

THE FIVE OF HEARTS

AN INTIMATE
PORTRAIT OF HENRY ADAMS
AND HIS FRIENDS
1880 - 1918



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Offers a candid image of the Gilded Age...
The characters and voices ring true."
The Washington Post Book World

PATRICIA O'TOOLE

"O'Toole is an exquisite writer...
This book's only fault is that it ends."
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PATRICK O'DOLE

Ballantine Books
New York

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Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 91-91877

ISBN: 0-345-37314-6

This edition published by arrangement with Clarkson N. Potter, Inc.

Cover design by Kristine V. Mills

Cover illustration: Henry Adams in his study, c. 1894, watercolor by his niece, Mable Hooper LaFarge. By permission of the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

Manufactured in the United States of America

First Ballantine Books Edition: October 1991

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

No man is an island.

JOHN DONNE

To be born is to be wrecked on an island.

J. M. BARRIE

Preface

The Five of Hearts entered my life in 1983, when I read *Descent from Glory: Four Generations of the John Adams Family* by Paul C. Nagel. In a few paragraphs, Nagel sketched a group of five men and women who came together in Washington, D.C., during the winter of 1880–81 and struck up a friendship that lasted for the rest of their lives. The most famous of them was Henry Adams, historian and man of letters, great-grandson of one president and grandson of another, a man who claimed to want nothing to do with politics yet chose to live in the shadow of the White House. Henry's wife, Marian Hooper Adams (known as "Clover"), presided over the capital's most exclusive salon, possessed a stinging wit, and was a gifted photographer. A victim of what modern medicine would probably diagnose as a manic-depressive mood disorder, Clover took her life at the age of forty-two. John Hay, charming, wry, enormously capable but unable to attach himself to a career, nevertheless managed to achieve distinction in two worlds, literature and diplomacy. He began as a secretary in the White House of Abraham Lincoln, wrote for and edited the *New York Tribune*, coauthored a ten-volume life of Lincoln, and ended his career as secretary of state to William McKinley and Theodore Roosevelt, overseeing the emergence of the United States as a world power. His wife, Clara Stone Hay, heiress to an

Ohio industrial fortune, was the soul of piety, deeply devoted to her family, and ill at ease in the society her husband craved. The fifth member of the quintet was Clarence King, a brilliant geologist. His survey of a large stretch of the route followed by the first transcontinental railroad was a landmark of nineteenth-century science and a key to the settlement of the American West. Superbly equipped to succeed as a mining entrepreneur, King died a pauper. He led another life as well—one that his close friends Hay and Adams knew nothing about until his death. In New York, where he kept an office on Wall Street and belonged to several of the city's most genteel men's clubs, King also had a black common-law wife who bore him five children.

Wanting to know more about the relationship of this striking assortment of personalities, I went to the library in search of a book about the Five of Hearts. No such thing existed. And when I turned to biographies of King and Hay and the Adamses, each new piece of information about the Five of Hearts seemed to widen the scope of their story. Like the Bloomsbury group in London and Gertrude Stein's circle in Paris, the Hearts had a genius for befriending everyone worth knowing. Over the course of their lives they knew Mark Twain and Walt Whitman, Henry James and Edith Wharton, Bret Harte and William Dean Howells, Horace Greeley, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, John Ruskin and Matthew Arnold, painters (John La Farge and John Singer Sargent), architects (Henry Hobson Richardson and Stanford White), the sculptor Augustus Saint-Gaudens, Bernard Berenson, the royal family of Tahiti, every president from Abraham Lincoln to Theodore Roosevelt, Andrew Carnegie, Carl Schurz, Henry Cabot Lodge, and scores of cabinet members and diplomats.

Though there was a paucity of published material about the Five of Hearts, I quickly discovered that they and their friends had left a trail of paper reaching from Massachusetts to California: thousands of letters, diary entries, memoirs, literary manuscripts, and documents as diverse as receipts, death certificates, menus, court testimony, and architectural drawings. The story that emerges from these sources (which are described more fully at the back of the book) is really two stories. The first is a group biography, a portrait of an elite who helped to define American culture and politics in the years between

the Civil War and World War I. The second unfolds not in a particular time or place but along a purely human axis, with intimacy at one pole and isolation at the other. This latter tale is one of abounding love, the riches of friendship, tenderness, loyalties verging on passion, generosity, and, at the opposite pole, a story of secrets, loneliness, betrayal, madness, and suicide.

In the preface of his life of Samuel Johnson, W. Jackson Bate writes that biography allows the reader "to touch hands with others, to learn from each other's experience and to get whatever encouragement we can." A biography of a circle of friends is doubly rewarding in this respect since it allows us to touch their hands and to see how they held out their hands to each other.

In piecing together the relationships of the Five of Hearts, I discovered as much about my feelings as theirs. Deeply moved by Henry Adams's kindness toward Clarence King after King's nervous collapse, I glimpsed the magnitude of my own hope for the same tenderness in time of desperation. Biases—mine and theirs—lurked everywhere. The impulses of educated Americans in the late twentieth century are infinitely more egalitarian than the attitudes of their nineteenth-century counterparts, which presents special difficulties in dealing with the elitism of a circle like the Five of Hearts. In particular I recoiled from Adams's anti-Semitic outbursts, King's contempt for women, and John Hay's scorn for immigrants. But one can try to account for a prejudice without endorsing it, and however disagreeable, these attitudes deserve to be put in context. This I have endeavored to do.

When William Roscoe Thayer, the first biographer of John Hay, asked the elderly Henry Adams about the Five of Hearts, Adams was brusque and enigmatic. The only record he cared to leave, he said, was the Saint-Gaudens sculpture he had commissioned decades earlier for Clover's grave. "People who want to know us—we are not eager for notoriety at any time—can go there and we shall tell no lies." As far as I know, I have told no lies. And since the Five of Hearts left a record considerably more complete than the haunting bronze figure in Washington's Rock Creek Church Cemetery, I hope I have caught something of the truth.

Prologue: Farewells

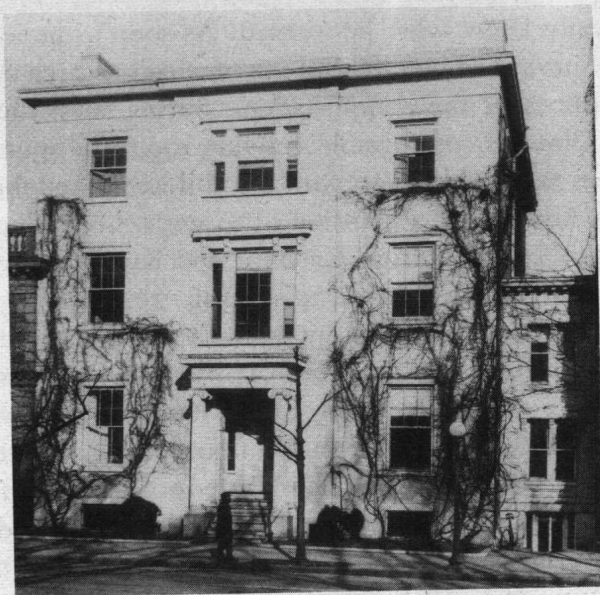
For twenty hours it snowed. Then it rained, and by the time the sun rose on March 4, 1881, the streets of Washington had turned to rivers. It was a day to stay home by the fire, which is precisely what Mr. and Mrs. Henry Adams of Lafayette Square intended to do. A gunshot echoed through their neighborhood at ten thirty in the morning, and if the sound drew them to their windows, they saw, across the square in front of the White House, a crowd of thousands—men in black hats, women with dripping umbrellas, and soldiers on horseback, their dark capes pinned back to show a flash of red.

The gunshot signaled the start of the inaugural parade in honor of James Abram Garfield, Civil War hero, Ohio Republican, and twentieth president of the United States. Among the celebrants sloshing down Pennsylvania Avenue toward the Capitol, it would have been difficult to find a happier man than the nineteenth president, Rutherford B. Hayes. Having come into the White House under the cloud of an election variously described as “disputed” and “stolen,” Hayes had passed his quadrennium without ever acquiring a taste for the presidency. As Garfield solemnly swore to uphold the Constitution, Hayes was heard mumbling cheerfully to himself, “Out of a scrape, out of a scrape.”

Snug by their hearth on that sodden Friday, sunk into dark red leather armchairs cut low and small to match their diminutive figures, Henry and Clover Adams were only dimly aware of distant fifes and drums. By Clover's reckoning, the odds were ten to one that they would see nothing of their new neighbor in the White House or his administration. "In this ever-shifting panorama of course we shall find new combinations," she wrote to her father, "but we shall hardly have the intimate cosy set that we did."

So it seemed. After more than a year abroad, the Adamses had returned to the capital just in time to grow deeply attached to John Hay and Clarence King, who were leaving the government with the changing of the presidential guard. Hay and King had encountered the Adamses a few times in the past, but when Henry and Clover moved into a rented house at 1607 H Street in December 1880, the two men became constant callers. Hay, an assistant secretary of state, would leave his desk at four-thirty, walk north across Lafayette Park, and in five minutes pass between the fluted columns of the portico at 1607, a graceful mansion known to Washingtonians as "the little White House." By the time he arrived, Clover was usually deep in conversation with King, the director of the U.S. Geological Survey, or with Hay's wife, Clara, who made frequent visits from the Hays' home in Cleveland. At five o'clock, when Henry Adams emerged from his study, tea began. Tea often stretched into dinner, and dinner flowed into a party lasting till midnight. Delighted with their delight in each other, the friends sealed their bond with a name: "the Five of Hearts." Although the origin of the phrase went unrecorded, it almost certainly sprang from their familiarity with two other playing-card epithets. Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, whose work was known to all of them, had belonged to a circle known as "the Five of Clubs," and a bit of Wild West derring-do had won Clarence King the title of "the King of Diamonds."

An outsider would have been hard put to understand the intense affections of the Five of Hearts. Apart from their age (all were close to forty except Clara, who was thirty-one) and apart from the Boston Brahminism that linked Henry and Clover Adams, the quintet had little in common. As a Westerner, John Hay belonged to a species considered innately inferior by Henry Adams, son of Beacon Hill. Clarence King thought the silent and darkly handsome Mrs.



Henry and Clover Adams's rented house at 1607 H Street, on Washington's Lafayette Square, where the Five of Hearts became friends in the winter of 1880-81.

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS

Hay "calm and grand," but her ardent domesticity held no appeal for Clover Adams. While Clara filled her Washington days at ladies' luncheons, Clover stayed home and read. Clara seemed a strange companion for her loquacious husband and his witty friends, who talked unceasingly and punned without mercy. (When one of the Adamses' Skye terriers developed an eye problem, Hay pronounced it a case of "cataract." King leaned toward a diagnosis of "tom-cataract.") Clover, impatient with Hay's reverence for the novels of Henry James, declared that James's trouble was not that he bit off more than he could chew but that "he chaws more than he bites off."

King, a hazel-eyed bachelor who wore his blondish beard and thinning hair cropped close, was the very thing Hay and Adams were not: a man of action. While Hay and Adams were content to write history, King intended to make it. At twenty-five he had begun directing the largest scientific study the federal government had ever undertaken, a geological survey along the route of the first transcontinental railroad. Awed by King's drive and intelligence, Henry Adams and John Hay predicted that their friend would have whatever prize he chose.

King already knew what he wanted. As soon as he left the U.S. Geological Survey, he would head for Mexico in search of the fabled lost silver mines of the conquistadors. Sitting with the Hearts in Henry and Clover's comfortable drawing room, he spun dreams of the day when he would have a wife and children, like John Hay, and live like the Adamses in a mansion filled with choice English paintings and the finest rugs from Kashmir and Kurdistan. His fortune made, he would devote himself to scientific research.

Out of loyalties dating from his years as a junior secretary in the White House of Abraham Lincoln, Hay had come to Washington in 1879 to fill an unexpected vacancy in the State Department. Now he was going back to Cleveland by way of New York, where he would spend a few months standing in for the editor of the *Tribune*, who was going away for a honeymoon. Once home, Hay had no ambition except to pick up where he had left off: managing his father-in-law's millions and collaborating with an old colleague on a life of Lincoln.

Henry and Clover also meant to resume the life they had led before their long stay in Europe. They rode in the morning, breakfasted at noon; and at one o'clock Henry retreated to his study to write a history of the United States in the opening years of the nineteenth century. Such an existence was idyllic, he thought—"like a dream of the golden age." Henry fervently believed that the future of the world lay in the United States and that the future of the United States lay in Washington. He reveled in the expectation and fancied himself one of "the first rays of light" that would one day set fire to the world.

As winter turned to spring and President Garfield settled into the White House, the Five of Hearts said farewell. "Five o'clock tea is a bore," Clover pouted when they had gone. But there would be other endings, just as there had been other beginnings.

About the Author

Patricia O'Toole has contributed articles, essays, and reviews to numerous publications. *The Five of Hearts*, her second book, was one of three finalists for the 1991 Pulitzer Prize in biography as well as a nominee for a National Book Critics Circle Award and a Los Angeles Times Book Award. A graduate of the University of Michigan, she received a MacDowell Colony fellowship in 1988 and in 1990 served as guest curator of an exhibition based on *The Five of Hearts* at the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C. She lives in Norwalk, Connecticut.

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PART ONE

*G*RAVITATIONS

1

A Family Fugitive

*H*enry Brooks Adams began life with all the blessings and burdens of a famous family. John Adams and John Quincy Adams, his paternal great-grandfather and grandfather, had been presidents of the United States, and it appeared possible that his father, Charles Francis Adams, would be the same. There was money, too, for the Adamses had prospered during their two centuries in Massachusetts, and Henry's maternal grandfather, Peter Chardon Brooks, was said to be the richest man in Boston.

The fourth of seven children, Henry was born on February 16, 1838. Like generations of Adams males before him, he spent his late adolescence at Harvard College, receiving a degree in 1858. He went to Europe, traveled, and studied in Germany with thoughts of becoming a lawyer. In 1860, when he returned to the Adams keep in Quincy, he was filled with doubt on all but one point: the law was not for him.

The young man's strongest inclinations were literary, though he had no idea what to do about them. Pure literature seemed beyond the reach of a self-conscious beginner of twenty-two, and his father disapproved of journalism, contending that the ephemeral nature of newspapers and magazines deprived journalists of any chance for real influence. As an old man, Henry liked to say that he had had the