Annals of a Great American Publishing House.*

It was in 1817 that James and John Harper, the two eldest of the four brothers who established the great publishing house now known the world over, entered into a partnership under the style of J. & J. Harper, and started business as printers in a dingy little room in Dover Street, New York, where, as their first important piece of work, they superintended and largely executed in person the printing of Seneca's "Morals" for the elder Duyckinck, a bookseller of note in his time. The next year Locke's "Essay on the Human Understanding" was undertaken independently by the young printers, who first, however, secured enough orders from the booksellers to warrant the success of the enterprise.

Such were the beginnings of the "House of Harper," whose history is now traced by Mr. J. Henry Harper, one of the third generation of Harpers at present conducting the business handed down from fathers to sons for almost a century. The completion of the original quartet of printer-publishers took place in 1825, when Fletcher Harper, the youngest of the four brothers, entered the firm, two years after the third brother, Joseph Wesley Harper, had cast in his lot with the infant establishment. Then followed a steady and increasingly rapid development of the business, connections being formed with many of our leading writers, and considerable republishing of foreign works being also undertaken, with gratifying results to the house. Four times within three decades serious fire losses were sustained and quickly recovered from, the most disastrous calamity of the sort being that of 1853 in Pearl and Cliff Streets, where had been built the largest and best-equipped plant of its kind in the world, that of Brockhaus in Leipzig ranking next. The present fire-proof buildings, occupying the site of those destroyed, were erected with all possible speed after the clearing-away of the ruins; and as temporary quarters had meanwhile been secured, the regular business of the house was not interrupted for a single day.

Reverting to the foregoing reference to the Harpers' republication of English books, one finds some interesting notes on the subject in an early chapter of Mr. Harper's history, which may serve to correct a prevalent false impression. Voluntary payments in large sums have from the first been made to foreign authors whose works were brought out by the Harpers, although of course the publishers enjoyed until recently no copyright protection in making such ventures, and the authors could legally demand no royalties. To Dickens Harper & Brothers paid £1250 for "Great Expectations," to Thackeray £480 for "The Virginians," to Anthony Trollope £700 for "Sir Harry Hotspur," and to George Eliot prices ranging as high as £1700 for a single novel. Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, Macaulay, and many other English authors were liberally treated by the same house in the days before international copyright. The author adds that the record-books of many other prominent American publishers, some of whom he names, "would show a similar array of facts and figures, and make clear that while many people in this country and England were of the opinion that the editions of English books published in this country brought no pecuniary return to the authors, the facts were that large sums were regularly paid by American publishers for the privilege of a few days' priority. These arrangements were satisfactory, with few exceptions, to English authors, and were usually sought by them."

A most attractive feature of Mr. Harper's richly reminiscent book is the part devoted to the distinguished authors and editors and other literary or artist workers whose names have become associated with the Harper firm. Sometimes these persons are made to tell in part, in the form of letters or of especially prepared papers, the story of their connection with the house. Particularly interesting is the portion thus contributed by Mr. Howells, and not less welcome is the account of Mr. Henry M. Alden from Mr. Harper's pen; also full of entertaining recollections are the pages relating to Mark Twain, to George William Curtis, to General Lew Wallace, to Lafcadio Hearn and William Black and Mr. Thomas Hardy and numerous others. In Mr. Alden's own words occurs the following brief characterization of the four Harper brothers as he first knew them in the early sixties:

"For nearly six years after my connection with the establishment the beautiful association of the four Harper brothers remained unbroken. They were known among themselves and their intimates by sobriquets whose origin referred to a time far antedating my acquaintance with them. James was for obvious reason known as 'the Mayor'; John was 'the Colonel'; Joseph Wesley 'the Captain'; Fletcher 'the Major.' How

*The House of Harper. A Century of Publishing in Franklin Square. By J. Henry Harper. With portraits. New York: Harper & Brothers.

indelible in my memory are the faces of these men and their frankly disclosed characters!"

Of the good old-fashioned business methods of these gentlemen some pleasing glimpses are given. The subjoined anecdote, illustrating Fletcher Harper's winning manner in his daily routine, is here in place:

"Frederick Halpin was one of the last of the old steel-plate portrait engravers. He frequently did work for the House, which was always in the highest degree satisfactory. He had the artistic temperament, was gentle, modest and unobtrusive in manner. One day he brought in a portrait which he had engraved for the House, and it was taken to Mr. Fletcher Harper, who looked over the proof of the portrait very carefully. Turning to Halpin, he said most pleasantly, 'It is a very fine piece of work, Mr. Halpin; what is your bill?' Halpin said very modestly, as if almost ashamed to mention the sum, 'One hundred and fifty dollars.' 'Is that all?' said Mr. Harper; 'I wish for your sake it was more,' and he immediately paid the bill. Of course this is a small circumstance, but it is not always that successful business men meet demands upon them in the same cordial, encouraging spirit."

Fletcher Harper, by the way, was the grandfather of Mr. J. Henry Harper, and not unnaturally many instances are cited of his conspicuous ability as the head of the literary department of the business and supervisor of its work in illustration and of other details having to do with the artistic side of printing and publishing. But the other brothers also are shown in their characteristic traits. For example, of the eldest, we read:

"James Harper in many respects reminds one of Abraham Lincoln, or rather of what Lincoln would probably have been had a less heavy burden been laid upon his shoulders. There was the same keen sense of humor, the same fondness for jokes and witticisms, and the same readiness in finding or making an anecdote pat to the purpose. James's favorite way was to father his joke upon the person to whom he was speaking. Apropos of anything that came up he would say, 'That puts me in mind of what you told me once,' and then would come some story most likely invented on the spot. 'Why! Mr. Harper,' would come the response, 'I never told you that; in fact, I never heard it before.' 'It is quite possible,' would be the rejoinder, 'but if it was not you it must have been somebody else,' and then would probably come another story."

"A keener judge of character I never knew," says one of his old friends. "While apparently joking with a man, he was taking his measure, and in this he was rarely mistaken. If he thought him trustworthy there was no limit to his friendliness, not merely in word, but in act."

Mr. Howells's account of his connection with the Harpers should be read and enjoyed in its entirety. Near its close he says, in reference to the firm's reorganization of a dozen years ago and the placing of its affairs under the able management of Colonel Harvey:

"Since then I have remained attached to the House of Harper & Brothers, with no desire for any other business relations. As there is some superstition to the contrary, and authors and publishers are supposed to be natural enemies, I think I may properly testify here to the friendship which has always existed between my publishers and myself. I do not believe the instance is uncommon, at least in America, though I have heard terrible things about authors and publishers in England, while from my own Scotch publishers I have constantly experienced a consideration worthy of Franklin Square in the past and in the present."

Mark Twain, of whom some characteristic anecdotes are told in the book, regretted in later years that he had not assumed two pseudonyms, one for humorous and the other for serious productions. His historical and sociological study, "The Prince and the Pauper," was written, he himself declared, in entire seriousness and after months of careful reading-up on the period in which the little Prince and his Pauper double were supposed to have lived. But it was no use; the signature "Mark Twain" proved the ruin of the book as a sober and earnest piece of work. Hence the anonymity of his next attempt in similar vein, "Joan of Arc." "And did any of these literary highbrows suggest in all their ravings that it was a book of humor?" asks the author. "Well, I guess not! Mark Twain at last stood for something more than mere tomfoolery."

Mention must not be omitted of the chapter devoted to the cartoonist Nast and his part in breaking up the notorious Tweed Ring. The New York "Times," with Louis J. Jennings in the editorial chair and George Jones to back him up as proprietor of the paper, and "Harper's Weekly," with the genius of Nast in its service, fought mightily and effectively for municipal reform; and Mr. Harper's account of the campaign is good reading, and shows the House of Harper as a valiant champion of the right.

The last chapter of the book, except the brief "Conclusion," contains a full and eulogistic review of the business activity of Colonel George Harvey, the present president of the Harper corporation, and a many-sided genius whose commercial acumen and administrative ability promise well for the increasing future prosperity of the great publishing house under his direction. If its second century of achievement shall prompt some yet unborn Harper to produce as excellent and gratifying a record of progress as that just put forth in so handsome a form, with so much of literary charm, and so appropriately and richly illustrated, there will be only one thing to regret,—that we cannot be there to read it.

PERCY F. BICKNELL.