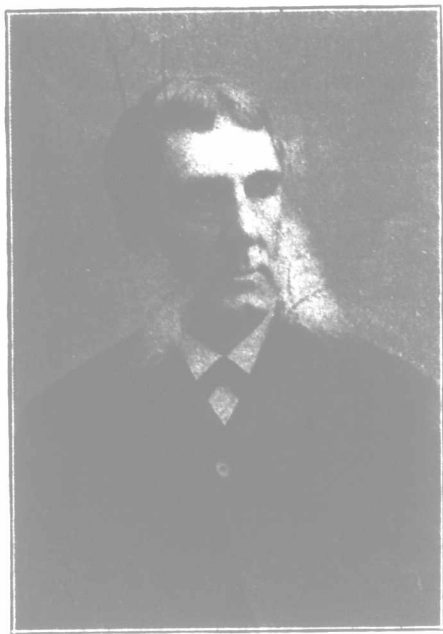


Little Trips Among the Eminent.



George William Curtis.
(1824 - 1892.)

An account of the New England writers would not be complete without mention of George William Curtis, essayist, editor and lecturer, some of whose books have been deservedly given place among America's classics.

He was born at Providence, Rhode Island, in 1824, and grew up, in point of both time and place, in an atmosphere which could scarcely fail to make a literary man of anyone with a bent towards literary art and scholarship. He it was, it will be remembered, who, with Alcott and Hosmer, helped Thoreau to build his famous hut at Walden. He was, moreover, a fervent admirer of Emerson, and was one of the habitués of the famous Literary Clubs and "Evenings" of the famous New England literary circle. He was also one of the party of idealistic men and women who essayed the socialistic experiment at Brook Farm.

In 1846 he went to Europe, where he remained for four years, returning to New York in 1850 to join the staff of the New York Tribune. He was also editor, for a time, of Putnam's Monthly, and leader-writer for Harper's Monthly, in which were published his "Editor's Easy Chair" papers, since collected into book form.

His famous story of New York life, "Trumps," appeared in 1862. Other works are the delightful and well-known "Prue and I," "Notes of a Howadji," and "The Howadji in Syria,"—entertaining accounts of a trip through the East; "Lotus-eating," a series of letters written from fashionable watering-places; and the caustic and entertaining "Potiphar Papers"—a satire on the pretentious life of New York of that day.

Mr. Curtis also lectured from time to time, and Major Pond, the manager and agent for so many of the famous men who were wont to lecture in the old Lyceum days, has told us (in his gossipy book, "The Eccentricities of Genius") of the enthusiasm always aroused by this quiet, handsome, dignified man, whose fine face and bearing gave an additional charm to the entertaining and perspicacious addresses which he invariably gave.

Mr. Curtis died in 1892.

TITBOTTOM'S SPECTACLES.

[From "Prue and I," by George William Curtis. Old Titbottom, the under bookkeeper, tells of the magical spectacles bequeathed to him by his grandfather, which enabled him to see people not as they seem, but as they are.]

"The revelations of the spectacles determined my feeling for the boys, and for all whom I saw through them. No shyness, nor awkwardness, nor silence, could separate me from those who looked lovely as lilies to my illuminated eyes. But the vision made me afraid. If I felt myself warmly drawn to anyone, I struggled with the fierce desire of seeing him through the spectacles, for I feared to find him something else than I fancied. I longed to enjoy the luxury of ignorant feeling, to love without knowing, to float like a leaf upon the eddies of life, drifted now to a sunny point, now to a solemn shade—now over glittering ripples, now over gleaming calms—and not to determined ports, a trim vessel with an inexorable rudder.

"But sometimes, mastered after long struggles, as if the unavoidable condition of owning the spectacles were using them, I seized them and sauntered into the little town. Putting them to my eyes, I peered into the houses and at the people who passed me. Here sat a family at breakfast, and I stood at the window looking in. O motley meal! fantastic vision! The good mother saw her lord sitting opposite, a grave, respectable being, eating muffins. But I saw only a bank-bill, more or less crumpled and tattered, marked with a larger or lesser figure. If a sharp wind blew suddenly, I saw it tremble and flutter; it was thin, flat, impalpable. I removed my glasses and looked with my eyes at the wife. I could have smiled to see the humid tenderness with which she regarded her strange vis-a-vis. Is life only a game of blindman's buff? of droll cross-purposes?

"In many houses I thought to see angels, nymphs, or, at least, women, and could only find broomsticks, mops, or kettles, hurrying about, rattling and tinkling, in a state of shrill activity. I made calls upon elegant ladies, and after I had enjoyed the gloss of silk and the delicacy of lace, and the glitter of jewels, I slipped on my spectacles, and saw a peacock's feather, flounced, and furbelowed, and fluttering; or an iron rod, thin, sharp, and hard; nor could I possibly mistake the movement of the drapery for any flexibility of the thing draped.

"Or, mysteriously chilled, I saw a statue of perfect form, or flowing movement, it might be alabaster, or bronze, or marble—but sadly often it was ice; and I knew that after it had shone a little, and frozen a few eyes with its despairing perfection, it could not be put away in the niches of palaces for ornament and proud family tradition, like the alabaster, or bronze, or marble statues, but would melt and shrink, and fall coldly away in colorless and useless water, be absorbed in the earth and utterly forgotten.

"But the true sadness was rather in seeing those who, not having the spectacles, thought that the iron rod was flexible, and the ice statue warm. I saw many a gallant heart, which seemed to me brave and loyal as the Crusaders pursuing through days and nights, and a long life of devo-

tion, the hope of lighting at least a smile in the cold eyes, if not a fire in the icy heart. I watched the earnest, enthusiastic sacrifice. I saw the pure resolve, the generous faith, the fine scorn of doubt, the impatience of suspicion. I watched the grace, the ardor, the glory of devotion. Through those strange spectacles how often I saw the noblest heart renouncing all other hope, all other ambition, all other life, than the possible love of some one of those statues.

"I mingled with men, but with little pleasure. There are but many varieties of a few types. I did not find those I came to clearer-sighted than those I had left behind. I heard men called shrewd and wise, and report said they were highly intelligent and successful. My finest sense detected no aroma of purity and principle; but I saw only a fungus that had fattened and spread in a night. They went to the theatres to see actors upon the stage. I went to see actors in the boxes, so consummately cunning that others did not know they were acting, and they did not suspect it themselves.

"Perhaps you wonder it did not make me misanthropical. My dear friends, do not forget that I had seen myself. That made me compassionate, not cynical.

"Of course, I could not value highly the ordinary standards of success and excellence. When I went to church and saw a thin, blue, artificial flower, or a great sleepy cushion expounding the beauty of holiness to pews full of eagles, half eagles, and three-pences, however adroitly concealed they might be in broadcloth and boots; or saw an onion in an Easter bonnet weeping over the sins of Magdalen, I did not feel as they felt who saw in all this not only propriety, but piety.

"Or, when at public meetings, an eel stood up on end, and wriggled and squirmed lithely in every direction, and declared that, for his part, he went in for rainbows and hot water—how could I help seeing that he was still black, and loved a slimy pool?

"I could not grow misanthropical when I saw in the eyes of so many who were called old the gushing fountains of eternal youth and the light of an immortal dawn, or when I saw those who were esteemed unsuccessful and aimless ruling a fair realm of peace and plenty, either in their own hearts or in another's—a realm and princely possession for which they had well renounced a hopeless search and a belated triumph.

"I knew one man who had been for years a by-word for having sought the philosopher's stone. But I looked at him through the spectacles and saw a satisfaction in concentrated energies, and a tenacity arising from devotion to a noble dream, which was not apparent in the youths who pitied him in the aimless effeminacy of clubs, nor in the clever gentlemen who cracked their thin jokes upon him over a gossiping dinner.

"And there was your neighbor over the way, who passes for a woman who has failed in her career, because she is an old maid. People wag solemn heads of pity, and say that she made so great a mistake in not marrying the brilliant and famous man who was for long years her suitor. It is clear that no orange flower will ever bloom for her. The young people make their tender re-

mances about her as they watch her, and think of her solitary hours of bitter regret and wasting longing, never to be satisfied.

"When I first came to town, I shared this sympathy, and pleased my imagination with fancying her hard struggle with the conviction that she had lost all that made life beautiful. I supposed that if I had looked at her through my spectacles I should see that it was only her radiant temper which so illuminated her dress that we did not see it to be heavy sables.

"But when, one day, I did raise my glasses, and glanced at her, I did not see the old maid whom we all pitied for a secret sorrow, but a woman whose nature was a tropic, in which the sun shone, and birds sang, and flowers bloomed forever. There were no regrets, no doubts and half-wishes, but a calm sweetness, a transparent peace. I saw her blush when that old lover passed by, or paused to speak to her, but it was only the sign of delicate feminine consciousness. She knew his love, and honored it, although she could not return it. I looked closely at her, and I saw that although all the world had exclaimed at her indifference to such homage, and had declared it was astonishing she should lose so fine a match, she would only say, simply and quietly:

"If Shakespeare loved me, and I did not love him, how could I marry him?"

"Could I be misanthropical when I saw such fidelity, and dignity, and simplicity?"

I do not believe you will be surprised that I have been content to remain a deputy bookkeeper. My spectacles regulated my ambition, and I early learned that there were better gods than Pentus. The glasses have lost much of their fascination now, and I do not often use them. But sometimes the desire is irresistible. Whenever I am greatly interested, I am compelled to take them out and see what it is that I admire.

"And yet—and yet," said Titbottom, after a pause, "I am not sure that I thank my grandfather."

A Christmas Carol.

It chanced upon the merry, merry Christmas Eve

I went sighing past the church, across the moorland dreary.

"Oh" never sin and want and woe this earth will leave,

And the bells but mock the wailing round, they sing so cheery.

How long, O Lord, how long before Thou come again?

Still in cellar, and in garret, and on moorland dreary

The orphans moan, the widows weep, and poor men toil in vain,

Till the earth is sick of hope deferred, though Christmas bells be cheery."

Then arose a joyous clamor from the wild fowl on the mere,

Beneath the stars, across the snow, like clear bells ringing,

'Till a voice within cried: "Listen!—Christmas carols even here!"

Though thou be dumb, yet o'er their work the stars and snows are singing.

Blind 'I live, I love, I reign; and all the nations through

With the thunder of my judgments even now are ringing;

Be thou faithful thy work but as you wilt fowl do.

Thou wilt heed no less the wailing, yet hear through it angels' singing."