

CHAPTER XXXIII

OLD MOUNTAIN PHELPS

ORSON SCHOFIELD PHELPS, guide and philosopher, belonged to Keene Valley and Charles Dudley Warner. He lived in the shade of the one, and in the light of the other. He was not a great guide. Indeed, many did not consider him even a good one. He delighted in showing the way but not in preparing the camp. His neighbors openly rated him as both lazy and shiftless, and of no genius could it more truly be said that he was not a hero to his valley. He went hunting or fishing as a housewife goes to market. What he lacked in sporting zest, however, was offset by a love of nature and a poetic cast of thought that made him a favorite with some of the most intellectual men of his day.

He was born in Wethersfield, Vt., on May 6, 1817. About 1830 he came into the Schroon Lake country with his father, who was a surveyor. The elder Phelps had to trace out some old lot lines, and his boy helped him. Their work gave them a glimpse of some of the higher mountains, and Orson conceived a youthful but abiding love for them. He returned home with his father, but only to wait for an opportunity of coming back to the wilderness. He made it a year or two later by finding employment at the Adirondack Iron Works. He stayed there till Mr. Henderson's death. Then he turned from a commercial career to the more congenial freedom of an outdoor life. He wandered over to Keene Valley and settled there permanently. He married a native maiden by the name of Melinda Lamb, who developed oddities of temperament and tricks of speech that matched well with those of her more conspicuous spouse. She never fell under the charm of Mr. Warner's pen, however, and so remained in the penumbra of the literary lime-light that was focused on her husband.

After his marriage, Phelps built a little home for himself

and wife in a cozy nook near Prospect Hill, a little off the main road. Near the house is a bubbling stream and some pretty falls, to which Phelps's name has been attached. In this spot he lived and died. His hobby, which developed into a remunerative specialty, was climbing mountains. This exclusiveness led to his being called "Old Mountain Phelps"—a name in which he took both pride and pleasure. When asked to lead the way up some unfamiliar trail, he would often say: "So you want Old Mountain Phelps to show you the way, do you? Well, I callerlate he kin do it."

His favorite mountain was Marcy, and he boasted of having climbed it over a hundred times. In 1849 he blazed the first trail to its summit from the east, going in from Lower Ausable Lake and then passing Haystack and the head of Panther Gorge. Later he cut what was known as the Bartlett Mountain trail. About 1850 he guided two ladies over it to the summit of Marcy. They were the first women to make the complete ascent, and the feat of getting them safely to the top and back gave Phelps his first local renown.¹

Old Phelps, like Dr. Johnson, owes the lasting and intimate quality of his fame to a clever biographer. In the "Atlantic" for May, 1878, Charles Dudley Warner published an essay entitled "The Primitive Man,"² introducing a new discovery to the world—an unwashed Thoreau of guidedom. As a result Old Phelps awoke one morning to find himself famous. He inquired into the cause, read it, and liked it. Thereafter he devoted himself, too obviously at times, to living up to the literary halo in which he had been most unexpectedly lassoed. It was a big halo and it got around his feet and tripped him up now and then, so that disappointed pilgrims returned from his shrine to accuse Warner of having raised exaggerated

¹ In this connection it is of interest to note that when Mr. Lossing, the historian, made an ascent of Marcy from the west, about 1860, he was accompanied by his wife. In speaking of the hardships of the climb for a lady, he says: "Mrs. Lossing, we were afterwards informed by the oldest hunter and guide in all that region (John Cheney), is only the third woman who has ever accomplished the difficult feat." (See Lossing's *The Hudson*, p. 36.) This would look as if Cheney knew of Phelps's two ladies, but had heard of no others attempting the climb in the interval.

² This will be found, slightly revised, under the caption "A Character Study," in the Backlog Edition of his works, Vol. VI.

hopes. The deception, such as it was, however, was certainly not intentional. The writer says nothing that is not essentially true, but he says it with such grace and charm of phrase that we forget that a squeaky voice, the reluctance to use soap, and allied oddities may be less alluring in actual contact than in the pages of a book. This, it seems to me, is the most serious charge that can be brought against Mr. Warner's inimitable description of his primitive man. He says:

You might be misled by the shaggy suggestion of Old Phelps's given name—Orson—into the notion that he was a mighty hunter, with the fierce spirit of the Berserkers in his veins. Nothing could be farther from the truth. The hirsute and grisly sound of Orson expresses only his entire affinity with the untamed and the natural, an uncouth but gentle passion for the freedom and wildness of the forest. Orson Phelps has only those unconventional and humorous qualities of the bear which make the animal so beloved in literature; and one does not think of Old Phelps so much as a lover of nature,—to use the sentimental slang of the period,—as a part of nature itself.

His appearance at the time when as a "guide" he began to come into public notice fostered this impression,—a sturdy figure, with long body and short legs, clad in a woollen shirt and butternut-colored trousers repaired to the point of picturesqueness, his head surmounted by a limp, light-brown felt hat, frayed away at the top, so that his yellowish hair grew out of it like some nameless fern out of a pot. His tawny hair was long and tangled, matted now many years past the possibility of being entered by a comb. His features were small and delicate, and set in the frame of a reddish beard, the razor having mowed away a clearing about the sensitive mouth, which was not seldom wreathed with a childlike and charming smile. Out of this hirsute environment looked the small gray eyes, set near together; eyes keen to observe, and quick to express change of thought; eyes that made you believe instinct can grow into philosophic judgment. His feet and hands were of aristocratic smallness, although the latter were not worn away by ablutions; in fact, they assisted his toilet to give you the impression that here was a man who had just come out of the ground,—a real son of the soil, whose appearance was partially explained by his humorous relation to soap. "Soap is a thing," he said, "that I hain't no kinder use for." His clothes seemed to have been put on him once for all, like the bark of a tree, a long time ago. The observant stranger was sure to be puzzled by the contrast of this realistic and uncouth exterior with the internal fineness, amounting to

refinement and culture, that shone through it all. What communion had supplied the place of our artificial breeding to this man?

Perhaps his most characteristic attitude was sitting on a log, with a short pipe in his mouth. If ever man was formed to sit on a log, it was Old Phelps. He was essentially a contemplative person. Walking on a country road, or anywhere in the "open," was irksome to him. He had a shambling, loose-jointed gait, not unlike that of the bear: his short legs bowed out, as if they had been more in the habit of climbing trees than of walking. On land, if we may use that expression, he was something like a sailor; but, once in the rugged trail or the unmarked route of his native forest, he was a different person, and few pedestrians could compete with him. The vulgar estimate of his contemporaries, that reckoned Old Phelps "lazy," was simply a failure to comprehend the condition of his being. It is the unjustness of civilization that it sets up uniform and artificial standards for all persons. The primitive man suffers by them much as the contemplative philosopher does, when one happens to arrive in this busy, fussy world.

If the appearance of Old Phelps attracts attention, his voice, when first heard, invariably startles the listener. A small, high-pitched, half-querulous voice, it easily rises into the shrillest falsetto; and it has a quality in it that makes it audible in all the tempests of the forest, or the roar of the rapids, like the piping of a boatswain's whistle at sea in a gale. He has a way of letting it rise as his sentence goes on, or when he is opposed in argument, or wishes to mount above other voices in the conversation, until it dominates everything. Heard in the depths of the woods, quavering aloft, it is felt to be as much a part of nature, an original force, as the northwest wind or the scream of the hen-hawk. When he is pottering about the camp-fire, trying to light his pipe with a twig held in the flame, he is apt to begin some philosophical observation in a small, slow, stumbling voice, which seems about to end in defeat; when he puts on some unsuspected force, and the sentence ends in an insistent shriek. Horace Greeley had such a voice, and could regulate it in the same manner. But Phelps's voice is not seldom plaintive, as if touched by the dreamy sadness of the woods themselves.

When Old Mountain Phelps was discovered, he was, as the reader has already guessed, not understood by his contemporaries. His neighbors, farmers in the secluded valley, had many of them grown thrifty and prosperous, cultivating the fertile meadows, and vigorously attacking the timbered mountains; while Phelps, with not much more faculty of acquiring property than the roaming deer, had pur-



"OLD MOUNTAIN" PHELPS

sued the even tenor of the life in the forest on which he set out. They would have been surprised to be told that Old Phelps owned more of what makes the value of the Adirondacks than all of them put together, but it was true. This woodsman, this trapper, this hunter, this fisherman, this sitter on a log, and philosopher, was the real proprietor of the region over which he was ready to guide the stranger. It is true that he had not a monopoly of its geography or its topography (though his knowledge was superior in these respects); there were other trappers, and more deadly hunters, and as intrepid guides: but Old Phelps was the discoverer of the beauties and sublimities of the mountains; and, when city strangers broke into the region, he monopolized the appreciation of these delights and wonders of nature. I suppose that in all that country he alone had noticed the sunsets, and observed the delightful processes of the seasons, taken pleasure in the woods for themselves, and climbed mountains solely for the sake of the prospect. He alone understood what was meant by "scenery." In the eyes of his neighbors, who did not know that he was a poet and a philosopher, I dare say he appeared to be a slack provider, a rather shiftless trapper and fisherman; and his passionate love of the forest and the mountains, if it was noticed, was accounted to him for idleness.

He was prone to nickname the natural wonders that he loved best. Mount Marcy he always called "Mercy." He held it to be the stateliest peak, commanding the finest view in the world. People would sometimes speak of the Alps or the Himalayas as having mountainous merit. But such idle talk annoyed him, and he would squeelch it with a sneer. "I caller-late you hain't never been atop o' Mercy," he would say, and turn away in disgust. His own joy in standing there he expressed as a feeling of "heaven up-h'isted-ness."

Loath as he was to hear his favorite "Mercy" disparaged, he was very careful about overpraising it or any of his pet views. He seemed to sense the value of surprise in the revelation of natural beauties, and to have the instinct of the true artist for the avoidance of an anti climax. He also brought a strange temperance to bear on his enjoyment of nature. He sipped his choicest vistas as a connoisseur sips his choicest wines. He once led Mr. Warner and some others to the Upper Ausable Lake, near which rise the uniquely beautiful Gothics. The party wished to camp on the south side of the

lake, which would give them a constant view of the mountains. But Phelps objected, much to their surprise, and urged the north shore, which did not command the desired view. The pros and cons were debated, and finally Phelps drawled out: "Waal, now, them Gothics ain't the kinder scenery yer want *ter hog down!*"

Outside of nature, however, there was another love and another influence that helped to mould his character: this was Horace Greeley's "Weekly Tribune." The "Try-bune" Phelps called it. It became his Bible. He not only read it; he soaked and wallowed in it, and then oozed Greeleyisms to lard the lean understandings of his associates. His constant reference to the paper led many of his neighbors to dub him "Old Greeley," and, as a matter of fact, he resembled the eccentric editor in both looks and voice. The "Tribune" at this time published much of Tennyson's poetry, and Old Phelps became very fond of it, largely, no doubt, as Mr. Warner suggests, because they were both lotus-eaters.

Despite a local aloofness engendered by his Tribunal education and his own philosophical "speckerlations," he was eager for contact with men of real intellect. Keene Valley was unusually full of them, and several of its finest spirits honored Phelps with their serious friendship. How much he valued it, the following will illustrate. The talk turned one day to the making of money, and Mr. Warner asked him if he would plan his life differently if he had it to live over again. "Yes," he answered thoughtfully, "but not about money. To have had hours such as I have had in these mountains, and with such men as Dr. Bushnell, Dr. Shaw and Mr. Twichell, and others I could name, is worth all the money the world could give."

He met these distinguished men on an easy footing of equality. He suffered from no abashed sense of their importance. Those whom he particularly liked he called by their first names. He always addressed Dr. Twitchell as "Joe." He often visited in Hartford, where he had a married daughter, besides several distinguished friends. One morning he walked into the Warner house and met Mrs. Warner coming downstairs. She had seen him but a couple of times and was

not aware that they were on an intimate footing. She was, therefore, a little taken aback to be greeted with, "Good morning, Susie! Charlie in?"

He tested every one by his own standards, and strangers stood or fell in his estimation by these alone. Nature was the test, and he used it much as a doctor would a toxin on a doubtful patient. After leading his subject to his laboratory, he would suddenly inject, through the eye, a dash of sunset or a dainty bit of landscape. Then he would withdraw to a log, and watch for the reaction. Its degree of intensity decided the rating. Those who did n't react became outcasts, and no other merits could restore them to his favor.

He once guided two or three young girls up Mount "Mercy." On reaching the top they glanced around irreverently, and then fell to talking about clothes and fashions. They must have known that they had passed some dangerous spots, but the greatest danger of all they probably never dreamed of—the itching desire of the disgusted Phelps "ter kick the silly things off my mounting."

His vocabulary was limited but extremely picturesque. He got his effects with few colors, as the artists say. He was particularly fond of working one word—like his favorite mountain—for all it was worth. Asked whither a to-morrow's tramp would lead, he produced this gem: "Waal, I callerlate, if they rig up the callerlation they callerlate on, we'll go to the Boreas." He made a nice distinction between a "reg'lar walk" and a "random scoot." The former meant over a beaten track; the latter, away from it. A tight place in the woods became a "reg'lar random scoot of a rigmarole." Assuring some one that no water had struck his back for forty years, he concluded with, "I don't believe in this etarnal soz-zlin'." As Dr. Twitchell once said of him, the dictionary in his mouth became as clay in the hands of the potter.

The constant reading of the "Tribune" and frequent contact with literary men, led to an almost inevitable result: Old Phelps finally burst into print, and no less a paper than the "Essex County Republican" became the willing purveyor of his writings. They took the form of both verse and prose, and ranged in subject from natural history to philosophy.

His "Speckerlations" in this line carried the hall-mark of the highest excellence—they are utterly incomprehensible to the average reader. One of them bore the title "Why Have Miracles Ceased?"

His nature writings, on the other hand, revealed unusually keen observation and a gift of expression truly remarkable for a backwoodsman whose primitive schooling had ceased when he was fifteen. One of these articles, called "The Growth of a Tree," attracted sufficient attention to be reproduced in pamphlet form.¹

The Manager of the Beaufort Gardens, in London, sent for a copy, and spoke of it with commendation. Professor Peck of the New York Museum of Natural History wrote a personal letter to the author after reading the pamphlet. "I thank you for writing it, and wish you were a botanist," he said. "You would do some good work with your natural aptitude for close observation and your facilities for investigation."

This and other of Phelps's writings were so good, comparatively, that many people were inclined to believe that what appeared over his name was largely the result of much blue-penciling. I am assured, however, that such was not the case, and that his manuscripts underwent no radical changes in the editorial office. If this is so, the quality of his literary output is certainly surprising. I give as a sample a few verses of one of the best of his longer poems, which is full of primitive poetic feeling and of his genuine love for the mountains.

MOUNTAIN SONG

How dear to my heart are the glorious old mountains,
When for thirty years past I recall scenes to view,
Their wild mossy gorges and sweet crystal fountains
Stand out now before me as vivid as new.
Their Avalanche stript faces that glitter in sunlight
With myriads of crystals that dazzle the eyes;
Their rough ragged rocks horizontal and upright,
Proclaim their Creator must have truly been wise.
The old feldspar mountains, with their sweet crystal fountains
The evergreen mountains we all love so well.

¹ The title-page reads: "*The Growth of a Tree from Its Germ or Seed*, by O. S. Phelps, written for the *Essex County Republican* and republished in pamphlet form—containing poem *Autumn Leaves*." No date.

The deep shady forests spread over these highlands
 Of the old sable spruce and lighter green fir-tree,
 And the lovely green moss that covers the lowlands
 Combine in a picture we seldom can see.
 Then higher up still are the bare rocky summits,
 With their Matterhorn spires towering up to the sky,
 And the thick stunted fir trees that fringe the bare granite
 Can creep upward no more than five thousand feet high.

The broad rapid rivers that flow down from your valleys,
 And brooks without number coming down from your heights,
 And long dancing cascades that glitter like lilies,
 And waterfalls singing their sweet songs in the night.
 Through the deep rock-bound chasms the waters are flowing
 O'er crystals and opals that glitter like diamonds
 In the bright rays of sunlight down through the trees dancing,
 And washed by pure water that came down from highlands.

The clear little lakes are so peacefully sleeping,
 At the feet of these giants so tall and so grand,
 That they look like the tears of many years weeping,
 That have flown down their cheeks and have mingled with sand.
 And broader lakes still, lying in the lone forests,
 That reflect all their grandeur like mirrors of glass,
 And make the great play-ground of thousands of tourists,
 That meet here in summer their spare time to pass.

* * * * *

My time is fast passing to view these grand mountains,
 And the grand scenes of Nature that about them I see,
 Of great boulder rocks and their sweet crystal fountains,
 Fresh from their Creator they have all come to me.
 And I must soon leave to unborn generations,
 Those scenes that so long have been dear to my sight,
 Who will hereafter view them with varied emotions,
 And volumes about them great Authors will write.
 Oh! the old feldspar mountains, with their sweet crystal fountains,
 The evergreen mountains we all love so well!

Phelps lived to be eighty-eight years old—showing that longevity has little to do with soap and water. He became very feeble in his last years, however, and spent them in the seclusion of his brook-side home. He also became more truly picturesque than ever. His long, matted hair and fanlike beard turned a most beautiful pure white, and sitting, as he often did in summer, in a doorway flanked with flaming sunflowers, he suggested a Northern Rabindranath Tagore, dreaming of a mountainous Nirvana. Behind him, through the open door-

way, could be seen a kitchen festooned with many strings of drying apples. These appeared to offer his only visible means of sustenance. There was a garden, to be sure, but it gave the impression of being kept for contemplative purposes rather than practical ones. He also kept a store on the same principle, occasionally selling one of Stoddard's guide-books or a portrait of himself.

During these sunset years the Rev. Samuel T. Lowrie of Philadelphia, who had built near by and wished to control the surrounding property, induced Phelps to sell on condition that he and his wife might live in the house until their death. Old Phelps died there on April 14, 1905. Soon afterward the widow went to live with a married daughter in Hartford, and died there in 1917. There were six surviving children, three daughters and three sons. Only one of them still lives in Keene Valley—a son, who is strangely reminiscent of his father in looks, in manner, and in a deep-seated love of nature. But he has never been Warnerized.

After Phelps died and Mrs. Phelps decided to move away, Dr. Lowrie tore down their old home, and what might have been a wayside shrine for a few sentimentalists exists no more. Nothing but Phelps Falls remains to perpetuate the memory of a unique figure among Adirondack guides. He was held by them in but slight esteem, and was considered a mere fumbler at most of their arts, but he possessed one unknown to the best of their guild: he could hallow a "random scoot" through the forests into something akin to questing for the Holy Grail.