

THROUGH THE MAGIC DOOR

BY 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 might 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 ear, 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 that

"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

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