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AN INTERLUDE

by Eugene Manlove Rhodes

I will not tell you where he lived; too much  
Already has been said; it would be spiteful,  
Many unkind remarks are made by such  
As live in places far, far less delightful.  
Be this enough--it may be plainly stated  
His mind was very highly cultivated.

Gilbert Winthrop Bradford Otis was, as might be inferred,  
descended from some of the best families.

He was young, healthy, strong, and his illusions had not been  
shattered. His parents were wealthy, and he had enjoyed every  
advantage. He had a maxima cum lauda from Harvard--vintage of '86.  
Natty and well-groomed he was, and his manners had the repose of  
the De Vere caste; a thing most excellent, however much we, who  
lack it, may sneer.

He had never known what it was to have a reasonable wish  
ungratified. Sorrow and grief had passed him by. Therefore,  
Gilbert Winthrop Bradford Otis was most unhappy.

When I first knew him, at Monterey, in '89 he had been on  
a two-years' tour of the world and was this far back on the  
homestretch. We met on the sand-hills beyond Pacific Grove, near  
the lighthouse, a lively rattlesnake doing the honors.

My attention was attracted by a wildly gesticulating figure  
in front of me "A snake!" it cried. I had a pocket-pistol with  
me and put a hole through his snakeship's head, thereby impressing  
Gilbert W. Bradford Otis very much.

He said, "Ah! an excellent shot, a splendid shot, may I  
inquire--er--where did you acquire your marksmanship?"

"But that isn't shooting--that's a trick. Anybody can do that. When you see it you think, 'Why, I ought to have knowed that--'"

"Known," he interrupted absently, and then paused, greatly confused. "Really, I beg your pardon most sincerely. The fact is I was meditating on the--er--reptile, and really did not observe what I was saying. Most impertinent of me, I assure you."

"Don't mention it," I rejoined. "The amendment is accepted."

"But you were telling me--er?"

"Oh, about, the trick. It's one of the hardest things in the world to find out for yourself, and one of the simplest after you are--er--shown. You get up pretty close, shove your gun at him, and pull the trigger just as he strikes. The snake does the aiming and hits the bullet with his head every time. It's another case of you touch the button and he does the rest."

"Most remarkable, but self-evident. Very interesting, I assure you. Pray do not think me too inquisitive, but your manner of handling the--er--gun denotes familiarity. May I inquire if you have had an army training?"

I dissembled my grief, and told him I was from New Mexico. He became interested at once, explaining that he had literary aspirations, and thought the frontier ought to furnish him admirable material.

He asked me many questions, taking notes the while. I am sorry to say that my answers were not, always veracious. He was in search of thrills, and it seemed a pity to disappoint him.

He was staying at the Hotel del Monte and we met frequently at the natatorium, where he was wont to do some spectacular high diving.

Invariably he took me out on the pier afterward and put on the thumb-screws, till I felt both memory and invention flagging, while he absorbed information at every pore.

He was not a bit patronizing or condescending, as I geographically expected, but he had an ingrowing habit of always correcting my frequent errors of speech.

I had dubbed him Miles Standish in the interest of economy. This annoyed him in his tender feelings, and sometimes I fancied he was taking this way of getting even. But most of the time it seemed to be hereditary.

At any rate a grammatical slip was always the signal for passage-at-arms.

On these occasions I took second money. He was on to the fine points of language. But I held him to a draw once, in the case of the word 'sick', which, he contended, applied strictly and only to a temporary malaise of the stomach and hence was a shocking sound to ears polite.

I stoutly maintained that there was a base conspiracy of those afflicted as to their ears to degrade a useful and respectable word in favor of an affectation, citing for the defense the well-known case of Peter's wife's mother, and the number of officers who apply for sick leave. If he was correct, military men must be subject to chronic dyspepsia. This rather staggered the purist.

Eventually we stirred up a sincere friendship, modified somewhat by the sense of superiority each naturally felt. And--one day he took me into his confidence. I gathered that he was suffering from too much undigested fiction.

It seems that his mother had picked out a nice New York girl for him one summer at Mount Desert. She was of the Livingston-

Scudder connection and resembled Barkis in one important particular.

This last bit of information was not given me by Miles S.--he was incapable of such a thing--but imparted to me long afterward by the lady herself. I can quite understand it, for Miles was a personable youth and distinctly eligible.

Obviously there was no romance in a marriage to which there were no insurmountable objections. Hence the globe-trotting.

On a little hunting trip to Sargent's Station several months before, he had met a charming Californienne, now at Pacific Grove attending Chautauqua.

This was a fine girl, too, and--having previously ascertained that there was Another, and that the Maternal Veto might reasonably be expected, inasmuch as the girl's parents were worthy, wholesome, hard-working people of the ancient family of Brown--G. W. Bradford Otis decided that he was madly and forevermore in love with her.

Miss Emily Brown refused him gently at first; then, as the habit, grew upon her, carelessly; and finally with some asperity; and G. Winthrop Bradford Otis reviled and reveled in his fate, and became irldustriously and energetically miserable, overtime and Sundays. He enjoyed himself hugely.

He was justly amazed, knowing the pit whence I was digged, to find that I could read coarse print. On observing this phenomenon his ideas took a new turn.

Having taken me into his confidence as to the state of his Lonely Heart, it was but a step farther to the Holy of Holies--and he showed me his literary efforts.

"Foamy," he said, with becoming diffidence, "I wonder if you would like to see some stories I have written?"

"I sure would. I never knew anyone who had wrote--"

Miles beat his breast. "Written--had written! What's the use of showing my stories to a man who makes such blunders, and refuses to learn either by observing others, or by being corrected.

"Really, one is forced to surmise that it is perversity, rather than carelessness, that makes you so abuse your verbs. Certainly you cannot plead ignorance, for I have been patiently explaining the theory and practise of past participles to you ever since we first met. And as to your persistent use of the word 'sure' as an adverb--- "

"'Tis pleasant, sure, to see one's name in print," I quoted, interrupting.

Miles flushed, nettled at the slur at his cherished aspirations.

"And who wrote that, pray?"

"Oh, a fellow named Gordon."

"Ah--one of your sage-brush sages? Scarcely a criterion, is he? Gordon--Gordon, I really never heard of him. What was his other name?"

"George--George Gordon. He was an Englishman."

Miles glared at me.

"Not Lord Byron? He didn't say that?"

"I believe he was a lord, or something of the sort. Anyway, he was one out of a hundred million--a very king of men. So it is immaterial about the lordship."

Miles flatly refused to believe this until he looked it up for himself; and I fancy that this finally decided him to show me his stories, after all.

Never have I enjoyed anything more than these productions of

the Slave of Hopeless Passion, read as they were in the light of his confidences.

He was entirely lacking in the sense of humor, but his language was classical, his imagination unsurpassed. I have never yet found the plot of a love-story that he had not either anticipated or benevolently assimilated.

But his character-drawing was limited. Harvey Lathrop (alias Miles Standish) carried Anna Roberts (Miss Emily Brown), a sprightly brunette with snapping brown eyes, from a burning building, just as it tottered to its fall.

Lyman Channing (Miles Standish) saved Isabel Rorrick (Miss Brown), a ravishing blond this time, from perishing on deep waters; and Miles Standish generally with various pseudonyms, gallantly rescued Miss Emily under manifold disguises as to name and personal attractions, from conspiracies, persecutions, sharks--finned and financial--rejected lovers of homicidal bent, mobs, a brutal soldiery, Indians, runaway horses, smallpox, railroad accidents, cyclones, earthquakes, floods, avalanches, snow storms (this was a cozy, comfy story, the best of the bunch), and every complication, peril, or predicament whatsoever, which, in any age or clime, the dispensations of Providence, the vagaries of Nature or the wickedness of man could inflict upon that much-enduring girl.

Sometimes constancy and noble devotion were rewarded as they deserved, but more often the rash and steadfast lover perished in his daring, or faded away into a welcome but untimely grave, the victim of blighted affection, while the lovely siren who had lured him to destruction wept over his pallid brow in vain regret--alas, too late! too late! It was most affecting.

His first rough draft was usually comparatively modest; in

the interlineations the plot thickened; in the fair copy every in aggravation possible to the situation was dragged in by main force, and the list of casualties increased like those of the men in buckram we wot of.

I remember that in the mob-story the hero originally overawed the evil-doers by his firm and dauntless bearing. Later he sacrificed one or two fellow creatures to his rising wrath. In the finished narrative a holocaust of mangled humanity marked his devastating course, and as the curtain fell to slow music Lathrop Adams and his lady-love were the only survivors. He was a most sanguinary man when aroused, despite his peaceful exterior.

Sometimes I have thought it rather a pity that the events about to be recorded dissuaded him from a literary career. He had a masterful and accurate command of language and firearms--on paper--and his methods were not dissimilar to those of other authors who have drifted into my ken.

As the summer wore on I left the grove for reasons not unconnected with the dollars of our daddies, leaving my disconsolate friend still engrossed in his sufferings.

If you have ever visited the Carmel Mission, you did not remark a large building of barnesque architecture a few hundred yards to the northwest of the church; a fine illustration of how much more sensible and artistic than the Spanish we are not.

But though you did not notice it, there it stands, an exaggerated dry-goods box, and I helped to build it.

I didn't have to, either. I had my choice, to do that or starve. And the memory of the mountain trout we had for breakfast every day is with me yet.

Meantime in Monterey the offspring of the Pilgrim Fathers

was in danger of being summarily ejected from his delightful garden, much as one of his remote forebears (mine as well) was driven from an earlier garden.

In his case the Angel of the Flaming Eyes informed him, in effect, that his attentions had lost their pristine charms, and custom had staled his infinite monotony. Further, she cast grave doubts on the sincerity of his great and passionate love, alleging, most unkindly, that his affections were preengaged.

This was too much. As a consistent hero there was but one course open to him.

He made a few judicious purchases, strapped them on his faithful ordinary, and set out on the Eighteen-Mile Drive.

As he passed through the grove he had a last glimpse of the scornful beauty who fatal charm had wrought him so much woe. She was walking with Ross Sargent, wearing his rhizome pin, and enjoying herself uncommonly well.

Little she knew, as she returned his grave salute with a maddening toss of her pretty head, unto what desolate and shoreless sea his desperate face was turned.

He rode on, grimly resolute, and saturated with gloom. At the Pescadaro, the Chinese fishing village, he left his wheel with an abalone-faced Celestial, and taking the bundle from the handlebars, stalked off down the seashore.

Now the prevailing southwest sea winds have so distorted the trees in this locality that the branches all grow on the northeast side giving them a maimed and pitiful appearance.

It has the further disadvantage of making most of them unsuitable to the design of Mr. Otis, which will presently appear. But he searched patiently until he found a promontory curving provi-

dentially around to the north, with a tiny arm of the sea on the east side. Even in that bitter hour it reminded him of his beloved Cape Cod.

A gnarled and hoary cypress, draped in ghostly Spanish moss, clutched its roots in the shattered granite, and its long arms extended over the water most conveniently.

He cast the last lingering look at sky and sea. I am glad to record that even in his extreme folly he refrained from writing the customary note implicating the adored one. Then he walked out on the lowermost branch, tied a slip-knot in the rope he had brought, adjusted it neatly to his neck, tied it to a higher limb-taking up the slack, as he did not wish to deprive himself of any last, lingering and luxurious sensations by prematurely breaking his neck.

Then, administering a liberal dose of laudanum, Gilbert W. B. Otis breathed the name of Emily, and stepped off.

As has been said on another occasion, "what followed then is worthy of attention."

The compression of the rope brought on a great difficulty in breathing, as may have been anticipated.

This eventually became most embarrassing, but all might have yet been well had not the perfidious juniper betrayed his confidence. A very traitor among junipers it was, for the limb upon which so much depended, unworthy of its high privilege, utterly belying its goodly exterior, broke incontinently, and W. Otis fell into the Pacific Ocean.

This mischance caused him much chagrin, and he tried to drown with laudable persistence; but the water was very, very wet, having besides an unpleasant, bitter flavor; his recreant body revolted at further outrage; his caitiff and rebellious limbs trained to

expert swimming, bore their deposed sovereign safely to a rock showing above the surface a dozen yards from shore; a veritable triumph of matter over mind.

There was one hope left him yet. But the moist and salty water he had swallowed brought on a violent nausea and the poison went to join McGinty.

Now this fell on a Sunday, and it had been predestined and foreordained from the foundations of the earth that at this juncture my weekly rowing expedition should have brought me just around the point.

I rowed to the cove and silently contemplated the pleasing tableau before me. Miles was stretched along the rock, barely out of the water, writhing in agony mental and physical. The rope was still around his neck, and he had towed the incriminating limb behind him to his refugee, where it prodded him malignantly with every wave, as if to add insult to injury.

From this evidence he had not yet found time, strength or inclination to disencumber himself; being as yet wholly engrossed by internal debate. To be or not to be was the question; the laudanum taking the negative.

Of course I couldn't guess what had really happened--nobody could. But I judged that his extremity was my opportunity. So I rested on my oars and inquired solicitously:

"What's the matter, Miles--are you ill? You seem much attached to that bit of timber. Been playing tug? I'm sure glad I seen you.

At this he raised his head feebly. "Not seen," he groaned, "not seen--saw."

Then it dawned upon him that my inquiry was prompted by malice.

and he cursed me vehemently,

"Go away, you hopeless barbarian--go away and let me die. Am I sick? Damn you, do you think I am doing this for fun?"

Here more consequences ensued, complicated, by this time, with shame and self-disgust.

I got him into the boat and started back to Carmel; Miles S., wet, miserable, wretched and retching, doubled up weakly over a thwart. I got the story out of him serially, between paroxysms, and incredible as it may seem he told it all. He must have been very sick.

Long before he had done I had joined him in the bottom of the boat, where I lay shrieking with laughter, abandoning our frail craft to the mercy of the powers that be.

Where, with his training, Miles acquired the weird but appropriate vocabulary which he used now in describing his gorgeous and unprecedented folly and reprobating my mirth I can't imagine.

Lurid and picturesque, too, were his threats of vengeance to be wreaked on me if I ever, here or hereafter, divulged his confidence to a living soul. The Pacific considerately forebore to drown us, but came so near that I was forced to take to the oars again.

On the way we arranged a compromise. I bound myself to reticence as to his exploits on the condition that he would let me order his goings for the for the next three months.

Further, I stipulated that I should thrash him as soon as he had sufficiently recovered, physically. This as a sop to my self-respect, which, I informed him, objected to my association with such a complicated ass.

That night we two rode over the mountains to Salinas, where,

at my suggestion, Miles S. wrote to his friends in Monterey, regretting that he had been suddenly called away by urgent business, dismissing his valet, and ordering his effects forwarded to Albuquerque.

As soon as he was able our fight came off, and I smote him grievously, explaining patiently between rounds what an unmitigated idiot he really was.

We went then to the hayfield, where Miles Standish's hands were blistered sore, his back was broken and those in authority spoke rudely to him.

Thence, when harvest began, to the heading at Matt Williams' home ranch and the Dumphries' place, where he started in as a net-jerker, clad in the garments that are always in fashion--a flannel shirt and blue overalls.

Two-fifty a day was his wage, hours 4 a.m. until half past dark, with five meals a day.

Stack-man he became thereafter, and driver--and his pride and joy when he was first deemed worthy to hold the lines over four lively bays on the header wagon was something pathetic.

The men were gathered together from the ends of the earth--San Francisco hoodlums, Danes, Swedes, Mexicans, Portuguese, and hoboos, with a sprinkling of Americans, mostly college men putting in their vacations), and in the field with us were Chinamen gleaning and threshing wild mustard by the methods that obtained before Confucius.

And every Sunday--unless the wheat was so ripe we had to work--G.W.B. Otis fought for his standing and to make mirth for those dissolute and abandoned ruffians.

I didn't assist at these festivities, having found my particular niche the previous summer; but I arranged privately with the

editors of the games that, he was not to be too grossly outmatched.

It was good for him--and there came a time when those of his weight and inches firmly declined any further collaboration with him. Whereafter Miles Standish walked with a becoming swagger, his hands deep in his pockets and his hat on the extreme northeastern corner of his head.

Long before the six thousand acres of the Dumphries ranch was headed, life had taken on a new meaning to Miles.

His face and arms were a healthy tan, his muscles were toughened and hardened, his hands were calloused (of which he was inordinately proud), his eye was clear and bright and his appetite tremendous.

His language had gained as much in force and directness as it had lost in precision. The primal curse became something more than a mere formula to him. Likewise, the words "thirsty" and "sleepy" became enlarged with new import to his intelligence.

We followed the ripening grain to Soledad and King's City--then the terminus of the railroad--and wound up at Peach Tree for the late mountain harvest.

Now that Sunday was no more a Roman holiday for Miles, he employed his scant leisure writing glowing descriptions of New Mexico scenery, manners, and morale, from data furnished by myself.

These were forwarded under cover to my friends in various points in that territory, to be forwarded to his mother and other correspondents. By like means the answers were returned to him--the shy aloofness of New Mexico post-offices serving to account for delays.

Looking back now after a lapse of fifteen years, it is easy

to see that our course of systematic deception was puerile and unworthy, and it is hard to see exactly why we perpetuated such a trick. But, at the time it seemed a brilliant, though obvious, thing to do.

When his three months were up he did not leave me, but took the back track with me on a thresher, where he officiated variously as round-about, straw-buck, hoe-down, and derrick-forker. Then I started skimming a six-mule team to haul the grain to warehouse, and he was my swamper.

But all things must have an end, and one evening, Miles called me out in the moonlight, thanked me for having been a good friend to him, and announced that he was to go in the morning.

"And now," he continued, "I am going to give you one most God-awful lickin'!" Which he proceeded to do in his thorough, painstaking, conscientious New England way.

"I had this in mind from the first, Foamy," he assured me as he rolled up his sleeves. "Else I would never have submitted to the indignity of being forced to fight with those ruffians."

"'Unhanged ruffians' is the customary phrase, I believe. But I don't in the least want to fight you," I protested.

"Ah!" observed Miles "Possibly--possibly. But that don't interest me, for you will fight me just the same."

"Doesn't, Miles," I corrected gravely. "Doesn't--not don't. Don't is the contraction for do not! Think how it would sound to say 'That do not interest me.'

"Alas! how evil associations have corrupted your good manners! If you compel me to fight you against my preference, how can you possibly justify yourself for saying that I 'will' to fight you?"

Miles, you make me shudder. I fear that you are a degenerate scion--- "

More I would have said, but at this point hostilities began, very suddenly.

Perhaps I may be excused from giving a detailed and accurate account of the battle. I did not get a good view of it at all, inasmuch as my impressions were extremely incomplete and fragmentary. And just at the last there is a slight hiatus in my recollection.

I pointed out to him, when I had sufficiently revived, that the match was most unfair, inasmuch as I had no incentive for fighting, save a desire to please; whereas he had a flourishing sense of personal dignity to reinstate and countless aspersions on his native city to avenge.

Miles said that was a mere detail; averring gleefully that, as he had always maintained, other things being equal, a citizen of--his birthplace--was superior to those less fortunate.. So we shook hands and parted with mutual good will and respect. He promised to visit us in New Mexico, and take a snubbing post-graduate course--but, the current of life caught him up and he never came back.

He went home, cured. The following spring he visited New York, married the young lady with the double-barreled name, and went into business with his father-in-law.

I visited them a few years ago, on which occasion Miles Standish presented me with the keys of the city on a lordly dish. His wife was very cordial to me, and evinced much curiosity as to how I had entrenched myself so firmly in the regard of her lord and master. I told her we had met in California, but did not go into details. (By the way, the adorable Emily married Sargent.)

Otis had a magnificent library, but it was all solid reading-- history, biography, essays, travels, science, philosophy, and so forth. The fiction and poetry was in his wife's special library, he said--he didn't care for that sort of thing.

He was for several terms a member of the New York Assembly, and was largely instrumental in securing the passage of the bill providing for electrocution in case of capital punishment.

As he was reelected as often as he would accept, it seems that his constituents were properly grateful. His name (which is not Otis) is still one to conjure with in certain districts of the metropolis.

I was told that in arguing for electrocution it was not so much his reasons as his manner of setting them forth that carried conviction. He seemed so very much in earnest, his converts stated. Hanging, he said, was painful.

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