INY THE year of eighteen hundred and seventy-eight, the late Wyatt Eaton went to Concord to paint the portrait of Emerson for The Century Magazine. The meeting between the poet and painter was brought about by Mr. F. B. Sanborn, of Concord, who is now the last leaf upon the tree of that brilliant group of men who were Emerson’s personal friends. In speaking of this meeting, Mr. Eaton says in his notes: “Mr. Sanborn entered heartily into the prospect of my painting Emerson’s portrait, yet with some misgivings as to the opportunity of accomplishing it, telling me that Emerson had not taken on the usual picturesqueness of old age, that he had been failing rapidly of late and was much broken in appearance. This did not discourage me, however, for to me at least Emerson was bound always to be a figure of real interest, a man with personality great enough to override the ravages of years.

“Mr. Sanborn took me over to Emerson’s house in the evening. We waited for him in a large sitting room. It was not quite dark and the lamps were not lighted. As he entered we came forward to greet him—it was indeed the real, the living Emerson. Where another man would hardly have been recognizable in the dim light, the quality of his personality was but accentuated—his tall, slightly drooping figure, his long neck and sloping shoulders, his strong features and well-formed head coming out with prominence in the quiet light. But it was not wholly his appearance that impressed me; it was rather his large and simple manner. I felt most truly in the presence of a great man.

“But little time was spent in formalities. Turning to Mr. Sanborn, Emerson reminded him of a promise that he, Emerson, had made to read something from his notes written during a visit to Washington in the early part of Lincoln’s presidency; if we would like it he would be glad to read them to us now. This was evidently a long anticipated pleasure. Lights were brought in and Emerson readily found his note books in the study adjoining, and seating himself by a large lamp had soon drawn us with him back again into Lincoln’s administration, those most perplexing times in Washington.

“Thus I saw Emerson at his best and in a rare mood, for while reading of those scenes of long past conflict, he seemed again to be
living them over, full of life and interest, surrounded by his oldest and dearest friends, men whom he admired and revered, of the same great aims as himself. I found in the course of the reading that during his visit at Washington Emerson was the guest of Charles Sumner, and it was evident from the frankness of Lincoln and those closely associated with him, in the presence of Emerson, that the integrity of the man was well understood. Never, however, in these notes did Emerson refer to his own relations or conversations with Lincoln or the other chiefs; he was always the listener.

"This visit of mine was within two years of the time of Emerson’s death, and the great man was at times a little forgetful and distraught in manner. The only faculty that seemed dimmed was his memory of names and places. It was this consciousness of a lack of freedom of expression that made him diffident before company. When alone with a few friends he would talk so interestingly and address them so directly that work was almost out of the question. Turning to me one morning, he asked: ‘Who is your favorite poet?’ Fortunately, I was saved from answering, as he went on to say, ‘Of course, we must all except Shakespeare and Burns.’ Taking up Burns, he spoke of him as almost as great in some qualities as Shakespeare.

"Mr. Sanborn was frequently with us while we were at work, and he knew well the subjects that would interest Emerson. Mr. Alcott would sometimes join us, and these rare morning talks became such a delight to me that I seemed to work without effort and almost without consciousness. Just at this time Dr. Jones, author of ‘Glimpses of Thoreau,’ had arrived in Concord for a visit, and a number of friends were invited one morning to Mr. Sanborn’s to hear Dr. Jones take up again the discussion of Plato, which he had touched upon at a previous gathering. At the end of his talk he turned to Emerson and asked if he would say a few words on the subject. In very broken sentences Emerson replied that he no longer had thoughts upon these subjects, and Mrs. Emerson hastened to add, ‘You mean to say that you no longer allow yourself to express your ideas in public,’ and Emerson pathetically answered, ‘Yes, that is what I meant to say.’

"One day Mrs. Emerson gave a tea, at which I imagine all the best friends in Concord were present. It was to be followed by a conversazione. Before the guests had left the dining room I went upon some errand to the study. There I found Emerson alone,
deeply absorbed in some papers. He had slipped away from the company unobserved, hoping to accomplish a little work before the evening. As I went into the room, he said to me, 'You must get through this work as quickly as possible (meaning my portrait of him), for I am very old and I have but a little longer time to live and so much to do.' And then he explained that it was not new work he wished to do, but the arrangement of all the work of past years.

'At first it seemed strange to me to hear Carlyle spoken of in this home almost in terms of comradeship. Emerson told me that he had corresponded with Carlyle for forty years, I believe it was. In speaking of his own works, Emerson said, 'I have always been a great writer. I have written all of these books,' indicating some shelves under one of his study windows—closely packed note books. 'And now,' he added, sadly, 'I shall write no more.'

'The portrait finished, I left Concord,' Mr. Eaton says, 'enchanted with the sloping hills, the broad valleys, the sweet meadows, Walden Pond and its road and the fragrant woods, the walk by the Old Manse down to the battleground and on to the river; the cattle on the river banks and the naked little boys in swimming, and the river, the most quiet, the most peaceful, the most inviting of all rivers.'

Soon after this Mr. Eaton was given an order for portraits of the other significant New England poets—Bryant, Whittier, Longfellow and Holmes (Lowell was then in Europe). From Mr. Eaton's notes it can readily be understood that, after Emerson, the man whom he enjoyed most was the genial and sympathetic Oliver Wendell Holmes. Mr. Eaton went to Boston on Christmas night to see Dr. Holmes, and called on him the next morning. According to the notes: 'His cordial manner removed at once all feeling of my being a stranger, and his bright face and his clear gray-blue eyes shining with tenderness were irresistible, filling me with delight. For a work room we fixed upon his study with the windows looking out on the Charles River. It was a delightful room, and at that season of the year the ice in great blocks was floating with the tide, with seagulls hovering about. Work was kept up every day, sometimes in both morning and afternoon. For this sitter I needed no one to help me or to relieve me from the weight of conversation. Dr. Holmes did not need entertaining. He talked delightfully and kept me in the mood for work, his face never diminishing in brightness for a second. Our talks were on literature, the arts, anatomy in its
external forms, people and places. The pleasure and interest that
Holmes could take in other people’s stories was an entertainment in
itself, and I realized with him for the first time how many good ones
I could tell, an inspiration which I fear lasted for that one week only
and never returned.

“I was just then fresh from the students’ quarter in Paris, and
this revived the poet’s memory of his own life in the Latin Quarter.
A closet opening into the study was filled with varieties of boots,
which recalled to him a remark of the elder Dumas about his son:
‘Alexander will never amount to anything; he has nine pairs of
boots and keeps them all in a row.’ Later he remembered a saying
of the younger Dumas that ‘my father is a baby I had when very
young.’

“My week’s experience with Holmes would lead me to say that
the charm of his wit is that it comes from a man of seriousness, and
the charm of his seriousness that it comes from a man of wit. During
my stay with him he showed me the models for his improved stereo-
scope, the one which finally came into general use. He seemed to
have no regret at not having patented his inventions, which would
have brought him a fortune. It was just at this time that his
biography of John Lothrop Motley came out. In it the author felt
that he had a threefold difficulty to deal with; loyalty to his Republi-
can Party, loyalty to his President, General Grant, and justice to his
friend. I had never asked anyone for an autograph; I had a very
great desire to have one of Holmes’ and yet I could not ask him for
it. But on going away he gave me a copy of his ‘Life of Motley’
with a full inscription upon the flyleaf, and also a photograph of the
portrait of Dorothy Quincy, carrying an autograph. I thus left rich
in souvenirs as well as in memories. In all the ground we covered
during this week of diversified talk, Dr. Holmes never repeated
a story or a remark, and what is still more exceptional, gave no sign
of fatigue at the long sittings, and when I left him I could not but
feel that I was actually taking away something of the man himself
in my drawing.”

At the time Mr. Eaton called upon William Cullen Bryant, ac-
 companied by Mr. Richard Watson Gilder, the poet was in
his eighty-fifth year, the last of his life. “My most vivid
memory of him,” Mr. Eaton says, “was the first time I saw him.
It was on a Sunday afternoon. Bryant came toward me from the
back parlor, rather tall, gaunt and high shouldered, his whole figure
seeming somewhat detached from his white bushy beard. His manner was marked by great quietness. He consented readily to Mr. Gilder's request for sittings. I offered to work at his house, but he showed a preference for my studio, which necessitated his climbing four flights of stairs, but this did not seem an objection to him and our appointments were made at once. In my studio, Bryant's head came out against the background with wonderful picturesqueness. I had never had such a model. It would have been a delight to have made some studies of him in oil with all the strong effects of light and shade, but this was not the purpose of the sittings. Mr. Bryant usually came at nine in the morning, always on the minute, and I found that he walked all the way in all kinds of weather. Once he disappointed me, and I called later to find him inconsolable at having forgotten his appointment. He had reached that period of old age when the soul is preoccupied with its own reveries, when people and things of the hour make but a slight impression. One day he repeated some poetry to me in a deep, sonorous voice. He seemed very old, not eighty-four, but a hundred or two or three hundred, and I felt myself as much of a stranger to him at the end of the sittings as I had on our first meeting.

Owing to the pressure of engagements Mr. Eaton was unable to go on with the portraits of the other poets until late in June of the following summer. Of Mr. Longfellow, Mr. Eaton writes in his notes: "I found him in his house in Cambridge, on the morning of my arrival in Boston. He had already received a letter in regard to my coming from his brother and my friend, the Rev. Samuel Longfellow. I was at once struck by a way Longfellow had of looking at one in the pauses of conversation with great intenstness, almost staring, his eyes brilliant as if he were looking you through, and it was this look that I tried to get into the portrait. Longfellow was at this time over seventy, and recently had had a severe illness; but to me he seemed wonderfully youthful and active, his mind always alert and his speech ready. His head gave the impression of age, but his eyes were those of youth and his conversation was full of quaint remarks and quotations. An English lord had just visited Cambridge; Longfellow spoke of his interest in the fine arts but I complained of the unfortunate art Lord D. had patronized in the market, to which Longfellow replied: 'He is perhaps like a certain other celebrity who was said to have a great deal of taste, but that, unfortunately, it was all bad.' I could never think of Longfellow as an old man. His years of life and experience seemed unreal and a mystery
to me. Our talks were generally during the rests from work or before and after sittings, when Longfellow would take me about the house showing me objects of interest, works of art, and talking freely about poetry, poets and translations. Everything was a subject of reminiscence to him of other times and other countries. A picture of Robert Buchanan occasioned the remark that he was a much better painter than poet (and I had always heard from artists who had known Buchanan that he was a much better poet than painter).

"The day of my last sitting was very warm, and that I might have a little more time Longfellow allowed me to continue at work in the afternoon. During the day a violent storm broke over us. It was too dark for work, and Longfellow went about the house to look after the windows, while I went out on the veranda, where I was, sheltered from the rain but could enjoy the storm. When the sky grew lighter, I found Longfellow in the library in his chair. His manner was very quiet, and presently in a deep, subdued voice he said, 'I believe I like nothing that is violent.'"

"The finishing of my portrait of Longfellow was hurried," complains Mr. Eaton. "I have often regretted that I could not follow him to Portland, for my whole summer should have been given to this work, rather than three weeks.

"From Cambridge I immediately went on to Danville—the new name for Salem Village—a walk of over a mile or so through country roads with stone fences and apple orchards brought me to a highly cultivated estate with well-kept lawns and trees of many countries. Oak Knoll was the name of the place, owned by ladies, cousins of Whittier, with whom he lived and who cared for him and humored him like a spoiled child. (They once told me of the difficulty they had in making him attend his seventieth birthday dinner given by his Boston friends, how they had actually to dress him, force him into the carriage and finally to shove him onto the train.) Whittier received me very kindly, but at first seemed unwilling to give me the sittings. He brought out a recent photograph which he showed me with much satisfaction. It was one of those hard retouched things, hardly recognizable. Handing it to me, he said, 'There, now, why can't you do your portrait from this?' I felt very much like accepting this as a refusal and going away, but I persisted and soon things were arranged.

"I never found in Whittier that ruggedness which I had imagined, but I soon grew to like him very much. I worked every day, and
Whittier was a good sitter, but I was afraid of tiring him and I think we spent more time out on the lawn than inside at work. My friend, Mr. Francis Lathrop, who was doing some landscapes in the neighborhood, often joined us, and we were a merry company under the trees of the old estate. Whittier was a great novel reader, it would seem, and much admired the works of George Parsons Lathrop. He was delighted when he found that my artist friend was a brother of the author. During these talks he was light and joyous, and it was a charming experience and memory to have lounged through a hot summer out in the midst of the most beautiful verdure with sympathetic companions and a man of so great interest and so full of memories, who seemed to have no cares or preoccupations, apparently desiring nothing but to sit in the shade on the grass, talking of writers and artists, and telling of the happenings of his past life. He was much pleased when he found that I knew some of his poetry by heart. Of his poem, 'Maud Muller,' he told me that he was once driving along a country road with his sister when they came upon a pretty girl raking hay. They stopped and spoke to her, and while standing before them the girl very shyly raked a little hay over her bare feet, and I told the poet that I thought his appreciation of the act quite as delightful as the poem. One day, while Whittier was making fun of certain ladies' difficulties with their bonnets, one of them said to him: 'A man who has to go to Philadelphia to get his coats cut should not be surprised at a little worry about a woman's bonnet.'

"Whittier spoke with great praise of all his important contemporaries, but particularly of Holmes. 'Why,' he would say, 'Holmes is in some respects the greatest of us all.' And so Oak Knoll and its pleasant inhabitants will always remain with me a fond memory."

This group of portraits by Mr. Eaton was engraved by Timothy Cole, and appeared as full-page illustrations in The Century Magazine. It is a matter of general regret that they were never exhibited as a whole, but they were the personal property of Dr. Holland, who then owned the magazine, and after his death they were boxed up and sent to his son, living in the West on a prairie ranch, so that with all their wealth of memories and of delightful comradeship they have gone beyond the reach of artists and art lovers, except for the few who remember their reproduction in the magazine for which they were made.