While on the Hill

A STROLL DOWN CHESTNUT STREET

By

Charlotte Greene

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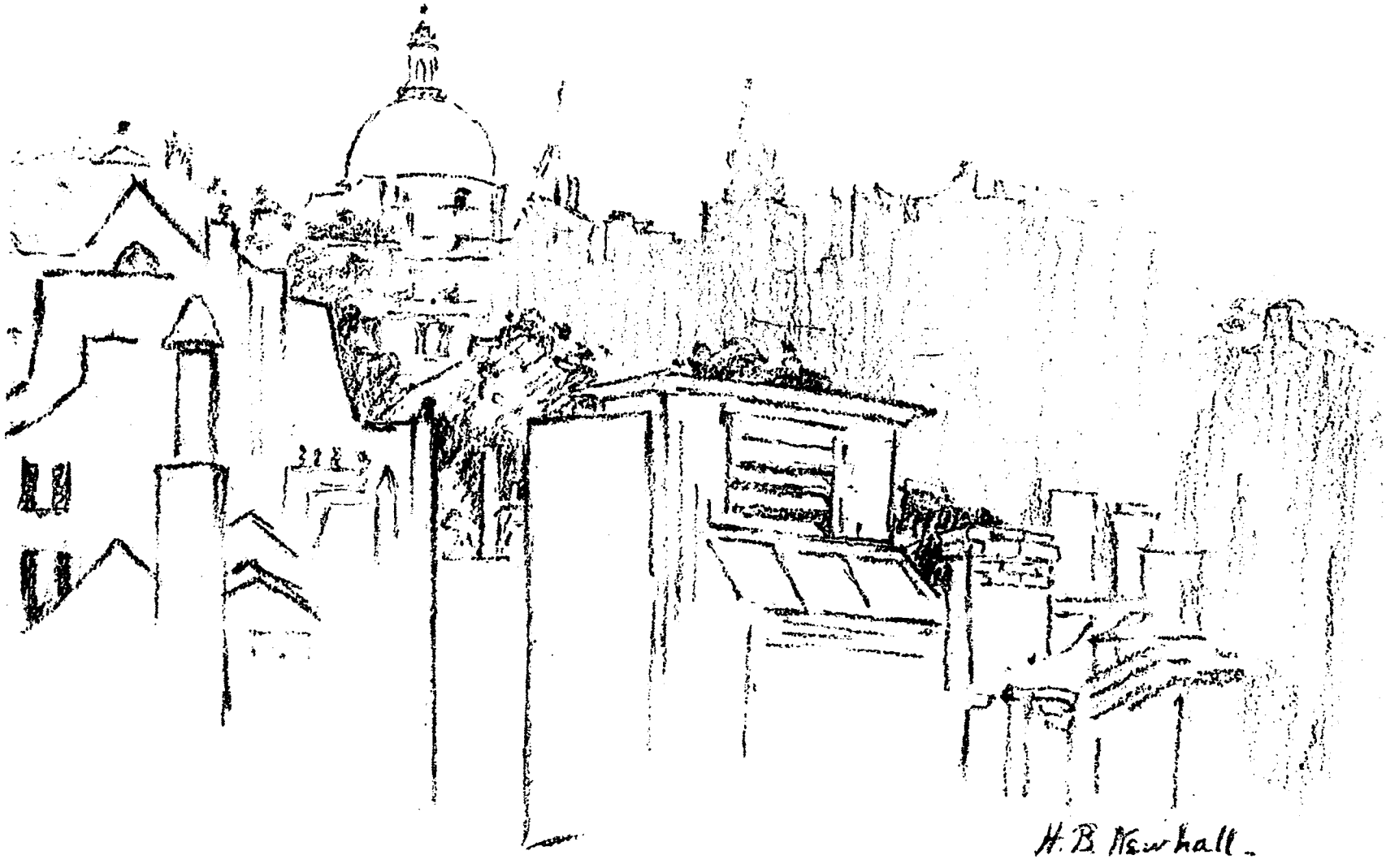
WHILE ON THE HILL

THE COPLEY FAMILY PICTURE

A Stroll Down Chestnut Street


H. B. Newhall

While On the Hill

BOSTON is a mature city, a mellow city, a city of experience and experiences, a city of age. "The history of Boston," writes Henry Ward Beecher, "is written in the best things that have befallen our land."

It was started by the solitary planter, William Blackstone, when one day he paddled his skiff across the river to Charlestown and convinced Governor Winthrop of the value of the springs on his side of the bay. The three hills composing the tract, called Shawmut Mountain by the Indians, became then Tremont on the lips of the English colonists. Blackstone's name is still remembered in our streets, and Boston Common, with its famous Frog Pond, was included in his original holdings. Governor Winthrop evidently liked the look of this irregular piece of ground, almost an island, covered with grass and a few trees, with springs and little brooks running down the hillside to the broad harbor. This was in the fall of 1630, and about a thousand persons in all moved from Charlestown to the new site. On September 17 of this year the General Court, in session at Charlestown, agreed to call the new settlement Boston.

The three peaks of Trimountain were named Colton, Beacon or Sentry, and West Hills. Beacon was the highest, 185 feet above sea level. On March 4, 1634, it was ordered that a beacon be set up on

Beacon to give notice to the country of any danger. Several beacons succeeded each other and the one blown down in 1789 gave place to one designed by Charles Bulfinch, a plain doric column of brick and stone capped by an eagle of gilded wood. (Its successor still stands on the Bowdoin Street side of the State House.)

On the river side of Beacon Hill lay a tract of land known as Sewall's elm pasture containing about five acres originally owned by Judge Sewall, whose witchcraft delusion was, in part, atoned for by his public repentance. This tract can be fairly accurately defined by Beacon, Mt. Vernon, and Joy, formerly Belknap Street, and the western boundary would pass very nearly through the center of the Somerset Club (42 Beacon Street). Between 1769 and 1773 these various parcels of land passed to the ownership of John Singleton Copley, the famous portrait painter, and were conveyed by him in 1796 to the Mt. Vernon Proprietors when he returned to London to live permanently. Among the original proprietors were Jonathan and Harrison Gray Otis and Mrs. James Swan. To them was due the laying out of Mt. Vernon Street in 1781 and Chestnut Street in 1799.

On the land owned by Copley and used by him as a cow pasture, stand houses interesting not only for their antiquity, but also for architectural excellence and memories of distinguished men and women who have lived within them.

There is no street in all Boston which has retained so much of the characteristic atmosphere of

THE BACK YARD GARDEN AT NUMBER SIX

the old city as Chestnut Street. Much is still left there of the Boston of antebellum days, of the time before the boulevard was built or even the Back Bay dreamed of. Business has not succeeded in elbowing its way in; it is quiet and tree-sheltered; there is no din of car, nor whirr or trolley. It is in the heart of things and yet beyond the bustle and confusion, the noise and fret of the world's working day; a quiet street that makes its noiseless way toward the setting sun and the broad river. To some who remember the past it is full of memories of that time when Boston was the Mecca for every literary aspirant, every admirer of genius; when the finest hospitality was dispensed by men and women whose names are history to the present generation.

Chestnut Street was well surrounded by a congenial company in olden days. To mention some of the outstanding neighbors, Mrs. Harrison Gray Otis, predecessor of Mrs. "Jack" Gardner in Boston society, lived first at 42 Beacon Street then at the corner of Mt. Vernon and Joy Streets. It was because she had observed with pleasure the gay and sophisticated life of Paris, Vienna, and London that Mrs. Otis determined to plant the seeds of social life in Boston. She opened a salon at her home. In 1854 Mrs. Otis published her novel "The Barclays of Boston." The scene is laid in Chestnut Street. Mrs. Otis was the first woman in America to dance the waltz. Her partner was the celebrated Lorenzo Papanti, a titled refugee from Italy, who opened the Dancing Academy at 23 Tremont Street where all

well brought up Boston boys and girls were taught to dance. One of her successes was the famous Ball at the Boston Theatre with fifteen hundred guests — a thousand tickets were issued for couples and five hundred for odd ladies — ladies were in demand in those days!

Mr. and Mrs. James T. Fields lived at 148 Charles Street (originally numbered 37) and entertained the literary world. Charles Dickens was among their guests. Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes at 164 Charles Street and, on the other side, John A. Andrew, the great war governor of Massachusetts, and the Thomas Bailey Aldriches — before they moved to Pinckney or Mt. Vernon streets — were friends and neighbors.

One day Dr. Holmes was walking up Chestnut Street. Seeing a little boy struggling to reach a knocker, Dr. Holmes graciously helped him. "Now," said the boy, "run like the devil!"

Thackeray also was entertained by the Fields. At a dinner given in his honor at the Tremont House, he was introduced to the American oyster. When urged to sample one, he replied, "No, it is too much like the high priest's servant's ear that Peter cut off." However, overcoming his scruples, the oyster vanished and with a sigh Thackeray remarked, "I feel as if I had swallowed a baby."

About 1884 William Dean Howells lived at 4 Louisburg Square. Around the corner at 84 Pinckney Street, Thomas Bailey Aldrich lived when he wrote "The Story of A Bad Boy."

Jenny Lind was married at 22 Louisburg Square. Louisa Alcott lived at Number 20 Louisburg Square from 1885 until her death in 1888. Bronson Alcott, her father, also died there. William Ellery Channing lived at 83 Mt. Vernon Street from 1835 to 1842. Margaret Deland lived at 86 Mt. Vernon Street. The window sills inside the house were widened to hold the scores of pots of bulbs for her annual plant sale held for a charity.

Now let us begin our stroll down Chestnut Street —

The linden trees (the blossoms of which are dried in France and used for a soothing tea called tilleul, served in the evening to quiet the nerves) in my girlhood days lined the street and, when snow fell, the top branches met and formed a perfect arch.

Judge Robert Grant, author of "Jack Hall," "The Chippendales," and many interesting books about Boston, passed part of his boyhood, from 1863 to 1873, at 5 Chestnut Street. He has written the following reminiscences.

"Chestnut Street running steeply down hill, was rarely without high snow banks on either side in midwinter, which gave opportunity for building dams, coasting, snow-balling, etc. . . . Diagonally across from my father's house (now No. 2) was the grocery shop of Jonas Priest.

"As is apt to be so with boys from twelve to fifteen we were more or less of a nuisance to some of our immediate neighbors. The premises of Mr. Priest, the grocer, unfortunately for him, contained an area

CHESTNUT STREET FROM WEST CEDAR

door with a pocket about a foot square cut in the panel and concealed by a swinging cover, which opened inwards, and shut as soon as pressure was removed. Through this the baker dropped his rolls in the morning into the basket in the cellar of the store, and one of the never-tiring amusements of the boys was to try to do the same with snow balls. From across the street this required some dexterity. As a consequence, the grocer had cause to complain bitterly, both of the influx of snow into his bread basket, and the dents in the woodwork of the door, which was apt to need a new coat of paint as soon as the spring came. We boys became adepts in hitting this mark. The plashing sound of the mushy snow balls affected the nerves of the grocer's clerk, whose name was Mustachio, as a red rag affects a bull. A vituperative cry, 'Mustachio-o-o! Mustachio-o-o!' loud enough to arouse the neighborhood constantly accompanied a ball aimed with precision whizzing within an inch of the poor clerk's head.

"Those were the days of booby huts and a host of sleighs with jingling bells. Number 5 where I lived was provided with a very long alley-way through which it was easy to escape by those molested. Almost opposite this alley-way, No. 6, was the residence of Dr. Luther Parks, spoken of familiarly by the boys as Puther Larks, and also called Stiffy Parks. It was easy to run a string from the alley across to his doorway which was approached by a number of steps. One device, an ancient one, was to make the outline of an envelope in white

chalk on his door step and then ring the bell and watch the maid try in vain to pick up the ghost of a letter. Another and more frequent one was to arrange the string on the level with the passer-by's hat, and in those days many wore tall silk hats, and pull the bell just as the person collided with the string. This resulted in various animated conversations between the two victims.

"Mr. Priest, the grocer, (Mr. Priest figures in "Jack Hall" as Mr. Briggs, Dr. Parks as Stiffy Bacon) complained frequently to our parents. He didn't mind so much our loitering about his store and 'hooking' dried apples, etc., but he particularly objected to our firing snow balls at the small shutter which guarded his bread basket. However, we got on fairly well with him in the end, as appears in the book. In the end also Dr. Parks really turned the tables on us. One spring he suddenly presented the group of boys with a cricket set and balls and thanked us for our consideration in being so quiet during his wife's confinement. We were dumbfounded, for I fear that our consideration was unconscious for no one knew that she was ill, but he rose immensely in our good opinion and possibly because we were older we became much less troublesome.

"The snow ball fights were really formidable affairs. There was a tradition that the Anderson Street boys used stones inside their snow balls, but I dare say this was not true, except for an occasional one. I imagine they got the better of us on the whole, but we often drove them back with slaughter.

I remember one of their leaders, a negro who, on account of the lightness of his complexion, was well known as 'custard.' "

The two houses Number 12 and Number 14 Chestnut Street, like the three opposite, were built for two sisters. Number 12 became the parsonage for the Brattle Square Church in old Doctor Lothrop's day. It remained a Unitarian parsonage, and Brooke Herford, with his distinguished family including Beatrice and Oliver, preceded Rev. and Mrs. Charles G. Ames. Dr. and Mrs. Ames organized in Philadelphia the first Associated Charities in this country and later Mrs. Ames founded the Women's Alliance which has had such influence in the Unitarian denomination. Mrs. Ames recalls that in the '90's her opposite neighbor, Mrs. Clipston Sturgis, as a thank offering after recovery from illness celebrated Christmas Eve by lighting rows of candles in her windows. On the succeeding Christmas, neighboring houses adopted the festive idea and from that small beginning grew the custom of Christmas Eve candle light in all the windows of Beacon Hill and even throughout the country.

It was in this same Number 7 Chestnut Street that the following extracts of a letter were found. Elizabeth (Winslow) Pickering writes in June, 1840, to her nephew Francis Winslow describing a wedding held at Number 7 Chestnut Street between Lieut. Dale, U.S.N. and Miss Jane Hales, the evening of Thursday, June 12, 1840.

"The evening was delicious. We were received

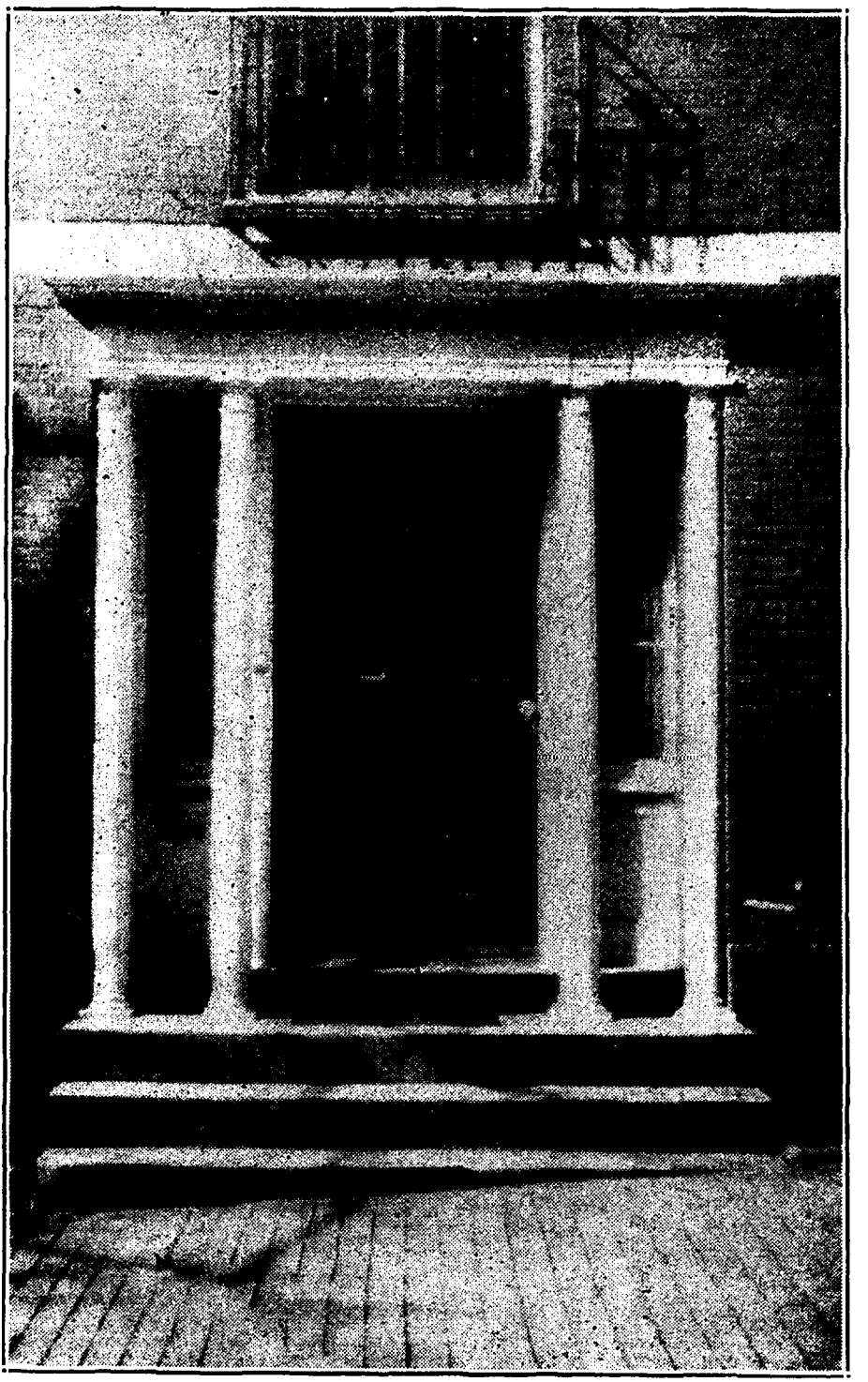
CHESTNUT STREET AFTER
A WINTER'S STORM

in the back room . . . the folding doors were closed and the bridal party were in the drawing room. After the arrival of the minister, Mr. Young, the doors were opened and disclosed the party. Against the center windows stood Jane and Dale with two couples on her right and left, making a beautiful tableau, four groomsmen and bridesmaids, they all looked like perfect statues, so motionless you could not discern for several minutes that either breathed. Jane was beautifully dressed in white satin made to fit her form exactly, from her head each side to her feet a transparent veil which looked very graceful. She was very pale when first seen but afterward her natural color returned. The ceremony commenced and in a few moments Mr. Young pronounced them man and wife — and then followed congratulations, etc. A fine band stationed in the entry commenced playing 'Oft in the Stilly Night' the instant the ceremony was concluded and continued through the evening and the company proceeded to march in couples up and down the rooms. . . . I left soon after this, not wishing to stay for the large party who were expected at nine. I went across the street to Mrs. Bradford's to await our go-cart to take me home. Chestnut Street was thronged on each side, listening to the music — early in the night there was a serenade, a guitar with three voices and later the Brigade Band."

John Lothrop Motley (1814—1877), the famous historian of the Dutch Republic, lived at Number 11 Chestnut Street from about 1848 until 1851.

Numbers 13, 15, and 17 Chestnut Street were built in 1807 by Mrs. Hepsibah Swan for her three daughters. Charles Bulfinch was the architect. Born August 8, 1763, in Bowdoin Square, he became one of our great architects (the first born in America), building our most beautiful houses and some of our fine public buildings noted for refinement and delicacy of detail. The original brick State House is his work, as well as the central part of the Capitol at Washington. Bulfinch was a true citizen too and gave long, faithful, and unstinted service to his native town.

Behind the three Bulfinch houses are three one-story houses, originally stables, facing Mt. Vernon Street. Mrs. Swan's deeds to her daughters provide that the roof of the stable shall never be raised more than thirteen feet above Olive Street (now Mt. Vernon Street). Another provision requires the perpetual maintenance of an enclosed runway 8 feet 5 inches wide connecting the stable yard which is on the alley level with Mt. Vernon Street, through which the occupants of the "adjacent" tenements (referring to the three Chestnut Street houses) are to have the right of ingress and egress for themselves and their cattle. The popular misunderstanding of these latter terms has been that a right of way was here granted for a cow. Possibly cows may have been kept by the original families, but the word "cattle" in this connection doubtless included horses, the stabling for which was in the basement with carriage rooms on the Mt. Vernon Street level.



JULIA WARD HOWE HOUSE

Where the Radical Club met

It was in Number 13, one of the most beautifully proportioned houses on the street, that Mary Sargent and her husband, John Turner Sargent, "conducted" the famous Radical Club (1867—1880). It was "started in the growing desire of certain ministers and laymen for larger liberty of faith, fellowship and communion. The club existed with as little formal organization as was possible. It was composed of members of all religious denominations. Thirty persons were present at the first meeting." Emerson, Whittier, Longfellow, Walt Whitman, Holmes, and Dr. (Cyrus) Bartol were among the distinguished.

Arlo Bates, who lived at 62 Chestnut Street, speaks of the Young People's Club which is less well known than the Radical Club. "It had no organization. We never knew what would happen. Out of all sorts of places, from fashionable and wealthy homes, from dingy boarding houses, even in some cases from dingier attics Mrs. Sargent had brought together young men and women who spoke a common language. They cared for the artistic; they followed ideals; they sympathized with aspiration, even if they could not understand. Some read a paper, someone sang or played; we discussed with all the fervor of youth; we went home with ideas seething in our heads and with the consciousness of being alive in a good time and place."

Mrs. Julia Ward Howe, author of the Battle Hymn of the Republic, lived at 13 Chestnut Street. "No one else in all literary history, ever won acknow-

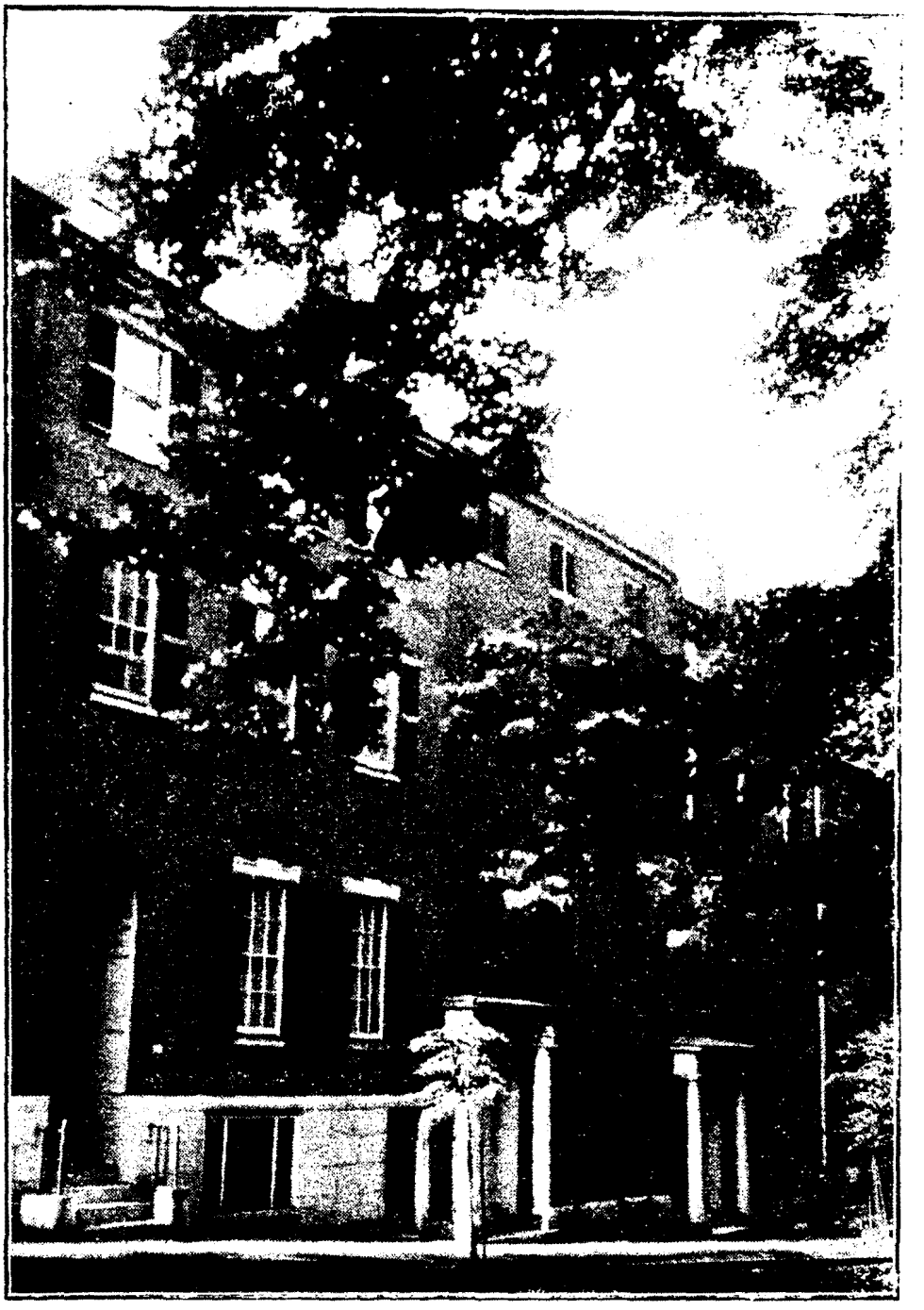
ledged literary leadership through a long life by one single song, plus personality."

Number 15 Chestnut Street was the home of Dr. John Jeffries (1745—1819), one of the most interesting characters in Boston. He was graduated from Harvard in 1763, getting his medical training in London and Aberdeen, returning to London in 1780. He was interested in scientific investigation and flew over the English Channel from Dover to France in a balloon. A curious monument with a balloon-like ball on its apex was later erected by public authority on the spot where he landed, in commemoration of his hazardous trip.

The house at 17 Chestnut Street has only recently passed from the possession of the descendants of Mrs. Swan, the builder. Miss Elizabeth Bartol inherited it from her mother, one of Mrs. Swan's daughters. Miss Bartol's father, the late Rev. Dr. Cyrus Bartol, succeeded the father of James Russell Lowell as pastor of the Old West Church whose building still stands at the corner of Cambridge and Lynde Streets and now houses the West End Branch of the Public Library.

Harrison Gray Otis in 1822 built Number 22 and 24 Chestnut Street, two houses with dignified classical porticoes. These he sold the next year and from that time until 1929, 24 Chestnut Street was owned by members of the same family.

For some years the two daughters of Rufus Choate lived at Number 24 — Mrs. Bell and Mrs. Pratt — both so brilliant that they were known as



SUMMER ON CHESTNUT STREET

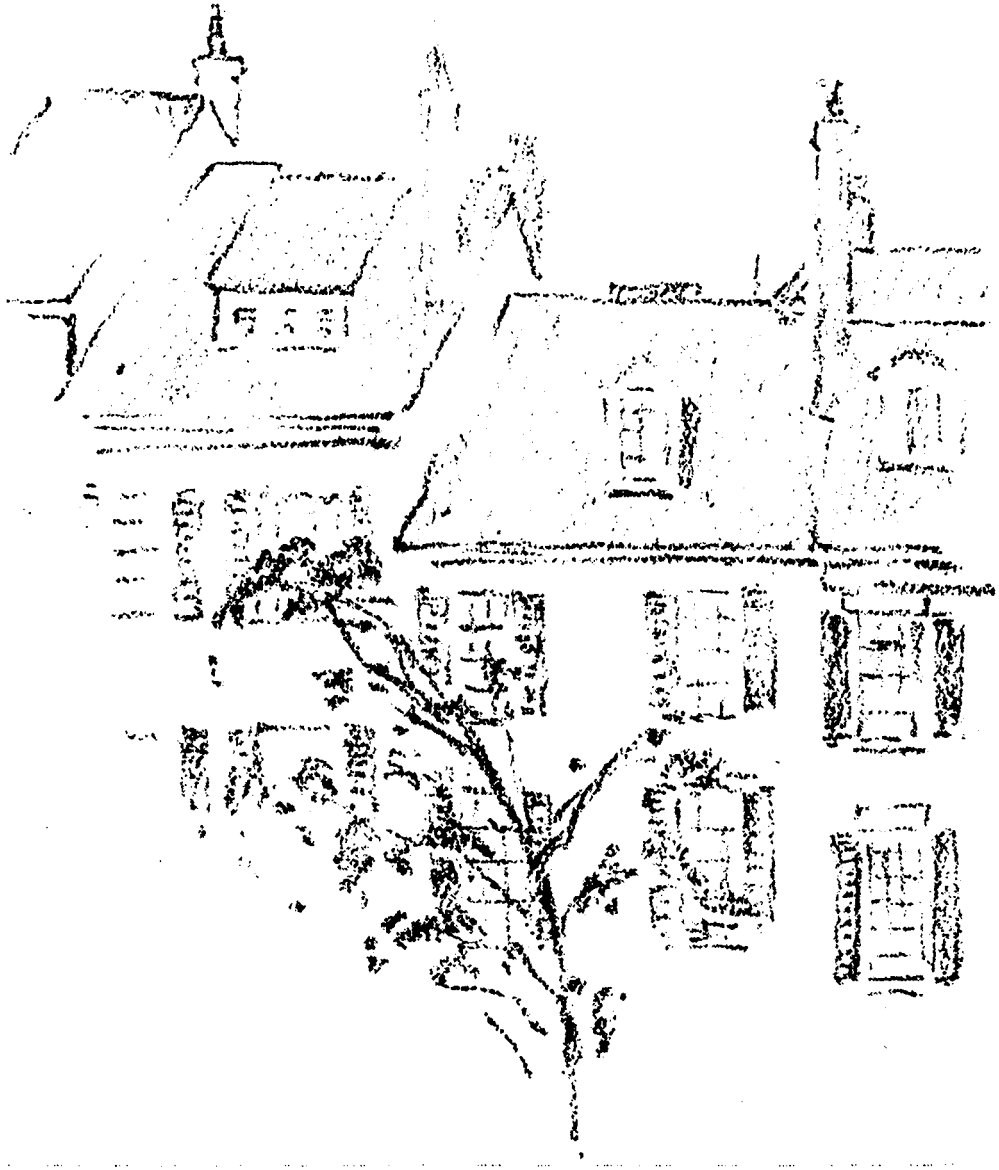
The houses are Numbers 20, 22 *and* 24

the "Duplex Burners." They held a salon each Monday and after Mrs. Pratt's death Mrs. Bell received alone on Thursday mornings. Well do I remember sitting at her feet entranced by her witty talk, first about the stars, then how she got the better of her dinner partner the night before! A cab constantly stood before her door at meal times for she was always in demand and "went out" to parties continually even when she was eighty years old. She loved the city. "Kick a tree for me" was her message to a friend leaving for the country. Each day she passed up and down the street, her arms full of books. Notice when you go to the Athenæum at 10½ Beacon Street the slab to the memory of Mrs. Bell and Mrs. Pratt. Many of Mrs. Bell's sayings are household words now. A group of ladies at luncheon were once telling about their illnesses and their operations. Finally there came a lull in the conversation, when suddenly Mrs. Bell exclaimed, "I feel as if I had been to an organ recital." Someone said to her once, "Why do you keep a pig?" To which she replied, "Because it is a convenient thing to put things into."

A youth called on Mrs. Bell one afternoon and when he did not go at dinner time was asked to remain. He stayed until eleven or so and when he finally rose to go, said to Mrs. Bell, "I hope I have not tired you." "My dear," said Mrs. Bell, "the dead are never tired."

Thackeray said it was worth crossing the ocean to sit beside her at dinner.

Senator Henry Cabot Lodge writes of Mrs. Bell:



CHESTNUT STREET ROOFS

"She was the daughter of Rufus Choate and inherited as it seemed, all the intellectual qualities which made him the most brilliant advocate of his time, an orator of extraordinary eloquence, with a wit and humor which are preserved by many anecdotes still dwelling in the memories of men. If Mrs. Bell had lived in the Paris of the 18th century she would have had a salon and a coterie, memoirs and letters, and in the next century a Sainte Beuve to criticise and explain them to an interested world.

"Her wit and humor, especially the latter, were apparently without limit, as spontaneous as the perfume of a flower, as flowing and sparking as a clear mountain brook. Not only was she a skilled musician but she knew and loved music and she knew and loved Shakespeare and that was from beginning to end."

Number 20 was for some years the home of Grafton Cushing once Lieutenant Governor of the Commonwealth, a public spirited citizen and one of Charles Dana Gibson's favorite models for the popular "Gibson Man."

One morning a number of years ago, Theodore Roosevelt was visiting Mr. Grafton Cushing and an automobile was waiting for him by the door. A small Chestnut Street boy was returning from school just at that time. It happened that this small boy was holding a diminutive bouquet of rose buds and forget-me-nots with a paper lace frill about it. Just as he passed Mr. Cushing's door the great man himself rapidly made for the car. The boy tried to present his

bouquet to Roosevelt and not meeting with success, jumped into the car after him, and pushed the bouquet into his hands. "You're a nice little boy," said Roosevelt with his characteristic grin.

The house, Number 29A, whose Bulfinch front faces the garden at the side, has a swan's neck staircase, connected with the wall in three places only. When many of the oldest houses on the hill were built a quantity of window glass was made which contained some unexpected material which in course of time and the action of sunlight turned the glass purple. This house was occupied by Edwin Booth from 1883 to 1887. It became Hopkinson's School for Boys in 1887. It was then that the great schoolroom was built at the back of the yard. The school was given up in 1904. The house was vacant for several years, due perhaps to the caretaker's invariable assurance to would-be purchasers that it would cost $50,000 to restore. This difficulty, however, did not deter Mrs. M. W. Kehew, the President of the Women's Educational and Industrial Union who rejoiced in surmounting difficulties. She purchased it and constantly entertained, always with charming hospitality.

But as I pass Number 29 I often think of how, in my school days at Miss Folsom's, Number 19—where Charles Eliot Norton's daughter now lives surrounded by treasures from afar — I had to run the gauntlet of the Hopkinson School boys who, much to my embarrassment, would line up on either side and make me pass between!

29A CHESTNUT STREET

Chestnut Street has been known for many years as a center for schools, St. Margaret's, Miss Foote's, Miss Hall's, etc. Even now there is one school, The Garland School for Homemakers, Mrs. Margaret Stannard, principal, the first of its kind in the country.

In the late nineties there were five schools on Chestnut Street: Miss Bridge's at Number 19, Miss Heloise Hersey's at Number 25, Mr. Hopkinson's at Number 29, and the Stone School further down the street. How the poor heads of these five schools struggled to keep the wayward youths and maidens apart at recess time!

Chaters, on Charles Street, was a bun shop. Big round buns with currants, for a penny each, were our favorite food, and we were *very* fond of cream cakes too. It was at Chaters that all the trouble started. The recess hours were always getting mixed and then we girls could get in a word or two with the boys, in spite of the poor school mistresses. Chaters was where the New England Kitchen now is, and what would we on the Hill do now when we are opening our houses in the fall without that neat and respectable lunchroom? It's there we pick up the news of our neighbors' summer doings.

Later at Number 16 lived Mr. and Mrs. Emil Williams. It was Mrs. Williams who, with Harriet Boyd (now Mrs. C. H. Hawes of Cambridge), excavated a city in Crete and wrote a large and delightful volume on this work of which Chestnut Street is very proud.

Judge Dwight Foster built Number 18 and lived there with his seven children, keeping his necessary cow in the basement. The owners of this house have the right for all time to pasture a cow on the Common, I am told.

Richard Henry Dana (1787—1879) lived at Number 45. He was a founder of the North American Review and one of the early poets and critics of American national literature.

Number 50 was the home of Francis Parkman (1823—1893) for nearly thirty years. He has been called the greatest of American historians. Almost directly behind this house is 55 Beacon Street where William H. Prescott wrote his famous "Conquest of Mexico," "Conquest of Peru," etc. Both Parkman and Prescott were nearly blind.

Chestnut Street, below Charles, used to have many stables and was unofficially known as Horse Chestnut Street. Some of the stables have been turned into garages and others into attractive shops, studios, and homes.

It is not often, nowadays, that one's letters are brought to one's door by the same devoted postman who brought them to our families twenty years ago. Our gratitude to Mr. Charles Worth is great. Ask him to tell you more of the present life of the Street. It is still a pleasant place to live in, with the same kindly spirit, with delightful neighbors and old friends, as well as with all its cherished associations with the past.

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I wish to express my indebtedness to several kind neighbors for anecdotes and suggestions; to Harriet B. Newhall for sketches; and to Mr. Copley Amory for his courtesy in allowing me to use the photograph of the Copley Family portrait.