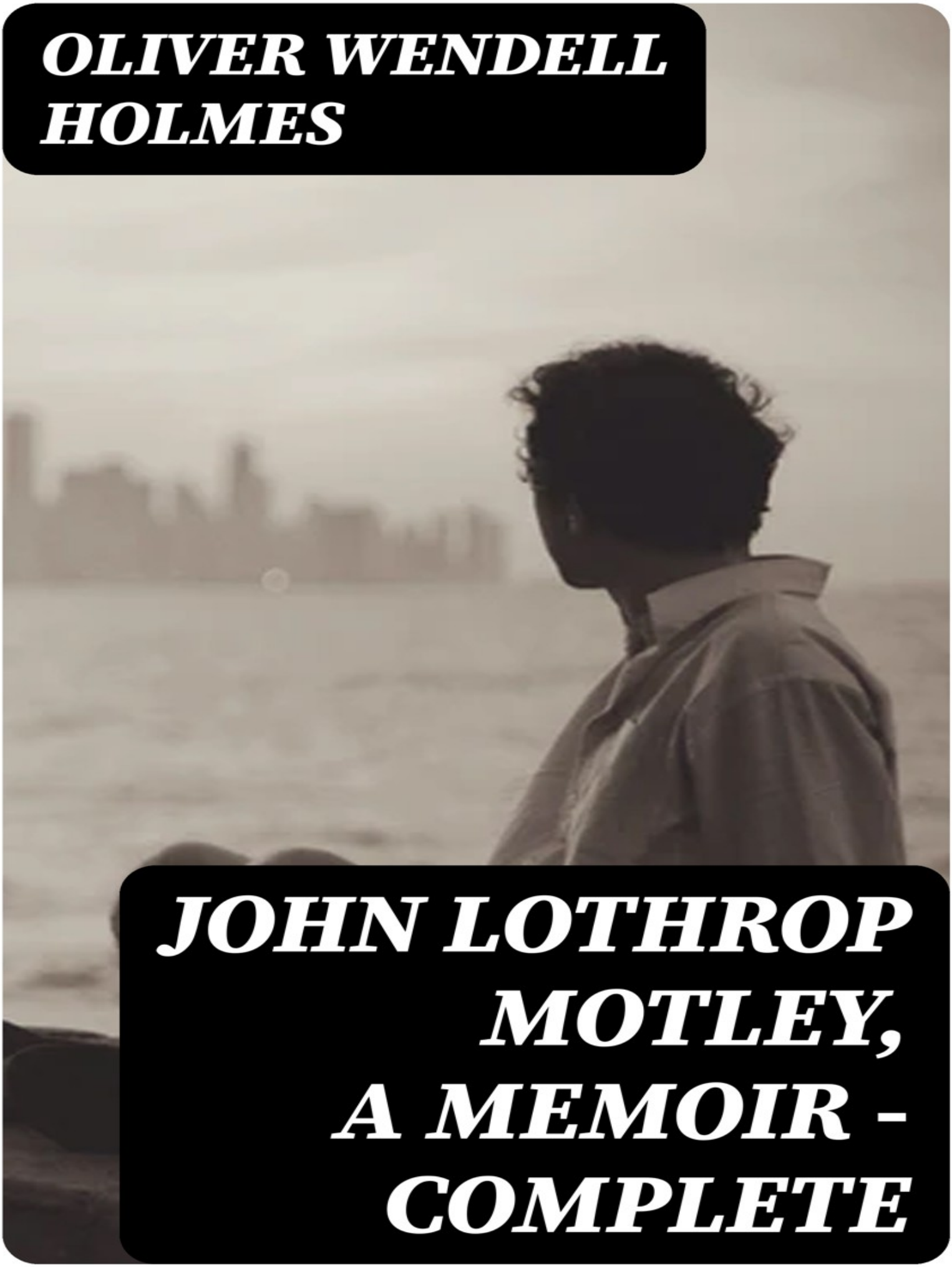

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES

JOHN LOTHROP MOTLEY, A MEMOIR - COMPLETE

Oliver Wendell Holmes

John Lothrop Motley, A Memoir — Complete

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Volume I.

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I. 1814-1827. To AEt. 13.

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BIRTH AND EARLY YEARS.

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John Motley, the great-grandfather of the subject of this Memoir, came in the earlier part of the last century from Belfast in Ireland to Falmouth, now Portland, in the District, now the State of Maine. He was twice married, and had ten children, four of the first marriage and six of the last. Thomas, the youngest son by his first wife, married Emma, a daughter of John Wait, the first Sheriff of Cumberland County under the government of the United States. Two of their seven sons, Thomas and Edward, removed from Portland to Boston in 1802 and established themselves as partners in commercial business, continuing united and prosperous for nearly half a century before the firm was dissolved.

The earlier records of New England have preserved the memory of an incident which deserves mention as showing how the historian's life was saved by a quickwitted handmaid, more than a hundred years before he was born.

On the 29th of August, 1708, the French and Indians from Canada made an attack upon the town of Haverhill, in Massachusetts. Thirty or forty persons were slaughtered, and many others were carried captive into Canada.

The minister of the town, Rev. Benjamin Rolfe, was killed by a bullet through the door of his house. Two of his daughters, Mary, aged thirteen, and Elizabeth, aged nine, were sleeping in a room with the maid-servant, Hagar. When Hagar heard the whoop of the savages she seized the children, ran with them into the cellar, and, after concealing them under two large washtubs, hid herself. The Indians ransacked the cellar, but missed the prey. Elizabeth, the younger of the two girls, grew up and married the Rev. Samuel Checkley, first minister of the “New South” Church, Boston. Her son, Rev. Samuel Checkley, Junior, was minister of the Second Church, and his successor, Rev. John Lothrop, or Lathrop, as it was more commonly spelled, married his daughter. Dr. Lothrop was great-grandson of Rev. John Lothrop, of Scituate, who had been imprisoned in England for nonconformity. The Checkleys were from Preston Capes, in Northamptonshire. The name is probably identical with that of the Chicheles or Chichleys, a well-known Northamptonshire family.

Thomas Motley married Anna, daughter of the Rev. John Lothrop, granddaughter of the Rev. Samuel Checkley, Junior, the two ministers mentioned above, both honored in their day and generation. Eight children were born of this marriage, of whom four are still living.

JOHN LOTHROP MOTLEY, the second of these children, was born in Dorchester, now a part of Boston,

Massachusetts, on the 15th of April, 1814. A member of his family gives a most pleasing and interesting picture, from his own recollections and from what his mother told him, of the childhood which was to develop into such rich maturity. The boy was rather delicate in organization, and not much given to outdoor amusements, except skating and swimming, of which last exercise he was very fond in his young days, and in which he excelled. He was a great reader, never idle, but always had a book in his hand,—a volume of poetry or one of the novels of Scott or Cooper. His fondness for plays and declamation is illustrated by the story told by a younger brother, who remembers being wrapped up in a shawl and kept quiet by sweetmeats, while he figured as the dead Caesar, and his brother, the future historian, delivered the speech of Antony over his prostrate body. He was of a most sensitive nature, easily excited, but not tenacious of any irritated feelings, with a quick sense of honor, and the most entirely truthful child, his mother used to say, that she had ever seen. Such are some of the recollections of those who knew him in his earliest years and in the most intimate relations.

His father's family was at this time living in the house No. 7 Walnut Street, looking down Chestnut Street over the water to the western hills. Near by, at the corner of Beacon Street, was the residence of the family of the first mayor of Boston, and at a little distance from the opposite corner was the house of one of the fathers of New England manufacturing enterprise, a man of superior intellect, who built up a great name and fortune in our city. The children from these three homes naturally became playmates. Mr.

Motley's house was a very hospitable one, and Lothrop and two of his young companions were allowed to carry out their schemes of amusement in the garden and the garret. If one with a prescient glance could have looked into that garret on some Saturday afternoon while our century was not far advanced in its second score of years, he might have found three boys in cloaks and doublets and plumed hats, heroes and bandits, enacting more or less impromptu melodramas. In one of the boys he would have seen the embryo dramatist of a nation's life history, John Lothrop Motley; in the second, a famous talker and wit who has spilled more good things on the wasteful air in conversation than would carry a “diner-out” through half a dozen London seasons, and waked up somewhat after the usual flowering-time of authorship to find himself a very agreeable and cordially welcomed writer,—Thomas Gold Appleton. In the third he would have recognized a champion of liberty known wherever that word is spoken, an orator whom to hear is to revive all the traditions of the grace, the address, the commanding sway of the silver-tongued eloquence of the most renowned speakers,—Wendell Phillips.

Both of young Motley's playmates have furnished me with recollections of him and of those around him at this period of his life, and I cannot do better than borrow freely from their communications. His father was a man of decided character, social, vivacious, witty, a lover of books, and himself not unknown as a writer, being the author of one or more of the well remembered “Jack Downing” letters. He was fond of having the boys read to him from such authors as Channing and Irving, and criticised their way of reading

with discriminating judgment and taste. Mrs. Motley was a woman who could not be looked upon without admiration. I remember well the sweet dignity of her aspect, her “regal beauty,” as Mr. Phillips truly styles it, and the charm of her serene and noble presence, which made her the type of a perfect motherhood. Her character corresponded to the promise of her gracious aspect. She was one of the fondest of mothers, but not thoughtlessly indulgent to the boy from whom she hoped and expected more than she thought it wise to let him know. The story used to be current that in their younger days this father and mother were the handsomest pair the town of Boston could show. This son of theirs was “rather tall,” says Mr. Phillips, “lithe, very graceful in movement and gesture, and there was something marked and admirable in the set of his head on his shoulders,”—a peculiar elegance which was most noticeable in those later days when I knew him. Lady Byron long afterwards spoke of him as more like her husband in appearance than any other person she had met; but Mr. Phillips, who remembers the first bloom of his boyhood and youth, thinks he was handsomer than any portrait of Byron represents the poet. “He could not have been eleven years old,” says the same correspondent, “when he began writing a novel. It opened, I remember, not with one solitary horseman, but with two, riding up to an inn in the valley of the Housatonic. Neither of us had ever seen the Housatonic, but it sounded grand and romantic. Two chapters were finished.”

There is not much remembered of the single summer he passed at Mr. Green's school at Jamaica Plain. From that school he went to Round Hill, Northampton, then under the

care of Mr. Cogswell and Mr. Bancroft. The historian of the United States could hardly have dreamed that the handsome boy of ten years was to take his place at the side of his teacher in the first rank of writers in his own department. Motley came to Round Hill, as one of his schoolmates tells me, with a great reputation, especially as a declaimer. He had a remarkable facility for acquiring languages, excelled as a reader and as a writer, and was the object of general admiration for his many gifts. There is some reason to think that the flattery he received was for a time a hindrance to his progress and the development of his character. He obtained praise too easily, and learned to trust too much to his genius. He had everything to spoil him, —beauty, precocious intelligence, and a personal charm which might have made him a universal favorite. Yet he does not seem to have been generally popular at this period of his life. He was wilful, impetuous, sometimes supercilious, always fastidious. He would study as he liked, and not by rule. His school and college mates believed in his great possibilities through all his forming period, but it may be doubted if those who counted most confidently on his future could have supposed that he would develop the heroic power of concentration, the long-breathed tenacity of purpose, which in after years gave effect to his brilliant mental endowments. “I did wonder,” says Mr. Wendell Phillips, “at the diligence and painstaking, the drudgery shown in his historical works. In early life he had no industry, not needing it. All he cared for in a book he caught quickly,—the spirit of it, and all his mind needed or would use. This quickness of apprehension was marvellous.” I do

not find from the recollections of his schoolmates at Northampton that he was reproached for any grave offences, though he may have wandered beyond the prescribed boundaries now and then, and studied according to his inclinations rather than by rule. While at that school he made one acquisition much less common then than now, —a knowledge of the German language and some degree of acquaintance with its literature, under the guidance of one of the few thorough German scholars this country then possessed, Mr. George Bancroft.

II. 1827-1831. AEt. 13-17.

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COLLEGE LIFE.

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Such then was the boy who at the immature, we might almost say the tender, age of thirteen entered Harvard College. Though two years after me in college standing, I remember the boyish reputation which he brought with him, especially that of a wonderful linguist, and the impression which his striking personal beauty produced upon us as he took his seat in the college chapel. But it was not until long after this period that I became intimately acquainted with him, and I must again have recourse to the classmates and

friends who have favored me with their reminiscences of this period of his life. Mr. Phillips says:

“During our first year in college, though the youngest in the class,
he stood third, I think, or second in college rank, and ours was an
especially able class. Yet to maintain this rank he neither cared
nor needed to make any effort. Too young to feel any
responsibilities, and not yet awake to any ambition, he became so
negligent that he was 'rusticated' [that is, sent away from college
for a time]. He came back sobered, and worked rather more, but with
no effort for college rank thenceforward.”

I must finish the portrait of the collegian with all its lights and shadows by the help of the same friends from whom I have borrowed the preceding outlines.

He did not care to make acquaintances, was haughty in manner and cynical in mood, at least as he appeared to those in whom he felt no special interest. It is no wonder, therefore, that he was not a popular favorite, although recognized as having very brilliant qualities. During all this period his mind was doubtless fermenting with projects which kept him in a fevered and irritable condition. “He had a small writing-table,” Mr. Phillips says, “with a shallow drawer; I have often seen it half full of sketches, unfinished poems, soliloquies, a scene or two of a play, prose portraits of some pet character, etc. These he would read to me, though he never volunteered to do so, and every now and then he burnt the whole and began to fill the drawer again.”

My friend, Mr. John Osborne Sargent, who was a year before him in college, says, in a very interesting letter with which he has favored me:

“My first acquaintance with him [Motley] was at Cambridge, when he came from Mr. Cogswell's school at Round Hill. He then had a good deal of the shyness that was just pronounced enough to make him interesting, and which did not entirely wear off till he left college. . . I soon became acquainted with him, and we used to take long walks together, sometimes taxing each other's memory for poems or passages from poems that had struck our fancy. Shelley was then a great favorite of his, and I remember that Praed's verses then appearing in the 'New Monthly' he thought very clever and brilliant, and was fond of repeating them. You have forgotten, or perhaps never knew, that Motley's first appearance in print was in the 'Collegian.' He brought me one day, in a very modest mood, a translation from Goethe, which I was most happy to oblige him by inserting. It was very prettily done, and will now be a curiosity. . . . How it happened that Motley wrote only one piece I do not remember. I had the pleasure about that time of initiating him as a member of the Knights of the Square Table,—always my

favorite
college club, for the reason, perhaps, that I was a sometime Grand
Master. He was always a genial and jovial companion at our supper-
parties at Fresh Pond and Gallagher's."

We who live in the days of photographs know how many faces belong to every individual. We know too under what different aspects the same character appears to those who study it from different points of view and with different prepossessions. I do not hesitate, therefore, to place side by side the impressions of two of his classmates as to one of his personal traits as they observed him at this period of his youth.

"He was a manly boy, with no love for or leaning to girls' company;
no care for dress; not a trace of personal vanity. . . . He was, or at least seemed, wholly unconscious of his rare beauty and of the
fascination of his manner; not a trace of pretence, the simplest and
most natural creature in the world."

Look on that picture and on this:—

"He seemed to have a passion for dress. But as in everything else,
so in this, his fancy was a fitful one. At one time he would excite
our admiration by the splendor of his outfit, and perhaps the next
week he would seem to take equal pleasure in his slovenly or

careless appearance.”

It is not very difficult to reconcile these two portraitures. I recollect it was said by a witty lady of a handsome clergyman well remembered among us, that he had dressy eyes. Motley so well became everything he wore, that if he had sprung from his bed and slipped his clothes on at an alarm of fire, his costume would have looked like a prince's undress. His natural presentment, like that of Count D'Orsay, was of the kind which suggests the intentional effects of an elaborate toilet, no matter how little thought or care may have been given to make it effective. I think the “passion for dress” was really only a seeming, and that he often excited admiration when he had not taken half the pains to adorn himself that many a youth less favored by nature has wasted upon his unblest exterior only to be laughed at.

I gather some other interesting facts from a letter which I have received from his early playmate and school and college classmate, Mr. T. G. Appleton.

“In his Sophomore year he kept abreast of the prescribed studies,
but his heart was out of bounds, as it often had been at Round Hill
when chasing squirrels or rabbits through forbidden forests. Already his historical interest was shaping his life. A tutor coming-by chance, let us hope—to his room remonstrated with him
upon the heaps of novels upon his table.

“'Yes,' said Motley, 'I am reading historically, and have come to the novels of the nineteenth century. Taken in the lump, they are very hard reading.'”

All Old Cambridge people know the Brattle House, with its gambrel roof, its tall trees, its perennial spring, its legendary fame of good fare and hospitable board in the days of the kindly old bon vivant, Major Brattle. In this house the two young students, Appleton and Motley, lived during a part of their college course.

“Motley's room was on the ground floor, the room to the left of the entrance. He led a very pleasant life there, tempering his college duties with the literature he loved, and receiving his friends amidst elegant surroundings, which added to the charm of his society. Occasionally we amused ourselves by writing for the magazines and papers of the day. Mr. Willis had just started a slim monthly, written chiefly by himself, but with the true magazine flavor. We wrote for that, and sometimes verses in the corner of a paper called 'The Anti-Masonic Mirror,' and in which corner was a woodcut of Apollo, and inviting to destruction ambitious youths by the legend underneath,—

'Much yet remains unsung.'

“These pieces were usually dictated to each other, the poet recumbent upon the bed and a classmate ready to carry off the manuscript for the paper of the following day. 'Blackwood's' was then in its glory, its pages redolent of 'mountain dew' in every sense; the

humor of the Shepherd, the elegantly brutal onslaughts upon Whigs
and Cockney poets by Christopher North, intoxicated us youths.

“It was young writing, and made for the young. The opinions were
charmingly wrong, and its enthusiasm was half Glenlivet. But this
delighted the boys. There were no reprints then, and to pass the
paper-cutter up the fresh inviting pages was like swinging over the
heather arm in arm with Christopher himself. It is a little
singular that though we had a college magazine of our own, Motley
rarely if ever wrote for it. I remember a translation from Goethe,
'The Ghost-Seer,' which he may have written for it, and a poem upon
the White Mountains. Motley spoke at one of the college exhibitions
an essay on Goethe so excellent that Mr. Joseph Cogswell sent it to
Madam Goethe, who, after reading it, said, 'I wish to see the first
book that young man will write.'”

Although Motley did not aim at or attain a high college rank, the rules of the Phi Beta Kappa Society, which confine the number of members to the first sixteen of each class, were stretched so as to include him,—a tribute to his recognized ability, and an evidence that a distinguished future was anticipated for him.

III. 1832-1833. AEt. 18-19.

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STUDY AND TRAVEL IN EUROPE.

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Of the two years divided between the Universities of Berlin and Gottingen I have little to record. That he studied hard I cannot doubt; that he found himself in pleasant social relations with some of his fellow-students seems probable from the portraits he has drawn in his first story, “Morton's Hope,” and is rendered certain so far as one of his companions is concerned. Among the records of the past to which he referred during his last visit to this country was a letter which he took from a collection of papers and handed me to read one day when I was visiting him. The letter was written in a very lively and exceedingly familiar vein. It implied such intimacy, and called up in such a lively way the gay times Motley and himself had had together in their youthful days, that I was puzzled to guess who could have addressed him from Germany in that easy and off-hand fashion. I knew most of his old friends who would be likely to call him by his baptismal name in its most colloquial form, and exhausted my stock of guesses unsuccessfully before looking at the signature. I confess that I was surprised, after laughing at the hearty and almost boyish tone of the letter,

to read at the bottom of the page the signature of Bismarck. I will not say that I suspect Motley of having drawn the portrait of his friend in one of the characters of “Morton's Hope,” but it is not hard to point out traits in one of them which we can believe may have belonged to the great Chancellor at an earlier period of life than that at which the world contemplates his overshadowing proportions.

Hoping to learn something of Motley during the two years while we had lost sight of him, I addressed a letter to His Highness Prince Bismarck, to which I received the following reply:—

FOREIGN OFFICE, BERLIN, March 11, 1878.

SIR,—I am directed by Prince Bismarck to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 1st of January, relating to the biography of the late Mr. Motley. His Highness deeply regrets that the state of his health and pressure of business do not allow him to contribute personally, and as largely as he would be delighted to do, to your depicting of a friend whose memory will be ever dear to him. Since I had the pleasure of making the acquaintance of Mr. Motley at Varzin, I have been intrusted with communicating to you a few details I have gathered from the mouth of the Prince. I enclose them as they are jotted down, without any attempt of digestion.

I have the honor to be
Your obedient servant,
LOTHAIR BUCHER.

“Prince Bismarck said:—

“'I met Motley at Gottingen in 1832, I am not sure if at the beginning of Easter Term or Michaelmas Term. He kept company with German students, though more addicted to study than we members of the fighting clubs (corps). Although not having mastered yet the German language, he exercised a marked attraction by a conversation sparkling with wit, humor, and originality. In autumn of 1833, having both of us migrated from Gottingen to Berlin for the prosecution of our studies, we became fellow-lodgers in the house No. 161 Friedrich Strasse. There we lived in the closest intimacy, sharing meals and outdoor exercise. Motley by that time had arrived at talking German fluently; he occupied himself not only in translating Goethe's poem “Faust,” but tried his hand even in composing German verses. Enthusiastic admirer of Shakespeare, Byron, Goethe, he used to spice his conversation abundantly with quotations from these his favorite authors. A pertinacious arguer, so much so that sometimes he watched my awakening in order to continue a discussion on some topic of science, poetry, or

practical
life, cut short by the chime of the small hours, he never lost his
mild and amiable temper. Our faithful companion was Count Alexander
Keyserling, a native of Courland, who has since achieved distinction
as a botanist.

“'Motley having entered the diplomatic service of his country, we
had frequently the opportunity of renewing our friendly intercourse;
at Frankfort he used to stay with me, the welcome guest of my wife;
we also met at Vienna, and, later, here. The last time I saw him
was in 1872 at Varzin, at the celebration of my “silver wedding,”
namely, the twenty-fifth anniversary.

“'The most striking feature of his handsome and delicate appearance
was uncommonly large and beautiful eyes. He never entered a
drawing-room without exciting the curiosity and sympathy of the
ladies.'”

It is but a glimpse of their young life which the great statesman gives us, but a bright and pleasing one. Here were three students, one of whom was to range in the flowery fields of the loveliest of the sciences, another to make the dead past live over again in his burning pages,

and a third to extend an empire as the botanist spread out a plant and the historian laid open a manuscript.

IV. 1834-1839. 2ET. 20-25.

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RETURN TO AMERICA.—STUDY OF LAW.—MARRIAGE.—HIS FIRST NOVEL, “MORTON'S HOPE.”

Of the years passed in the study of law after his return from Germany I have very little recollection, and nothing of importance to record. He never became seriously engaged in the practice of the profession he had chosen. I had known him pleasantly rather than intimately, and our different callings tended to separate us. I met him, however, not very rarely, at one house where we were both received with the greatest cordiality, and where the attractions brought together many both young and old to enjoy the society of its charming and brilliant inmates. This was at No. 14 Temple Place, where Mr. Park Benjamin was then living with his two sisters, both in the bloom of young womanhood. Here Motley found the wife to whom his life owed so much of its success and its happiness. Those who remember Mary Benjamin find it hard to speak of her in the common terms of praise which they award to the good and the lovely. She was not only handsome and amiable and agreeable, but there was a cordial frankness, an openhearted sincerity about her which made her seem like a sister to those who

could help becoming her lovers. She stands quite apart in the memory of the friends who knew her best, even from the circle of young persons whose recollections they most cherish. Yet hardly could one of them have foreseen all that she was to be to him whose life she was to share. They were married on the 2d of March, 1837. His intimate friend, Mr. Joseph Lewis Stackpole, was married at about the same time to her sister, thus joining still more closely in friendship the two young men who were already like brothers in their mutual affection.

Two years after his marriage, in 1839, appeared his first work, a novel in two volumes, called “Morton's Hope.” He had little reason to be gratified with its reception. The general verdict was not favorable to it, and the leading critical journal of America, not usually harsh or cynical in its treatment of native authorship, did not even give it a place among its “Critical Notices,” but dropped a small-print extinguisher upon it in one of the pages of its “List of New Publications.” Nothing could be more utterly disheartening than the unqualified condemnation passed upon the story. At the same time the critic says that “no one can read 'Morton's Hope' without perceiving it to have been written by a person of uncommon resources of mind and scholarship.”

It must be confessed that, as a story, “Morton's Hope” cannot endure a searching or even a moderately careful criticism. It is wanting in cohesion, in character, even in a proper regard to circumstances of time and place; it is a map of dissected incidents which has been flung out of its box and has arranged itself without the least regard to