

The Technology Review

VOL. II.

JANUARY, 1900

No. 1

ROBERT C. BILLINGS

It should be a subject for gratulation to friends of the Institute to note how hearty is the support given it by business men, who, though they could not have in their youth those advantages of education which it affords, have grown to appreciate its usefulness in the city, State, and nation, and have come to realize the considerable degree of success it has attained in solving the difficult problem of giving a student, within the short space of four years, a thorough familiarity with the underlying principles of his profession, and sufficient knowledge of its technique to enable him to enter at once on the practice of it, while fulfilling the requirements of a broad and liberal education.

Of the late benefactors of the Institute, none better illustrates the broad-gauged view which successful business men take of the value of scientific education and research than Robert Charles Billings, whose large bequest to the Corporation was announced a few months ago. Mr. Billings was a Bostonian of Bostonians, made of the sturdy New England stock, and imbued with that resolute spirit which carved the new nation out of the wilderness, and placed Massachusetts on the firing line of progress. To him life was a battle to be fought—and won. There must be no compromise with wrong, no concession to weakness. He

believed that every man had within him the germ of success, and that it was for him to develop it, and nourish it, until it made him the master of his work and the peer of any of his competitors. To him nothing that contributed to this end was trivial or insignificant: no detail was to be neglected, no task left undone. He knew that true greatness was builded on firm foundations, and that every plank in the structure must be sound and every nail driven home. He demanded of himself the utmost accuracy and punctuality. He left his house for his place of business at exactly the same time every day, and he arrived there on the tick of the clock. He went to his lunch at five minutes of noon, and re-entered his office at precisely one o'clock. So punctual was he, indeed, that his neighbors often remarked that they set their watches by him, when they saw him coming up the street. In his life he was the most temperate of men, doing everything in moderation, nothing in excess. He believed that most disease was due to over-eating and over-drinking; but he abstained from nothing that was harmless and innocent, and had none of the Puritan's distaste for the good things of life. He had the best of everything, but he regulated his diet by the strictest hygienic rules. In the matter of exercise he was also particular; and, although he kept excellent horses in his stable, he took frequent long walks, always walking to and from the Park Square Station to his store on Franklin Street. In fact, even up to the last year of his life, he could often be seen running across the Common, like a boy. This careful observance of the rules of health made him at seventy-five as vigorous and active as many men at forty-five. He climbed the steep hill upon which his beautiful house was built without the slightest weariness or fatigue; and, until his last illness, he never knew a sick day.

It may be thought that one so precise in business and so methodical in his living would fall into the ruts of tradition and prejudice; but it was not so. He took a keen pleasure in his business success and in his long-continued and vigorous health; yet he never conceitedly attributed these to any unusual natural ability, but believed them to be the results of will-power and discipline, which others might exercise if they would, and thereby attain a corresponding success. He admired industry and ability in others, and especially liked those who "made something of themselves," who used their talents, no matter in what direction they might lie. He worshipped honorable success in all lines.

Mr. Billings was pre-eminently a self-made man. From humble beginnings he rose to be one of Boston's foremost merchants. From poverty he attained wealth. From an insignificant office-boy, sweeping floors and running errands, he became the millionaire owner of one of the finest estates in Jamaica Plain. And, best of all, he won it honestly. In his long business career there is no instance of unfairness to competitors or employees, no blemish or stain on his name. His integrity was adamant: it might be assailed, but it could not be shaken. He was a man with a strong moral nature and an iron will.

A fine feature of Mr. Billings's character was his devotion to his mother and his veneration for her memory. He often spoke of her as the inspiration of his life, and told of her sacrifices and fortitude under most trying circumstances. His father, who was a ship-chandler, failed in business; and his mother refused to take the property which was legally hers, saying that the creditors should receive every cent available. The son gloried in her action; and declared, that in times of temptation in his business life, it had often been a source of help to him.

His parents were devout members of the old Brattle Street Unitarian Church, and he was always an active member of and liberal contributor to that denomination. While a resident of Boston, he attended the South Congregational Church, of which Rev. Edward Everett Hale is the pastor; and on his removal to Jamaica Plain he joined the Unitarian church there, and bore the expense of erecting a stone tower upon its meeting-house. He was a constant attendant, and was always seen in his pew, whatever the weather, up to the time his late illness confined him to the house.

He was born on Fort Hill in Boston, January 3, 1819, and lived in the city all his life, dying June 12, 1899, in his eighty-first year. He was the son of Ebenezer and Elizabeth (Cleverly) Billings, both of whom came from old colonial stock, his father being of the Billings family of West Roxbury, and his mother of the old Nash family of Weymouth. He attended the public schools of Boston, and won one of the Franklin medals for scholarship, but entered upon his business career at the early age of fourteen, when he obtained a place in the dry-goods jobbing house of Thomas Tarbell & Co. in State street. He remained with this firm and its successor all his life, a period of sixty-six years, and died its senior member and chief owner,—a record rare, indeed, in these days of constant changes. His industry and ability attracted the early attention of Charles Faulkner, a member of the firm, who took him into his confidence and promoted him to a position of responsibility, which he filled with such fidelity as to lead to a lifelong friendship between the two men. Mr. Billings was soon taken into the firm, and remained with it through all its various changes in name and *personnel*. At the time of his death he was one of the oldest

men engaged in active business in Boston. He was twice married, but left no children.

Mr. Billings left what has been well called "a noble will." He bestowed all his vast wealth with remarkable discernment and discretion; and the leading institutions of learning, as well as many of the most worthy charitable societies, have cause to bless his memory. He bequeathed the Institute of Technology, without restriction, the sum of one hundred thousand dollars, with an additional fifty thousand to found the "Billings Student Fund," with the understanding that any student receiving benefit from the fund is expected to abstain from the use of alcohol or tobacco in any of their varied forms. It will be noted that he does not require the signing of a pledge or previous abstinence, but leaves it to the honor of the student to carry out his wishes. Bequests of one hundred thousand dollars each were also made to Harvard University and to the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; while twenty-eight other institutions, including numerous hospitals, colleges, and some religious establishments, were donated amounts varying from ten to fifty thousand dollars.

ARTHUR A. NOYES, '86.



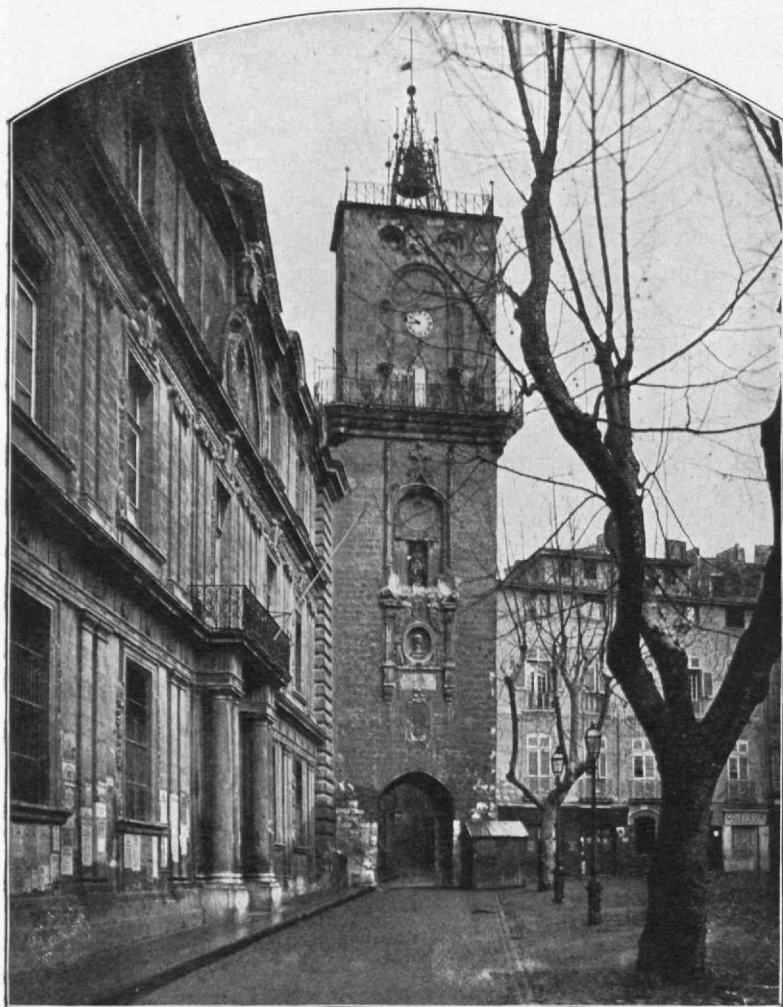
A Corner of the Cloister,
Saint Trophime, Arles.

A DAY IN PROVENCE

During the first weeks of the tour of the Summer School of Architecture, we had been looking forward to the architectural treasures of the Rhône valley, and, while pushing our bicycles over the long mountain grades of the Riviera, had often comforted ourselves with thoughts of the level country ahead. The eastern edge of the great plains of the Camargues, however, is quite broken by rocky hills and ravines; so, as we journeyed from Marseilles in the afternoon train, stopping at all the little stations of a branch road, our approach to Aix was varied by numerous tunnels leading to the long curved viaduct over the river Arc.

On either side, the deep green valleys, the water-worn rocky hills, and even the gray house-tops of occasional villages seemed to tell of the ancient character of the land. Far older in appearance than the fertile plain of northern Italy or the mountains of the Riviera, the environs of Aix harmonize with the tradition of this most ancient Roman settlement of Gaul, the resting-place of the legions of Marius and Cæsar. But the baths, palaces, and temples of Aquæ Sextiæ, visited by consuls and patricians as early as the second century before Christ, were destroyed by the Saracens in the eighth century, and the modern city gives little evidence of its former splendor. Aix-en-Provence is, however, a most interesting town. Its broad boulevards shaded by dense screens of foliage, its numerous fountains, statues, and large modern buildings indicate that the former capital of Provence is to-day deeply interested in progressive municipal government.

Taking our bicycles from the train, and seeing that no



Hôtel de Ville and Belfry, Aix.

repairs were needed, we soon wheeled into the shadows under the leafy covering of the magnificent Cours Mirabeau, and at last, among the larger houses of the northern side, found the Hôtel Nègre Coste.

In the early morning, after paying for a table d'hôte dinner, a bed, and a good breakfast the moderate sum of six and one-half francs each, we oiled bearings and made all ready for the fifty-mile ride before us. Deciding that we had not time to visit the paintings and antiquities of the Museum, or the modern buildings of the École Nationale des Arts-et-Métiers, we bumped along the rough stones of the older streets, passing the colonnade of the Palais de Justice and the memorial obelisk fountain in the Place des Prêcheurs. At the upper end of the Place we stopped to examine the Dominican church of Sainte Marie Madeleine, attracted by M. Révoil's bold Renaissance design for the façade. Thence by devious ways we went on past the prisons and corn market to the Hôtel de Ville and belfry. Only the narrow end of the Hôtel de Ville faces the public square, and this side gives little idea of the real extent of the building. Its modern additions somewhat disturb the original design; but its three stories certainly show Renaissance details that in general character are far more Italian than French. Close to the corner rises the belfry, erected one hundred and fifty years earlier than its seventeenth-century neighbor,—a plain mass of stonework that is varied only by the archway and heavy cornice, although the plain walls are a little softened by the Gothic decorations and the Renaissance sculpture around the old clock face, and relieved by the curious wrought-iron railings and bell spire. During our tour in the Rhône valley we noticed many bell spires resembling this open structure at Aix; but some were far richer in detail, with wrought-iron work showing great variety in design.