

Percy Holmes

by Raymond Abbott

It is summer now as I write this brief narrative, and often when I turn on my car radio, usually to Public Radio, I hear various individuals talking about summer reading, past or present. One program featured books the speakers had read early in their lives and were now revisiting, or thinking about doing this if they dared. They worried, I guess, that the books would not hold up to the test of time, and my bet is a lot of them didn't. I find revisiting Hemingway as an adult is just plain disappointing. Even his best books. One title I heard mentioned was *Catcher in the Rye*. Another was *Huckleberry Finn*.

Their programs got me thinking about Percy Holmes, I should say the late Percy Holmes, an English teacher I had in the tenth grade at Haverhill High School in Haverhill, Massachusetts.

I remember Mr. Holmes as a dapper little man, carefully groomed and dressed with absolute precision, a man with no hair and a bald head that would shine. Indeed one wondered if he didn't shine it the way others each day might shine their shoes. I remember too he wore a vest and watch chain across the vest, and attached to it a pocket watch which, at the end of the class, as the bell rang, he would pull out to check the time.

I am sure Mr. Holmes never knew who I was. I had nothing to say in his class or any other classes in those days, nor was I anything but a C student in English, if that. What I found of interest though in Mr. Holmes's class was his reading aloud. He didn't do it in each class, as I recall now. But I seem to remember he did it several times a week if time permitted, if other work were completed. It was done as kind of a reward, I suppose. I always hoped there was time. He would read from a novel, often as not, but I didn't remember many of the books. I only had him one year, so maybe there were only two or three books. The one I recall was a story set in a leper colony in Louisiana, told I believe by one of the residents of the colony, someone with leprosy I guess. I suppose it was a novel but it could have been nonfiction, a memoir of some sort. I just don't know now, nor do I know how the story came out because the school year ended before the book did. I am fairly certain Mr. Holmes gave us the title and the author's name so we could find the book in the library for ourselves. Yet I have no recollection of this. I may have had the title once and author too, but if I did I quickly forgot it. Yet I didn't forget those readings; they stuck to me like glue.

After the tenth grade at Haverhill a number of us in my class were transferred to a regional high school miles away, a brand new facility. We were only at Haverhill High

School for two years while this new school was under construction. The town where I lived, Groveland, had paid for us to attend the high school in Haverhill. Haverhill High School was a large school, to me anyway, and not a place I wished to remain any longer than necessary. I welcomed the opening of the regional high school which was fairly large but by no means as big a place as Haverhill High, nor were the kids there as tough. Not nearly as tough.

But still I had this wonderful memory of what I thought was a great book that Percy Holmes read to us for a few weeks that winter. Up to that time in my youth, books were not an important aspect of life to me. Yet I hung on to the memory of Mr. Holmes's presentation of the story of the lepers.

Life is full of second chances, we are often taught, or we note ourselves, and it so happened that years later the name of Percy Holmes came up. I was told that, though long retired from teaching, he now volunteered regularly (or worked part-time) in a museum in Haverhill. I believe it was at the Hanna Duston home. I can't well explain who Hanna Duston was, except to say that she fought off, bravely I gather, attacking Indians in the early settlement of Haverhill and she is so honored today for this feat. (I hope I present this bit of history with some accuracy.) The point is that Percy Holmes was still around and probably available for me to talk to and acquire at long last that book title. So contact him I did at the Hanna Duston Museum on River Street in Haverhill, Massachusetts, one Saturday.

"Mr. Holmes," I said straight away, extending my hand to shake hands with him, no longer shy. After all I was past forty by a few years by then. Still I was somewhat hesitant as I approached him. "You don't remember me, I know."

How many former students, I wondered after I said these words, had said the same thing to him time after time? Dozens, surely.

Then I said my name and there was no flicker of recognition, not that I expected any. Even when I said I was from Groveland and reminded him of the group of students who were there in Haverhill for two years (surely several quite good students, too), there was no recognition.

"I was in your English class," I went on, thinking he knew as much since he only taught English, "and you used to read to us, time permitting from other work, of course, and I remember this one book so vividly. It was about a leper colony in Louisiana. About the life of this man who lived there, I think it was."

He seemed to be trying to recall the book I described. "I read so many books over the years," he said with no great interest, I thought, in this conversation. He struck me as a bit bored with what I had to say, as well he might have been.

Yet, I thought, how many books did he read about lepers in Louisiana? It could not be that many. Surely there was only that one.

"You say lepers in Louisiana. I just don't recall such a book. You couldn't have me confused with someone else?" he inquired.

No chance. He was not easily confused with anyone else. My God, he ought to know this himself by now, at his age, I thought, but I didn't say that of course. He looked just the same as he did when I was in high school. He was dressed the same way, complete with the tweed coat (I may not have mentioned that coat) and the vest and the watch chain. Maybe he was acting now as he did way back then, coming across as a bit unavailable, that distance that successful teachers need to establish. I never knew him sufficiently then to make such a judgment. In fact I knew him not at all, beyond knowing he was the man who stood at the front of the class and who gave me no higher grade than a C for the entire year. I do not begrudge him that C, but I did feel somewhat cheated at this moment that he could not recall the title of that book.

Yet I am grateful to the man, in a way, because reading a portion of that one story to me, our entire class, impressed me for a lifetime as to the power of words, the power for them to entertain and the power for them to change people. That is a lot of legacy to leave, deliberate or not, on the part of Percy Holmes. He just never knew it, or else he never let me know that he knew it.