

## AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT

AMOS BRONSON ALCOTT was born at Wolcott, Conn., November 29, 1799, and died at Boston, Mass., March 4, 1888.

It is often noticed, when the tie between two lifelong associates is broken by the death of one of them, that the other shows the effect of the shock from that moment, as if left only half alive — *nec superstes integer*. So close was the intercourse, for many years, between Mr. Alcott and Mr. Emerson — so perfect their mutual love and reverence — so constant their coöperation in the kind of work they did and the influence they exerted — that it was difficult to conceive of Mr. Alcott as living long alone; and it seemed eminently appropriate that part of the remaining interval of his life should be employed in delineating his friend's traits. They were singularly different in temperament, and yet singularly united. They were alike in simplicity and integrity of nature, as well as in their chosen place of residence and in the elevated influence they exercised. In all other respects they were unlike. Mr.

Alcott was conspicuously an instance of what may be called the self-made man in literature. Without early advantages, and with no family traditions of culture, he took his place among the most refined though not among the most powerful exponents of the ideal attitude; whereas Mr. Emerson came of what Dr. Holmes called Brahmin blood, had behind him a line of educated clergymen, and had received the best that could be given in the way of training by the New England of his youth. Their temperaments were in many ways different: Emerson was shy and reserved, Alcott was effusive and cordial; Emerson repressed personal adulation, Alcott expanded under it; Emerson found in literature his natural function, Alcott came to it with such difficulty that Lowell wrote of him,

"In this, as in all things, a lamb among men,  
He goes to sure death when he goes to his pen."

Emerson's style was enriched by varied knowledge, his use of which made one always wish for more. Alcott's reading lay only in one or two directions, and his use of it was sometimes fatiguing. Emerson's most serious poems were prolonged lyrics; Alcott could put no lyric line into his grave and sometimes weighty sonnets. Emerson was thrifty, and a good steward of his own affairs; Alcott always seemed in a

stately way penniless, until the successful career of his daughter gave him ampler means. Emerson gave lectures with an air of such gracious humility that every hearer seemed to do part of the thinking; Alcott called his lectures "conversations," and then was made obviously unhappy if his monologue was seriously disturbed by any one else. Emerson's most startling early paradoxes were given with such dignity that those hearers most hilariously disposed were subdued to gravity; Alcott's most thoughtful sentences, at the same period, sometimes came with such a flavor of needless whimsicality as to make even the faithful smile.

Yet there was between them a tie as incapable of severance as that which united the Siamese twins. Mr. Emerson found in the once famous Chardon-Street and Bible Conventions no result so interesting as the "gradual but sure ascendancy" of Mr. Alcott's spirit — "in spite," wrote this plain-spoken friend, "of the incredulity and derision with which he is at first received, and in spite, we might add, of his own failures." Mr. Alcott, as has been said, devoted his last years to the delineation of Emerson as the greatest of men. Yet so sincere was this mutual admiration, so noble this love, that it is impossible to speak of it with anything but reverence; and the far wider

fame and influence of Emerson made it for Alcott, during his whole life, an immense advantage to have the unfailing support of a friend so eminent.

For it must be remembered that during many years the public was scarcely in the habit of taking Mr. Alcott seriously. It received him, as Emerson said, "with incredulity and derision." His antecedents seemed a little questionable, to begin with. Born in a country village in Connecticut, and occupied for many years in the humble vocation of a traveling salesman in Virginia, — not to say peddler, — he came, in 1828, before the somewhat narrow intellectual circles of Boston in a wholly different light from Emerson, who had every advantage of local prestige. Alcott's school, which became celebrated through the "Record of a School," by his friend and assistant, Miss Elizabeth P. Peabody (Boston, 1835; 2d ed., 1836), was generally regarded as coming near the edge of absurdity, because of the rather obtrusive reverence paid in it to the offhand remarks of children six years old, and because of the singular theory of vicarious punishment which sometimes led to the giving of physical pain to teacher instead of pupil. Yet this school undoubtedly anticipated in some respects the views of teaching now recognized; it won

the warm approval of James Pierrepont Greaves, the pupil and English interpreter of Pestalozzi; and it led to the establishment of an "Alcott House School" at Ham (Surrey), in England, by Henry G. Wright, afterward Mr. Alcott's colaborer in another direction. Mr. Alcott himself visited this school in 1842, and was lionized to his heart's content — which is saying a good deal — among English reformers. Some account of this visit and of the English enterprise will be found in a paper by Mr. Emerson in the "Dial" for October, 1842. Mr. Alcott's first conspicuous social movement was in the very vague direction of the Fruitlands Community, at Harvard, Mass., a scheme which was as much wilder than Brook Farm as Brook Farm was than Stewart's dry-goods shop, and which was amusingly delineated by Miss Louisa Alcott in one of her minor sketches. His first intellectual demonstrations were in the "Orphic Sayings" of the "Dial," which were regarded at the time as the *reductio ad absurdum* of those daring pages. How were people to take a man seriously who wrote, "The popular genesis is historical," and "Love globes, wisdom orbs everything"? These sentences now seem quite harmless, though perhaps a little enigmatical; but they were then held to be the worst shibboleth of that new bugbear, Tran-

scendentalism; and they represented the most unpopular aspect of the "Dial," while the more plain-spoken essays of Theodore Parker were what sold the numbers, so far as they ever did sell. Then, what Mr. Alcott called conversations, in his earlier days, were such startling improvisations, so full of seemingly studied whim and utter paradox, that those who went to learn remained to smile. There was plenty of thought in them, and much out-of-the-way literary knowledge; but, after all, the theories of race, food, genesis, and what not, left but little impression on the public mind. It awakened some surprise when the first volume of "Appletons' Cyclopædia" (in 1857) contained a sketch of Alcott, written by Emerson. Thenceforward Alcott's claim to recognition stood on a basis a little firmer; but he had up to this time paid the price which a hopelessly ideal temperament must pay before it has established its right to live.

It was fortunate for Mr. Alcott that with this ideal tendency he combined in a high degree the qualities of moral and physical courage which have in all ages been held essential to the true sage. This was hardly tested in the milder and safer reforms, in which he took a certain enjoyment, partly founded on the prominence they gave him. He was unquestionably

one of those who like to sit upon a platform, to be pointed out, *digito monstrari*, and he may have liked to feel that his venerable aspect had the effect of a benediction. But he was equally true to the anti-slavery movement, when that meant the sacrifice of friends, the diminution of his always scanty finances, and even the physical danger involved in mobs. Once at least, in a notable instance, he proved himself personally brave when many others seemed cowards, this being on the night of the attempted rescue of the fugitive Anthony Burns, in Boston (May 26, 1854).<sup>1</sup>

It is probably true that in the later years of his life Mr. Alcott felt some reaction from the theological radicalism which at one time marked him, and which made him in this direction a source of influence over others. At the first annual meeting of the Free Religious Association in 1868, he affirmed his belief of the simple humanity of Jesus Christ, and of the essential identity of all forms of the religious sentiment. He said of this position:—

"So fine, so sublime a religion as ours, older than Christ, old as the Godhead, old as the soul, eternal as the heavens, solid as the rock, *is and only is*; nothing else is but that, and it

<sup>1</sup> For the details of Mr. Alcott's demeanor during this little incident see my *Cheerful Yesterdays*, p. 148.

is in us and is us; and nothing is our real selves but that in the breast."

So identified was he with the whole spirit of that meeting as to say of it, "I have seen many charmed days, and shared sublime hopes; but this, of all days I have yet seen, is the most sublime." But during the later years of his life, though he shared in the very last meeting of this same Association, he seemed to revert more towards the historical Christianity in which his childhood was reared, taking an active part in various "symposia" held by Mr. Joseph Cook, at which the veteran free-thinker was received with many blandishments, and was introduced without compunction to strangers as "Mr. Alcott, the American Plato."

Mr. Alcott's published volumes were as follows: "Conversations with Children on the Gospels, conducted and edited by A. B. Alcott," 2 vols. (Boston: Munroe, 1836-37); "Spiritual Culture, or Thoughts for the Consideration of Parents and Teachers" (Boston: Dowe, 1841 [this was anonymous, but was attributed to Mr. Alcott by Charles Lane in "Dial" iii. 417]); "Tablets" (Boston: Roberts, 1868); "Concord Days" (Boston: Roberts, 1872); "Sonnets and Canzonets" (Boston: Roberts, 1882). To these must be added a preliminary sketch of Emerson, printed but not

published, and also many contributions to the "Dial" (1840-44), the "Radical," and other magazines. In the "Atlantic Monthly," (ix. 443) he wrote one of the best sketches yet made of Thoreau, under the title "The Forester." But he was less disposed to pride himself upon his books than upon his chosen mode of influence, conversation; and it was through this, rather than by anything placed in the permanent record of print, that his influence was exerted. He wrote in the "Dial," in 1842, "We must come to the simplest intercourse — to Conversation and the Epistle. These are most potent agencies — the reformers of the world" (ii. 431). And he might well feel it a tribute to his real power in this chosen form of propagandism, that, after his audiences in the Eastern States had grown less numerous and less attentive, he should have found a wide circle scattered through different Western cities, where parlors and pulpits were opened to him for an annual tour of conversation and discourse, sending him back each year happy, refreshed, and — wonder of all wonders — with money in his purse.

Mr. Alcott contributed even less than Emerson to anything that can be called systematic thought; he was indeed by nature more remote than Emerson from anything to be called a sys-

tem. Yet the good that he did was not merely fragmentary and sporadic; it might rather be called, using one of his own high-sounding adjectives, atmospheric; it lay in the atmosphere of the man, his benign face, his pure life, his only too willing acceptance of everything that looked like original thought in others. More than all, it lay in the persistent moral activity that could outlive what Emerson called his "failure," could outgrow the censure of his critics, outgrow even his earlier self. In some respects he always remained the same, even to his weaknesses; there was always a certain air of high-souled attitudinizing; he still seemed to be in a manner "an innocent charlatan." Even his latest achievement, the "Concord Summer School of Philosophy," had always an indefinable air of posing for something that it was not. It undoubtedly fulfilled Mr. Alcott's most delicious visions to find himself the centre of an admiring group of young disciples, having the Assabet River for an Ilissus and the Concord elms for the historic plane-trees; but, after all, the institution, like its name, was a little incongruous; there was plenty of summer, something of philosophy, and very little school. Probably most of those who were assembled came simply with a desire to place themselves in contact with Mr. Alcott;

and this was the highest compliment they could pay him. They instinctively felt, as all may well feel, that the essential fidelity of the man to great abstract principles made him a living exponent, not merely of the temporary school of Transcendentalism, but of the whole ideal attitude. Now that he has passed away, all his little vanities, if he had them, — all his oracular way of peering into the dark and winning but little out of it, — these defects, if they were defects, disappear in the sweetness and dignity of a life so prolonged and so honorable. There lives no man who ever found in Mr. Alcott an enemy; there exists no man who ever went to him for counsel and found him unsympathetic or impatient; while there are many men who, at the forming period of their intellectual existence, have derived from him a lifelong impetus towards noble aims.