

# *The* JOURNAL

OF THE RUTGERS UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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VOLUME XXI

DECEMBER 1957

NUMBER I

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## TWO HOWELLS LETTERS

BY CLARA AND RUDOLF KIRK

PROFESSOR AND MRS. KIRK *have for many years been interested in W. D. Howells and have previously contributed articles on him to the Journal. They also edited the American Writers Series Howells, published in 1950, and have prepared a volume of his essays which will appear in 1959. Mr. C. Walker Barrett generously allowed the use of one letter from his collection. They are indebted to Professor W. W. Howells of Harvard University for his kind permission to publish the letters in this article. They may not be reprinted without his specific permission.*

THE RUTGERS LIBRARY has recently acquired two hitherto unpublished letters written by William Dean Howells to his publisher, James R. Osgood. The first is dated October 16, 1882, and the second, October 21, 1891. The letters are in perfect condition and were found folded in two Howells novels, *A Woman's Reason* and *An Imperative Duty*, purchased for the Library at an auction sale in New York by the late C. Rexford Davis. Because they were written at the beginning and in the midst of Howells's most productive and influential period, the letters add to our growing understanding of the writer, who, at this time, was regarded as America's most distinguished novelist. A few introductory paragraphs may be helpful to the reader before he turns to the letters, which are printed in full below.

### I.

A month before Howells publicly announced his resignation of the editorship of the *Atlantic* in March, 1881, he wrote to James R. Osgood, February 2, 1881, that, having made his decision, he would now be glad to propose to Osgood the publication of his writings.

St. Charles, p. 100  
Stuyvesant,  
Oct. 16, 1882.

My Dear Rogers:

Yours of the 23 is just at hand. The motto of the Boston paper I have already fully written you about, and I have a charming understanding man that I can give him to Harper if I like.

I have already sent them the Century paper, the first volume of the story, of which I have changed the title; I now call it "Old Woman's Reason" which fits it far better than the other name. I am having it stereotyped at Edinburgh, as soon as my last understanding with you, and I have sent it to New York in print. I will

continue abroad with the majority of the young republicans looking to him.

I am glad the Massachusetts stance stands off as well, and I hope it will fulfill all your expectations. Any characteristic services will be welcome.

Conroy's will was good.

All the family join me in regards. Rememb me to all the people at all.

Yours ever,

W. D. Howells.

Osgood, who had been one of the publishers of the *Atlantic*, had recently withdrawn from that undertaking and had organized his own publishing company, known as James R. Osgood & Company; he remained Howells's publisher and friend until the failure of his business in May, 1885.

At the time of the writing of the first letter below, Howells was travelling abroad with his family, for, after fifteen years with the *Atlantic*, ill health had forced him to take a vacation from the routine work of an editor. This letter was written to Osgood from Villeneuve, a small resort on Lake Geneva, in reply to a letter from Osgood, dated October 2, 1882, to which Howells referred in his opening sentence. Osgood, who had talked with Howells in London before his return to Boston and Howells's trip to Switzerland, wrote to Howells concerning "the matter of the Venetian papers" which Howells had proposed to write for *Century*, then under the editorship of Richard Watson Gilder and owned by Roswell Smith. "It was more than a week after my return," wrote Osgood,

before I could see Roswell Smith and Gilder. They tell me they have accepted your Venice papers, provided you still choose to write them after you have seen Henry James's *Venice*, which is to appear in the November number, and which they have sent you early sheets of. So I suppose that question is disposed of.<sup>1</sup>

Apparently Howells had received the sheets and had reconsidered his proposal to *Century*, for he wrote to Osgood, on October 4, 1882:

I don't believe he [Gilder] wants my Venetian papers, and I certainly don't want to follow James in the *Century*.<sup>2</sup>

Howells's letter crossed Osgood's, quoted above, as did also Howells's second letter concerning the Venetian papers, which he wrote on October 5, having forgotten to ask Osgood to forward his letter to Gilder, and having just received one from Smith, suggesting that the placing of Howells's essay in *Century*, or *Harper's* or the *Atlantic* be left entirely to Osgood. Howells's letter of October 5, 1882, may be read in *Life in Letters of William Dean Howells*; it is clear that Howells had his misgivings about his Venetian papers, for he wrote:

I suppose it will be best to let this matter rest, as far as they [Gilder and Smith]

<sup>1</sup> Unpublished letter, Houghton Library, Harvard.

<sup>2</sup> *Idem.*

are concerned, till I begin to write the papers—if I ever do. But if necessary, you might explain the whole affair to the Harpers.<sup>3</sup>

Howells never wrote the Venetian papers, though as late as 1900 he submitted a plan for a history of Venice to H. M. Alden, editor of *Harper's*. That Howells had been deeply stirred by his four years in Venice as American consul (1861-1865) is attested by the first book which brought him fame, *Venetian Life* (1866), as well as by the three novels, making use of his Venetian experiences, which appeared during the next fifteen years—*A Foregone Conclusion* (1875), *The Lady of the Aroostook* (1879) and *A Fearful Responsibility* (1881). In the third paragraph of his letter to Osgood, Howells is again proposing to call upon his Venetian memories to supply background for a novel.

This novel, which, like the Venetian papers, was never written, we might call "The Adventures of a Young American Skipper," borrowing Howells's descriptive phrase. Howells referred to the projected novel in his letter to Osgood merely as "No. 3." No. 2, mentioned in the second paragraph, was *A Woman's Reason*, on which Howells had been working for years; No. 1, *A Modern Instance*, had already begun to appear in *Century* and now Howells was eagerly awaiting reviews, as we see at the close of his letter. Howells's description of No. 3 is interesting both as an example of his customary method of selling his novels to publishers before they were written and as the only intimation we have that he had ever proposed an historical novel, and a highly romantic one at that.

In describing "The Adventures of a Young American Skipper" Howells outlined an historical novel dealing with the dying Venetian Republic of 1794 or 1795, in spite of the fact that he had frequently inveighed against the historical novel, which, he thought, falsified both history and human nature. Though he had such a proposal in mind, we observe that, even in this atmosphere of gayety and masking, he confined himself to the familiar in describing his hero as "the commercial American . . . then venturing abroad with the energy of the young Republic boiling in him."

One regrets that Howells did not write this novel, "strictly within the bounds of honesty," in which "a splendidly reprehensible illus-

<sup>3</sup> Edited by Mildred Howells (1928), I, 323-324.

trissima" was to make overtures to a Yankee "in whom the puritan tradition strongly lingered." Perhaps he did not do so because a warm-blooded puritan presented too many difficulties to a recorder of "the commonplace." The projected novel was never again referred to by Howells, as far as we know; nor did the Venetian papers materialize, though Howells often spoke of them. Instead, he wrote a series of essays on Italian towns, which appeared in *Century* in 1885, profusely illustrated by Joseph Pennell, whom Gilder had sent to Italy to accompany Howells on his travels through "Tuscan Cities." While journeying from town to town with Pennell during the spring of 1883, Howells was still thinking of the two projects he never completed. On April 20, 1883, he wrote to Osgood from Venice, which he found "shabbier and gayer and lovelier than ever":

I think I shall certainly wish to write of Venice again; but it will be next year, after I've finished the third story. I'm going to rush work on the Tuscan Cities, whilst I'm here, and hope to have finished the papers on Florence before I leave. That will let them run them in the magazine from November on.<sup>4</sup>

*Tuscan Cities* was published in book form in 1886 and *Indian Summer*, with Florence, rather than Venice, as a background, but neither the essays nor the novel were the books Howells dreamed of writing.

Two final notes to the letter which follows: (1) "Conway's will was good" refers back to a letter by Howells to Osgood of August 5, 1882.<sup>5</sup> In this letter Howells discussed with him Moncure D. Conway's effort to gain permission from the English publisher of Conway's *Emerson* to bring his book out in this country. Conway was unsuccessful, but his "will was good." (2) The office of James R. Osgood was 211 Tremont Street, Boston, not far from the old *Atlantic* office, where Howells had many pleasant associations.

## II.

No doubt Conway's difficulty in obtaining permission for the reprinting of his book by an American company was part of the copyright battle which caused ill-will on both sides of the Atlantic during the '80's. Howells's second letter to Osgood, written nine years after

<sup>4</sup> Unpublished letter in the possession of C. Waller Barrett.

<sup>5</sup> Unpublished letter in the Houghton Library.

the first, is concerned with the effect of the Copyright Law, which had been adopted by Congress and signed by President Harrison, 4 March 1891. Mr. Douglas was the Edinburgh publisher of Howells's novels, and is here quoted as offering Howells freedom to seek more advantageous publishing arrangements if he could do so. Howells, however, interpreted his letter as a hint that he intended henceforth to print only cheap editions of his work, and was quick to tell Osgood of his reading of Douglas's remarks. The letter reflects the confused state of mind of publishers and writers on both sides of the Atlantic as to the implications of the new law for which Howells and Mark Twain had agitated for years. Howells's business astuteness is clearly shown in this letter. That his awareness of the practical problems of authors extended beyond his own interests is shown by an essay Howells wrote for *Scribner's* two years later, entitled "The Man of Letters as a Man of Business." Perhaps the fact that Howells was realistic in his business dealings as well as in his theory of novel-writing explains, in part, the enormous power he wielded in the American literary scene of the 1890's.

The two letters follow:

Le Clos, près Villeneuve, Vaud,  
Switzerland,  
Oct. 16, 1882.

My dear Osgood:

Yours of the 2d is just at hand. The matter of the Venetian papers I have already fully written you about, and I have a clear understanding now that I can give them to Harpers if I like.

I have already sent them—the Century people,—the first installment of the story, of which I have changed the title; I now call it "A Woman's Reason" which fits it far better than the other name. I am having it stereotyped at Edinbergh, according to my last understanding with you, and I have sent it to New York in print. I will follow rapidly on with the copy, so that they need not be anxious.

—My notion for No. 3, is the adventures of young American skipper <sup>or supercargo</sup> with his ship who goes to Venice <sup>about the close of the last century, from Plymouth, or Salem, or perhaps Boston.</sup> I suppose him to be a man in whom the puritan tradition strongly lingers, and who is thoroughly characterized by the colonial civilization of his time, but whose blood is warm enough

to be stirred by the love affairs that await him in the capital of the dying Republic. It is the year 1794 or '95, just before Venice falls, and I imagine

masking  
a typical epoch of corrupt gayety, with ~~carneval~~ six months of the year, and all manner of lively times; and one of my objects would be to contrast the new republic with the old, in the heart of the fresh young Yankee who finds himself in the midst of these scenes. As nearly as I can see the story now, the love-making is to be rather complicated: a splendidly reprehensible illustrissima is to make rather fierce advances to him, while he is really taken with the young girl who becomes his wife. All is to be strictly within the bounds of honesty; and I think the story can be made very sweet and pretty for the mere novel-reader, while those who care for the deeper drift will be interested in the

with the  
studies of the times and place, and their contrast ~~of~~ <sup>of</sup> New England life at both ends of the story: I should begin it and end it in Boston. I can't be more explicit about the plot, now; but this outline will give an intelligible notion of it, I hope. I have long wished to touch historical ground in my work, and here I shall do it. After all, any editor would have to trust me for the character and quality of the story, and let what I have done be a guaranty for what I shall do. I may change very considerably when I get to work on the story, but I give this sketch as it now lies in my mind. I choose a captain or supercargo for my hero, because that is the kind of American who would then probably find himself in Venice; and because the commercial American was then venturing abroad with the energy of the young Republic boiling in him.

I'm glad the Modern Instance starts off so well, and I hope it will fulfill all your expectations. Any characteristic reviews will be welcome.

Conway's *will* was good.

All the family join me in regards. Remember me to all the people at 211.

Yours ever,

W. D. Howells

Boston, Oct. 21, 1891.

My dear Osgood:

Mr. Douglas has written to me saying that he will bring out *An Imperative Duty* in the shilling edition, and sending me a check for it. His letter closes with this statement: "No one can foresee what may be the effect of the new copyright act on the literature of both countries, and I wish to tell you, in case you have application from your old publisher Mr. Osgood, or any other English firm offering you terms by which you can make money that you are to consider yourself quite free to enter into them for any editions in England to be published at a price not less than 5/. I mention this in case you should be applied to, and I should not wish to stand dog in the manger."

I understand from this that ~~if hereafter~~ he will hereafter probably publish only a cheap edition of my books. If it appears to you desirable to come to any agreement with him, of a general nature, you know I should prefer you to any other publisher for such editions as he does not want to issue. The thing may look too complicated to you, or I may not be worth while as an author; you are to decide; I merely put you in possession of the facts.

Yours ever

W. D. Howells.

I hear of English schoolboys liking *A Boy's Town*; but there is no English edition, and they see only borrowed American copies.