The Professor's Commencement

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THE professor sat at his library table at six o'clock in the morning. He had risen with the sun, which is up betimes in June. An uncut volume of "Huxley's Life and Letters" lay open on the table before him, but he tapped the pages absently with his paper−knife and his eyes were fixed unseeingly on the St. Gaudens medallion of Stevenson on the opposite wall. The professor's library testified to the superior quality of his taste in art as well as to his wide and varied scholarship. Only by a miracle of taste could so unpretentious a room have been made so attractive; it was as dainty as a boudoir and as original in color scheme as a painter's studio. The walls were hung with photographs of the works of the best modern painters, — Burne−Jones, Rossetti, Corot, and a dozen others. Above the mantel were delicate reproductions in color of some of Fra Angelica's* most beautiful paintings. The rugs were exquisite in pattern and color, pieces of weaving that the Professor had picked up himself in his wanderings in the Orient. On close inspection, however, the contents of the book−shelves formed the most remarkable feature of the library. The shelves were almost equally apportioned to the accommodation of works on literature and science, suggesting a form of bigamy rarely encountered in society. The collection of works of pure literature was wide enough to include nearly all the major languages of modern Europe, besides the Greek and Roman classics.

To an interpretive observer nearly everything that was to be found in the Professor's library was represented in his personality. Occasionally, when he read Hawthorne's "Great Stone Face" with his classes, some clear sighted student wondered whether the man ever realized how completely he illustrated the allegory in himself. The Professor was truly a part of all that he had met, and he had managed to meet most of the good things that the mind of man had desired. In his face there was much of the laborious precision of the scientist and not a little of Fra Angelico and of the lyric poets whose influence had prolonged his youth well into the fifties. His pupils always remembered the Professor's face long after they had forgotten the things he had endeavored to teach them. He had the bold, prominent nose and chin of the oldest and most beloved of American actors, and the high, broad forehead which Nature loves to build about her finely adjusted minds. The grave, large outlines of his face were softened by an infinite kindness of mouth and eye. His mouth, indeed, was as sensitive and mobile as that of a young man, and, given certain passages from "Tristram and Isolde" or certain lines from Heine, his eyes would flash out at you like wet corn−flowers after a spring shower. His hair was very thick, straight, and silver white. This, with his clear skin, gave him a somewhat actor−like appearance. He was slight of build and exceedingly frail, with delicate, sensitive hands curving back at the finger ends, with dark purple veins showing prominently on the back. They were exceedingly small, white as a girl's, and well−kept as a pianist's.

As the Professor sat caressing his Huxley, a lady entered.

"It is half past six, Emerson, and breakfast will be served at seven." Anyone would have recognized her as the Professor's older sister, for she was a sort of simplified and expurgated edition of himself, the more alert and masculine character of the two, and the scholar's protecting angel. She wore a white lace cap on her head and a knitted shawl about her shoulders. Though she had been a widow for twenty−five years and more, she was always called Miss Agatha Graves. She scanned her brother critically and having satisfied herself that his linen was immaculate and his white tie a fresh one, she remarked, "You were up early this morning, even for you."

"The roses never have the fragrance that they have in the first sun, they give out their best then," said her brother nodding toward the window where the garden roses thrust their pink heads close to the screen as though they would not be kept outside. "And I have something on my mind, Agatha," he continued, nervously fingering the sandalwood paper−cutter, "I feel distraught and weary. You know how I shrink from changes of any sort, and this — why this is the most alarming thing that has ever confronted me. It is absolutely cutting my life off at the stalk, and who knows whether it will bud again?"

Miss Agatha turned sharply about from the window where she had been standing, and gravely studied her

brother's drooping shoulders and dejected figure.

"There you go at your old tricks, Em," she remonstrated. "I have heard many kinds of ability attributed to you, but to my mind no one has ever put his finger on the right spot. Your real gift is for getting all the possible pain out of life, and extracting needless annoyance from commonplace and trivial things. Here you have buried yourself for the best part of your life in that High School, for motives Quixotic to an absurdity. If you had chosen a University I should not complain, but in that place all your best tools have rusted. Granted that you have done your work a little better than the people about you, it's no great place in which to excel, — a city high school where failures in every trade drift to teach the business they cannot make a living by. Now it is time that you do something to justify the faith your friends have always had in you. You owe something to them and to your own name."

"I have builded myself a monument more lasting than brass," quoted the Professor softly, balancing the tips of his slender fingers together.

"Nonsense, Emerson!" said Miss Agatha impatiently. "You are a sentimentalist and your vanity is that of a child. As for those slovenly persons with offensive manners whom you call your colleagues, do you fancy they appreciate you? They are as envious as green gourds and their mouths pucker when they pay you compliments. I hope you are not so unsophisticated as to believe all the sentimental twaddle of your old students. When they want recommendations to some school board, or run for a city office and want your vote, they come here and say that you have been the inspiration of their lives, and I believe in my heart that you are goose enough to accept it all."

"As for my confreres," said the Professor smiling, "I have no doubt that each one receives in the bosom of his family exactly the same advice that you are giving me. If there dwell an appreciated man on earth I have never met him. As for the students, I believe I have, to some at least, in a measure supplied a vital element that their environment failed to give them. Whether they realize this or not is of slight importance; it is in the very nature of youth to forget its sources, physical and mental alike. If one labors at all in the garden of youth, it must be free from the passion of seeing things grow, from an innate love of watching the strange processes of the brain under varying influences and limitations. He gets no more thanks than the novelist gets from the character he creates, nor does he deserve them. He has the whole human comedy before him in embryo, the beginning of all passions and all achievements. As I have often told you, this city is a disputed strategic point. It controls a vast manufacturing region given over to sordid and materialistic ideals. Any work that has been done here for aesthetics* cannot be lost. I suppose we shall win in the end, but the reign of Mammon has been long and oppressive. You remember when I was a boy working in the fields how we used to read Bunyan's "Holy War" at night? Well, I have always felt very much as though I were keeping the Ear Gate of the town of Mansoul, and I know not whether the Captains, who succeed me be trusty or no."

Miss Agatha was visibly moved, but she shook her head. "Well, I wish you had gone into the church, Emerson. I respect your motives, but there are more tares than wheat in your crop, I suspect."

"My dear girl," said the Professor, his eye brightening, "that is the very reason for the sowing. There is a picture by Vedder of the Enemy Sowing Tares at the foot of the cross, and his seeds are golden coins. That is the call to arms; the other side never sleeps; in the theatres, in the newspapers, in the mills and offices and coal fields, by day and by night the enemy sows tares."

As the Professor slowly climbed the hill to the High School that morning, he indulged in his favorite fancy, that the old grey stone building was a fortress set upon the dominant acclivity of that great manufacturing city, a stronghold of knowledge in the heart of Mammon's kingdom, a Pharos to all those drifting, storm−driven lives in the valley below, where mills and factories thronged, blackening the winding shores of the river, which was dotted with coal barges and frantic, puffing little tugs. The High School commanded the heart of the city, which was like that of any other manufacturing town — a scene of bleakness and naked ugliness and of that remorseless desolation which follows upon the fiercest lust of man. The beautiful valley, where long ago two limpid rivers met at the foot of wooded heights, had become a scorched and blackened waste. The river banks were lined with bellowing mills which broke the silence of the night with periodic crashes of sound, filled the valley with heavy carboniferous smoke, and sent the chilled products of their red forges to all parts of the known world, — to fashion railways in Siberia, bridges in Australia, and to tear the virgin soil of Africa. To the west, across the river, rose the steep bluffs, faintly etched through the brown smoke, rising five hundred feet, almost as sheer as a

precipice, traversed by cranes and inclines and checkered by winding yellow paths like sheep trails which lead to the wretched habitations clinging to the face of the cliff, the lairs of the vicious and the poor, miserable rodents of civilization. In the middle of the stream, among the tugs and barges, were the dredging boats, hoisting muck and filth from the clogged channel. It was difficult to believe that this was the shining river which tumbles down the steep hills of the lumbering district, odorous of wet spruce logs and echoing the ring of axes and the song of the raftsmen, come to this black ugliness at last, with not one throb of its woodland passion and bright vehemence left.

For thirty years the Professor's class−room had overlooked this scene which caused him unceasing admiration and regret. For thirty years he had cried out against the image set up there as the Hebrew prophets cried out against the pride and blind prosperity of Tyre. Nominally he was a professor of English Literature, but his real work had been to try to secure for youth the rights of youth; the right to be generous, to dream, to enjoy; to feel a little the seduction of the old Romance, and to yield a little. His students were boys and girls from the factories and offices, destined to return thither, and hypnotized by the glitter of yellow metal. They were practical, provident, unimaginative, and mercenary at sixteen. Often, when some lad was reading aloud in the class−room, the puffing of the engines in the switch yard at the foot of the hill would drown the verse and the young voice entirely, and the Professor would murmur sadly to himself: "Not even this respite is left to us; even here the voice of youth is drowned by the voice of the taskmaster that waits for them all impatiently enough."

Never had his duty seemed to call him so urgently as on this morning when he was to lay down his arms. As he entered the building he met the boys carrying palms up into the chapel for class−day exercises, and it occurred to him for the first time that this was his last commencement, a commencement without congratulations and without flowers. When he went into the chapel to drill the seniors on their commencement orations, he was unable to fix his mind upon his work. For thirty years he had heard youth say exactly the same thing in the same place; had heard young men swear fealty to the truth, pay honor to the pursuit of noble pleasures, and pledge themselves "to follow knowledge like a sinking star beyond the utmost bound of human thought." How many, he asked himself, had kept their vows? He could remember the occasion of his own commencement in that same chapel; the story that every senior class still told the juniors, of the Professor's humiliation and disgrace when, in attempting to recite "Horatius at the Bridge," he had been unable to recall one word of the poem following

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"Then out spake bold Horatius
The Captain of the gate;"
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and after some moments of agonizing silence he had shame−facedly left the platform. Even the least receptive of the Professor's students realized that he had risen to a much higher plane of scholarship than any of his colleagues, and they delighted to tell this story of the frail, exquisite, little man whom generations of students had called "the bold Horatius."

All the morning the Professor was busy putting his desk and bookcases in order, impeded by the painful consciousness that he was doing it for the last time. He made many trips to the window and often lapsed into periods of idleness. The room had been connected in one way and another with most of his intellectual passions, and was as full of sentimental associations for him as the haunts of his courtship days are to a lover. At two o'clock he met his last class, which was just finishing "Sohrab and Rustum," and he was forced to ask one of the boys to read and interpret the majestic closing lines on the "shorn and parceled oxus." What the boy's comment was the Professor never knew, he felt so close a kinship to that wearied river that he sat stupefied, with his hand shading his eyes and his fingers twitching. When the bell rang announcing the end of the hour; he felt a sudden pain clutch his heart; he had a vague hope that the students would gather around his desk to discuss some point that youth loves to discuss, as they often did, but their work was over and they hurried out, eager for their freedom, while the professor sat helplessly watching them.

That evening a banquet was given to the retiring professor in the chapel, but Miss Agatha had to exert all her native power of command to induce him to go. He had come home so melancholy and unnerved that after laying out his dress clothes she literally had to put them on him. When he was in his shirt sleeves and Miss Agatha had

carefully brushed his beautiful white hair and arranged his tie, she wheeled him sharply about and retreated to a chair.

"Now Emerson, say your piece," she commanded.

Plucking up his shirt sleeves and making sure of his cuffs, the Professor began valiantly:

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"Lars Porsena of Clusium
By the nine gods he swore,"
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It was all Miss Agatha's idea. After the invitations to the banquet were out and she discovered that half−a−dozen of the Professor's own classmates and many of his old students were to be present, she divined that it would be a tearful and depressing occasion. Emerson, she knew, was an indifferent speaker when his heart was touched, so she had decided that after a silence of thirty−five years Horatius should be heard from. The idea of correcting his youthful failure in his old age had rather pleased the Professor on the whole, and he had set to work to memorize Lord Macaulay's lay, rehearsing in private to Miss Agatha, who had drilled him for that fatal exploit of his commencement night.

After this dress rehearsal the Professor's spirits rose, and during the carriage ride he even made several feeble efforts to joke with his sister. But later in the evening when he sat down at the end of the long table in the dusky chapel, green with palms for commencement week, he fell into deep depression. The guests chattered and boasted and gossiped, but the guest of honor sat silent, staring at the candles. Beside him sat old Fairbrother, of the Greek department, who had come into the faculty in the fifth year of Graves's professorship, and had married a pretty senior girl who had rejected Graves's timid suit. She had been dead this many a year; since his bereavement lonely old Fairbrother had clung to Graves, and now the Professor felt a singular sense of support in his presence.

The Professor tried to tell himself that now his holiday time had come, and that he had earned it; that now he could take up the work he had looked forward to and prepared for for years, his History of Modern Painting, the Italian section of which was already practically complete. But his heart told him that he had no longer the strength to take up independent work. Now that the current of young life had cut away from him and into a new channel, he felt like a ruin of some extinct civilization, like a harbor from which the sea has receded. He realized that he had been living by external stimulation from the warm young blood about him, and now that it had left him, all his decrepitude was horribly exposed. All those hundreds of thirsty young lives had drunk him dry. He compared himself to one of those granite colossi of antique lands, from which each traveller has chipped a bit of stone until only a mutilated torso is left.

He looked reflectively down the long table, picking out the faces of his colleagues here and there, souls that had toiled and wrought and thought with him, that simple, unworldly sect of people he loved. They were still discussing the difficulties of the third conjugation, as they had done there for twenty years. They were cases of arrested development, most of them. Always in contact with immature minds, they had kept the simplicity and many of the callow enthusiasms of youth. Those facts and formulae which interest the rest of the world for but a few years at most, were still the vital facts of life for them. They believed quite sincerely in the supreme importance of quadratic equations, and the rule for the special verbs that govern the dative was a part of their decalogue. And he himself — what had he done with the youth, the strength, the enthusiasm and splendid equipment he had brought there from Harvard thirty years ago? He had come to stay but a little while — five years at the most, until he could save money enough to defray the expense of a course in some German university. But then the battle had claimed him; the desire had come upon him to bring some message of repose and peace to the youth of this work−driven, joyless people, to cry the name of beauty so loud that the roar of the mills could not drown it. Then the reward of his first labors had come in the person of his one and only genius; his restless, incorrigible pupil with the gentle eyes and manner of a girl, at once timid and utterly reckless, who had seen even as Graves saw; who had suffered a little, sung a little, struck the true lyric note, and died wretchedly at three−and−twenty in his master's arms, the victim of a tragedy as old as the world and as grim as Samson, the Israelite's.

He looked about at his comrades and wondered what they had done with their lives. Doubtless they had

deceived themselves as he had done. With youth always about them, they had believed themselves of it. Like the monk in the legend they had wandered a little way into the wood to hear the bird's song — the magical song of youth so engrossing and so treacherous, and they had come back to their cloister to find themselves old men — spent warriors who could only chatter on the wall, like grass−hoppers and sigh at the beauty of Helen as she passed.

The toasts were nearly over, but the Professor had heard none of the appreciative and enthusiastic things that his students and colleagues had said of him. He read a deeper meaning into this parting than they had done and his thoughts stopped his ears. He heard Miss Agatha clear her throat and caught her meaning glance. Realizing that everyone was waiting for him, he,* blinked his eyes like a man heavy with sleep and arose.

"How handsome he looks," murmured the woman looking at his fine old face and silver hair. The Professor's remarks were as vague as they were brief. After expressing his thanks for the honor done him, he stated that he had still some work to finish among them, which had been too long incomplete. Then with as much of his school−boy attitude as he could remember, and a smile on his gentle lips, he began his

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"Lars Porsena of Clusium, by the Nine
     Gods he swore
That the proud house of Tarquin should
     suffer wrong no more."
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A murmur of laughter ran up and down the long table, and Dr. Maitland, the great theologian, who had vainly tried to prompt his stage−struck fellow graduate thirty−five years ago, laughed until his nose glasses fell off and dangled across his black waistcoat. Miss Agatha was highly elated over the success of her idea, but the Professor had no heart in what he was doing, and the merriment rather hurt him. Surely this was a time for silence and reflection, if ever such time was. Memories crowded upon him faster than the lines he spoke, and the warm eyes turned upon him, full of pride and affection for their scholar and their "great man," moved him almost beyond endurance.

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" — the Consul's brow was sad
And the Consul's speech was low,"
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he read, and suited the action marvellously to the word. His eyes wandered to the chapel rostrum. Thirty−five years ago he had stood there repeating those same lines, a young man, resolute and gifted, with the strength of Ulysses and the courage of Hector, with the kingdoms of the earth and the treasures of the ages at his feet, and the singing rose in his heart; a spasm of emotion contracted the old man's vocal cords.

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Outspake the bold Horatius,
The Captain of the gate."
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he faltered; — his white hand nervously sought his collar, then the hook on his breast where his glasses usually hung, and at last tremulously for his handkerchief; then with a gesture of utter defeat, the Professor sat down. There was a tearful silence; white handkerchiefs fluttered down the table as from a magician's wand, and Miss Agatha was sobbing. Dr. Maitland arose to his feet, his face distorted between laughter and tears. "I ask you all," he cried, "whether Horatius has any need to speak, for has he not kept the bridge these thirty years? God bless him!"

"It's all right, so don't worry about it, Emerson," said Miss Agatha as they got into the carriage. "At least they were appreciative, which is more than I would have believed."

"Ah, Agatha," said the Professor, wiping his face wearily with his crumpled handkerchief, "I am a hopeless dunce, and you ought to have known better. If you could make nothing of me at twenty, you showed poor judgment to undertake it at fifty−five. I was not made to shine, for they put a woman's heart in me."