

## An Old Autograph Album

In the 1870's the graceful two-story house of Peter Patrick Freeman, successful grocer in Iowa City, stood on Washington Street, where today rises the stream-lined building of the Iowa City *Press-Citizen*. The roof was sharply gabled and a pillared porch extended across the front and along one side. Within were high-ceilinged rooms with slender windows reaching to the floor. In the spacious parlors, floors were richly carpeted to the baseboard. Pieces of French-styled furniture, supported on delicate legs, were, perhaps, more ornamental than trustworthy. Their backs and seats were frames of walnut upholstered in pastel-shaded materials with an elaborate flower design so thickly padded as to cause discomfort for a too patient sitter.

Gold-framed paintings were of the best type of a period which discarded dignified steel engravings for the closer intimacy of portrayal in color. A tall mirror, encased in a moulded gilt frame, rose above the mantel and seemed to increase the depth of the parlors. Dangling crystals from intricate chandeliers tossed back twinkling lights and heightened the air of opulence which aided

the social background of four popular and attractive daughters.

Helen, the eldest, became eighteen on July 4, 1872; she was then entitled to enter "society" and "receive" young men callers. My imagination pictures her from childhood memories as she was when she became my aunt by marrying my uncle, Edward E. Brainerd. Dressed in the flowing skirts and the frills and furbelows of the period, she belonged in the formal parlor. Light, wavy hair was caught back loosely with a curl or two lingering along her neck. Her blue eyes were set off by her creamy skin and her delicate coloring was unemphasized by rouge or lipstick.

It is not surprising that her home in this mid-western university town was well supplied with young men callers. Of this there are indications in her old autograph album, today the treasured possession of her daughter, Mrs. Joseph F. Keirnan, of Kansas City, Missouri. The little book measures about six and one-half by four and one-half inches and is bound in leather, deep blue in color, tooled in gold around the edges, with the owner's name, Helen M. Freeman, in capitals on the front. To a considerable extent, the contents are not impersonal signatures, but a collection of poetic contributions, often original. The penmanship is frequently Spencerian.

The source of the album itself is not indicated. It bears no date nor any name of the giver. The opening leaf has an inscription on each side. On the first page some one wrote in shaded Spencerian:

My album's open, come and see  
What! wont you waste a thought on me?  
Write but a word, a word or two  
And make me love to think on you.

On the reverse side, admonitions being essential for genteel young ladies of those days, sweeping strokes present Pope's famous lines:

Beauties in vain their pretty eyes may roll;  
Charms strike the sight, but merit wins the soul.

Thus was Helen launched upon the next five years, bearing in her hands a tacit invitation to flattery and praise from the gallant sex, weaponed only with the warning on behalf of merit against the wiles of beauty.

Among earlier contributions are some stereotyped lines, evidently current for this popular pastime, but leaving much to be desired in the way of meter:

Storms may not retard us always,  
Brighter days will soon be here.  
Sorrow may oppress us often,  
Yet the jubilee is near; and as

You take your Western journey,  
 Let this reflection light your way  
 Nature's darkest hour is always  
 Just before the break of day.

O. J. Wolcott

A sincere evasion of the treacherous path of poetic fancy is dated May 21, 1873:

The most extravagant expressions of regard would fail to express my esteem for and admiration of the lady at whose request the undersigned autograph is written.

N. G. Ishbell

More subtle was Edward Chase, a smart young man who wrote this testimony to Helen's charm and beauty, addressing it to "Ah Sin":

To tell your *faults* would be too *thin*,  
 So this I'll leave to brother Finn.  
 To sing your *praises* would make me hoarse,  
 So this I'll leave to Charlie Vorse.

Your Friend Edward C. Chase

"Brother Finn" (C. L. Finn, a law student) reciprocated with:

Ah Sin

Had I the power to trace  
 The way in which you *turn* and *pace*  
 From the deck's bottom, in the face  
 Of old "Experts" like Doctor Chase  
 In law 'twould win me every case  
 On Earth I'd lack no rank nor place

But be the foremost in "Life's race"  
To get to Heaven I'd not need "grace".  
Its golden streets I'd walk apace  
And crowd the Angels into space  
Entice St. Peter from his place  
Open the door and let in "Chase".

Was it Charlie Vorse who wrote?:

Could I think that other faces  
Would of me blot out all traces  
From remembrance than endeavor  
Not to blot me out forever. Chas.

A single page dated January 1, 1874, seems to contain a list of New Year's callers. Among the signers were Perry E. Clark, who became a banker and skilled horseman, and James E. Berryhill, a future prominent lawyer in Des Moines. Carroll Wright, a future Des Moines lawyer and attorney for the Rock Island Railway, contributed, in a forthright masculine hand, a Scotch quotation. Charles Baker, then on the way to his place as a leading attorney in Iowa City, wrote his name in sturdy strokes. A rising clothier, Fred Sawyer, offered in delicate script a few lines suitable for a primary Sunday school class, from *Harper's* for August, 1873.

An interesting contribution is signed by W. J. Welch. Possibly Mr. Welch had already begun to develop "The Dresden", a superior china shop.

His Haviland sets were stamped on the bottom, "Made in Limoges, France, for Willard J. Welch, The Dresden, Iowa City, Iowa." In these lines we see intimations of his artistic nature:

Of thoughts and sayings well expressed  
In this little book at thy request  
I find they all do imbibe the same  
Spirit of address, to thy good name.  
La belle Helene doth oft appear  
The truth of which could I re-echo here!  
But as it is, so let it be,  
For of all the tributes payed to thee,  
There's none but what are justly due,  
And these I heartily repeat anew.  
For virtues rare and elegant grace,  
Mirrored all, reflect thy face.  
Now I close. This favor extend —  
Be ever my true, sincere friend!

W. J. Welch

John P. Irish, the editor of the *Democratic Press* in Iowa City, and a Democratic leader in the State, had served a term in the State legislature and had exerted a determining influence in establishing the Law College of the State University. He must have been barely thirty, with these mature activities already in his record, when, on April 3, 1874, he responded to Helen's request for "something" in her album. Library research uncovers no trace in any collection of verse, humor-

ous, or otherwise, of this clever bit, and we conclude that this touch of genius was offered solely for Helen's benefit.

Leda's little daughter, Helen,  
 Whose papa was a swan,  
 Of all fair girls in Attica  
 Was fairer than the dawn.  
 Ulysses loved her warmly,  
 And Ajax sued in vain,  
 For Menelaus was her favorite  
 And beat the royal twain.  
 But — fair Helen, false Helen!  
 Helen, wooed and won!  
 Parisian fashions ruined her,  
 As they often since have done.  
 Shall we blame the Grecian maiden?  
 Shall Troy's blood be on her head?  
 Is there not a maiden's reason  
 For the prankly life she led?  
 Her three good Grecian lovers  
 Weighed her worth in coarser scale,  
 As cold lovers weigh a sweetheart,  
 Like a fleece, or cotton bale.  
 But the Helens are all *jewels* —  
 Diamonds, at their best estate,  
 And like her should all be valued  
 By their lovers at *Troy* weight.

John P. Irish

W. W. Baldwin, of Burlington, a future attorney for the Burlington and Quincy Railway, made his contribution on May 9, 1875.

Amidst these intellectual flowers  
 Reared and culled in Cupid's balmy bowers  
 I have placed an Ivy, which when you see  
 Think of its emblem and of Will W. B.

In the back of the book, under the date February 9, 1876, Edward M. Doe, a willing admirer but a reluctant poet, wrote:

Helen

To give you praise in words is but your due  
 In rhyme — since you request — 'tis proper too.  
 With hair of gold and cheeks of rosy hue  
 To give your charms of which you've not a few  
 Each separate one its special meed and due  
 In short to show to ev'ry one that you  
 Are just the sweetest girl that ever grew  
 But then the measure (d-nt) wont come true  
 And what the D—l can a fellow do  
 So for the deed pray take the will in lieu  
 And ever let us be good friends and true.

An interesting feature is the number of foreign language quotations, a forgiveable display in the period when advanced education was highly prized. We have referred to the Scotch of Carroll Wright. George W. Lewis, a future grocer in Iowa City, used his inherited Welsh: *Eich Dyn*. Two young ladies wrote in French, probably learned in a convent. C. J. Dodge, from Burlington, son of Augustus Caesar Dodge, gallantly wrote, "*Amicos meos amo.*" A message in

Greek script is conveniently translated — “My life I love you.” Another contributor wrote in German script, “Ohne Gast und ohne R uhe”.

On a few pages in the latter half of the album are pasted slips of paper bearing autographs of well-known public writers and speakers, possibly some of those who appeared on the lecture platform in the city. The signature of George William Curtis, the distinguished editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* and polished essayist, is written in delicate flowing style, including his address, “West New Brighton, L. Island, N. Y. Oct 6/74.” The signature, Bret Harte, is written in small, neat, regular letters with the final “e” swept into a straight reverse line below. On a slip of ruled paper, in careless, self-assured hand is “Yrs truly R. G. Ingersoll.” It may be noted that none of these vigorous, original thinkers used the Spencerian penmanship.

To complete this group of national celebrities, we turn to the year 1876. Theodore Tilton, famous in pre-Civil War days as a strong Abolitionist and well-known as a popular lecturer, undoubtedly won Helen’s admiration. We may picture her, an appealing beauty of twenty-two, timidly offering her request in the hotel parlor. The gallant lecturer, at a writing desk with convenient pen and ink, in rotund strokes, greets her thus:

In this Centennial year, I bear you a hundred wishes for a thousand blessings on your head and heart — on your home and life.

Theodore Tilton

Much entertaining material has been necessarily omitted, but this little book of seventy years ago bears silent witness to a friendly social atmosphere, a bit of teasing fun, flattery, and refreshing spontaneity. We offer tribute to Helen Freeman's persuasive skill with her guests, and we add our appreciative thanks to the many who contributed in the spirit of friendly coöperation and "a good time".

FRANCES L. ROGERS