

Human nature must not have seemed to him but-  
bling over with sympathy and kindness in those  
days; but he cherished no resentment. He never  
lost his faith in the goodness of human nature. He  
remembered, with an excess of gratitude, only the  
persons who had been kind to him when he was a  
waif.

His early harsh experiences left their traces upon  
his character, of course. He owed to his gipsy life  
among minstrels and circus folk a whimsical habit  
of looking at men distinguished in literature or in  
art as successful showmen who had had a remark-  
ably attractive programme to start with, or had man-  
aged their little wax-works with great cleverness.  
He was fond of classifying popular authors, assign-  
ing them to various lines of business in circuses and  
theaters and menageries. "There's Blank, now," he  
once said to me, mentioning a well-known and  
rather heavy didactic novelist, "he is doing the  
moral elephant." Keeler was only half in earnest in  
the matter; but he was half in earnest, and it often  
prevented him from doing serious work. He was,  
however, outgrowing this cynicism, and passing be-  
yond the influence of other delusions engendered by  
the hardships of his youth. He saw his way clear to  
something like success. He had only to acquire the  
habit of systematic and continuous labor—which his  
rambling existence had hitherto made antagonistic  
—to reach an enviable rank as a journalist or as a  
literateur. &c. &c.

It was, however, as a journalist, and more es-  
pecially as a correspondent, that he had given the  
most promise. His letters from the South and West,  
contributed to *Every Saturday*, in 1870-1; his recent  
article on Geneva, in *Harpers Magazine*, and lastly,  
his letters to *THE TRIBUNE*, from Cuba, all evince  
that quick eye and sympathetic pen which made his  
services as special correspondent so valuable.

Mr. Keeler published only two books, so far as I  
am aware—a boyish novel, "Gloverson and his Silent  
Partner," of which he was soon not proud, and  
"Vagabond Adventures," a very entertaining vol-  
ume, though that, too, fell below his subsequent  
standard. At the time he left Custer, Ohio, to assume  
the post of Cuban correspondent for *THE TRIBUNE*, he  
was preparing a work on John Brown, for which he  
had gathered a mass of fresh material illustrating  
some striking and little known passages in the life of  
the old hero. I infer from a letter which Mr. Keeler  
wrote to me in September last that he had nearly  
completed the book. The manuscript is probably in  
the possession of his brother, at Custer, in whose  
house Keeler was always a welcome guest. He had  
a room there, which he was accustomed to occupy  
when he was engaged in work requiring quiet and  
seclusion. The mention or several sketches of char-  
acter or travel contributed to various magazines, a  
translation of George Sand's *Le Marquis de Villemer*,  
and a number of brief book reviews in *The Atlantic  
Monthly*, completes the list of his publications. He  
was not a voluminous writer, and nothing he wrote  
was so remarkable as his personal experience, or so  
interesting as himself.

We honor the man who, starting in life a poor and  
friendless boy, becomes through his own exertions  
a millionaire—a millionaire, and nothing more.  
What honor then should we pay to a man like Ralph  
Keeler, who, without aid or example, lifts himself  
from out the most demoralizing associations, works,  
starves, struggles for culture as men struggle for  
gold, and wins at last a noble foothold, the master  
of five or six languages, and the possessor of a store  
of general knowledge that would put to the blush  
eight out of ten college-trained men?

He has left behind him neither book nor verse  
that adequately represents his ability. He has, per-  
haps, done better than that—he has left us the heroic  
example of a man who might have evaded danger  
without incurring any special reproach, but who  
preferred to face death rather than shrink from the  
duties he had assumed. THOMAS BAILEY ALDRICH.  
Cambridge, Mass., Jan. 3, 1871.

#### THE AUTHOR OF "VAGABOND ADVEN- TURES."

A TRIBUTE TO RALPH KEELER BY T. B. ALDRICH.  
To the Editor of *The Tribune*.

SIR: The mystery which surrounds the last hours  
of Ralph Keeler—suggesting every kind of tragic  
hypothesis, but leaving the tragedy, if there were  
any, untold—has touched the sympathies of many  
who were not, perhaps, familiar with the man or  
his writings. It may not be out of place here for me  
to speak briefly of both. At all events, I would  
like, for the sake of old comradeship, to say a few  
words about Ralph Keeler in these columns, to  
which he gave the last labors of his pen.

It was in the Summer of 1868, if I remember, that  
Mr. Keeler came to me with a letter of introduction  
from a friend in California. He was at that time  
very slight and boyish of figure, with that flourish-  
ing manner and conversation with which a certain  
kind of shy man always fails to blind one to his  
shyness. He was, in fact, at once curiously shy and  
aggressive. His instantaneous assumption that I  
was deeply interested in all his affairs was so fresh  
a trait of character to me that I lacked the heart to  
dispel his illusion until it was too late; for I ended  
by becoming very deeply interested.

After remaining in Boston three or four weeks Mr.  
Keeler departed abruptly. I heard of him from time  
to time delivering lectures in various towns, East and  
West, but did not see him again until the following  
year, when he returned to Boston, and finally made  
his home in Cambridge—if it can be said of Keeler  
that he made his home anywhere. To state it cor-  
rectly, he secured a room in the old University  
town, and occupied it at irregular intervals during  
the next five or six years. It was at this period  
that professional work and inclination brought us  
frequently in company.

Keeler came of an excellent family I believe. In  
one of the early chapters of his "Vagabond Adven-  
tures" he hints as much, in a half deprecatory way,  
as if it were not becoming in a vagabond to have too  
respectable antecedents. He hints at it darkly, so  
to speak. Of his early life, which was a singularly  
sad one, this book appears to be a faithful account.  
The story, as I have heard it from his lips, does not dif-  
fer in essentials from the printed narrative. It can  
there be seen that Keeler, who was born in Ohio,  
lost both his parents in his infancy, and at his  
tenth or eleventh year found his surroundings so  
intolerable that he ran away from the home pro-  
vided for him, and never returned to it. "I gave  
up," he used to say, "what I have ever since been  
struggling to gain." Not that he regretted this  
particular home. "It is due," he writes, "to both  
of us—the home and myself—to observe that it was  
not a very attractive hearth I ran from." My father  
and mother were dead, and no brothers or sisters of  
mine were there,—nothing at all, indeed, like affec-  
tion, but something very much like its opposite." This  
is the only bitter passage in the book, through-  
out which the light-heartedness is pathetic. He  
escaped from the house in Buffalo at night, and  
secreted himself in a neighboring stable until he  
obtained a place as steward's assistant on board the  
steamboat *Diamond*. Then began the little vagabond's  
adventures,—a squalid life among wharves,  
and steamboats, and railway stations.

First he is cabin-boy on board the *Baltic*; then  
train-boy on the Michigan Southern and Northern  
Indiana Railroad, selling economically-composed and  
fatal lemonade; now he is the infant phenomenon of  
Kunkel's Band of negro minstrels; now he is end  
man in Johnny Booker's Ethiopian Troupe; now he  
is drifting down the Mississippi, with sacred wax  
statuary and stuffed animals, in Dr. Spaulding's  
*Floating Palace*; now we find him with that burnt  
cork washed off—miraculous transformation! study-  
ing the classics in St. Vincent's College, at Cape Girar-  
deau, where he remains sixteen happy months, and  
picks up enough pure French to last him a life-time.  
Now he is clerk in the Toledo Post-Office—something  
of a come-down, we should say, though still a man of  
letters—and now he is steerage passenger on an En-  
glish steamer, heading for Queenstown. From Lon-  
don he goes to Paris; thence to Heidelberg. He is  
a student in the famous Karl Rupert University,  
and wins his diploma, too, (this end man,) making  
pedestrian tours meanwhile through Italy, the Tyrol,  
Switzerland, France and Bavaria, wearing the cos-  
tume and speaking with the accent of a veritable  
Handwerksbursch.

All this Mr. Keeler has related himself with a  
fidelity which I suspected at first. Especially did I  
suspect the negro minstrel portions of his auto-  
biography, until one or two of those same old min-  
strels turned up in my presence and hallooed with  
decorous and subdued joy the infant phenomenon of  
other days. How many boys, I wonder, placed in  
Keeler's circumstances, would have graduated at  
Heidelberg? Fate evidently intended to make a  
worthless fellow of him; he scorned Fate, and made  
a gentleman and a scholar of himself.

On returning from Europe, Keeler went to Cali-  
fornia. Of his career there I know nothing. I be-  
lieve he wrote for the San Francisco press, and I  
think he told me he taught French and German for  
a while in some academy. In 1868 he came to Bos-  
ton, as I have stated. He went abroad again in 1872,  
remaining about eight or ten months.

In spite of his varied knowledge of life—gained in  
those long and curious pilgrimages beyond the sea,  
as well as by extensive travel in his own land—Mr.  
Keeler retained in many things the innocence and  
simplicity of inexperience. His unworldliness and  
want of tact, socially, often led conventional people  
to underrate his sterling qualities. He had a hun-  
dred small faults in this sort, but looking back upon  
them now, I see how they were more than atoned  
for by an amiability so unforced and sweet that it  
could have flowed only from a loyal and generous  
heart.

I never knew a man with so little bitterness in his  
nature. His childhood, as we have seen, was marked  
by neglect and cruelty; adverse fates must have  
rocked his cradle; he was adrift upon the world  
when he was only ten years old. The world is a  
hard step-mother for strong men and women—but  
for a little child! He suffered cold and hunger, and  
knew none of the pleasures of boyhood; he had no  
boyhood. He was a little sharp-faced old man from  
the first: it was only after and that he grew young.