

The First New Jersey Novel

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Berkeley Hall: Or, the Pupil of Experience. A Novel, in three volumes. (Quotation, 6 lines from Othello.) Vol. I. London: Printed for J. Tindal, Great Portland Street, Oxford Street. 1796. 16mo. Vol. I. Pp. (4), 324; Vol. II. Pp. (4), 402; Vol. III. Pp. (4), 411.

A New Jersey Novel in the Eighteenth Century! What a surprise and curiosity! What is the plot? Who were the characters? Where is the scene of the story located? Who was the writer? These are the questions that naturally arise as we handle these three little volumes, published "in wrappers," sold at the moderate price of 10s 6d. The copy before us is neatly bound in boards, half calf, lettered on the back "Pupil of Experience," with the initial "F" in script stamped in gilt on the back. Was "F" the writer? Who shall say?

"It was in the month of August, during a violent thunderstorm, that a poor traveler knocked at the door of a venerable mansion in New Jersey, and begged, for the love of God, shelter from the severity of the weather." With this promising opening the narrative begins. The traveler received a hospitable welcome at the hands of Dr. Homily, the owner of the mansion, and subsequently related his adventures. He proved to be an Englishman, who had taken part in some of the last uprisings in behalf of the Stuarts, and who, through a variety of misfortunes lost all his property, and was transported to the Colonies. There he was sold as an indented servant, in Maryland, and subsequently made his way to western Pennsylvania, where he acquired a farm. Through the conflict between "New Hampshire" and Pennsylvania, his buildings were burned and his stock destroyed. This fixes the time of the story between 1769 and 1775, when the settlers from Connecticut, not New Hampshire, poured into the Wyoming Valley and forcibly ejected the Pennsylvania residents. During the night after the stranger's arrival, the house caught fire, but the itinerant soldier-farmer gallantly rescued a boy from an upper room, and the fire was extinguished. And so on page 57 of Vol. I. , this gallant veteran vanishes from sight, not to appear again until page 400 of Vol. II. Why he was brought into the story at all is a mystery.

Dr. Homily was of a respectable family of Lancashire, where he once held considerable preferment in the Church, but abandoned it and his country on account of his principles, which would not permit him to take the oaths required by the "Revolution." If this refers to the Revolution which was brought about by King William, it makes it difficult to reconcile the dates, as he would seem to have spent sixty or seventy years in America, and he would be at least one hundred years old. It probably refers, however, to the accession of George I. in 1714.

"He had been so fortunate as to bring with him to America from the sale of his

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paternal estate, property enough to purchase him lands in New Jersey to the value of £500 per annum. Berkeley Hall, his mansion, was situated on the side of a verdant hill, covered with orchards of apples, pears, peaches and other fruits, which grew as standards to the greatest perfection. The trees formed a crescent; and at about two hundred yards distant from the middle of it his house stood surrounded by a garden furnished with clumps of evergreens and banks of flowers. In the front of it appeared a small lake supplied with water from a rivulet, which flowing in cascades from the mountain behind the house, glided in a full serpentine stream through the orchards, and after meandering through the garden formed a beautiful expanse of water before the house; it then joined a large river, emptying itself into the bay of New York, which exhibited from the windows a most delicious prospect of grotesque islands, ships and boats sailing, and the fort and city at a considerable distance." Was this location on the Raritan?

A young officer of an English regiment quartered at New York obtained leave of absence and resided for his health in New Jersey, in the vicinity of Berkeley Hall, occupying his spare time in cultivating the acquaintance of Dr. Homily's daughter Matilda. There is a graphic account of a rattlesnake climbing a tree(!), and fascinating a bird, and then descending, and by its menacing rattles pretending to pursue the fair Matilda, but the gallant captain attacked him and severed the creature in a dozen places. Captain Tickle finally persuaded the young lady to consent to a secret marriage at the house of a mutual friend in New York, as he was about to return to England, where he was going to get his father's consent to the marriage. It transpired that he already had a wife and children in the old country, which coming to Matilda's knowledge broke her heart, and she died soon after giving birth to a son, Timothy Tickle, who is the hero of the novel. Before she died, she was advised that Tickle's wife in England had died a few weeks or months before his marriage to Matilda. When Matilda received the shocking intelligence of Captain Tickle's treachery, she started to return home, "and the second day after their departure from New York, she arose with the lark, and summoned them (her friends) with alacrity to proceed, that they might reach Berkeley Hall early that day." This gives us some idea of the distance of Berkeley Hall from the city. The same day a postman arrived at Berkeley Hall from Elizabethtown.

Glimpses of Dr. Homily's character are given. He derived a singular pleasure that "his grandson was born on the day of King Charles's restoration, whence he augured he would be a friend to monarchy, and our happy establishment in church and state. A storm, also, the preceding night blew down the old steeple of a meeting-house in the neighborhood, which had long been a great eye-sore to the Doctor; and destroyed a bell, which sounded like a perpetual insult and triumph over episcopacy, in his ears. The ruling elders (knowing his charity) applied to him on the occasion for assistance; but he could not, he said, in conscience, give anything to such idle mimicry, and presumptuous erections; but he offered them £50 toward an organ, which they

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refused - and actually gave them £20 towards the improvement of the body of their church, or for the relief of the poor."

He encouraged his grandson in the practice of innocent amusements "as the best preservatives against guilty ones," and "that a strong constitution, formed by exertion and exposure to difficulties, is one of the best blessings in life, and generally renders the owner most happy in himself, and most useful to others." Accordingly, the youth with his faithful slave Sancho, "would float with the ice on Hudson's majestic river," or "would go with a party of neighbors to Staten Island and erect tents on its spacious beach, partly encircled with a magnificent bay, and partly opening to an unbounded view of the sublime Atlantic Ocean." Timothy was persuaded to "graduate at an American college in the neighborhood. The favored branches cultivated at this seminary were logic, metaphysics, the laws of nature and nations, and the most abstruse school divinity. Edwards on Freewill, Locke, Sidney, Collins, Berkeley, Trenchard, Shaftsbury, the Rights of the Christian Church, the Independent Whig, and other authors of this stamp, were in great currency among the students." Evidently the college in question was Princeton. Timothy was greatly outraged at the favoritism shown some indolent coxcombs, "who had nothing to recommend them but the enormous landed estates of their fathers, or their seats in the Provincial Assemblies or Councils. The mock noblesse had more family pride and aristocratical spirit than the wealthiest and most ancient of the European nobility." Among his fellow students was one Aaron Forester, son of Col. Anthony Forester, who had acquired an immense property, and was called by the people, "the great padrone, or Proprietor," from his extensive tracts of land. Tim has a variety of college scrapes and tricks, but finally graduates.

One-half of the first volume is taken up with the fantastic adventures of Prince Pangoleen, an African chief, who was carried into slavery in America. He had some extraordinary experiences in trying to capture a whale off the coast of California, and his boat was drawn by the monster into an enormous cavern. The bay was inhabited by amphibious beings with web fingers and toes, human forms and fish tails. There is a reminder here of the celebrated adventures of Peter Wilkins and his flying men. He was taken by the hospitable inhabitants of the cavern to see all the sights of the place, including the palatial quarters of the King, who was able to address him in his native language, he having some years before visited Angola. The King in turn recounted many of his own experiences, the most remarkable being a journey via the South pole to the interior of the earth, which he found was hollow, the principal entrances to the interior being at the poles. This book was published thirty years before the little work expository of Captain John Cleves Symmes's "Theory of Concentric Spheres," that the earth was hollow, and inhabited on the concave as well as on the convex sides. Did Captain Symmes get his idea from "Berkeley Hall?" There is a very close parallel between the two books in the descriptions of the conditions of the interior world. The whole country within the earth, said this King, was brilliantly lighted and the

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people were industrious and happy, enjoying an ideal state of society, with "a government instituted for the public good, and so administered that public and private interest was the same." They had perfected the navigation of the air; "large spheres made of the lightest skins were filled with a fluid specifically lighter than the air, to which they suspended a little cart or box, which they could propel by wings of great magnitude worked easily by springs and machinery invented for the purpose."

This book was published soon after Mongalfier had made his first experiments with balloons. The inhabitants of the inside of the earth, moreover, had trained great eagles to fly through the air with their aerial cars. One of the outlets of this inner world, the North Pole, is the site of a great volcano, which was the cause of the northern lights; a division of its flames perforates Mount Hecla, in Iceland. This, too, is intimated in the "Theory of Concentric Spheres." Among these people inhabiting the concave side of the earth, "the country appeared to be highly cultivated, and very thickly settled with large cities, towns and villages; in which the inhabitants swarmed like bees, and seemed as active and industrious in manufacture and traffic indeed, as we afterwards found, the ruling principle of these central nations is, that no one should be idle; that it is the prime duty of every member of their society to understand and pursue some useful art and business. Every parent is compelled by the state, to give his children an education of a beneficial kind; and if he is unable to do it (which is rarely the case), a provision is made for the purpose by the public." A long description is given of the government, and physical and moral conditions of these people, whose state was ideal.

In the second volume the old adage that the course of love never runs smooth is exemplified in the experiences of Timothy. He conceives a warm affection for Miss Letitia Forester, daughter of Colonel Forester, "who, having been sent when very young to a boarding school at Elizabeth-Town, had often visited Berkeley Hall with her schoolmates."

She was removed to finish her education to New York; where she remained without returning into the country till she was about sixteen; at which time she paid a visit to her friend, Miss Julia Moody, at Elizabeth-Town. "Miss Moody had designs of her own on Timothy, and contrived to throw a variety of obstacles in the way of their intercourse, which nearly drove the two young people to madness and despair." Letitia was sought in marriage by Colonel Beekman, of New York, a gentleman about forty years of age, "five feet two in height and ten feet in circumference." He had the advantage of being favored by her parents.

In Timothy's despairing state, he started out into the world with Dr. Sourby, his former tutor. They passed the "Falls of Passaic in New Jersey, much admired by travellers." They met with various adventures on the way to East Town, Pennsylvania, and thence journeyed to Bethlehem. A good description is given of the Moravian settlement. They travelled for some days on the frontiers of Pennsylvania, and apparently in the Wyoming settlement. Dr. Sourby bought a block-house there

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from a stranger, which he called "Independent Hall." This is probably a play on Governor Livingston's "Independence Hall," near Elizabethtown. It transpired that the land was held by a deed from the Proprietary of Pennsylvania, but it was claimed by the "New Hampshire" men, who forcibly ejected the Doctor, and sent him and Tim as captives to "New Hampshire," where they arrived in a rapid march of three days. There they were committed to prison in one of the towns, but were rescued from jail by the veteran who had appeared on page 1 of Vol. I. He had sold his estate at Wyoming and had settled in "New Hampshire," but was determined to dispose of that and secure a home in Dr. Homily's neighborhood.

The third volume opens with an account of a hermit in Eastern Pennsylvania, the description of whose cave resembles that of Francis Phylfe, as given in the newspapers of the day about 1779. The hermit recounts his despicable exploits, remorse for which had caused him to seek refuge in this remote locality. As he concludes his story the party are attacked by Indians, and carried off prisoners to the country of the Iroquois. They are rescued by Ancuna, a beautiful Indian maiden, and her Indian lover, and shortly make their way back to Berkeley Hall, accompanied by their Indian saviours. Tim makes his peace with Letitia, and everything looks propitious for the young lovers. Miss Moody seeks to provoke another estrangement, but Tim is able to show her treachery to Letitia. Her brother, Edward Moody, quarrels with Tim about his sister, and although our hero tries to avoid an encounter with him, he insists, and as a result is wounded so badly that he is expected to die. Timothy is obliged to flee, and he pushes across country "towards a small seaport town, Shrewsbury, whence he could take passage on some vessel for New York or Philadelphia bound for Europe." After many hairbreadth escapes, he arrives there, and ultimately boards a vessel for Dublin. The craft is driven ashore two or three days later, and Timothy resolves to go back to New York and deliver himself up. There he learns that Edward Moody has recovered, and has completely exonerated him. He accordingly hastens off once more for Berkeley Hall. But his joy is moderated at the afflicting intelligence that his beloved Letitia has fallen into a decline, and is on her way to Baltimore, whence she is to take passage for Madeira. She is accompanied by her brother Aaron and the perfidious Miss Moody, who in the interval has married her brother. Timothy resolves to follow her, but in the meantime his attention is diverted by an important trust. The hermit before referred to has died, leaving a will, bequeathing several thousand pounds for various public objects, in the charge of a trusted friend, another hermit, who has made his home in one of the most remote recesses of the Allegheny mountains. The latter recluse is discovered in due time by Timothy and Dr. Sourby, and turns out to be Timothy's father, Captain Tickle. He is instrumental in restoring Timothy and his Letitia to each other's arms. This has come about through the treachery of her brother Aaron and his wife, the former Miss Moody, who had carried the sister off into the remote mountain regions, and left her there in charge of some brutal custodians. She had managed to make her way through

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various extensive caverns, and so had been brought to the care of the senior Tickle.

There was a beautiful romantic glen, which was called by the inhabitants the "Vale of Conan," enclosed by mountains, and almost inaccessible. "They consisted of about one hundred families and spoke a language resembling the Welch. They have a tradition among them, that, at some very distant period, their ancestors came from beyond the seas, under the command of a leader or prince called Madoc, the son of Gwnnedh, a foreign prince, that a part of them emigrated to the countries northwest of the great river Mississippi, and the remainder being almost destroyed by the Indians around, they took refuge in this neighborhood," where they had lived for many generations. This is an old tradition in Georgia and South Carolina, by the way.

Our hero and his lady love return to New York, and thence to Berkeley Hall, where they are received with open arms. Subsequently, Timothy was elected a member of the American Assembly in the province by the people of the county in which he resided. Aaron Forester and his wife were obliged to seek a home in one of the western settlements. His wife eloped from him, and he being universally execrated, settled at finally in St. Eustatia, and report says that he was assassinated at last by his own blacks, who were irritated by his cruelties.

The story is unconscionably padded with long disquisitions on the beauties of the English constitution and the English church, and metaphysics. There are also some shrewd observations on psychical phenomena, apparitions, second sight, etc. On the whole, there is considerable literary ability evinced, and the plot is somewhat ingenious.

Who was the writer? Probably some civilian officeholder in New Jersey before the Revolution. There is much to indicate that it was the work of a woman, but on the whole, it was probably the work of a man. The allusions to localities show a correct knowledge of the geography of the Province, although some incidents are introduced which could have occurred only in New England. The absolute silence as to the events of the Revolution would indicate that the author left the Province before the war; possibly the occurrences of that period were reserved for another work, for in the concluding sentence it is intimated that the author might publish a sequel to the novel, but it is not known that this intention was ever carried out.

The "Monthly Review," a London periodical, in Volume XXII, from January to April, 1797, gives this notice of the novel:

The scene of this work is laid in America; and the time is a short period before the late revolution in that country. The author has freely given the reins to his fancy, and in consequence has produced many absurdities and incongruities: but it is an entertaining performance, and by no means the common production of a hackney novelwriter. Metaphysics and polemical discussions frequently occur: more reading, and more learning, than are usual in this line of composition, are displayed; and some interesting delineations are given of the manners and customs of the American Indians.