

ROUND THE TABLE.

In *Harper's Monthly* for last December it was announced that the management had concluded an arrangement with Howells, by which "all his new writings,—his novels, short stories, descriptive sketches, and dramatic pieces—would be exclusively at their disposal;" and with the January number he began his charming literary talks in the *Editor's Study*. It will soon be a year since this arrangement came into force; and he has not yet stepped out from the *Editor's Study*. It may be that like G. W. Curtis, with whom the Harper's made a similar arrangement some years before, which is to be regretted in that though his conversations from his *Easy Chair* are never less delightful than we may expect from the author of *Prue and I*, he has foregone the writing of books,—Howells, too, prefers to loiter in his study in slippers ease. But one would judge that his habits of life are altogether different.

"Lemuel Barker,"—for the publication of which in the *Century* arrangements had been made before the time of his contract with the Harper's,—is nearing the conclusion; and still the opening chapters of a new novel have not yet appeared in *Harper's*. This is not in accordance with Howells' wont. His talk in the *Study* cost him little more than the mere taking up of his pen from month to month; his literary friends, I am sure, have the pleasure of hearing many unprinted pages. He has always been an untiring brain-worker; what then is he doing now? You will remember that there was a rumour a long time ago that a drama written by himself and Mark Twain, had been found unfitted for the stage.

(This, you may be sure, taking it for granted that the rumour was not all a lie, was due to Howells' discriminating artistic sense of unattainment, and not to the strictures of the managerial mind, which, after original and startling scenic effects, regards the box-office as the adjunct of the drama which has the finest possibilities. From the point of view of the advance agent, turning reluctantly from a grand inspiring Pisgah-sight of HOWELLS and MARK TWAIN on play-bills and posters all over the continent, their withdrawal of the drama must have seemed sheer, disgusting imbecility.)

You will remember, too, what was said of the American theatre in a conversation between Evans and Sewell in *Lemuel Barker*. It is likely, then, that—

"I, bearing in mind all these things," said the ingenious man, taking the pipe from his mouth, "and in addition thereto the fact Wiggins, of Ottawa, has met with indifferent success as a prophet, do hereby venture so far as to predict,—smiting with my fist the table in THE VARSITY sanctum, on this the ninth day of November, at eleven minutes to one in the morning,—that Howells is going to do something big at the drama some of these days. Give me a match, I prithee, good me lord, that I may light me pipe again withal."

This was how we talked round the Table a month ago. We thought it best, however, to allow Howells more time, and we are pleased to see that in this month's *Harper's* a comedy of his appears, and, moreover, the announcement is made that in the number for February he will begin a new novel. I may mention in this connection that within the past month two letters were printed in THE VARSITY, with the heading "A Street Wanted." The City Council has posted placards along St. George street announcing that the new street is to be opened at once. We begin to perceive that we have weight. Our feelings are like those of the editor of the two-sheet paper in the country town who came in on a dead-head ticket to see a company of barnstormers act *Richelieu* in the town-hall. At the words,

"The pen is mightier than the sword," he arose and removed his hat. Or as Artemus Ward reports the meeting in Baldinsville—

"I am identified, young man, with a Arkymedian leaver which moves the world," said the Editor, wiping his auburn brow with his left coat tail. "I allude, young man, to the press. Terms, two dollars a year, invariably in advance. Job printing executed with neatness and dispatch!" And with this brilliant burst of elekanee the editor introduced Mr. J. Brutus Hinkins, who is sufferin' from an attack of College in a naberin' place."

Do we not sometimes miscall novelty progress? Whether progressive or not, there is something very attractive in ideas that point to a revolution in society. The majestic sweep of the new tide of thought, (looking merely at its deductions without scanning too closely its hypothetical foundations) carries us away with enthusiasm, and we forget how to reason patiently. It is tame and insipid in comparison to laboriously examine the old, to detect its

kernel of truth. For such core even the most barbarous of polities assuredly had. No society can be based upon a lie. But when in the course of time the civil constitution becomes untrue and therefore unjust, it cannot persist. For then men's minds begin to run wild and riot to the tune of the French Revolution. Such was the lesson of that upheaval, and so sharp, that repetition must be unnecessary.

While thus much may perhaps be sufficient to indicate the general attractiveness of communistic theories, it must be supplemented in the case of those educated visitors to the old world who return imbued therewith. Anarchism, indeed, may be left out of view, for such form of thought can be forgiven the educated man only on the plea of dyspeptic pessimism.

But our friend, who has a natural bent for social investigations spends a few months in Paris where he examines the proletariat at close quarters. The misery and hopeless degradation of the lowest class appeals to his sensibility, and he seems to pay all demands in full (without much self sacrifice it is true) when he rushes to embrace the proletariat, and in the fulness of his feeling exclaims, "Brother, I too am of the *commune*; my heart bleeds for you." On his return we naturally ask about the great Redflagged. With a knowing nod of the head, and in mysterious tones, the reply will be, "Well! I think there's something in it." Perhaps there is the least spice of vanity in his dilettante socialism. It is so picturesque to hint darkly that one has advanced views on social questions. I would not like to say that this picturesqueness is the motive that prompts the profession; but it is pleasing to know that there is this compensation.

If there is one word that a first year student comes to have a positive dislike for it is *freshman*, until the period of his trial is over, and he obtains the footing of an all-wise sophomore, his seniors never lose an opportunity of informing him that he is fresh. This epithet dates back to a time when salt was actually administered to new students by their considerate elders, for salt was a classical emblem of learning and wisdom. Here follows an extract describing how a freshman was qualified at old English colleges.

"On this important occasion the freshmen were obliged to doff their gowns and bands, and look as much like scoundrels as possible; after which they mounted a form that was placed upon a table, and declaimed to the grinning and shouting students below. In the meantime a huge brazen pot of caudle was bubbling on the fire before them, to refresh such of the orators as had recited their speeches gracefully; but those who had acquitted themselves indifferently had their caudle qualified with salt; while those who declaimed very ill were drenched with salted beer, and subjected to sharp admonishment by pinches on the chin from the thumb-nails of the seniors."—*Knight, History of England*.

How different all this from the mild treatment in our college of the few luckless wights that have incurred the great displeasure of their seniors. Called before ye mufti, they have counsel graciously allowed them, who spare no quirks of student law to get them off. Ye chariot of the sun, from long disuse has its lustre dimmed, for none but the gravest offences are now visited with aught but reprimand and humiliation. This year, I am informed, no one of the accused was forced to tread the mystic dance to clear himself from the taint of freshdom by that trying ordeal.

A friend of mine has written to me an account of a letter by Keats, which was sold with the Osgood collection in New York last winter. The handwriting is small, and on one quarto leaf. The first page has some lines scratched out at the top, and beneath them "Oxf—" and "My dear friends." The reverse page contains the address, "Miss Reynolds, Mrs. Earle's, Little Hampton, Sussex," in the middle of the page; at the bottom are eight lines, and at the top nine lines, signed "Yours truly, John Keats." There is a postmark "1817," and a clearly impressed seal of a classical head, slightly broken. The letter is curious:

".....But let us refresh ourselves from this depth of thinking and turn to some innocent jocularity, the Bow cannot always be bent, nor the gun always loaded if you ever let it off..... There you are among sands, stocks, stones, pebbles, beaches, cliffs, rocks, deeps, shallows, weeds, ships, boats (at a distance), carrots, turnips, sun, moon, and stars, and all these sort of things—here am I among colleges, halls, stalls, plenty of trees, thank God—plenty of water, thank heaven—plenty of books; thank the Muses—plenty of snuff, thank Sir Walter Raleigh—plenty of segars, ditto—plenty of flat country, thank Tellus's rolling pin."

"In Lord Houghton's life of Keats," said the ingenious man, "we read of how the poet once scorched his epiglottis with red pepper, to enjoy the delightful sensation of cooling it with claret. It's a pity he did not know enough to fill up on claret some night,—he'd have had a thirst next morning that he wouldn't sell for fifty dollars."

Then Spinx said: "That's a great scheme, but it's nothing!"