

A STORY OF SUCCESS.

POTTER PALMER, LANDLORD OF
THE FAMOUS PALMER HOUSE.

One of Chicago's Millionaires—A Great
Fortune Twice Won—How He Succeeded.
The Interior of the Renowned Hotel.
How He Hired a New Engineer.

(Special Correspondence.)

CHICAGO, March 23.—Probably not one in a thousand of the multitude of travelers who enter the great portals of Chicago's greatest hotel is able to recognize the elderly, but erect and active, man who occasionally hurries by—a busy man, with his hands full of papers, a high hat, none too new or glossy, worn well back upon his head, clothes severely plain, small but kindly eyes, and a pinched mouth, whose hard lines are ever ready to break into a smile of good nature. This man is Potter Palmer, builder and landlord of the hotel which is by many pronounced the greatest in the world. The story of his life is a story of success—of two successes, in fact—



POTTER PALMER.

of a great fortune twice won. Like most of the self-made men of Chicago, Potter Palmer was in youth a farmer's boy. He was born nearly sixty years ago in Albany county, N. Y. His parents were Quakers, and the lad was raised in habits of frugal-

ity and industry. At 18 he became clerk in the store of Platt Adams, which stood in the village of Durham, Greene county, within the shadow of the Catskills. Shortly afterward he started a dry goods store of his own at Oneida, and a year later removed to Lockport. He was successful from the beginning, and though Lockport was a thriving town, the young Quaker soon found his ambition superior to his opportunity. He cast about for a more promising location, and while upon a prospecting tour spent one day in Chicago. This was then a straggling town of 40,000 people, but the keen eye of the dry goods merchant perceived the signs of coming greatness, and that one day decided him. He at once sold his store in Lockport and came to Chicago with a capital of less than \$6,000. That was in 1852, and the first year his sales were \$73,000. He was almost an ideal merchant of the old school; was first to arrive at his store in the morning, the last to leave at night, careful alike of his credit and that of his customers, watchful of the pennies and polite to the ladies. With all of his Quaker prudence he was bold when boldness was required, and this quality of courageous action, following the resolve born of keen perception, was ultimately found to be the secret of his great success. The war was his opportunity, and he was not slow in improving it. He believed that values were soon to become greatly inflated, and, risking his fortune upon the correctness of his judgment, he filled all the warehouses he could rent with cotton and woolen goods, purchased immediately after Sumter was fired upon. His courage was amply rewarded. In four years he made \$2,500,000, and when, in 1865, he concluded to retire from business, he held more than \$2,200,000 in government bonds. Satisfied with what he had, he abandoned his position as the merchant prince of interior America. In thirteen years the sales of his house, now wholesale as well as retail, had grown from \$73,000 to \$7,000,000 a year, making it the largest dry goods establishment, with two exceptions, on this continent.

A bachelor of 40, the possessor of good health and \$3,000,000 or \$4,000,000, Mr. Palmer retired to what he hoped would be a life of ease. At Saratoga he soon acquired reputation as a dashing man of the world. No turnout was finer than his, no man more liberal with money than he, no flirt more desperate than the Quaker dry goods prince from the wild west. During one gay season he was the lion of the Springs, and at him were shied innumerable feminine caps. Queer stories are told of those holiday pranks—of late dinners of dashing wits, of late dinners of dashing wits, of late dinners of dashing wits.

of 1873. Yet he pulled through, and soon found that his very boldness had saved much of his fortune. For whereas a more timid man would have kept nearer the shore in the storm and sold more readily, Palmer held to as much as possible and subsequently profited by the amazing increase in the value of Chicago business property. Potter Palmer is to-day a very wealthy man, and his rent roll is the largest in the city. It fills twenty pages, and much of it represents stores and other business buildings in the heart of the city. Thus notwithstanding that the real estate which he was compelled to sacrifice during his extremity is now worth \$1,000,000 more than he received for it, Potter Palmer has expended more money in buildings than any other Chicagoan. Four and a half million dollars represent his investments in this direction in this city. These, as well as the other figures given in this letter, may be relied upon, as I have them from Mr. Palmer's own lips.

That Potter Palmer's life story is one of success may be gathered from the foregoing, as well as from the fact that the Quaker dry goods dealer has been a successful landlord. Not every dry goods man succeeds as a hotel keeper. The Palmer house was built to rent, but so great was his need for income upon its completion that he determined to manage it himself. For twelve years he has devoted to the management of this house almost daily attention. Nothing escapes his eye. He is thoroughly familiar with all the details of its innumerable departments, keeping almost as close watch upon the vast caravansary, with its 850 rooms and 600 employees, as the most zealous country landlord is able to give his humble inn. His hobby is repairs. Every day, and at most hours of every day, he may be found giving directions to mechanics—plumbers, carpenters, decorators, painters—never trusting such work to subordinates. His weak point is inability to remember faces. About two years ago he discharged his engineer for incompetency, after finding something amiss in the engine room. A few hours afterward a neatly dressed man accosted him:

"Hear you want to hire an engineer."

"Yes. Have you got good recommendations?"

The man had, and he was hired at a salary of \$10 a month more than the old engineer was paid. He proved a good man, too, and for several days everything went along nicely. Then Palmer made a strange discovery. The new engineer was the old one, whom the landlord had not recognized in his "store clothes." The man is still in charge of the engine, and at the advanced salary, too.

Potter Palmer lives in the finest house in Chicago. It is a castle, and stands on the shore of Lake Michigan, near Lincoln park.



In some respects it is the finest residence in America. The great gothic tower suggests a castle of England. The hall is baronial, with carved oak staircases and furnishings. Slender gothic pillars support the gallery, for the hall's vaulted roof extends the height of the house, and draped across these pillars are the most perfect examples of Gobelin tapestries, rich and rare. The floor is composed of a most wonderful piece of mosaic in marble. An Indian rug of unique pattern, bearskin rugs, and the skin of an enormous Bengal tiger, add warmth of color to the scene. A grand old oaken table carved in Italy centuries ago, Power's "Medea," suits of armor, other statues and a bust of the owner of the house are interesting objects in this apartment.

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But Palmer did not devote himself entirely to pleasure. At the close of the war Chicago had no retail street of pretensions. State street, save two blocks, was a narrow lane, between rows of shanties. Single-handed and alone, Potter Palmer set out to make this alley the principal thoroughfare of the growing city. He moved with characteristic boldness. In less than six months he bought three-quarters of a mile of frontage; he bought old buildings, moved them back so as to make the street 100 feet wide, or built new ones on the new line. He coaxed some property holders and frightened others; and at last, after four years of work and expenditure, he succeeded in having State street made 100 feet wide. Almost as if by magic the new street became metropolitan in appearance. Palmer himself erected a dozen fine buildings, including the first Palmer house, and a store building, whose marble front alone cost more than \$100,000, and which was, upon its completion, the finest building in the world devoted to trade. In October, 1871, the new Palmer house was begun, and State street was then, what it has since remained, the leading thoroughfare of Chicago.

To Potter Palmer the great fire came as a crushing calamity. Ninety-five of his buildings were destroyed. A rent roll of \$192,000 a year was reduced to nothing. His total loss of income was \$220,000, and the income remaining was not sufficient by \$15,000 to pay the taxes alone. The prospect was so dreary that for a day Palmer hesitated. Only a year married, and about beginning a series of travels, his dreams of ease and bliss were thus suddenly dispelled. He was tempted to withdraw the remnant of his fortune and leave to others the work of rebuilding the city. While thus hesitating he went to his wife, whose sister is Mrs. Fred Grant. To her he described his perplexity. "What," he asked, "shall we do?"

"Mr. Palmer," replied the wife, "it is the duty of every Chicagoan to stay here and devote his fortune and his energies to rebuilding this stricken city."

This decision gave to Chicago her palace hotel and a score of palatial business blocks. From that moment Potter Palmer's energies were devoted to the work of resurrection. Upon the ruins of a dozen buildings, an army of workmen were soon busy clearing away rubbish. Train loads of building material came rushing in to his order. Foundations were renewed or rebuilt. For the first time in this country artificial lights were used that work on the new Palmer house might go on by night and as well as by day. Building after building rose from the ashes. No man contributed so much to the resurrection and new life of Chicago as Potter Palmer.

But his whole fortune was risked upon the outcome. It is only half a secret that at one time it was a question if he could escape at least temporary insolvency. He had little or no income. His fortune was invested in real estate. Insurance returns were meager, taxes enormous. His building operations required immense outlays. The Palmer house alone swallowed \$2,500,000 in its building and furnishing before it was opened to guests. But he never faltered. Some real estate was sold, other mortgaged. Rates of interest were high, and following all came the panic



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The whole house is in keeping with this superb hall. Spanish artists have decorated the grand library, where the bookcases are of carved oak, and where life-sized oaken figures from a chapel near Antwerp, and believed to have been made by the same master who fashioned the famous carvings in Antwerp cathedral, may be found upon the mantel. There is an Indian room, unique and dazlingly oriental, a Moorish room fitting Irving's description of the Alhambra, a Japanese boudoir, a piano made to order of maple, mahogany tables, a Dutch bedroom, another of colonial furnishings, a great conservatory, Moorish lamps—everything rich and artistic which good taste could desire or money procure. The mistress of this palace is still young and beautiful, popular in society, devoted to her Quaker husband, and, as may be imagined, as happy as the day is long.

WALTER WELLMAN.

A correspondent says: "The American element in London is stronger than it has ever been. Its influence is asserting itself more and more, leavening the whole mass, and even in a certain occult but perceptible fashion diverting into new channels the steady, sluggish current of English society. Women, and almost solely women, are responsible for this. London is, far more than Paris, the luminous focus to which the pretty American moth flies with blind faith and a practical spirit. It is the inexhaustible mine from which it can draw the realization of its cherished ambition. These moths generally secure the "open sesame" to one of the concentric circles of society, but they do not all unlock the same one. They move and gravitate in the circle they have entered, and become, as it were, integrated, as if belonging to it by birth, education and habit, instead of being by birth, education and habit free lances, with the world of conquest before them.

We have the woman literary, but she mostly confines herself to the American coterie, pure and simple, where Londoners and foreigners are bidden, made much of, but never strike permanent roots. Celebrities are asked to meet her, and are duly instructed beforehand in her past achievements. She is, on the whole, better liked than her English sisters, being less dictatorial and more original.

The Dog's Howl and Death.

[Boston Budget.]

The idea which associates the dog's howl with the approach of death is probably derived from a conception of an Aryan mythology, which represents a dog as summoning the departing soul. Throughout all Aryan mythology the souls of the dead are supposed to ride on the night wind with their howling dogs, gathering into their throng the souls of those just dying as they pass by their houses.

By the Wholesale.

The London Echo says the king of Siam, for his 263 children, buys marbles by the ton, hoops by the gross, dolls by the hundred and paregoric by the gallon.

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