³¹ As already noted, from the *Atlantic* he had gone on to the editorship of the *Sunday Courier*; then he freelanced with success, went to Europe briefly in 1881, and two years after his return became the leader in copyright reform. Some of his associates liked him and some did not; perhaps all had occasion to be aggrieved by his low boiling-point outbursts. Howells was among these, for Lathrop, upon resigning from the *Atlantic*, had prepared the way by writing, among other complaints: "I have been disappointed in my relationship with The Atlantic since I became your assistant, because I have never been able to throw into the work the tremendous ardor wh. I felt about it. . . . I could not help feeling that in a good many ways there was a tendency to make me an outsider, a merely mechanical clerk. . . ." In spite of Lathrop's resignation in these terms, Howells seems not to have borne him ill will and continued to accept and even encourage contributions by him. He is one of the relatively few people whom Mrs. Howells introduced to her cousins the Hayeses when they were in the White House, writing to Mrs. Hayes on 31 March 1880, when the product of the "wicked interviewer" would have

³¹ The best biographical sketch is by Raymond Adams in the *Dictionary of American Biography*, which may be cautiously supplemented by Theodore Maynard, *A Fire Was Lighted: The Life of Rose Hawthorne Lathrop* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1948). Lathrop seems worthy of a book, and the source material is available, for more than four hundred letters are enumerated in *American Literary Manuscripts*, 2nd ed. (1977). The variety and importance of Lathrop's writings are indicated by entries 11416-11482 et seq. in the *Bibliography of American Literature*, V (1969), 326-339.

been still fresh in her mind: "M^r Lathrop has been with M^r Howells on the Atlantic, and is still a valued contributor. He will let me remind you that he is the son-in-law as well [as] biographer of Hawthorne, and I can safely leave the rest to him."³²

The outburst to Howells and other infelicities in letters are not unusual. On 12 February 1879, Lathrop wrote Edwin M. Bacon of the *Advertiser* inviting him to dinner at the Papyrus Club, mentioned incidentally in the *Harper's* article; so far so good, but Lathrop goes on to explain at length that he knows Bacon had an unpleasant experience at the club once, but that the member who caused it "never comes now, & the overpoweringly representative sentiment of the club was quite against the decision announced by an unfortunate vote."³³ Though Lathrop may have made the explanation in kindness, to remind an invited guest that he had been blackballed as a member is all too typical of him. The *Harper's* piece also led to a scathing Lathrop letter in the *Advertiser* on 5 February 1881. After defending himself against lesser criticism in the *Advertiser* itself and in the *Hartford Courant*, but with a vehemence hardly called for, he goes even further with a third critic:

Mr. Francis H. Underwood, it seems, does not possess the rudimentary knowledge of composition which would make this clear to him, if I may judge from the "open letter" with which I see he has favored me, at a slight economy in postage, but at a considerable expense to dignity and justice. He complains of my omitting or passing rapidly certain names; of my treating particular points too fully and others too meagrely; with all of which, since it is his individual opinion, it strikes me that the public is not deeply concerned. But his chief grievance is, that I have left him out. From his own account of his wide celebrity, one would suppose any mention by me quite needless; indeed, I am almost persuaded that had I taken the rôle of showman towards a person so eminent, he would have considered it an insolence on my part.

Everyone knew that Underwood was still brooding on being passed over by the *Atlantic*, which he was instrumental in founding, and that he had never quite "arrived";³⁴ and these remarks must have hurt, as Lathrop meant them to.

³² Lathrop to Howells, 4 July 1877 (*SL*, II, 214). On Lathrop's resignation, see the Howells-Lathrop correspondence at Harvard. For Lathrop's dealings with associates, see Ballou, pp. 215, 285. Mrs. Howells to Mrs. Hayes, 31 March [1880] (from the Lucy Webb Hayes Papers, The Rutherford B. Hayes Presidential Center, Fremont, Ohio), quoted by permission.

³³ Lathrop to Bacon, 12 February 1879 (private collection), quoted by permission.

³⁴ George F. Whicher in *DAB*. In a footnote to his letter of 9 February 1881 to Howells, E. C. Stedman had written of the *Atlantic* succession: "I suppose Lathrop & Underwood

Another example of Lathrop's ungraciousness appears in a letter to E. C. Stedman, who, although supporting him in his copyright reform efforts, had differed on some details. A letter of 17 February 1884 tries to patch up the difference, but ends with this postscript: "The fact that, in the course of my life, I have been forced into two painful public controversies undoubtedly gives you a chance for the sneer which you have thrown at me, but I never supposed until now that you would be willing to avail yourself of so ignoble a weapon." Still, a week later Lathrop gracefully apologized; and though there are other instances of petulance, he could write letters of undiluted friendliness. In one letter dated 11 August 1881 his thanks to Howells for his kind mention of *An Echo of Passion* in the August *Century* ended with this paragraph: "With remembrances from pleasant association on *The Atlantic*, that survive all recollection of little inevitable difficulties, & with hearty satisfaction at your many successes, I am / Faithfully & affectionately yours." Another such letter is a mild review of his literary activities, dated 29 August 1880, which by the way establishes a *Herald* connection in mentioning "2 or 3 full" reports of lectures that he had done "in B. Herald."³⁵ From the *Harper's* article and from various letters it was clear that Lathrop might have written the 1880 sketch of Howells in the *Herald*, but evidence for anything more than a possibility was lacking. And so Lathrop as prime suspect faded into the background.

It looked then as if it were time to reinspect the still dormant theory of Mark Twain's authorship. Since there is no notebook for the period between September 1879 and 26 July 1880 (in itself a telling circumstance?), we looked at the Howells-Twain letters again. Though Clemens thought he had finished *A Tramp Abroad*, which Howells was reading

are *bors concours!* They both, certainly are *bors de combat.*" A pathetic letter to T. W. Higginson, 20 February 1881, explains that Lathrop's vacillation in allowing the letter to be published resulted from the illness of his son shortly before the boy's death. Underwood's criticism has not been located, which is a pity, since James called it "a most precious American document"; see Leon Edel, ed., *Henry James Letters* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975), II, 350. Also unlocated is the review that Lathrop could be expected to have written on James's *Hawthorne*. For disparaging remarks on Lathrop, see *Henry James Letters*, II, 255 and 274-275 ("Poor little Lathrop ought to be [spanked] and put to bed, and forbidden the use of pen and ink."). J. Fraser Cocks, III, of Colby College, has kindly examined the manuscript and thinks that the substitution of "[spanked]" for Edel's "[tear]" is justified.

³⁵ Lathrop to Stedman, 17 February 1884 (Edmund C. Stedman Papers, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University), quoted by permission; and Lathrop to a Mr. Jenks, 29 August 1880 (Department of Rare Books and Manuscripts, Boston Public Library), by courtesy of the Trustees of the Boston Public Library.

in proof, on 23 November 1879, he was still working on "this infernal book" up until his letter of 8 January, which reported that he had given the last of the manuscript to Bliss. On the same day he was leaving for Elmira, where in relaxation after his trials with *A Tramp* he conceivably could have dashed off the interview that praised Howells so much but only at the expense of Fields. In spite of his good time at Belmont, he had heatedly reproved the telegraph girl at the station for her "insolent neglect" and almost caused her dismissal. In the *Hartford Courant* on the day he wrote Howells, he had blasted the secretary of the Postmaster General and in the process printed that secretary's letter in a fashion reminiscent of the engraver Linton's publication of Howells's letters to which the interview referred. Rebuking the telegraph girl and rebuking the secretary — along with the strain of rehabilitating himself at the Holmes breakfast — suggest that Clemens had his Lathropish moments. And then on 24 January, less than a week after the *Herald* piece appeared, Clemens's letter to Howells starts, "Say — are you dead again?" and encloses an unidentified contribution which Twain "didn't dare sign . . . the histories are too thinly disguised."³⁶ Are these two remarks thinly veiled allusions to Twain's friendly wickedness, or are they merely coincidental?

Just as we were pondering this, a delayed photocopy of an 1885 article that we had been trying to obtain arrived, putting an end (alas!) to our wild speculations about Mark Twain. Though it has less impact than the 1880 interview and need not be reprinted here, it is a pleasant sketch of Howells that the author thought well enough of to place the notice "Copyright, 1885" at the top when it appeared in the *New York Tribune* on 8 November. "W. D. Howells. His Career and His Home" finds the novelist now on Beacon Street, with his *Atlantic* editorship in the past, but it recalls his earlier Cambridge and Belmont houses as well as his earlier career. Strikingly enough it contains about twenty derivations from the 1880 interview, with also a similarity in tone. The conclusion, all but legally certain, is that the same author drew upon his previous work, for the alternative of a later author plagiarizing from it is remote, and a half-dozen parallels will establish the case of common authorship. In 1880 the shingles "together with some association with a kind of grass abundant, I believe, in Ohio, whence Mr. Howells comes, has given the place an informal name — Redtop," and in 1885 the house is "called Redtop: partly from the prevalence there of a kind

³⁶ *Twain-Howells*, I, 284-289. Howells asked for a revision and signature: "This sketch as it stands, is not good enough to go without your name, and your name is too good for it."



George Parsons Lathrop

Bookman, 1896

of grass familiar in Ohio under the name of 'red-top' " and partly from the shingles. In both 1880 and 1885, "Larkin Meade" is spelled with a final "c." In 1880 there was "something Italian in the effect of [Howells's] face, with its slight brown tint," while in 1885 "A slight tinge of brown on his otherwise colorless face suggests something Italian about him." In 1880 the children "flit in and out as naturally as bees about the hive," and in 1885 they "came into the study at will and ran out again, like bees around a hive." Finally the same mistakes are made about *Venetian Life* in almost the same words:

1880

A MODERATE-SIZED EDITION from type, which was immediately distributed. In a fortnight the whole 1500 copies had been sold, and the book had to be reset and stereotype plates made to supply the steady demand.

in a very short time, the editor who had refused his book came in eager haste to engage him as an assistant on the magazine.

1885

an edition of 1,500 copies from type, which was then distributed. In a fortnight every copy was sold, and plates had to be made for a new edition.

The success was so marked that Mr. J. T. Fields at once discovered in his rejected contributor a valuable ally, and engaged him to become assistant editor of *The Atlantic*.

The case of the "wicked interviewer" thus became solved, and the suspect positively identified, because the 1885 article (copyrighted, as noted before) at its conclusion was signed "GEORGE PARSONS LATHROP."

EPILOGUE

While Howells may have known "who" had written the 1880 *Herald* piece, he could not very well have told Fields. As to "when" the interview had taken place, he was rightly puzzled, since no formal interview as such ever occurred in Belmont, as the 1885 article makes clear. In this article, which follows Howells through "the various houses he had occupied," Lathrop recalls their conversations "when we were in Cambridge together." He specifies also that the Belmont house was "the third house in which [he] saw Mr. Howells at home." So the so-called Belmont interview was not a single interview at all, and never took place in Belmont. It was based instead on a long acquaintance between Howells and Lathrop, especially at Cambridge where they were neighbors, and where, as assistant editor of the *Atlantic*, Lathrop had constant access to Howells and his family.

Lathrop joins a distinguished group as candidate for the prototype of Bartley Hubbard in *A Modern Instance*: Clemens (by his own claim), Harte (the honor thrust upon him), and Howells (in retrospective confession). Sharing with at least some of them marital problems and over-indulgence in drink or venom, Lathrop also qualifies best for being "a city newspaper man," who was to be hero of the novel, as Howells wrote his father from Belmont (*SL*, II, 296). But that is a harder case to wrap up.

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