

"THE LIBERRY"

BY

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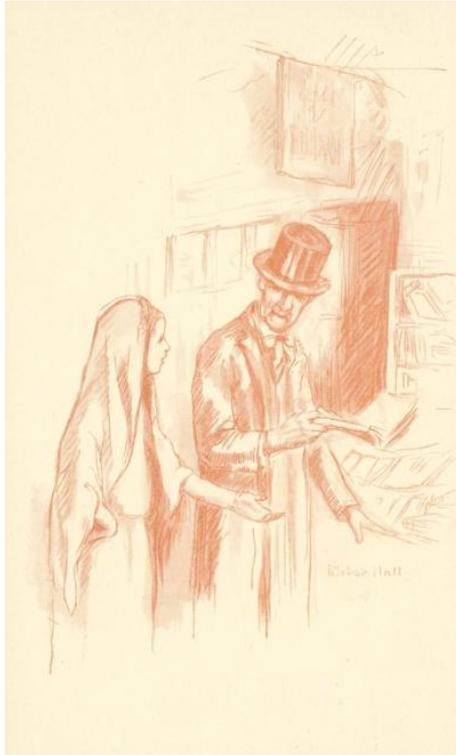
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The Liberry

"THE LIBERRY"

I

I first met Mr. Baxter at the fourpenny box outside Mr. Timpenny's second-hand bookshop in High Street, and was attracted at once by the loving care with which he handled its contents. Dirty and dog's-eared as most of them were, he never snatched one up or threw it down, after the common fashion of patrons of inexpensive literature, but would gently extract a more than usually disreputable volume from its heap, blow the dust off, straighten the warped cover, and smooth out the wrinkled pages before dipping into the subject-matter. In fact, the last operation struck me as interesting him least of all.

Becoming aware of my presence, he moved aside with a courtly little bow. He was a dusty old gentleman, in a very shabby frock-coat. He looked as if he lived in the fourpenny box himself.

"Am I preventing you from selecting a volume, sir?" he inquired.

I hastened to reassure him. I had no special designs on the fourpenny box, or indeed on any. I was merely idling.

"I am waiting for the druggist to make up a prescription," I said.

"Then you don't do your own dispensing, sir?"

"As a rule, yes. I have run out of this particular drug, though. But you know me?"

"Yes, sir; by sight. We do not take long in Broxborough to get to know every one by sight. You succeeded to Dr. Wiseman's practice, I think?"

"Yes."

"A good old man, sir, and a lover of books, like myself."

"You're right about yourself," I said. "You handle a book as I would a delicate patient."

"A very apt comparison, sir. To me, in a manner of speaking, a book is a human thing. A dilapidated book is a patient; I like to repair its broken back and gum in its loose pages. In fact, the late Archdeacon used to rally me upon the subject, sir. He insisted that I cared more for a book, as a book, than for what was inside it."

I ventured, with immediate success, to draw him out upon the subject of the late Archdeacon.

"Archdeacon Belford, sir. He died many years ago, and few remember him now. A great scholar and gentleman. I was associated with him almost continuously in my younger days. It was he who assisted me to found my library."

"Your library?"

"Yes, sir." The old gentleman's mild blue eyes suddenly glowed with pride. "Nothing very pretentious, of course; but I take my little pleasure in it. And it grows—it grows." He picked a small tattered volume out of the box—it looked like an ancient school prize—and turned down a few dog's-ears with a distressed expression.

"A sweet little edition," he said, examining the text, "but small print. I have left my glasses at home. Would you very kindly indicate to me the nature of its contents, sir?"

I read a few lines aloud to him—poetry.

"I don't know it," I confessed. "Poetry is not much in my line. Let me look at the title-page. Ah—Robert Southey."

"I rather thought it was Southey," said Mr. Baxter immediately.

"I fancy you are more widely read than I am," I remarked.

"I make a point of reading aloud a passage out of one of my books every day, sir. I acquired the habit under the late Archdeacon. We read together constantly. He had very definite views on the value of reading. 'A man with books about him,' he used to say, 'is a man surrounded by friends far more interesting and distinguished than any he is likely to meet when he dines with the Bishop. A man with a library of his own, however small, is at once a capitalist who can never go bankrupt and an aristocrat who moves in circles to which the common herd cannot penetrate. In other words, a man with a library is a man respected!' That was why I founded my own, sir. The Archdeacon himself contributed the first few volumes."

"Is it a large library?" I asked, glancing furtively at my wrist-watch.

"No, sir; of very modest dimensions. But it is sufficiently large to be utilized by nearly all my friends."

"You lend them books, then?"

"Oh, no, sir. I would not do that. My books are everything to me—and you know what book-borrowers are! My friends are welcome to tap my literary resources, but it must be through me as medium."

"I don't quite understand," I said, noting out of the corner of my eye that Mr. Pettigrew, the druggist next door, had emerged from behind the carved wooden screen which masks the mysteries of his dispensing department from the layman's eye, and was now visible through the shop window, busy with white paper and sealing-wax.

"When a seeker after knowledge calls upon me," explained the indefatigable Mr. Baxter, "I select from my library the appropriate volume and read, or recite, to him such passages as appear to me most applicable to his case. In this way I ensure the safety and cleanliness of my literary property—

"So here you are! I thought so. Have you been buying another of those dirty things?"

A small, alert, slightly shrewish girl of about fifteen had suddenly appeared from nowhere, and was now transfixing my flinching companion with the eye of the Ancient Mariner.

"Only fourpence, my dear," replied Mr. Baxter deferentially.

"That's right. Throw money about!" said the young lady. "Have you got fourpence?" she added, with a slight softening of manner.

"Well, to be exact, I rather think all I have at the moment is threepence."

The Ancient Mariner produced a penny.

"Here you are," she said, handing him the coin with a not altogether successful attempt at an indulgent smile. "You haven't bought anything for a fortnight. Go in and pay for it, and then come home to dinner, do!"

"Good-morning, Mr. Baxter! How's the library this morning?"

The druggist was standing in his doorway, with a facetious twinkle in his eye. Evidently Mr. Baxter's library was an accepted target for local humour.

Mr. Baxter took no notice, but disappeared into the bookshop. Mr. Pettigrew handed me my bottle.

"One of our characters, that old fellow," he said, with that little air of civic pride which marks the country-townsman booming local stock. "Quite a poor man, but possesses an extensive library—*quite* extensive. His learning is at the service of his fellow-citizens. He likes to be called The Oracle. Supposing you want to know something about Shakespeare, or Julius Cæsar, or Wireless Telegraphy, or Patagonia, you go to Baxter. You press the button and he does the rest! Lives a bit in the clouds, of course; and I wouldn't go so far as to say that his information is always infallible. In fact"—Mr. Pettigrew tapped his forehead significantly—"his upper storey—"

"Who made up a wrong prescription, and poisoned a baby?" demanded an acid voice immediately under the humourist's elbow. He swung round. The small girl, crimson with wrath, but with her emotions well under control, stood gazing dispassionately before her, apparently talking to herself.

"Whose wife gave a party," she continued—"and nobody came? Whose daughter wants to marry the curate—and he won't? Who—"

"That'll do," announced Mr. Pettigrew, shortly, and retired in disorder into his shop. Simultaneously The Oracle emerged from the bookshop with Robert Southey under his arm, and with a stately inclination in my direction departed down the street, under the grim and defiant escort of his infant guardian.

II

One morning about three months later, my butler, footman, valet-de-chambre, chauffeur, and general supervisor, McAndrew, thrust his head round the dining-room door as I sat at breakfast and announced:

"There's a wee body in the hall."

I have known McAndrew for seven years now, and I understand his vernacular. We met in that great rendezvous of all time, the Western Front, on a day when I took command of a Field Ambulance in which McAndrew was functioning as a stretcher-bearer. When our unit was demobilized in Nineteen Nineteen, McAndrew came before me and announced that he had relinquished all intention of resuming his former profession of "jiner" in his native Dumbarton, and desired henceforth to serve me in the capacity mentioned above for the joint term of our natural lives. I took him on, and he does very well. He has his own ideas about how to wait at table, and his methods with unauthenticated callers are apt to be arbitrary; but he is clean and honest, and—well, he wears a vertical gold stripe on his left sleeve and three ribbons just above his watch-pocket. That is enough for me.

As I say, his vernacular now contains no mysteries for me. So when he made the alarming announcement just mentioned I realized at once that no case of infant mortality had occurred on my premises, but that a person of small stature desired an interview.

"Man or woman?" I asked.

"A lassie."

"A patient?"

"I couldna say: she wouldna tell me," replied McAndrew, not without bitterness.

"Bring her in," I said. Forthwith the Ancient Mariner was ushered into my presence.

"Grampa's in bed with one of his legs again," she announced.

I forbore to ask an obvious and fatuous question, and nodded.

"Dr. Wiseman used to attend him," continued my visitor; "but he didn't charge him very much—next to nothink, almost," she added, with a shade of anxiety.

"Is your grandfather insured, or on any club?" I asked. "If so, the panel doctor—"

"No, he isn't insured, or anything. He's a gentleman. He has a liberry."

Toujours the Liberry! "Where does he live?" I inquired.

"Twenty-One, The Common. When can you come?"

"Eleven o'clock."

"All right. Don't be earlier than that: I have the room to straighten."

The Home of The Oracle proved to be one of a row—something between a villa and a cottage. The door was opened by my sharp-featured little friend.

"Walk in," she said—"and wipe your boots."

Mr. Baxter was in bed in the front parlour. As I had suspected, he had both legs with him—but one of these was inflamed and swollen.

"I always bring him in here when he's poorly," explained the granddaughter (whose name I discovered later to be Ada Weeks), "because he likes to be with his old books." She favoured her patient with an affectionate glare. "He's half silly about them."

I attended to the invalid's immediate wants, and then overhauled him generally. He was not what an insurance agent would have termed "a good life." After that, I was introduced to the library, which occupied the wall opposite to the bed. It consisted of a couple of mahogany bookcases, of solid Victorian workmanship, with locked glass doors lined with faded green silk. Ada Weeks produced a key from under her grandfather's pillow and unlocked one of the doors, revealing the books. They were all neatly covered in brown paper. There were no titles on the backs, but each book bore a number, in sprawling, irregular figures.

"There, sir!" announced my patient, with simple pride. "There you behold the accumulated wealth of a man who is just as wealthy as he wishes to be!"

"Rats!" remarked a sharp voice from the recesses of the library; but the old gentleman appeared not to hear.

"It dates from the lamented death of the late Archdeacon. There are a hundred and seventy-nine volumes in all. The little Southey is the last arrival. Show it to us, Ada."

Miss Weeks extracted Volume One Hundred and Seventy-Nine from the lowest shelf, and handed it to the old man. He turned over the pages lovingly.

"Here is the passage which made us acquainted, sir," he said. "A delightful thing." He produced spectacles from somewhere in the bed, adjusted them, and read:

*"My days among the Dead are passed:
Around me I behold
(Where'er these casual eyes are cast)
The mighty minds of old:
My never-failing friends are they,
With whom—With whom—"*

He faltered.

"*With whom I converse day by day,*" said Ada Weeks in a matter-of-fact voice. "Don't strain your eyes."

"You are right, my dear," admitted Mr. Baxter, laying down the book. "The type is somewhat small. But this little poem is strangely suggestive of my own condition. It is called 'The Scholar'—just about an old man living in the past among his books. I have read it to myself many a time since last I saw you, sir. Put it back, Ada; and show the Doctor an older friend. Something out of the late Archdeacon's library—say Number Fourteen."

Miss Ada pulled down the volume indicated, blew viciously upon the top edges, and handed it to me. It proved to be part of an almost obsolete Encyclopædia.

"A useful little compendium of knowledge," was Mr. Baxter's comment. "Unfortunately, I have not the set complete—only eight

volumes. They go as far as *Pocahontas*. There are four more, really."

"*Prairie Oyster to Zymotic*," confirmed the ever-ready Miss Weeks.

"Precisely. You would be surprised at the number of my callers who desire information on matters that come between *Prairie Oyster* and *Zymotic*!" The old gentleman sighed. "But where their requirements are limited to the earlier letters of the alphabet, I can usually find a passage which both interests and enlightens them." He glanced at the number on the back of the book. "This is the first volume of the set—*A—Byzantium*. Many a hungry soul have I fed from it." He turned over the pages. "*Addison—Algebra—Archæology—Adenoids*— That reminds me, a neighbour is coming in to consult me about adenoids this afternoon. A mother—a woman in quite humble circumstances. I must look up adenoids."

"Isn't that rather trespassing on my department?" I asked.

"Oh, dear! no, sir. All I shall do will be to find the passage relating to adenoids, and read it aloud to Mrs. Caddick."

"Mrs. Caddick? I am treating a child of hers for adenoids at present."

"Quite so, sir. And Mrs. Caddick naturally wishes to know what they are. I shall read aloud to her the scientific definition of the ailment. It is surprising what a comfort that will be to her. Poor soul, she's almost illiterate; and the printed word is a sacred mystery to such!"

"You are an authority on human nature, Mr. Baxter, I perceive."

"You are kind to say so, sir. But I was a mere disciple of the late Archdeacon. It's a strange thing, human nature," he continued pensively. "I have studied it all my life. My recreation is to help it—and it needs all the help it can get. I am at home every evening, and folk look in quite regularly to ask for my guidance on some literary, historical, or scientific point of interest. 'Consulting The Oracle,' they are kind enough to call it. Such visits enable me to gratify at once my hobby and my vanity!" He smiled.

"You have one or two bulky-looking volumes up there," I said, approaching the bookcase and inspecting the top shelf. "Who is this big fellow—Number Eighty-Seven?"

I half raised my hand; but in a flash Ada Weeks was before me.

"It's Shakespeare," she announced, snatching the volume down and holding it to her flat little bosom. "Presentation!"

"Ada is always a little jealous about letting the presentation volumes out of her hands," explained Mr. Baxter, from the bed. "That book was conferred upon me as a small token of esteem by a certain literary circle in London in which I was interested before I came here, many years ago. Bring it to me, my dear."

Ada Weeks, with a sidelong and defiant glance in my direction, handed the great book to the old man. He opened it at random, and began to read aloud.

"This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in a silver sea,
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this England,—"

He broke off, and smiled.

"You see I do not need glasses," he said, "for such a passage as that! I almost know it by heart, although I never possessed the Archdeacon's astonishing facility in that direction. He was accustomed to commit a passage to memory every day. Put it back, Ada, dear."

Miss Weeks restored the volume to the case, closed the door, turned the key, and faced me with the air of a small but determined hen which has safely shut her chickens into the coop in the very face of an ill-disposed but inexperienced young fox. I took up my hat.

"Good-bye, Mr. Baxter," I said. "I shall come and see you tomorrow. Don't let your disciples overtire you."

The old man flushed. "I thank you for that flattering word, sir," he said.

Halfway down the street I realized that I had forgotten my stethoscope. Accordingly, I retraced my steps.

I found the front door open. I might have walked in without ceremony; but, inspired by a very proper fear of Miss Ada Weeks, I tapped respectfully and waited. There was no response. Presently I became aware of voices proceeding from the front parlour, the door of which stood wide open just inside the passage. This is what I heard.

"*Adenitis*, and *Adenoid Growths*—that's the nearest I can find. Which do you want?"

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