HISTORY OF THE CLASS OF 1870: ENGLISH HIGH SCHOOL. WITH AN ALLEGORY

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W. EUSTIS BARKER & FRANK W. DARLING

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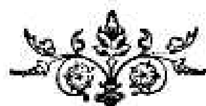

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HISTORY

OF THE

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ENGLISH HIGH SCHOOL.

On one of the bright October days which preceded this winter of 1877, I sauntered leisurely along Tremont Street, in the City of Boston, my attention being about equally divided between the busy throng hurrying by with preoccupied faces, on business intent, or sauntering aimlessly, like myself, between these and the shop windows filled with wares as varied in their character and as wide in their scope of nationality, if not wider, than the faces passing to and fro before them. At last I came to the store of one of our largest furniture dealers, in whose capacious window nestled, it seemed to me, incongruously among brilliant tapestries and highly-polished and ornate furniture, a plainly framed but large and fine photograph, labelled, "The New English High and Latin School Building."

Before this picture I stopped, and gazed upon its magnificent and graceful outlines. Cast in the simple grandeur which is the most beautiful of modern architecture, generous in extent, low and broad, airy and light, for one short moment I envied the prospective high school boy; envied him as I went my way and pondered on the age that he was coming into; the age of enlightenment and wisdom and generosity; the age when learning begins to take her place by the side of and walk hand in hand with the beautiful and the healthful. For in

spite of myself the picture of the old school-house would come into my mind, displacing the grand picture which I had just left. The old building came back, as I saw it first, and as you saw it, dear classmates of '70, on the hot July day in '67, when we stood in its narrow yard, where the hot sun poured in his melting rays until the rough bricks seemed to simmer in the heat, while, when we were in the dark rooms, cool by contrast, the same sun seemed to have deserted us and did not suffice to warm us, sitting there under the examining teacher's eye, gazing in despair at the inexorable papers with inexorable questions to be answered, forgetful of date, item, mood, tense, cape, river, or mountain, definition or orthography, in the newness and strangeness of the place, and our own awe of the stern examiner, who looked then the incarnation of all learning, and whom we never thought would be subject of our jokes in the future; or if we did think so we hurried the thought out of sight, lest the lynx-eyed master should detect it in our guilty hearts. But we get used to these things; familiarity, if it does not alway breed contempt, takes the sharp edge off of reverence, as a rule. But to return to the yard, or rather to the picture in my mind, for therein the yard holds a prominent place, as it was in the yard that we met, as each season of torture was over, to encourage or congratulate each other; to compare notes, coach up the shaky ones, cheer up the despondent, or gaze askance on our future classmates. There was a little of this, but not much, for the candidates from the different grammar schools clustered in excited groups, discussing their own chances and not caring much about the future relations of those around them. There used to be a melancholy patch of green sward, fenced in by iron railing, between the High and Latin buildings. A poor little patch of struggling grass, looking, oh, so lonely; so out of place, of such feeble emulation of the green pastures of the country; looking as though it longed for the sun, which it only saw when the vertical rays scorched its roots, and burnt out its little tender life! So forlorn did this look that I was glad to see it disappear, one day, that the place might be covered with the more appropriate bricks. But the

building rests in my eye now; the tall building, rearing its granite front between those even more ambitious, which shut out the much-needed light and air; and then inside, — well, all of us in '70 know the inside from roof to foundation. Did not the R. Society meet in the cellar? Well, they can describe its exits and entrances; and the circular stairway, with its well in the centre, where we used to drop ——, in fact, anything, on the heads below; the scarred, notched, and battered railing; the wide, airy hall at the top, and the dark, dirty rooms below; the master's desk on the right, the sink in the left hand corner, and the hard-used blackboard on two sides; are they not all familiar to us? But not to you, oh high school boy of the future. Light and elegance, and air and beauty; these will be your portion, and only see that you appreciate it, and do not let them pamper your education from you, but if you must know that to your fathers education was a stern duty, and in comfortless rooms, bare of ornament save such little marks as erratic sponges or other missiles might have left on the walls,— they garnered the wisdom which has made them plan out and realize, as they will, the splendid edifice which caught my eye and caused the opening of this sketch. And now to you, dear classmates, the writer turns, to revel with you in the scenes closely allied to the old school-house; to take you back to the dear old times, and leave to posterity a record, as far as it is possible to compile one, of the doings of the Class of 1870, written not consecutively, not chronologically, but as they come into the writer's mind, but always written without envy and without malice.

Silent and deserted has the old school-house been during the hot summer months, and the ripening leaves have commenced to turn red and yellow, and to fall and in turn get caught up and whirled away by September gales, ere the old school-house yard again resounds with merry talk and laughter, not to be hushed until the great bell rings and we troop in, and blundering into our respective rooms, sit down in silence to take our first impressions of the new life opening before us. No one ever will know the varied train of thought passing through the minds of the three hundred new boys

gathered in the old school-house, but I think most of us made high resolves. There was something to be proud of in our position;—we had taken such a long step. Emancipated from the grammar school, we stood on the threshold of a new and higher range of duties, in a new and curious world. The English High had always such a name! The wise men who had grown up from it were pointed out to us, and vague stories floated round of the number and magnitude of our studies, the fierceness of the masters, and the stupendous, practical jokes, that in the good old times had been played by former pupils. All these influences, combined with the sense of our dignity, instilled into our hearts a desire to live a braver, higher life, and our good resolutions lasted firmly until the newness had worn off, and then,—well, for what came then, and for the lessons which we learned not down upon the books, follow me, classmates, in the failures and triumphs, during three years of high school life.

The English High School began in 1867 to outgrow its present (1877) quarters. The number of admissions, during that year, was two hundred, and the candidates came from all classes of the grammar schools, whether wisely or not remains to be proved. In previous years, no candidates, unless showing especial excellence in all departments, had been admitted from any but the graduating classes of the grammar schools. In consequence of the departure from this rule in 1867, two growing evils, sapping at the very foundation of the principles of the High School, at once arose. The first of these was the necessary softening in the rigor of the primary examination, in order to allow second and third class scholars to compete successfully with first class, and the consequent reduction in the vigor of all following studies. The next evil was the admission of a large number of scholars of such widely differing extent of culture, as to give each master, not only a class which it lay beyond his power to instruct thoroughly and individually, from its size, but also a class where one portion must of necessity retard the rest. How far these evils may go, and what may be their effect ultimately upon the English High School, once the noblest monument of educa-

tion in Boston, it is not in the writer's province or power to determine; but that these evils did exist, and had a powerful effect upon the character and quantity of erudition imbibed by the average high school scholar, between 1867 and 1870, he does know from actual experience and an observation made supernaturally keen by an ardent love for the institution in question.

But our province is not with the high school management (but these little things will crop out here and there), but with the Class of 1870, which at the time of which we are writing, that is 1867, was not the unit which left in 1870. The parts of that unit were scattered into four different rooms, to be merged into two rooms in the second year, and then joined in one room, the remnant graduated on the third; hence the extreme difficulty of writing the history of the Class as a class. And indeed so difficult is the labor that I will leave it to some abler historian, and content myself with giving you the history of a member of the class. "But," cries my inquisitive hearer, "Who is he? can he properly represent the class?" "Right!" cry the chorus, so I will introduce him as Joseph Gillot, No. 351, so called because he never rose any higher; and now, classmates, he was always at the foot, was an Innocent, and an officer of the R. Society; can he not represent you? Listen and see.

Gillot's first week at the High School was under the eye of the gentleman whose tastes led him so deeply into botany, mineralogy, and the like, that he learned to despise any terminations which had not the sound of 'y;' hence his pronunciation of arnica, America, &c., was, to say the least, startling. With him Gillot's stay was short, for his high resolves not having lost their effervescence, he did so well that by the end of the week he was promoted, and placed under the care of a gentleman, whose name, as it was abbreviated by the boys, gave evidence that the missing link to the Darwinian theory might have been found. In this gentleman's room Gillot met with many kindred spirits, and endeavored as much as possible to relieve the monotony of our daily routine of study and recitation. However, he never overworked, although another fellow, whom we will call Smith, and Gillot did actually work

for five consecutive hours, over a problem in algebra. Many thanks they got for their pains, too; for although only those two had the right solution to the problem, instead of being lauded to the skies, as they would have been had they been at the head of the class instead of the foot, the whole class was called stupid, and set to work on the problem again, with more successful results; and no wonder, since nearly half of them borrowed work from the two successful candidates. That disgusted Gillot, and he did not do any very heavy work after that, so it was a matter of surprise when, at the end of the year, his name was found among the "twenty" who went "up." Perhaps our Darwinian master had a spite against the next higher, and amply paid it off in that way. One little story about Smith, before we lay him on the shelf. On declamation days he usually came out strong, and did the pathetic in a way to draw tears from Mark Tapley. One day, however, the pathos was not a success. Smith's piece was, "Move my arm-chair, faithful Pompey," which harrowing recitation had been rendered by hundreds of school-boys, in all stages of serio-comic sadness, and which Smith did very well until he got to the place where the venerable darkey is supposed to be shading the whites of his eyes, as he gazes intently down an imaginary river; here Smith, while in position, stuck fast for the next word, and stood gazing at vacancy, while half the class tittered, and sundry friends offered marvellously inappropriate words in stage whispers. However, Smith gave it up, and left the class in pleasing doubt as to what "faithful Pompey" saw, if, indeed, he saw anything.

It was in this class that we, for the first time, saw the French teacher who flourished during 1867-8-9, and here let us stop and give a description of this master, ere we pursue such a fruitful theme. One day the door of our room slowly opened, and a fat little figure, which, dressed in the traditional cowl and gown, would have been the beau ideal of one of the jolly friars of the Robin Hood period, came, with a succession of short bows, slowly into the room. A fat little figure, dressed in a dark coat, a silk waistcoat with flowers embossed upon it, a checked neck-tie, and a not over-clean white