

EARLY DAYS OF "THE ATLANTIC MONTHLY."

FORTY years ago the Boston publisher, Phillips, with the assistance of that famous coterie of American writers that included Longfellow, Lowell, Emerson, Whittier, Holmes, Motley, Quincy, Parker, Cabot, and Underwood, launched *The Atlantic Monthly*. In its issue for October *The Atlantic* commemorates the event with a particularly brilliant array of talent and a sketch of its own career. Ten of the fourteen contributors to the first number, we are told, were Motley, Longfellow, Charles Eliot Norton, Emerson, Holmes, Whittier, Mrs. Stowe, Trowbridge, Lowell, and Parke Godwin. It was Holmes who named the magazine, and it was he, probably, more than any other, who assured its success. He figures largely, of course, in the reminiscences of those days, as will be seen from the following extracts from the sketch:

"All the articles were unsigned, and it is no wonder that every one asked himself and his neighbor who this Autocrat might be with his off-hand introduction, 'I was just going to say, when I was interrupted'; for there could not have been one reader in a thousand who recalled that in the old New England magazine for 1831 and 1832 there were two papers of an Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table by a young student of medicine; and the whimsicality of going on after an interruption of twenty-five years would have puzzled even the knowing ones of a generation which had not yet learned the Autocrat's habit of thought. . . .

"In 1857 there were not wanting those who were on a keen lookout for the twinklings of heterodoxy in matters of religious belief. Of the very first number one of the sectarian papers published in Boston said: 'We shall observe the progress of the work, not without solicitude.' Their watchfulness was soon rewarded in a measure, for of the third number they declared: 'The only objectionable article is one by Emerson on 'Books,' in which the sage of Concord shows his customary disregard of the religious opinions of others and of the fundamental laws of social morality.' . . .

"In a letter written to Motley in 1861, he [Dr. Holmes] exclaimed, *a propos* of *The Atlantic*, 'But, oh! such a belaboring as I have had from the so-called 'evangelical' press for the last two or three years, almost without intermission! There must be a great deal of weakness and rottenness when such extreme bitterness is called out by such a good-natured person as I can claim to be in print.' Even the *New York Independent*, which was printing every week the sermons of Henry Ward Beecher, said of 'The Professor at the Breakfast-Table' when it appeared as a book, 'We presume that we do but speak the general conviction, as it certainly is our own, when we say that that which was to have been apprehended has not been avoided, by the "Professor," but has been painfully realized in his new series of utterances. He has dashed at many things which he does not understand, has succeeded in irritating and repelling from the magazine many who had formerly read it with pleasure, and has neither equaled the spirit and vigorous vivacity nor maintained the reputation shown and acquired by the preceding papers.'

"Writing of these papers nearly twenty-five years after their first publication, Dr. Holmes himself said: 'It amuses me to look back on some of the attacks they called forth. Opinions which do not excite the faintest show of temper at this time from those who do not accept them were treated as if they were the utterances of a Nihilist incendiary. It required the exercise of some forbearance not to recriminate.'"

The sketch of *The Atlantic's* forty years of existence closes

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with the following comparison of literature in America then and now :

"We sometimes hear that the day of a high literary standard and of definite literary aims is past. Yet fair comparison of the literary work done in the United States to-day with the work that was going on in 1857 will show that there has been no real decline, except in poetry. In fiction, if Hawthorne be set aside (as it is fair to set aside any great genius) there is much more work done now of the grade next to the very highest than was done forty years ago; in history there has been as great an improvement in style as there has come a wider and surer grasp in these days of fuller knowledge; in politics and social science there has been no falling away by our few best writers, and the field is larger and the spirit of liberality more generous; and by the exact sciences new worlds full of revelation and romance have been discovered since Agassiz first wrote for *The Atlantic*. The conspicuous changes that have taken place are two: We have no single group of men of such genius as the group that contributed to the early numbers; and as a result of the spread of culture no man of less than the very highest rank can now hold as prominent a position as a man of the same qualities held when good writers were fewer."

The statement is made and reiterated in the course of the article (and no one is likely to dispute it) that the prime object of *The Atlantic* was in the beginning and has continued to be the making of American literature, "to hold literature above all other human interests." Something is told to illustrate the spirit of the early editors in this regard, and much more might be told. They wrought not only to bring out a magazine but to develop literary talent wherever it was found, by personal letters of praise and encouragement. An instance in point is given in the letter written by Mr. Lowell, then an editor working fifteen hours a day, to Mr. Higginson, then quite a young writer, praising the latter's contributions as "the most *telling* essays we have printed." We venture to add here another instance of Lowell's quickness to express his appreciation. When Dr. Palmer, also a young writer at that time, sent his first contribution, a sketch of life in India, to *The Atlantic* in 1858, Lowell, in a letter dated May 8, 1858, wrote to him:

"I did not even know the name of the author—but if you had heard me laugh over 'Putterum' and the letter of the widow—if you could have known how pleased I was at the sudden budding and blossoming among the dry sticks of our contributions! . . . Send me some more East Indian sketches. I have read a good deal of Oriental stuff in my day, including even the 'Asiatic Researches' and Orme's 'History,' but I never SAW India before I looked through your stereoscope."

It can be imagined what inspiration a young and self-deprecating writer would derive from such a letter from one whom he had never met. Or from a second letter from Lowell, saying: "I should be glad to get it [another sketch] if it were written with the end of a burnt stick." Or from this written by Holmes in his capacity as advisory editor:

"I just write a word or two to tell you with what pleasure I read your infinitely lively and picturesque article in *The Atlantic*. There is a piquancy and brilliancy in your narrative that I find nothing to surpass and I hardly know what to equal. My boy of seventeen, saucy and fastidious (the Ruskinite we spoke of), speaks of your Brahmin in similar style."

These are samples of the way in which the editors of *The Atlantic* stimulated their contributors to the best possible work.