In Memory of

Stillman Francis Kelley

Born 1851 — Died 1931
FROM the thinning ranks of its earliest members, our club has lost another friend by the death of Stillman Francis Kelley on March 27, 1931. Mr. Kelley was born in East Dennis, Mass., on February 28, 1851, being one of ten children.

Picture to yourselves a Cape Cod village in a majority of whose houses dwelt the captains of the clipper ships of those early days, and where the topics of consuming interest were the arrival and the departure of the sea-going folk on their distant voyages, and news recently received from Calcutta, Hong Kong, and other far-away ports; and you have the environment and “atmosphere” in which the boy Stillman was reared. Had he been born a decade earlier, perchance Boston and Cambridge would have had one business man less, and the Cape one more sailor of “the seven seas”; but the Civil War intervened with its devastating result to our merchant marine.

About this time, Mr. Kelley’s father, Captain Stillman Kelley, and Captain Nathan Sears, who later became Mr. Kelley’s father-in-law, retired from the sea, formed a partnership under the name of Kelley and Sears, and purchased the village store. The new firm soon added to its general merchandising the handling of coal and lumber, and the outfitting of a fleet of deep-sea fishing vessels, which sought their “fares” from Newfoundland to Cape Hatteras.

As a helper in this varied business, during his school days and for a few years following, Mr. Kelley received a training that developed an exceptional capacity for hard work, a sound judgment, and a versatile initiative; all of which, supplemented by a strong physique, an alert mind, and an ambition to succeed, formed the personal equipment with which, at nineteen, he began his career in Boston by entering the employ of Charles E. Moody and Co., one of the leading wholesale grocers of that period.

Only five years passed, when the initiative of this lad from the country was made evident by the formation of a partnership with I. O. Whiting, as importers and wholesale dealers in molasses, syrups, and sugars. After a score or more of successful years, Mr. Kelley purchased his partner’s interest. Later, he sold the entire business with its goodwill to the Boston Molasses Company.

As a sidelight, explaining how business men accomplished so much before the time of the stenographer and the telephone, one need only to follow Mr. Kelley for a day: The office was usually open from seven in the morning till six, or later, in the evening. His horse and carriage were always at the curb for quick transit from firm to firm when personal interviews were necessary. This outfit was his telephone. The rapidity with which he dashed off a numerous correspondence in long hand, at the close of the day, was marvelous,— rarely exceeded by the speed of the modern stenographer.

Mr. Kelley next became associated with Mr. Edwin Mellen by the purchase of the interests of Curtis, Davis and Co. of this city. After some three years, it was learned that Lever Brothers, of Liverpool, were looking for an American factory as another link in their chain with which they planned to encircle the world. Negotiations were opened with the English company and the deal was consummated to the mutual satisfaction of both parties.

The attention of Mr. Kelley was now turned to the development of light and traction companies. Here he found an unlimited field for the use of those organizing and executive abilities which he possessed in an unusual degree,— a field which he cultivated with great personal satisfaction. These undertakings, with directorships in various corporations and banks, again made him a very busy man; but during his later years, he gradually relinquished the more pressing and taxing duties.

However, even when the demands of his personal enterprises were the most exacting, he was ever ready to be “a friend in need.” The amount of time, of sound business counsel, and of financial aid, which he gave to those who were in difficulty and uncertainty about their private or commercial affairs, will never be known except by those who were benefited by them.

But beyond these personal benefactions, he was deeply interested in the civic, social, and ethical welfare of our city. Although he never desired political office, he entered enthusiastically and untiringly into many mayoralty campaigns, especially during those which resulted in the election and re-election of General Bancroft.

As a member of the Cambridge Water Board, his vision of the future needs of the city for an adequate water supply, his exhaustive study of this project, and the effective service he rendered in its execution contributed largely toward the excellent service which we now have.
In co-operation with Hon. O. H. Durrell and other presidents of our Young Men’s Christian Association, he greatly assisted in establishing this organization and in providing its present equipment.

He was also one of the inner group of friends and supporters of the Cambridge School of Nursing until it was merged in the Cambridge Hospital, of which institution he was at one time a trustee.

Few knew of his many philanthropies. In my friendly association with him in the hotel lobby and on the golf links, our casual conversations would often reveal new names of individuals and organizations which had been the recipients of his generous gifts.

In 1875, Mr. Kelley married Chloe Crowell Sears of his native village. The following year Cambridge became their permanent home. Mrs. Kelley died in 1926. Their son Stillman Randolph Kelley died in 1911. Their younger son, Edmund Sears Kelley, is a resident of this city and a member of our club.

Mr. Kelley loved and lived the simple life. During his early years in Boston, his chief deterrent of loneliness, during his hours of leisure, was the reading of Shakespeare’s plays. Ever afterwards, he especially enjoyed reciting the numerous choice extracts that he had memorized. Nature in its open spaces always gave him an insistent call, and he was never happier than when strolling about the grounds or working among the trees at his summer home. The hills and fields of old Cape Cod never loosened their grip on his heart strings, ever drawing him to the scenes of his youth with frequency throughout his life.

Thus lived a strong man,— an upright citizen,— a kind and helpful friend.

We often hesitate to speak intimately of others while they are among us; but surely, after their departure, a sympathetic contemplation of their highest ideals and noblest accomplishments should be an inspiration to us to “go and do likewise.”

It is with this thought in mind that I have written so familiarly of our departed friend.

JAMES L. PAINE.

*Cambridge Club*
April, 1931.