CHAPTER XVI

THE FORBES FAMILY

It will be recalled that Colonel Thomas Handasyd Perkins had five sisters. One of these, Nancy, married a Cushing and became the mother of John P. Cushing. A younger sister, Margaret, married Ralph Bennett Forbes. Their son, Robert Bennett Forbes, a nephew of Colonel Perkins just as John P. Cushing was, had the good luck to be taken early into the Perkins business. When he was only fifteen John P. Cushing wrote to their uncle in Boston:

I have omitted in my letters per Nautilus mentioning our young friend Bennett Forbes, recommending his being promoted to be an officer on the return of the Canton packet. He is without exception the finest lad I have ever known and has already the stability of a man of thirty. During the stay of the ship I have had him in the office and have found him as useful as if he had regularly been brought up in the business; he has profited so much by the little intercourse that he has had with the Chinese that he is now more competent to transact business than one half the supercargoes sent out.

Forbes had started his sea-going career at thirteen, his mother having then equipped his ditty bag with a supply of threads, needles, buttons, some well-darned socks, a Testament, a bottle of lavender water, one of essence of peppermint, a small box of broken sugar and a barrel of apples.

1 Born in 1804. The Forbes and Bennett families were both of Scotch background. Not much is known of the immediate ancestors of John Forbes, first of the name in this country (who came originally from Deskne, Scotland), but he married Dorothy Murray (whose mother was Barbara Bennett) and Ralph Bennett Forbes, who married Margaret Perkins, was their son.

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“She wanted to give me a pillow and some sheets and pillow cases,” he records, “but I scorned the idea, having been told that sailors never used them but usually slept with a stick of wood, with the bark on, for a pillow.”

From this beginning the young man prospered mightily. His own synopsis of his rise to affluence is impressively brief: “At the age of sixteen I filled a man’s place as third mate; at the age of twenty I was promoted to a command; at the age of twenty-six I commanded my own ship; at twenty-eight I was at the head of the largest American house in China.” No mention is made, in this modest autobiographical summary of the great humanitarian service rendered by Robert Bennett Forbes when he took the ship Jamestown to Ireland, laden with food, at the time of the Irish famine.

A son named Thomas had been born to Mr. and Mrs. Ralph Bennett Forbes the year before Robert came. Later there were six other children, making eight in all. A good deal of responsibility devolved upon Thomas and Robert, in the matter of bringing up these brothers and sisters. John Murray Forbes, the sixth of the children (born in Bordeaux, February 23, 1813) particularly appreciated what his brothers did for him. Before his father’s death (in 1824) it had been possible for him, through their earnings, to go away to study. And from the time he was ten until he was fifteen he had the very good luck to be enrolled at Round Hill School, Northampton, to which the best Boston families were at that time sending their sons. Thus, when he entered his uncle’s counting-house at fifteen, to take up his share of the family burden, he was already equipped with a good foundation in the humanities as well as in commercial subjects.

Following the custom of the day this new clerk was given

1 Captain Robert Bennett Forbes had three children. One was James Murray Forbes who married Miss Alice Bowditch. Allan Forbes, Mary Bowditch Forbes and Dorothy Forbes are their three children.

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opportunities to have "ventures" of his own in the vessels of the firm and thus Murray Forbes had accumulated one thousand dollars by the time he was seventeen. Just then the news reached Boston that his brother, Thomas, had been drowned six months before. On its heels came a chance to go out to China in a ship commanded by his brother, Bennett.

Tom Forbes had for some time before his death been the sole representative of his firm in Canton. John Murray was, of course, too young and inexperienced to take on that job yet. But Mr. Augustine Heard had sailed with him and when they arrived they found that an arrangement had been made whereby the business of J. and T. H. Perkins was to be turned over to the American house of Russell and Company on condition that Mr. Heard be received into that firm as a partner. Hidden in this proposal was an article, not at the time communicated to John Murray Forbes, to the effect that if, at the end of three years, he was still a clerk for the firm he also should be admitted to the partnership for a term of three years.

From first to last there were forty-eight members in the firm of Russell and Company, all of whom lived in China a portion of the time, and on some occasions had their wives and daughters with them for short visits. It will be understood, therefore, why no organization exerted a more powerful influence on Boston society than this wealthy and highly successful house. Many Bostonians, before the middle of the nineteenth century, could talk of the East as intelligently as Kipling now does and could echo feelingly the verses, beginning:

"Know ye the land where the bamboo and queue are —"

and ending

"Where the flowers have no smell and no flavor the fruit
And 'tis stupid to talk and there's nothing to shoot;
Where the earth is burnt mud and the sky is all blaze,
Where the dew is death-fog and the air is red haze?"
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'Tis the land of the East; 't is the region of curry
That slowly we come to and leave in a hurry.
Know ye the land? My good friend, if you do,
By the Lord, I don't envy you; I know it too!"

But for the enormous profits accruing from commercial intercourse with Canton, American trade with China would undoubtedly have been abandoned much sooner than it was, because every step of the business was laden with harassing formalities and complicated customs and duties.

Tom Forbes had acted as confidential agent in Canton of the Mandarin, Houqua, one of the richest merchants in all China and possessed of some twenty millions of dollars. Houqua was also the head of the hong, or company, which managed the foreign trade of the country, a group through which all diplomatic affairs were then conducted. John Murray Forbes fell heir to his brother's close relationship with this exalted personage and was soon conducting all the great man's correspondence, writing the answers to letters about public affairs, chartering ships and sending them out loaded with teas and silks. In all this Forbes used his own name as if he were managing his own business and he received for his services ten per cent of the profits of the trade. Thus (at nineteen!) he became well known to Baring Brothers and to their affiliated banking houses as a China merchant who sometimes had as much as half a million dollars invested in various ways at one time.

But the climate told on the lad. As the poetic effusion just quoted implies, China was a country to be endured rather than loved. At twenty John Murray Forbes was bald and looked thirty. He had threatened that he would "get married within a week" after returning home (June, 1833) and had instructed his sisters to look about for him among their friends for a wife.

One of these friends, Sarah Hathaway of New Bedford, attracted his ardent interest almost as soon as he disem-
barked and on February 8, 1834, the two were married. But now that he had a wife it was more than ever necessary for him to make a good income, and China seemed the only place where his peculiar gifts commanded a high money value. So, in less than a month from the day of his wedding, he set off again as supercargo for Canton, leaving Mrs. Forbes behind, because she was no sailor. On his arrival in China he learned for the first time of the arrangement by which, ten months before, he had become a member of the firm of Russell and Company. His share of the profits already amounted to a neat sum, and Houqua would turn his business over to the firm if he were in it. None the less, to stay in China for three years more was a very great hardship for young Forbes under the circumstances. Had not ill health made it necessary for Mr. Heard to return home he would not have agreed to the terms of the partnership.

As it was, young Forbes accepted the situation but almost the instant he had completed the term of active partnership with Russell and Company for which the contract called, he left China for good. He reached New York in December, 1836, after what was then regarded as a quick run of one hundred and twenty days. "The next afternoon," he writes, "found me snugly harbored at my aunt James Perkins' in Pearl Street where my wife . . . met me after an absence of a little over three years."

Forbes' work, for some years now, was attending to the interests of Russell and Company in the United States. For the first fifteen of these years his home was in a cottage on Milton Hill, seven miles from Boston. Then he moved to a larger house (that now occupied by Mrs. J. Malcolm Forbes) close at hand, from which he could see his ships come and go on their four-months' voyages to China around the Cape of Good Hope. He never had a house in town. In 1843 he purchased, with his wife's uncle, W. W. Swain, the island of Naushon at the entrance to Buzzards Bay, of which he later acquired full possession. From Milton and Naushon
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he helped the Free State men in Kansas in many ways. When (in June, 1860) he was chosen elector-at-large for the President, he did much in his own quiet fashion to interpret to New England the great heart and mind of Lincoln.¹

Though an extremely busy man, Mr. Forbes always had perfectly definite ideas concerning the way he wished his six children to be brought up. For one thing he preferred Milton Hill to Boston as a residence for them “because, with their rich circle of acquaintance in Boston and with their probable wealth, they would, if in the city, be liable to get injurious ideas of their own consequence and their own duties.” He desired, also, that they should have “happy views of religion and of life and death, and . . . a habit of feeling that it is their duty to be useful to their fellow-creatures.”

John Murray Forbes’ most important contribution to his country’s business progress lay in developing the field of the American railroad. Transportation conditions in the West, before the Civil War, were much as they have been described by Charles Dickens in his “American Notes”, the trains rarely exceeding a speed of six miles an hour. Lines of communication in this vast region were meager as well as slow. The development of the steam railroad seemed to Western pioneers their only hope of moving crops profitably to any market. In 1845 two young men, both Easterners, went west full of faith in the possibilities of such development. One of these, John W. Brooks, soon brought to the counting-room of John Murray Forbes the needs and the opportunities of the Michigan Central Road.

Forbes had already applied steam to ocean transportation but not with financial success. (The Midas, built and

¹ Miss Mary Bowditch Forbes, daughter of James Murray Forbes, Harvard ’66, is carrying on the family interest in Lincoln through a reproduction, on the Forbes estate at Milton, of the cabin in which Lincoln was born. This replica of Lincoln’s birthplace is filled with valuable Lincoln souvenirs and annually thousands of visitors, young and old, rich and poor, representing every diverging interest, come here to pay tribute to the memory of Abraham Lincoln.

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owned by the Forbes brothers, was the first steamer to navigate Chinese waters.) He was, however, quite ready to listen to the possibilities of steam transportation on land and threw himself into Brooks' enterprise with characteristic energy. He realized that the China trade and the whaling industry, from which New England had, in the past, benefited so richly, were on the decline; and he saw that, with the McCormick reaper making possible a twenty or thirtyfold increase of harvest, railroads to facilitate the transportation of this grain could not fail to succeed. Moreover, the recent discovery of gold in California had caused the nation for the first time to take what Henry Greenleaf Pearson has called "a continental view of itself." ¹ Because many a man's chief desire now was to get to the other side of the country quickly, railroads became a necessity.

The contribution to railroad building of the great promoter whose career we are now following becomes the more impressive when one realizes the conditions under which his colossal work was done. There was then, of course, no telephone and even the telegraph was thriftily used. Almost all Forbes' letters were written with his own hand. At the end of a day in which he had filled thirty-one pages of his letter-press book he wrote: "Y'rs in great haste, hunger and all uncharitableness, having been here at my desk since 8½ A.M., now 6 P.M. living upon crackers! but still Yours Truly." ²

The ramifications of John Murray Forbes' interests now became enormous. Towards the end of the Crimean War he was commissioned, through Baring Brothers, to purchase large supplies of breadstuffs to send to France for Louis Napoleon. Immediately preceding that night when railroad business brought to Milton Hill the pro-slavery governor of Missouri, who had set a price of three thousand dollars on

² Ibid., p. 57.
John Brown’s head, John Brown himself had occupied the same guest room in Forbes’ home, having told his host the story of Kansas and of Ossawatomie before retiring.

Forbes was able to be of enormous service to the Union cause, not only through his social affiliations and the money he could raise in business circles, but because of his wife’s Quaker connections in England and elsewhere. The fact that he had a great personal stake in the army helped also. To his friend, Fox, he wrote, “My son and my son-in-law are there — my younger son training to go. All the young men that I love or value are there or incapacitated. I want peace for their sakes; I hate war for its own sake; but I solemnly protest against crying ‘peace’ when there is no peace.”

During the most depressing period of the war Forbes, in his capacity of “drummer-up”, called on leading merchants in New York accompanied by Peter Cooper, then not so well known outside of Manhattan Island as he is now by reputation. Declaring that there was “no time for letters or palavers”, Cooper invited his visitor to drive about in his buggy with him and call on the people who might help:

From door to door we drove [writes Forbes], through the crowded streets, stirring up one timid friend, holding back the next who wanted some other method, and insisting against delay, or doubt, or change of plans; and in half the time anybody else would have taken, he (with the big Cooper...

1 Important among Mr. Forbes’ contributions to the cause of the North was the assistance which he gave to Fanny Kemble in the matter of an American edition of her book, “Diary of Life on a Southern Plantation.” This book had already been brought out in England, but Forbes arranged that the Harpers should issue it in this country. It was written in 1838-1839 on the Georgia rice plantation where Fanny Kemble was then living with her husband, Pierce Butler, whom she had married after that famous visit to Philadelphia in 1832 when she played Juliet to the Romeo of her father, Charles Kemble. During her years in the South, Mrs. Butler became more and more inclined to take the side of the Abolitionists against that of the slaveholders, of whom her husband was one, and Forbes was quick to see that her passionate resentment of this “cruel and ignorant folly”, as she called slavery, was bound to be valuable pro-Union propaganda.

JOHN MURRAY FORBES ABOUT 1832

(Courtesy of Edward Waldo Forbes)
RALPH WALDO EMERSON

From the Hawes portrait

REV. EZRA RIPLEY

Who married the widow of Rev. William Emerson

From the portrait in the possession of
Mrs. John W. Ames of Concord
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Institute open at his nod) settled the great meeting of the period, when the brains and force of New York gave the key-note to the voices of the country for making no compromise, no step backward while such a contest at the polls was going on, until by hard knocks the back of the Rebellion should be broken and a real peace secured.¹

The thing which Mr. Forbes himself always considered the most important service which he performed for his country during the Civil War was his mission to England in 1863. As a result of this certain ironclad vessels, which were being built in the great British shipyards for the slaveholders' government (though under cover), were diverted from their intended use. "It is plain," the American emissary wrote to leaders of the Society of Friends in England who, as he knew, could relay his words to places where they would count, "that your nation and ours cannot live in peace if you permit such engines of destruction to be sent from your harbors against us. The law of nations and the common sense of mankind will decide that your local laws are made sufficient to carry out your international obligations." There is little question that Mr. Forbes, at this time, not only strengthened the Union cause but in all probability prevented a war between England and the United States.

In all this public work John Murray Forbes was, however, most self-effacing. He profoundly believed that in a political experiment like ours "everybody must work and agitate and educate." But he also realized that to do this effectively one must not dominate. He therefore made every possible effort to keep his acts for the common good out of the public prints.

He died October 12, 1898, at the ripe age of eighty-five, directly after returning from a summer on his island home, whose development had for forty years been his chief recreation.

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John Murray Forbes had six children, four daughters and two sons. Alice Forbes became Mrs. Edward M. Cary. Her twin sister, Ellen R. Forbes, died unmarried. Mary Hathaway Forbes married Henry Sturgis Russell, a colonel in the Fifth Massachusetts Cavalry. Sarah Forbes, the youngest of the family, married William Hastings Hughes, brother of Thomas Hughes, the English author. Mrs. Hughes wrote the life of her father. William Hathaway Forbes, the eldest son, served in the Civil War and became a lieutenant colonel in the Second Massachusetts Cavalry. Later he was the president of the American Bell Telephone Company. He married Edith Emerson, the daughter of Ralph Waldo Emerson.¹ William Cameron Forbes for four years Governor General of the Philippine Islands and

¹ So much has been written of Emerson that any extended history of his family may well be omitted from this book. On his father's side he came of eight successive generations of ministers, including Parson Bulkeley of the Connecticut family of that name. Reverend William Emerson, of Concord-Revolutionary fame, married Phoebe Bliss. Their son, Reverend William Emerson, graduated from Harvard in 1789 and preached first in the town of Harvard, Massachusetts, and then at the First (Unitarian) Church, Boston. He married Ruth Haskins, the daughter of John Haskins of Boston, and died in 1811, his eldest son, William, being then ten. Ralph Waldo, born in 1803, Edward Bliss, Robert Bulkeley and Charles Chauncy were the other sons of this marriage. Ralph Waldo entered Harvard in August, 1817, at the age of fourteen and began his divinity studies in February, 1825. Two years later, while preaching at Concord, New Hampshire, he met Ellen Tucker who, though a Boston girl, was at this time living in Concord with her mother and her stepfather, Colonel W. A. Kent. He made her his wife and they came to Boston, where Ralph Waldo had been called to the pastorate of the Second (Unitarian) Church. She died in February, 1831, and three years later Emerson moved to his own Concord to make his home there with his mother. On September 14, 1835, he married Lidian Jackson of Plymouth, a sister of Doctor Charles T. Jackson, scientist. Mr. Emerson drove down to Plymouth for the wedding in a chaise and drove back with his bride next day. "I must win you to love Concord," he had already written her. The first child of this marriage was born in the autumn of 1836 and, though he died when only six, was always tenderly mourned by his father; Ellen Emerson, born February 24, 1839; Edith, born November 22, 1841; and Edward Waldo, born in 1844, were the remaining children of the family. It was this youngest daughter of the Sage of Concord who married Colonel William H. Forbes in 1865. She lived to be eighty-eight. Doctor Edward Waldo Emerson, who made his home in the Emerson homestead in Concord, married the daughter of Honorable John S. Keyes of Concord. Assisted by Waldo Emerson Forbes, he edited the ten-volume edition of Emerson's "Journal." This work and James Elliott Cabot's "Memoir" are mines of information in regard to the Emerson family.
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appointed our Ambassador to Japan in June, 1930, Edward Waldo Forbes, now director of the Fogg Museum, and Waldo Emerson Forbes, who was associated with his uncle, Edward Waldo Emerson, in publishing the Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson, were among their sons. John Malcolm Forbes, who married Sarah Jones of New Bedford and, years later, Rose Dabney,¹ was the second son of John Murray Forbes.

Allan Forbes, president of the State Street Trust Company (and the grandson of Robert Bennett Forbes) has done much, through the excellent historical publications sponsored by his bank, to make real to twentieth-century Americans the days of the China trade to whose prosperity his forebears so largely contributed.

¹ Daughter of Samuel W. and Harriet W. Dabney. Mrs Forbes' father and her grandfather (Charles W. Dabney) both lived for many years in Fayal, Azores, where each held the post of American Consul.