Arthur Conan Doyle

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Аннотация

"Through the Magic Door" is an essay by Arthur Conan Doyle: his subject is the charisma and charm of books. Doyle invites readers to enjoy the greatest minds of all times through what they have left behind and argues that, when we read, the selfishness and hopelessness of the world can be left behind.

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Through the Magic Door by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle

I

I care not how humble your bookshelf may be, nor how lowly the room which it adorns. Close the door of that room behind you, shut off with it all the cares of the outer world, plunge back into the soothing company of the great dead, and then you are through the magic portal into that fair land whither worry and vexation can follow you no more. You have left all that is vulgar and all that is sordid behind you. There stand your noble, silent comrades, waiting in their ranks. Pass your eye down their files. Choose your man. And then you have but to hold up your hand to him and away you go together into dreamland. Surely there would be something eerie about a line of books were it not that familiarity has deadened our sense of it. Each is a mummified soul embalmed in cere-cloth and natron of leather and printer's ink. Each cover of a true book enfolds the concentrated essence of a man. The personalities of the writers have faded into the thinnest shadows, as their bodies into impalpable dust, yet here are their very spirits at your command.

It is our familiarity also which has lessened our perception of the miraculous good fortune which we enjoy. Let us suppose

that we were suddenly to learn that Shakespeare had returned to earth, and that he would favour any of us with an hour of his wit and his fancy. How eagerly we would seek him out! And yet we have him – the very best of him – at our elbows from week to week, and hardly trouble ourselves to put out our hands to beckon him down. No matter what mood a man may be in, when once he has passed through the magic door he can summon the world's greatest to sympathize with him in it. If he be thoughtful, here are the kings of thought. If he be dreamy, here are the masters of fancy. Or is it amusement that he lacks? He can signal to any one of the world's great story-tellers, and out comes the dead man and holds him enthralled by the hour. The dead are such good company that one may come to think too little of the living. It is a real and a pressing danger with many of us, that we should never find our own thoughts and our own souls, but be ever obsessed by the dead. Yet second-hand romance and second-hand emotion are surely better than the dull, soul-killing monotony which life brings to most of the human race. But best of all when the dead man's wisdom and strength in the living of our own strenuous days.

Come through the magic door with me, and sit here on the green settee, where you can see the old oak case with its untidy lines of volumes. Smoking is not forbidden. Would you care to hear me talk of them? Well, I ask nothing better, for there is no volume there which is not a dear, personal friend, and what can a man talk of more pleasantly than that? The other books are over

yonder, but these are my own favourites – the ones I care to re-read and to have near my elbow. There is not a tattered cover which does not bring its mellow memories to me.

Some of them represent those little sacrifices which make a possession dearer. You see the line of old, brown volumes at the bottom? Every one of those represents a lunch. They were bought in my student days, when times were not too affluent. Threepence was my modest allowance for my midday sandwich and glass of beer; but, as luck would have it, my way to the classes led past the most fascinating bookshop in the world. Outside the door of it stood a large tub filled with an ever-changing litter of tattered books, with a card above which announced that any volume therein could be purchased for the identical sum which I carried in my pocket. As I approached it a combat ever raged betwixt the hunger of a youthful body and that of an inquiring and omnivorous mind. Five times out of six the animal won. But when the mental prevailed, then there was an entrancing five minutes' digging among out-of-date almanacs, volumes of Scotch theology, and tables of logarithms, until one found something which made it all worth while. If you will look over these titles, you will see that I did not do so very badly. Four volumes of Gordon's "Tacitus" (life is too short to read originals, so long as there are good translations), Sir William Temple's Essays, Addison's works, Swift's "Tale of a Tub," Clarendon's "History," "Gil Blas," Buckingham's Poems, Churchill's Poems, "Life of Bacon" – not so bad for the old threepenny tub.

They were not always in such plebeian company. Look at the thickness of the rich leather, and the richness of the dim gold lettering. Once they adorned the shelves of some noble library, and even among the odd almanacs and the sermons they bore the traces of their former greatness, like the faded silk dress of the reduced gentlewoman, a present pathos but a glory of the past.

Reading is made too easy nowadays, with cheap paper editions and free libraries. A man does not appreciate at its full worth the thing that comes to him without effort. Who now ever gets the thrill which Carlyle felt when he hurried home with the six volumes of Gibbon's "History" under his arm, his mind just starving for want of food, to devour them at the rate of one a day? A book should be your very own before you can really get the taste of it, and unless you have worked for it, you will never have the true inward pride of possession.

If I had to choose the one book out of all that line from which I have had most pleasure and most profit, I should point to yonder stained copy of Macaulay's "Essays." It seems entwined into my whole life as I look backwards. It was my comrade in my student days, it has been with me on the sweltering Gold Coast, and it formed part of my humble kit when I went a-whaling in the Arctic. Honest Scotch harpooners have addled their brains over it, and you may still see the grease stains where the second engineer grappled with Frederick the Great. Tattered and dirty and worn, no gilt-edged morocco-bound volume could ever take its place for me.

What a noble gateway this book forms through which one may approach the study either of letters or of history! Milton, Machiavelli, Hallam, Southey, Bunyan, Byron, Johnson, Pitt, Hampden, Clive, Hastings, Chatham – what nuclei for thought! With a good grip of each how pleasant and easy to fill in all that lies between! The short, vivid sentences, the broad sweep of allusion, the exact detail, they all throw a glamour round the subject and should make the least studious of readers desire to go further. If Macaulay's hand cannot lead a man upon those pleasant paths, then, indeed, he may give up all hope of ever finding them.

When I was a senior schoolboy this book – not this very volume, for it had an even more tattered predecessor – opened up a new world to me. History had been a lesson and abhorrent. Suddenly the task and the drudgery became an incursion into an enchanted land, a land of colour and beauty, with a kind, wise guide to point the path. In that great style of his I loved even the faults – indeed, now that I come to think of it, it was the faults which I loved best. No sentence could be too stiff with rich embroidery, and no antithesis too flowery. It pleased me to read that "a universal shout of laughter from the Tagus to the Vistula informed the Pope that the days of the crusades were past," and I was delighted to learn that "Lady Jerningham kept a vase in which people placed foolish verses, and Mr. Dash wrote verses which were fit to be placed in Lady Jerningham's vase." Those were the kind of sentences which used to fill me with a vague

but enduring pleasure, like chords which linger in the musician's ear. A man likes a plainer literary diet as he grows older, but still as I glance over the Essays I am filled with admiration and wonder at the alternate power of handling a great subject, and of adorning it by delightful detail – just a bold sweep of the brush, and then the most delicate stippling. As he leads you down the path, he for ever indicates the alluring side-tracks which branch away from it. An admirable, if somewhat old-fashioned, literary and historical education night be effected by working through every book which is alluded to in the Essays. I should be curious, however, to know the exact age of the youth when he came to the end of his studies.

I wish Macaulay had written a historical novel. I am convinced that it would have been a great one. I do not know if he had the power of drawing an imaginary character, but he certainly had the gift of reconstructing a dead celebrity to a remarkable degree. Look at the simple half-paragraph in which he gives us Johnson and his atmosphere. Was ever a more definite picture given in a shorter space –

"As we close it, the club-room is before us, and the table on which stand the omelet for Nugent, and the lemons for Johnson. There are assembled those heads which live for ever on the canvas of Reynolds. There are the spectacles of Burke, and the tall thin form of Langton, the courtly sneer of Beauclerk and the beaming smile of Garrick, Gibbon tapping his snuff-box, and Sir Joshua with his trumpet in his ear. In the foreground is that

strange figure which is as familiar to us as the figures of those among whom we have been brought up – the gigantic body, the huge massy face, seamed with the scars of disease, the brown coat, the black worsted stockings, the grey wig with the scorched foretop, the dirty hands, the nails bitten and pared to the quick. We see the eyes and mouth moving with convulsive twitches; we see the heavy form rolling; we hear it puffing, and then comes the 'Why, sir!' and the 'What then, sir?' and the 'No, sir!' and the 'You don't see your way through the question, sir!'"

It is etched into your memory for ever.

I can remember that when I visited London at the age of sixteen the first thing I did after housing my luggage was to make a pilgrimage to Macaulay's grave, where he lies in Westminster Abbey, just under the shadow of Addison, and amid the dust of the poets whom he had loved so well. It was the one great object of interest which London held for me. And so it might well be, when I think of all I owe him. It is not merely the knowledge and the stimulation of fresh interests, but it is the charming gentlemanly tone, the broad, liberal outlook, the general absence of bigotry and of prejudice. My judgment now confirms all that I felt for him then.

My four-volume edition of the History stands, as you see, to the right of the Essays. Do you recollect the third chapter of that work – the one which reconstructs the England of the seventeenth century? It has always seemed to me the very high-water mark of Macaulay's powers, with its marvellous mixture of

precise fact and romantic phrasing. The population of towns, the statistics of commerce, the prosaic facts of life are all transmuted into wonder and interest by the handling of the master. You feel that he could have cast a glamour over the multiplication table had he set himself to do so. Take a single concrete example of what I mean. The fact that a Londoner in the country, or a countryman in London, felt equally out of place in those days of difficult travel, would seem to hardly require stating, and to afford no opportunity of leaving a strong impression upon the reader's mind. See what Macaulay makes of it, though it is no more than a hundred other paragraphs which discuss a hundred various points –

"A cockney in a rural village was stared at as much as if he had intruded into a kraal of Hottentots. On the other hand, when the lord of a Lincolnshire or Shropshire manor appeared in Fleet Street, he was as easily distinguished from the resident population as a Turk or a Lascar. His dress, his gait, his accent, the manner in which he gazed at the shops, stumbled into gutters, ran against the porters, and stood under the waterspouts, marked him out as an excellent subject for the operations of swindlers and banterers. Bullies jostled him into the kennel, Hackney coachmen splashed him from head to foot, thieves explored with perfect security the huge pockets of his horseman's coat, while he stood entranced by the splendour of the Lord Mayor's Show. Money-droppers, sore from the cart's tail, introduced themselves to him, and appeared to him the most honest friendly gentlemen that he had ever seen.

Painted women, the refuse of Lewkner Lane and Whetstone Park, passed themselves on him for countesses and maids of honour. If he asked his way to St. James', his informants sent him to Mile End. If he went into a shop, he was instantly discerned to be a fit purchaser of everything that nobody else would buy, of second-hand embroidery, copper rings, and watches that would not go. If he rambled into any fashionable coffee-house, he became a mark for the insolent derision of fops, and the grave waggery of Templars. Enraged and mortified, he soon returned to his mansion, and there, in the homage of his tenants and the conversation of his boon companions, found consolation for the vexations and humiliations which he had undergone. There he was once more a great man, and saw nothing above himself except when at the assizes he took his seat on the bench near the Judge, or when at the muster of the militia he saluted the Lord Lieutenant."

On the whole, I should put this detached chapter of description at the very head of his Essays, though it happens to occur in another volume. The History as a whole does not, as it seems to me, reach the same level as the shorter articles. One cannot but feel that it is a brilliant piece of special pleading from a fervid Whig, and that there must be more to be said for the other side than is there set forth. Some of the Essays are tinged also, no doubt, by his own political and religious limitations. The best are those which get right away into the broad fields of literature and philosophy. Johnson, Walpole, Madame D'Arblay, Addison,

and the two great Indian ones, Clive and Warren Hastings, are my own favourites. Frederick the Great, too, must surely stand in the first rank. Only one would I wish to eliminate. It is the diabolically clever criticism upon Montgomery. One would have wished to think that Macaulay's heart was too kind, and his soul too gentle, to pen so bitter an attack. Bad work will sink of its own weight. It is not necessary to souse the author as well. One would think more highly of the man if he had not done that savage bit of work.

I don't know why talking of Macaulay always makes me think of Scott, whose books in a faded, olive-backed line, have a shelf, you see, of their own. Perhaps it is that they both had so great an influence, and woke such admiration in me. Or perhaps it is the real similarity in the minds and characters of the two men. You don't see it, you say? Well, just think of Scott's "Border Ballads," and then of Macaulay's "Lays." The machines must be alike, when the products are so similar. Each was the only man who could possibly have written the poems of the other. What swing and dash in both of them! What a love of all that is and noble and martial! So simple, and yet so strong. But there are minds on which strength and simplicity are thrown away. They think that unless a thing is obscure it must be superficial, whereas it is often the shallow stream which is turbid, and the deep which is clear. Do you remember the fatuous criticism of Matthew Arnold upon the glorious "Lays," where he calls out "is this poetry?" after quoting –

"And how can man die better Than facing fearful odds For the ashes of his fathers And the Temples of his Gods?"

In trying to show that Macaulay had not the poetic sense he was really showing that he himself had not the dramatic sense. The baldness of the idea and of the language had evidently offended him. But this is exactly where the true merit lies. Macaulay is giving the rough, blunt words with which a simple-minded soldier appeals to two comrades to help him in a deed of valour. Any high-flown sentiment would have been absolutely out of character. The lines are, I think, taken with their context, admirable ballad poetry, and have just the dramatic quality and sense which a ballad poet must have. That opinion of Arnold's shook my faith in his judgment, and yet I would forgive a good deal to the man who wrote –

"One more charge and then be dumb, When the forts of Folly fall, May the victors when they come Find my body near the wall."

Not a bad verse that for one's life aspiration.

This is one of the things which human society has not yet understood – the value of a noble, inspiriting text. When it does we shall meet them everywhere engraved on appropriate places, and our progress through the streets will be brightened and ennobled by one continual series of beautiful mental impulses and images, reflected into our souls from the printed thoughts which meet our eyes. To think that we should walk with empty, listless minds while all this splendid material is running to waste.

I do not mean mere Scriptural texts, for they do not bear the same meaning to all, though what human creature can fail to be spurred onwards by "Work while it is day, for the night cometh when no man can work." But I mean those beautiful thoughts – who can say that they are uninspired thoughts? – which may be gathered from a hundred authors to match a hundred uses. A fine thought in fine language is a most precious jewel, and should not be hid away, but be exposed for use and ornament. To take the nearest example, there is a horse-trough across the road from my house, a plain stone trough, and no man could pass it with any feelings save vague discontent at its ugliness. But suppose that on its front slab you print the verse of Coleridge –

"He prayeth best who loveth best All things, both great and small For the dear Lord who fashioned him He knows and loveth all."

I fear I may misquote, for I have not "The Ancient Mariner" at my elbow, but even as it stands does it not elevate the horse-trough? We all do this, I suppose, in a small way for ourselves. There are few men who have not some chosen quotations printed on their study mantelpieces, or, better still, in their hearts. Carlyle's transcription of "Rest! Rest! Shall I not have all Eternity to rest in!" is a pretty good spur to a weary man. But what we need is a more general application of the same thing for public and not for private use, until people understand that a graven thought is as beautiful an ornament as any graven image, striking through the eye right deep down into the soul.

However, all this has nothing to do with Macaulay's glorious lays, save that when you want some flowers of manliness and patriotism you can pluck quite a bouquet out of those. I had the good fortune to learn the Lay of Horatius off by heart when I was a child, and it stamped itself on my plastic mind, so that even now I can reel off almost the whole of it. Goldsmith said that in conversation he was like the man who had a thousand pounds in the bank, but could not compete with the man who had an actual sixpence in his pocket. So the ballad that you bear in your mind outweighs the whole bookshelf which waits for reference. But I want you now to move your eye a little farther down the shelf to the line of olive-green volumes. That is my edition of Scott. But surely I must give you a little breathing space before I venture upon them.

II

It is a great thing to start life with a small number of really good books which are your very own. You may not appreciate them at first. You may pine for your novel of crude and unadulterated adventure. You may, and will, give it the preference when you can. But the dull days come, and the rainy days come, and always you are driven to fill up the chinks of your reading with the worthy books which wait so patiently for your notice. And then suddenly, on a day which marks an epoch in your life, you understand the difference. You see, like a flash, how the one stands for nothing, and the other for literature. From that day onwards you may return to your crudities, but at least you do so with some standard of comparison in your mind. You can never be the same as you were before. Then gradually the good thing becomes more dear to you; it builds itself up with your growing mind; it becomes a part of your better self, and so, at last, you can look, as I do now, at the old covers and love them for all that they have meant in the past. Yes, it was the olive-green line of Scott's novels which started me on to rhapsody. They were the first books I ever owned – long, long before I could appreciate or even understand them. But at last I realized what a treasure they were. In my boyhood I read them by surreptitious candle-ends in the dead of the night, when the sense of crime added a new zest to the story. Perhaps you have observed that

my "Ivanhoe" is of a different edition from the others. The first copy was left in the grass by the side of a stream, fell into the water, and was eventually picked up three days later, swollen and decomposed, upon a mud-bank. I think I may say, however, that I had worn it out before I lost it. Indeed, it was perhaps as well that it was some years before it was replaced, for my instinct was always to read it again instead of breaking fresh ground.

I remember the late James Payn telling the anecdote that he and two literary friends agreed to write down what scene in fiction they thought the most dramatic, and that on examining the papers it was found that all three had chosen the same. It was the moment when the unknown knight, at Ashby-de-la-Zouch, riding past the pavilions of the lesser men, strikes with the sharp end of his lance, in a challenge to mortal combat, the shield of the formidable Templar. It was, indeed, a splendid moment! What matter that no Templar was allowed by the rules of his Order to take part in so secular and frivolous an affair as a tournament? It is the privilege of great masters to make things so, and it is a churlish thing to gainsay it. Was it not Wendell Holmes who described the prosaic man, who enters a drawing-room with a couple of facts, like ill-conditioned bull-dogs at his heels, ready to let them loose on any play of fancy? The great writer can never go wrong. If Shakespeare gives a sea-coast to Bohemia, or if Victor Hugo calls an English prize-fighter Mr. Jim-John-Jack – well, it was so, and that's an end of it. "There is no second line of rails at that point," said an editor to a minor author. "I make a

second line," said the author; and he was within his rights, if he can carry his readers' conviction with him.

But this is a digression from "Ivanhoe." What a book it is! The second greatest historical novel in our language, I think. Every successive reading has deepened my admiration for it. Scott's soldiers are always as good as his women (with exceptions) are weak; but here, while the soldiers are at their very best, the romantic figure of Rebecca redeems the female side of the story from the usual commonplace routine. Scott drew manly men because he was a manly man himself, and found the task a sympathetic one.

He drew young heroines because a convention demanded it, which he had never the hardihood to break. It is only when we get him for a dozen chapters on end with a minimum of petticoat – in the long stretch, for example, from the beginning of the Tournament to the end of the Friar Tuck incident – that we realize the height of continued romantic narrative to which he could attain. I don't think in the whole range of our literature we have a finer sustained flight than that.

There is, I admit, an intolerable amount of redundant verbiage in Scott's novels. Those endless and unnecessary introductions make the shell very thick before you come to the oyster. They are often admirable in themselves, learned, witty, picturesque, but with no relation or proportion to the story which they are supposed to introduce. Like so much of our English fiction, they are very good matter in a very bad place. Digression and want of

method and order are traditional national sins. Fancy introducing an essay on how to live on nothing a year as Thackeray did in "Vanity Fair," or sandwiching in a ghost story as Dickens has dared to do. As well might a dramatic author rush up to the footlights and begin telling anecdotes while his play was suspending its action and his characters waiting wearily behind him. It is all wrong, though every great name can be quoted in support of it. Our sense of form is lamentably lacking, and Sir Walter sinned with the rest. But get past all that to a crisis in the real story, and who finds the terse phrase, the short fire-word, so surely as he? Do you remember when the reckless Sergeant of Dragoons stands at last before the grim Puritan, upon whose head a price has been set: "A thousand marks or a bed of heather!" says he, as he draws. The Puritan draws also: "The Sword of the Lord and of Gideon!" says he. No verbiage there! But the very spirit of either man and of either party, in the few stern words, which haunt your mind. "Bows and Bills!" cry the Saxon Varangians, as the Moslem horse charges home. You feel it is just what they must have cried. Even more terse and businesslike was the actual battle-cry of the fathers of the same men on that long-drawn day when they fought under the "Red Dragon of Wessex" on the low ridge at Hastings. "Out! Out!" they roared, as the Norman chivalry broke upon them. Terse, strong, prosaic – the very genius of the race was in the cry.

Is it that the higher emotions are not there? Or is it that they are damped down and covered over as too precious to be exhibited?

Something of each, perhaps. I once met the widow of the man who, as a young signal midshipman, had taken Nelson's famous message from the Signal Yeoman and communicated it to the ship's company. The officers were impressed. The men were not. "Duty!" they muttered. "We've always done it. Why not?" Anything in the least highfalutin' would depress, not exalt, a British company. It is the under statement which delights them. German troops can march to battle singing Luther's hymns. Frenchmen will work themselves into a frenzy by a song of glory and of Fatherland. Our martial poets need not trouble to imitate – or at least need not imagine that if they do so they will ever supply a want to the British soldier. Our sailors working the heavy guns in South Africa sang: "Here's another lump of sugar for the Bird." I saw a regiment go into action to the refrain of "A little bit off the top." The martial poet aforesaid, unless he had the genius and the insight of a Kipling, would have wasted a good deal of ink before he had got down to such chants as these. The Russians are not unlike us in this respect. I remember reading of some column ascending a breach and singing lustily from start to finish, until a few survivors were left victorious upon the crest with the song still going. A spectator inquired what wondrous chant it was which had warmed them to such a deed of valour, and he found that the exact meaning of the words, endlessly repeated, was "Ivan is in the garden picking cabbages." The fact is, I suppose, that a mere monotonous sound may take the place of the tom-tom of savage warfare, and hypnotize the soldier into valour.

Our cousins across the Atlantic have the same blending of the comic with their most serious work. Take the songs which they sang during the most bloody war which the Anglo-Celtic race has ever waged – the only war in which it could have been said that they were stretched to their uttermost and showed their true form – "Tramp, tramp, tramp," "John Brown's Body," "Marching through Georgia" – all had a playful humour running through them. Only one exception do I know, and that is the most tremendous war-song I can recall. Even an outsider in time of peace can hardly read it without emotion. I mean, of course, Julia Ward Howe's "War-Song of the Republic," with the choral opening line: "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord." If that were ever sung upon a battle-field the effect must have been terrific.

A long digression, is it not? But that is the worst of the thoughts at the other side of the Magic Door. You can't pull one out without a dozen being entangled with it. But it was Scott's soldiers that I was talking of, and I was saying that there is nothing theatrical, no posing, no heroics (the thing of all others which the hero abominates), but just the short bluff word and the simple manly ways, with every expression and metaphor drawn from within his natural range of thought. What a pity it is that he, with his keen appreciation of the soldier, gave us so little of those soldiers who were his own contemporaries – the finest, perhaps, that the world has ever seen! It is true that he wrote a life of the great Soldier Emperor, but that was the one piece of hackwork of

his career. How could a Tory patriot, whose whole training had been to look upon Napoleon as a malignant Demon, do justice to such a theme? But the Europe of those days was full of material which he of all men could have drawn with a sympathetic hand. What would we not give for a portrait of one of Murat's light-cavalrymen, or of a Grenadier of the Old Guard, drawn with the same bold strokes as the Rittmeister of Gustavus or the archers of the French King's Guard in "Quentin Durward"?

In his visit to Paris Scott must have seen many of those iron men who during the preceding twenty years had been the scourge and also the redemption of Europe. To us the soldiers who scowled at him from the sidewalks in 1814 would have been as interesting and as much romantic figures of the past as the mail-clad knights or ruffling cavaliers of his novels. A picture from the life of a Peninsular veteran, with his views upon the Duke, would be as striking as Dugald Dalgetty from the German wars. But then no man ever does realize the true interest of the age in which he happens to live. All sense of proportion is lost, and the little thing hard-by obscures the great thing at a distance. It is easy in the dark to confuse the fire-fly and the star. Fancy, for example, the Old Masters seeking their subjects in inn parlours, or St. Sebastians, while Columbus was discovering America before their very faces.

I have said that I think "Ivanhoe" the best of Scott's novels. I suppose most people would subscribe to that. But how about the second best? It speaks well for their general average that there

is hardly one among them which might not find some admirers who would vote it to a place of honour. To the Scottish-born man those novels which deal with Scottish life and character have a quality of raciness which gives them a place apart. There is a rich humour of the soil in such books as "Old Mortality," "The Antiquary," and "Rob Roy," which puts them in a different class from the others. His old Scottish women are, next to his soldiers, the best series of types that he has drawn. At the same time it must be admitted that merit which is associated with dialect has such limitations that it can never take the same place as work which makes an equal appeal to all the world. On the whole, perhaps, "Quentin Durward," on account of its wider interests, its strong character-drawing, and the European importance of the events and people described, would have my vote for the second place. It is the father of all those sword-and-cape novels which have formed so numerous an addition to the light literature of the last century. The pictures of Charles the Bold and of the unspeakable Louis are extraordinarily vivid. I can see those two deadly enemies watching the hounds chasing the herald, and clinging to each other in the convulsion of their cruel mirth, more clearly than most things which my eyes have actually rested upon.

The portrait of Louis with his astuteness, his cruelty, his superstition and his cowardice is followed closely from Comines, and is the more effective when set up against his bluff and war-like rival. It is not often that historical characters work out in their actual physique exactly as one would picture them to

be, but in the High Church of Innsbruck I have seen effigies of Louis and Charles which might have walked from the very pages of Scott-Louis, thin, ascetic, varminty; and Charles with the head of a prize-fighter. It is hard on us when a portrait upsets all our preconceived ideas, when, for example, we see in the National Portrait Gallery a man with a noble, olive-tinted, poetic face, and with a start read beneath it that it is the wicked Judge Jeffreys. Occasionally, however, as at Innsbruck, we are absolutely satisfied. I have before me on the mantelpiece yonder a portrait of a painting which represents Queen Mary's Bothwell. Take it down and look at it. Mark the big head, fit to conceive large schemes; the strong animal face, made to captivate a sensitive, feminine woman; the brutally forceful features – the mouth with a suggestion of wild boars' tusks behind it, the beard which could bristle with fury: the whole man and his life-history are revealed in that picture. I wonder if Scott had ever seen the original which hangs at the Hepburn family seat?

Personally, I have always had a very high opinion of a novel which the critics have used somewhat harshly, and which came almost the last from his tired pen. I mean "Count Robert of Paris." I am convinced that if it had been the first, instead of the last, of the series it would have attracted as much attention as "Waverley." I can understand the state of mind of the expert, who cried out in mingled admiration and despair: "I have studied the conditions of Byzantine Society all my life, and here comes a Scotch lawyer who makes the whole thing clear to me in a

flash!" Many men could draw with more or less success Norman England, or mediaeval France, but to reconstruct a whole dead civilization in so plausible a way, with such dignity and such minuteness of detail, is, I should think, a most wonderful tour de force. His failing health showed itself before the end of the novel, but had the latter half equalled the first, and contained scenes of such humour as Anna Comnena reading aloud her father's exploits, or of such majesty as the account of the muster of the Crusaders upon the shores of the Bosphorus, then the book could not have been gainsaid its rightful place in the very front rank of the novels.

I would that he had carried on his narrative, and given us a glimpse of the actual progress of the First Crusade. What an incident! Was ever anything in the world's history like it? It had what historical incidents seldom have, a definite beginning, middle and end, from the half-crazed preaching of Peter down to the Fall of Jerusalem. Those leaders! It would take a second Homer to do them justice. Godfrey the perfect soldier and leader, Bohemund the unscrupulous and formidable, Tancred the ideal knight errant, Robert of Normandy the half-mad hero! Here is material so rich that one feels one is not worthy to handle it. What richest imagination could ever evolve anything more marvellous and thrilling than the actual historical facts?

But what a glorious brotherhood the novels are! Think of the pure romance of "The Talisman"; the exquisite picture of Hebridean life in "The Pirate"; the splendid reproduction of

Elizabethan England in "Kenilworth"; the rich humour of the "Legend of Montrose"; above all, bear in mind that in all that splendid series, written in a coarse age, there is not one word to offend the most sensitive car, and it is borne in upon one how great and noble a man was Walter Scott, and how high the service which he did for literature and for humanity.

For that reason his life is good reading, and there it is on the same shelf as the novels. Lockhart was, of course, his son-in-law and his admiring friend. The ideal biographer should be a perfectly impartial man, with a sympathetic mind, but a stern determination to tell the absolute truth. One would like the frail, human side of a man as well as the other. I cannot believe that anyone in the world was ever quite so good as the subject of most of our biographies. Surely these worthy people swore a little sometimes, or had a keen eye for a pretty face, or opened the second bottle when they would have done better to stop at the first, or did something to make us feel that they were men and brothers. They need not go the length of the lady who began a biography of her deceased husband with the words – "D – was a dirty man," but the books certainly would be more readable, and the subjects more lovable too, if we had greater light and shade in the picture.

But I am sure that the more one knew of Scott the more one would have admired him. He lived in a drinking age, and in a drinking country, and I have not a doubt that he took an allowance of toddy occasionally of an evening which would have

laid his feeble successors under the table. His last years, at least, poor fellow, were abstemious enough, when he sipped his barley-water, while the others passed the decanter. But what a high-souled chivalrous gentleman he was, with how fine a sense of honour, translating itself not into empty phrases, but into years of labour and denial! You remember how he became sleeping partner in a printing house, and so involved himself in its failure. There was a legal, but very little moral, claim against him, and no one could have blamed him had he cleared the account by a bankruptcy, which would have enabled him to become a rich man again within a few years. Yet he took the whole burden upon himself and bore it for the rest of his life, spending his work, his time, and his health in the one long effort to save his honour from the shadow of a stain. It was nearly a hundred thousand pounds, I think, which he passed on to the creditors – a great record, a hundred thousand pounds, with his life thrown in.

And what a power of work he had! It was superhuman. Only the man who has tried to write fiction himself knows what it means when it is recorded that Scott produced two of his long novels in one single year. I remember reading in some book of reminiscences – on second thoughts it was in Lockhart himself – how the writer had lodged in some rooms in Castle Street, Edinburgh, and how he had seen all evening the silhouette of a man outlined on the blind of the opposite house. All evening the man wrote, and the observer could see the shadow hand conveying the sheets of paper from the desk to the pile at the side.

He went to a party and returned, but still the hand was moving the sheets. Next morning he was told that the rooms opposite were occupied by Walter Scott.

A curious glimpse into the psychology of the writer of fiction is shown by the fact that he wrote two of his books – good ones, too – at a time when his health was such that he could not afterwards remember one word of them, and listened to them when they were read to him as if he were hearing the work of another man. Apparently the simplest processes of the brain, such as ordinary memory, were in complete abeyance, and yet the very highest and most complex faculty – imagination in its supreme form – was absolutely unimpaired. It is an extraordinary fact, and one to be pondered over. It gives some support to the feeling which every writer of imaginative work must have, that his supreme work comes to him in some strange way from without, and that he is only the medium for placing it upon the paper. The creative thought – the germ thought from which a larger growth is to come, flies through his brain like a bullet. He is surprised at his own idea, with no conscious sense of having originated it. And here we have a man, with all other brain functions paralyzed, producing this magnificent work. Is it possible that we are indeed but conduit pipes from the infinite reservoir of the unknown? Certainly it is always our best work which leaves the least sense of personal effort.

And to pursue this line of thought, is it possible that frail physical powers and an unstable nervous system, by keeping a

man's materialism at its lowest, render him a more fitting agent for these spiritual uses? It is an old tag.

"Great Genius is to madness close allied, And thin partitions do those rooms divide."

But, apart from genius, even a moderate faculty for imaginative work seems to me to weaken seriously the ties between the soul and the body.

Look at the British poets of a century ago: Chatterton, Burns, Shelley, Keats, Byron. Burns was the oldest of that brilliant band, yet Burns was only thirty-eight when he passed away, "burned out," as his brother terribly expressed it. Shelley, it is true, died by accident, and Chatterton by poison, but suicide is in itself a sign of a morbid state. It is true that Rogers lived to be almost a centenarian, but he was banker first and poet afterwards. Wordsworth, Tennyson, and Browning have all raised the average age of the poets, but for some reason the novelists, especially of late years, have a deplorable record. They will end by being scheduled with the white-lead workers and other dangerous trades. Look at the really shocking case of the young Americans, for example. What a band of promising young writers have in a few years been swept away! There was the author of that admirable book, "David Harum"; there was Frank Norris, a man who had in him, I think, the seeds of greatness more than almost any living writer. His "Pit" seemed to me one of the finest American novels. He also died a premature death. Then there was Stephen Crane – a man who had also

done most brilliant work, and there was Harold Frederic, another master-craftsman. Is there any profession in the world which in proportion to its numbers could show such losses as that? In the meantime, out of our own men Robert Louis Stevenson is gone, and Henry Seton Merriman, and many another.

Even those great men who are usually spoken of as if they had rounded off their career were really premature in their end. Thackeray, for example, in spite of his snowy head, was only 52; Dickens attained the age of 58; on the whole, Sir Walter, with his 61 years of life, although he never wrote a novel until he was over 40, had, fortunately for the world, a longer working career than most of his brethren.

He employed his creative faculty for about twenty years, which is as much, I suppose, as Shakespeare did. The bard of Avon is another example of the limited tenure which Genius has of life, though I believe that he outlived the greater part of his own family, who were not a healthy stock. He died, I should judge, of some nervous disease; that is shown by the progressive degeneration of his signature. Probably it was locomotor ataxy, which is the special scourge of the imaginative man. Heine, Daudet, and how many more, were its victims. As to the tradition, first mentioned long after his death, that he died of a fever contracted from a drinking bout, it is absurd on the face of it, since no such fever is known to science. But a very moderate drinking bout would be extremely likely to bring a chronic nervous complaint to a disastrous end.

One other remark upon Scott before I pass on from that line of green volumes which has made me so digressive and so garrulous. No account of his character is complete which does not deal with the strange, secretive vein which ran through his nature. Not only did he stretch the truth on many occasions in order to conceal the fact that he was the author of the famous novels, but even intimate friends who met him day by day were not aware that he was the man about whom the whole of Europe was talking. Even his wife was ignorant of his pecuniary liabilities until the crash of the Ballantyne firm told her for the first time that they were sharers in the ruin. A psychologist might trace this strange twist of his mind in the numerous elfish Fenella-like characters who flit about and keep their irritating secret through the long chapters of so many of his novels.

It's a sad book, Lockhart's "Life." It leaves gloom in the mind. The sight of this weary giant, staggering along, burdened with debt, overladen with work, his wife dead, his nerves broken, and nothing intact but his honour, is one of the most moving in the history of literature. But they pass, these clouds, and all that is left is the memory of the supremely noble man, who would not be bent, but faced Fate to the last, and died in his tracks without a whimper. He sampled every human emotion. Great was his joy and great his success, great was his downfall and bitter his grief. But of all the sons of men I don't think there are many greater than he who lies under the great slab at Dryburgh.

III

We can pass the long green ranks of the Waverley Novels and Lockhart's "Life" which flanks them. Here is heavier metal in the four big grey volumes beyond. They are an old-fashioned large-print edition of Boswell's "Life of Johnson." I emphasize the large print, for that is the weak point of most of the cheap editions of English Classics which come now into the market. With subjects which are in the least archaic or abstruse you need good clear type to help you on your way. The other is good neither for your eyes nor for your temper. Better pay a little more and have a book that is made for use.

That book interests me – fascinates me – and yet I wish I could join heartily in that chorus of praise which the kind-hearted old bully has enjoyed. It is difficult to follow his own advice and to "clear one's mind of cant" upon the subject, for when you have been accustomed to look at him through the sympathetic glasses of Macaulay or of Boswell, it is hard to take them off, to rub one's eyes, and to have a good honest stare on one's own account at the man's actual words, deeds, and limitations. If you try it you are left with the oddest mixture of impressions. How could one express it save that this is John Bull taken to literature – the exaggerated John Bull of the caricaturists – with every quality, good or evil, at its highest? Here are the rough crust over a kindly heart, the explosive temper, the arrogance, the insular

narrowness, the want of sympathy and insight, the rudeness of perception, the positiveness, the overbearing bluster, the strong deep-seated religious principle, and every other characteristic of the cruder, rougher John Bull who was the great grandfather of the present good-natured Johnnie.

If Boswell had not lived I wonder how much we should hear now of his huge friend? With Scotch persistence he has succeeded in inoculating the whole world with his hero worship. It was most natural that he should himself admire him. The relations between the two men were delightful and reflect all credit upon each. But they are not a safe basis from which any third person could argue. When they met, Boswell was in his twenty-third and Johnson in his fifty-fourth year. The one was a keen young Scot with a mind which was reverent and impressionable. The other was a figure from a past generation with his fame already made. From the moment of meeting the one was bound to exercise an absolute ascendency over the other which made unbiassed criticism far more difficult than it would be between ordinary father and son. Up to the end this was the unbroken relation between them.

It is all very well to pooh-pooh Boswell as Macaulay has done, but it is not by chance that a man writes the best biography in the language. He had some great and rare literary qualities. One was a clear and vivid style, more flexible and Saxon than that of his great model. Another was a remarkable discretion which hardly once permitted a fault of taste in this whole enormous

book where he must have had to pick his steps with pitfalls on every side of him. They say that he was a fool and a coxcomb in private life. He is never so with a pen in his hand. Of all his numerous arguments with Johnson, where he ventured some little squeak of remonstrance, before the roaring "No, sir!" came to silence him, there are few in which his views were not, as experience proved, the wiser. On the question of slavery he was in the wrong. But I could quote from memory at least a dozen cases, including such vital subjects as the American Revolution, the Hanoverian Dynasty, Religious Toleration, and so on, where Boswell's views were those which survived.

But where he excels as a biographer is in telling you just those little things that you want to know. How often you read the life of a man and are left without the remotest idea of his personality. It is not so here. The man lives again. There is a short description of Johnson's person – it is not in the Life, but in the Tour to the Hebrides, the very next book upon the shelf, which is typical of his vivid portraiture. May I take it down, and read you a paragraph of it? –

"His person was large, robust, I may say approaching to the gigantic, and grown unwieldy from corpulency. His countenance was naturally of the cast of an ancient statue, but somewhat disfigured by the scars of King's evil. He was now in his sixty-fourth year and was become a little dull of hearing. His sight had always been somewhat weak, yet so much does mind govern and even supply the deficiencies of organs that his perceptions were

uncommonly quick and accurate. His head, and sometimes also his body, shook with a kind of motion like the effect of palsy. He appeared to be frequently disturbed by cramps or convulsive contractions of the nature of that distemper called St. Vitus' dance. He wore a full suit of plain brown clothes, with twisted hair buttons of the same colour, a large bushy greyish wig, a plain shirt, black worsted stockings and silver buckles. Upon this tour when journeying he wore boots and a very wide brown cloth great-coat with pockets which might almost have held the two volumes of his folio dictionary, and he carried in his hand a large English oak stick."

You must admit that if one cannot reconstruct the great Samuel after that it is not Mr. Boswell's fault – and it is but one of a dozen equally vivid glimpses which he gives us of his hero. It is just these pen-pictures of his of the big, uncouth man, with his grunts and his groans, his Gargantuan appetite, his twenty cups of tea, and his tricks with the orange-peel and the lamp-posts, which fascinate the reader, and have given Johnson a far broader literary vogue than his writings could have done.

For, after all, which of those writings can be said to have any life to-day? Not "Rasselas," surely – that stilted romance. "The Lives of the Poets" are but a succession of prefaces, and the "Ramblers" of ephemeral essays. There is the monstrous drudgery of the Dictionary, a huge piece of spadework, a monument to industry, but inconceivable to genius. "London" has a few vigorous lines, and the "Journey to the Hebrides"

some spirited pages. This, with a number of political and other pamphlets, was the main output of his lifetime. Surely it must be admitted that it is not enough to justify his predominant place in English literature, and that we must turn to his humble, much-ridiculed biographer for the real explanation.

And then there was his talk. What was it which gave it such distinction? His clear-cut positiveness upon every subject. But this is a sign of a narrow finality – impossible to the man of sympathy and of imagination, who sees the other side of every question and understands what a little island the greatest human knowledge must be in the ocean of infinite possibilities which surround us. Look at the results. Did ever any single man, the very dullest of the race, stand convicted of so many incredible blunders? It recalls the remark of Bagehot, that if at any time the views of the most learned could be stamped upon the whole human race the result would be to propagate the most absurd errors. He was asked what became of swallows in the winter. Rolling and wheezing, the oracle answered: "Swallows," said he, "certainly sleep all the winter. A number of them conglobulate together by flying round and round, and then all in a heap throw themselves under water and lie in the bed of a river." Boswell gravely dockets the information. However, if I remember right, even so sound a naturalist as White of Selborne had his doubts about the swallows. More wonderful are Johnson's misjudgments of his fellow-authors. There, if anywhere, one would have expected to find a sense of proportion. Yet his conclusions

would seem monstrous to a modern taste. "Shakespeare," he said, "never wrote six consecutive good lines." He would only admit two good verses in Gray's exquisite "Elegy written in a Country Churchyard," where it would take a very acid critic to find two bad ones. "Tristram Shandy" would not live. "Hamlet" was gabble. Swift's "Gulliver's Travels" was poor stuff, and he never wrote anything good except "A Tale of a Tub." Voltaire was illiterate. Rousseau was a scoundrel. Deists, like Hume, Priestley, or Gibbon, could not be honest men.

And his political opinions! They sound now like a caricature. I suppose even in those days they were reactionary. "A poor man has no honour." "Charles the Second was a good King." "Governments should turn out of the Civil Service all who were on the other side." "Judges in India should be encouraged to trade." "No country is the richer on account of trade." (I wonder if Adam Smith was in the company when this proposition was laid down!) "A landed proprietor should turn out those tenants who did not vote as he wished." "It is not good for a labourer to have his wages raised." "When the balance of trade is against a country, the margin must be paid in current coin." Those were a few of his convictions.

And then his prejudices! Most of us have some unreasoning aversion. In our more generous moments we are not proud of it. But consider those of Johnson! When they were all eliminated there was not so very much left. He hated Whigs. He disliked Scotsmen. He detested Nonconformists (a young lady who

joined them was "an odious wench"). He loathed Americans. So he walked his narrow line, belching fire and fury at everything to the right or the left of it. Macaulay's posthumous admiration is all very well, but had they met in life Macaulay would have contrived to unite under one hat nearly everything that Johnson abominated.

It cannot be said that these prejudices were founded on any strong principle, or that they could not be altered where his own personal interests demanded it. This is one of the weak points of his record. In his dictionary he abused pensions and pensioners as a means by which the State imposed slavery upon hirelings. When he wrote the unfortunate definition a pension must have seemed a most improbable contingency, but when George III., either through policy or charity, offered him one a little later, he made no hesitation in accepting it. One would have liked to feel that the violent expression of his convictions represented a real intensity of feeling, but the facts in this instance seem against it.

He was a great talker – but his talk was more properly a monologue. It was a discursive essay, with perhaps a few marginal notes from his subdued audience. How could one talk on equal terms with a man who could not brook contradiction or even argument upon the most vital questions in life? Would Goldsmith defend his literary views, or Burke his Whiggism, or Gibbon his Deism? There was no common ground of philosophic toleration on which one could stand. If he could not argue he would be rude, or, as Goldsmith put it: "If his pistol missed fire,

he would knock you down with the butt end." In the face of that "rhinoceros laugh" there was an end of gentle argument. Napoleon said that all the other kings would say "Ouf!" when they heard he was dead, and so I cannot help thinking that the older men of Johnson's circle must have given a sigh of relief when at last they could speak freely on that which was near their hearts, without the danger of a scene where "Why, no, sir!" was very likely to ripen into "Let us have no more on't!" Certainly one would like to get behind Boswell's account, and to hear a chat between such men as Burke and Reynolds, as to the difference in the freedom and atmosphere of the Club on an evening when the formidable Doctor was not there, as compared to one when he was.

No smallest estimate of his character is fair which does not make due allowance for the terrible experiences of his youth and early middle age. His spirit was as scarred as his face. He was fifty-three when the pension was given him, and up to then his existence had been spent in one constant struggle for the first necessities of life, for the daily meal and the nightly bed. He had seen his comrades of letters die of actual privation. From childhood he had known no happiness. The half blind gawky youth, with dirty linen and twitching limbs, had always, whether in the streets of Lichfield, the quadrangle of Pembroke, or the coffee-houses of London, been an object of mingled pity and amusement. With a proud and sensitive soul, every day of his life must have brought some bitter humiliation. Such an experience

must either break a man's spirit or embitter it, and here, no doubt, was the secret of that roughness, that carelessness for the sensibilities of others, which caused Boswell's father to christen him "Ursa Major." If his nature was in any way warped, it must be admitted that terrific forces had gone to the rending of it. His good was innate, his evil the result of a dreadful experience.

And he had some great qualities. Memory was the chief of them. He had read omnivorously, and all that he had read he remembered, not merely in the vague, general way in which we remember what we read, but with every particular of place and date. If it were poetry, he could quote it by the page, Latin or English. Such a memory has its enormous advantage, but it carries with it its corresponding defect. With the mind so crammed with other people's goods, how can you have room for any fresh manufactures of your own? A great memory is, I think, often fatal to originality, in spite of Scott and some other exceptions. The slate must be clear before you put your own writing upon it. When did Johnson ever discover an original thought, when did he ever reach forward into the future, or throw any fresh light upon those enigmas with which mankind is faced? Overloaded with the past, he had space for nothing else. Modern developments of every sort cast no first herald rays upon his mind. He journeyed in France a few years before the greatest cataclysm that the world has ever known, and his mind, arrested by much that was trivial, never once responded to the storm-signals which must surely have been visible around him. We read

that an amiable Monsieur Sansterre showed him over his brewery and supplied him with statistics as to his output of beer. It was the same foul-mouthed Sansterre who struck up the drums to drown Louis' voice at the scaffold. The association shows how near the unconscious sage was to the edge of that precipice and how little his learning availed him in discerning it.

He would have been a great lawyer or divine. Nothing, one would think, could have kept him from Canterbury or from the Woolsack. In either case his memory, his learning, his dignity, and his inherent sense of piety and justice, would have sent him straight to the top. His brain, working within its own limitations, was remarkable. There is no more wonderful proof of this than his opinions on questions of Scotch law, as given to Boswell and as used by the latter before the Scotch judges. That an outsider with no special training should at short notice write such weighty opinions, crammed with argument and reason, is, I think, as remarkable a tour de force as literature can show.

Above all, he really was a very kind-hearted man, and that must count for much. His was a large charity, and it came from a small purse. The rooms of his house became a sort of harbour of refuge in which several strange battered hulks found their last moorings. There were the blind Mr. Levett, and the acidulous Mrs. Williams, and the colourless Mrs. De Moulins, all old and ailing – a trying group amid which to spend one's days. His guinea was always ready for the poor acquaintance, and no poet was so humble that he might not preface his book with a dedication

whose ponderous and sonorous sentences bore the hall-mark of their maker. It is the rough, kindly man, the man who bore the poor street-walker home upon his shoulders, who makes one forget, or at least forgive, the dogmatic pedantic Doctor of the Club.

There is always to me something of interest in the view which a great man takes of old age and death. It is the practical test of how far the philosophy of his life has been a sound one. Hume saw death afar, and met it with unostentatious calm. Johnson's mind flinched from that dread opponent. His letters and his talk during his latter years are one long cry of fear. It was not cowardice, for physically he was one of the most stout-hearted men that ever lived. There were no limits to his courage. It was spiritual diffidence, coupled with an actual belief in the possibilities of the other world, which a more humane and liberal theology has done something to soften. How strange to see him cling so desperately to that crazy body, with its gout, its asthma, its St. Vitus' dance, and its six gallons of dropsy! What could be the attraction of an existence where eight hours of every day were spent groaning in a chair, and sixteen wheezing in a bed? "I would give one of these legs," said he, "for another year of life." None the less, when the hour did at last strike, no man could have borne himself with more simple dignity and courage. Say what you will of him, and resent him how you may, you can never open those four grey volumes without getting some mental stimulus, some desire for wider reading, some insight into human learning

or character, which should leave you a better and a wiser man.

IV

Next to my Johnsoniana are my Gibbons – two editions, if you please, for my old complete one being somewhat crabbed in the print I could not resist getting a set of Bury's new six-volume presentment of the History. In reading that book you don't want to be handicapped in any way. You want fair type, clear paper, and a light volume. You are not to read it lightly, but with some earnestness of purpose and keenness for knowledge, with a classical atlas at your elbow and a note-book hard by, taking easy stages and harking back every now and then to keep your grip of the past and to link it up with what follows. There are no thrills in it. You won't be kept out of your bed at night, nor will you forget your appointments during the day, but you will feel a certain sedate pleasure in the doing of it, and when it is done you will have gained something which you can never lose – something solid, something definite, something that will make you broader and deeper than before.

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