

Adventures and Letters

by

Richard Harding Davis

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The Early Days

Richard Harding Davis was born in Philadelphia on April 18, 1864, but, so far as memory serves me, his life and mine began together several years later in the three-story brick house on South Twenty-first Street, to which we had just moved. For more than forty years this was our home in all that the word implies, and I do not believe that there was ever a moment when it was not the predominating influence in Richard's life and in his work. As I learned in later years, the house had come into the possession of my father and mother after a period on their part of hard endeavor and unusual sacrifice. It was their ambition to add to this home not only the comforts and the beautiful inanimate things of life, but to create an atmosphere which would prove a constant help to those who lived under its roof--an inspiration to their children that should endure so long as they lived. At the time of my brother's death the fact was frequently commented upon that, unlike most literary folk, he had never known what it was to be poor and to suffer the pangs of hunger and failure. That he never suffered from the lack of a home was certainly as true as that in his work he knew but little of failure, for the first stories he wrote for the magazines brought him into a prominence and popularity that lasted until the end. But if Richard gained his success early in life and was blessed with a very lovely home to which he could always return, he was not brought up in a manner which in any way could be called lavish. Lavish he may have been in later years, but if he was it was with the money for which those who knew him best knew how very hard he had worked.

In a general way, I cannot remember that our life as boys differed in any essential from that of other boys. My brother went to the Episcopal Academy and his weekly report never failed to fill the whole house with an impenetrable gloom and ever-increasing fears as to the possibilities of his future. At school and at college Richard was, to say the least, an indifferent student. And what made this undeniable fact so annoying, particularly to his teachers, was that morally he stood so very high. To "crib," to lie, or in any way to cheat or to do any unworthy act was, I believe, quite beyond his understanding. Therefore, while his constant lack of interest in his studies goaded his teachers to despair, when it came to a question of stamping out wrongdoing on the part of the student body he was invariably found aligned on the side of the faculty. Not that Richard in any way resembled a prig or was even, so far as I know, ever so considered by the most reprehensible of his fellow students. He was altogether too red-blooded for that, and I believe the students whom he antagonized rather admired his chivalric point of honor even if they failed to imitate it. As a schoolboy he was aggressive, radical, outspoken, fearless, usually of the opposition and, indeed, often the sole member of his own party. Among the students at the several schools he attended he had but few intimate friends; but of the various little groups of which he happened to be a member his aggressiveness and his imagination usually made him the leader. As far back as I can remember, Richard was always starting something--usually a new club or a violent reform movement. And in school or college, as in all the other walks of life, the reformer must, of necessity, lead a somewhat tempestuous, if happy, existence. The following letter, written to his father when Richard was a student at Swarthmore, and about fifteen, will give an idea of his conception of the ethics in the case:

SWARTHMORE--1880.

DEAR PAPA:

I am quite on the Potomac. I with all the boys at our table were called up, there is seven of us, before Prex. for stealing sugar-bowls and things off the table. All the youths said, "O President, I didn't do it." When it came my turn I merely smiled gravely, and he passed on to the last. Then he said, "The only boy that doesn't deny it is Davis. Davis, you are excused. I wish to talk to the rest of them." That all goes to show he can be a gentleman if he would only try. I am a natural born philosopher so I thought this idea is too idiotic for me to converse about so I recommend silence and I also argued that to deny you must necessarily be accused and to be accused of stealing would of course cause me to bid Prex. good-by, so the only way was, taking these two considerations with each other, to deny nothing but let the good-natured old duffer see how silly it was by retaining a placid silence and so crushing his base but thoughtless behavior and machinations.

DICK.

In the early days at home--that is, when the sun shone--we played cricket and baseball and football in our very spacious back yard, and the programme of our sports was always subject to Richard's change without notice. When it rained we adjourned to the third-story front, where we played melodrama of simple plot but many thrills, and it was always Richard who wrote the plays, produced them, and played the principal part. As I recall these dramas of my early youth, the action was almost endless and, although the company comprised two charming misses (at least I know that they eventually grew into two very lovely women), there was no time wasted over anything so sentimental or futile as love-scenes. But whatever else the play contained in the way of great scenes, there was always a mountain pass--the mountains being composed of a chair and two tables--and Richard was forever leading his little band over the pass while the band, wholly indifferent as to whether the road led to honor, glory, or total annihilation, meekly followed its leader. For some reason, probably on account of my early admiration for Richard and being only too willing to obey his command, I was invariably cast for the villain in these early dramas, and the end of the play always ended in a hand-to-hand conflict between the hero and myself. As Richard, naturally, was the hero and incidentally the stronger of the two, it can readily be imagined that the fight always ended in my complete undoing. Strangulation was the method usually employed to finish me, and, whatever else Richard was at that tender age, I can testify to his extraordinary ability as a choker.

But these early days in the city were not at all the happiest days of that period in Richard's life. He took but little interest even in the social or the athletic side of his school life, and his failures in his studies troubled him sorely, only I fear, however, because it troubled his mother and father. The great day of the year to us was the day our schools closed and we started for our summer vacation. When Richard was less than a year old my mother and father, who at the time was convalescing from a long illness, had left Philadelphia on a search for a complete rest in the country. Their travels, which it

seems were undertaken in the spirit of a voyage of discovery and adventure, finally led them to the old Curtis House at Point Pleasant on the New Jersey coast. But the Point Pleasant of that time had very little in common with the present well-known summer resort. In those days the place was reached after a long journey by rail followed by a three hours' drive in a rickety stagecoach over deep sandy roads, albeit the roads did lead through silent, sweet-smelling pine forests. Point Pleasant itself was then a collection of half a dozen big farms which stretched from the Manasquan River to the ocean half a mile distant. Nothing could have been more primitive or as I remember it in its pastoral loveliness much more beautiful. Just beyond our cottage the river ran its silent, lazy course to the sea. With the exception of several farmhouses, its banks were then unsullied by human habitation of any sort, and on either side beyond the low green banks lay fields of wheat and corn, and dense groves of pine and oak and chestnut trees. Between us and the ocean were more waving fields of corn, broken by little clumps of trees, and beyond these damp Nile-green pasture meadows, and then salty marshes that led to the glistening, white sand-dunes, and the great silver semi-circle of foaming breakers, and the broad, blue sea. On all the land that lay between us and the ocean, where the town of Point Pleasant now stands, I think there were but four farmhouses, and these in no way interfered with the landscape or the life of the primitive world in which we played.

Whatever the mental stimulus my brother derived from his home in Philadelphia, the foundation of the physical strength that stood him in such good stead in the campaigns of his later years he derived from those early days at Point Pleasant. The cottage we lived in was an old two-story frame building, to which my father had added two small sleeping-rooms. Outside there was a vine-covered porch and within a great stone fireplace flanked by cupboards, from which during those happy days I know Richard and I, openly and covertly, must have extracted tons of hardtack and cake. The little house was called "Vagabond's Rest," and a haven of rest and peace and content it certainly proved for many years to the Davis family. From here it was that my father started forth in the early mornings on his all-day fishing excursions, while my mother sat on the sunlit porch and wrote novels and mended the badly rent garments of her very active sons. After a seven-o'clock breakfast at the Curtis House our energies never ceased until night closed in on us and from sheer exhaustion we dropped unconscious into our patch-quilted cots. All day long we swam or rowed, or sailed, or played ball, or camped out, or ate enormous meals--anything so long as our activities were ceaseless and our breathing apparatus given no rest. About a mile up the river there was an island--it's a very small, prettily wooded, sandy-beached little place, but it seemed big enough in those days. Robert Louis Stevenson made it famous by rechristening it Treasure Island, and writing the new name and his own on a bulkhead that had been built to shore up one of its fast disappearing sandy banks. But that is very modern history and to us it has always been "The Island." In our day, long before Stevenson had ever heard of the Manasquan, Richard and I had discovered this tight little piece of land, found great treasures there, and, hand in hand, had slept in a six-by-six tent while the lions and tigers growled at us from the surrounding forests.

As I recall these days of my boyhood I find the recollections of our life at Point Pleasant much more distinct than those we spent in Philadelphia. For Richard these days were

especially welcome. They meant a respite from the studies which were a constant menace to himself and his parents; and the freedom of the open country, the ocean, the many sports on land and on the river gave his body the constant exercise his constitution seemed to demand, and a broad field for an imagination which was even then very keen, certainly keen enough to make the rest of us his followers.

In an extremely sympathetic appreciation which Irvin S. Cobb wrote about my brother at the time of his death, he says that he doubts if there is such a thing as a born author. Personally it so happened that I never grew up with any one, except my brother, who ever became an author, certainly an author of fiction, and so I cannot speak on the subject with authority. But in the case of Richard, if he was not born an author, certainly no other career was ever considered. So far as I know he never even wanted to go to sea or to be a bareback rider in a circus. A boy, if he loves his father, usually wants to follow in his professional footsteps, and in the case of Richard, he had the double inspiration of following both in the footsteps of his father and in those of his mother. For years before Richard's birth his father had been a newspaper editor and a well-known writer of stories and his mother a novelist and short-story writer of great distinction. Of those times at Point Pleasant I fear I can remember but a few of our elders. There were George Lambdin, Margaret Ruff, and Milne Ramsay, all painters of some note; a strange couple, Colonel Olcott and the afterward famous Madam Blavatsky, trying to start a Buddhist cult in this country; Mrs. Frances Hodgson Burnett, with her foot on the first rung of the ladder of fame, who at the time loved much millinery finery. One day my father took her out sailing and, much to the lady's discomfiture and greatly to Richard's and my delight, upset the famous authoress. At a later period the Joseph Jeffersons used to visit us; Horace Howard Furness, one of my father's oldest friends, built a summer home very near us on the river, and Mrs. John Drew and her daughter Georgie Barrymore spent their summers in a near-by hostelry. I can remember Mrs. Barrymore at that time very well--- wonderfully handsome and a marvellously cheery manner. Richard and I both loved her greatly, even though it were in secret. Her daughter Ethel I remember best as she appeared on the beach, a sweet, long-legged child in a scarlet bathing-suit running toward the breakers and then dashing madly back to her mother's open arms. A pretty figure of a child, but much too young for Richard to notice at that time. In after-years the child in the scarlet bathing-suit and he became great pals. Indeed, during the latter half of his life, through the good days and the bad, there were very few friends who held so close a place in his sympathy and his affections as Ethel Barrymore.

Until the summer of 1880 my brother continued on at the Episcopal Academy. For some reason I was sent to a different school, but outside of our supposed hours of learning we were never apart. With less than two years' difference in our ages our interests were much the same, and I fear our interests of those days were largely limited to out-of-door sports and the theatre. We must have been very young indeed when my father first led us by the hand to see our first play. On Saturday afternoons Richard and I, unattended but not wholly unalarmed, would set forth from our home on this thrilling weekly adventure. Having joined our father at his office, he would invariably take us to a chop-house situated at the end of a blind alley which lay concealed somewhere in the neighborhood of Walnut and Third Streets, and where we ate a most wonderful luncheon of English

chops and apple pie. As the luncheon drew to its close I remember how Richard and I used to fret and fume while my father in a most leisurely manner used to finish off his mug of musty ale. But at last the three of us, hand in hand, my father between us, were walking briskly toward our happy destination. At that time there were only a few first-class theatres in Philadelphia--the Arch Street Theatre, owned by Mrs. John Drew; the Chestnut Street, and the Walnut Street--all of which had stock companies, but which on the occasion of a visiting star acted as the supporting company. These were the days of Booth, Jefferson, Adelaide Neilson, Charles Fletcher, Lotta, John McCullough, John Sleeper Clark, and the elder Sothern. And how Richard and I worshipped them all--not only these but every small-bit actor in every stock company in town. Indeed, so many favorites of the stage did my brother and I admire that ordinary frames would not begin to hold them all, and to overcome this defect we had our bedroom entirely redecorated. The new scheme called for a gray wallpaper supported by a maroon dado. At the top of the latter ran two parallel black picture mouldings between which we could easily insert cabinet photographs of the actors and actresses which for the moment we thought most worthy of a place in our collection. As the room was fairly large and as the mouldings ran entirely around it, we had plenty of space for even our very elastic love for the heroes and heroines of the footlights.

Edwin Forrest ended his stage career just before our time, but I know that Richard at least saw him and heard that wonderful voice of thunder. It seems that one day, while my mother and Richard were returning home, they got on a street-car which already held the great tragedian. At the moment Forrest was suffering severely from gout and had his bad leg stretched well out before him. My brother, being very young at the time and never very much of a respecter of persons, promptly fell over the great man's gouty foot. Whereat (according to my mother, who was always a most truthful narrator) Forrest broke forth in a volcano of oaths and for blocks continued to hurl thunderous broadsides at Richard, which my mother insisted included the curse of Rome and every other famous tirade in the tragedian's repertory which in any way fitted the occasion. Nearly forty years later my father became the president of the Edwin Forrest Home, the greatest charity ever founded by an actor for actors, and I am sure by his efforts of years on behalf of the institution did much to atone for Richard's early unhappy meeting with the greatest of all the famous leather-lunged tragedians.

From his youth my father had always been a close student of the classic and modern drama, and throughout his life numbered among his friends many of the celebrated actors and actresses of his time. In those early days Booth used to come to rather formal luncheons, and at all such functions Richard and I ate our luncheon in the pantry, and when the great meal was nearly over in the dining-room we were allowed to come in in time for the ice-cream and to sit, figuratively, at the feet of the honored guest and generally, literally, on his or her knees. Young as I was in those days I can readily recall one of those lunch-parties when the contrast between Booth and Dion Boucicault struck my youthful mind most forcibly. Booth, with his deep-set, big black eyes, shaggy hair, and lank figure, his wonderfully modulated voice, rolled out his theories of acting, while the bald-headed, rotund Boucicault, his twinkling eyes snapping like a fox-terrier's, interrupted the sonorous speeches of the tragedian with crisp, witty criticisms or "asides"

that made the rest of the company laugh and even brought a smile to the heavy, tragic features of Booth himself. But there was nothing formal about our relations with John Sleeper Clark and the Jefferson family. They were real "home folks" and often occupied our spare room, and when they were with us Richard and I were allowed to come to all the meals, and, even if unsolicited, freely express our views on the modern drama.

In later years to our Philadelphia home came Henry Irving and his fellow player Ellen Terry and Augustin Daly and that wonderful quartet, Ada Rehan, Mrs. Gilbert, James Lewis, and our own John Drew. Sir Henry I always recall by the first picture I had of him in our dining-room, sitting far away from the table, his long legs stretched before him, peering curiously at Richard and myself over black-rimmed glasses and then, with equal interest, turning back to the ash of a long cigar and talking drama with the famous jerky, nasal voice but always with a marvellous poise and convincing authority. He took a great liking to Richard in those days, sent him a church-warden's pipe that he had used as Corporal Brewster, and made much of him later when my brother was in London. Miss Terry was a much less formal and forbidding guest, rushing into the house like a whirlwind and filling the place with the sunshine and happiness that seemed to fairly exude from her beautiful magnetic presence. Augustin Daly usually came with at least three of the stars of his company which I have already mentioned, but even the beautiful Rehan and the nice old Mrs. Gilbert seemed thoroughly awed in the presence of "the Guv'nor." He was a most crusty, dictatorial party, as I remember him with his searching eyes and raven locks, always dressed in black and always failing to find virtue in any actor or actress not a member of his own company. I remember one particularly acrid discussion between him and my father in regard to Julia Marlowe, who was then making her first bow to the public. Daly contended that in a few years the lady would be absolutely unheard of and backed his opinion by betting a dinner for those present with my father that his judgment would prove correct. However, he was very kind to Richard and myself and frequently allowed us to play about behind the scenes, which was a privilege I imagine he granted to very few of his friends' children. One night, long after this, when Richard was a reporter in New York, he and Miss Rehan were burlesquing a scene from a play on which the last curtain had just fallen. It was on the stage of Daly's theatre at Thirtieth Street and Broadway, and from his velvet box at the prompt-entrance Daly stood gloomily watching their fooling. When they had finished the mock scene Richard went over to Daly and said, "How bad do you think I am as an actor, Mr. Daly?" and greatly to my brother's delight the greatest manager of them all of those days grumbled back at him: "You're so bad, Richard, that I'll give you a hundred dollars a week, and you can sign the contract whenever you're ready." Although that was much more than my brother was making in his chosen profession at the time, and in spite of the intense interest he had in the theatre, he never considered the offer seriously. As a matter of fact, Richard had many natural qualifications that fitted him for the stage, and in after-years, when he was rehearsing one of his own plays, he could and frequently would go up on the stage and read almost any part better than the actor employed to do it. Of course, he lacked the ease of gesture and the art of timing which can only be attained after sound experience, but his reading of lines and his knowledge of characterization was quite unusual. In proof of this I know of at least two managers who, when Richard wanted to

sell them plays, refused to have him read them the manuscript on the ground that his reading gave the dialogue a value it did not really possess.

In the spring of 1880 Richard left the Episcopal Academy, and the following September went to Swarthmore College, situated just outside of Philadelphia. I fear, however, the change was anything but a success. The life of the big coeducational school did not appeal to him at all and, in spite of two or three friendships he made among the girls and boys, he depended for amusement almost wholly on his own resources. In the afternoons and on holidays he took long walks over the country roads and in search of adventure visited many farmhouses. His excuse for these calls was that he was looking for old furniture and china, and he frequently remained long enough to make sketches of such objects as he pretended had struck his artistic fancy. Of these adventures he wrote at great length to his mother and father, and the letters were usually profusely decorated with illustrations of the most striking incidents of the various escapades. Several of these Swarthmore experiences he used afterward in short stories, and both the letters and sketches he sent to his parents at the time he regarded in the light of preparation for his future work. In his studies he was perhaps less successful than he had been at the Episcopal Academy, and although he played football and took part in the track sports he was really but little interested in either. There were half-holidays on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and when my brother did not come to town I went to Swarthmore and we spent the afternoons in first cooking our lunch in a hospitable woods and then playing some games in the open that Richard had devised. But as I recall these outings they were not very joyous occasions, as Richard was extremely unhappy over his failures at school and greatly depressed about the prospects for the future.

He finished the college year at Swarthmore, but so unhappy had he been there that there was no thought in his mind or in that of his parents of his returning. At that time my uncle, H. Wilson Harding, was a professor at Lehigh University, and it was arranged that Richard should go to Bethlehem the following fall, live with his uncle, and continue his studies at Ulrich's Preparatory School, which made a specialty of preparing boys for Lehigh. My uncle lived in a charming old house on Market Street in Bethlehem, quite near the Moravian settlement and across the river from the university and the iron mills. He was a bachelor, but of a most gregarious and hospitable disposition, and Richard therefore found himself largely his own master, in a big, roomy house which was almost constantly filled with the most charming and cultivated people. There my uncle and Richard, practically of about the same age so far as their viewpoint of life was concerned, kept open house, and if it had not been for the occasional qualms his innate hatred of mathematics caused him, I think my brother would have been completely happy. Even studies no longer worried him particularly and he at once started in to make friendships, many of which lasted throughout his life. As is usual with young men of seventeen, most of these men and women friends were several times Richard's age, but at the period Richard was a particularly precocious and amusing youth and a difference of a few decades made but little difference--certainly not to Richard. Finley Peter Dunne once wrote of my brother that he "probably knew more waiters, generals, actors, and princes than any man who lived," and I think it was during the first year of his life at Bethlehem that he began the foundation for the remarkable collection of friends, both as to numbers

and variety, of which he died possessed. Although a "prep," he made many friends among the undergraduates of Lehigh. He made friends with the friends of his uncle and many friends in both of the Bethlehems of which his uncle had probably never heard. Even at that early age he counted among his intimates William W. Thurston, who was president of the Bethlehem Iron Company, and J. Davis Brodhead, one of Pennsylvania's most conspicuous Democratic congressmen and attorneys. Those who knew him at that time can easily understand why Richard attracted men and women so much older than himself. He was brimming over with physical health and animal spirits and took the keenest interest in every one he met and in everything that was going on about him. And in the broadest sense he saw to it then, as he did throughout his life, that he always did his share.

During those early days at Bethlehem his letters to his family were full of his social activities, with occasional references to his work at school. He was always going to dinners or dances, entertaining members of visiting theatrical companies; and on Friday night my mother usually received a telegram, saying that he would arrive the next day with a party of friends whom he had inadvertently asked to lunch and a matinee. It was after one of these weekly visits that my mother wrote Richard the following:

Monday Night.

MY DARLING Boy:

You went off in such a hurry that it took my breath at the last. You say coming down helps you. It certainly does me. It brings a real sunshine to Papa and me. He was saying that to-day. I gave Nolly a sort of holiday after her miseries last night. We went down street and got Papa a present for our wedding day, a picture, after all, and then I took Miss Baker some tickets for a concert. I saw her father who said he "must speak about my noble looking boy." I always thought him a genius but now I think him a man of penetration as well. Then Nolly and I went over to see the Russians. But they are closely boxed up and not allowed to-day to see visitors. So we came home cross and hungry. All evening I have been writing business letters.

Papa has gone to a reception and Charley is hard at work at his desk.

I answered Mr. Allen's letter this morning, dear, and told him you would talk to him. When you do, dear, talk freely to him as to me. You will not perhaps agree with all he says. But your own thoughts will be healthier for bringing them--as I might say, out of doors. You saw how it was by coming down here. Love of Christ is not a melancholy nor a morbid thing, dear love, but ought to make one more social and cheerful and alive.

I wish you could come home oftener. Try and get ahead with lessons so that you can come oftener. And when you feel as if prayer was a burden, stop praying and go out and try to put your Christianity into real action by doing some kindness--even speaking in a friendly way to somebody. Bring yourself into contact with new people--not John, Hugh, Uncle and Grandma, and try to act to them as Christ would have you act, and my word for it, you will go home with a new light on your own relations to Him and a new

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