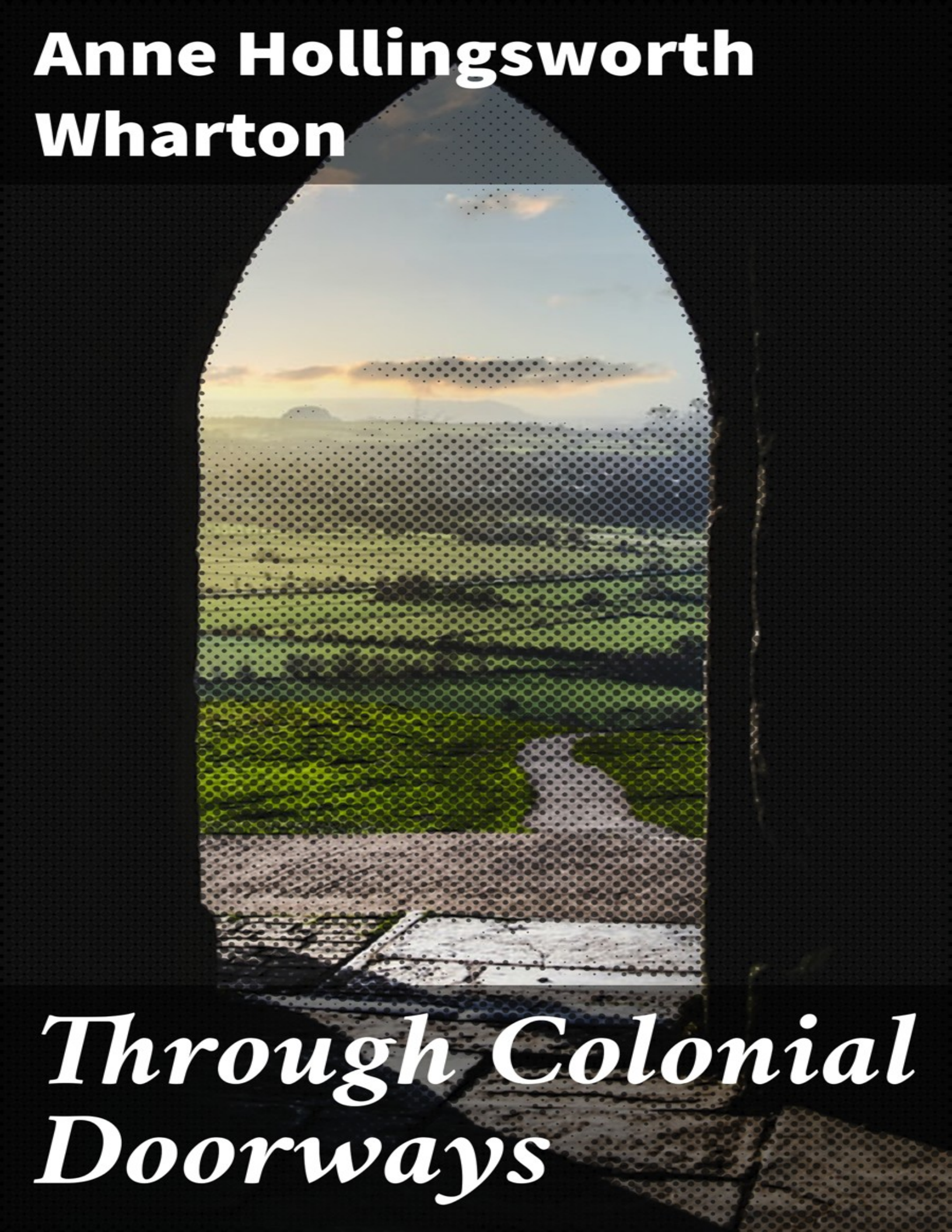
Anne Hollingsworth Wharton



Through Colonial Doorways

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PREFACE

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The revival of interest in Colonial and Revolutionary times has become a marked feature of the life of to-day. Its manifestations are to be found in the literature which has grown up around these periods, and in the painstaking individual research being made among documents and records of the past with genealogical and historical intent.

Not only has a desire been shown to learn more of the great events of the last century, but with it has come an altogether natural curiosity to gain some insight into the social and domestic life of Colonial days. To read of councils, congresses, and battles is not enough: men and women wish to know something more intimate and personal of the life of the past, of how their ancestors lived and loved as well of how they wrought, suffered, and died.

With some thought of gratifying this desire, by sounding the heavy brass knocker, and inviting the reader to enter with us through the broad doorways of some Colonial homes into the hospitable life within, have these pages been written.

For original material placed at my disposal, in the form of letters and manuscripts, I am indebted to numerous friends, among these to Mrs. Oliver Hopkinson, the Misses Sharples, Miss Anna E. Peale, Miss F. A. Logan, Mrs. Edward Wetherill, Mr. C. R. Hildeburn, and Mr. Edward Shippen.

To the Editors of the *Atlantic Monthly*, the *Lippincott's Magazine*, and the *Philadelphia Ledger* and *Times*, I wish to express my appreciation of their courtesy in allowing me to use in some of these chapters material to which they first gave place in their columns.

A. H. W.

PHILADELPHIA, March, 1893.

THROUGH COLONIAL DOORWAYS

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The historian of the past has, as a rule, been pleased to treat with dignified silence the lighter side of Colonial life, allowing the procession of noble men and fair women to sweep on, grand, stately, and imposing, but lacking the

softer touches that belong to social and domestic life. So much has been written and said of the stern virtues of the fathers and mothers of the Republic, and of their sacrifices, privations, and heroism, that we of this generation would be in danger of regarding them as types of excellence to be placed upon pedestals, rather than as men and women to be loved with human affection, were it not for some old letter, or diary, or anecdote that floats down to us from the past, revealing the touch of nature that makes them our kinsfolk by the bond of sympathy and interest, of taste and habit, as well as by that of blood.

The dignified Washington becomes to us a more approachable personality when, in a letter written by Mrs. John M. Bowers, we read that when she was a child of six he dandled her on his knee and sang to her about “the old, old man and the old, old woman who lived in the vinegar-bottle together,” or when we come across a facetious letter of his own in which the general tells how his cook was “sometimes minded to cut a figure,” notably, when ladies were entertained at camp, and would, on such occasions, add to the ordinary roast and greens a beefsteak pie or a dish of crabs, which left only six feet of space between the different dishes instead of twelve; or again, when General Greene writes from Middlebrook, “We had a little dance at my quarters. His Excellency and Mrs. Greene danced upwards of three hours without once sitting down. Upon the whole we had a pretty little frisk.”

We are not accustomed to associate minuets and “pretty frisks” with the stern realities of Revolutionary days, yet as brief mention of them comes down to us, they serve to light

up the background of that rugged picture, as when Miss Sally Wister tells, in her sprightly journal, of the tricks played by herself and a bevy of gay girls upon the young officers quartered in the old Foulke mansion, at Penllyn, soon after the battle of Brandywine. Miss Wister's confidences are addressed to Miss Deborah Norris, afterwards the learned Mrs. George Logan, and the principal actors in the century-old drama are the lively Miss Sally, who dubs herself "Thy smart journalizer," and Major Stoddert from Maryland, who in the first scenes plays a *rôle* somewhat similar to that of Young Marlow, but later develops attractions of mind and character that Miss Sally finds simply irresistible. She considers him both "good natur'd and good humor'd," and evinces a fine discrimination in defining the application of these terms, which shows that a Quaker maiden in love may still retain a modicum of the clear-headedness which is one of the distinguishing characteristics of her sect. The cousinly allusions to "chicken-hearted Liddy"—Miss Liddy Foulke, later known as Mrs. John Spencer—and her numerous admirers are very interesting. When Miss Sally, who is evidently reducing the heart of the gallant major to "ashes of Sodom," naively remarks, *à propos* of Liddy's conquests, "When will Sally's admirers appear? Ah! that, indeed. Why, Sally has not charms sufficient to pierce the heart of a soldier. But still I won't despair. Who knows what mischief I yet may do?" we feel that maidens' hearts in 1777 were made on much the same plan that they are nowadays, and that even to so rare a *confidante* as Miss Deborah Norris the whole was not revealed.

Through such old chroniclers or letter-writers we sometimes meet the great ladies of the past at ball or dinner, or, better still, in the informal intercourse of their own homes, and catch glimpses of their husbands and lovers, the warriors, statesmen, and philosophers of the time, at some social club, like the Hasty Pudding of Cambridge, the State in Schuylkill or the Wistar Parties of Philadelphia, or the Tuesday Club and the Delphian in Baltimore. Meeting them thus, enjoying witticisms and good cheer in one another's excellent company, we feel a closer bond between their life and our own than if they were always presented to us in public ceremonial or with pen and folio in hand. When we read of Judge Peters crying out good-humoredly, as he pushed his way between a fat and a slim man who blocked up a doorway, "Here I go through thick and thin;" or when we think of the signers of the Declaration, gathered together in the old State House on that memorable July day of 1776, illuminating the solemnity of the occasion by jokes, even as grim ones as those of Hancock and Franklin and Gerry, we are conscious of a sense of comradeship inspired more by the mirth and *bonhomie* than by the heroism of these men, who labored yesterday that we might laugh to-day. The great John Adams, who with all his greatness was not a universal favorite among his contemporaries, comes down to us irradiated with a nimbus of amiability, in a picture that his wife draws of him, submitting to be driven about the room with a willow stick by one of his small grandchildren; and when Mrs. Bache begs her "dear papa" not to reprimand her so severely for desiring a little finery, in which to appear at

the Ambassador's and when she "goes abroad with the Washingtons," because he is the last person to wish to see her "dressed with singularity, or in a way that will not do credit to her father and her husband," we can fancy Dr. Franklin's grave features relaxing in a smile over the daughter's diplomacy, inherited from no stranger. The wedding of President Madison to the pretty Widow Todd seems more real to us when we learn from eye-witnesses of the various festivities that illuminated the occasion, and of how the girls vied with one another in obtaining mementos of the evening, cutting in bits the Mechlin lace that adorned the groom's delicate shirt-ruffles, and showering the happy pair with rice when they drove off to Montpelier, old Mr. Madison's estate in Virginia. Through it all, we can hear Mrs. Washington's earnest voice assuring "Dolly" that she and General Washington approve of the match, and that even if Mr. Madison is twenty years older than herself, he will still make her a good husband. That this sensible advice from the stately matron should have made the girl-widow blush and run away does not surprise us, for, while acknowledging to an immense respect for Mrs. Washington, in consequence not only of her position, but of the dignity and serenity of her character, we are always conscious of a feeling of restraint in her presence, which she makes no effort to overcome by word or smile. We cannot imagine ourselves spending a pleasant evening with her, discussing events of the day, or the last engagement or ball, as we can with Mrs. John Adams, Mrs. John Jay, or sprightly Mrs. Bache. We confess to the same emotions with regard to Mrs. Robert Morris, whose character stands out, like that of her intimate

friend Mrs. Washington, surrounded by a halo of excellence. Is this the fault of these worthy ladies, or is it that of their biographers, who, in presenting them to the world with all the lofty virtues of Roman matrons, have added no lighter touches to their pictures? In vain we search for some shred of gayety, or mirth, or enthusiasm, on their part, and in sheer desperation back out of their presence with a stately courtesy, and take refuge with Rebecca Franks, or Sally Wister, or Eliza Southgate, with whom we are always sure of passing a merry half-hour. Nor is it frivolity and merry-making that we look for in the records of the past: it is life, with its high hopes and homely cares, its simple pleasures and small gayeties, that served to relieve the tension of earnest endeavor needed to accomplish a great and difficult task. Mrs. Adams's letters about her children, her household economies, and her experiments in farming are almost as interesting as those written from abroad, because she approaches all subjects, even the most commonplace, with a buoyant spirit and playful fancy. To her husband, during one of his long absences from home, she writes, "I am a mortal enemy to anything but a cheerful countenance and a merry heart, which, Solomon tells us, does good like medicine." And again, "I could give you a long list of domestic affairs, but they would only serve to embarrass you and in noways relieve me. All domestic pleasures are absorbed in the great and important duty you owe your country, 'for our country is, as it were, a secondary god, and the first and greatest parent. It is to be preferred to parents, wives, children, friends, and all things,—the gods only excepted.'" It is not strange that to such a wife John Adams

should have written, “By the accounts in your last letter, it seems the women in Boston begin to think themselves able to serve their country. What a pity it is that our generals in the northern districts had not Aspasias to their wives! I believe the two Howes have not very great women for wives. If they had, we should suffer more from their exertions than we do. This is our good fortune. A woman of sense would not let her husband spend five weeks at sea in such a season of the year. A smart wife would have put Howe in possession of Philadelphia a long time ago.” It is evident that Mr. Adams did not need to be won over to any modern theories with regard to the higher education of women, and, as a relief to the sterner side of the picture, we find the wife who penned such wise and inspiriting words to her husband entering on other occasions with the delight of a *mondaine* into a court or republican function, describing the gowns of the women, their faces and their manners, with the minuteness and accuracy of a Parisian. Was there ever anything written more spirited than Mrs. Adams’s description of Madame Helvetius at Passy, throwing her arms about the neck of *ce cher Franklin*? or her picture of Queen Charlotte and the royal princesses, for whom her admiration was of the scantest? With far different touches was it her pleasure to describe some of the American beauties abroad, for Mrs. Adams was always a true daughter of New England, and we can read between the lines when she writes of Madame Helvetius’s singular manners, “I should have been greatly astonished at this conduct if the good Doctor [Franklin] had not told me that in this lady I

should see a genuine Frenchwoman, wholly free from affectation or stiffness of behavior."[1]

Pleasant it is, and not wholly unprofitable to the student of life and manners, to look into the family room of some Colonial mansion, to hear girlish laughter and raillery about balls and beaux in one corner, while in another the father of the family writes of his aspirations for the nation in which his hopes for his children are bound up, and the mother, looking over his shoulder, sympathizes with his patriotic and fatherly ambitions, while she turns over in her brain, for the hundredth time, the important question of how she and Nancy are to make a respectable appearance at the next Assembly ball, when silks, laces, and feathers are so very dear,—worth their weight in gold, as Mrs. Bache tells us. It is such touches of life as these that we find in the diaries of Sarah Eve, who was living in Philadelphia in 1772, of Eliza Southgate of Scarborough, and of Elizabeth Drinker; in Mrs. Grant's pictures of New York and Albany life, in which Madame Philip Schuyler is the central figure; or in such letters as those of Thomas Jefferson to his family, of Mrs. Bache, Miss Franks, Lady Cathcart, and Mrs. John Morgan. The latter gives us charming glimpses of Cambridge society in 1776, and tells of dinners, tea-drinking, and reviews in company with the Mifflins, Roberdeaus, and others, of handsome officers and pretty girls. Of one of the latter she speaks, in a letter to her mother, in a manner which reveals her own loveliness of character quite as clearly as it does the external charms of the beauty whom all the world and her own husband admire. "The one that drew every one's attention," she writes, "was the famous Jersey beauty, Miss

Keyes, who is now on a visit to Mr. Roberdeau. She may justly be said to be fairest where thousands are fair. I have had an opportunity of seeing her, and think her a most beautiful creature, and what makes her still more engaging is her not betraying the least consciousness of her own perfections. I am, it seems, a most violent favorite with her; she is to dine here to-morrow. You will wonder, perhaps, how this great intimacy took place, but you must know she has been indisposed since her coming to town, and Dr. Morgan had the honor of attending her,—you know what an admirer of beauty he is; the rest followed, of course."

In a different vein, but no less piquant, are Lady Cathcart's remarks on London personages and functions, in the midst of which her thoughts fly back to her relatives and friends in America. One moment she is describing the "Queen's Birthnight Ball," and the next is sending Mrs. Jauncey a picture of her son with "Six Curles of a Side," or commenting upon Betty Shipton's marriage to Major Giles, adding, "I am sure I never believed her, last winter, when she used to talk so much about him."

There being many old letters and diaries still unread and unpublished, it seems a task not unworthy of the later historian to gather together such records, in order to present to this generation more characteristic pictures of their grandfathers and grandmothers, drawn with a freer hand and touched with the familiar light of every-day intercourse. One young girl of the present time was strongly attracted towards her own great-grandmother by reading a letter written by her to her mother in Newport, asking her to send her from thence "a sprigged muslin petticoat, and the

making of an apron such as all the girls are wearing.” A rather more modest request, this, than that of Miss Eliza Southgate, who begged her mother for five dollars with which to purchase a wig for the next Assembly, because Eleanor Coffin had one, and it was quite impossible “to dress her hair stylish without it.” Placed thus in touch with her great-grandmother’s longings and aspirations, which flowed in the same frivolous channel as her own, this young descendant suddenly realized that they two were of one flesh and blood, and gathering and piecing together all that could be learned from older members of the family of this lady of the last century, she has become the heroine of romance so thrilling and so sweet, that the girl of to-day may be said to entertain for her unknown ancestress a more than ordinary affection.

The records that have come down to us are, after all, only a few out of the great mass written. Many, perhaps equally interesting, have in some garret fallen a prey to mould, decay, and the book-lizard; or have found their way to the fireplace, impelled thither by some family iconoclast possessed with a rage for clearing up; or, still more ignoble fate, have been torn up for curl-papers! A narrator of veracity tells how a bevy of gay young girls, gathered together in the roomy old Hopkinson house in Bordentown, appropriated some letters found in the garret to this purpose, and lighting on some interesting passages, amused themselves by reading them aloud at what Macaulay names the “curling hour.” Reports of these nocturnal revels being carried down-stairs, a member of the family interested herself in the preservation of the letters,