

# KITTREDGE OF HARVARD

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MANY men who are indebted to George Lyman Kittredge—more than a few of them are Canadians—would like to be able to write about him as well as he wrote about his own great master. His brief memoir of Francis James Child which prefaces *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* is a model, a neglected model, in its kind: precise yet full (Kittredge's own recipe for good answers in a test), perfectly fitted to occasion and subject, impelled by a finely moderated energy of affection. Such an example may well discourage even a competent biographer. The notes which follow are merely informal records made by an ordinary student of the sort who crowded into Kittredge's lecture-room in the years before 1914. Perhaps they may be useful as a rough and haphazard "control" on the memoir which is still to be written.

Late one Sunday afternoon I found my room-mate, a simple soul from the Medical School, anxiously awaiting me in the dormitory. He announced that God had called shortly after twelve o'clock and left a note on my desk. The note was there, all right, and the initials signing it explained the epiphany. G. L. K. had appeared in the doorway, clad in shining Sabbath raiment. Anyone who has seen that sight will understand my friend's concern—especially as the simple soul had been sun-bathing on the window-seat, and had had no time to sew fig-leaves together.

To me, however, his embarrassment was nothing to worry about. Kittredge had called! After chapel he had turned out of his way, marched down to the dormitory, and climbed to the third floor, in order to remind an ordinary student of something which "anyone might easily forget when he was unwell."

To men of my day, the incident will sound important enough, and very characteristic. For Kittredge was always doing things like that, and some of them were on a truly grand scale. There is a story, for which I cannot vouch, that he secretly translated a long Norse document for a struggling *doctorand*, and turned the result over as if it were nothing. I do know that he gave to another student a great body of notes on one of his favourite

to such occasions; and if any word had been adequate, Kittredge would not have welcomed it. He knew very well that thanks would almost surely follow in the form of results. And those results, it should be noted, would often surprise the beneficiary far more than the donor. If Kittredge thought that a noble rage for knowledge was latent anywhere, he knew exactly how to release it and make it akin to his own.

Fifty classes of students delight in recalling his genius in another kind of rage. No real human being would wish to forget the outbursts for which Kittredge was famous. They too left the recipient speechless, and afterwards they gave him the pride of remembering that he had once provoked an earthquake. One of them I witnessed myself. Some unfortunate had been caught in the act of withdrawing his attention. Probably he had yawned, or looked at his watch. There was an awful pause in the lecture, followed by a still more awful voice from the platform: "Perhaps, Sir, you can deliver this lecture better than I. Come up here and show us how it ought to be done." Forthwith, the wretch was haled from the middle of a row and seated in the chair on the dais, while Kittredge's beard descended to burn with white heat among the students. The new instructor emitted no sound. Again the voice: "Well, Sir, now you see." With that, the beard lifted into the air and streamed like a comet to the door.

All this may ring flat in the telling and, to an impercipient, it may seem incredible or beyond pardon. But, first, it did happen as I have told it, and, secondly, I feel sure that the victim cherished no lasting grudge. Certainly a more or less similar experience has left no scar on the mind of one ordinary student. It remains in memory not as an offence but as a grand performance of a scene from *Lear*. (Kittredge himself is said to have admitted that his thunder-storms were "largely histrionic.") At the same time, I am bound to say that, magnificent as the performances were, one tried to prevent their occurrence. I have seen a class of mature graduates hastily summoning all their wits to contrive some safety valve against an imminent explosion. After that experience they had a better understanding of the Psalmist's text: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom."

A "legend" was obviously bound to grow up about the name and person of Kittredge of Harvard. Concerning one of his favourite characters, it was said that her "sighs and tears"

"... storms and tempests than almanacs can report."

like those of old Nile's serpent, had the rush and sweep of a natural force. The least thing he said or did seemed weighty with meaning.

For instance, the "legend" quite rightly plays up those remarkable entrances into class. Their effect has been dryly outlined by one of Kittredge's greatest pupils: "When he came into a room," said John Mathews Manly, "you knew at once that somebody important was there." It was always an entrance in style. The white beard would take the eye. And so would the clothes. As trade journals might put it, he was "sartorially impeccable"; and in naval phrase his visibility was high. On him grey coats and trousers somehow became different: on his

sustaining garments not a blemish,

But fresher than before.

Not even primy nature can always abide the challenge of neckties in delicate rose or clear pale blue; but under Kittredge's beard they sat naturally, as the real right thing. In an envious moment you would have been glad to detect a flaw in the ensemble. There was never one in my day. But I was grateful to hear, on authority, of an error in packing that once compelled him to wear two left-foot shoes at a public lecture; and of another tense occasion when his trousers antedated the rest of his elaborate dress-clothes by more than a decade. This is set down in a malice born of admiration. Men who think most of Kittredge will wish they had been there to see him carry it off, as he would and did, without sound or sign to the world at large.

Once the stir of entrance had subsided, you found his teaching equally remarkable. A few unwise pupils have tried to imitate his modes of instruction, thereby giving colour to the epithet "little Kittredges" which an eminent colleague coined. Such flattery is, of course, fatuous. You may learn from Lear and Cleopatra, but you had better not try to ape them. Kittredge did not often "lecture," at least not in my hearing. His "lectures" were really dramatic monologues, each as different from the other as the Canterbury Tales. True, a monologue might be interrupted by questions—in English 2, the legendary course on Shakespeare, they were often fired at him as from a machine-gun, and they never failed of the apparently final answer. But as for "discussion," that sacred cow of the "progressives," Heaven help the upstart who would try to argue in class with Kittredge! Even if anyone had dared to try, the class would have withered

issue from the moment, like a spring of easy talk. But when you came to look over your notes, you found in them a structure and progression that never could have been your own. He was at his best, of course, as an *explicateur de texte*: in this rôle he surely had no rival. Numberless minor—and major—folk have quarried, not always with acknowledgment, from their notes of his comment on *Beowulf* and the *Squire's Tale*. Chaucerian vowel qualities would be fixed in their memory by a juicy echo from New Hampshire, Dame Partelote's nature by an expert analysis of the general intelligence of hens. And medieval *taedium vitae* came to life again in Kittredge's story of a prize pessimist from Cape Cod: "I put six eggs under that hen, and I begod the chickens all died on me but five".

A great scholar is sometimes said to wear his learning lightly. As for Kittredge, he wore his variously. He could, and often did, wear it as Sinai wore clouds. He could, and often did, put it on as if it were motley. When he was in the mood, he could throw up a smoke-screen of erudition that choked off everything in range. One night he consented to speak for the Modern Language Conference at their annual meeting with the Classical Club, the Moderns hoping he would unjoint some of the younger Classical noses. He did. The lecture, on some remote theme I never heard of before or since, was for once cast in rigid form, complete with heads and sub-heads. It had all the apparatus of intelligibility. Yet apart from very wise and humorous persons like Professor E. K. Rand, nobody understood anything the lecturer said. (I remember, or seem to remember, one lone mysterious phrase—"that fine Gellian word, *symbolike*.") Kittredge was well aware that the Moderns group would be hopelessly and cheerfully ignorant, and he therefore addressed himself to the younger Ancients: if *they* had a thirst for ancient learning, by Janus he would satisfy it! I have never witnessed a more solemn and successful rag.

There were times, also, when the learning *was* worn lightly. Some student would need expert advice, and he would get it poured out so easily and graciously that he was made to feel like an equal at a scholars' conference. Such was the temper of the seminar, night after night, while papers were being read at the centre of the maze in the professor's study, and an inexhaustible cigar-box went around.

All this belongs to the "legend". But Kittredge was most

I will discease me, and myself present  
As I was sometime Milan.

G. L. K., at a party, *in propria persona*—to one group of students nothing can ever beat that combination of elements. One of my friends, a cool and undefaceable youngster, invited him to dine with the gang. His acceptance flattered us mightily, but, I must say, rather frightened us as well. We had dinner far down a dark Bostonian alley, at a place well-known for cheap meals and freedom from restraint. To recall the event is probably unwise, since none of us can hope to convey any sense of what happened. It will sound priggishly literary, no doubt, but it is nevertheless true, to say that we young fellows felt we were entertaining Socrates, Lucian, the Nun's Priest, Montaigne, Falstaff, Dr. Johnson and Mark Twain—with a glimpse or two of Autolyceus. I cannot imagine what would occur if those shades did actually gather together at an Elysian table. But when they appear and do their turns *seriatim*, they put on an amazing show. Especially if each of the audience is able to feel as eminent as the entertainers. It was a party at which liberty and decorum were happily mated, and nobody was aware of exercising either.

An ordinary student likes to recall his own special hour. At the close of a meeting in the city, G. L. K. took him to oyster-supper in what appeared to be a permanently reserved corner of the Adams House coffee-room. There, as all will know who have had the like fortune, Kittredge was the perfect fireside host. And probably each lucky fellow will remember his hour as the one and only time when waiters served him as if he were a Royal Highness.

One last *memorable*: Kittredge, at a doctors' dinner, gleefully correcting Professor Fred Robinson, of all men the most exact, for a false Latin quantity.

Twenty-nine years ago, the editors of the *Kittredge Anniversary Papers* wrote of a "term of service which has been of unusual significance for the advancement of American learning." What was an understatement then is palpably inadequate now. I dare say the satisfactory memoir will duly estimate the vast influence which the work and person of Kittredge have had on learning everywhere. Unhappily, the virtue which emanates from men like him utterly escapes print—it has to be caught on the wing; and no one should be surprised if a few unlucky souls fail to catch it. Some of that tribe have held him responsible

no need to pause over these petty jealousies. Clearly he could not prevent academic birds of any species, tassel-gentle or worm-fowl, from flocking to hear him and trying to fly in his wake. Since he is no longer here to rebuke me, I will misquote Chaucer, who has a word relevant to the case:

Ne there nas foul that cometh of engendrure  
That they ne were prest in here presence  
To take his dom and yeve hym audience.

Even at Harvard, among so many notables, he was a commanding presence; and, what is very significant indeed, most of the others were quite willingly subaltern.

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