

The Silent Isle eBook

The Silent Isle by A. C. Benson

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

(c)1998-2002; (c)2002 by Gale. Gale is an imprint of The Gale Group, Inc., a division of Thomson Learning, Inc. Gale and Design and Thomson Learning are trademarks used herein under license.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers". (c)1994-2005, by Walton Beacham.

All other sections in this Literature Study Guide are owned and copyrighted by BookRags, Inc.

Contents

The Silent Isle eBook.....	1
Contents.....	2
Table of Contents.....	10
Page 1.....	12
Page 2.....	13
Page 3.....	15
Page 4.....	16
Page 5.....	17
Page 6.....	18
Page 7.....	19
Page 8.....	20
Page 9.....	21
Page 10.....	22
Page 11.....	23
Page 12.....	24
Page 13.....	25
Page 14.....	26
Page 15.....	27
Page 16.....	28
Page 17.....	29
Page 18.....	30
Page 19.....	31
Page 20.....	33
Page 21.....	34
Page 22.....	35

Page 23.....	36
Page 24.....	37
Page 25.....	38
Page 26.....	39
Page 27.....	40
Page 28.....	41
Page 29.....	42
Page 30.....	43
Page 31.....	44
Page 32.....	45
Page 33.....	46
Page 34.....	47
Page 35.....	48
Page 36.....	49
Page 37.....	51
Page 38.....	52
Page 39.....	54
Page 40.....	55
Page 41.....	56
Page 42.....	57
Page 43.....	58
Page 44.....	59
Page 45.....	60
Page 46.....	61
Page 47.....	62
Page 48.....	63

Page 49.....	64
Page 50.....	65
Page 51.....	67
Page 52.....	68
Page 53.....	69
Page 54.....	70
Page 55.....	71
Page 56.....	72
Page 57.....	73
Page 58.....	75
Page 59.....	76
Page 60.....	77
Page 61.....	78
Page 62.....	79
Page 63.....	80
Page 64.....	81
Page 65.....	82
Page 66.....	83
Page 67.....	84
Page 68.....	85
Page 69.....	86
Page 70.....	87
Page 71.....	88
Page 72.....	89
Page 73.....	90
Page 74.....	91

Page 75.....	92
Page 76.....	94
Page 77.....	95
Page 78.....	96
Page 79.....	97
Page 80.....	98
Page 81.....	99
Page 82.....	100
Page 83.....	101
Page 84.....	102
Page 85.....	103
Page 86.....	104
Page 87.....	105
Page 88.....	106
Page 89.....	107
Page 90.....	108
Page 91.....	109
Page 92.....	110
Page 93.....	111
Page 94.....	112
Page 95.....	113
Page 96.....	114
Page 97.....	115
Page 98.....	116
Page 99.....	117
Page 100.....	118

Page 101.....	119
Page 102.....	120
Page 103.....	121
Page 104.....	122
Page 105.....	123
Page 106.....	124
Page 107.....	125
Page 108.....	126
Page 109.....	127
Page 110.....	128
Page 111.....	129
Page 112.....	130
Page 113.....	131
Page 114.....	132
Page 115.....	133
Page 116.....	135
Page 117.....	136
Page 118.....	137
Page 119.....	139
Page 120.....	140
Page 121.....	141
Page 122.....	142
Page 123.....	143
Page 124.....	144
Page 125.....	145
Page 126.....	146

Page 127.....	147
Page 128.....	148
Page 129.....	149
Page 130.....	150
Page 131.....	151
Page 132.....	152
Page 133.....	153
Page 134.....	154
Page 135.....	155
Page 136.....	156
Page 137.....	157
Page 138.....	158
Page 139.....	159
Page 140.....	160
Page 141.....	162
Page 142.....	163
Page 143.....	164
Page 144.....	165
Page 145.....	166
Page 146.....	167
Page 147.....	168
Page 148.....	169
Page 149.....	170
Page 150.....	171
Page 151.....	172
Page 152.....	173

Page 153.....	174
Page 154.....	175
Page 155.....	176
Page 156.....	177
Page 157.....	178
Page 158.....	179
Page 159.....	180
Page 160.....	181
Page 161.....	182
Page 162.....	183
Page 163.....	184
Page 164.....	185
Page 165.....	187
Page 166.....	188
Page 167.....	189
Page 168.....	191
Page 169.....	192
Page 170.....	193
Page 171.....	194
Page 172.....	195
Page 173.....	196
Page 174.....	197
Page 175.....	199
Page 176.....	200
Page 177.....	201
Page 178.....	202

Page 179.....	203
Page 180.....	204
Page 181.....	205
Page 182.....	206
Page 183.....	207
Page 184.....	208
Page 185.....	209
Page 186.....	210
Page 187.....	211
Page 188.....	212

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Start of eBook	1
INTRODUCTION	1
THE SILENT ISLE	2
I	2
II	10
III	16
IV	19
V	23
VI	28
VII	30
VIII	32
IX	35
X	36
XI	38
XII	41
XIII	43
XIV	47
XV	50
XVI	53
XVII	56
XVIII	58
XIX	61
XX	64
XXI	66
XXII	69
XXIII	73
XXIV	75
XXV	77
XXVI	79
XXVII	83
XXVIII	87
XXIX	92
XXX	94
XXXI	97
XXXII	99
XXXIII	101
XXXIV	104
XXXV	106
XXXVI	108
XXXVIII	115

XXXIX	118
XL	122
XLI	126
XLII	128
XLIII	133
XLIV	137
XLV	140
XLVI	143
XLVII	147
XLVIII	150
XLIX	153
L	157
LI	160
LII	163
LIII	167
LIV	169
LV	172
LVI	174
LVII	177
LVIII	178
EPILOGUE	183
	188

Page 1

INTRODUCTION

There are two ways of recording and communicating to others an impression, say, of a building or a place. One way is to sit down at a definite point, and make an elaborate picture. It is thus perhaps that one grasps the artistic significance and unity of the object best; one sees it in a chosen light of noon or eve; one feels its dominant emotion, its harmony of proportion and outline. Or else one may wander about and take sketches of it from a dozen different points of view, record little delicacies of detail, tiny whims and irregularities; and thus one learns more of the variety and humours of the place, its gestures and irritabilities, its failures of purpose or design. The question is whether you like a thing idealised or realised. As to the different methods of interpretation, they can hardly be compared or subordinated. An artist does not choose his method, because his method is himself.

The book that follows is an attempt, or rather a hundred attempts, to sketch some of the details of life, seen from a simple plane enough, and with no desire to conform it to a theory, or to find anything very definite in it, or to omit anything because it did not fit in with prejudices or predilections. The only unity of mood which it reflects is the unity of purpose which comes from a decision. I had chosen a life which seemed to me then to be wholesome, temperate, and simple, in exchange for a life that was complicated, restless, and mechanical. The choice was not in the least a revolt against conventions; it was only the result of a deliberate belief that conventions were not necessary to contentment, and that if one never ventured anything in general, one would never gain anything in particular. It was not, to speak with absolute frankness, intended to be an attempt to shirk my fair share of the natural human burden. If I had believed in my own power of bearing that burden profitably and efficiently, I hope I should not have laid it down. It was rather that I thought that I had carried a burden long enough, without having the curiosity to see what it contained. When I did untie it and inspect it, it seemed to me that a great part of what it contained was not particularly useful, but designed, like the furniture of the White Knight's horse, in *Through the Looking Glass*, to provide against unlikely contingencies. I thought that I might live life, of the brevity and frailty of which I had become suddenly aware, upon simpler and more rational lines.

I was then, in embarking upon this book, in what may be described as a holiday-making frame of mind, as a man might be who, after a long period of sedentary life, finds himself at leisure, strolling about on a sunny morning in a picturesque foreign town, in that delicious mood when the smallest sights and sounds and incidents have a sharpness and delicacy of flavour which brings back the untroubled and joyful passivity

Page 2

of childhood, when one had no need to do anything in particular, because it was enough to be. It seemed so futile to go on consuming stolidly and grimly the porridge of life, when one might take one's choice of its dainties! I had no temptation to waste my substance in riotous living. I had no relish for the passionate and feverish delights of combat and chase. It did not seem to be worth while to pretend that I had, merely for the sake of being considered robust and full-blooded. To speak the truth, I did not particularly care what other people thought of my experiment. It seemed to me that I had deferred to all that too long; and though I had no wish to break violently with the world or to set it at defiance, I thought I might venture to find a little corner and a little book, and see the current spin by. It seemed to me, too, that most of the people who waxed eloquent about the normal duties and responsibilities of life chose them not reluctantly and philosophically, but because, on the whole they preferred them, and felt dull without them; and I imagined that I had my right to a preference too, particularly if it was not pursued at the expense of other people.

Whether or not the choice was wise or foolish will be seen, or may be inferred. But I do not abjure the theory. I think and believe that there are a good many people in the world who pursue lives for which they are not fitted, and lose all contentment in the process, simply because they respect conventions too much, and have not the courage to break away from them. Some of the most useful people I know are people who not only think least about being useful, but are ready to condemn themselves for their desultoriness. The people who have time to listen and to talk, to welcome friends and to sympathise with them, to enjoy and to help others to enjoy, seem to me often to do more for the world than the people who hurry from committee to committee, address meetings, and do what is called some of the drudgery of the world, which might in a hundred cases be just as well undone. It is most of it merely a childish game either way; and the child who looks on and applauds is often better employed than the child who makes a long score, and thinks of nothing else for the rest of the afternoon.

And anyhow, this is what I saw and thought and did; not a very magnificent performance, but a little piece of life observed and experienced and written down.

THE SILENT ISLE

I

The Silent Isle, I name it; and yet in no land in which I have ever lived is there so little sight and sound of water as here. It oozes from field to drain, it trickles from drain to ditch, it falls from ditch to dyke, and then moves silently to the great seaward sluice; it is

not a living thing in the landscape, bright and vivacious, but rather something secret and still, drawn almost reluctantly away, rather than

Page 3

hurrying off on business of its own. And yet the whole place gives me the constant sense of being an island, remote and unapproachable; the great black plain, where every step that one takes warns one of its quivering elasticity of soil, runs sharply up to the base of the long, low, green hills, whose rough, dimpled pastures and old elms contrast sharply and pleasantly with the geometrical monotony of the immense flat. The village that I see a mile away, on a further promontory of the old Isle, has the look of a straggling seaport town, dipping down to wharves and quays; and the eye almost expects a fringe of masts and shipping at the base of the steep streets. Then, too, the encircling plain is like water in its tracklessness. There are no short cuts nor footpaths in the fen. You may strike out for the village that on clear days looks so close at hand, and follow a flood-bank for miles without drawing a pace nearer to the goal. Or you may find yourself upon the edge of one of the great lodes or levels, and see the pale-blue stripe of water lie unbridged, like a pointed javelin of steel, to the extreme verge of the horizon. The few roads run straight and strict upon their reed-fringed causeways; and there is an infinite sense of tranquil relief to the eye in the vast green levels, with their faint parallel lines of dyke or drift, just touched into prominence here and there by the clump of poplars surrounding a lonely grange, or the high-shouldered roof of a great pumping-mill. And then, to give largeness to what might else be tame, there is the vast space of sky everywhere, the enormous perspective of rolling cloud-bank and fleecy cumulus: the sky seems higher, deeper, more gigantic, in these great levels than anywhere in the world. The morning comes up more sedately; the orange-skirted twilight is more lingeringly withdrawn. The sun burns lower, down to the very verge of the world, dropping behind no black-stemmed wood or high-standing ridge; and how softly the colour fades westward out of the sky, among the rose-flushed cloud-isles and green spaces of air! And out of all this spacious tracklessness comes a sense of endless remoteness. While the roads converge like the rays of a wheel upon the inland town, each a stream of hurrying life, here the world flows to you more rarely and deliberately. Indeed, there seems no influx of life at all, nothing but a quiet interchange of voyagers. Promotion arrives from no point of the compass; nothing but a little tide of homely life ebbs and flows in these elm-girt villages above the fen. Of course, the anxious and expectant heart carries its own restlessness everywhere; but to read of the rush and stress of life in these grassy solitudes seems like the telling of an idle tale. And then the silence of the place! The sounds of life have a value and a distinctness here that I have never known elsewhere. I have lived much of my life in towns; and there, even if one is not conscious of distinct sound, there is a

Page 4

blurred sense of movement in the air, which dulls the ear. But here the sharp song of the yellow-hammer from the hedge, or the cry of the owl from the spinney, come pure and keen through the thin air, purged of all uncertain murmurs. I can hear, it seems, a mile away, the rumble of the long procession of red mud-stained field-carts, or the humming of the threshing-gear; or the chatter of children on the farm-road beyond my shrubberies breaks clear and jocund on the ear. I become conscious here of how noisily and hurriedly I have lived my life; happily enough, I will confess; but the thought of it all—the class-room, the street, the playing-field—bright and vivacious as it all was, seems now like a boisterous prelude of blaring brass and tingling string, which lapses into some delicate economy of sweet melody and gliding chord. It has its shadows, I do not doubt, this Silent Isle; but to-day at least it is all still and translucent as its clear-moving quiet waters, free as its vaulted sky, rich as its endless plain.

It is not that I mean to be idle here! I have my web to weave; I have my lucid mirror. But instead of scrambling and peeping, I mean to see it all clearly and tranquilly, without dust and noise. I have lived laboriously and hastily for twenty years; and surely there is a time for garnering the harvest and for reckoning up the store? I want to see behind it all, into the meaning of it all, if I can. Surely when we are bidden to consider the lilies of the field, and told that they neither toil nor spin, it is not that we may turn aside from them in scorn, and choose rather to grow rank and strong, bulging like swedes, shoulder by shoulder, in the gross furrow. It is not as though we content ourselves with the necessary work of the world; we multiply vain activities, we turn the songs of poets and the words of the wise into dumb-bells to toughen our intellectual muscles; we make our pastimes into envious rivalries and furious emulations; and when we have poured out our contempt upon a few quiet-minded dreamers for their lack of spirit, scarified a few lovers of leisure for their absence of ability, ploughed up a few pretty wastes where the field-flowers grew as they would, bred up a few hundred gay golden birds, that we may gloat over the thought of striking them blood-bedabbled out of the sky on a winter afternoon, we think complacently of the Kingdom of God, and all we have done so diligently to hasten its coming.

There is a pleasant story of a man who was asked by an ardent missionary for a subscription to some enterprise or other in the ends of the earth. The man produced a shilling and a sovereign. "Here is a shilling for the work," he said, "and here is a sovereign to get it out there!" That seems to me an allegory of much of our Western work. So little of it direct benefit, so much of it indirect transit! When I was a schoolmaster, it always seemed to me that nine-tenths of what we did was looking

Page 5

over work which we had given the boys to do to fill up their time, and to keep them, as we used to say, out of mischief. The worst of bringing up boys on that system is that they require to be kept out of mischief all their life long; and yet the worst kind of mischief, after all, may be to fill life with useless occupations. There are two ways of going out into your garden. You may walk out straight from the bow-window on to the lawn; or you may go out into the street, take the first turn to the right, then the next to the right, and let yourself in at the back-garden door. But there is no merit in that! It is not a thing to be complacent about; still less does it justify you in saying to the simple person who prefers the direct course that the world is getting lazy and decadent and is always trying to save itself trouble. The point is to have lived, not to have been merely occupied. I remember once, when I was an undergraduate, staying at a place in Scotland for a summer holiday. There were all sorts of pleasant things to be done, and we were there to amuse ourselves. One evening it was suggested that we should go out yachting on the following day. I agreed to go, but being a miserable sailor, added that I should only go if it were fine. We were to start early, and when I was called and found it an ugly, gusty morning I went gratefully back to bed, and spent the rest of the day fishing. There was a dreadful, strenuous old Colonel staying in the house; he had been with the yachting party, and they had had a very disagreeable day. That evening in the smoking-room, when we were recounting our adventures, the old wretch said to me: "Now I should like to give you a piece of advice. You said you would go with us, and shirked because you were afraid of a bit of wind. You must excuse an older man who knows something of the world saying straight out that that sort of thing won't do. Make up your mind and stick to it; that's a golden rule." It was in vain that I said that I had never intended to go if it was windy, and that I should have been ill the whole time. "Ah, that's what I call cry-baby talk," said the old ruffian; "I always say that if a thing is worth doing at all, it is worth doing thoroughly." I said meekly that I should certainly have been thoroughly sea-sick, but that I did not think it was worth while being sea-sick at all. At which he felt very much nettled, and said that it was effeminate. I was very much humiliated, but not in the least convinced; and I am afraid that I enjoyed the most unchristian exultation when, two or three days after, the Colonel insisted on walking to the deer-forest, instead of riding the pony that was offered him; in consequence of which he not only lost half the day, but got so dreadfully tired that he missed two stags in succession, and came home empty-handed, full of excellent excuses, and more pragmatical than ever.

Page 6

Of course, a man has to decide for himself. If he does not desire leisure, if he finds it wearisome and mischievous, he had better not cultivate it; if his conscience tells him that he must go on with a particular work, he had better simply obey the command. But it is very easy to educate a false conscience in these matters by mere habit; and if you play tricks with your mind or your conscience habitually, it has an ugly habit of ending by playing tricks upon you, like the Old Man of the Sea. The false conscience is satisfied and the real conscience drugged, if a person with a sense of duty to others fills up his time with unnecessary letters and useless interviews; worse still if he goes about proclaiming with complacent pride that his work gives him no time to read or think. If he has any responsibility in the matter, if it is his business to help or direct others, he ought to be sure that he has something to give them beyond platitudes which he has not tested. In the story of Mary and Martha, which is a very mysterious one, it is quite clear that Martha was rebuked, not for being hospitable, but for being fussy; but it is not at all clear what Mary was praised for—certainly not for being useful. She was not praised for visiting the sick, or for attending committees, but apparently for doing nothing—for sitting still, for listening to talk, and for being interested. Presumably both were sympathetic, and Martha showed it by practical kindness, and attention to the knives and the plates. But what was the one thing needful? What was the good part, which Mary had chosen, and which would not be taken from her? The truth is that there is very little said about active work in the Gospel. It is, indeed, rather made fun of, if one may use such an expression. There is a great deal about simple kindness and neighbourliness, but nothing about making money, or social organisation. In a poor village community the problem was no doubt an easier one; but in our more complicated civilisation it is not so easy to see how to act. Suppose that I am seized with a sudden impulse of benevolence, what am I to do? In the old storybooks one took a portion of one's dinner to a sick person, or went to read aloud to some one. But it is not so easy to find the right people. If I set off here on a round with a slop-basin containing apple fritters, my intrusion would be generally and rightly resented; and as for being read aloud to or visited when I am ill, there is nothing I should personally dislike more than a succession of visitors bent on benevolence. I might put up with it if I felt that it sprung from a genuine affection, but if I felt it was done from a sense of duty, it would be an intolerable addition to my troubles. Many people in grief and trouble only desire not to be interfered with, and to be left alone, and when they want sympathy they know how and where to ask for it. Personally I do not want sympathy at all if I am in trouble, because it only makes me suffer more; the real comfort under such circumstances is when people behave quite naturally, as if there were no troubles in the world; then one has to try to behave decently, and that is one's best chance of forgetting oneself.

Page 7

The only thing, it seems to me, that one may do, is to love people, if one can. It is the mood from which sympathy and help spring that matters, not the spoken word or the material aid. In the worst troubles one cannot help people at all. The knowledge that others love you does not fill the aching gap made by the death of child or lover or friend. And now too, in these democratic days, when compassion and help are more or less organised, when the sense of the community that children should be taught issues in Education Bills, and the feeling that sick people must be tended is expressed by hospitals—when the world has thus been specialised, tangible benevolence is a much more complex affair. It seems clear that it is not really a benevolent thing to give money to anyone who happens to ask for it; and it is equally clear, it seems to me, that not much is done by lecturing people vaguely about their sins and negligences; one must have a very clear sense of one's own victories over evil, and the tactics one has employed, to do that; and if one is conscious, as I am, of not having made a very successful show of resistance to personal faults and failings, the pastoral attitude is not an easy one to adopt. But if one loves people, the problem is not so difficult—or rather it solves itself. One can compare notes, and discuss qualities, and try to see what one admires and thinks beautiful; and the only way, after all, to make other people good, if that is the end in view, is to be good oneself in such a way that other people want to be good too.

The thing which really differentiates people from each other, and which sets a few fine souls ahead of the crowd, is a certain clearness of vision. Most of us take things for granted from the beginning, accept the opinions and conventions of the world, and muddle along, taking things as they come, our only aim being to collect in our own corner as many of the good things of life as we can gather round us. Indeed, it must be confessed that among the commonest motives for showing kindness are the credit that results, and the sense of power and influence that ensues. But that is no good at all to the giver. For the fact is that behind life, as we see it, there lies a very strange and deep mystery, something stronger and larger than we can any of us at all grasp. There are a thousand roads to the city of God, and no two roads are the same, though they all lead to the same place. If we take up the role of being useful, the danger is that we become planted, like a kind of professional guide-post, giving incomplete directions to others, instead of finding the way for ourselves. The mistake lies in thinking that things are unknowable when they are only unknown. Many mists have melted already before the eyes of the pilgrims, and the tracks grow plainer on the hillside; and thus the clearer vision of which I speak is the thing to be desired by all. We must try to see things as they are, not obscured by prejudice or privilege

Page 8

or sentiment or selfishness; and sin does not cloud the vision so much as stupidity and conceit. I have a dream, then, of what I desire and aspire to, though it is hard to put it into words. I want to learn to distinguish between what is important and unimportant, between what is beautiful and ugly, between what is true and false. The pomps and glories of the world are unimportant, I believe, and all the temptations which arise from wanting to do things, as it is called, on a large scale. Money, the love of which as representing liberty is a sore temptation to such as myself, is unimportant. Conventional orthodoxies, whether they be of manners, or of ways of life, or of thought, or of religion, or of education, are unimportant. What then remains? Courage, and patience, and simplicity, and kindness, and beauty, and, last of all, ideas remain; and these are the things to lay hold of and to live with.

And even so one cannot help puzzling and grieving and wondering over all the dreadful waste of time and energy, all the stupidities and misunderstandings, all the unnecessary business and tiresome pleasure, all the spitefulness and malignity, all the sham rules and artificial regulations, all the hard judgments and dismal fears and ugly cruelties of the world, beginning so early and ending so late. An hour ago I met two tiny children, a boy and girl, in the road. The girl was the older and stronger. The little boy, singing to himself, had gathered some leaves from the hedge, and was enjoying his posy harmlessly enough. What must his sister do? She wanted some fun; so she took the posy away, dodged her brother when he tried to catch her, and finally threw it over a paling, and went off rejoicing in her strength, while the little boy sate down and cried. Why should they not have played together in peace? On my table lie letters from two old friends of mine who have had a quarrel over a small piece of business, involving a few pounds. One complains that the other claims the money unjustly; the other resents being accused of meanness; the result, a rupture of familiar relations. One cannot, it seems, prevent sorrows and pains and tragedies; but what is the ironical power which gives us such rich materials for happiness, and then infects us with the devilish power of misusing them, and worrying over them, and hating each other, and despising ourselves? And then the little lives cut relentlessly short, how does that fit in? And even when the life is prolonged, one becomes a puckered, winking, doddering old thing, stiff and brittle, disgraceful and humiliated, and, what is worse than anything, feeling so young and sensible inside the crazy machine. If we knew that it was all going to help us somewhere, sometime, no matter how far off, to be strong and cheerful and brave and kind, how easy to bear it all!

Page 9

But in spite of everything, how one enjoys it all; how interesting and absorbing it all is! Wherever one turns, there are delicious things to see, from the aconite with its yellow head and its green collar in the bare shrubbery, to the streak of sunshine on the plain with the great rays thrust downwards from the hidden sun, making the world an enchanted place. And all the curious, fantastic, charming people that one meets, from the boy sitting on the cart-shaft, with all sorts of old love-histories hinted in his clear skin and large eye, to the wizened labourer in his quaint-cut, frowzy clothes, bill-hook in hand, a symbol of the patient work of the world. So helpless a crowd, so patient in trouble, so bewildered as to the meaning of it all; and zigzagged all across it, in nations, in families, in individuals, the jagged lines of evil, so devastating, so horrible, so irremediable; and even worse than evil—which has at least something lurid and fiery about it—the dark, slimy streaks of meanness and jealousy, of boredom and ugliness, which seem to have no use at all but to make things move heavily and obscurely, when they might run swift and bright.

So here in my isle of silence, between fen and fen, under the spacious sky, I want to try an experiment—to live simply and honestly, without indolence or haste, neither wasting time nor devouring it, not refusing due burdens but not inventing useless ones, not secluding myself in a secret cell of solitude, but not multiplying dull and futile relations. One thing I may say honestly and sincerely, that I do indeed desire to fulfil the Will and purpose of God for me, if I can but discern it; for that there is a great will at work behind it all, I cannot for a moment doubt; nor can I doubt that I do it, with many foolish fears and delays, and shall do it to the end. Why it is that, voyaging thus to the haven beneath the hill, I meet such adverse breezes, such headstrong currents, such wrack of wind and thwarting wave, I know not; nor what that other land will be like, if indeed I sail beyond the sunset; but that a home awaits me and all mankind I believe, of which this quiet house, so pleasantly ordered, among its old trees and dewy pastures, is but a faint sweet symbol. It may be that I shall find the vision I desire; or it may be that I shall but fall bleeding among the thorns of life; who can tell?

As I write, I see the pale spring sunset fade between the tree-stems; the garden glimmers in the dusk; the lights peep out in the hamlet; the birds wing their way home across the calm sky-spaces. Even now, in this moment of ease and security, might be breathed the message I desire, as the earth spins and whirls across the infinite tracts of heaven, from the great tender mind of God. But if not, I am content. For this one thing I hold as certain, and I dare not doubt it—that there is a Truth behind all confusions and errors; a goal beyond all pilgrimages. I shall find it, I shall reach it, in some day of sudden glory, of hope fulfilled and sorrow ended; and no step of the way thither will be wasted, whether trodden in despair and weariness or in elation and delight; till we have learned not to fear, not to judge, not to mistrust, not to despise; till in a moment our eyes will be opened, and we shall know that we have found peace.

Page 10

II

I realised a little while ago that I was getting sadly belated in the matter of novel-reading. I had come to decline on a few old favourites and was breaking no new ground. That is a provincial frame of mind, just as when a man begins to discard dressing for dinner, and can endure nothing but an old coat and slippers. It is easy to think of it as unworldly, peaceable, philosophical; but it is mere laziness. The really unworldly philosopher is the man who is at ease in all costumes and at home in all companies.

I did not take up my novel-reading in a light spirit or for mere diversion. To begin a new novel is for me like staying at a strange house; I am bewildered and discomposed by the new faces, by the hard necessity of making the acquaintance of all the new people, and in determining their merits and their demerits. But I was bent on more serious things still. I knew that it is the writers of romances, and not the historians or the moralists, who are the real critics and the earnest investigators of life and living. There may be at the present day few subtle psychologists or surpassing idealists at work writing novels, and still fewer great artists; but for a man to get out of the way of reading contemporary fiction is not only a disease, it is almost a piece of moral turpitude—or at best a sign of lassitude, stupidity, and Toryism; because it means that one's mind is made up and that one has some dull theory which life and the thoughts of others may confirm if they will, but must not modify: from which deadly kind of incrustation may common-sense and human interest deliver us.

It is a matter of endless debate whether a novel should have an ethical purpose, or whether it should merely be an attempt to present beautifully any portion of truth clearly perceived, faithfully observed, delicately grouped, and artistically isolated. In the latter case, say the realists, whatever the subject, the incident, the details may be, the novel will possess exactly the same purpose that underlies things, no more and no less; and the purpose may be trusted to look after itself.

The other theory is that the novelist should have a definite motive; that he should have a case which he is trying to prove, a warning he wishes to enforce, an end which he desires to realise. The fact that Dickens and Charles Reade had philanthropic motives of social reform, and wished to improve the condition of schools, workhouses, lunatic asylums, and gaols, is held to justify from the moral point of view such novels as *Nicholas Nickleby*, *Oliver Twist*, *Hard Cash*, and *It is Never too Late to Mend*. And from the moral point of view these books are entirely justified, because they did undoubtedly interest a large number of people in such subjects who would not have been interested by sermons or blue-books. These books quickened the emotions of ordinary people on the subject; and public sentiment is of course the pulse of legislation.

Page 11

Whether the philanthropic motive injured the books from the artistic point of view is another question. It undoubtedly injured them exactly in proportion as the philanthropic motive led the writers to distort or to exaggerate the truth. It is perfectly justifiable, artistically, to lay the scene of a novel in a workhouse or a gaol, but if the humanitarian impulse leads to any embroidery of or divergence from the truth, the novel is artistically injured, because the selection and grouping of facts should be guided by artistic and not by philanthropic motives.

Now the one emotion which plays a prominent part in most romances is the passion of love, and it is interesting to observe that even this motive is capable of being treated from the philanthropic as well as from the artistic point of view. In a book which is now perhaps unduly neglected, from the fact that it has a markedly early Victorian flavour, Charles Kingsley's *Yeast*, there is a distinct attempt made to fuse the two motives. The love of Lancelot for Argemone is depicted both in the artistic and in the philanthropic light. The passion of the lover throbs furiously through the odd weltering current of social problems indicated, as a stream in lonely meadows may be seen and heard to pulsate at the beat of some neighbouring mill which it serves to turn. Yet the philanthropic motive is there, in that love is depicted as a redeeming power, a cure for selfishness, a balm for unrest; and the artistic impulse finally triumphs in the death of Argemone unwedded.

In the hands of women-writers, love naturally tends to be depicted from the humanitarian point of view. It is the one matchless gift which the woman has to offer, the supreme opportunity of exercising influence, the main chance of what is clumsily called self-effectuation. The old proverb says that all women are match-makers; and Mr. Bernard Shaw goes further and maintains that they act from a kind of predatory instinct, however much that instinct may be concealed or glorified.

Now there was one great woman-writer, Charlotte Bronte, to whom it was given to treat of love from the artistic side. She has been accused of making her heroines, Jane Eyre, Caroline Helstone, Lucy Snowe, too submissive, too grateful for the gift of a man's love. They forgive deceit, rebuffs, severity, coldness, with a surpassing meekness. But it is here that the artistic quality really emerges; these beautiful, stainless hearts are preoccupied with what they receive rather than with what they give. In that crude, ingenuous book *The Professor*, the hero, who is a good instance of how Charlotte Bronte confused rigidity of nature with manliness, surprised by an outbreak of passionate emotion on the part of his quiet and self-contained wife, and still more surprised by its sudden quiescence, asks her what has become of her emotion and where it is gone. "I do not know where it is gone," says the girl, "but I know that whenever it is wanted it will

Page 12

come back.” That is a noble touch. It may be true that Paul Emmanuel and Robert Moore cling too closely to the idea of rewarding their humble mistresses, after testing them harshly and even brutally, with the gift of their love—though even this humility has a touching quality of beauty; but the supreme lover, Mr. Rochester, who, in spite of his ridiculous affectations, his grotesque *hauteurs*, his impossible theatricality, is a figure of flesh and blood, is absorbed in his passion in a way that shows the fire leaping on the innermost altar. The irresistible appeal of the book to the heart is due to the fact that Jane Eyre never seems conscious of what she is giving, but only of what she is receiving; and it is this that makes her gift so regal, so splendid a thing.

Side by side with this book I would set a recent work, Miss Cholmondeley’s *Prisoners*. Fine and noble as the book is in many ways, it is yet vitiated by the sense of the value of the gift of love from the woman’s point of view. Love is there depicted as the one redeeming and transforming power in the world. But in order to prove the thesis, the two chief characters among the men of the book, Wentworth and Lord Lossiemouth, are not, like Mr. Rochester, strong men disfigured by violent faults, but essentially worthless persons, one the slave of an oldmaidish egotism and the other of a frank animalism. The result in both cases is an *experimentum in corpore vili*. The authoress, instead of presiding over her creations like a little Deity, is a strong partisan; and the purpose seems to be to bring out more clearly the priceless nature of the gift which comes near their hand. No one would dispute the position that love is a purifying and transforming power; but love, conscious of its worth, loses the humility and the unselfishness in which half its power lies. Even Magdalen, the finest character in the book, is not free from a quality of condescension. In the great love-scene where she accepts Lord Lossiemouth, she comforts him by saying, “You have not only come back to me. You have come back to yourself.” That is a false touch, because it has a flavour of superiority about it. It reminds one of the lover in *The Princess* lecturing the hapless Ida from his bed-pulpit, and saying, “Blame not thyself too much,” and “Dearer thou for faults lived over.” One cannot imagine Jane Eyre saying to Mr. Rochester that he had come back to himself through loving her. It just detracts at the supreme moment from the generosity of the scene; it has the accent of the priestess, not of the true lover; and thus at the moment when one longs to be in the very white-heat of emotion, one is subtly aware of an improving hand that casts water upon the flame.

The love that lives in art is the love of Penelope and Antigone, of Cordelia and Desdemona and Imogen, of Enid, of Mrs. Browning, among women; and among men, the love of Dante, of Keats, of the lover of Maud, of Pere Goriot, of Robert Browning.

Page 13

It is the unreasoning, unquestioning love of a man for a woman or a woman for a man, just as they are, for themselves only; "because it was you and me," as Montaigne says. Not a respect for good qualities, a mere admiration for beauty, a perception of strength or delicacy, but a sort of predestined unity of spirit and body, an inner and instinctive congeniality, a sense of supreme need and nearness, which has no consciousness of raising or helping or forgiving about it, but is rather an imperative desire for surrender, for sharing, for serving. Thus, in love, faults and weaknesses are not things to be mended or overlooked, but opportunities of lavish generosity. Sacrifice is not only not a pain, but the deepest and acutest pleasure possible. Love of this kind has nothing of the tolerance of friendship about it, the process of addition and subtraction, the weighing of net results, though that can provide a sensible and happy partnership enough. And thus when an author has grace and power to perceive such a situation, no further motive or purpose is needed; indeed the addition of any such motive merely defames and tarnishes the quality of the divine gift.

It is not to be pretended that all human beings have the gift of loving so. To love perfectly is a matter of genius; it may be worth while to depict other sorts of love, for it has infinite gradations and *nuances*. One of the grievous mistakes that the prophets and prophetesses of love make is that they tend to speak as if only some coldness and hardness of nature, which could be dispensed with at will or by effort, holds men and women back from the innermost relationship. It is the same mistake as that made by many preachers who speak as if the moral sense was equally developed in all, or required only a little effort of the will. But a man or a woman may be quite able to perceive the nobility, the solemn splendour of a perfect love, and yet be incapable of either feeling or inspiring it. The possession of such a gift is a thing to thank God for; the absence of it is not a thing to be shrewishly condemned. The power is not often to be found in combination with high intellectual or artistic gifts. There is a law of compensation in human nature, but there is also a law of limitations; and this it is both foolish and cowardly to ignore.

When one comes to form such a list as I have tried to do of great lovers in literature and life, it is surprising and rather distressing to find, after all, how difficult it is to make such a list at all. It is easier to make a list of women who have loved perfectly than a list of men. Two rather painful considerations arise. Is it because, after all, it is so rare, so almost abnormal an experience for one to love purely, passionately, and permanently, that the difficulty of making such a list arises? There are plenty of books, both imaginative and biographical, to choose from, and yet the perfect companionship seems very rare. Or is it that we nowadays exaggerate

Page 14

the whole matter? That would be a conclusion to which I would not willingly come; but it is quite clear that we have transcendentalised the power of love very much of late. Is this due to the immense flood of romances that have overwhelmed our literature? Does love really play so large a part in people's lives as romances would have us think? Or do the immense number of romances rather show that love does really play a greater part than anything else in our lives? The transcendental conception of love has found a high and passionate expression in the sonnets of Rossetti, yet all that we know of Rossetti would seem to prove that in his case it was actual rather than transcendental; and he is to be classed in the matter of love rather among its voluptuaries and slaves than among its true and harmonious exponents. I am disposed to think that with men, at all events, or at least with Englishmen of the present day, love is rather a bewildering episode than a guiding principle; and that some of the happiest alliances have been those in which passion has tranquilly transformed itself into a true and gentle companionship. This would seem to prove that love was as a rule a physical rather than a spiritual passion, cutting across life rather than flowing in its channels.

And then, too, the further consideration intervenes: Can any one, in reflecting upon the instances of great and loving relationships that have come within the range of his experience, name a single case in which a deep passion has ever been conceived and consummated, without the existence of physical charm of some kind in the woman who has been the object of the passion? I do not, of course, limit charm to regular and conventional beauty. But I cannot myself recall a single instance of such a passion being evoked by a woman destitute of physical attractiveness. The charm may be that of voice, of glance, of bearing, of gesture, but the desirable element is always there in some form or other.

I have known women of wit, of intellect, of sympathy, of delicate perception, of loyalty, of passionate affectionateness, who yet have missed the joy of wedded love from the absence of physical charm. Indeed, to make love beautiful, one has to conceive of it as exhibited in creatures of youth and grace like Romeo and Juliet; and to connect the pretty endearments of love with awkward, ugly, ungainly persons has something grotesque and even profane about it. But if love were the transcendental thing that it is supposed to be, if it were within reach of every hand, physical characteristics would hardly affect the question. I wish that some of the passionate interpreters of love would make a work of imagination that should render with verisimilitude the love-affair of two absolutely grotesque and misshapen persons, without any sense of incongruity or absurdity. I should be loth to say that love depends upon physical characteristics; but I think it must be confessed that impassioned

Page 15

love does so depend. A woman without physical attractiveness, but with tenderness, loyalty, and devotion, may arrive at plenty of happy relationships; she may be trusted, confided in, adored by young and old; but of the redeeming and regenerating love that comes with marriage she may have no chance at all. It is a terrible question to ask, but what chance has love against eczema? And yet eczema may co-exist with every mental and spiritual grace in the world. In this case it is evident that the modern transcendental theory of love crumbles away altogether, if it is at the mercy of a physical condition.

The truth is that, like all the joys of humanity, love is unequally distributed, and that it is a thing which no amount of desire or admiration or hope can bring about, unless it is bestowed. Even in the case of the faint-hearted lover, so mercilessly lashed in *Prisoners*, who will pay a call to see the beloved, but will not take a railway journey for the same object, is it not the physical vitality that is deficient? I do not quarrel with the transcendental treatment of love; I only say that if this is accompanied with a burning scorn and contempt for those who cannot pursue it, it becomes at once a pharisaical and bitter thing. No religion was ever propagated by scolding backsliders or condemning the weak; no chivalry was ever worth the name that did not stand for a desire to do battle only with the strong.

The genius of Charlotte Bronte consists in the fact that she makes love so splendid and glorifying a thing, and that she does not waste her powder and shot upon the poor in spirit. The loveless man or woman, after reading her book, may say, "What is this great thing that I have somehow missed? Is it possible that it may be waiting somewhere even for me?" And then such as these may grow to scan the faces of their fellow-travellers in hope and wonder. In such a mood as this does love grow, not under a brisk battery of slaps for being what, after all, God seems to have meant us to be. There are many men and women nowadays who must face the fact that they are not likely to be brought into contact with transcendental passion. It is for them to decide whether they will or can accept some lower form of love, some congenial companionship, some sort of easy commercial union. If they cannot, the last thing that they should do is to repine; they ought rather to organise their lives upon the best basis possible. All is not lost if love be missed. They may prepare themselves to be worthy if the great experience comes; but the one thing in the world that cannot be done from a sense of duty is to fall in love; and if love be so mighty and transcendent a thing it cannot be captured like an insect with a butterfly-net. The more transcendental it is held to be, the greater should be the compassion of its interpreters for those who have not seen it. It is not those who fail to gain it that should be scorned, but only the strong man who deliberately, for prudence and comfort's sake, refuses it and puts it aside. It is our great moral failure nowadays that legislation, education, religion, social reform are all occupied in eradicating the faults of the weak rather than in attacking the faults of the strong; and the modern interpreters of love are following in the same poor groove.

Page 16

If love were so omnipotent, so divine a thing, we should have love stories proving the truth and worth of alliances between an Earl and a kitchen-maid, between a Duchess and a day-labourer; but no attempt is made to upset conventional traditions which are tamely regarded as insuperable. "Let me not to the marriage of true minds admit impediment," said Shakespeare; but who experiments in such ways, who dares to write of them? We are still hopelessly feudal and fastidious. "Such unions do not do," we say; "they land people in such awkward situations." Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* is read with disgust, because the girl was a lodging-house servant; but if Hazlitt had abandoned himself to a passion for a girl of noble birth, the story would have been deemed romantic enough. Thus it would seem that below the transcendentalism of modern love lies a rich vein of snobbishness. With Charlotte Bronte the triumph over social conditions in *Jane Eyre*, and even in *Shirley*, is one of the things that makes the story glow and thrill; but the glow of the peerage has to be cast in *Prisoners* over the detestable Lossiemouth, that one may feel that after all the heroine has done well for herself from a social point of view. If social conditions are indeed a barrier, let them be treated with a sort of noble shame, as the love of the keeper Tregarva for the squire's daughter Honoria is treated in *Yeast*; let them not be fastidiously ignored over the tea-cups at the Hall.

Love is a mighty thing, a deep secret; but if we dare to write of it, let us face the truth about it; let us confess boldly that it is limited by physical and social conditions, even though that involves a loss of its transcendent might. But let us not meekly accept these narrowing axioms, and while we dig a neat canal for the emotion with one hand, claim with the other that the peaceful current has all the splendour and volume of the resistless river foaming from rock to rock, and leaping from the sheltered valley to the boundless sea.

III

People often talk as if human beings were crushed by sorrows and misfortunes and tragic events. It is not so! We are crushed by temperament. Just as Dr. Johnson said about writing, that no man was ever written down but by himself, so we are the victims not of circumstances but of disposition. Those who succumb to tragic events are those who, like Mrs. Gummidge, feel them more than other people. The characters that break down under brutalising influences, evil surroundings, monotonous toil, are those neurotic temperaments which under favourable circumstances would have been what is called artistic, who depend upon stimulus and excitement, upon sunshine and pleasure. Of course, a good deal of what, in our ignorance of the working of psychological laws, we are accustomed to call chance or luck, enters into the question. Ill-health, dull surroundings, loveless lives cause

Page 17

people to break down in the race, who in averagely prosperous circumstances might have lived pleasantly and reputably. But the deeper we plunge into nature, the deeper we explore life, the more immutable we find the grip of law. What could appear to be a more fortuitous spectacle of collision and confusion than a great ocean breaker thundering landwards, with a wrack of flying spray and tossing crests? Yet every smallest motion of every particle is the working put of laws which go far back into the dark aeons of creation. Given the precise conditions of wind and mass and gravitation, a mathematician could work out and predict the exact motion of every liquid atom. Just so and not otherwise could it move. It is as certain that every minute psychological process, all the phenomena that we attribute to will and purpose and motive, are just as inevitable and immutable.

The other day I went by appointment to call on an elderly lady of my acquaintance, the widow of a country squire, who has settled in London on a small jointure, in an inconspicuous house in a dull street. She has always been a very active woman. As the wife of a country gentleman she was a cordial hostess, loving to fill the house with visitors; and in her own village she was a Lady Bountiful of the best kind, the eager friend and adviser of every family in the place. Now she is old and to a great extent invalided. But she is vigorous, upright, dignified, imperative, affectionate, with a stately carriage and a sanguine complexion. She is always full to the brim of interest and liveliness. She carries on a dozen small enterprises; she is at daggers drawn with some of her relations, and the keen partisan of others. Everything is “astonishing” and “wonderful” and “extraordinary” that happens to her; and it is an unceasing delight to hear her describe the smallest things, her troubles with her servants, her family differences, the meetings of the societies she attends, the places she visits. Her talk is always full of anecdotes about mysterious people whose names are familiar to me from her talk but with whom I have never come into contact. It is impossible to forecast what circumstances may fill her with excitement and delight. She will give you a dramatic account of a skirmish with her Vicar about some incredibly trifling matter, or describe with zest how she unveiled the pretentious machinations of some undesirable relative. She is full of malice, anger, uncharitableness, indignation; but, on the other hand, she is just as full of compassion, goodwill, admiration, and enthusiasm. Everyone she knows is either perfectly delightful or else entirely intolerable; and thus she converts what would seem to many people a confined and narrow sphere of action into a stormy and generous clash of great forces.

Page 18

On this particular occasion she kept me waiting for a few minutes, and then darted into the room with an eager apology. She had just had, she said, very bad news. Her second son, a soldier in India, had died suddenly of fever, and the news had reached her only that morning. She is a devoted mother, and she wept frankly and unashamedly as she told me the sad details. Her grief was evidently deep and profound; and yet, strange to say, I found myself realising that this event, entailing peculiarly tragic consequences which I need not here define, was to the gallant old lady, in spite of, or rather in consequence of, her grief, a thing which heightened the values of existence, put a fire into her pulses, and quickened the sense of living. It was not that she did not feel the loss; she suffered acutely; but for all that, it was an experience of a stirring kind, and her indomitable appetite for sensation was fed and sustained by it. She was full of schemes for the widow and children; she was melted with heart-felt grief for them; but I perceived that she was in no way dejected by the experience; it called all her powers, even the power of bearing grief, into play; and the draining of the bitter cup was more congenial to her than inactive monotony. It gave me a strong sense of her vitality, and I felt that it was a really splendid thing to be able to approach a grief with this fiery zest, rather than to collapse into a dreary and hysterical depression. There were fifty things she could do, and she meant to do them every one, and secretly exulted in the task. It was even, I felt, a distinct pleasure to her to describe the melancholy circumstances of the event in the fullest detail. It was not a pensive or luxurious emotion, but a tumult of vehement feeling, bearing the bark of the soul triumphantly along. She would have been distressed and even indignant if I had revealed my thoughts; but the fact was there for all that; instead of brooding or fretting over small affairs, she was face to face with one of the great unanswerable, unfathomable facts of life, and her spirit drank in the solemnity, the greatness of it, as a flower after a drought drinks in the steady plunging rain.

I will not say that this is the secret of life; for it is a faculty of temperament, and cannot be acquired. But I reflected how much finer and stronger it was than my own tendency to be bewildered and cowed beneath a robust stroke of fate. I felt that the thing one ought to aim at doing was to look experience steadily in the face, whether sweet or bitter, to interrogate it firmly, to grasp its significance. If one cowers away from it, if one tries to distract and beguile the soul, to forget the grief in feverish activity, well, one may succeed in dulling the pain as by some drug or anodyne; but the lesson of life is thereby deferred. Why should one so faint-heartedly persist in making choice of experiences, in welcoming what is pleasant, what feeds our vanity and self-satisfaction,

Page 19

what gives one, like the rich fool, the sense of false security of goods stored up for the years? We are set in life to feel insecure, or at all events to gain stability and security of soul, not to prop up our failing and timid senses upon the pillows of wealth and ease and circumstance. The man whom I entirely envy is the man who walks into the dark valley of misfortune or sickness or grief, or the shadow of death, with a curious and inexpressible zest for facing and interrogating the presences that haunt the place. For a man who does this, his memory is not like a land where he loves to linger upon the sunlit ridges of happy recollection, but a land where in reflection he threads in backward thought the dark vale, the miry road, the craggy rift up which he painfully climbed; the optimism that hurries with averted glance past the shadow is as false as the pessimism that hurries timidly across the bright and flowery meadow. The more we realise the immutability of our lot, the more grateful we become for our pains as well as for our delights. If we have still lives to live and regions to traverse, after our eyes close upon the world, those lives and those regions may be, as we love to think, tracts of serener happiness and more equable tranquillity. But if they be still a mixture, such as we here endure, of pain and pleasure, then our aim ought to be at all costs to learn the lesson of endurance; or rather, if we hold firmly to the sense of law, minute, pervading, unalterable law, to welcome every step we make in the direction of courage and hopefulness. In the midst of atrocious sorrow and suffering there is no sense so blessed as the sense that dawns upon the suffering heart that it can indeed endure what it had represented to itself as unendurable, and that however sharply it suffers, there is still an inalienable residue of force and vitality which cannot be exhausted.

IV

Such a perfect day: the sky cloudless; sunlight like pale gold or amber; soft mists in the distance; a delicate air, gently stirred, fresh, with no poisonous nip in it. I knew last night it would be fine, for the gale had blown itself out, and when I came in at sunset the chimneys and shoulders of the Hall stood out dark against the orange glow. The beloved house seemed to welcome me back, and as I came across the footpath, through the pasture, I saw in the brightly-lighted kitchen the hands of some one whose face I could not see, in the golden circle of lamplight, deftly moving, preparing something, for my use perhaps.

Yet for all that I am ill at ease; and as I walked to-day, far and fast in the sun-warmed lanes, my thoughts came yapping and growling round me like a pack of curs—undignified, troublesome, vexatious thoughts; I chase them away for a moment, and next moment they are snapping at my heels. Experiences of a tragic quality, however depressing they may be, have a vaguely sustaining power about them, when they close in, as the fat bulls of Bashan closed in upon the Psalmist. There is no escape then, and the matter is in the hands of God; but when many dogs have come about one, one feels

that one must try to deal with the situation oneself; and that is just what one does not want to do.

Page 20

What sort of dogs are they? Well, to-day they are things like this—an angry letter from an old friend to whom something which I said about him was repeated by a busybody. The thing was true enough, and it was not wrong for me to say it; but that it should be repeated with a deft and offensive twist to the man himself is the mischief. I cannot deny that I said it, and I can only affirm its truth. Was it friendly to say it? says my correspondent. Well, I don't think it was unfriendly as I said it. It is the turn given to it that makes it seem injurious; and yet I cannot deny that what has been repeated is substantially what I said. Why did I not say it to him? he asks, instead of saying it to an acquaintance. It might, he goes on, have been conceivably of some use if I had said it to him, but it can be of no use for me to have said it to a third person. I have no reply to this; it is perfectly true. But I do not go in for pointing out my friends' faults to them, unless they ask me to do so: and the remark in question was just one of those hasty, unconsidered, sweeping little judgments that one does pass in conversation about the action of a friend. One cannot—at least I cannot—so order my conversation that if a casual criticism is repeated without qualification to the person who is the subject of it, he may not be pained by it. The repetition of it in all its nakedness makes it seem deliberate, when it is not deliberate at all. I say in my reply frankly that I admire, esteem, and love my friend, but that I do not therefore admire his faults. I add that I do not myself mind my friends criticising me, so long as they do not do it to my face. But I am aware that, for all my frankness, I cut a poor figure in the matter. I foresee a tiresome, useless correspondence, and a certain inevitable coldness. Then, too, I must write a disagreeable letter to the man who has repeated my criticism; and he will reply, quite fairly, that I ought not to have said it if I did not mean it, and if I was not prepared to stand by it. And he will be annoyed too, because he will not see that he has done anything that he ought not to have done. I shall say that I shall have for the future to be careful what I say to him, and he will reply that he quite approves of my decision, and that it is a pity I have not always acted on the same principle; and he will have a detestable species of justice on his side.

Then there are other things as well. There is some troublesome legal business, arising out of a quarrel between two relations of mine on a question of some property. Whatever I decide, someone will be vexed. I do not want to take any part in the matter at all, and the only reason I do it is because I have been appealed to, and there does not seem to be anyone else who will do it. This will entail a quantity of correspondence and some visits to town, because of the passion that people have for interviews, and because lawyers love delay, since it is a profitable

Page 21

source of income to them. In this case the parties in the dispute are women, and one cannot treat their requests with the same bluntness that one treats the requests of men. "I should feel so much more happy," one of them says, "if you could just run up and discuss the matter with me; it is so much more satisfactory than a letter," This will be troublesome, it will take up time, it will be expensive, and, as I say, I shall only succeed in vexing one of the claimants, and possibly both.

Then, again, the widow of an old friend, lately dead, asks my advice about publishing a book which her husband has left unfinished, I do not think it is a very good book, and certainly not worth publishing on its merits. But the widow feels it a sacred duty to give it to the world; she seems, too, to regard it as a sacred duty for me, as a loyal friend, to edit the book, fill up the gaps, and see it through the press. Then I shall be held responsible for its publication, and the reviewers will say that it is not worth the paper it is printed on—an opinion I cannot honestly contest.

Another trial is that a young man, whom I do not know, but whose father was a friend of mine in old days, writes to me to use my influence that he should obtain an appointment. He says that he is just as well qualified as a number of other applicants, and all that is needed is that I should write a letter to an eminent man whom I know, which will give him his chance, I hate to do this; I hate to use private friendship in order that I may do jobs for my friends. If I do not write the required letter, the young man will think me forgetful of the old ties; if he does not obtain the appointment, he will blame me for not acting energetically enough. If he does obtain it on my recommendation, it may of course turn out all right; but if he does not show himself fit for the post, I shall be rightly blamed for recommending him on insufficient grounds; and in any case my eminent friend will think me an importunate person.

I am busy just now on a book of my own, but all these things force me to put my work aside, day after day. Even when I have some leisure hours which I might devote to my own work, I cannot attain the requisite serenity for doing it—cannot get these vexatious matters out of my head; and there are other matters, too, of the same kind which I need not further particularise.

Of course, it may be said that the knot is best cut by refusing to have anything to do with any of these things. I suppose that if one was strong-minded and resolute one would behave like Gallio, who drove the disputants from his judgment-seat. But I have a tenderness for these people, and a certain conscience in the matter, so that I do not feel it would be right to refuse. Yet I do not quite know upon what basis I feel that there is a duty about it. I do not undertake these tasks as a Christian. The only precedent that I can find in the Gospel which

Page 22

bears on the matter would seem to justify my refusing to have anything to do with it all. When the two men came to Christ about a question of an inheritance, he would not do what they asked him. He said, "Man, who made me a judge or a divider between you?" Again, I do not do it as a gentleman, because there is no question of personal honour involved. I only do it, I think, because I do not like refusing to do what I am asked to do, because I wish to please people—a muddled sort of kindness.

But the whole question goes deeper than that. I suppose that tasks such as these fall in the way of all human beings, whatever their motives for undertaking them may be. How can one do them, and yet not let them disturb one's tranquillity? The ordinary moralist says, "Do what you think to be right, and never mind what people say or think." But unfortunately I do mind very much. I hate coldnesses and misunderstandings. They leave me with a sore and sensitive feeling about my heart, which no amount of ingenious argument can take away. I suppose that one ought to conclude that these things are somehow or other good for one, that they train one in patience and wisdom. But when, as is the case with all these episodes, the original dispute ought never to have occurred; when the questions at issue are mean, pitiful, and sordid; when, if the people concerned were only themselves wise, patient, and kind, the situation would never have occurred, what then? If my acquaintance, in the first case, had not taken a mean pleasure in tale-bearing and causing pain, if in the second case my two relatives had not been grasping and selfish, if in the third case my friend's widow had not allowed her own sense of affection to supersede her judgment, if in the fourth case my friend had been content to let his merits speak for themselves instead of relying upon personal influences, these little crises would never have occurred; it seems unfair that the pain and discomfort of these paltry situations should be transferred to the shoulders of one who has no particular personal interest in the matter. Besides, I cannot honestly trace in my own case the beneficial results of the process. These rubs only make me resolve that in the future I will not have anything to do with such matters at all. It is true that I shall not keep my resolution; but that does not mend matters appreciably.

Moreover, instead of giving me a wholesome sense of hopefulness and confidence, it only makes me feel acutely the dreary and sordid elements which seem inextricably intermingled with life, which might otherwise be calm, serene, and beautiful. I do not see that any of the people concerned are the better for any of the incidents which have occurred—indeed, I think that they are all the worse for them. It is not encouraging or inspiring to have the meanness and pettiness of human nature brought before one, and to feel conscious of one's own weakness and feebleness as well. Some sorrows and losses purge, brace, and strengthen. Such trials as these stain, perplex, enfeeble.

Page 23

The immediate result of it all is that the work which I can do and desire to do, and which, if anything, I seem to have been sent into the world to do, is delayed and hindered. No good can come out of the things which I am going to spend the hours in trying to mend. Neither will any of the people concerned profit by my example in the matter, because they will only have their confidence in my judgment and amiability diminished.

And so I walk, as I say, along the sandy lanes, with the fresh air and the still sunlight all about me, kept by my own unquiet heart from the peace that seems to be all about me within the reach of my hand. The sense of God's compassion for his feeble creatures does not help me; how can he compassionate the littleness for which he is himself responsible? It is at such moments that God seems remote, careless, indifferent, occupied in his own designs; strong in his ineffable strength, leaving the frail and sensitive creatures whom he has made, to whom he has given hopes and dreams too large for their feeble nerves and brains, to stumble onwards over vale and hill without a comforting smile or a sustaining hand. Would that I could feel otherwise! He gives us the power of framing an ideal of hopefulness, peace, sweetness, and strength; and then he mocks at our attempts to reach them. I do not ask to see every step of the road plainly; I only long to know that we are going forwards, and not backwards, I must submit, I know; but I cannot believe that he only demands a tame and sullen submission; rather he must desire that I should face him bravely and fearlessly, in hope and confidence, as a loving and beloved son.

V

How often in sermons we are exhorted to effort! How rarely are we told precisely how to begin! How glibly it is taken for granted that we are all equally capable of it. Yet energy itself is a quality, a gift of temperament. The man who, like Sir Richard Grenville, says "Fight on," when there is nothing left to fight with or to fight for, except that indefinable thing honour, or the man who, like Sir Andrew Barton, says:

"I'll but lie down and bleed awhile,
And then I'll rise and fight again;"—

they are people of heroic temper, and cannot be called a common species. "Do the next thing," says the old motto. But what if the next thing is one of many, none of them very important, and if at the same time one has a good book to read, a warm fire to sit by, an amusing friend to talk to? "He who of such delights can judge, and spare to interpose them oft, is not unwise," says Milton. Most of us have a certain amount of necessary work to do in the world, and it can by no means be regarded as established that we are also bound to do unnecessary work. Supposing that one's heart is overflowing with mercy, compassion, and charity, there are probably a hundred channels in which the stream can flow; but that is only because a good many

Page 24

hearts have no such abounding springs of love; and thus there is room for the philanthropist; but if all men were patient, laborious, and affectionate, the philanthropist's gifts would find comparatively little scope for their exercise; there might even be a *queue* of benevolent people waiting for admission to any house where there was sickness or bereavement. Moreover, all sufferers do not want to be cheered; they often prefer to be left alone; and to be the compulsory recipient of the charity you do not require is an additional burden. A person who is always hungering and thirsting to exercise a higher influence upon others is apt to be an unmitigated bore. The thing must be given if it is required, not poured over people's heads, as Aristophanes says, with a ladle. To be ready to help is a finer quality than to insist on helping, because, after all, if life is a discipline, the aim is that we have to find the way out of our troubles, not that we should be lugged and hauled through them, "bumped into paths of peace," as Dickens says. Just as justice requires to be tempered by mercy, so energy requires to be tempered by inaction. But the difficulty is for the indolent, the dreamy, the fastidious, the loafer, the vagabond. Energy is to a large extent a question of climate and temperament. What of the dwellers in a rich and fertile country, where a very little work will produce the means of livelihood, and where the temperature does not require elaborate houses, carefully warmed, or abundance of conventional clothing? A dweller in Galilee at the time of the Christian era, a dweller in Athens at the time of Socrates—it was possible for each of these to live simply and comfortably without any great expenditure of labour; does morality require that one should work harder than one need for luxuries that one does not want? Neither our Lord nor Socrates seems to have thought so. Our Lord himself went about teaching and doing good; but there is no evidence that he began his work before he was thirty, and he interposed long spaces of reflection and solitude. If the Gospel of work were to be paramount, he would have filled his days with feverish energy; but from the beginning to the end there is abundance of texts and incidents which show that he thought excessive industry rather a snare than otherwise. He spoke very sternly of the bad effect of riches. He told his disciples not to labour for perishable things, not to indulge anxiety about food and raiment, but to live like birds and flowers; he rebuked a bustling, hospitable woman—he praised one who preferred to sit and hear him talk. His whole attitude was to encourage reflection rather than philanthropy, to invite people to think and converse about moral principles rather than to fling themselves into mundane activities. There is far more justification in the Gospel for a life of kindly and simple leisure than there is for what may be called a busy and successful career. The Christian is taught rather to love God and to be interested in his neighbour than to love respectability and to make a fortune. Indeed, to make a fortune on Christian lines is a thing which requires a somewhat sophistical defence.

Page 25

And thus the old theory of accepting salvation rather than working for it is based not so much upon the theory that in the presence of absolute and infinite perfection there is little difference between the life of the entirely virtuous and the entirely vicious man, as upon the fact that if one's limitations of circumstance and heredity are the gift of God, one's salvation must be his gift also. We do not know to what extent our power of choice and our freedom of action is limited; it is quite obvious that it is to a certain extent limited by causes over which we have no control, and it is therefore best to trust God entirely in the matter, and to acquit him of injustice, if we can, though it must be a hard matter for the innocent child who is the victim of his ancestor's propensities to believe that the best has been done for him that it was possible to do.

And thus the question of effort is not a simple one, though it may be said roughly that as every one's ideal is at all events somewhat higher than his practice, it is a plain duty to make one's practice conform a little closer to one's ideal.

Sometimes one is bewildered by the sight of men who seem to have all the material for a good and useful and happy life ready to hand, but who yet attempt the wrong things, or are pushed into attempting them, by not taking the measure of their powers. Of course, there is a great nobleness about people who ardently undertake the impossible; but what can one make of the people, and they are very numerous, who have not the ardent quality in their souls? Is it possible to become ardent even if one does not happen to admire the quality? I fear not. But what ought to be possible for every one is to arrive at a sort of harmony of life, to have definite things that they want to do, definite regions in which they desire to advance. The people whom it is hard to fit into any scheme of benevolent creation are the vague, insignificant, drifting people, whose only rooted tendency is to do whatever is suggested to them. One who like myself has been a schoolmaster knows that the danger of school life is not that the wicked are numerous, but the weak; the boys who have little imagination, little prudence, and who cannot summon up an instinctive motive to protect them against yielding to any temptation that may fall in their way. These are the people who get so little sympathy and encouragement. Their stronger companions use them and despise them, treating them as a convenient audience, as the Greek heroes in the *Iliad* treated the feeble, sheep-like soldiers, who ran hither and thither on the field of battle, well-meaning, ineffective, "strengthless heads." The brisk and virtuous master bullies them, calls them bolsters and puddings, loafers and ne'er-do-weels. What wonder if they do not easily discern their place in the scheme of things! Indeed, if it were not for tender fathers and mothers who believe in them and encourage them, their lot would be intolerable.

Page 26

How is such a boy to make an effort? His work wearies and puzzles him—it does not seem to lead him anywhere; he has no gift for games; he is neither amusing nor attractive; he gets no credit for anything, and indeed he deserves none; he ought really to be in a kind of moral sanatorium, guarded, guided, encouraged by wise and faithful and compassionate pastors. The worst feature of school life is that if it fortifies characters with some vigour about them, it implies that others must inevitably go under and be turned out moral and mental failures. It is the way of the world, says the philosopher, rough justice! It may be justice, but it is certainly rough; and I look forward to the time when we educators of the present generation will be considered incredibly hard-hearted, unconscientious, immoral, for acquiescing so contentedly in the ruthless sacrifice of the weak to the culture of the strong.

Ought we then, it may be asked, to decide that if people are incapable of sustained effort, no effort is to be expected of them? Are we to decline upon a genial determinism, and to sweep away all belief in moral responsibility? No! because even if we are determinists, we have to take into account the fact that society does for some reason advance. When we consider the fact that the rightness of humanitarian principles, of anti-slavery movements, of popular education, of Factory Acts, of public hospitals is universally admitted; when we compare the current principles of the nineteenth-century man with the current principles, say, of the fourteenth-century man, it is plain that there has been a remarkable rise of the moral temperature, and that our optimistic view of progress is a rational one.

The ordinary person is to-day quite as strongly convinced of the rights of other men as he is of their duties; and thus the determinist is bound to confess that there is an ameliorating and humanising principle at work, if not in the world at large, at least in the Western races. It is inconsistent to acquiesce in faulty practice and not to acquiesce in the growth of ideals, even though one may believe that the advance is due to some external cause and is not self-developed. If performance is always more or less straining after the ideal, the determinist is justified in expecting a higher standard of performance, and his fatalism may take the direction of removing the obstacles to further improvement. But in dealing with individuals the moralist does well to temper his hopes with a wise determinism, and not to be too much cast down if one to whom he has made clear the disastrous effects of yielding to temptation cannot at once harmonise his purpose and his practice. If it were true, as too many preachers take for granted, that we have all, whatever our difference of physical and mental equipment, an equal sense of moral responsibility, the result would be to plunge us into hopeless pessimism. The question is whether the moralist is justified

Page 27

in pretending, for the sake of the effort that it may produce, to the victim of some moral weakness, that he really has the power of conquering his fault. He may say to himself, "Some people have the power of self-mastery, and it is better to assume that all have, because it tends to produce a greater effort than if one merely tries to console a moral weakling for his deficiencies." But this is a dangerous and casuistical path to tread.

It may be justified perhaps on the medical theory that if you tell a man he will get well, even if you consider him to be doomed, he is more likely to get well than if you tell him that you consider him to be doomed. But it is surely wrong to display no more moral indignation in the case of a vigorous person who has perversely indulged some temptation which he might have resisted, than in the case of one who is hampered by inheritance with a violent predisposition to moral evil. Even the most ardent moralist ought to be true to what he knows to be the truth. The method of Christ seems here again to differ from the method of the Christian teacher. Christ reserved his denunciations for the complacency of virtuous people. We do not see him rebuking the sinner; his rebukes are rather heaped upon the righteous. He seems to have had nothing but compassion for the sins that brought their own obvious punishment, and to have been indignant only with the sins that brought material prosperity with them. He treated the outcast as his friend, the respectable as his enemy. He seems to have held that sin at least taught people to make allowances, to forgive, to love, and that this was the nearest way to the Father's heart. Christ was very critical, and relentlessly exposed those of whom he disapproved, but he was never critical of weakness.

But, we may say, the moral principles which we have won with such difficulty will collapse and fail if we do not make a resolute stand against gross faults and strike at them wherever they show their heads. It is true that we have not got on very fast, but may it not be that we have mistaken the right method? Perhaps we should have got on faster still if we had reserved our indignation for the right things—self-satisfaction, complacency, injustice, cruelty. What we have done is to fight against the faults of the weak, against the faults of which no defence is possible, rather than against the faults of the strong, who can resent and revenge themselves for our criticism. Christ himself seems not to have been afraid of the sins of the flesh, but to have shown his severity rather against the sins of the world. Would it be rash to follow his example? We can all see the havoc wrought by impurity and intemperance, and there are plenty of rich respectable people, chaste and moderate by instinct, who are ready to join in what are called crusades against them. But as long as sins do not menace health or prosperity or comfort, we easily and glibly condone them. As long as Christian teachers pursue wealth and preferment, indulge ambition, seek the society of the respectable, practise pharisaical virtues, we are not likely to draw much nearer to the ideals of Christ.

Page 28

VI

There is one step of supreme importance from which a man must not shrink, however difficult it may seem to be; and that is to search and probe the depths of his soul, that he may find out what it is that he really and deeply and whole-heartedly and instinctively loves and admires and desires. Without this first step no progress is possible or conceivable, because whatever external revelations of God there may be, through nature, through beauty, through work, through love, there is always a direct and inner revelation from God to every individual soul; and, strange as it may appear, this is not always easy to discern, because of the influences, the ideas, the surroundings that have been always at work upon us, moulding us, for good and for evil, from our earliest days. We have been told that we ought to admire this and desire that, until very often our own inspiration, our true life, has been clumsily obscured. All these conventional beliefs we must discard; we may indeed resolve that it is better in some cases to comply with them to a certain extent for the sake of tranquillity, if they are widely accepted in the society in which we live; that is to say, we may decide to abstain from certain things which we do not believe to be wrong, because the world regards them as being wrong, and because to be misunderstood in such things may damage our relations with others. Thus, to use a familiar instance, we might think it unjust that a landowner should be permitted by the State to have the sole right of fishing in a certain river, and though one's conscience would not in the least rebuke one for fishing in that river, one might abstain from doing so because of the inconvenience which might ensue. Or, again, if society considers a certain practice to be morally meritorious, one might acquiesce in performing it even though one disbelieved in its advisability; thus a man might believe that a marriage ceremony was a meaningless thing, and that mutual love was a far higher consecration than the consecration of a priest; and yet he might rightly acquiesce in having his own wedding celebrated according to the rites of a particular church, for the sake of compliance with social traditions, and because no principle was involved in his standing out against it, or even because he thought it a seemly and beautiful thing. The only compliance which is immoral is the compliance with a practice which one believes to be immoral and which yet is sanctioned by society. Thus if a man believes hunting to be immoral, he must not take part in it for the sake of such enjoyment as he may find in it, or for the sake of friendly intercourse, simply because no penalty awaits him for doing what he knows to be wrong.

Page 29

The only criterion in the matter is this: one must ask oneself what are the things that one is ashamed of doing, the things for which, when done, one's own conscience smites one in secret, even if they are accompanied by no social penalty whatever, even if they are forgiven and forgotten. These are not the things which one would simply dislike others to know that one has done. One might fear the condemnation of others, even though one did not believe that a particular act was in itself wrong; because of the misunderstandings and vexation and grief and derision that the knowledge of one's action might create. To take an absurd instance, a man might think it pleasant and even beneficial to sit or walk naked in the open air; but it would not be worth his while to do it, because he would be thought eccentric and indecent. There would be people who would condemn it as immoral; but it is not our duty, unless we believe it to be so, to convert others to a simpler kind of morality in wholly indifferent matters.

The sort of offences for which conscience condemns one, but to which no legal penalty is attached, are things like petty cruelty, unnecessary harshness, unkindness, introducing innocent people to evil thoughts and ideas, disillusioning others, disappointing them. A man may do these things and not only not be thought the worse of for them, but may actually be thought the better of, as a person of spirit and manliness; but if for any motive whatever, or even out of the strange duality of nature that besets us, he yields to these things, then he is living by the light of conventional morality and quenching his inner light, as deliberately as if he blew out for mere wantonness a lantern in a dark and precipitous place.

But if a man, looking narrowly and nearly into his own soul, says to himself in perfect candour, I do not desire truth; I do not admire self-sacrifice; I do not wish to be loved; I only wish to be healthy and rich and popular: what then? What if he says to himself in entire frankness that the only reason why he admires what are called virtues is because there seem to be enough people in the world to admire them to add to his credit if such virtues are attributed to him—what of his case? Well, I would have him look closer yet and see if there is not perhaps someone in the world, a mother, a sister, a child, whom he loves with an unselfish love, whom he would willingly please if he could, and would forbear to grieve though he could gain nothing by doing so or abstaining from doing so. I do not honestly think that there is any living being who would not discover this minimum of disinterestedness in his spirit, and upon this slender foundation he must try to build, for upon no other basis than genuine and native truth can any life be built at all.

Page 30

But as a rule, in most hearts, however hampered by habit and material desires, there is a deep-seated desire to be worthier and better. And all who discern such a desire in their hearts should endeavour to fan it into flame, should warm their shivering hands at it, should frame it as a constant aspiration, should live as far as possible with the people and the books and the art which touches that frail desire into life and makes them feel their possibilities. They may fail a thousand times; but for all that, this is the seed of hope and love, the tree of life that grows in the midst of the garden. God will not let any of us stay where we are, and yet the growth and progress must be our own. We may delay it and hamper it, but we yet may dare to hope that through experiences we cannot imagine, through existences we cannot foresee, that little seed may grow into a branching tree, and fill the garden with shade and fragrance.

But if we are indeed desirous to do better, to grow in grace, and yet feel ourselves terribly weak and light-minded, what practical steps can we take to the goal that we see far off? The one thing that we can do in moments of insight is to undertake some little responsibility which we shall be ashamed to discard. We can look round our circle, and it will be strange if we cannot find at least one person whom we can help; and the best part of assuming such a responsibility is that it tends to grow and ramify; but in any case there is surely one person whom we can relieve, or encourage, or listen to, or make happier; if we can find the strength to come forward, to lead such a one to depend upon us, we shall have little inclination to desert or play false one whom we have encouraged to trust us. And thus we can take our first trembling step out of the mire.

VII

It is an error either to glorify or degrade the body. If we worship it or pamper it, when it fails us, we are engulfed and buried in its ruins; if we misuse it, and we can misuse it alike by obeying it and disregarding it, it becomes our master and tyrant, or it fails us as an instrument. We must regard it rather as our prison, serving us for shelter and security, to be kept as fair and wholesome and cleanly as may be. When we are children, we are hardly conscious of it—or rather we are hardly conscious of anything else; in youth and maturity we are perhaps conscious of its joy and strength; but even so we must also at times be sadly aware that it is indeed the body of our humiliation; we must be aware of its dishonour, its uncleanly processes, its ugliness and feebleness, its slothfulness and perversity. There are times when the soul sighs to think of itself as chained to a sort of brute; it tugs at its chain, it snaps and growls, it tears and rends us; at another time it is content and serviceable; at another it grows spent and faint, and keeps the soul loitering, heart-sick and reluctant, on its pilgrimage.

Page 31

But when once we have perceived the truth, that the body is not ourselves, but the habitation of the soul, we can make it into an instrument of our development. We can curb it when it is headstrong, we can goad it when it is indolent, and when it fails and thwarts us, as sooner or later it must do to all of us, the soul can sit beside it, neither heeding it nor compassionating it, but just triumphing over it in hope and patience.

There are seasons in the lives of most of us when the soul is full of zeal and insight, when it would like to work joyfully, to cheer and console and help others, to utter its song of praise, to make a happy stir in the world, when the body is morose and feeble and ill at ease, checks our work and utterance, makes us timid when we should be bold, and mournful when we wish to be amiable and genial; but these are the very hours when the soul grows most speedily and surely, if we do not allow the body to check and restrain us; we must perhaps husband its resources, but we can stifle our complaints, we can be brave and cheerful and kind.

And even if the disasters of the body have been in a sense our own fault; if we have lived prodigally and carelessly, either yielding to base desires or recklessly overworking and overstraining the mortal frame, for however high a motive, we can still triumph if we never yield for a moment to regret or remorse, but accept the conditions humbly and quietly, using such strength as we have to the uttermost. For here lies one of our strongest delusions, our belief in our own effectiveness. God's concern with each of us is direct and individual; the influences and personalities he brings us into contact with are all of his designing; and we may be sure of this, that God will make us just as effective as he intends, and that we are often more effective in silence and dejection than we are in activity and courage. We mourn faithlessly over lives cut short, activity suspended, promise unfulfilled; but we may be sure that in every case God is dealing faithfully with each soul, and using it as an instrument as far as it is fitted to be used; and thus for an active man disabled by illness to mourn over his wasted power is a grievous mistake, and no less a mistake to mourn over the unprofitableness of our lives, for they have been as profitable as God willed them to be. We can only be profitable to those for contact with whom God has prepared both them and us; and thus our duty in the matter is not to indulge in any anticipations of what our body may be able to do or unable to do, but simply to undertake what seems our plain duty; and then we shall find that the body can often do more than we could have imagined, and especially if it be directed by a tranquil mind; and if it fails us, that very failure is but the pressure of God's hand upon our shoulder, saying, "Continue in weakness and be not dismayed." If it is an error to increase our own limitations, it is equally an error not to give heed to them and to profit by

Page 32

them; and, after all, the body is more apt to rebel in carrying out the duties we dislike than in enjoying the pleasures on which we have set our mind. The real reason of our faithlessness is that we are so apt to look upon the one life in which we find ourselves as our only chance of expression and effectuation. If it were so, it would matter little what we did or said, if the soul is to be extinguished as a blown-out flame when the body is mingled with the dust.

I stood once upon the deck of a ship watching a shoal of porpoises following us and racing round us: every now and then the brown, sleek, shining bodies of the great creatures rose from the blue waves and entered them again with a soft plunge. Our life is like that: we rise for an instant into the light of life, we fall again beneath the waves; but all the while the soul pursues her real track unseen and unsuspected, as the gliding sea-beast cuts the green ocean twilight, or wanders among rocks and hidden slopes fringed with the branching ribbons, the delicate tangles of brine-fed groves.

VIII

Religion, as it is often taught and practised, has a dangerous tendency to become a merely mechanical and conventional thing. Worse still, it may even become a delusion, either when it is made an end in itself, or when it is regarded as a solution of all mysteries. The religious life is a vocation for some, just as the artistic life is a vocation for others, but it is not to be hoped or even desired that all should embrace and follow the religious vocation; it is just one of the paths to God, neither more nor less; and the mistake that the technically religious make is to regard it as a kind of life that is or ought to be universal. One who has the vocation is right to follow it, but he is not right to force it upon others, any more than an artist would be right in forcing the artistic life on others. It is too commonly held by the religious that formal worship is a necessity for all; they compare the relation of worship to the spiritual life to the relation of eating and drinking to the physical life. But this is not true of all human beings. Public liturgical worship is a kind of art, a very delicate and beautiful art; and just as the appeal of what is spiritual comes to some through worship, it comes to others through art, or poetry, or affection, or even through some kinds of action. There is no hint that Christ laid any stress on liturgical or public worship at all; he attended the synagogue, and went up to Jerusalem to the sacrifices; but he nowhere laid it down as a duty, or reproached those who did not practise it. He spoke vehemently of the practice of prayer, but recommended that it should be made as secret as possible; he chose a social meal for his chief rite, and the act of washing as his secondary rite. He did indeed warn his followers very sternly against the dangers of formalism; he never warned

Page 33

them against the danger of neglecting rites and ceremonies. On the other hand, it may be confidently stated that when religious worship has become a customary social act, a man who sympathises with the religious idea is right to show public sympathy with it; he ought to weigh very carefully his motives for abstaining. If it is indolence, or a fear of being thought precise, or a desire to be thought independent, or a contempt for sentiment that keeps him back, he is probably in the wrong; nothing but a genuine and deep-seated horror of formalism justifies him in protesting against a practice which is to many an avenue of the spiritual life. A lack of sympathy with certain liturgical expressions, a fear of being hypocritical, of being believed to hold the orthodox position in its entirety, justifies a man in not entering the ministry of the Church, even if he desires on general grounds to do so, but these are paltry motives for cutting oneself off from communion with believers. It is clear that Christ himself thought many of the orthodox practices of the exponents of the popular religion wrong, but he did not for that reason abjure attendance upon accustomed rites; and it is far more important to show sympathy with an idea, even if one does not agree with all the details, than to seem, by protesting against erroneous detail, to be out of sympathy with the idea. The mistake is when a man drifts into thinking of ceremonial worship as a practice specially and uniquely dear to God; every practice by which the spiritual principle is asserted above the material principle is dear to God, and a man who reads a beautiful poem and is thrilled with a desire for purity, goodness, and love thereby, is a truer worshipper of the Spirit than a man who mutters responses in a prescribed posture without deriving any inspiration from them.

The essence of religion is to desire to draw near to God, to receive the Spirit of God. It does not in the least degree matter how the individual expresses that essential truth. He may love some consecrated rite as being pure and beautiful, or even because other hearts have loved it,—the rite is permitted, not commanded by God—he may express God by terms of co-equality and consubstantiality, and even desire to proclaim such expressions, in concert with like-minded persons, to the harmonies of an organ, so long as it uplifts him in spirit; but such a man falls into a grievous error when he vilifies or condemns others for not seeing as he does, or enunciates that thus and thus only can a man apprehend God. The more firmly that a Church holds the necessity of what is unessential, the more it diverges from the Spirit of Christ.

Page 34

It is by the essentials that we live and make progress. The man who apprehends such a statement of doctrine as the Athanasian creed affords, as a sweet and gracious mystery, thereby draws nearer to God. But if he goes further and says, "The essence of my finding inspiration in any particular creed is that I should believe it to be absolutely and literally true, and that all outside it are thieves and robbers, or at the best ignorant and misguided persons," then he stumbles at the very outset. His own belief is probably true in the sense that the truth doubtless transcends and embraces all spiritual light hopefully discerned; but the moment that a man condemns those who do not exactly agree with himself, he sins against the Spirit. Is it not a ghastly and inconceivable thought that Christ should have authorised that men should be brought to the light by persecution? Or that any of his words could be so foully distorted as to lend the least excuse to such a principle of action? It matters not what kind of persecution is employed, whether it be mental or physical. The essence is that men should so apprehend God as to desire to draw nearer to him, and that they should be goaded or coerced or terrified into submission is intolerable.

The true worshipper is the man who at no specified place or time, but as naturally as he breathes or sleeps, opens his heart to God and prays for holy influences to guard and guide him. There are some who have a quickened sense of fellowship and unity, when such prayers and aspirations are uttered in concert; but the error is to desire merely the bodily presence of one's fellow-creatures for such a purpose, rather than their mental and spiritual acquiescence. The result of such a desire is that it is often taught, or at all events believed, that there is a kind of merit in the attendance at public worship. The only merit of it lies in the case of those who sacrifice a personal disinclination to the desire to testify sympathy for the religious life. It is no more meritorious for those who personally enjoy it, than it is for a lover of pictures to go to a picture-gallery, for thus the hunger of the spirit is satisfied.

It would be better, perhaps, if it were frankly realised and recognised that it is a special taste, a peculiar vocation. It would be better if those who loved liturgical worship desired only the companionship of like-minded people; better still if it were recognised that there is no necessary connection between liturgical worship and morality at all, except in so far that all pure spiritual instincts are on the side of morality. But so far from holding it to be a duty for a man to protest against the importance attached to worship by liturgically-minded people, I should hold it to be a duty for all spiritually-minded men to show as much active sympathy as they can for a practice which is to many persons a unique and special channel of spiritual grace.

Page 35

It is not the business of those who are enlightened to protest against conventional things, unless those conventions obscure and distort the truth. It is rather their duty to fall in with the existing framework of life, and live as simply and faithfully inside it as they can. To myself the plainest service is beautiful and uplifting, if it obviously evokes the spiritual ardour of the worshippers; and, on the other hand, a service in some majestic church, consecrated by age and tradition and association, and enriched by sacred art and heart-thrilling music, appeals as purely and graciously as anything in the world to my spiritual instinct. But I would frankly realise that to some such ceremonies appear merely as unmeaning and uninspiring; and the presence of such people is a mere discord in the harmony of sweetness.

The one essential thing is that we should desire to draw near to God, that we should faithfully determine by what way and in what manner we can approach him best, and that we should pursue that path as faithfully and as quietly as we can.

IX

It is Good Friday to-day. This morning I wandered through a clean, rain-washed world; among budding hedges, making for the great Cathedral towers that loom across the flat. It was noon when I passed through the little streets. Entering the great western portals, I found the huge Cathedral all lit by shafts of golden sunshine. There was a little company of worshippers under the central lantern; and a grave and dignified priest, with a tender sympathy of mien, solemnly vested, was leading the little throng through the scenes of the Passion. I sat for a long time among the congregation; and what can I say of the message there delivered? It was subtle and serious enough, full of refinement and sweetness, but it seemed to me to have little or nothing to do with life. I will not here go into the whole of the teaching that I heard—but it was for me all vitiated by one thought. The preacher seemed to desire us to feel that the sad and wasted form of the Redeemer, hanging in his last agony on the cross among the mocking crowd, was conscious at once of his humanity and his Divinity. But the thought is meaningless and inconceivable to me. If he was conscious then of his august origin and destiny, if he knew that, to use a material metaphor enough, he would shortly pass through lines of kneeling angels amid triumphant pealing music to the very Throne and Heart of God, the sufferings of his Passion can have been as nothing. There is no touch of example or help for me in the scene. Even the despairing cry, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” becomes a piece of unworthy drama; and yet if one presses the words of Jesus, and remembers that he had said but a few short hours before that he had but to speak the word, and legions of angels were at hand to succour him, it is impossible to resist the feeling that he knew who he was and whither he was bound. I do not say that the thesis is untrue; I only say that if he knew the truth, then there is no medicine in his sufferings for human despair.

Page 36

The preacher seemed to feel the difficulty dimly, for he fell back upon the thought that the agony was caused by Christ's bearing the load of the world's sin. But here again I felt that, after all, sin must have been in a sense permitted by God. If God is omnipotent and all-embracing, no amount of freewill in man could enable him to choose what was not there already in the Mind of God.

And then, too, the lesson of science is that man is slowly struggling upwards out of his bestial inheritance into purity and light; and thus if a man can inherit evil from evil progenitors by the law of God, he is not a free agent in the matter; and it thus becomes a piece of sad impiety, or worse, to say that it was inconceivable agony to God to bear the sins which his own awful law perpetuated.

And to go deeper, what did the sacrifice effect? It effected no instant change in the disposition of man; it appears to me to be a dark profanity to believe that the human death of Christ effected any change in the purpose and Love of God to the world. That God should come himself on earth to die, in order that he might thereafter regard the human race more mercifully, seems to me, if it were true, to be a helpless piece of metaphysical jugglery. If that were true of God, there is nothing that I could not believe of him.

And so the words of the preacher, a man, as I knew, of faithful energy and unbroken prosperity of virtue, brought me no more hint of the truth than did the voice of a hidden dove which cooed contentedly in the stillness in some sun-warmed window of the clerestory. Dove and preacher alike had lived secure and contented lives under the shadow of the great Church, and equally, no doubt, if unconsciously, approved of the system which made such tranquil lives possible.

Once, it seemed to me, the human accent broke urgently through, when the preacher spoke of dark hours of spiritual dryness, when the soul seemed shut out from God—"When we know," he said in heart-felt tones, "that the Love of God is all about us, but we cannot enter into it; it seems to be outside of us." Had he indeed suffered thus, this courteous, kindly priest? I felt that he had, and that he was one of the sorrowful fellowship.

One word he said that dwells with me, that "Faith overleaps all visible horizons." That was a golden thought; so that as I walked back in the cool of the afternoon, and saw the prodigious plain stretch on all hands, and thought how strangely my own tiny life was limited and bound, I felt that the message of Christ was a mysterious trust, an undefined hope; not a mechanical process of forgiveness and atonement, but an assurance that there is something in the world which calls lovingly to the soul, and that while we stretch out yearning hands and desirous hearts to that, we are indeed very near to the unknown Mind of God.

X

Page 37

I have often wondered how it has come about that Job has become proverbial for patience. I suppose that it has arisen out of the verse in the Epistle of St. James about the patience of Job; but, like the passage in the Book of Numbers which attributes an extreme meekness to Moses, it seems to me to be either a very infelicitous description, or else a case where both adjectives have shifted their meaning. Moses is notable for an almost fiery vehemence of character, and the punishment that was laid upon him was the outcome of a display of intemperate wrath. Just as we associate meekness with the worm that never turns, so the typically patient animal is the ass who is too phlegmatic to resent the most unjust chastisement, and ready to accommodate itself to the most overtaxing burdens. But Job is the very opposite of this; he endures, because there is no way out; but he never for a moment acquiesces in the justice of his affliction, and his complaints are both specific and protracted. He does not even display any very conspicuous fortitude under his afflictions. He is not indomitable so much as persistent. He is rather stubbornly self-righteous. It could not, of course, be otherwise, for the essence of the situation is that the sufferer should be aware that his deeds do not deserve punishment, and that the sufferings he endures should be permitted in order that his faith in God as well as his faith in his own integrity should be tested.

The truth is that the word patience is used in English in a double sense; it is applied to a sort of unreasoning stupidity, which accepts suffering and pain without adding to it by imaginative comparison; such patience knows nothing of the pain of which Dante speaks, the pain of contrasting present unhappiness with past delight; and similarly, it does not suffer the pangs of anticipation, the terrors of which Lord Beaconsfield spoke, when he said that the worst calamities in his life were the calamities which never happened. Nine-tenths of the misery of suffering lies in the power of forecasting its continuance and its increase, and the lesser patience of which I have spoken is the patience which, by no effort of reason, but by pure instinct, hears the burden of the moment in the spirit of the proverb that "sufficient for the day is the evil thereof."

But there is a nobler and a purer quality of patience which is perhaps one of the highest and most hopeful attributes of humanity, because it is nurtured in so strong a soil, and watered with the dew of tears; this is a certain tranquil, courageous, and unembittered sweetness in the presence of an irreparable calamity, which is in its very essence divine, and preaches more forcibly the far-reaching permanence of the spiritual clement in mankind than a thousand rhapsodies and panegyrics extolling human ingenuity and human greatness. Mankind has a deeply rooted and childlike instinct that apology and repentance ought to be met with the

Page 38

suspension of pains and penalties, and the hardest lesson in the world to learn is that guilt may be forgiven, but that the consequences of guilt may yet have to be endured. When we have really learnt that, we are indeed perfected. St. Peter in one of his epistles says that it is less creditable to be patient when one is buffeted for one's faults than when one suffers for one's virtues. I fear that I cannot agree with this. One may be convinced of the justice of a sentence, but the more one is convinced of it, the more does one regret the course of conduct that made the sentence necessary. The sinner who suffers for his sin bears not only the pain of the punishment but also the sense of shame and self-condemnation. The good man who suffers for his goodness does indeed have to bear the burden of an awful mystery, a doubt whether God is indeed on the side of the righteous; but he is not crushed beneath the additional burden of self-contempt, he has not the humiliating sense of folly and weakness which the transgressor has to bear; and thus it so often happens that the well-meaning transgressor is slow to learn the lesson of patience, because he takes refuge in a vague sort of metaphysics, and attributes to heredity and environment what is really the outcome of his own wilfulness and perversity.

But the true patience, whatever the cause of its sufferings, brings with it a blessed sense of the faithful sternness, the fruitful lovingness of God, who will not let even the feeblest of sinners be satisfied with less than he can attain, in whose hands the punishment, like fire, runs swiftly and agonisingly to and fro, consuming the baser elements of passion and desire.

XI

I am quite sure that I like solitude. There is no pleasure in the world like waking up in the morning and feeling that absolutely the whole day is at one's disposal; that one can work when one likes, go out when it is fine, have one's meals when one prefers, even when one is hungry. There is no one near enough to drop in, in this blissful corner of the world, and a caller is a rare bird. I have too much to do ever to be bored, and indeed the day is seldom long enough for all I have designed. Best of all, my work, though abundant, is seldom pressing. I have hardly ever anything to do that must be done that moment. With some people that would end in putting off everything till the last moment, but that is not the case with me. The greatest luxury I know is to have accumulated stores of work on which one can draw; and my tendency is, if ever a piece of work is entrusted to me, to do it at once. I have few gregarious instincts, I suppose. I like eating alone, reading alone, and walking alone. There is also a good deal to be said for learning to enjoy solitude, for it is the one luxury that a man without any close home ties can command. An independent bachelor is sure, whether he likes it or not, to have, as life goes on, more and more enforced solitude—that is, if he detests living in a

town. I have not even nephews and nieces whom it would be natural to see something of; and thus it is a wise economy to practise for solitude.

Page 39

From the point of view of work, too, it is undeniably delightful. I need never suspend a train of thought; I can write till I have finished a subject. There is never the abominable necessity of stopping in the middle of a sentence, with the prospect of having laboriously to recapture the mood; and it is the same with reading. If I am interested in a book, I can read on till I am satiated. Never before in my life have I had the chance of reading, as Theocrite praised God, “morning, evening, noon, and night.” But now, if I get really absorbed in a volume, I can let the whole story, tragedy or comedy, open before me, take its course, and draw to a close. The result is that I find I can apprehend a book in a way that I have never apprehended one before, in its entirety; one can enter wholly and completely into the mind of an author, into the progress of a biography; so that to read a book now is like sitting out a play.

All this is very delightful; and no less delightful, too, is it, if the mood takes me, to wander off for a whole day in the country; to moon onwards entirely oblivious of time; to stop on a hill-top and survey a scene, to turn into a village church and sit long in the cool gloom; to seek out the heart of a copse, all carpeted with spring flowers, and to lie on a green bank, with the whisper of the leaves in one’s ear; or to sit beside a stream, near a crystal pool, half-hidden in sedges, and to see hour by hour what goes on in the dim waterworld. I do not mean to say that it would not be pleasanter to share one’s rambles with a congenial companion; but it is not easy to find one; either there are differences of opinion, or the subtle barriers of age to overleap, or one is conscious that there are regions of one’s mind in which a friend will inevitably and fretfully miss his way—there are not many friends, for anyone, to whom his mind can lie perfectly and unaffectedly open; and thus, though I do not hesitate to say that I would prefer the society of the perfect friend to my loneliness, yet I prefer my loneliness to the incursions of the imperfect friend.

Then at the close of day there is a prospect of a long, quiet evening; one can go to bed when one wishes, with the thought of another unclouded and untroubled day before one. Liberty is, after all, the richest gift that life can give.

And now, having made this panegyric on solitude, I will be just and fair-minded, and I will say exactly what I have found the disadvantages to be.

In the first place, though I do not grow morbid, I find a loss of proportion creeping over me. I attach an undue importance to small things. A troublesome letter, which in a busy life one would answer and forget, rattles in the mind like a pea in a bladder. A little incident—say, for instance, that one has to find fault with a servant—assumes altogether unreal importance. In a busy life one would make up one’s mind as well as one could, and act. But here it is not easy to make up one’s

Page 40

mind. One weighs all contingencies too minutely; one is too considerate, if that is possible; and if one makes up one's mind, perhaps, to find fault, the presence in the house of a dissatisfied person is an undue weight on the mind. Or one reads an unfavourable review, and is too much occupied with its possible results on one's literary prospects. It is not depression that these things induce, but one expends too much energy and thought upon them.

But this on the whole matters little. There is time to be slow in decision; there is time to forecast possibilities. Indeed, it is an advantage for the solitary man to cultivate an over-elaborate way of considering a subject, a slow picking-up and matching of patterns, a maddening deliberation, simply by way of recreation. For a danger of solitude, if one likes one's work, is that one works too much and too hard. Then one writes too much, forgets to fill the cistern; one uses up the old phrases, the old ideas. All which is a sore temptation to a forgetful writer like myself, who re-invents and re-discovers the old sentences with a shock of pleasing novelty and originality, only to find it all written in an earlier book.

But these are all superficial material difficulties such as have to be faced in every life. The real and dark danger of solitude is the self-absorption that is bound to follow. With one like myself, to whom the meeting of a new person is a kind of momentous terror, who feels forced instinctively to use all possible arts to render a clumsy presence and a heavy manner bearable, whose only hope is to be respectfully tolerated, to whom society is not an easy recreation but an arduous game, who would always sooner write a dozen letters than have an interview, with such an one the solitary life tends to make one ghost-like and evasive before one's time. Yet it is not for nothing, I reflect, that Providence has never pushed a pawn to me in the shape of an official wife, and has markedly withheld me from nephews and nieces. It is not for nothing that relationships with others appear to me in the light of a duty, at least in the initial stages, rather than a pleasure.

And yet I reflect that I should doubtless be a better man, even with a shrewish wife and a handful of heavy, unattractive children. I should have to scheme for them, to make things easier for them, to work for them, to recommend them, to cherish them, to love them. These dear transforming burdens are denied me. And yet would the sternest and severest mentor in the world bid me marry without love, for the sake of its effect on my character? "No," he would say, "not that! but let yourself go, be rash, fall in love, marry in haste! It is your only salvation." But that is like telling a dwarf that it is his only salvation to be six feet high—it cannot be done by taking thought. No one can see more acutely and clearly, in more terrible and melancholy detail, than myself what one misses.

Page 41

Call it coldness, call it indifference, call it cowardice—the matter is not mended. If one is cold, one does not grow hot by pretending to perspire; if one is indifferent, one does not become enthusiastic by indulging in hollow rhetoric. If one is cowardly, one can only improve by facing a necessary danger, not by thrusting oneself into perilous situations. To marry without love, for the sake of the discipline, is as if a dizzy man should adventure himself alone upon the Matterhorn; the rashness of proved incapacity is not courage, but a detestable snobbishness. One must make the best of the hard problem of God, not add to its complexity, in order to increase one's patience. Neither men nor angels have any patience with a fool, and it is the deed of a fool to cultivate occasions of folly. One serves best by making the most of one's faculties, not by choosing a life where one's disabilities have full play, in order to correct them. I might as well tell the Pharisee, who bids me let myself go, to take to drink, in order that he may learn moral humility, or to do dishonest things for the discipline of reprobation. I do not think so ill of God as not to believe that he is trying to help me; as the old poet said, "The Gods give to each man whatever is most appropriate to him. Man is dearer to the Gods than to himself." God has sent me many gifts, both good and evil; but he has not sent me a wife, perhaps in pity for a frail creature of his hand, who might have had to bear that tedious fate! But I know what I miss, and see that loveless self-interest is the dark bane of solitude. One may call it a moral leprosy if one loves hard names; but no leper would choose to be a leper if he could avoid it. Whatever happens in this dim world, we should be tender and compassionate of one another. It is a mere stupidity, that stupidity which is of the nature of sin, to compassionate a man for being ill or poor, and not to compassionate him for being cold and lonely. The solitary man must dwell within his own shadow, and make what sport he can; and it is the saddest of all the privileges of reasoning beings, that reason can thus debar a man from wholesome experience. Even in the desolation of ruined Babylon the satyr calls to his fellow and the great owl rears her brood; but the narrow and shivering soul must sit in solitude, till perhaps on a day of joy he may see the background of his dark heart all alive with a tapestry of shining angels, bearing vials in their hands of the water of Life.

XII

I wonder if others experience a very peculiar sensation, which comes upon me at intervals unexpectedly and inexplicably in a certain kind of scene, and on reading a certain type of book—I have known it from my early childhood, as far back as I can recollect anything. It is the sensation of being quite close to some beautiful and mysterious thing which I have lost, and for which in a blind way I am searching.

Page 42

It contains within it a vague yet poignant happiness, a rich and unknown experience. It is the nearest I ever come to a sense of pre-existence; and I have sometimes wondered if it might not be, not perhaps my own pre-existence, but some inherited recollection of happiness in which I myself had no part, but which was part of the mind of one, or of many, from whom I derive my origin. If limbs and features, qualities and desires, are derived from one's ancestors, why should one not also derive a touch of their happy dreams, their sweet remembrances?

The first time it ever came to me was when we were taken, quite as small children, to a little cottage which stood in a clearing of a great pine-wood near Wellington College. I suppose that the cottage was really older than the wood; it was guarded by great sprawling laurels, and below the house was a privet-hedged garden, sheltered all round by the pines, with a stream at the foot. The sun lay very warm on the vegetable beds and orchard trees, and there was a row of hives—not painted cupboards such as one now sees, but big egg-shaped things made of a rope of twisted straw—round which on warm days the humming bees made a low musical note, that rose and fell as the numbers increased or diminished. I suppose my nurse went to buy honey there—we called it The Honey-woman's Cottage. I dimly remember an old, smiling, wrinkled woman opening the door to us, summoning my nurse in to a mysterious talk, and inviting us to go into the garden meanwhile. The whole proceeding was intensely mysterious and beautiful. Through the red pine stems one could see the sandy soil rising and falling in low ridges, strewn with russet needles. Down below, nearer to the stream, a tough green sword-grass grew richly; and beyond lay the deep wood, softly sighing, and containing all sorts of strange scents and haunting presences. In the garden there was a penetrating aromatic smell from the box-hedges and the hot vegetable-beds. We wandered about, and it used to seem to me, I remember, like the scenes in which some of Grimm's fairy-tales were enacted I suppose that the honey-woman was the wife of a woodman and was a simple soul enough; but there was something behind it all; she knew more than she would say. Strange guests drew nigh to the cottage at nightfall, and the very birds of the place had sad tales to tell. But it was not that I connected it with anything definite—it was just the sense of something narrowly eluding me, which was there, but which I could not quite perceive. There were other places, too, that gave me the same sense—one a big dark pool in the woods, with floating water-lilies; it was there, too, that mysterious presence; and it was to be experienced also at the edge of a particular covert, a hanging wood that fell steeply from the road, where the ferns glittered with a metallic light and the flies buzzed angrily in the thicket.

Page 43

And there have been places since where the same sense has come strongly upon me. One was a glade in Windsor Forest, just to be reached by a rapid walk from Eton on a half-holiday afternoon; it was a wide grassy place, with a few old oaks in it, gnarled and withered; and over the tree-tops was a glimpse of distant blue swelling hills. Even now the same sensation comes back to me, more rarely but not less keenly, at smoke going up from the chimney of an unseen house surrounded by woods, and certain effects of sunset upon lonely woodsides and far-off bright waters. It comes with a sudden yearning, and a sense, too, of some personal presence close at hand, a presence that feels and loves and would manifest itself if it could—one with whom I have shared happiness and peace, one in whose eyes I have looked and in whose arms I have been folded. But the thing is so utterly removed from any sense of desire or passion that I can hardly describe it. It gives a sense of long summer days spent in innocent experience, with no need of word or sign. There is no sense of stirring adventure, of exultation, or pride about it—it is just an infinite untroubled calm, of beautiful things perceived in a serenity untroubled by memory or hope, by sorrow or fear. Its quality lies in its eternity; there is no beginning or end about it, no opening or closing door. There seems nothing to explain or reconcile in it; the heart is content to wonder, and has no desire to understand. There is in it none of the shadow of happy days, past and gone, embalmed in memory; no breath of the world comes near it, no thought of care or anxiety, no ugly shadows of death or silence. It seems when it comes like the only true thing in the world, the only perfectly pure thing, like light or sweet sound. And yet it has always the sense that it is not yet quite found, that it is there waiting for a moment to declare itself, within reach of the hand and yet unattained. It is so real that it makes me doubt the reality of everything else in the world, and it removes for an instant all sense of the jarring and inharmonious elements of life, the pitiful desires, the angers and coldnesses of fellow-mortals, the selfish claims of one's own timid heart and mind.

It came to me for a moment to-day in my little orchard deep in high-seeded grass: a breeze came and went, stirring the leaves of the trees and bowing the tall grasses with its flying footsteps; a bird broke out in a bush into a jocund trill of song, as if triumphing in the joyful sight of something that was hidden from my eyes. If I could but have caught and held the secret, how easily it would have solved my own perplexities, how faithfully would I have whispered it in men's ears; but while I wondered, it was gone like the viewless passage of an angel, and left me with my longing unfulfilled, my yearning unsatisfied.

XIII

Page 44

I have been spending some days in town, on business; I have been sitting on two committees, I have given a lecture, I have attended a public dinner; and now I have come back gratefully to my hermitage. I got home in the evening; it is winter, but unusually warm; and the birds were fluting in the bushes, as I walked round the garden in the twilight, as though they had an inkling of the Spring; to hear them gave me a sort of delicious pain, I hardly know why. They seemed to speak to me of old happy hours that have long folded their wings, of bright pleasant days, lightly regarded, easily spent, shut into the volumes of the past. "I see," as the Psalmist said, "that all things come to an end." There is something artificial about the soft sadness that one feels, and yet it is perfectly natural and instinctive; it is not as if I were melancholy or unhappy; my life is full of active enjoyment, and I am in that mood of delightful tranquillity which comes of having finished a tiresome series of engagements which I had anticipated without pleasure. It is not the sense only of vanished days; nor is it the sense of not having realised their joyfulness at the time; it is a deeper regret than that; it is the shadow of the uncertainty as to what will ultimately become of our individuality. If one was assured of immortality, of permanence, of growth, of progress, these regrets would fall off from one as gently as withered leaves float from a tree; or rather, one would never think of them; but now one has the sense of a certain number of beautiful days dealt out to one by God, and the knowledge that they are spent one by one. Another strange thing about the retrospective sadness of the vanished past is that it is not the memorable days of life, as a rule, whose passing one regrets. One would not, I think, wish to have one's days of triumph, of success, or even the days when one was conscious of an extreme personal happiness, back again. Partly it is that one seems to have appreciated their quality and crushed out their sweetness—partly, too, there mingles with days of extreme and conscious bliss a certain fever of the spirit, a certain strain of excitement, that is not wholly pleasurable. No, the days that one rather desires to have again are the days of tranquil and easy contentment, when the old home-circle was complete, and when one hardly guessed that one was happy at all, and did not perceive—how could one?—as life rose serenely and strongly to its zenith, what the pains and shadows of the declining life might be. And yet more strange is it that the memory, by some subtle alchemy, has the power of involving in a delicate golden mist days of childhood and boyhood which one knows as a matter of fact not to have been happy. For instance, my own memory continues to clothe my early schooldays with a kind of sunlit happiness, though I was not only not consciously happy, but distinctly and consciously unhappy. But memory refuses to retain the elements of unhappiness,

Page 45

the constant apprehension, that hung over one like a cloud, of punishment, and even ill-usage. I was not unduly punished at school, and I was certainly never ill-used. But one saw others suffer, and my own sensitive and timid nature perpetually foreboded disaster. Day after day as a little boy I longed for home surroundings and home affections as eagerly as the hart desires the water-brooks. But memory pushes all that aside, and obstinately insists on regarding the whole period in an idyllic and buoyant light.

I walk round the borders, which are all full of the little glossy spikes of snowdrops pushing up, struggling through the crusted earth. The sad hero of *Maud* walked “in a ghastly glimmer,” and found “the shining daffodil dead.” I walk in the soft twilight, that is infinitely tender, soothing, and sweet, and find the daffodil taking on his new life; and there rises in my heart an uplifted yearning, not so much for the good days that are dead, but that I may somehow come to possess the peace that underlies the memory of them all—not handle it for a moment and lay it down, but possess it or be possessed by it for ever.

Yet these busy days through which I have been passing are good for me, I believe. I have seen and talked to a number of people; and so far from finding that my solitary life makes me unfit for society, I think that it gives me a good-humoured contentment in the interchange of talk and argument, which I lacked in old days when I was fighting for my position. The things seem to matter so little to me now. I do not care in the least what impression I make, so long as people are kind and friendly. Life is no longer a race, where I wish to get ahead of others; it is a pilgrimage in which we are all alike bound. But it is good for me to be in the middle of it all, not only because of the contrast which it presents to the life I have chosen, but because it is like the strong scour of a current sweeping through the mind and leaving it clean and sweet. The danger of the quiet life is that one gets too comfortable, too indolent. It does me good to have to mix with people, to smile and bow, to try and say the right thing, to argue a point courteously, to weigh an opponent's arguments, to make efforts, to go where I do not desire to go; and I have no longer an axe of my own to grind; I only desire that the right conclusion should be reached.

But the things which people consider amusing and entertaining bewilder me more and more. I went to an evening party on one of the evenings I spent in town. There was a suite of fine rooms, hung with beautiful pictures and full of works of art. A courteous host and hostess received us, said a few amiable words to each, and passed us on into the rooms: we circulated, stood, sate, looked, talked. I suppose it is a question of temperament, but I felt that every single element of social, intellectual, and aesthetic pleasure was absent from the scene. One had no

Page 46

time to look at the beautiful things that leaned and beckoned from the walls. There was no chance of quiet, reasonable talk; one pumped up a few inanities to person after person. I suppose that most of the guests would not have come if they did not at all events think it amused them; but what was the charm? I suppose that to most of the guests it was the stir, the light, the moving figures—for there were many beautiful and stately women and distinguished men present—the sense of company, warmth, success, about it all. To me it was merely distracting—a score of sources of pleasure, and all of them preventing the enjoyment of each. I think I am probably more and not less sensitive to all these fine and rare things than perhaps most people; and I suppose it is this very sensitiveness that makes me averse to them all *in mass*. It is to me like the jangling of all the strings of some musical instrument. I felt that I could have lingered alone in these fine rooms, wandering from picture to picture with a lively pleasure. There were many people present with whom I should have deeply enjoyed a *tete-a-tete*. But the whole effect was like over-eating oneself, like having to taste a hundred exquisite dishes in a single meal. I do not protest against such gatherings on principle; if they give the guests a sense of pleasure and well-being, I have not a word to say against it all. But I believe in my heart that there are many people who do not really enjoy it, or enjoy it only in a purely conventional way; and what I should like to do is to assist the people whose enjoyment of it is conventional, to find out simpler and more real sources of happiness; because to make these great houses possible there is a vast amount of patient and unpraised human labour wasted. I do not think labour is wasted in producing beautiful things, so long as they can have an effect; but a superabundance of beauty has no effect—no effect, at least, that could not be produced by things less costly of effort and skill. The very refreshments, which hardly any one touched, stand for an amount of wasted labour which might have given pleasure to the poor toilers who produced them. Think of the ransacking of different climates, of the ships speeding over the sea, the toil of gatherers, porters, cooks, servers, that went to fit out that sparkling buffet. I suppose that it is easy for me, who do not value the result, to be mildly socialistic about these things; the pathos is not in the work, but in the waste of the work, not in the delicate things collected for our use and however fitfully enjoyed, but in the things made and collected by unknown toilers, and then either not used at all or not consciously enjoyed.

Page 47

And so it is with a heightened relish for the serener simplicities of life, that I return to my quiet rooms, my old trees, my carelessly ordered garden, as a sailor floats into the calm waters of the well-known haven out of the plunge and surf of the sea. There is no strain here to torment me, no waste to afflict me. I do not have to spend reluctant hours in enjoyments which I do not enjoy; I am not overshadowed by the sense of engagements which I am bound to keep. Moreover, I can return to the beloved work which is unwillingly suspended in the bustle of town. I do not know why it is that I have so deep a sense of the value of time, when what I do matters so little to any one. But at least I have here the sense of doing work that may conceivably minister something to the service of others, while in town I have the sense of spending hours in occupations that cannot in any way benefit others, while they are certainly no satisfaction to myself,

“In hoc portu quiescit
Si quis aquas timet inquietas,”

says the wistful poet; and the tossing on the waves of the world thus gives me the tonic sense of contrast to my peaceful life which it would otherwise lack. It is the sail and vinegar of the banquet, lending a brisk and wholesome savour to what might otherwise tend to become vapid and dull.

XIV

I have just finished a book and despatched it to the press. It is rather a dreary moment that! At first one has a sense of relief at having finished a task and set down a burden, but that elation lasts only for a day or two, and then one begins to miss one's true and faithful companion. This particular book has been in a special sense a companion to me, because it has been a book out of my own mind and heart, not a book undertaken for the sake of diffusing useful information, but a book of which I conceived the idea, planned the structure, and filled up the detail. It has almost assumed a personality. It has hardly been absent from my thoughts for the last six months. It has darted into my mind when I awoke; it has stood looking over my shoulder as I read, pointing with airy finger at the lines, “There is a thought for you; here is an excellent illustration of that point you could not make clear.” It has walked with me as close or closer than my shadow, until it has become a real thing, a being, a friend, like myself but yet not quite myself.

And then my book, as I read it through for the last time, is all full of gentle and tender associations. This chapter brings back to me a day of fierce wind and blustering rain, when I walked by sodden roads and whistling hedges in my oldest clothes, till they hung heavily about me and creaked as I moved; the thought of the chapter came to me, I remember, when I decided that I had been far enough for health and even for glory, and when I fled back before the hooligan wind; then followed a long, quiet, firelit evening

Page 48

when I abandoned myself in luxurious ease to my writing, till the drowsy clock struck the small hours of the morning. Then another chapter is all scented with the breath of roses, that stole into my windows on a still summer evening; at another point the page is almost streaked and stained for me with the sorrowful tidings which came to me in the middle of a sentence; when I took up my writing again some days after, it seemed as though there was a deep trench between me and my former self. And again another chapter was written in all the glow of a beautiful and joyful experience, in a day of serene gladness which made me feel that it was worth while to have lived, even if the world should hold nothing else that was happy for me.

Thus, then, and thus has my life transferred itself to these pages, till they are all full for me of joy and sorrow, of experience and delight, I suppose that a painter or a musician have the same tenderness about their work, though it seems to me impossible that their life can have so flowed into picture or song as my life has flowed into my book. The painter has had to transcribe what he sees, the musician to capture the delicate intervals that have thrilled his inner ear—but if the painter's thought has been absorbed in the forms that he is depicting, if the musician has lost himself among the airy harmonies, the sweet progressions, these things must have drawn them away from life, and secluded them in a paradise of emotion; but with me it has been different; for it is life itself that has palpitated in my pages, my very heart's blood has been driven by eager pulsations through sentence and phrase; and the book is thus a part of myself in a way in which no picture and no melody can be. I have something, I think, of the joy of the mother over her child, the child that has lain beneath her bosom and been nourished from her heart; and now that my book is to leave me, it is a part of myself that goes into the world of men.

And now I shall pass vague and dreary days, until the seed of life again quickens within me, and till I know again that I have conceived another creature of the mind. Dreary days, because the mind, relieved of its sweet toil, flaps loose and slack like a drooping sail. I am weary, too, not with a pleasant physical weariness, but with the weariness of one who has spent a part of life too swiftly. For the joy of such work as mine is so great that there seems nothing like it in the world; and the hours are vain and listless that are not so comforted. Now I shall make a dozen beginnings, not foreseeing the end, and I shall abandon them in despair. The beauties of the earth, the golden sunlight, the crimson close of day, the leaping streams, the dewy grass will call in vain. Books and talk alike will seem trivial and meaningless tattle, ministering to nothing.

And then my book will begin to return to me in printed pages. Sometimes that is a joy, when it seems better than one knew; sometimes it is a disgust, if one has passed swiftly out of the creative mood; and then it will be lost to me for a time while it is drest and adorned, to walk abroad; till it comes back like a stranger in its new guise.

Page 49

And then comes what is the saddest experience of all; it will pass into the hands of friends and readers; echoes of it will come back to me, in talk and print; but it will no longer be the book I knew and loved, only a part of my past. And this is the hardest thing of all for a writer, that when others read one's book they take it for the flash of a present mood, while the writer of it will only see in it a pale reflection of a time long past, and will feel perhaps even farther away from his book than those who criticise it, however severely. If my book is criticised as I write it, or directly after I have written it, it is as though I were myself maltreated; but when it appears so belatedly, I am often the harshest critic of all, because my whole point of view may perhaps have shifted, and I may be no longer the man who wrote the book, but a man of larger experience, who can judge perhaps more securely than any one else how far behind life the book lags. There is no season in the world in which the mind travels faster from its standpoint than when it has finished a book, because during all the writing of it one has kept, as it were, tensely and constrainedly at a certain point; and so when freedom comes, the thought leaps hurriedly forward, like a weight lifted by an elastic cord that has been stretched almost to breaking. "Can I ever have thought or felt so?" the mind says to itself, scanning the pages; and thus a book, which is mistaken for the very soul of a man, is often no more like the man himself than a dusty, sunburnt picture that represents what he was long years before.

But to-day my only thought is that the little companion whom I loved so well, who has walked and sate, eaten and drunk, gone in and out with me, silent and smiling, has left me and departed to try his fortune in the rough world. How will he fare? how will he be greeted? And yet I know that when he returns to me, saying, "I am a part of yourself," I shall be apt to deny it. For whereas now, if my child is lame, or feeble or pitiful or blind, I love him the better that he is not strong and active; when he returns I shall have a clear eye for his faults and weaknesses, and shall wish him other than he will be.

Sometimes I have talked with the writers of books, and they have told me of the misery and agony that the composition of a book has brought them. They speak of hot and cold fits; of times when they write fiercely and eagerly, and of times when they cannot set down a line to their mind; days of despair when they hate and despise the book; days when they cannot satisfy themselves about a single word: all this is utterly unknown to me; once embarked upon a book, I have neither hesitation nor fear. To sit down to it, day after day, and to write, is like sitting down to talk with one's nearest friend, where no concealment or diplomacy is necessary, but where one can say exactly what comes into the mind, with no fear of being misunderstood. I have not the

Page 50

smallest difficulty about expressing exactly as I wish to express it, whatever is in my mind. When I fail, it is because the thought itself is incomplete, imperfect, obscure; yet as I write, weariness and dissatisfaction are unknown. I cannot imagine how anyone can write a book without loving the toil, such as it is. Probably that is because I am indolent or pleasure-loving. I do not see how work of this kind can be done at all in a spirit of heaviness, it may be a fine moral discipline to do a dreaded thing heavily and faithfully; but what hope is there of the work being tinged with delight? It is as though a tired man set out to make a butterfly out of cardboard and gum and powdered silks; it would be nothing when it was made. A book must, before all things, have vigour; and vigour cannot be germinated by a sense of duty; it can only spring from hope and confidence and desire.

But now, to-day, my darling has gone from me; he is jolting in some dusty van, or he is propelled through muddy streets in a red box on wheels; or perhaps he is already in the factory among the rattle of type and the throb of the printing-press. I feel like a father whose boy has gone to school, and who sits wondering how the child may be faring in the big, unfamiliar place. Well, I will not grieve; but rather I will thank the Father of all things living, the inspirer of all sweet and delicate thoughts, all pleasant fancies, all glowing words, for the joy that I have had.

XV

In one respect only does the advance of age cast a shadow over my mind; in most matters it is a pure gain. Even though a certain peculiar quality of light-hearted happiness visits me more rarely—a happiness like that of a lark that soars, beats her wings, and trills in the blue sky—yet the loss is more than compensated for by the growth of an equable tranquillity, neither rapturous nor sad, which abides with me for long spaces.

But here is the secret wound—*clausum pectore volnus!*—I am or would be an artist in words. Well, when I look round at the work of the artists whose quality I envy and adore, I am struck by this alarming fact, that in almost every case their earliest work is their best work.

This is almost invariably true in one particular domain, that of purely imaginative poetical work. By which I do not mean poetry only, but poetical prose like Pater's, poetical fiction like Charlotte Brontë's; I think that a narrative writer, a humorous writer, a critical writer, a biographical writer may continue to improve until his faculties begin to decay. He may get a wider, a more penetrating, a more tolerant view of life; his style gain lucidity, impressiveness, incisiveness, pungency; but in the case of the poetical and the

reflective writer it seems to me that something evaporates—some quite peculiar freshness, naivete, indiscreetness, which, can never be recaptured. Take a few typical

Page 51

instances. Coleridge lost the poetical gift altogether when he left his youth behind; Wordsworth wrote all his best poetry in a few early years; Milton lost his pure lyric gift. But the most salient instance of all is Tennyson; in the two earliest volumes there is a perfectly novel charm, a grace, a daring which he lost in later life. He became solemn, mannerised, conscious of responsibility. Sometimes, as in some of the lyrics of *Maud*, he had a flash of the old spirit. But compare the *Idylls of the King*, for all their dignity and lavish art, their sweet cadences, their mellifluous flow, with the early fragment in the same manner, the *Morte d'Arthur*, and you become aware that some exquisite haunted quality has slipped away from the later work which made the *Morte d'Arthur* one of the most perfect poems of the century. The *Morte d'Arthur* is seen, the *Idylls* are laboriously imagined. The *Idylls*, again, are full of an everyday morality—the praise of civic virtues, the evolution of types—and how tiresome they thus become! but in the *Morte d'Arthur* there is only a prophetic mysticism, which is all the more noble because it is so remote from common things.

With Browning it is the same in a certain degree; there is a charm about *Pauline*, for all its immaturity, which creates an irrepressible, uncalculating mood of undefined longing, utterly absent from his latest work. Perhaps one of the most remarkable instances is that of Rossetti. In the course of the *House of Life*, the dark curtain of the exotic mood, with its strange odours and glimpses, its fallen light, its fevered sense, is raised at intervals upon a sonnet of pure transparency and delicate sweetness, as though the weary, voluptuous soul, in its restless passage among perfumed chambers, looked out suddenly from a window upon some forest glade, full of cool winds and winter sunshine, and stood silent awhile. These sonnets will always be found to be the earlier writings transplanted into the new setting.

I suppose it is to a certain extent a physical thing. It is the shadow of experience, of familiarity, of weariness that creeps over the soul. In youth the spirit expands like an opening rose, and things heard and seen strike upon the senses with an incredible novelty and freshness, hinting at all sorts of sweet surprises, joyful secrets, hopeful mysteries. It is the subtle charm of youth that evaporates, the charm that makes a young and eager boy on the threshold of manhood so interesting, so delightful, even though he may be inarticulate and immature and self-absorbed. Who does not remember friends of college days, graceful and winning creatures, lost in the sense of their own significance, who had nothing, it may be, particular to say, no great intellectual grip, no suggestiveness, yet moving about in a mysterious paradise of their own, full of dumb emotion, undefined longing, and with a deep sense of the romantic possibilities of

Page 52

life. Alas, as the days move on and the crisis delays, as life brings the need of labour, the necessity of earning money, as love and friendship lose their rosy glow and settle down into comfortable relations, the disillusionment spreads and widens. I do not say that the nearer view of life is not more just, more wholesome, more manly. It is but the working of some strictly determined law. The dreams fade, become unreal and unsubstantial; though not rarely, in some glimpse of retrospect, the pilgrim turns, ascends a hillock by the road, and sees the far-off lines, the quiet folds, of the blue heights from which he descended in the blithe air of the morning, and knows that they were desirable. Perhaps the happiest of all are those who, as the weary day advances, can catch a sight of some no less beautiful hills ahead of him, their hollows full of misty gold, where the long journey may end; and then, however wearily the sun falls on the dusty road and the hedged fields to left and right, he knows that the secrets of the earlier day are beautiful secrets still, and that the fine wonder of youth has yet to be satisfied. And yet the shadow does undoubtedly fall heavily on the way for me and for such as me, whose one hope is that before they die they may make some delicate thing of beauty and delight which may remind those that come after that the first beauty of opening light and the song of the awakening bird is a real and true thing, not a mere effect of air and sun and buoyant spirit. Experience and fact and hard truth have a beauty of their own, no doubt. Politics and commerce, the growth of social liberty and law, civic duty and responsibility—dull words for noble things—have their place, their value, their significance. But to the poet they seem only the laborious organising of his dreams, the slow and clumsy manufacture of what ought to be instinctive and natural. If the world must grow upon these lines, if men must toil in smoke-stained factories or wrangle in heated Parliaments, then it is well that the framework of life should be made as firm, as compact, as just as it can. But not here does his hope lie; he looks forward to a far different regeneration than can be effected by law and police. He looks forward to a time when the hearts of men shall be so wise and tender and simple that they shall smile at the thought that life needs all this organising and arranging. For those who labour for social good lose sight too often of the end in the means. They think of education as a business of delightful intricacy, and forget that it is but an elaborate device for teaching men to love quiet labour and to enjoy the delight of leisure. They lose themselves in the dry delight of codifying law, and forget that law is only necessary because men are born brutal and selfish. Morality may be imposed from without, or grace may grow from within; and the poet is on the side of the inner grace, because he thinks that if it can be achieved it will outrun the other lightly and easily.

Page 53

But as we journey through the world, as we become aware of the meanness and selfishness of men, as we learn to fight for our own hand, the high vision is apt to fade. Who then can be more sad than the man who has felt in the depths of his soul the thrill of that opening light, and the further that he journeys, finds more and more weary persons who tell him insistently that it was nothing but a foolish incident of youth, a trick of fancy, a passing mood, and that life must be given to harder and more sordid things? It is well for him if he can resist these ugly voices; if he can continue to discern what there is of generous and pure in the hearts of those about him, if he can persevere in believing that life does hold a holy and sweet mystery, and that it is not a mere dreary struggle for a little comfort, a little respect, a little pleasure by the way. It is upon a man's power of holding fast to undimmed beauty that his inner hopefulness, his power of inspiring others, depends. But though it is sad to see some artist who has tasted of the morning dew, and whose heart has been filled with rapture, trading and trafficking, in conventional expression and laborious seriousness, with the memories of those bright visions, it is sadder far to see a man turn his back cynically upon the first hope, and declare his conviction that he has found the unreality of it all. The artist must pray daily that his view may not grow clouded and soiled; and he must be ready, too, if he finds the voice grow faint, to lay his outworn music by, though he does it in utter sadness of soul, only glad if he can continue sorrowful.

XVI

I have been thinking all to-day, for no particular reason that I can discover, of a house where I spent many of the happiest days of my life. It belonged for some years to an old friend of mine a bachelor, a professional man, who used to go there for his holidays, and delighted to gather round him a few familiar friends. Year after year I used to go there, sometimes twice in the year, for long periods together. The house was in North Wales: it stood somewhat above the plain on a terrace among woods, at the base of a long line of dark crags, which showed their scarped fronts, with worn fantastic outlines, above the trees that clustered at their feet and straggled high up among the shoots of stone. The view from the house was of extraordinary beauty. There was a flat rich plain below, dotted with clumps of trees; a mountain rose at one side, a rocky ridge. Through the plain a slow river broadened to the sea, and at the mouth stood a little town, the smoke of which went up peacefully on still days. Across the sea, shadowy headlands of remote bays stood out one after another to the south. The house had a few sloping fields below it; a lawn embowered in trees, and a pretty old walled garden, where the sun-warmed air was redolent with the homely scent of old-fashioned herbs and flowers. Several little steep paths meandered through the wood, crossing and recrossing tiny leaping streams, and came out on a great tract of tumbled moorland above, with huge broad-backed mountains couched about it.

Page 54

The house itself was full of low, pleasant rooms, looking out on to a wide verandah. It was almost austere furnished, and the life was simple and serene. We used to go for vague walks on the moor or by the sea, and sometimes took long driving and walking expeditions among the hills. It was a rainy region, and we were often confined to the house, except for a brisk walk in the soft rain. The climate never suited me; I was always languid in body there, greedy of sleep and food. There was no great brilliance of talk, only a quiet ease of communication such as takes place among people of the same interests. I was ill there, more than once, and often anxious and perplexed. And yet, for all that, my memory persists in investing it all with a singular radiance, and tells me over and over again that I was never so happy in any place in my life. I must say that my friend was an ideal host, quiet, benevolent, anxious that people should enjoy themselves in their own way, and yet with a genial firmness of administration which is the greatest of all luxuries if it co-exists with much liberty. He was not a great talker, though he occasionally uttered a witty epigram, often of a somewhat caustic kind; but the air of serene benevolence with which he used to preside always set people at their ease. There was, too, another friend, who was there less often, but who shared the expense of the house, who was a singularly charming and stimulating talker, full of acute observation and emotional appreciation of character. The combination of the two was perfection.

It is pleasant to recollect the long, vague summer days there, the mornings spent in reading in the verandah, the afternoons in a quiet ramble; not less delightful were the short winter days, when the twilight set in early, and the house was warm and softly lit. One agreeable rule was that after dinner anyone who felt inclined should read rather than talk; and we have often sate in an amiable silence, with the fire rustling in the grate, and the leaves of books being softly turned. The charm was the absence of constraint, and the feeling that one could say exactly what came into one's mind without any danger of being misunderstood. But for all that I cannot quite explain the golden content that seems in retrospect to have overspread the whole house. We were often frankly critical. We did not spare each other's weaknesses; but no resentment, no dissatisfaction, no strife seems to me ever to have clouded the sunny atmosphere.

It all came to an end some years ago; circumstances made it necessary for my friends to give up the house; and one of the most beautiful instances of the spirit of the place was on the occasion of our last visit. We knew that the good days were over, and that our lives could never be quite so pleasantly united again; but the place held us under its spell; and I remember as I drove away through the woods, in a soft moist dawn, I felt nothing but a deep and uncomplaining gratitude

Page 55

for all the happiness that I had enjoyed there; the trees, the crags, the embowered lawn with its smiling flowers, the verandah with its chairs piled up for departure, the dismantled library, all seemed to say farewell with the same tenderness with which they had always welcomed us. It seemed impossible to regret or repine. The house would receive and guard and comfort other pilgrims in their turn. I felt that any sense of sorrowful loss would be somehow like a kind of treachery, a peevish ingratitude, not even to be entertained in thought, much less expressed; to have yielded to any form of repining would have been, it seemed to me, like spending the last few minutes of a visit, where one had been received with a cordial and simple hospitality, in pointing out to one's host the inconvenience of his house.

I think that where one so often makes a mistake in life is in thinking of the beautiful past as over and done with. One ought to think of it rather as existing. It can no more be lost than any other beautiful thing or fine feeling can be lost. The flower may fade, the tree may shed its leaf, the work of art may perish, the great poem may be forgotten; the lovely ancient building, with all the grace of tradition and memory, all the sweet mellowing of outline and detail, may be dismantled or restored; yet the beauty is not in the passing form, but in the spirit that expresses itself in the form on the one hand—the great, subtle, tender, powerful spirit that is for ever working and creating and producing—and, on the other hand, it lies no less in the desire and worship that thrills and beats, deep in the spirit, leaning out like one who gazes upon the sunset from the window of a tower, listening to the appeal of beauty, looking out for it, welcoming it, thirsting for it. Both these powers are there, the spirit that calls and the spirit that answers the call. The mistake we make is to anchor ourselves timidly and persistently to one set of beautiful forms, and if they are destroyed, to feel that the world is made desolate for us. We are apt to think that there is a sort of loyalty about this, and that an ineffectual repining for the beautiful thing that has passed proves the intensity of our regard and love. It is not so; we might as well repine if we have loved a child, to find it growing up to strength and manhood. Because we have loved the rosebud, we need not despise the rose, and when the child loses its tender charm, when the rose drops her loosened petals on the grass, our love is a mere sentiment, an aesthetic appreciation, if we can only regret what is past. It is the fragrant charm, the echoing harmony of the spirit that matters; and if the charm passes out of our ken, if the song dies upon the air, if the sunset hue fades, it is all there none the less, both the beauty and the love we bore it. I do not mean that the conquest is an easy one, because our perceptions are so narrow and so finite that when the sweet sound or the delicate

Page 56

light passes out of our horizon, it is hard to feel that it is not dead. But we ought, I am sure, to remind ourselves more constantly that both the quality of beauty itself and the desirous love that it evokes are the unchangeable things; and that though they shift and fuse, ebb and flow, they are assuredly there. "When they persecute you in one city, flee into another," said the Saviour of men in a dim allegory. It is true of all things; and the secret is to realise that we have no continuing city. Of course there sometimes fall shattering blows upon us, when someone who was half the world to us, on whom we have leant and depended, whose mind and heart have cast a glow of hope and comfort upon every detail of life, steps past the veil into the unseen. Then comes the darkest hour of struggling bewilderment; but even then we make a miserable mistake, if we withdraw into the silence of our own hearts and refuse to be comforted, priding ourselves, it may be, upon the abiding faithfulness of our love. But to yield to that is treachery; and then, most of all, we ought to stretch out our hands to all about us and welcome every gift of love. It is impossible not to suffer, yet we are perhaps but tenderly punished for having loved the image better than the thing it signified. We are punished because our idolising love has rested content with the form that it has borne, and has not gone further and deeper into the love which it typified.

What we have to beware of is a timid and cautious loitering in the little experience we have ourselves selected, in the little garden we have fenced off from the plain and the wood. And thus the old house that I loved in my pleasant youth, the good days that I spent there year by year, are an earnest of the tender care that surrounds me. I will not regard them as past and gone; I will rather regard them as the slow sweet prelude of the great symphony; if I am now tossed upon the melancholy and broken waves of some vehement scherzo of life, the subject is but working itself out, and I will strive to apprehend it even here. There are other movements that await me, as wonderful, as sweet.

"And now that it is all over," said an old, wearied, and dying statesman, after a day of sad farewells, "it is not so bad after all." The terror, the disquietude, is not in the thing suffered, but in our own faithless hearts. But if we look back at the past and see how portion after portion has become dear and beautiful, can we not look forward with a more steadfast tranquillity and believe that the love and beauty are all there waiting for us, though the old light seems to have been withdrawn?

XVII

Page 57

What a strange, illusory power memory has in dealing with the past, of creating a scene and an emotion that not only never existed, but that could not possibly ever have existed. When I look back to my own commonplace, ordinary, straightforward boyhood, wrapped up in tiny ambitions, vexed with trivial cares, full of trifling events, with a constant sense of small dissatisfaction, I am amazed at the colours with which memory tints the scene. She selects a few golden hours, scenes of peculiar and instantaneous radiance, when the old towers and trees were touched with a fine sunshine, when the sky was unclouded, the heart light, and when one lived for a moment in a sense of some romance of ambition or friendship; and she bids one believe that all one's boyhood was thus bright and goodly, although one knows in one's heart that the texture of it was often mean, pitiful, and selfish; though reason at the same time overwhelms one with reproach and shame for not having made a brighter and braver thing of it, when all the conditions were so favourable.

It is so too with pathos—that pathos which centres so firmly upon the smallest details, and neglects the larger sadnesses. I had so curious an instance of this the other day that I cannot refrain from telling it, because I suppose it can hardly ever have happened to anyone before.

I have an old friend who lives by himself in London, where I sometimes visit him. He is a studious, unmethodical, untidy man. His rooms are dusty and neglected, and he is quite unaware of his surroundings. By his favourite arm-chair stands a table covered with papers, books, cigar-boxes, paper-knives, pencils, in horrible confusion; a condition of things which causes him great discomfort and frequent loss of time. I have often exhorted him to sort the mess; he has always smilingly undertaken to do so, but has never succeeded.

A few weeks ago I called to see him; the servant who let me in, whose face was new to me, looked very grave; and when I asked if my friend was in, turned pale and said: "I suppose you do not know what has happened, sir—Mr. A—— died yesterday at Brighton. I think that Mr. B——" (naming the owner of the house, who lets lodgings) "can tell you all about it—will you go upstairs? I will tell him you are here."

I went up: the sun was streaming into the room, with its well-known furniture and pictures, shabby and yet somehow home-like. There was the familiar table, with all its litter. I was stunned with the news, unable to realise it; and the sight of the table, with all the customary details in the old disorder, fairly unmanned me; so it was all over and done with, and my friend was gone without a word or sign.

I heard rapid steps along the passage; Mr. B——, the owner of the house, entered with an apologetic smile. "I am afraid that there has been a mistake, sir," he said. "Mr. A—— is not dead, as the servant informed you; it is the gentleman who lives on the floor above, who has been an invalid for some time, who is dead; the servant is new to the

place, and has made a confusion; we only had a wire a few minutes ago. Mr. A—— is perfectly well, and will be in in a few minutes if you will wait”

Page 58

I waited, in a strange revulsion of spirit; but the most singular thing is that the crowded table, which had been a few minutes before the most pathetic thing in the world, had become by the time that A—— entered smiling, as irritating and annoying as ever; changed from the poor table where his earthly litter had accumulated, which he could touch no more for ever, into the table which he ought to have put straight long ago and should be ashamed of leaving in so vile a condition.

XVIII

I have had a night of strange and terror-haunted dreams. Yesterday I was forced to work at full speed, feverishly and furiously for a great many hours, at a piece of work that admitted of no delay. By the evening I was considerably exhausted, yet the work was not done. I slept for an hour, and then settled down again and worked very late in the night, until it was finished. Such a strain cannot be borne with impunity, and I never do such a thing except under pressure of absolute necessity. I suppose that I contrived to inflame some delicate tissue of the brain, as the result was a series of intensely vivid dreams, with a strange quality of horror about them. It was not so much that the incidents themselves were of a dreadful type, but I was overshadowed by a deep boding, a dull ache of the mind, which charged everything that I saw with a sense of fortuitous dismay. I woke in that painful mood in which the mind is filled with a formless dread; and the sensation has hung about me, more or less, all day.

What a strange phenomenon it is that the sick mind should be able thus to paint its diseased fancies in the dark, and then to be dismayed at its own creations. In one of my dreams, for instance, I seemed to wander in the bare and silent corridors of a great house. I passed a small and sinister door, and was impelled to open it. I found myself in a large oak-panelled room, with small barred windows admitting a sickly light. The floor was paved with stone; and in the centre, built into the pavement, stood a large block of basalt, black and smooth, which was roughly carved into the semblance of a gigantic human head. I stared at this for a long time, and then swiftly withdrew, overcome with horror which I could not translate into words. All that I seemed to know was that some kind of shocking rites were here celebrated: I did not know what they were, and there were no signs of anything; no instruments of death, no trace of slaughter; yet for all that I knew that the place stood for some evil mystery, and the very walls and floor seemed soaked with fear and pain.

That is the inexplicable part of dreams, that one should invent incidents and scenes of every kind, with no sense of invention or creation, with no feeling that one is able to control what one appears to hear or see; and then that in some other part of one's mind, one should be moved and stirred by the appropriate emotions awakened by word or sight. In waking hours one can be stirred, amused, grieved by the exercise of one's imagination, but one is aware that it is imagination, and one does not lose the sense of responsibility, the consciousness of creation.

Page 59

It is this sensation, that dreams arise from some power or influence exterior to oneself, which then the significance which they used to possess, and indeed still possess, for the unreasoning mind. They seem communications from some other sphere of life, experiences external to oneself, messages from some hidden agency. When they correspond, as by coincidence they are almost bound on occasions to do, with some unforeseen and unexpected event that follows them, it is very difficult for unphilosophical minds not to believe that they are visions sent from some power that can foresee the future. It would be strange if dreams, trafficking as they do with such wide and various experiences, did not occasionally seem to be related to events of the following day, however little anticipated those events may be; but no theory of dreams would be satisfactory or scientific which did not take account of the vast number of occasions on which they do not in the least correspond with what followed in the day. The natural temper of man is so pre-eminently unscientific that a single occasion on which a dream does seem to correspond in a curious manner with subsequent events outweighs a thousand occasions on which no such correspondence is traceable. Yet nothing but a long series of premonitory dreams could suffice for the basis of a scientific theory.

The main interest of dreams to myself is that they serve to show the essential texture of the mind. In waking hours I am conscious of many natural phenomena which make a strong impression on my mind; but my dreaming mind makes, it seems, a whimsical selection among these incidents, and discards some, while it makes a liberal use of others. For instance, in real life, the sight of a beautiful sunset is a common experience, and stirs in me the most profound emotion; yet I have never seen a sunset in dreams. All my dreams are enacted in a pale and clear light of which the source is never visible. I have never seen sun, moon, or star in a dream. Again, to step into a farther region, I am a good deal occupied in real life by ethical considerations; but in dreams I have absolutely no sense of morality. I am afraid, in my dreams, of the consequences of my acts; but I commit a murder or a theft in a dream without the least scruple of conscience.

Whether this proves that my morality, my conscience, in real life, is a purely conventional thing, acquired by habit, I do not know; it would appear to be so. Again, some of my most habitual actions in real life are never repeated in dreams; I have for many years devoted much time and energy to literary work in real life, but in dreams I have never written anything; though I have heard poems repeated or read from books which are purely imaginary, and I have even read my own compositions aloud from what appeared in dreams to be a previously written manuscript; but I am never conscious, in dreams, of ever having put pen to paper for any purpose whatever, even to write a letter. Yet, again, it is not as though all the materials were drawn from a time before I had begun to write; because sometimes dreams will repeat, or interweave into their texture, quite recent experiences.

Page 60

It appears to me as though the only part of the brain that is active in dreams is the spectatorial and dramatic part; and even so it is quite beyond me to solve the problem of how it comes about that my visualising faculty in dreams can bring upon the stage, as it often does, some personage who is perfectly well known to me in real life, and cause him to behave in so unaccountable and grotesque a fashion that I appear to be entirely bewildered and even shocked by the occurrence. For instance, I dreamt the other night that I went to see a high ecclesiastical dignitary, whom I have known for many years, whom I knew in my dream to have been undergoing a rest-cure, though the person in question has never to my knowledge undergone any such experience. I was greatly surprised and even distressed when he entered the room arrayed in a short jacket, with an Eton collar, carrying some childish toys, and saying, "I am completely rejuvenated." I was not in the least amused by this at the time, but only lost in wonder as to how I could communicate to him that it would be a great misfortune if he went back to his dignified post in such a guise and with such avocations as his toys implied.

The whole thing is an insoluble mystery. I often wish that some scientific person would investigate the matter in a strictly rational spirit; though it is certainly difficult to see in what directions such investigations could be fruitful. Still it seems to me strange and unsatisfactory that so little should be known about the origin and nature of so universal a phenomenon.

I have had sometimes dreams of a solemnity and beauty that appear to transcend my powers of imagination. I have seen landscapes in dreams of a kind that I have never seen in real life; I have held long, intimate, and tender conversations with persons long since dead, which I might, if I were inclined, consider to be real contact with disembodied spirits, did I not also sometimes hold trivial, absurd, and even painful intercourse, of an entirely uncharacteristic kind, with the same people, intercourse which all sense of affection and reverence would lead me unhesitatingly to regard as purely imaginary. The strangest thing in such dreams is that the memory is wholly at fault, because, though one is not conscious that the people have died long ago, the mind is apt to wrestle with the wonder as to why one has seen so little of them of recent years. The memory seems to be perfectly aware that one has not seen much of them of late, but the effort to recall the fact that they are dead, even when their deaths have been some of the most vivid and grievous experiences of one's life, seems to be quite beyond its power.

One of the most curious facts of all is this. I sometimes have had extremely affectionate and confidential interviews with people in dreams whom I have not known well—so vivid, indeed, that the dream interview has proved a real step in a friendship, because when, as has more than once occurred, I have met the same people in real life while the dream is still fresh in my mind, I have met them with a sense of confidential relations that has made it easier for me to advance in intimacy and to take a certain sympathy for granted. I have one particular friend in mind whose friendship I can honestly say I gained in a dream.

Page 61

On the other hand, I have occasionally had in a dream so painful and unsatisfactory an interview with a friend, rousing in my mind such anger and resentment, that it has proved a cloud over my acquaintance. It is not that on awaking I believe in the reality of the experience; but it seems to have given a real shock to a delicate sympathy, so that there has been an actual difficulty on meeting the friend upon the same terms as formerly, even though one may relate the dream incident and laugh over it with him.

These are indubitably very mysterious experiences; and I cannot say that I think that they are explicable upon any ordinary hypothesis; that one should thus create a sense of sympathy or misunderstanding by the exercise of involuntary imagination which should have a real power to affect one's relations with a person—here I feel myself on the threshold of a very deep mystery indeed.

XIX

It is generally taken for granted nowadays by fervent educationalists that the important thing to encourage in boys is keenness in every department of school life. As a matter of fact, the keenness which is as a rule most developed in the public school product is keenness about athletic exercises. In the intellectual region, a boy is encouraged to do his duty, but there is no question that a boy who manifested an intense enthusiasm for his school work, who talked, thought, dreamed of nothing but success in examinations, would be considered rather abnormal and eccentric both by his instructors and his schoolfellows, though he would not be thought singular by any one if he did the same about his athletic prospects. What one cannot help wondering is whether this kind of enthusiasm is valuable to the character under its influence, whatever the subject of that enthusiasm may be. The normal boy, who is enthusiastic about athletics, tends to be cynical about intellectual success; and indeed even eminent men are not ashamed to encourage this by uttering, as a Lord Chancellor lately did, good-humoured gibes about the futility of dons and schoolmasters, and the uselessness of lectures. The other day a young friend of mine indulged in a glowing description, in my presence, of the methods and form of a certain short-distance runner. It was a generous panegyric, full of ingenuous admiration. He spoke of the runner's devices—I fear I cannot reproduce the technical terms—with the same thrilled and awestruck emotion which Shelley might have used, as an undergraduate, in speaking of Homer or Shakespeare. I suppose it is a desirable thing, on the whole, to be able to run faster than other people, though the practical utility of being able to do a hundred yards in a fraction of a second less than other runners is not easily demonstrable. But for all that I cannot help wondering whether such enthusiasm is not thrown away or misapplied. Perhaps the same indictment might be made against

Page 62

all warmly expressed admiration for human performances. The greatest philosopher or poet in the world is, after all, a very limited being. The knowledge possessed by the wisest man of science is a very minute affair when compared with what there remains in the universe to know; the finest picture ever painted compares very unfavourably with the beauty that surrounds us every minute of every day. The question, to my mind, is whether we do not do ourselves harm in the long-run by losing ourselves in frantic admiration for any human performance. The Psalmist expressed this feeling very cogently and humorously when he said that the Creator did not delight in any man's legs. The question is not whether it is not a natural temptation to limit our dreams of ultimate possibilities by the standard of human effort, but whether we ought to try and resist that temptation. When I was at a private school, I heard a boy express the most fervent and unfeigned admiration for our head-master, because he caned culprits so hard, and I suppose that one of the germs of religious feeling is the admiration of the Creator because the forces of nature make such havoc of human precautions. Perhaps it is a necessary stage through which we all must pass, the stage of admiring something that is just a little stronger and more effective than ourselves. Our admiration is based upon the fact that such strength and effectiveness is not wholly outside our own powers of attainment, but that we can hope that under favourable circumstances we may acquire equal or similar energies. But even if it is a necessary stage of progress, I am quite sure that it ought not to be an ultimate stage, and that a man ought not to spend the whole of his life admiring limited human performances, however august they may be. That is the great and essential force of religion in human lives, that it tends to set a higher standard, and to concentrate admiration upon Divine rather than upon human forces. Even when we are dealing with emotions, the same holds good. The writer of romances who lavishes the whole force of his enthusiasm upon the possibilities of human love, its depth, its loyalty, its faithfulness, is apt to lose the sense of proportion. One ought to employ one's sense of admiration for the august achievements of humanity as a species of symbolism. Our admiration for athletic prowess, for art, for literature, ought not to limit itself to these, but ought to regard them as symbols of vaster, larger, more beautiful truths.

The difficulty is to know at what point to draw the line. These limited enthusiasms may have an educative effect upon the persons who indulge them, but they may also have a stunting effect if they are pursued too long. A boy passes my window whistling shrill a stave of a popular song. He is obviously delighted with and intent upon his performance, and he is experiencing, no doubt, the artistic joy of creation; but if that boy goes on in life, as many artists do, limiting his

Page 63

musical aspirations to the best whistle that he can himself emit, his ideal will be a low one, however faithfully pursued. The ugly part of thus limiting our aspirations is that such petty enthusiasm is generally accompanied by an intense craving for the admiration of other people, and it is this which vitiates and poisons our own admirations. We do not merely think how fine a performance it is; we think how much we should like to impress and astonish other people, to arouse their envy and jealousy by a similar performance. The point is rather that we should enjoy effort, and that our aim should be rather to improve our own performances than to surpass the performances of others. The right spirit is that which Matthew Arnold displays in one of his letters. He was writing at a time when his own literary fame was securely established, yet he said that the longer he lived the more grateful he was for his own success. He added that the more people he came to know, the more strongly he felt the comparative equality of human endowments, and the more clearly he perceived that the successful writer *found* rather than *invented* the telling phrase, the stimulating thought. That is a very rare attitude of mind, and it is as noble as it is rare. The successful writer, as a rule, instead of being grateful for his good fortune in perceiving what others have not perceived, takes the credit to himself for having originated it, whereas he ought rather to conceive of himself as one of a company of miners, and be thankful for having lighted upon a richer pocket of auriferous soil than the rest.

Of course it sounds what is commonly called priggish when a man, in the style of Mr. Barlow, is always imploring the boy who wins a race or gets a prize to turn his thoughts higher and to take no credit to himself for what is only a piece of good fortune, and is not so great a performance after all. It is easy to say that this is but a pietistic quenching of natural and youthful delight; but much depends upon the way in which it is done, and it is probably the right line to take, though it is supposed to be merely the old-fashioned parental attitude of little goody books. The really modest and ingenuous boy does it for himself, and the boy who “puts on side” because of his triumphs is universally disapproved of. Moreover, as a rule, in the larger world, the greatest men are really apt to be among the most modest; and it is generally only the second-rate people who try to extort deference and admiration.

False enthusiasm is probably only one degree better than cynicism. Cynicism is generally the refuge of the disappointed and indolent, but there is, after all, a nobler kind of cynicism, which even religion must strive to develop, the cynicism which realises the essential worthlessness and pettiness of human endeavour. The cynicism that stops short at this point is the evil kind of cynicism, and becomes purely contemptuous and derisive. But there is a fruitful kind of cynicism, which faithfully contrasts the aspirations and possibilities of humanity with its actual performances and its failures, which makes the poet and the philosopher humble in the presence of infinite beauty and infinite knowledge.

Page 64

It is the quality, the spirit, of a performance that matters. If a performance is the best of which a man is capable, and better than what he has hitherto done, he has achieved all that is possible. If he begins to reflect that it is better than what others have done, then his satisfaction is purely poisonous. But to estimate human possibilities high and human performances low, and to class one's own performances with the latter rather than the former, this is temperate and manly and strong.

XX

There is a picture of Rossetti's, very badly painted, I think, from the technical point of view, of Lucrezia Borgia. There are apologists who say that the wickedness of the Borgia family is grossly exaggerated, and that they were in reality very harmless and respectable people. But Rossetti thought of them, in painting this picture, as people stained with infamous and unspeakable crime, and he has contrived to invest the scene with a horror of darkness. Lucrezia sits in what is meant to be an attitude of stately beauty, and the figure contrives somehow to symbolise that; though she appears to be both stout and even blowsy in appearance. Her evil father, the Pope Alexander, sits leering beside her, while her brother Caesar leans over her and blows rose-leaves from her hair. There certainly hangs a hideous suggestiveness of evil over the group. In the foreground, a page of ten or twelve is dancing, together with a little girl of perhaps nine or ten. The page is slim and delicate, and watches his small companion with a tender and brotherly sort of air; both children are entirely absorbed in their performance, which they seem to have been bidden to enact for the pleasure of the three watchers. The children look innocent enough, though they too are rather dimly and clumsily painted; but one feels that they are somehow in the net, that they are growing up in a pestilential and corrupting atmosphere, and that the flowers of evil will soon burst into premature bloom in their tender souls. The whole scene is overhung with a close and enervating gloom; one apprehends somehow that the air swims with a heavy fragrance; and though one feels that the artist's hand failed to represent his thought, he was painting with a desperate intentness, and the dark quality of the conception contrives to struggle out. The art of it is great rather than good; it is the art of a man who realises the scene with a terrible insight, and in spite of a clumsy and smudgy handling, manages to bring it home perhaps even more impressively than if he had been fully master of his medium. There is a mingling of horror and pathos over it all, and the pretty, innocent gaiety of the children seems obscured as by a gathering thunder-cloud; as when the air grows close and still over some scene of rustic merriment, and the blitheness of the revellers sinks into torpor and faintness, not knowing what ails them. One feels that the performers of the dance will be rewarded with kisses and sweetmeats, and that they will draw the poison into their souls.

Page 65

It is surely very difficult to analyse what this shadow of sin upon the world may be, because there is so large an element of subjectivity mingled with it. So much of it seems to depend upon the temper and beliefs of the time, so much of the shadow of conscience to be the fear of social and even legal penalty. Not to travel far for instances, one finds Plato speaking in a guileless and romantic fashion of a whole range of passions and emotions that we have grown to consider as inherently degrading and repulsive. Yet no shadow of the sense of sin seems to have brooded over that bright and clear Greek life, the elements of which, except in the regions which our morality condemns, seem so intensely desirable and ennobling. In ages, too, when life was more precarious, and men were so much less sensitive to the idea of human suffering, one finds a light-hearted cruelty practised which is insupportable to modern ideals. Those wars of extermination among the Israelites, when man and woman, boy and girl, were ruthlessly and sternly slain, because they were held to belong to some tribe abhorred by the God of Sabaoth; or when, in their own polity, some notorious sinner was put to death with all his unhappy family, however innocent—no shadow of conscience seems to have brooded over those destroyers: they rather had the inspiring and ennobling sense of having performed a sacred duty, and carried out the commands of a jealous God. Viewing the matter, indeed, as dispassionately and philosophically as possible, it is hard to justify the ways of a Creator who slowly developed and matured a race, keeping them deliberately ignorant of light and truth, in order that they might at last be exterminated, in blood and pain, by a dominant and righteous race of invaders.

It would seem, indeed, as though the sense of sin did not reside in the act at all, but only in the sense that the act is committed in defiance of light and higher instinct. Even our own morality, on which we pride ourselves, how confused and topsy-turvy it is in many respects! How monstrous it is that a hungry man should be punished legally for theft, while an ill-tempered and unjust parent or schoolmaster should be allowed, year after year, to make the lives of the children about them into misery and heaviness. Life is full of such examples, where no agency whatever is, or can be, brought to bear by society upon a notorious wrecker of human happiness, so long as he is prudent and wary.

It is the slowness of it all that is so disheartening; the impossibility that dogs the efforts of the high-minded, the kind, the just, of prevailing against tradition and prejudice and stupidity; the grim acquiescence in sanctioned oppression that characterises a certain type of respectable virtue; the melancholy ineffectiveness of kindly persons, the lamentable lack of proportion that mars the work of the enthusiastic faddist—these things tempt one at times, in moments of despair and

Page 66

dreariness, to believe that the one lesson of life is meant to be a hopeless patience, a dull acquiescence in deeply-rooted evil. It is bewildering to see a world so out of joint, and to feel that the one force that has worked wonders is the discontent with things as they are. And even so the lesson is a hard one, because it has been the lot of so few of the great conquerors of humanity ever to see the hour of their triumph, which comes long after and late, when they have breathed out their ardent spirit in agony and despair.

But, after all, however much we may philosophise about sin or attempt to analyse its essence, there is some dark secret there, of which from time to time we are grievously conscious. Who does not know the sense of failure to overcome, of lapsing from a hope or a purpose, the burden of the thought of some cowardice or unkindness which we cannot undo and which we need not have committed? No resolute determinism can ever avail us against the stern verdict of that inner tribunal of the soul, which decides, too, by some instinct that we cannot divine, to sting and torture us with the memory of deeds, the momentousness and importance of which we should utterly fail to explain to others. There are things in my own past, which would be met with laughter and ridicule if I attempted to describe them, that still make me blush to recollect with a sense of guilt and shame, and seem indelibly branded upon the mind. There are things, too, of which I do not feel ashamed, which, if I were to describe them to others, would be received with a sort of incredulous consternation, to think that I could have performed them. That is the strange part of the inner conscience, that it seems so wholly independent of tradition or convention.

And it is from this sense of a burden, borne without hope of redemption, that we would all of us give our most prized possessions to be free; it is this which has cast such an awful power into the hands of the unscrupulous people who have claimed to be able to atone for, to loose, to set free the ailing soul. Face to face with the terror of darkness, there is hardly anything of which mankind will not repent; and I have sometimes thought that the darkest and heaviest temptation in the whole world is the temptation to yield to a craven fear, when the sincere conscience does not condemn.

XXI

I listened the other day, at a public function, to an eloquent panegyric, pronounced by a man of great ability and sympathetic cultivation, on the Greek spirit. I fell for the moment entirely under the spell of his lofty rhetoric, his persuasive and illuminating argument. I wish I could reproduce what he said; but it was like a strain of beautiful music, and my mind was so much delighted by his rich eloquence, his subtle transitions, his deft modulations, that I had neither time nor opportunity to commit what he said to memory. One thing he said which

Page 67

struck me very much, that the Greek spirit resembled rather the modern scientific spirit than any other of the latter-day developments of thought. I think that this is true in a sense, that the Greeks were penetrated by an insatiable curiosity, and desired to study the principles and arrive at the truth of things. But I do not, upon reflection, think that it is wholly true, because the modern spirit is greatly in love with classification and with detail, while the Greek spirit rather aimed at beauty, and investigated the causes of things with wonder and delight, in what may be called the romantic, the poetical spirit.

The mistake that the orator seemed to me to make was that he implied, or appeared to imply, that the Greek spirit could be attained by the study of Greek. My own belief is that the essence of the Greek spirit was its originality, its splendid absence of deference, its disregard of what was traditional. The Greeks owed nothing to outside influences. If the dim origins of their art were Egyptian, they strode forward for themselves, and spent no time in investigating the earlier traditions. Again, in literature, they wasted no force in attempting to imbibe culture from outside influences; they merely developed the capacities of their own sonorous and graceful language; they infused it with their own vivid and beautiful personality.

Of course, it may be urged that there probably did not exist in the world at that date treasures of ancient literature and art. The question is what the Greeks would have done if they had found themselves in a later world, stocked, and even overstocked, with old masterpieces and monuments of human intellect and energy and skill. The doubt is whether the creative impulse would have died away, and whether the Greeks would have tended to fling themselves into the passionate study, the eager apprehension, of the beautiful inheritance of the ages. I cannot myself believe it. They would have had, I believe, an intense and ardent appreciation of what had been, but the desire to see and hear some new thing of which St. Paul spoke, the deep-seated desire for self-expression, would have kept them free from any tame surrender to tradition, any danger of basing their cultivation on what had been represented or thought or sung by their human predecessors. I cannot, for instance, conceive of the Greeks as devoting themselves to erudition; I cannot imagine their giving themselves up to the same minute appreciation of ancient forms of expression which we give to the Greek literature itself.

Moreover, unless we concede to the Greek literature the position of the high-water mark of human expression, and believe that the intellect of man had since that day suffered decline and eclipse, we ought not to allow an ancient literature to overshadow our own energies, or to give up the hope of creating a vivid literature, at once classical and romantic, of our own.

Page 68

And even if we did concede to Greek literature this august supremacy, I cannot believe that our best intellect ought to be practised in the awestruck submissiveness of mind that too often results from our classical education. That is why I admire the American spirit in literature. The Americans seem to have little of the reverent, exclusive attitude which we value so highly. They are preoccupied in their own native inspiration. They will speak, without any sense of absurdity, of Shakespeare and E.A. Poe, of Walter Scott and Hawthorne, as comparable influences. They are like children, entirely absorbed in the interest and delight of intent creation. But though their productions are at present, with certain notable exceptions, lacking in vitality and quality, this spirit is, I believe, the spirit in which new ideas and new literatures are produced. I do not desire to see the Americans more critical of the present or more deferential to the past. I do not desire to see them turn with a hopeless wonder to the study of the great English masterpieces. Indeed, I think that our own tendency in England to reverence, our constant appeal to classical standards, is an obstacle to our intellectual and artistic progress. We are like elderly writers who tend to repeat their own beloved mannerisms, and who condemn and decry the work of younger men, despairing of the future. A nation may reach a point, like an ancient and noble dynasty of princes, where it is overshadowed and overweighted by its own past glories, and where it learns to depend upon prestige rather than upon vigour, to wrap itself in its own dignity. What I would rather see is an elasticity, a recklessness, a prodigal trying of experiments, a discontented underrating of past traditions, than a meek acquiescence in their supremacy. What is our present condition? We have few poets of the first rank, few essayists or reflective writers, few dramatists, few biographers. I do not at all wish to underrate the immense vitality of our imaginative faculties, which shows itself in our vast output of fiction; but even here we have few masters, and our critics know and care little for style; they are entirely preoccupied with plot and incident and situation. What we lack is true originality, tranquil force; we are all occupied in trying to startle and surprise, to make a sensation. How little the Greeks cared for that! It was beauty and charm, delicate colour, fine subtlety of which they were, in search; they held all things holy, yet nothing solemn. Their dignity was not a pompous dignity, but the dignity of high tragedy, of unconquerable courage and ruthless fate; not the dignity of the well-appointed house and the tradition of excellent manners.

Of course our love of wealth and comfort is to a certain extent responsible for this. We have been thrown off our balance by the vast and rapid development of the resources of the earth, the binding of natural forces to do our bidding; it is the most complicated thing in the world nowadays to live the simple life; and not until we can gain a rich simplicity, not until we can recover an interest in ideas rather than an appetite for comforts, will our force and vitality return to us.

Page 69

We are all too anxious to do the right thing and to be known to the right people; but unfortunately for us the right people are not the people of vivacity and intellectual zest, but the possessors of industrial wealth or the inheritors of scrupulous traditions and historical names. The sad fact, the melancholy truth, is that we have become vulgar; and until we can purge ourselves of vulgarity, till we can realise the ineffable ugliness of pomposity and pretension and ostentation, we shall effect nothing. Even our puritan forefathers, with their hatred of art, were in love with ideas. They sipped theology with the air of connoisseurs; they drank down Hebrew virtues with a vigorous relish. Then came a rococo and affected age, neat, conceited, and trim; yet in the middle of that stood out a great rugged figure like Johnson, full to the brim of impassioned force. Then again the intellect, the poetry of the nation stirred and woke. In Wordsworth, in Scott, in Keats and Shelley and Byron, in Tennyson and Browning, in Carlyle and Ruskin, came an age of passionate sincerity of protest against the dulness of prosperity. But now we seem to have settled down comfortably to sleep again, and are content to fiddle melodiously on delicate instruments. The trumpet and the horn are silent.

Perhaps we must content ourselves with the vigorous advance of science, the determination to penetrate secrets, to know all that is to be known, not to form conclusions without evidence. But the scientific attitude tends, except in the highest minds, to develop a certain dryness, a scepticism about spiritual and imaginative forces, a dulness of the inner apprehension, a hard quality of judgment. Not in such a mood as this does humanity fare further and higher. Men become cautious, prudent, and decisive thus, instead of generous, hopeful, and high-hearted.

But to despair too soon of an era, to despise and satirise an age, a national temper, is a deep and fatal mistake. The world moves onwards patiently and inevitably, obeying a larger and a mightier law. What is rather the duty of all who love what is noble and beautiful is not to carp and bicker over faulty conditions, but to realise their aims and hopes, to labour abundantly and patiently, to speak and feel sincerely, to encourage rather than to condemn, *Serviendum lietandum* says the brave motto. To serve, one cannot avoid that; but to serve with blitheness, that is the secret.

XXII

I cannot help wondering what the substance was which my fellow-traveller to-day was consuming under the outward guise of cigarettes. It had a scent that was at once strange and afflicting. It was no more like tobacco than tobacco is like violets. It seemed as though it must have been carefully prepared and procured for some unknown purpose, but it was impossible to connect pleasure with it. It had a corroding mineral scent, and must have been digged,

Page 70

I think, out of the bowels of the surely not harmless earth. And the man himself! He was primly and precisely dressed, but he had an indefinable resemblance to a goat; his hair curled like horns; and he had the thin, restless, sneering lips, the impudent, inexpressive eyes of the goat. I found myself curiously oppressed by him. I hated his slow, deliberate movements; the idea that the air he breathed should mingle with the air of the carriage, and be transferred to my own lungs and blood, was horrible to me. I pitied those who had to serve him, and the relations compelled to own him. Yet I cannot trace the origin of this deep repugnance. There are innumerable natural objects far more hideous and outwardly repellent, but which yet do not possess this nauseating quality. Such shuddering hostility may lie far deeper than the outward appearance, and arise from some innate enmity of soul. It is a wholly unreasonable thing, no doubt, and yet it transcends all reason and surmounts all moral principle. I should not, I hope, refuse to help or succour such a man if he were in need or pain; but I do not wish to see him or to be near him, nor can I desire that he should continue to exist.

It is an interesting question how far it is allowable to dislike other people. Of course we are bound to love our enemies if we can, but even the Gospel sets us an example of unbounded and uncompromising denunciation, in the case of the Pharisees. It is the habit of preachers to say that when we are dealing with detestable and impossible people we should perform that subtle metaphysical process that is described as hating the sin and loving the sinner. But that is surely a very difficult thing to do? It is like saying that when one is contemplating a very ugly and repulsive face, we are to dislike the ugliness of it but admire the face; and the fact remains that it is an extremely difficult and complicated thing to do to separate an individual from his qualities. The most one can say is that one might like him if he were different from what he is; but as long as that remains what the grammarians call an unfulfilled condition, one's liking is of a very impersonal nature. Such a statement as that one would like a person well enough if he were only not what he is, is like the speech that was parodied by Archbishop Whately in the House of Lords. A speaker was recommending a measure on the ground that it would be a very satisfactory one if only the conditions which it was meant to meet were different. "As much as to say," said Whately to his neighbour on the conclusion of the speech, "that if my aunt were a man, he would be my uncle."

Of course the thing is easy enough when one is dealing, say, with a fine and generous nature which is disfigured by a conspicuous fault. If a man who is otherwise lovable and admirable has occasional outbursts of spiteful and vicious ill-temper, it is possible to love him, because one can conceive of him without the particular fault. But there are some faults that permeate and soak through a man's whole character, as in the Cornish *squab pie*, where an excellent pasty of bacon, potatoes, and other agreeable commodities is penetrated throughout with the oily flavour of a young cormorant which is popped in at the top just before the pie is baked.

Page 71

If a man is malignant or unreliable or mean or selfish, the savour of his fault has a way of noisomely imbuing all his qualities, especially if he is not aware of the deficiency. If a man is humbly and sadly aware of the thing that is vile, if he makes clumsy and lamentable attempts to get rid of it, one may pity him so much that one may almost find oneself admiring him. One feels that he is made so, that he cannot wholly help it, and we lose ourselves in wondering why a human being should be so strangely hampered. But if a man displays an odious fault complacently; if he takes mean advantage of other people, and frankly considers people fools who do not condescend to the same devices; if he gives one to understand that he dislikes and despises one; if he reserves a spiteful respect only for those who can beat him with his own weapons; if he is vulgar, snobbish, censorious, unkind, and self-satisfied into the bargain, it is very hard to say what the duty of a Christian is in the matter. I met the other day, at a country house, a man whom I will frankly confess that I disliked. He was a tall, grim-looking man, of uncompromising manners, who told interminable stories, mostly to the discredit of other people—"not leaving Lancelot brave or Galahad clean." His chief pleasure seemed to be in making his hearers uncomfortable. His stories were undeniably amusing, but left a bad taste in the mouth. He had an attentive audience, mainly, I think, because most of us were afraid to say what we thought in his presence. He was a man of wide and accurate knowledge, and delighted in showing up other people's ignorance. I suppose the truest courage would have been to withstand him boldly, or, better still, to attempt to convert him to a more generous view of life. But it did not seem worth the trouble; it was impossible to argue with him successfully, and his conversion seemed more a thing to be prayed for than to be attempted. One aged and genial statesman who was present did indeed, by persistent courtesy, contrive to give him a few moments of uneasiness; and the sympathies of the party were so plainly on the side of the statesman that even our tyrant appeared to suspect that urbanity was sometimes a useful quality. We all breathed more freely when he took his departure, and there was a general sense of heightened enjoyment abroad.

Yet it is impossible to compassionate such a man, because he does not need compassion. He is perfectly satisfied with his position; he does not want people to like him—he would consider that to be sentimental, and for sentiment of every kind he has a profound abhorrence. His view of himself is, I suppose, of a brilliant and capable man who holds his own and makes himself felt. The only result on the mind, from contemplating him, is that one revels in the possibility of metempsychosis and pictures him as being born again to some dreary and thankless occupation, a scavenger or a sewer-cleaner, or, better still, penned in the body of some absurd and inefficient animal, a slug or a jelly-fish, where he might learn to be passive and contemptible.

Page 72

Meanwhile it is true, of course, that the most detestable people generally do improve upon acquaintance. I have seldom spent any length of time in the enforced society of a disagreeable person without finding that I liked him better at the end than at the beginning. Very often one finds that the disagreeable qualities are used as a sort of defensive panoply, and that they are the result, to a certain extent, of unhappy experiences. Since I met our friend I have learnt a fact about him, which makes me view him in a somewhat different light, I have discovered that he was bullied at school. I am inclined to believe that his fondness for bullying other people is mainly the result of this, and that it arises partly from a rooted belief that other people are malevolent, and that the only method is to exhibit his own spines; partly also from a perverted sense of justice; on the ground that, as he had to bear undeserved persecution in the days when he was defenceless, it is but just that others should bear it in their turn. He is like the cabin-boy Ransome in *Kidnapped*, who, being treated with the grossest brutality by the officers, kept a rope's end of his own to wallop the little ones with. I do not say that this is a generous or high-hearted view of life. It would be better if he could say *Miseris succurrere disco*. What he rather says, to parody the words of the hermit in *Edwin and Angelina*, is—

“The flocks that range the valley free,
To slaughter I condemn;
Taught by the Power that bullies me,
I learn to bully them.”

It is a poor consolation to say that the man who is not loved is miserable. He is, if he desires to be loved and cannot attain it; if he says, as Hazlitt said, “I cannot make out why everybody should dislike me so.” But if he does not want love in the least, while he gets what he does desire—money, a place in the world, influence of a sort—then he is not miserable at all, and it is idle to pretend that he is.

But if, as I say, one is condemned to the society of a disagreeable person, it generally happens that on his discovering one to be harmless and friendly he will furl his spines and become, if not an animal that one can safely stroke, at least an animal whose proximity it is not necessary to dread and avoid. One can generally establish a *modus vivendi*, and unless the man is untrustworthy as well, one may hope to live peacefully with him. The worst point about our friend is that he is frankly jealous, and woe betide you if you gain any species of reputation on lines that he does not approve. Then indeed nothing can save you, because he resents your success as a personal injury done to his own.

Page 73

The truth is that anyone who has any pronounced views at all, any definite strain of temperament, is sure to encounter people who are entirely uncongenial. What one is bound to do is to realise that there is abundant room for all kinds of personalities in the world, and it is much better not to protest and censure unless one is absolutely certain that the temperament one dislikes is a mischievous one. It is not necessarily mischievous to be quarrelsome, though a peaceable person may dislike it. There is no reason whatever why two quarrelsome people, if they enjoy it, should not have a good set-to. What is mischievous is if a man is brutal and tyrannical, and prefers a tussle with an inoffensive person who is no match for him. That is a piece of cowardice, and protest is more than justifiable. There is a fine true story of a famous head-master, who disliked a weakling, putting on a stupid, shy, and ungainly boy to construe, and making deliberate fun of him. There was a boy present, of the stuff of which heroes are made, who got up suddenly in his place and said, "You are not teaching that boy, sir; you are bullying him." The head-master had the generosity to bear his censurer no grudge for his outspokenness. But even if one is sure that one's indignation is justified and that one's contempt is deserved, it is a very dangerous thing to assume the disapproving attitude. One may know enough of a man to withstand him to the face, if one is sure that his action is base or cruel; one can hardly ever know enough of a man's temperament and antecedents to condemn him unreservedly. It is scarcely possible to be sure that a man is worse than he need have been, or that one would have done better if one had been in his place; and thus one must try to resist any expression of personal disapproval, because such an expression implies a consciousness of moral superiority, and the moment that one is conscious of that, as in the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican, the position of the condemner and the condemned is instantaneously reversed. To hate people is the most dangerous luxury that one can indulge in, and the most that one is justified in doing is to avoid the society of entirely uncongenial people. It is not a duty to force yourself to try to admire and like everyone who repels you. The truth is that life is not long enough for such experiments. But one can resolutely abstain from condemning them and from dwelling in thought and speech upon their offensive qualities. *Nous sommes tous condamnés*, says the sad proverb, and we have most of us enough to do in rooting up the tares in our own field, without pointing out other people's tares exultantly to passers-by.

XXIII

Page 74

The great fen to-day was full, far and wide, of little smouldering fires. On fallow after fallow, there lay small burning heaps of roots and fibres, carefully collected, kindled, tended. I tried to learn from an old labourer what it was that he was burning, but I could not understand his explanation, and I am not sure that he knew himself. Perhaps it was the tares, as in the parable, that were at length gathered into heaps and burned! Anyhow, it was a pretty sight to see the white smoke, all at one delicate angle, rising into the clear, cloudless sky on the soft September breeze. The village on the wooded ridge, with the pale, irregular houses rising among the orchards, gained a gentle richness of outline from the drifting smoke. It reminded me, too, of the Isle of Voices, and the little magic fires that rose and were extinguished again, while the phantom voices rang in the sea-breeze.

It made for me, as I passed slowly across the great flat, a soft parable of the seasons of the soul, when gratefully and joyfully it burns its gathered failures when the harvest time is over. Failures in aim, indolence, morbid glooms, doubts of capacity, unwise words, irritable interferences—what a vista of mistakes as one looks back! But there come days when, with a grateful, sober joy—the joy of feeling thankful that things have not been worse, that one has somehow emerged, and that there is after all a little good grain in the garner—one gathers one's faults and misdeeds into heaps for the burning.

The difficulty is to believe that they are burned; one thinks of the old fault, with evil fertility, ever ripening and seeding, ever increasing its circle. Well, it is so in a sense, however diligently we gather and burn. But there is enough hopefulness left for us to begin our ploughing and sowing afresh, I think.

I have had a great burning lately! I saw, in the mirror of a book, written by one who knew me well, and who yet wrote, I am sure, in no vindictive or personal spirit, how ugly and mean a thing a temperament like mine could be. One needs a shock like that every now and then, because it is so easy to drift into a mild complacency, to cast up a rough sum of one's qualities, and to conclude that though there is much to be ashamed of, yet that the total, for any who knew all the elements of the problem, is on the whole a creditable one. But here in my friend's book, who knew as much of the elements of the problem as any one could, the total was a minus quantity!

How is one to make it otherwise? Alas, I know how little one can do, but so long as one is humiliated and ashamed, and feels the keen flame scorching the vicious fibre, something, we may be sure, is being done for us, some heavenly alchemy that shall make all things new.

How shall I tell my friend that I am grateful? The very telling of it will make him feel guilty of a sort of treachery, which he did not design. So I must be silent for awhile; and, above all, resist the feeling, natural enough in the first humiliation, that one would like to send some fire-tailed fox into his standing-corn as well.

Page 75

There is no impulse to be more carefully and jealously guarded than the impulse which tells us that we are bound to speak unpleasant truths to one's friends. It must be resisted until seventy times seven! It can only be yielded to if there is nothing but pure pain in the doing of it; if there is the least touch of satisfaction or zest about it, it may be safely put aside.

And so to-day I will stand for a little and watch the slow smoke drifting heavenwards from the dry weeds of my soul. It is not a sad experience, though the fingers of the fire are sharp! Rather as the rich smoke rolls into the air, and then winds and hangs in airy veils, there comes a sense of relief, of lightness, of burdens not stricken harshly off, but softly and cleanly purged away.

XXIV

One meets a great many people of various kinds, old and young, kind and severe, amiable and harsh, gentle and dry, rude and polite, tiresome and interesting. One meets men who are, one recognises, virtuous, honourable, conscientious, and able; one meets women of character, and ingenuousness, and charm, and beauty. But the thing that really interests me is to meet a person—and it is not a common experience—who has made something of himself or herself; who began with one set of qualities, and who has achieved another set of qualities, by desiring them and patiently practising them; who, one is sure, has a peculiar sympathy drawn from experience, and a wisdom matured by conflict and effort.

As a rule, one feels that people are very much the same as they began by being. They are awkward and have not learned to be easy; they are dull and have not learned to be interesting; or they are clever and have not learned to be sympathetic; or charming and have not learned to be loyal; who are satisfied, in fact, with being what they are. But what a delightful and reviving thing it is to meet one whose glance betrays a sort of tenderness, a gentleness, a desire to establish a relationship; who means to like one, if he can; whose face bears signs of the conflict of spirit, in which selfishness and complacency have been somehow eradicated; who understands one's clumsy hints and interprets one's unexpressed feelings; who goes about, one knows, looking out for beautiful qualities and for subtle relationships; who evokes the best of people, their confidence, their true and natural selves; who is not in the least concerned with making an impression or being thought wise or clever or brilliant, but who just hopes for companionship and equality of soul.

Sometimes, indeed, one does not discern this largeness and wisdom of spirit quite at first sight, though it is generally revealed by aspect even more than by words. Sometimes these brotherly and sisterly persons have a fence of shyness which cannot be instantly overleapt; but one generally can discern the beautiful creature waiting gently within. But as a rule these gracious people have nothing that is formidable or

daunting about them; they are quiet and simple; and having no cards to play and no game to win, they are at leisure to make the best of other people.

Page 76

I have met both men and women of this apostolic kind, and one feels that they understand; that in their tranquil maturity they can make allowances for crude immaturity; that they do not at once dismiss one as being foolishly young or tiresomely elderly: they have no subjects of their own which they are vexed at finding misunderstood or not comprehended. They do not think the worse of a person for having preferences or prejudices; though when one has uttered a raw preference or an unreasonable prejudice in their presence one is ashamed, as one is for hurling a stone into a sleeping pool. One comes away from them desiring to appreciate rather than to condemn, with horizons and vistas of true and beautiful things opening up on all sides, with a wish to know more and to understand more, and to believe more; with the sense of a desirable secret of which they have the possession.

One meets sometimes exactly the opposite of all this, a lively, brilliant, contemptuous specialist, who talks briskly and lucidly about his own subject, and makes one feel humble and clumsy and drowsy. One sees that he is pleased to talk, and when the ball rolls to one's feet, one makes a feeble effort to toss it back, whereupon he makes a fine stroke, with an ill-concealed contempt for a person who is so ill-informed. Perhaps it is good to be humiliated thus; but it is not pleasant, and the worst of it is that one confuses the subject with the personality behind it, and thinks that the subject is dreary when it is only the personality that is repellent.

Such a man is repellent, because he is self-absorbed, conceited, contemptuous. He has grown up inside a sort of walled fortress, and he thinks that everyone outside is a knave or a fool. He has not *changed*. It is this change, this progress of the soul that is adorable.

The question for most of us—a sad question too—is whether this change, this progress, is attainable, or whether a power of growth is given to some people and denied to others. I am afraid that this is partially true. A good many people seem to be born inside a hard carapace which cannot expand; and it protects them from the sensitive apprehension of injury and hurt, which is in reality the only condition of growth. If we feel our failures, if we see, every now and then, how unjustly, unkindly, perversely we have behaved, we try to be different next time. Perhaps the motive is not a very high one, because it is to avoid similar suffering; but we improve a little and a little.

Of course, occasionally, one meets people who have not changed much, because they started on so high a plane—it is commoner to find this among women than among men; they have begun life tender, loyal, unselfish; it has always been a greater happiness to see that people round them are pleased than to find their own satisfaction. Such people are often what the world calls ineffective, because they have no selfish object to attain. I have a friend

Page 77

who is like that. He is what would be called an unsuccessful man; he has never had time to do his own talents justice, because his energies have always been at the service of other people; if you ask him to do something for you, he does it as exactly, as punctually, as faithfully as if his own reputation depended upon it. He is now a middle-aged man with hundreds of friends and a small income. He lives in a poky house in a suburb, and works harder than anyone I know. If one meets him he has always the same beautiful, tired smile; and he has fifty things to ask one, all about oneself. I can't describe what good it does one to meet him. The other day I met a cousin of his, a prosperous man of business. "Yes," he said, "poor Harry goes on in his feckless way. I gave him a bit of my mind the other day. I said, 'Oh, it's all very well to be always at everyone's beck and call, and ready to give up your time to anyone who asks you—it is very pleasant, of course, and everyone speaks well of you—but it doesn't pay, my dear fellow; and you really ought to be thinking about making a position for yourself, though I am very much afraid it is too late.'"

The prosperous cousin did not tell me how Harry received his advice; but I have no doubt that he thought his cousin very kind to interest himself in his position, and went away absurdly grateful. But I would rather, for all that, be in Harry's poky lodgings, with a treasure of love and service in my heart, than in his cousin's fine house in the country, the centre of a respectful and indifferent circle.

Of course there is one sad reflection that rises in one's mind at the thought of such a life as my friend lives. When one sees what a difference he makes to so many people, and what a beautiful thing his life is, one wonders vaguely why, if God makes men as he wills, he does not make more of such natures. They are rare; they are the salt of the world; and I suppose that if the world were all salt, it would not be so rich and beautiful a place. If everyone were like Harry there would be no one left to help; and I suppose that God has some reason for leaving the world imperfect, which even we, in our infinite wisdom, cannot precisely detect.

XXV

It is such a perennial mystery to me what beauty is; it baffles me entirely. No one has ever helped me to discover in what region of the spirit it abides. The philosopher begins by telling you that the simplest and most elementary form of beauty which appeals to every one, the beauty of human beings, has its root originally only in desire; but I cannot follow that, because that would only account for one's admiring a certain kind of fresh and youthful beauty, and in admiring human beauty less and less as it declines from that. But this is not the case at all; because there is a beauty of age which is often, in its way, a more impressive and noble thing than the beauty of

Page 78

youth. And there is, too, the beauty of expression, a far more subtle and moving thing than mere beauty of feature: we must have often seen, for instance, a face which by all the canons of beauty might be pronounced admirable, yet the effect of which is wholly unattractive; while, on the other hand, we have known faces that, from some ruggedness or want of proportion, seemed at first sight even repellent, which have yet come to hold for one an extraordinary quality of attractiveness, from the beauty of the soul being somehow revealed in them, and are yet as remote from any sense of desire as the beauty of a tree or a crag.

And then, again, in dealing with the beauty of nature, I have heard philosophers say that the appeal which it makes is traceable to a sense of prosperity or well-being; and that the love of landscape has grown up out of the sense of satisfaction with which our primaeval ancestors saw a forest full of useful timber and crowded with edible game. But that again is entirely contradicted by my experience.

I went to-day on a vague walk in the country, taking attractive by-ways and field-paths, and came in the course of the afternoon to a lonely village among wide pastures which I had never visited before. The bell-like sound of smitten metal, ringing cheerfully from a smithy, outlined against the roar of a blown fire, seemed to set my mind in tune. I turned into the tiny street. The village lies on no high-road; it is remote and difficult of access, but at one time it enjoyed a period of prosperity because of a reputation for dairy produce; and there were half-a-dozen big farm-houses on the street, of different dates, which testified to this. There was an old timbered Grange, deserted, falling into ruin. There was a house with charming high brick gables at either end, with little battlemented crow-steps, and with graceful chimney-stacks at the top. There was another solid Georgian house, with thick white casements and moss-grown tiling—all of them showing signs of neglect and fallen fortunes.

But the ruined Grange, with a moat round it full of willows and big water-plants, approached by a pretty bridge with ruinous parapets, had the perfect quality of beauty. Yet all the associations that it aroused were sad ones. It spoke of an old and prosperous family life, full of simple happiness, brought to an end of desertion and desolation. It seemed to say, like the Psalmist, "I see that all things come to an end." Just opposite was a new and comfortable farm-house, the only prosperous house in the village, with a trim lawn, and big barns covered with corrugated iron roofing. Everything about it spoke of comfort and security. Yet the only appeal that it made to the spirit was that one wished it out of sight, while the ruined Grange touched the heart with yearning and pathos, and even with a far-off and beautiful hope. The transfiguring hand of time was laid gently upon it, and there was not a single detail of the scene which was not filled with a haunting sense of delight and sweetness.

Page 79

It was just at sunset that I saw it; and as the sun went down and the colour began to ebb out of bush and wall, the sense of its beauty and grace became every instant more and more acute. A long train of rooks, flying quietly homeward, drifted across the rose-flushed clouds. Everything alike spoke of peace, of a quiet ending, of closed eyes and weary hearts at rest. And yet the sense was not a joyful one, for it was all overshadowed by a consciousness of the unattainable. What increased the mystery was that the very thought that it could not be attained, the yearning for the impossible, was what seemed to lend the deepest sense of beauty to the scene. Who can interpret these things? Who can show why it is that the sense of beauty, that deep hunger of the heart, is built up on the fact that the dream cannot be realised? Yet so it is. The sense of beauty, whatever it may be, seems to depend upon the fact that the soul there catches a glimpse of something that waits to bless it—and upon which it cannot lay its hand; or is aware that if it does for a moment apprehend it, yet that a moment later it will be dragged rudely back into a different region. The sense of beauty is then of its nature accompanied by sadness; it is essentially evanescent. A beautiful thing with which we grow familiar stands often before us dumb and inarticulate, with no appeal to the spirit. Then perhaps in a sudden movement, the door of the spirit is unlatched, and the soul for a moment discerns the sweet essence, to which an instant before it had been wholly unresponsive, and which an instant later will lose its power. It seems to point to a possible satisfaction; and yet it owes its poignancy to the fact that the heart is still unsatisfied.

XXVI

I once wrote and published a personal and intimate book; it was a curious experience. There was a certain admixture of fiction in it, but in the main it was a confession of opinions; for various reasons the book had a certain vogue, and though it was published anonymously, the authorship was within my own circle detected. I saw several reviews of it, and I was amused to find that the critics perspicuously conjectured that because it was written in the first person it was probably autobiographical. I had several criticisms made on it by personal friends: some of them objected to the portraiture of persons in it being too life-like, selecting as instances two characters who were entirely imaginary; others objected to the portraiture as not being sufficiently life-like, and therefore tending to mislead the reader. Others determined to see in the book a literal transcript of fact, set themselves to localise and identify incidents which were pure fiction, introduced for reasons of picturesqueness. It brought me, too, a whole crop of letters from unknown people, many of which were very interesting and touching, letters which pleased and encouraged me greatly, because they proved that the book had made its way at all events to certain hearts.

Page 80

But one old friend, whose taste and judgment I have every reason to respect, took me to task very seriously for writing the book. He said: "You will not misunderstand me, I know; but I cannot help feeling that the deliberate exposure of a naked soul before the public has something that is almost indecent about it." I did not misunderstand him, nor did I at all resent the faithful criticism, even though I could not agree with it.

I had written books before, and I have written books since, but none which made that particular personal appeal. I may proudly say that it contained nothing that was contrary either to faith or morals; it was quite unobjectionable. It aimed at making thought a little clearer, hope a little brighter; at disentangling some of the complex fibres of beauty and interest which are interwoven into the fabric of life. I tried to put down very plainly some of the things that had helped me, some of the sights that had pleased me, some of the thoughts that had fed me. I do not really know what else is the purpose of writing at all; it is only a kind of extended human intercourse. I am not a good conversationalist; my thoughts do not flow fast enough, do not come crowding to the lips; moreover, the personalities of those with whom I talk affect me too strongly. There are people with whom one cannot be natural or sincere. There are people whose whole range of interests is different from one's own. There are critical people who love to trip one up and lay one flat, boisterous people who disagree, ironical people who mock one's sentiment, matter-of-fact people who dislike one's fancies. But one can talk in a book without *gene* or restraint. It is like talking to a perfectly sympathetic listener when no third person is by. I wrote the book without premeditation and without calculation, just as the thoughts rose to my mind, as I should like to speak to the people I met, if I had the art and the courage. Well, it found its way, I am glad to think, to the right people; and as for exposing my heart for all the world to read, I cannot see why one should not do that! I am not ashamed of anything that I said, and I have no sort of objection to any one knowing what I think, if they care to know. I spoke, if I may say so without conceit, just as a bird will sing, careless who listens to it. If the people who wander in the garden do not like the song, the garden is mine as well as theirs; they need not listen, or they can scare the bird with ugly gestures out of his bush if they will. I have never been able to sympathise with that jealous sense of privacy about one's thoughts, that is so strong in some people. I like to be able to be alone and to have my little stronghold; but that is because the presence of conventional and unsympathetic people bores and tires me. But in a book it is different. One is not intruded upon or gazed at; one may tell exactly as much of one's inner life as one will—and there are, of course, many things which I would not commit

Page 81

to the pages of a book, or even tell a friend. But I put nothing in my book that I would not have said quite readily to a friend whom I loved and trusted; and I like to feel that the book has made me several gentle and unknown friends, whose company the laws of time and space forbid me to frequent. And more than that, there might be things about the people who liked my book which I should not like; superficial things such as manner or look; I might not even like their opinions on certain points; but now, by writing this book, the best part of me, I think, has made friends with the best part of them. All art depends upon a certain kinship of spirit between the man who produces and the men who perceive; and just as a painter may speak to kindred spirits in a picture, or as a preacher may show his own heart in a sermon, so a writer may reveal himself in a book, if he is so inclined. The best kind of friendship is made in that way, the friendship that is not at the mercy of superficial appearances, habits, modes of breeding, conventions, which erect a barrier in this mysterious world between the souls of men.

Perhaps one of the greatest interests and pleasures we have in life is the realising of different temperaments and different points of view. It is not only interesting, it is wholesome and bracing. It helps us out of egotism; it makes us sympathetic; and I wish with all my heart that people would put more of their own unadulterated selves into books; that would be real, at all events. But what writers so often do is to tell the adventures of imaginary people, write plays where persons behave as no one ever behaves in real life; or they turn to what is called serious literature, and write a history of things of which no one can ever know the truth; or they make wise and subtle comments on the writings of great authors, covering them with shining tracks, as when snails crawl over a wall and leave their mucus behind them. And there are many other sorts of books which I need not define here, some of them useful, no doubt, and some of them wearisome enough. But the books of which we can never have enough are the books which tell us what people are really like, because our true concern is with the souls of men; and if we are all bound, as I believe we are, upon a progress and a pilgrimage, though the way is dark and the goal remote, the more we can know of our fellow-pilgrims the better for ourselves. This knowledge can teach us, perhaps, to avoid mistakes, or can make us ashamed of not being better than we are; or, best of all, it may lead us to love and pity those who are like ourselves, to bear their burdens when we can, to comfort, to help. I think it would be far better if we could talk more simply and openly to each other of our hopes and fears—what we love, what we dread, what we avoid. The saddest thing in the world is to feel that we are alone; the best thing in the world is to feel that we are loved and needed.

Page 82

However, as things are, the sad fact remains that in common talk we speak of knowing a man whom we have met and spoken to a dozen times, while it would never occur to us to use the word of a man whose books we might have read a dozen times and yet never have seen; though as matter of fact we know the latter's real mind, or a part of it, while we may only know the healthy or pathetic face of the former.

If we make writing the business of our lives, it will be necessary to give up many things for it, things which are held to be the prizes of the world—position, station, wealth—or, rather, to give up the pursuit of these things; probably, indeed, if we really love our art we shall be glad enough to give up what we do not care about for a thing about which we do care. But there will be other things to be given up as well, which we may not like resigning, and one of these things is the multiplication of pleasant relations with other people, which cannot indeed be called friendships, but which rank high among the easy pleasures of life. We must give them up because they mean time, and time is one of the things that the artist cannot throw away. Of course the artist must not lose his hold on life; but if he is working in a reflective medium, it is his friendships that help him, and not his acquaintances. He must learn to be glad to be alone, for it is in solitude that an idea works itself out, very often quite unconsciously, by a sort of secret gestation. How often have I found that to put an idea in the mind and to leave it there, even if one does not consciously meditate upon it, is sufficient to clothe the naked thought with a body of appropriate utterance, when it comes to the birth. But casual social intercourse, the languid interchange of conventional talk, mere gregariousness, must be eschewed by an artist, for the simple reason that his temptation will be to expend his force in entering into closer relations with the casual, and possibly unintelligent, person than the necessities of the situation warrant. The artist is so impatient of dulness, so greedy of fineness, in all his relations, that he is apt to subject himself to a wasteful strain in talking to unperceptive and unappreciative persons. It is not that he desires to appear brilliant; it is that he is so intolerant of tedium that he sacrifices himself to fatiguing efforts in trying to strike a spark out of a dull stone. The spark is perhaps struck, but he parts with his vital force in striking it. He will be apt to be reproached with being eremitical, self-absorbed, unsociable, fastidious; but he must not care for that, because the essence of his work is to cultivate relations of sympathy with people whose faces he may never see, and he must save his talk, so to speak, for his books. With his friends it is different, for talking to congenial people with whom one is familiar is a process at once stimulating and tranquillising, and it is at such moments that ideas take swift and brilliant shape.

Page 83

Those who may read these words will be apt to think that it is a selfish business after all; yet that is only because so many people consider the life of the writer an otiose and unnecessary life; but the sacrifices of which I speak are only those that all men who follow an absorbing profession have to make—barristers, politicians, physicians, men of business. No one complains if they seclude themselves at certain hours. Of course, if a writer finds that general society makes no demands upon his nervous force, but is simply a recreation, there is no reason why he should not take that recreation; though I have known men who just missed being great writers because they could not resist the temptation of general society.

The conclusion of the matter is that an artist must cultivate a strict sense of responsibility; if he has a certain thing to say, he must say it with all his force; and he must be content with a secret and silent influence, an impersonal brotherliness, deep and inner relations of soul with soul, that may never express themselves in glance or gesture, in hand-clasp or smile, but which, for all that, are truer and more permanent relations than word or gesture or close embrace can give; a marriage of souls, a bodiless union.

XXVII

I have often thought that in Art, judging by the analogy of previous development, we ought to be able to prophesy more or less the direction in which development is likely to take place. I mean that in music, for instance, the writers of the stricter ancient music might have seen that the art was likely to develop a greater intricacy of form, an increased richness of harmony, a larger use of discords, suspensions, and chromatic intervals, a tendency to conceal superficial form rather than to emphasise it, and so forth. Yet it is a curious question whether if Handel, say, could have heard an overture of Wagner's he would have thought it an advance in beauty or not—whether it would have seemed to him like the realisation of some incredible dream, a heavenly music, or whether he would have thought it licentious, and even shapeless. Of course, one knows that there is going to be development in art, but the imagination is unable to forecast it, except in so far as it can forecast a possibility of an increased perfection of technique. It is the same with painting. It is a bewildering speculation what Raffaele or Michelangelo would have thought of the work of Turner or Millais: whether they would have been delighted by the subtle evolution of their own aims, or confused by the increase of impressional suggestiveness—whether, indeed, if Raffaele or Michelangelo had seen a large photograph, say, of a winter scene, or a chromo-lithograph such as appears as a supplement to an illustrated paper, they might not have flung down their brush in a mixture of rapture and despair.

Page 84

There is the same difficulty when we come to literature. What would Chaucer or Spenser have thought of Browning or Swinburne? Would such poetry have seemed to them like an inspired product of art, or a delirious torrent of unintelligible verbiage? Of course, they would not have understood the language, to begin with; and the thought, the interfusion of philosophy, the new problems, would have been absolutely incomprehensible. Probably if one could have questioned Spenser, he would have felt that the last word had probably been said in poetry, and would not have been able to conceive of its development in any direction.

The great genius who is also effective is generally the man who is not very far ahead of his age, but just a little ahead of it—who foresees not the remote possibilities of artistic development, but just the increased amount of colour and quality which the received forms can bear, and which are consequently likely to be acceptable to people of artistic perceptions. If a Tennyson had lived in the time of Pope, he would doubtless have used the heroic couplet faithfully, and put into it just a small increase of melody, a slightly more graceful play of thought, a finer observation of natural things—but he probably would not have strayed beyond the accepted forms of art.

Then there comes in a new and interesting question as to whether it is possible that any new species of art will be developed, or whether all the forms of art are more or less in our hands. It is possible to conceive that music may in the future desert form in favour of colour; it is possible to conceive that painters might produce pictures of pure colour, quite apart from any imitation of natural objects, in which colour might aspire more to the condition of music, and modulate from tone to tone.

In literary art, the movement in the direction of realistic art, as opposed to idealistic, is the most marked development of later days. But I believe that there is still a further possibility of development, a combination of prose and poetry, which may be confidently expected in the future.

It is clear, I think, that the old instinct which tended to make a division between poetry and prose is being gradually obliterated. The rhythmical structure of poetry, and above all the device of rhyme, is essentially immature and childish: the use by poets of rhythmical beat and verbal assonance is simply the endeavour to captivate what is a primeval and even barbarous instinct. The pleasure which children take in beating their hands upon a table, in rapping out a tattoo with a stick, in putting together unmeaning structures of rhyme, is not necessarily an artistic thing at all; what lies at the root of it is the pleasure of the conscious perception of similarity and regularity. This same tendency is to be seen in our buildings, in the love of geometrical forms, so that the elementary perception is better pleased by contemplating a building with a door in

Page 85

the middle and the same number of windows on each side, than in contemplating the structure of a tree. Uneducated people are far more charmed by the appearance of a rock which has a resemblance to something else—a human face or an animal—than by a beautifully proportioned and irregular crag. The uncultivated human being, again, loves geometrical forms in nature, such as the crystal and the basalt column, or the magnified snowflake, better than it loves forms of lavish wildness. We gather about our dwellings flowers which please by their sharply defined tint, and their correspondence of petal with petal; and yet there is just as precisely ordered a structure in natural objects, which appear to be fortuitous in shape and outline, as there is in things whose outline is more strictly geometrical. The laws which regulate the shape of a chalk down or an ivy tendril are just as severe as the laws which regulate the monkey-puzzle tree or the talc crystal. My own belief is that the trained artistic sense is probably only in its infancy, and that it will advance upon the line of the pleased apprehension of the existence of less obvious structure.

If we apply this to literature, it is my belief that the love of human beings for the stanza and the rhyme is probably an elementary thing, like the love of the crystal and the flower-shape, and that it is the love not so much of the beautiful as of the kind of effect that the observer could himself produce. The child feels that, given the materials, he could and would make shapes like crystals and flowers; but to make things of more elaborate structure would be outside his power.

To confine ourselves, then, to one single literary effect, it appears to me that the poetry of the future will probably not develop very much further in the direction of metre and rhyme. Indeed, it is possible to see, not to travel far for instances, in the work of such writers as Mr. Robert Bridges or Mr. Stephen Phillips, a tendency to write lines which shall conceal as far as possible their rhythmical beat. It is indeed a very subtle pleasure to perceive the effect of lines which are unmetrical superficially but which yet confine themselves to a fixed structure below, by varying the stresses and compensating for them. It is possible, though I do not think it very likely, that poetry may develop largely in this direction. I do not think it likely, because such writing is intricate and difficult, and ends too often in being a mere *tour de force*; the pleasure arising from the discovery that, after all, the old simple structure is there, though strangely disguised, I think it more probable that the superficial structure will be frankly given up. If we consider what rhyme is, and what detestable limitations it enforces on the writer for the sake of gratifying what is, after all, not a dignified pleasure, the only wonder is that such a tradition should have survived so long.

Page 86

What I rather anticipate is the growth among our writers of a poetical prose, with a severe structure and sequence of thought underlying it, but with an entire irregularity of outline. The pleasure to be derived from perfectly proportioned lucid prose is a far subtler and more refined pleasure than that derived from the rhythmical beat of verse. Take, for instance, such works as *The Ring and the Book* and *Aurora Leigh*. Is there anything whatever to be gained by the relentless drumming, under the surface of these imaginative narratives, of the stolid blank verse? Would not such compositions have gained by being written in pure poetical prose? The quality which at present directs writers to choosing verse-forms for poetical expression, apart from the traditions, is the need of condensation, and the sense of proportion which the verse-structure enforces and imparts. But I should look forward to the writing of prose where the epithets should be as diligently weighed, the cadence as sedulously studied; where the mood and the subject would indicate inevitably the form of the sentence, the alternation of languid, mellifluous streams of scented and honied words with brisk, emphatic, fiery splashes of language. Indeed, in reading even great poetry, is one not sometimes sadly aware, as in the case of Shelley or Swinburne, that the logical sequence of thought is loose and indeterminate, and that this is concealed from one by the reverberating beat of metre, which gives a false sense of structure to a mood that is really invertebrate?

What I am daily hoping to see is the rise of a man of genius, with a rich poetical vocabulary and a deep instinct for poetical material, who will throw aside resolutely all the canons of verse, and construct prose lyrics with a perfect mastery of cadence and melody.

The experiment was made by Walt Whitman, and in a few of his finest lyrics, such as *Out of the Cradle endlessly rocking*, one gets the perfection of structure and form. But he spoilt his vehicle by a careless diffuseness, by a violent categorical tendency, and by other faults which may be called faults of breeding rather than faults of art—a ghastly volubility, an indiscretion, a lust for description rather than suggestion; and thus he has numbered no followers, and only a few inconsiderable imitators.

I think, too, that Whitman was, in position, just a little ahead, as I have indicated, of the taste of his time; and he was not a good enough artist to enforce the beauty and the possibilities of his experiment upon the world.

There is, moreover, this further difficulty in the way of the literary experimentalist. Whitman, in virtue of his strength, his vitality, his perception, his individuality, rather blocks the way; it is difficult to avoid imitating him, though it is easy to avoid his errors. It is difficult in such poetry not to apostrophise one's subject as Whitman did.

Page 87

It may be asked, in what is this poetical prose to differ from the prose of great artists who have written melodious, reflective, essentially poetical prose—the prose of Lamb, of Ruskin, of Pater? The answer must be that it must differ from Lamb in sustained intention, from Ruskin in firmness of structure, from Pater in variety of mood. Such prose as I mean must be serious, liquid, profound. It must probably eschew all broad effects of humour; it must eschew narrative; it must be in its essence lyrical, an outburst like the song of the lark or the voice of the waterfall. It must deal with beauty, not only the beauty of natural things, but the beauty of human relations, though not trenching upon drama; and, above all, it must take into itself the mystery of philosophical and scientific thought. Science and philosophy are deeply and essentially poetical, in that they are attempts to build bridges into the abyss of the unknown. The work of the new lyrist must be to see in things and emotions the quality of beauty, and to discern and express the magic quickening thrill that creeps like a flame through the material form, and passes out beyond the invisible horizon, leaping from star to star, and from the furthest star into the depths of the ancient envioning night.

XXVIII

A few days ago an old friend of mine, who has been a good friend to me, who is more careful of my reputation even than myself, gave me some serious advice. He said, speaking with affectionate partiality, that I had considerable literary gifts, but that I was tending to devote myself too much to ephemeral and imaginative literature, and that I ought to take up a task more worthy of my powers, write a historical biography such as a Life of Canning, or produce a complete annotated edition of the works of Pope, with a biography and appendices. I assured him that I had no talents for research, and insufficient knowledge for a historical biography. He replied that research was a matter of patience, and that as for knowledge, I could acquire it.

I thanked him sincerely for his thoughtful kindness, and said that I would hear it in mind.

The result of my reflections is that the only kind of literature worth writing is literature with some original intention. Solid works have a melancholy tendency to be monumental, in the sense that they cover the graves of literary reputations. Historical works are superseded with shocking rapidity. One remembers the description which FitzGerald gave of the labours of his friend Spedding upon Bacon. Spedding gave up the whole of his life, said FitzGerald, to editing works which did not need editing, and to whitewashing a character which could not be whitewashed. It is awful to reflect how many years Walter Scott gave to editing Dryden and Swift and to writing a Life of Napoleon—years which might have given us more novels and poems. Did Scott, did

Page 88

anyone, gain by the sacrifice? Of course one would like to write a great biography, but the biographies that live are the lives of men written by friends and contemporaries, living portraits, like Boswell's *Johnson* or Stanley's *Arnold*. To write such a book, one needs to have been in constant intercourse with a great personality, to have seen him in success and failure, in happiness and depression, in health and sickness, in strength and weakness. Such an opportunity is given to few.

Of course, if one has a power of wide and accurate historical survey, a trustworthy memory, a power of vitalising the past, one may well give one's life to producing a wise and judicious historical work. But here a man must learn his limitations, and one can only deal successfully with congenial knowledge. I have myself a very erratic and unbusinesslike mind. There are certain things, like picturesque personal traits, landscape, small details of life and temperament, that lodge themselves firmly in my mind; but when I am dealing with historical facts and erudite matters, though I can get up my case and present it for the time being with a certain cogency, the knowledge all melts in my mind; and no one ought to think of attempting historical work unless his mind is of the kind that can hold an immense amount of knowledge in solution. I have a friend, for instance, who can put all kinds of details into his mind—he has an insatiable appetite for them—and produce them again years afterwards as sharp and definite in outline as when he put them away. His mind is, in fact, a great spacious and roomy warehouse, where things are kept dry and in excellent order. But with myself it is quite different. To store knowledge of an uncongenial kind in my own mind is just as though I put away a heap of snowballs. In a day or two their outline is blurred and blunted; in a few months they have melted away and run down the gutters. So much for historical work.

Then there comes the question of editorial work: and here again I have the greatest admiration for men like Dr. Birkbeck Hill or Professor Masson, who will devote a lifetime to patiently amassing all the facts that can be gleaned about some great personality. But this again requires a mind of a certain order, and there is no greater mistake in literary work than to misjudge the quality and force of one's mind.

My own work, I am certain, must be of a literary kind; and when one goes a little further back and asks oneself what it is that makes great personalities, like Milton or Dr. Johnson, worth spending all this labour about, why one cares to know about their changes of lodgings and their petty disbursements, it is, after all, because they are great personalities, and have displayed their greatness in imaginative writings or in uttering fertile and inspiring conversational dicta. Imagine what one's responsibility would have been if one could have persuaded Charles Lamb to have taken up the task

Page 89

of editing the works of Beaumont and Fletcher, and to have deserted his ephemeral contributions to literature. Or if one could have induced Shelley to give up writing his wild lyrics, and devote himself to composing a work on Political Justice. Jowett, who had a great fancy for imposing uncongenial tasks on his friends, is recorded to have said that Swinburne was a very brilliant, young man but that he would never do anything till he had given up wasting his time in poetry. Imagine the result if Jowett had had his way!

Of course, it all depends upon what one desires to achieve and the sort of success one sets before oneself. If one is enamoured of academical posts or honorary degrees, why, one must devote oneself to research and be content to be read by specialists. That is a legitimate and even admirable ambition—admirable all the more because it brings a man a slender reputation and very little of the wealth which the popular writer hauls in.

The things which live in literature, the books which make a man worth editing a century or two after he is dead, are, after all, the creative and imaginative books. It is not in the hope of being edited that imaginative authors write. Milton did not compose *L'Allegro* in the spirit of desiring that it might be admirably annotated by a Scotch professor. Keats did not write *La Belle Dame sans Merci* in order that it might be printed in a school edition, with a little biography dealing with the paternal livery-stable. It may be doubted whether any very vital imaginative work is ever produced with a view to its effect even upon its immediate readers. A great novelist does not write with a moral purpose, and still less with an intellectual purpose. He sees the thing like a picture; the personalities move, mingle, affect each other, appear, vanish, and he is haunted by the desire to give permanence to the scene. For the time being he is under the thrall of a strong desire to make something musical, beautiful, true, life-like. It is a criticism of life that all writers, from the highest to the humblest, aim at. They are amazed, thrilled, enchanted by the sight and the scene, by the relationships and personalities they see round them. These they must depict; and in a life where so much is fleeting, they must seek to stamp the impression in some lasting medium. It is the beauty and strangeness of life that overpowers the artist. He has little time to devote himself to things of a different value, to the getting of position or influence or wealth. He cannot give himself up to filling his leisure pleasantly, by society or amusement. These are but things to fill a vacant space of weariness or of gestation. For him the one important thing is the shock, the surprise, the delight, the wonder of a thousand impressions on his perceptive personality. And his success, his effect, his range, depend upon the uniqueness of his personality in part, and in part upon his power of expressing that personality.

Page 90

Of course, there are natures whose perceptiveness outruns their power of expression—and these are, as a rule, the dissatisfied, unhappy temperaments that one encounters; there are others whose power of expression outruns their perceptiveness, and these are facile, fluent, empty, agreeable writers.

There are some who attain, after infinite delays, a due power of expression, and these are often the happiest of all writers, because they have the sense of successful effort. And then, lastly, there are a divine few, like Shakespeare, in whom both the perception and the power of expression seem limitless.

But if a man has once embraced the artistic ideal, he must embark upon what is the most terrible of all risks. There is a small chance that he may find his exact subject and his exact medium, and that the subject may be one which is of a widespread interest. But there are innumerable chances against him. Either the fibre of his mind is commonplace; or he is born out of his due time, when men are not interested in what are his chief preoccupations; or he may miss his subject; or he may be stiff, ungainly, puerile in expression.

All of these are our literary failures, and life is likely to be for them a bitter business. I am speaking, of course, of men who embrace the matter seriously; and the misery of their position is that they will be confounded with the dilettantes and amateurs who take up literature as a fancy or as a hobby, or for even less worthy motives.

A man such as I have described, who has the passion for authorship, and who fails in the due combination of gifts, must face the possibility of being regarded as a worse than useless being; as impractical, childish, slipshod, silly, worth no one's attention. He is happy, however, if he can find a solace in his own work, and if he is sustained by a hopefulness that makes light of results, if he finds pleasure in the mere doing of unrecognised work.

And thus, in my own case, I have no choice, I must perfect my medium as far as I can, and I must look diligently for a congenial subject. I must not allow myself to be discouraged by advice, however kindly and well-intentioned, to devote myself to some more dignified task. For if I can but see the truth, and say it perfectly, these writings, which it is so easy to call ephemeral, will become vital and enriching. It is not the subject that gives dignity; it is not wholly the treatment either; it is a sort of fortunate union of the two, the temperament of the writer exactly fitting the mould of his subject—no less and no more.

Page 91

In saying this I am not claiming to be a Walter Scott or a Charles Lamb. But I can imagine a friend of the latter imploring him not to waste his time, with his critical gifts, upon writing slender, trifling essays; and I maintain that if Charles Lamb knew that such essays were the work that he did best, with ease and delight, he had the right to rebuff the hand that held out a volume of Marlowe and begged him to annotate it. What spoils our hold on life for so many of us is this false sense of conventional dignity. In art there is no great and small. Whatever a mind can conceive clearly and express beautifully, that is good art, whether it be a harrowing tragedy in which murders and adulteries cluster as thick as flies, or the shaking of a reed in a stream as the current plucks it softly from below. If a man can communicate to others his amazed bewilderment in the presence of the tragedy, or his exquisite delight in the form and texture and motion of the reed, he is an artist. Of course, there will always be more people who will be affected by a melodrama, by strange and ghastly events, by the extremes of horror and pathos, than will be affected by the delicate grace of familiar things—the tastes of the multitude are coarse and immature. But a man must not measure his success by the range of his audience, though the largest art will appeal to the widest circle. Art can be great and perfect without being large and surprising. And thus the function of the artist is to determine what he can see clearly and perfectly, and to take that as his subject. It may be to build a cathedral or to engrave a gem; but the art will be great in proportion as he sees his end with absolute distinctness, and loves the detail of the labour that makes the execution flawless and perfect. The artist, if he would prevail, must not be seduced by any temptation, any extraneous desire, any peevish criticism, any well-meant rebuke, into trying a subject that he knows is too large for him. He must be his own severest critic. No artistic effort can be effective, if it is a joyless straining after things falteringly grasped. Joy is the essential quality; it need not always be a present, a momentary joy. There are weary spaces, as when a footsore traveller plods along the interminable road that leads him to the city where he would be. But he must know in his heart that the joy of arrival will outweigh all the dreariness of the road, and he must, above all things, mean to arrive. If at any moment the artist feels that he is not making way, and doubts whether the object of his quest is really worth the trouble, then he had better abandon the quest; unless, indeed, he has some moral motive, apart from the artistic motive, in continuing it. For the end of art is delight and the quickening of the pulse of emotion; and delight cannot be imparted by one who is weary of the aim, and the pulse cannot be quickened by one whose heart is failing him. There may, as I say,

Page 92

be moral reasons for perseverance, and if a man feels that it is his duty to complete a work when his artistic impulse has failed him, he had better do it. But he must have no delusions in the matter. He must not comfort himself with the false hope that it may turn out to be a work of art after all. His biographer draws a terrible picture of Flaubert pacing in his room, flinging himself upon his couch, rising to pace again, an agonised and tortured medium, in the search of the one perfect word. But the misery was worth it if the word was found, and the fierce faint joy of discovery was worth all the ease and serenity of declining upon the word that sufficed, instead of straining after the word required.

XXIX

We artists who try to discern beauty, and endeavour to rule our lives to be as tranquil, as perceptive, as joyful as possible, are apt to be too impatient of the petty, mean, and sordid things with which the fabric of life is so much interwoven—the ugly words of spiteful people, little fretting ailments, unsympathetic criticisms, coldness and indifference, tiresome business, wearisome persons. It is a deep-seated mistake. We cannot cast these things away as mere debris. They must be used, applied, accommodated. These are our materials, which we must strive to combine and adapt. To be disgusted with them, to allow them to disturb our serenity, is as though a painter should sicken at the odour of his pigments and the offscourings of his palette. The truer economy is to exclude all such elements as we can, consistently with honour, tenderness, and courage. Then we must not be dismayed with what remains; we must suffer it quietly and hopefully, letting patience have her perfect work. After all it is from the soul of the artist that his work arises; and it is through these goads and stings, through pain and weariness joyfully embraced, that the soul wins strength and subtlety. They are as the implements which cleave and break up the idle fallow, and without their work there can be no prodigal or generous sowing.

I suppose that I put into my observation of Nature—and perhaps into my hearing of music—the same thing that many people experience only in their relations with other people. To myself relations with others are cheerful enough, interesting, perplexing—but seldom absorbing, or overwhelming; such experiences never seem to say the ultimate word or to sound the deeper depth. I suppose that this is the deficiency of the artistic temperament. I write looking out upon a pale wintry sunset. There, at least, is something deeper than myself. I do not suppose that the strange pageant of clouds and burning light, above the leafless grove, the bare fields, is set there for my delight. But that I should feel its inexpressible holiness, its solemn mystery—feel it with a sense of pure tranquillity, of satisfied desire—is to me the sign that it holds some sacred secret for

Page 93

me. I suppose that other men have the same sense of sacredness and mystery about love and friendship. They are deep and beautiful things for me, but they are things seen by the way, and not waiting for me at the end of my pilgrimage. Music holds within it the same sort of hidden influence as the beauty of nature. It is not so with pictorial art, or even with writing, because the personality, the imperfections, of the artist come in between me and the thought. One cannot make the pigments and the words say what one means. Even in music, the art sometimes comes between one and the thing signified. But the plain, sweet, strong chords themselves bring the fulness of joy, just as these broken lights and ragged veils of cloud do. I remember once going to dine at the house of a great musician; I was a minute or two before the time, and I found him sitting in his room at a grand piano, playing the last cadence of some simple piece, unknown to me. He made no sign of recognition; he just finished the strain; a lesser man would have put the sense of hospitality first, and would have leapt up in the midst of an unfinished chord. But not till the last echo of the last chord died away did he rise to receive me. I felt that he was thus obeying a finer and truer instinct than if he had made haste to end.

Everyone must find out for himself what are the holiest and most permanent things in life, and worship them sincerely and steadfastly, allowing no conventionality, no sense of social duty, to come in between him and his pure apprehension. Thus, and thus only, can a man tread the path among the stars. Thus it is, I think, that religious persons, like artists, arrive at a certain detachment from human affections and human aims, which is surprising and even distressing to men whose hearts are more knit to the things of earth. Those who see in the dearest and most intimate of human relations, the purest and highest gift of God, will watch with a species of terror, and even repulsion, the aloofness, the solitariness of the mystic and the artist. It will seem to them a sort of chilly isolation, an inhuman, even a selfish thing; just as the mystic and the artist will see in the normal life of men a thing fettered and bound with sad and small chains. It is impossible to say which is the higher life—no dogmatism is possible—all depends upon the quality of the emotion; it is the intensity of the feeling rather than its nature that matters. The impassioned lover of human relations is a finer being than the unimpassioned artist, just as the impassioned artist is a finer being than the man who loves sensually and materialistically. All depends upon whether the love, whatever it be—the love of nature or of art, of things spiritual or divine, the love of humanity, the sense of brotherly companionship—leads on to something unfulfilled and high, or whether it is satisfied. If our desire is satisfied, we fail; if it is for ever unsatisfied, we are on the right

Page 94

path, though it leads us none can tell whither, to wildernesses or paradises, to weltering seas or to viewless wastes of air. If the artist rests upon beauty itself, if the mystic lingers among his ecstasies, they have deserted the pilgrim's path, and must begin the journey over again in weariness and in tears. But if they walk earnestly, not knowing what the end may be, never mistaking the delight of the moment for the joy that shines and glows beyond the furthest horizon, then they are of the happy number who have embraced the true quest. Such a faith will give them a patient and beautiful kindliness, a deep affection for fellow-pilgrims, and, most of all, for those in whose eyes and lips they can discern the wistful desire to see behind the shadows of mortal things. But the end will be beyond even the supreme moment of love's abandonment, beyond the fairest sights of earth, beyond the sweetest music of word or chord. And we must, above all things, forbear to judge another, to question other motives, to condemn other aims; for we shall feel that for each a different path is prepared. And we shall forbear, too, to press the motives that seem to us the fairest upon other hearts. We must give them utterance as faithfully as we can, for they may be a step in another's progress. But the thought of interfering with the design of God will be impious, insupportable. Our only method will be a perfect sincerity, which will indeed lead us to refrain from any attempt to overbalance or to divert ingenuous minds from their own chosen path. To accuse our fellow-men of stupidity or of prejudice is but to blaspheme God.

XXX

What, after all, is the essence of the artistic life, the artist's ideal? I think the reason why it is so often misconceived and misunderstood is because of the fact that it is a narrow path and is followed whole-heartedly by few. Moreover, in England at the present time, when we are all so tolerant and imagine ourselves to be permeated by intelligent sympathy with ideas, there seem to me to be hardly any people who comprehend this point of view at all. There is a good deal of interest in England in moral ideals, though even much of that is of a Puritan and commercial type. The God that we ignorantly worship is Success, and our interest in moral ideas is mainly confined to our interest in what is successful. We are not in love with beautiful, impracticable visions at all; we measure a man's moral intensity by the extent to which he makes people respectable and prosperous. We believe in an educator when he makes his boys do their work and play their games; in a priest, when he makes people join clubs, find regular employment, give up alcohol. We believe in a statesman when he makes a nation wealthy and contented. We have no intellectual ideals, no ideals of beauty. Our idea of poetry is that people should fall in love, and our idea of art is the depicting of rather obvious allegories.

Page 95

These things are good in their way, but they are very elementary. Our men of intellect become scientific researchers, historians, erudite persons. How few living writers there are who unite intellect with emotion! The truth is that we do not believe in emotion; we think it a thing to play with, a thing to grow out of, not a thing to live by. If a person discourses or writes of his feelings we think him a sentimentalist, and have an uneasy suspicion that he is violating the canons of good taste. The result is that we are a sensible, a good-humoured, and a vulgar nation. When we are dealing with art, we have no respect for any but successful artists. If the practice of art results in fame and money, we praise the artist in a patronising way; when the artist prophesies, we think him slightly absurd until he commands a hearing, and then we worship him, because his prophecies have a wide circulation. If the artist is unsuccessful, we consider him a mere dilettante. Then, too, art suffers grievously from having been annexed by moralists, who talk about art as the handmaid of religion, and praise the artist if he provides incentives for conduct of a commercial type. It would be better for art if it were frankly snubbed rather than thus unctuously encouraged. We look upon it all as a matter of influence, for the one thing that we desire is to be felt, to affect other people, to inspire action. The one thing that we cannot tolerate is that a man should despise and withdraw from the busy conventional world. If he ends by impressing the world we admire him, and people his solitude with ugly motives. The fact is that there was never a more unpromising soil for artists than this commonplace, active, strenuous century in which we live. The temptations we put in the artist's way are terribly strong; when we have done our work, we like to be amused by books and plays and pictures, and we are ready to pay high prices to the people who can give our heavy souls small sensations of joy and terror and sorrow. And wealth is a fierce temptation to the artist, because it gives him liberty, freedom of motion, comfort, things of beauty and consideration. The result is that too many of the artists who appear among us fall victims to the temptations of the world, and become a kind of superior parasite and prostitute, believing in their dignity because they are not openly humiliated.

But the true artist, like the true priest, cares only for the beautiful quality of the thought that he pursues. The true priest is the man who loves virtue, disinterestedness, truth, and purity with a kind of passion, and only desires to feed the same love in faithful hearts. He seeks the Kingdom of God first; and if the good things of the world are strewn, as they are apt to be strewn, in the path of the virtuous person, he is never for a moment seduced into believing that they are the object of his search. His desire is that souls should glow and thrill with high, sacred, and tender emotions, which are their own surpassing reward.

Page 96

So, too, the artist is concerned solely with the beautiful thing—whether it is the beauty of the eager relationships of men and women, or the ever-changing exquisite forms and colours of nature, or the effect of all these things upon the desirous soul of man. And it is here that his danger lies, that he may grow to be preoccupied with the changing and blended texture of his own soul, into which flow so many sweet influences and gracious visions—if, like the Lady of Shalott, he grows to think of the live things that move on the river-side only as objects that may minister to the richness of the web that he weaves. He must keep his eye intent upon the power, whatever it may be, that is behind all these gracious manifestations; they must all be symbols to him of some unrevealed mystery, or he will grow to love the gem for its colour, the flower for its form, the cloud for its whiteness or empurpled gloom, the far-off hill for its azure tints, and so forget to discern the spirit that thus gleams and flashes from its shrouding vapours.

And then, too, in art as in love, the artist must lose himself that he may find himself. If he considers all things in relation to his own sensitive and perceptive temperament, he will become immured in a chilly egotism, a narrow selfishness, from which he will not dare to emerge. He must fling himself whole-heartedly into a passionate worship of what is beautiful, not desiring it only that it may thrill and satisfy him, but longing to draw near to its innermost essence. The artist may know, indeed, that he is following the wrong path when he loves the artistic presentation of a thing better than the thing presented, when he is moved more by a single picture of a perfect scene than by the ten thousand lovely things which he may see in a single country walk. He must, indeed, select emotions and beautiful objects by their quality; he must compare and distinguish; but if he once believes that his concern is with representation rather than with life, he goes downward. He must not be concerned for a single instant with the thought, “How will this that I perceive affect others as I represent it?” but he must rather be so amazed and carried out of himself by the beauty of what he sees, that the representing of it is only a necessary consequence of the vision; as a child may tell an adventure breathlessly and intently to its mother or its nurse, absorbed in the recollection.

And thus the true artist will not weigh and ponder the most effective medium for his expression; the thought must be so overpowering that the choice of a medium will be a matter of pure instinct. The most, indeed, of what he feels and perceives he will recognise to be frankly untranslatable in speech or pigment or musical notes, too high, too sacred, too sublime. His work will be no more selfish than the work of the pilot or the general is selfish. The responsibility, the crisis, the claim of the moment, will outweigh and obliterate all personal, all fruitless considerations. He must have no thought of success; if it comes, he may rejoice that he has been a faithful interpreter, and has shared his joy with others; if it does not come, his joy is not lessened.

Page 97

Then, too, in ordering his life, he must be humble, sincere, and simple. He must keep his eye and his mind open to all generous admirations. He must let no lust or appetite, no ambition of pride, cloud his vision. He must take delight in the work of other artists, and strive to see the beautiful and perfect rather than the false and feeble. He must rejoice if he can see his own dream more seriously and sweetly depicted than he can himself depict it, for he must care for nothing but the triumph of beauty over ugliness, of light over darkness. And thus the true artist may be most easily told by his lavish appreciation of the work of other artists, rather than by his censure and disapproval.

And, again, he must be able to take delight in the smallest and humblest beauties of life. He must not need to travel far and wide in the search for what is romantic, but he must find it lying richly all about him in the simplest scene. He must not crave for excitement or startling events or triumphs or compliments; he must not desire to know or to be known by famous persons, because his joys must all flow from a purer and clearer fountain-head. He must find no day nor hour dreary, and his only fatigue must be the wholesome fatigue that follows on patient labour, not the jaded fatigue of the strained imagination.

Age, and even infirmity, does not dull the zest of such a nature; it merely substitutes a range of gentler and more tranquil emotions for the heroic and passionate enthusiasms of youth; for the true artist knows that the emotion of which he is in search is something far higher and purer and more vivid than his fiercest imaginations—and yet it has the calm of strength and the dignity of worth; the vehement impulses of youth “do it wrong, being so majestic.” And he draws nearer to it when animal heat and the turbulence of youthful spirit has burnt clearer and hotter, throwing off its smoke and lively flame for a keener and purer glow.

And above all things, the artist must most beware of the complacency, the sense of victory, the belief that he has attained, has plumbed the depth, seen into the heart of the mystery. Rather as life draws on he must feel, in awe and hope, that it is infinitely mightier and greater than he thought in the days of potent impulse. His whole soul must be full of a sacred fear as he draws closer to the gate, the opening of which may give him a nearer glimpse of the secret. The humble sense of failure will be a bright and noble thought, because it will show him how much the mystery transcends the most daring hope and dream.

XXXI

Page 98

I was present in a great church the other day at a service held at the hour of sunset The dying light fell richly through the stained windows, lending a deep and beautiful mystery to the scenes there depicted. The pale faces of pictured saints, with their rich robes, were outlined with a pathetic sweetness against backgrounds of solemn buildings or confused woods. The lighted tapers of the choir threw a faint glow up to the intricate roof, which seemed flooded with a golden mist; the gilt pipes of the organ gleamed softly; the music began to roll and stir, with a grave melodious thunder, like the voice of a dreaming spirit. A procession of white-vested figures moved with a ceremonial dignity to their places, and then the service proceeded through soft gradations of prayer and praise, in words of exquisite and restrained felicity, all haunted with the echoes of the ages. I sate alone, a silent listener, and it seemed to me that every appeal which the beauty of art could make to the spirit was here delicately displayed. Eye and ear, emotion and intellect, were alike thrilled and satisfied. They sang the 119th Psalm, that perfect expression of holy quietude: "Thy testimonies are wonderful; therefore doth my soul seek them." Wonderful, indeed, and gracious, sweet as honey. The heart, in that glad moment, drew near to the tender Father of life, who seemed, as in the old parable, to see the repentant son of his heart wandering sadly a long way off, to go forth to meet him, and to fill the house with light and music, that he might feel it to be home indeed.

That the instinct that has drawn all the treasures of art into its service, and with them welcomes and sustains the wearied soul, is a pure and beautiful one, I make no doubt. But then I thought of all that lies outside: of crowded cities, of the ugly mirth, the sordid cares of men and women; of the dark laws that wound and slay; of pain and shame; of tired labour and cruelty and harshness, of lust and greediness.

I thought of how few there were of mankind to whom the sweet pomp which I sate to see and hear makes any appeal, I thought that for one to whom such beauty was desirable and satisfying, there were thousands who would prefer the brisk interchange of life, the race-course, the athletic spectacle, the restaurant, the tap-room. Was this, indeed, religion at all? I wondered. It did, indeed, use the language of religion, surround itself with the memories of saints, the holy wisdom of the ages. But what was the end of it? Did it inspire those who heard it with the desire to win, to sustain, to ameliorate other souls? Did it inculcate the tender affection, the self-sacrifice, the meek devotion that Christ breathed into life? Did it not rather tend to isolate the soul in a paradise of art, to consecrate the pursuit of individual emotion? It is hard to imagine that a spirit who has plunged into the intoxication of sensuous delight that such a solemnity brings would depart without an increased aversion

Page 99

to all that was loud and rude, with an intensified reluctance to mingle with the coarser throng. Was it not utterly alien to the spirit of Christ thus to seclude oneself in light and warmth, among sweet strains of music and holy pictures? I do not doubt that these delights have a certain ennobling effect upon the spirit; but are they a medicine for the sorrows of the world? are they not rather the anodyne for sensitive spirits fond of tranquil ease?

I could not restrain the thought that if a man of sensitive nature is penetrated with the spirit of Christ first, if the passion of his soul to seek and save the lost is irresistible, if his faith runs clear and strong, he might win a holy refreshment from these peaceful, sweet solemnities. But the danger is for those who have no such unselfish enthusiasm, and who are tempted, under the guise of religion, to yield themselves with a sense of fastidious complacency to what are, after all, mere sensuous delights. Is it right to countenance such error? If piety frankly said, "These things are no part of religion at all; they are only a pure region of spiritual beauty, a garden of refreshment into which a pilgrim may enter by the way; only a mere halting-place, a home of comfort,"—then I should feel that it would be a consistent attitude. But if it is only a concession to the desire of beauty, if it distracts men from the purpose of Christ, if it is a mere bait for artistic souls, then I cannot believe that it is justified.

While I thus pondered, the anthem rose loud and sweet upon the air; all the pathos, the desire of the world, the craving for delicious rest, stirred and spoke in those moving strains—round a quiet minor air, sung by a deep grave voice of a velvety softness, a hundred mellow pipes wove their sweet harmonies: it told assuredly of a hope and of a truth far off; it drew the soul into a secret haven, where it listened contentedly to the roar of the surge outside. But the error seemed to be that one desired to rest there, like the Lotos-eaters in the enchanted land, and not to fare forth as a soldier of God. It spoke of delight, not of hardness; of acquiescence, not of effort.

XXXII

Strange that the sight of a man being guillotined should inspire me with a burning desire to inflict the very thing which I see another suffer! What a violent metaphor for a very minute matter! It is only a review which I have been reading, in which a pompous, and I imagine clerical, critic comes down with all his might on a man whom I gather to be a graceful and mildly speculative writer. The critic asks ponderously. What right has a man who seems to be untrained in philosophy and theology to speculate on philosophical and religious matters? He then goes on to quote a passage in which the writer attacks the current view of the doctrine of the Atonement, and he adds that a man who is unacquainted with the

Page 100

strides which theology has made of late years in the direction of elucidating that doctrine ought not to presume to discuss it at all. No doubt, if the writer in question made any claim to be discussing the latest theological position on the subject of the Atonement, in a technical way, he would be a mere sciolist; but he is only claiming to discuss the Current conception of the Atonement; and, as far as I can judge, he states it fairly enough. The truth is that the current conceptions of old theological doctrines tend to be very much what the original framers of those doctrines intended them to be. All that later theologians can do, when the old doctrine is exploded, is to prove that the doctrine can be modified and held in some philosophical or metaphysical sense, which was certainly not in the least degree contemplated by the theologians who framed it; but they are quite unable to explain to the man in the street what the new form of the doctrine is; and their only chance of doing that is to substitute for an old and perfectly clear doctrine a new and perfectly clear doctrine. The tone adopted by this critic reminds me of the tone adopted by Newman to his disciples. Mark Pattison relates how on one occasion he advanced, in Newman's presence, some liberal opinion, in the days when he was himself numbered among the Tractarians; and that Newman deposited, as was his wont, an icy "Very likely!" upon the statement; after which, Pattison says, you were expected to go into a corner and think over your sins. Not so does thought make progress!

But the larger question is this. What right have philosophers or theologians to arrogate to themselves the sole right of speculation in these matters? If religion is a vital matter, and if all of us who have any thoughts at all about life and its issues are by necessity to a certain extent practical philosophers, why should we meekly surrender the stuff of speculation to technical disputants? Of course, there are certain regions of experiment that must be left to specialists, and a scientist who devoted himself to embryology might justly complain of a man who aired views on the subject without adequate study. But as far as life goes, any thoughtful and intelligent man who has lived and reflected is in a sense a specialist. In life and conduct, in morality and religion, we are all of us making experiments all day long, whether we will or no; and it may be fairly said that a middle-aged man who has lived thoughtfully has given up far more time to his subject than the greatest scientist has devoted to his particular branch. A church-goer, like myself, has been lectured once or twice a week on theology for as long as he can remember. For years I have speculated, with deep curiosity, on problems of religion, on the object and ultimate issues of life and death. Neither philosophers nor theologians have ever discovered a final solution which satisfies all the data. The theologian, indeed, is encumbered

Page 101

by a vast mass of human tradition, which he is compelled to treat more or less as divine revelation. The whole religious position has been metamorphosed by scientific discovery; and what theologian or philosopher has ever come near to solving the incompatibility of the apparent inflexibility of natural law with the no less apparent liberty of moral choice? Theologians and philosophers may, if they choose, attempt to crush the speculations of an experimentalist in life, though I think they would be better employed in welcoming them as an instance of how theological and metaphysical conceptions strike upon the ordinary mind; but they shall not prevent one who, like myself, has observed life closely under aspects which the technical student has had no opportunity of observing it, from making my comment upon what I see. It is possible that such comments may appeal to ordinary people with even more force than technical considerations are likely to appeal. We have all to sin and to suffer, to enjoy and to fear; we find our instinct at variance with our reason and our moral sense alike. We have in our souls conceptions of justice, truth, purity, generosity, and we find the natural law, which we would fain believe is the law of God, constantly thwarting and even insulting these conceptions; and yet these conceptions are as real and vivid to us as the law which takes no account of them. We find theologians basing their faith on documents which every day appear to be less and less historical, and on deductions drawn from these documents by men who believed them to be historical. I have the utmost sympathy with the position in which theologians find themselves; but they have mostly their own prudence to thank for it; they are so cautious about sifting the chaff from the grain, that they will not throw away the chaff for fear of casting away a single grain. They are so averse to unsettling the faith of the weak, that the vitality has ebbed away from the faith of the strong; they have clung so hard to tradition, that they have obscured fact; they would confine the limbs of manhood in the garb of childhood; and thus they have forfeited the confidence of intelligent men, and ranged themselves with the credulous, the comfortable, and the unenterprising. Intolerant persecution is out of date, and the question will be solved by the stranding of the theological hull, owing to the quiet withdrawal of the vital tide.

XXXIII

My way this afternoon lay through a succession of old hamlets, one closely bordering on another, that lie all along the base of the wold. I have no doubt that the reason for their position is simply that it is just along the base of the hills that the springs break out, and a village near a perennial and pure spring generally represents a very old human settlement indeed. Sometimes the wold drew near the road, sometimes lay more remote; its pale fallows, its faintly-tinted pastures, seemed to lie very quietly

Page 102

to-day under the grey laden sky. Here a chalk-pit showed its miniature precipices; here a leafless covert detached its wiry sprays against the light. The villages were pretty enough, with their quaint, irregular white cottages, comfortably thatched, among the little orchards and gardens; and in every village the ancient, beautiful church, each with a character of its own and a special feature of interest or beauty, lay nestled in trees, or held up its grey tower over ricks and barns. We are apt to forget what beautiful things these churches are, because they are so common, so familiar; if there were but a few of them, we should make careful pilgrimages to see them, but now we hardly turn off the road to visit them.

I often wonder what exactly the feeling and the spirit were that produced them, what the demand precisely was that created the supply. I suppose they were almost always the gift of some wealthy person; of course labour and perhaps materials were cheaper, but there must have been a much larger proportion of people employed in the trade of building than is the case nowadays; probably these churches were slowly and leisurely built, in the absence of modern mechanical facilities. It is difficult to conceive how the thing was carried out at all in places with so few resources—how the stone was conveyed thither over the infamous miry roads, how the carving was done, how the builders were lodged and fed. One would like, too, to know exactly what part the churches played in the social life of the place. Some people would have us believe that the country people of that date had a simple enjoyment of beauty and artistic instincts which caused them to take a pleasure, which they do not now feel, in these beautiful little sanctuaries. I do not know what the evidence is for that. I find it very hard to believe that our agricultural labourers have gone backwards in this respect; I should imagine it was rather the other way. My impression is that education has probably increased the power of perception and appreciation rather than diminished it. It is possible that the absence of excitement, of diffuse reading, of communication in those days may have tended to concentrate the affections and interests of agricultural people more on their immediate surroundings, but I rather doubt it; the problem is, considering the much greater roughness and coarseness of village life in the Middle Ages, how there could have existed a poetical and artistic instinct among villagers, which they have now forfeited.

These churches certainly indicate that a very different view of religion prevailed; they testify to a simpler and stronger sense of religion than now exists, but not, I think, to a truer sense of it. They stand, I do not doubt, for a much more superstitious and barbarous view of the relation of God to men; the people who built them had, I imagine, the idea of conciliating God by the gift of a seemly sanctuary, a hope of improving

Page 103

not only their spiritual prospects in the after-life, but of possibly advancing their material prosperity in this, by thus displaying their piety and zeal in God's service. I cannot believe that the churches were designed with the intention of making the rustic inhabitants of the place holier, more virtuous, more refined—except incidentally; they were built more in obedience to ecclesiastical tradition, in a time when rationalism had not begun to cast doubt on what I may call the Old Testament theory of the relation of God to men—the theory of a wrathful power, vindictive, jealous of recognition, withholding blessings from the impious and heaping them upon the submissive. As to those who worshipped there, I imagine that the awe and reverence they felt was based upon the same sort of view, and connected religious observance with the hope of prosperity and wealth, and the neglect of it with the fear of chastisement. If misfortune fell upon the godly, they regarded it as the chastening of God inflicted upon the sons of His love; if it fell upon the ungodly, it was a punishment for sin; religion was a process by which one might avert the punishment of sin, induce the bestowal of favours, and in any case improve one's future prospects of heaven. No doubt this form of religion produced a simpler kind of faith, and a profounder reverence; but I do not think that they were very beautiful qualities when so produced, because they seem to me very alien from the simplicity of the religion of Christ. The difficulty in which popular religion finds itself, nowadays, is that in a Protestant Church like our own, neither priest nor people believe in the old mechanical theories of religion, and yet the people are not yet capable of being moved by purer conceptions of it. A priest can no longer threaten his congregation sincerely with the penalties of hell for neglecting the observances of the Church; on the other hand, the conception of religion as a refining, solemnising attitude of soul, bringing tranquillity and harmony into life, is too subtle an idea to have a very general hold upon unimaginative persons. Thus the beauty of these exquisite and stately little sanctuaries, enriched by long associations and touched with a delicate grace by the gentle hand of time, has something infinitely pathetic about it. The theory that brought them into existence has lost its hold, while the spirit that could animate them and give them a living message has not yet entered them; the refined grace, the sweet solemnity of these simple buildings, has no voice for the plain, sensible villager; it cannot be interpreted to him. If all the inhabitants of a village were humble, simple, spiritually minded people, ascetic in life, with a strong sense of beauty and quality, then a village church might have a tranquil and inspiring influence. But who that knows anything of village life can anticipate even in the remote future such a type of character prevailing? Meanwhile the beautiful churches, with all the grace of antiquity and subtle beauty, must stand as survivals of a very different condition of life and belief; while we who love them can only hope that a more vital consciousness of religion may come back to the shrines from which somehow the significance seems to have ebbed away. They are now too often mere monuments and memorials of the past. Can one hope that they may become the inspiration and the sanctification of the present?

Page 104

XXXIV

I have just returned from a very curious and interesting visit. I have been to stay with an old school friend of my own, a retired Major; he has a small place of his own in the country, and has lately married a very young and pretty wife. I met him by chance in my club in London, looking more grey and dim than a man who has just married a lovely and charming girl ought to look. He asked me rather pressingly to come and stay with him; and though I do not like country-house visits, for the sake of the old days I went.

Well, it was a very interesting visit; I was warmly welcomed. The young wife, who I must say is the daughter of a penniless country clergyman with a large family, was radiant; the Major was quietly and undemonstratively pleased to see me; the veil of the years fell off, and I found myself back on the old easy terms with him, as when we were schoolboys together thirty years ago. He is a very simple and transparent creature, and I read him as if he were a book. He indulged in almost extravagant panegyrics of his wife and descriptions of his own happiness. But I very soon made a discovery: his charming wife is, not to put too fine a point upon it, a fool. She is perfectly harmless, good-natured, and virtuous. But she is a very silly and a very conventional girl. She is full of delight at her promotion; but she is entirely brainless, and not even very affectionate. She is wholly preoccupied about her new possessions, and the place she is going to take in the county; she cares for her husband, because he represents her social success, and because he is a creditable and presentable man. But she has no grain of sympathy, perception, humour, or emotion. I began by thinking it was rather a tragedy; my old friend had married for love; he is anything but a fool himself, except for this one serious error, the falling in love with a girl who can give him none of the things he desires. He is a very serious, simple, intelligent, and tenderhearted fellow, with all sorts of odd ideas of his own, which he produces with an admirable humility. He likes books; he reads poetry—I even suspect him of writing it. He is interested in social problems, and has a dozen kindly enterprises—a club, a carving class, a natural history society, and so forth—for the benefit of the village where he lives. He would have been an ideal country clergyman; he is an excellent man of business, and does a good deal of county work. He is fond of sport, too—in fact, one of those grave, affectionate, solid men who are to be found living quietly in every part of England—a characteristic Englishman, indeed. But the strain of romance in his nature has for once led him wrong, and the mistake seemed irreparable. I was at first inclined to regard him with deep compassion. He is the soul of chivalry, and it struck me as deeply pathetic to see him smiling indulgently, but with a sad and

Page 105

bewildered air, at the terrible snobbishness, to be candid, which his lively wife's conversation revealed. She was for ever talking about "the right people," and the only subject which seemed to arouse her enthusiasm was the fact that she had been received on equal terms by some of the wives of neighbouring squires. The Major tried to give a pleasant turn to the conversation, and when he was alone with me, after praising the practical good sense of his wife, added, "Of course she hasn't quite settled down yet! She has lived rather a poky life, and the change has upset her a little." That was the nearest that the good fellow could get to an apology, and it touched me a good deal. I did my part, and praised my hostess's charm and beauty, and expressed gratitude for the warmth of my welcome.

But now that I have had time to reflect on the situation, I am not at all sure that the Major is not to be congratulated after all. He has got before him a perfectly definite occupation, and one which he will fulfil with all the generosity of his nature. He was a lonely man before his marriage, and, like all lonely men, was becoming somewhat self-absorbed. Now his work is cut out for him. He has got to make the best of a tiresome and unsympathetic wife. I will venture to say that if the Major lives to be eighty, his wife will never suspect that he does not adore and admire her. He will never say a harsh or unkind or critical thing to her. He may induce her, perhaps, by gentle precepts, to moderate her complacency; and perhaps, too, they will have children, and some kind affection may awake in his shallow little partner's heart. The Major will make a perfect father, and he will find in his children, if only they inherit something of his own wise and tender nature, a deep and lasting joy. I think that if he had married an adoring and sympathetic wife, he might almost have grown exacting—perhaps even selfish, because he is the sort of man that requires to have the best part of him evoked. He is unambitious and in a way indolent; and if everything had been done for him—his wishes anticipated, sympathy lavished upon him—he would have had no region in which to exercise that self-restraint which is now a necessity of the case. We are very liable to try and arrange the lives of others for them, and to think we could have done better for them than Providence; and since I have pondered over the situation, I am inclined to be ashamed of myself for feeling the regret which I began by feeling. If there was any weakness in my friend's mind, if I thought that he would grow irritable, harsh, impatient with his silly wife, it would be different. But he will have to stand between her and the world; she will shock and distress all his finer feelings and instincts of propriety. They will go and pay visits, and he will have to hear her saying all sorts of trivial and vulgar things. He will make himself into a kind guardian and interpreter and champion for this foolish young woman. She

Page 106

will try his patience, his endurance, his chivalry to the uttermost; and he will never fail her for an instant—he will never even confess to himself in the loneliness of his own heart that there is anything amiss. The severest criticism he will ever pass upon her will be a half-hearted wish that she should exhibit the best side of herself more consistently. And so I come at last to think that there are many worse things in the world for a strong man than to be the bulwark and fortress of a thoroughly inferior nature. He feels the strain at first, because it is all so different from what he expected and hoped. But he will soon grow used to that. And, after all, his wife is both lovely and healthy; she will always be delightful to look at. Indeed, if he can teach, her to hold her tongue, to listen instead of rattling away, to smile with those pretty eyes of hers as if she understood, to ask the simplest questions about other people's tastes and preferences, instead of describing her own garden and poultry-yard, she might pass for a delightful and even enchanting woman. But I fear that neither he nor she are quite clever enough for that. I do not personally envy my old friend; if I were in his position, the situation would bring out the very worst side of my nature. But because I realise how much better a fellow he is than myself, I believe that he has every prospect of being a decidedly happy man.

XXXV

There are certain writers—men, too, of ability, humour, perspicacity, with wide knowledge, lucidity of expression, firm intellectual grip, genuine admirations, who really live among the things of the mind—whose writings are almost wholly distressing to me, and affect me exactly as the cry of an itinerant vendor in a quiet and picturesque town affects me. It is an honest trade enough; he saves people a great deal of trouble; he sells, no doubt, perfectly wholesome and inexpensive things; but I am glad when he has turned the corner, and when his raucous clamour is heard more faintly—glad when he is out of sight, and still more when he is out of hearing. So with these authors; if I take up one of their books, however brilliant and even true the statements may be, I am sorry that the writer has laid hands upon a thing I admire and value. He seems like a damp-handed auctioneer, bawling in public, and pointing out the beauties of a mute and pathetic statue.

I am thinking now of one writer in particular, a well-known man of letters, a critic, essayist, and biographer; a man of great acuteness and with strong and vehement preferences in literature. When I have been forced by circumstances, as I sometimes have, to read one of his books, I find myself at once in a condition of irritable opposition. He writes sensibly, acutely, epigrammatically; but there is a vile complacency about it all, an underlying assumption that every one who does not agree with him in the smallest particular

Page 107

is necessarily a fool—a sense that he feels that he has gone into the merits of a book, and that there is exactly as much and as little in it as he tells you. He is very often right; that is the misery of it. But this lack of urbanity, this unnecessary insolence, is a very grave fault in a writer—fatal, indeed, to his permanence. He turns a book or a person inside out, dissects it in a deft and masterly way; but one feels at the end as one might feel about an anatomist who has dissected every fibre of an animal's body, classified every organ, traced every muscle and nerve, and bids you at the end take it on his authority that there is no such thing as the vital principle or the informing soul, because he has shown you everything that there is to see. Yet the finest essence of all, the living and breathing spirit, has escaped him.

But what is a still worse fault in the writer of whom I speak is that he is the victim of a certain intellectual snobbishness. By which I mean that when he has once conceived an admiration for a historical personage or a writer he becomes unable to criticise him; he can only justify and praise him, sling mud at his opponents, and, so to speak, clear a space round his hero by knocking over in opprobrious terms any one who may threaten his supremacy. He condones and even praises any fault in his idol; and what would be in his eyes a damning fault in one whom he happened to dislike, becomes a salient virtue in the person whom he praises. He condemns Swift for his coarseness and praises Johnson for his outspokenness. He condemns Robert Browning for his obscurity and praises George Meredith for his rich complexity. He would never see that the victory lies with the appreciator of any personality, because, if you happen to appreciate a figure whom he himself dislikes, you are proclaimed to be guilty of perversity and bad taste. Thus I not only feel sore when he abuses a character whom I love, but I feel ashamed when he decries one whom I hate, for I am tempted to feel that I must have grossly misunderstood him; and even when he rapturously and unctuously belauds some figure that I admire, I feel my admiration to be smirched and tarnished.

The one quality which I think he always misses in a character is a high, pure, delicate sense of beauty, the subtlest fibre of poetry. This my swashbuckler misnames sentimentality—and thus I feel that he always tends to admire the wrong qualities, because he condones even what he calls sentimentality in one whom he chooses to admire.

It is this attitude of disdain and scorn, based upon the intellect rather than upon the soul, that I think is one of the most terrible and satanical things in life. Such a quality may be valuable in scientific research, it may be successful in politics, because there are still among us many elementary people who really like to see a man belaboured; it may be successful in business, it may bring a man wealth, position, and a certain kind of influence. But it never inspires confidence or affection; and though such a man may be feared and respected on the stage of life, there is an invariable and general sense of relief when he quits it.

Page 108

"The fruit of the Spirit," wrote the wise apostle—who knew, too, the bitter pleasures of a vehement controversy, and was no milk-and-water saint—"the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, meekness, long-suffering, kindness." None of these fruits hang upon the vigorous boughs of our friend's tree. He is rather like that detestable and spidery thing the araucaria, which has a wound for every tender hand, and invites no bright-eyed feathered songsters to perch or build among its sinister branches.

The only critic who helps me is the critic whose humility keeps pace with his acuteness, who leads me gently where he has himself trodden patiently and observantly, and does not attempt to disfigure and ravage the regions which he has not been able to desire to explore. The man who will show me unsuspected connections, secret paths of thought, who will teach me how to extend my view, how I may pass quietly from the known to the unknown; who will show me that stars and flowers have voices, and that running water has a quiet spirit of its own; and who in the strange world of human life will unveil for me the hopes and fears, the deep and varied passions, that bind men together and part them, and that seem to me such unreasonable and inexplicable things if they are bounded by the narrow fences of life—emotions that travel so long and intricate a path, that are born with such an amazing suddenness and attain so large a volume, so fierce a velocity—this is the interpreter and guide whom I would welcome, even if he know but a little more than myself; while if my guide is infallible and disdainful, if he denies what he cannot see and derides what he has never felt, then I feel that I have but one enemy the more, in a place where I am beset with foes.

XXXVI

I have had rather a humiliating experience to-day. A young literary man, whom I knew slightly, came down to see me, and stayed the night. He was a small, shapely, trim personage, with a pale, eloquent face, large eyes, mobile lips, and of extraordinary intelligence. I was prepared—I make the confession very frankly—to find a certain shyness and deference about my young friend. He has not made his mark as yet, though I think he is likely to make it; he has written nothing in particular, whereas I am rather a veteran in these matters.

We had a long talk about all kinds of things, mostly books; and it presently dawned upon me that, so far from being either shy or deferential, it was rather the other way. He looked upon himself, and quite rightly, as an advanced and modern young man, brimful of ideas and thoroughly abreast of the thoughts and movement of the day. Presently I made a fresh discovery, that he looked upon me as an old fogey, from whom intelligence and sympathy could hardly be expected. He discussed some modern books with great acuteness, and I became aware that, so far from desiring to learn my opinion, he had not the slightest

Page 109

wish even to hear me express it. He listened very courteously to my criticisms, as a man might listen to the talk of a child. However, when I had once got hold of the clue, I abandoned myself joyfully to what appeared to me to be the humour of the situation. I thought to myself that here was an opportunity of turning inside out the mind of a very young and intelligent man. I might learn, I thought, what the new ideas were, the direction in which the younger generation were tending. Now, it would be invidious to mention the names of the books that we discussed. Many of the volumes that he ranked very high, I had not even read; and he was equally at sea in the old books that seemed to me the most vital and profound. I discovered that the art that he preferred was a kind of brilliant impressionism. He did not care much about the truth of it to life; the desirable quality seemed to him to be a sort of arresting daring of statement. He was not a narrow-minded man at all; he had read a great many books, both old and new, but he valued specious qualities above everything, and books which seemed to me to be like the crackling of thorns under a pot seemed to him to be the glowing heart of the fire. The weakness of my young friend's case lay, I thought, in the fact that he not only undervalued experience, but that he evidently did not believe that experience could have anything to say to him. With the swift insight of youth, he had discounted all that, and growing older appeared to him to be a mere stiffening and hardening of prejudices. Where he seemed to me to fail was in any appreciation of tender, simple, wistful things; as I grow older, I feel the pathetic charm of life, its hints, its sorrow, its silence, its infinite dreams, its darkening horizon, more and more acutely. Of all this he was impatient. His idea was to rejoice in his strength; he loved, I felt, the sparkling facets of the gem, the dazzling broken reflections, rather than its inner heart of light. The question which pressed on me with a painful insistence was this: "Was he wholly in the right? was I wholly in the wrong?" I am inclined, of course, to believe that men do their best artistic work in their youth, while they are passionately just, charmingly indiscreet, relentlessly severe; before they have learnt the art of compromise or the force of limitations. I suppose that I, like all other middle-aged writers, am tempted to think that my own youth is miraculously prolonged; that I have not lost in fire what I have gained in patience and width of view. But he would believe that I have lost the glow, and that what seems to me to be gentle and beautiful experience is but the closing in of weariness and senility. I have often thought myself that an increase of accomplishment goes hand-in-hand with an increased tameness of spirit. And the most pathetic of all writers are, to my mind, those whose mastery of their art grows as the initial impulse declines. But my young friend appeared to me to value only prodigal and fantastic vigour, and to prefer the sword-dance to the minuet.

Page 110

I began to perceive at last that he was feeling as Hamlet did when the bones of Yorick were unearthed; with a kind of luxurious pity for my mouldering conditions; touched, perhaps, a little by the thought that I was excluded from the bright and brave shows of earth, and sadly conscious of the odour of corruption. I felt as he strolled with me round my garden on the following morning that he was regarding my paltry, unadventurous life with a sincere pity, as the life of one who had stolen from the brisk encounters of wit and revelry to a quiet bedroom and a basin of gruel. And yet the curious thing was that I felt no kind of resentment about it at all. I did not envy him his youth and his pride; indeed, I felt glad to have escaped from it, if I was like what he was at his age. The world seemed full to me of a whole range of fine sensations, gentle secrets, remote horizons, of which he had no perception. Indeed, I think he despised my whole conception of patient and faithful art. His idea rather was that one should not spend much time over work, but that one should break at intervals into a spurting, fizzing flame, and ascend like a rocket over the heads of the crowd, discharging a shower of golden stars.

I may, of course, be only coming down like a burnt-out stick; and this is where the humiliation lies; but I feel rather as if I were soaring to worlds unknown: though perhaps, after all, that is only one of the happy delusions, the gentle compensations, which God showers down so plentifully upon the middle-aged.

I have had two visitors lately who have set me reflecting upon the odd social habits of the men of my nation. They were not unusual experiences—indeed I think they may fairly be called typical.

One of these was a man who invited himself to come and see me; the excuse, a small matter of business; but he added that we had many common friends, that he had read my books, and much wished to make my acquaintance.

He came down to luncheon and to spend the afternoon. He was a tall, handsome, well-dressed man, with a courteous, conventional manner, but every inch a gentleman. He had a perfect social ease; he began by paying me rather trite compliments, saying that he found my books extremely sympathetic, and that I constantly put feelings into words which he had always had and which he had never been able to express. Then we turned to our business and finished it in five minutes. It now remained to fill the remainder of the time. We strolled round the garden; we lunched; we strolled again. We had an early tea, and I walked down to the station with him. I had thought that perhaps he wished to discuss some of the topics on which I had written in my books; but he did not appear to have any such wish. He had lately taken a house himself in the country; and he appeared to wish to tell me about that. I was delighted to hear about it, because I am always interested to hear how other people live; but I began to be surprised when I discovered

Page 111

that this seemed to be the only thing he wished to talk about. He described the house, the garden, the village, the neighbours; he described his mode of life, his parties, the things he said to other people, the visits he paid. I became a mute listener. Occasionally I assented or asked a question; but if I attempted to contribute to the conversation he became restive and bored; so I merely let him have his head, and he talked on. I will confess that I derived a good deal of entertainment from my companion, for he was a shrewd and observant man. I do not think I ever learnt so much about an entire stranger in so short a time. I even knew what he had for breakfast and what he drank with his luncheon. When we said goodbye at the station, he said that he had spent a very pleasant day, and I am sure it was the truth; he pressed me to visit him with much cordiality, and said that it had given him great pleasure to make my acquaintance; we bowed and smiled and waved our hands, and the train moved out of the station.

The surprising thing is that it never seemed to occur to him that he had not made my acquaintance at all. He had seen my house, indeed, but every detail that he observed had suggested to him some superior detail in his own house. He had certainly allowed me to make his acquaintance, but that had not been the professed object of his visit. He could not have talked more obligingly if I had been an interviewer who had desired to write his biography. I do not believe that it had ever crossed his mind that the occasion had been anything but a complete success. His enjoyment was evidently to converse, and he had conversed unintermittently for several hours. The man was an egoist, of course, but he had not talked exclusively about himself. Much of his talk had been devoted to other people, but they were all of them the people whom he saw in his own private mirror. I have no doubt that for the time being I was a figure in his dreams, and that I shall be described with the same minuteness to the unhappy recipients of his confidences who are now awaiting him at dinner,—at which I may mention he always drinks whisky-and-seltzer.

I do not mean that every one is like this; but there are really a larger number of people in the world than I like to think whose delight it is not to perceive but to relate. The odd thing is that my friend should think it necessary to preface his meeting with courteous formulas, which I suppose are really merely liturgical, like the *Dominus vobiscum*, relating to what a polite Frenchman the other day called *votre presence et votre precieux concours*.

It is really impossible to convey anything to such people; in fact, it is almost impossible to communicate with them at all. “Never tell people how you are,” as a trenchant lady of my acquaintance said to me the other day; “they don’t want to know.”

Page 112

I think that the society of people who do want to know, and who ply one with questions as to one's tastes and habits, are almost more trying than the purely narrative people, and induce a subtle sense of moral hypochondria. The perfect mixture, which is not a common one, is that of the person who both desires to know and is willing to illustrate one's experience by his own. Then there is a still more inexplicable class—the people who go greedily to entertainments, come early and go late, who seem to wish neither to learn nor to communicate, but sit staring and tongue-tied. The inveterate talker is the least tiresome of the three undesirable types, because one at least learns something of another's point of view. But the danger of general society to a person like myself, who has a desire to play a certain part in talk, is that sometimes one is tied to an uncompromising person as to a post for execution. I love a decent equality in the matter of talk. I want to hear other people's views and to contrast my own with them. I do not wish to lie, like a merchant vessel near a pirate ship, and to be fired into at intervals until I surrender. Neither do I want to do all the firing myself.

The odd thing is that people, like the saints in the psalm, are so joyful in glory! They seem entirely content with their aims and methods, and not even dimly to suspect that they might be enlarged or improved. Some of them want to talk, and some of them seem not even to wish to be talked to; a very few to listen, and a small and happy percentage desire both to give and to take.

Well, I suppose that I ought to be glad that my visitor enjoyed himself; but I cannot help feeling that my coachman would have done as well as myself—indeed better, for he is a pleasantly taciturn man, and would not even have given way to rebellious thoughts.

The impression left on my mind by my visitor is just as though a grasshopper had leapt upon my window-sill from the garden-bed, and sate there awhile, with his blank eyes, his long, impassive, horse-like face, twiddling his whiskers and sawing out a whizzing note with his dry arm. It would please me to observe his dry manners, his unsympathetic and monotonous cries; but neither visitor nor grasshopper would seem within the reach of any human emotion, except a mild curiosity, and even amusement. Indeed, the only difference is that if I had clapped my hands the grasshopper would have gone off like a skipjack, and after a sky-high leap would have landed struggling among the laurels; while the more I clapped my hands at my visitor, the longer he would have been delighted to stay.

Page 113

My other visitor, who came a day or two later, was a very different type of man. He was a young, vigorous, healthy creature, who had lately gone as a master to a big public school. He came at my invitation, being the son of an old friend of mine. He, too, spent a day with me, and left on my mind a very different impression, namely, that I should grow to respect and like him the more that I saw of him. There was nothing insincere or lacking in genuineness about him. I felt his solidity, his loyalty, his uprightness very strongly. But he exhibited on first acquaintance—due no doubt to a sturdy British shyness—all the qualities that make us so detested upon the Continent, and that lead the more expansive foreigner, who only sees the superficial aspect of the Englishman, to think of us as a brutal nation. He was an odd mixture of awkwardness and complacency, a desire to be courteous struggling with a desire to show his independence; he had no ease of manner, no bonhomie, but a gruff and ugly kind of jocosity, which I am sure was not really natural to him, but was his protest against the possibility of my considering him to be shy. He seemed anxious to show that he was as good a man as myself, which I was quite ready to take for granted. He jested about the dullness of the country; said that he thought it made people jolly mouldy. He did not see that it was a pity to press that fact upon me; the truth was that he was thinking of himself for the time being, though he was no egoist. And whereas the courtly egoist pays you compliments first and then returns to a more congenial self-contemplation, my burly young friend would, I have not the slightest doubt, grow more companionable and considerate every day that one knew him. But his manner was the manner of the common-room and the cricket field, that odd British humour, that, without meaning to be unkind, thrusts its darts clumsily in the weak points of the armour. It is this, I think, that makes English public school life so good a discipline, if one unlearns its methods as soon as one has done with it, because it makes men tolerant of criticism and even ridicule; its absence of sentiment makes them tough; its absence of courtesy makes them strong.

But I did not like it at the time. He surveyed my belongings with good-humoured contempt. He said he did not care for fiddling about a garden himself, and at my fowl-house he jested of fleas. In my library he said he had no time for poking about with books. I asked him about his life at P—— and he assured me it was not half bad; that the boys were all right if you knew how to take them; and he told me some pleasant stories of some of his inefficient colleagues. He said that a good deal of the work was rot, but that they had a first-rate cricket pitch, and a splendid Pro.

Page 114

Yet this young man took a high classical degree, and is, I know for a fact, an admirable schoolmaster, sensible, effective, and even wise; he makes his boys work, and work contentedly, and he is not only popular but really trusted by the boys. He would never do a mean thing or an unkind thing; he is absolutely manly, straightforward, and honourable, and I gladly admit that a man's behaviour on a social occasion is a very trivial thing beside these greater qualities. But what is it, then, which causes this curious gruffness and rudeness, this apparent assumption that every one is slightly grotesque, low-minded, and dishonest? For the style of humour which this type develops is the humour that consists in calling attention in public to any deficiencies that you may observe in a man's appearance, manner, and surroundings, and also taking for granted that his motives for action are bad. I do not mean to say that my young friend considers me grotesque or dishonest, but his idea of humour is to make a pretence of thinking so. He would be distressed if he thought that he had given me pain; his intention is to diffuse a genial good-humour into the scene; and if he were bantered in the same way, he would take it as an evidence of friendly feeling.

The truth is that it is really schoolboy humour belatedly prolonged. Vituperation is the schoolboy's idea of friendly banter. The schoolboy does not so much consider the feelings of his victim as his companions' need for amusement. But I am sure that the tendency nowadays is, somehow or other, to prolong the hobbledehoy days. There is so much more organisation of everything at schools that young men remain boys longer than they used to do. Partly, too, in the case of this young man, it arises from his never having had a change of atmosphere. He remained a jolly schoolboy till the end of his University days, and then he went back to the society of schoolboys. He is simply undeveloped; and the mistake he makes is to consider himself a man of the world.

But partly, too, it arises from national characteristics, the preference for bluntness and frankness and outspokenness; the tendency to believe that a display of courtesy and emotion and consideration is essentially insincere. One does not at all want to get rid of frankness and outspokenness. Combined with a certain degree of deference and sympathy, they are the most delightful graces in the world. But though the attitude which I have been describing prides itself upon being above all things unaffected, it is in reality a highly affected mood, because it is all based on a kind of false shame. Such a man as my young friend does not really say what he thinks, and very rarely thinks what he says. He is, as I have said, a high-minded, intelligent, and sensible man; but he thinks it priggish to let his real opinions be known, and thus is priggish without perceiving it. The essence of priggishness is the disapproving attitude, and it is priggish to wish to appear superior; but my young friend, in the back of his mind, does think himself the superior of courteous, sympathetic, and emotional persons.

Page 115

And thus I did not particularly enjoy his visit, because I could not feel at ease with my visitor. I could not say frankly what I thought, but had to select topics which I thought he would consider unaffected.

I think, in fact, that we pay too high a price for our British reticence: perhaps we keep a few foolish and gushing people in order, stifle effusiveness, and dry up unctuousness; but we do so at the price of silencing a much larger number of simple and direct people, and lose much variety of characteristics and interchange of sincere opinions thereby!

XXXVIII

There are some people in the world, I am sure, who are born solitary, who are not conscious of any closeness of relationship with others. They are not necessarily ungenial people—indeed they sometimes have a great deal of external geniality; but when it is a question of forming a closer relationship, they are alarmed and depressed by the responsibility which attaches to it, and become colder instead of warmer, the deeper and more imperative that the claims upon them become. Such people are not as a rule unhappy, because they are spared the pain which arises from the strain of intimacy, and because loss and bereavement do not rend and devastate their hearts. They miss perhaps the best kind of happiness, but they do not suffer from the penalties that dog the great affections of men.

I had an old friend, who was a boy at school with me, who was of this type. He was essentially solitary in spirit, though he was amiable and sociable enough. There can be no harm in my telling the story of his life, as the actors in it are all long ago dead.

He was at the University with me, though not at the same College; I think that owing to a certain similarity of tastes, and perhaps of temperament, I was his nearest and most intimate friend. He confided in me as far as he confided in any one; but I always felt that there was a certain fence behind which I was never admitted; and probably it was because I never showed any signs of desiring to claim more than he was ready to give in the way of intimacy that he found himself very much at his ease with me.

A year or two after he left the University I heard from him, to my great surprise, that he was engaged to be married. I went up to see him in town, where he was then living, and he took me to see his fiancée. She was one of the most beautiful and charming creatures I have ever seen, and the two were evidently, as the phrase goes, very much in love. I must say that my friend was superficially a most attractive fellow; he had a commanding presence, and great personal beauty, and there was a certain air of mystery about him which must, I think, have added to the charm. They were married, and for a time, to all appearances, enjoyed great happiness. A child was born to them, a daughter. I saw them at intervals, and my impression was that my friend had found

the one thing that he wanted, the companionship of a loving, beautiful, and intelligent woman.

Page 116

It was in the course of the year after the birth of the child that I became aware that something had gone wrong; a shadow seemed to have fallen upon them. I became aware in the course of a few days which I spent with them in a little house by the sea, which they had taken for the summer, that all was not well. My friend seemed to me distraught and heavy-hearted; his wife seemed to be pathetically affectionate and anxious. There was no indifference or harshness apparent in his manner to her; indeed, he seemed to me to be extraordinarily considerate and tender. One day—we had gone off in the morning for a long ramble on the cliffs, leaving his wife in the company of an old school friend of hers who had come to stay with them—he suddenly said to me, with a determined air, that he wished to consult me on a point. I expressed the utmost readiness to be of use, and wondered in an agitated way what the matter could be; but he was silent for so long—we were sitting on a grassy headland high above a broad, calm expanse of summer sea—that I wondered if he had repented of his resolution. At last he spoke. I will not attempt to reproduce his words, but he said to me, with an astonishing calmness, that he found that he was ceasing to care for his wife: he said very quietly that it was not that he cared for anyone else, but that his marriage had been a mistake; that he had engaged himself in a moment of passion, and that this had subsequently evaporated. In the days of his first love he had poured out his heart to his wife, and now he no longer desired to do so; he did not wish any more to share his thoughts with her, and he was aware that she was conscious of this; he said that it was infinitely pathetic and distressing to him to see the efforts that she made to regain his confidence, and that he tried as far as he could to talk to her freely, but that he had no longer any sincere desire to do it, and that the effort was acutely painful; he was, he said, deeply distressed that she should be bound to him, and he indicated that he was fully aware that her own affection for him had undergone no change, and that it was not likely to do so. He asked me what he had better do. Should he continue to struggle with his reluctance to communicate his feelings to her; should he endeavour to make her acquiesce in altered relations; should he tell her frankly what had happened; or should he—he confessed that he would prefer this himself—arrange for a virtual separation? “I feel,” he said, “that I have lost the only thing in the world I really care about—my liberty.” It sounds, as I thus describe the situation, as though my friend was acting in an entirely selfish and cold-blooded manner; but I confess that it did not strike me in that light at the time. He spoke in a mood of dreary melancholy, as a man might speak who had committed a great mistake, and felt himself unequal to the responsibilities he had assumed. He spoke of his wife with a deep compassionateness, as though intensely alive to the

Page 117

sorrow that he had inconsiderately inflicted upon her. He condemned himself unsparingly, and said frankly that he had known all the time that he was doing wrong in allowing himself to be carried away by his passion. "I hoped," he said, "that it might have been the awakening of a new life in me, and that it would be an initiation for me into the inner life of the world, from which I had always been excluded." He went on to say that he would make any sacrifice he could for her happiness—adding gravely, looking at me with a strange air, that if he thought that she would be the happier if he killed himself, he would not hesitate to do it. "But live as we are living," he said, "I cannot. My life has become a continual and wearing drama, in which I can never be myself, but am condemned to play an unreal part."

I made him the only answer that was possible—namely, that I thought that he had undertaken a certain responsibility and that he was bound in honour to fulfil it. I added that I thought that the whole of his future peace of mind depended upon his rising to the situation, even though it were to be a martyrdom. I said that I thought, believing as I did in the providential guidance of individual lives, that it was the crisis of his fate; that he had the opportunity of playing a noble part.

"Yes," he said dispassionately, "if it was the case of a single action of the kind that is usually called heroic, I think I could do it; what I can't say that I think I am equal to is the making of my life into one long pretence; and what is more, it will not be successful—I cannot hope to deceive her day after day."

"Well," I said, "it is a terrible position; but I think you are bound to make the attempt."

"Thanks," he said; "you don't mind my having asked you? I thought it would perhaps make things clearer, and I think that on the whole I agree with you." He then began to talk of other matters with the utmost calmness. The sequel is a strange one; what he said to his wife I do not know, but for the few days that I spent with them there was a very different feeling in the air; he had contrived to reassure her, and her anxiety seemed for a time, at all events, to be at an end. A few days after I left them, the child fell ill, and died within a week. The shock was too much for the wife, and within a month she followed the child to the grave. My friend was left alone; and it seemed to me like a ghastly fulfilment of his desires. I was with him at the funeral of his wife; is it terrible to relate that there was a certain tranquillity about him that suggested the weariness of one off whom a strain had been lifted? But his own life was to be a short one; about two years after he himself died very suddenly, as he had always desired to die. I saw him often in the interval; he never recurred to the subject, and I never liked to reopen it. Only once did he speak to me of her. "I feel," he said to me on one

Page 118

occasion, quite suddenly, "that the two are waiting for me somewhere, and that they understand; and my hope is that when I am freed from this vile body I shall be different—perhaps worthy of their love; it is all within me somewhere, though I cannot get at it. Don't think of me," he said, turning to me, "as a very brutal person. I have tried my best; but I think that the capacity for real feeling has been denied me."

It is a very puzzling episode; what I feel is that though we always recognise the limitations of people physically and mentally, we do not sufficiently recognise the moral and emotional limitations. We think of the will as a dominant factor in people's lives, as a thing that we can all make use of if we choose; we forget that it is just as strictly limited and conditioned as all our other faculties.

XXXIX

I have an acquaintance at Cambridge, John Meyrick by name, who visits me here at intervals, and is to me an object of curious interest. He is a Fellow and Lecturer of his College. He came up there on a scholarship from a small school. He worked hard; he was a moderate oar; he did not make many friends, but he was greatly respected for a sort of quiet directness and common-sense. He never put himself forward, but when it fell to him to do anything he did it with confidence and discretion. He had an excellent head for business, and was Secretary or Treasurer of most of the College institutions. After taking an excellent degree he was elected to a Fellowship. He took advantage of this to go abroad for a year to Germany, and returned a first-rate German scholar, with a considerable knowledge of German methods of education; and was shortly afterwards given a lectureship. I believe he is one of the best lecturers in the place; he knows his subject, and keeps abreast of it. He is extraordinarily clear, lucid, and decisive in statement, and though he is an advanced scholar, he is an extremely practical one. His men always do well. I made his acquaintance over a piece of business, and found him friendly and pleasant. He is fond of taking long, solitary walks on Sunday, as he seldom has time for exercise in the week; and I asked him to come over and see me; he walked from Cambridge one morning, arriving for luncheon, and I accompanied him part of the way back in the afternoon. Since that time he generally comes over once or twice a term. I do not quite know his object in doing this, because I always feel that he has a sort of polite contempt for my ways of life and habits of thought; but it makes a good goal for a long walk, and, moreover, he likes to know different types of people.

He is now about forty-five. In appearance he is trim and small, and gives the impression of being, so to speak, in first-rate training. He has a firm, pale face, of which the only distinction is that it has a look of quiet strength and self-confidence. He has rather thick dark hair, and a close-cropped beard, sprinkled with grey; strong, ugly hands, and serviceable feet. His dress is precise and deliberate, but in no particular

fashion. He wears a rather stiff dark suit, low collars, a black tie, a soft black hat, and strong elastic-sided boots. If one met him in the road, one would think him a Board-School Master.

Page 119

He is very considerate and polite; for instance, if he is coming over he always lets me know a few days before, so that I may get his post-card forwarded to me if I happen to be away. If the day is wet or if he is prevented from coming, he invariably wires in the morning to let me know that he will not appear.

He has one of the best-filled and most serviceable minds I know; though he is overwhelmed by business of all kinds—he is Secretary to two or three boards—he always seems to have read everything and to have a perfectly clear-cut idea about it. He does this by the most extraordinarily methodical use of his time. He rises early, disposes of his correspondence, never failing to answer a letter as briefly as possible the same day that he receives it; reads the paper; lectures and coaches all the morning; attends meetings in the afternoon; coaches again till dinner; and after dinner reads in his rooms till midnight. He seems to have perfect bodily health and vigour, and he has never been known to neglect or to defer anything that he undertakes. In fact, he is a perfectly useful, competent, admirable man.

His behaviour to every one is exactly the same; he treats everybody, his young men, his colleagues, his academical superiors, with the same dry politeness and respect. He is never shy or flustered; he found one day here, staying with me, a somewhat rare species of visitor, a man of high political distinction, who came down to get a quiet Sunday to talk over an important article which I happened to be entrusted with. Meyrick's behaviour was unexceptionable: he was neither abrupt nor deferential; he was simply his unaffected, self-confident self.

I like seeing Meyrick at intervals, because, though he is not really a typical Don at all, he is exactly the sort of figure which would be selected as typical nowadays. The days of the absent-minded, unkempt, slatternly, spectacled, owlish Don are over, and one has instead a brisk professional man, fond of business and ordered knowledge, who is not in the least a man of the world, but a curious variety of it, a man of a small and definite society who, on the strength of knowing a certain class, and of possessing a certain *savoir faire*, credits himself with a mundane position and enjoys his own self-respect.

But I should be very melancholy if I had to spend a long time in Meyrick's company. In the first place, his views on literature are directly opposed to mine. He has a kind of scheme in his head, and classifies writers into accurate groups. He seems to have no predilection and no admirations except for what he calls important writers. He has no personal interest in writers whatever. He can assign them their exact places in the development of English, but he never approaches an author with the reverential sense of drawing near to a mysterious and divine secret, but rather with a respect for technical accomplishment. In fact, his pleasure in dealing with an author is the pleasure of mastering him and classifying him. He puts a new book through its paces as a horse-dealer does with a horse; he observes his action, his strong and weak points, and then forms a business-like estimate of his worth.

Page 120

It is the same with his treatment of people. He has a hard and shrewd judgment of character, and a polite contempt for weakness of every kind. He is a Radical by conviction, with a strong sense of equal rights. Socialism he thinks unpractical, and he is interested in movements rather than in men.

But he seldom or never lets one into his confidence about people. If he respects and values a man he says so frankly, but keeps silence about the people of whom he does not approve. On one of the few occasions in which I had a peep into the interior of his mind, I was surprised to find that he had a strong class-feeling. He had an obvious contempt for what may be called the upper class, and gave me to understand that he thought their sense of superiority a very false one. He thought of them simply as the people, so to speak, in possession, but entirely lacking in moral purpose and ideal. I said something about the agreeable, sympathetic courtesy of well-bred people, and he made it plain that he regarded it as a sort of expensive and useless product. He had, I found, a different kind of contempt for the lower classes, regarding them as thriftless and unenterprising. In fact, the professional middle class seemed to him to have a monopoly of the virtues—common-sense, simplicity, respectability.

Two things for which he has no kind of sympathy are art and music, which appear to him to be a kind of harmless and elegant trifling. I am afraid that what irritates me in his treatment of these subjects is his cool and sensible indifference to them. He never expresses the least opposition to them, but merely treats them as purely negligible things. He is not exactly complacent, because there is no touch of vanity or egotism about him; and then his attitude is impossible to assail, because there is no assumption whatever of superiority about it. He merely knows that he is right, and he has no interest whatever in convincing other people; when they know better, when they get rid of their emotional prejudices, they will feel, he is sure, as he does.

In discussing matters he is not at all a doctrinaire; he deals with any objections that one makes courteously and frankly, and even covers his opponent's retreat with a polite quoting of possible precedents. Without being a well-bred man, he is so entirely unpretentious that he could hold his own in any company. He would sit next a commercial traveller and talk to him pleasantly, just as he would sit next the King, if it fell to his lot to do so, and talk without any embarrassment.

I find it hard to say why it is that a man who is so admirable in his conduct of life and in his relations with others inspires me at times with so strange a mixture of anger and terror. I am angry because I feel that he takes no account of many of the best things in the world; I am frightened because he is so extraordinarily strong and complete. If he were to be given absolute and despotic power, he would

Page 121

arrange the government of a State on just and equable lines; the only tyranny that he would originate would be the tyranny of common-sense. The only thing which he would be hard on would be unreasonableness in any form. I am very fond of reasonableness myself; I think it a very fine and beautiful quality, and I think that it wins probably the best victories of the world. But I desire in the world a certain driving force, whereas to me Meyrick only represents an immensely strong regulating force. When I am away from him I think subordination and regulation are very fine things, but when I am with him I feel that my liberty is somehow strangely curtailed. I cannot be fanciful or extravagant in Meyrick's company; his polite laugh would be a disheartening rebuke; he would think my extravagance an agreeable conversational ornament, but he would put me down as a man unfit to be placed upon a syndicate. I do not feel that I am being consciously judged and condemned; I simply feel that I am being unconsciously estimated; which fills me with inexplicable rage.

I wrote this on Sunday evening, having spent an hour or two in his company, I can still see him as I stopped to say farewell to him on the long, straight road leading to Cambridge. "Going to turn back here? Well, I must be getting on—very good of you to give me luncheon—good-bye!" with a little brisk smile—he never shakes hands, I must add, on these occasions. I stood for an instant to watch him walk off at a good pace down the road. His boots rose and fell rhythmically, and he put his stick down at regular intervals. He never turned his head, but no doubt plunged into some definite train of thought. Indeed, I have little doubt that he had arranged beforehand exactly what he would think out when I left him alone.

So the little, trim, compact figure trudged away, like a spirit of law, decency, and order, with the long fields stretching to left and right with their distant clumps of trees. He seemed to me to be the embodiment of sensible civilisation, knowing his own mind perfectly, a drill-sergeant of humanity, with a strong sense of responsibility for, but no sympathy with, all lounging, fanciful, and irresolute persons. How useful, how competent, how good, how honourable he was! What a splendid guide, mentor, and guardian! and yet I felt helplessly that he possessed and desired none of the things that make humanity dear and the world beautiful. I often feel very impatient with the way in which writers, and particularly clerical writers, use the word spiritual; it often means, I feel, that they are only conscious of the entire inadequacy of the motives for conduct that they are themselves able to supply; but the moment that I set eyes upon Meyrick, I know what the word means, that it is the one great quality that, for all his virtue and strength, he misses. I do not know what the quality is exactly, but I do know that he is without it; and in the dry light of Meyrick's

Page 122

mind, I forgive all muddled and irresolute people their sins and foolishnesses, their aggravating incompetence, their practical inefficacy; because I know that they have somehow in a clumsy way got hold of the two great principles that "The end is not yet," and "It doth not yet appear what we shall be." For them the misty goal is not even in sight; the vale is bounded by huge pine-clad precipices, wreathed with snow and crowned with cloud; but to Meyrick it does appear quite definitely what we are, and as for the end, well, the avenue of the world seems to lead up to a neat classical building with pillars and a pediment, that is called the temple of reason and common-sense.

I do not know what Meyrick's religious views are; he attends his College chapel with a cool decorum. But I suspect him of being a quiet agnostic. I do not think he cares a straw whether his individuality endures, and he looks forward to a progress which can be tabulated and statistics about the decrease of crime and disease that can be verified; that, I am sure, is his idea of the Kingdom of Heaven.

XL

I have been staying with a friend in Yorkshire, in an out-of-the-way place, and I have seen a good deal of the parish clergyman there, who is rather a pathetic person, I think. It seems to me that he belongs to a type which is perhaps becoming more common, and the fact makes me somewhat anxious about the future of the Church of England, because it is a type that does not seem to me to correspond to the needs of the day at all. He was, I believe, the son of a solicitor in a small country town; he was educated at a local grammar-school, and went up to a small Cambridge College; here he took a pass-degree, and then went into a Theological College, of a rather advanced High-Church type. Having received a so-called classical education, he had no particular intellectual interests. He was not an athlete; he worked just enough to secure a pass-degree, and spent his time at Cambridge in mild sociability. He takes no interest in politics, books, art, games, or even agriculture. Just when his mind began to expand a little he went off to the Theological College, where he was indoctrinated with high ecclesiastical ideas, and formed a great idea of the supreme importance of his vocation. He had no impulse to examine the foundations of his faith, but he meekly assimilated a large number of doctrinal and traditional propositions, such as the Apostolic succession, the visible corporate Church, the sacrificial theory of the Eucharist, priestly absolution, and so forth. He is a believer in systematic confession, but is careful to say that this was not inculcated upon him, but only indicated, and that his belief in it is based on practical experience. He also imbibed a great love of liturgical and ceremonial usage. He was for a short time a country curate, and married a clergyman's daughter. His College gave him the living which he now holds, which

Page 123

is fairly endowed; and having some small means of his own, he lives comfortably. I will add that he is a thoroughly kindly man, and very conscientious in the discharge of what he conceives to be his duty. He has a great many services on Sunday, somewhat sparsely attended. He reads matins and vespers every day in his church, and gives an address on saints' days. But he seems to have no idea what his parishioners are doing or thinking about, and no particular desire to know. He is assiduous in visiting, in holding classes, in teaching; he has no sense of humour whatever; and the system of religion which he administers is so perfectly obvious and unquestioned a thing to him, that it never occurs to him to wonder if other people are not built on different lines. I have often, attended his church and heard him preach; but the sermons which I have heard are either expositions of high doctrine, or else discourses of what I can only call a very feminine and even finicking kind of morality; he preaches on the duty of church-going, on the profane use of scriptural language, on the sanctification of joy, on the advisability of family prayer, on religious meditation, on the examples of saints, on the privilege of devotional exercises, on the consecration of life, on the communion of saints, on the ministry of angels. But it seems all remote from daily life, and to be a species of religion that can only be successfully cultivated by people of abundant leisure. I do not mean to say that many of these things do not possess a certain refined beauty of their own; but I do feel that farmers and labourers are not, as a rule, in the stage in which such ideas are possible or even desirable. I have seen him conduct a children's service, and then he is in high content, surrounded by clean and well-brushed infants, and smiling girls. He sits in a chair on the chancel steps, in a paternal attitude, and leads them in a little meditation on the childhood of the Mother of Christ. Whenever he describes a scene out of the Bible, and he is fond of doing this, it always sounds as if he were describing a stained-glass window; his favourite qualities are meekness, submissiveness, devotion, holiness; and he is apt to illustrate his teaching by the example of the Apostles, whom we are to believe were men of singular modesty because we hear so very little about them. The modern world has no existence for him whatever; and yet one cannot say that he lives in the Middle Ages, because he knows so little about them; he moves in a paradise of cloistered virgins and mild saints; and the virtue that he chiefly extols is the virtue of faith; the more that reason revolts at a statement, the greater is the triumph of godly faith involved in accepting it unquestioned.

The result is that the little girls love him, the boys laugh at him, the women admire him, the men regard him as not quite a man. The only objects for which he raises money diligently are additions to the furniture of the church; he takes a languid interest in foreign missions, he mistrusts science, and social questions he frankly dislikes. I have heard him say, with an air of deep conviction, when the question of the unemployed is raised, "After all, we must remember that the only possible solution of these sad difficulties is a spiritual one."

Page 124

The pity of it all is that he is so entirely complacent, so absolutely unaware that there is anything amiss. He does not see that people have to be tenderly and simply wooed to religion, and that they have to be led to take an interest in their own characters and lives. His idea is that the Church is there, a holy and venerable institution, with undeniable claims on the allegiance and loyalty of all. Worship is to him a man's first duty and privilege; and if he finds that one of his parishioners thinks the services tedious, tiresome, or unintelligible, he looks upon him as a child of wrath, perverse and ungodly. The one chance a clergyman has to gain the confidence of the men of his congregation is when he prepares the boys for confirmation; but the vicar sees them, each alone, week after week, and initiates them into the theory of the Visible Church and the advisability of regular confession. I confess sadly that it does not seem to me to resemble Christianity at all; in the place of the shrewd, simple, tender, and wise teaching of Christ about daily life and effort, the duties of kindness, purity, unselfishness, he gives an elaborate picture of rites and ceremonies, of mystical and spiritual agencies, which play little part in the life of a day-labourer's son. If he would learn something about the points of a horse instead of about the points of an angel, if he would study the rotation of the crops instead of the rotation of Easter-tide, he would find himself far more in line with his flock: if he would busy himself with getting the boys and girls good places, he would soon have a niche in the hearts of his parishioners; all that he does is to give a ploughboy, who is going off to a neighbouring farm, a little manual of devotion, with ugly and sentimental chromo-lithographs, and beg him to use it night and morning.

His wife is of the same type, a prim and colourless woman, who believes intensely in her husband, and devotes herself to furthering his work. They have three rather priggish children, whose greatest punishment is not to be allowed to teach in the Sunday-school.

One does not like to laugh at a man whose whole life is spent in doing what he believes to be right; but he seems to have no hold on realities, and to be quite unable to throw himself, by imagination or sympathy, into what his people want or need. He has no belief in secular education, and thinks it makes people discontented and faithless. He is generous with his money, spending lavishly on the Church, but he does not believe in what he calls indiscriminate charity. The incident which has touched him more than any other in the course of his ministry, he will tell you, is when a poor old woman on her death-bed confided to him a few shillings to be spent on providing an altar-frontal. He gives a Sunday-school feast every year, which begins with a versicle and a response. "Thou openest Thine Hand," he says in a rich voice and the children pipe in chorus, "And fillest all things living with plenteousness." The day ends with a little service, which he thoroughly enjoys.

Page 125

Even the services themselves are a dreary business, because he insists on the whole thing being choral; and little boys in short cassocks, with stocking-legs underneath, howl the responses and monotone the prayers to the accompaniment of a loud raw organ. He reads the lessons in what he calls a devotional way, which consists in reciting all episodes alike, the song of Deborah or the victories of Gideon, as if they were melancholy and pathetic reflections. He is fond of Gregorians and plain-song. The choirmen consist of a scrofulous invalid, his own gardener and coachman, and a bankrupt carpenter, given to drink and profuse repentance. But he is careful to say that he did not suggest the introduction of a choral service—"it was forced upon him by the wish of certain earnest and devoted helpers."

The fact is that the man is, as the children say, a real goose. There is nothing manly, vigorous, or sensible about him; he sometimes deplores the indifference of his parishioners to what he calls true Churchmanship, but he never thinks of comparing his ideal with the Gospel or with the actual conditions of the world. He seems to be hopelessly befogged; he is as certain as only a virtuous or stupid man can be that the religious system which he inculcates is the exact and deliberate development of the Spirit of Christ; and to hear him talk, you would suppose that the only joy in heaven resulted from a rumour that another church was added to the list of sanctuaries which had daily matins. The hopeless difficulty is that he considers his system so pure and lovely that to modify it in any way would seem to be a grievous compromise with worldliness, a violation of his high calling; he looks forward confidently to the time when the people of England will be a devotional and submissive flock, crowding daily to their village sanctuaries, and going back home with the glow and glory of the heavenly mysteries radiating from them in grave smiles and pious ejaculations.

It all seems to me a profoundly melancholy business. One does not wish to prevent people from worshipping God in the vicar's way, if they feel that thus they draw near to the divine presence; but it can only be a very small minority who will ever find satisfaction in this particular type of religion; and I must add that, for myself, I would not unwillingly see that minority reduced. It is a narrow, stuffy, and secluded region at best, remote from the open air, little alive to simplicity, manliness, humour, courage, and cheerfulness. What I resent about it is the solemn certainty with which this system is announced to be the eternal purpose and design of God for man. I am not in a position to say that it is not God's purpose, but nothing that I see in the world convinces me of it; and in any case I can only feel that if this type of religion continues to spread, which I believe it will do, if the better, more unaffected, more intellectual, more manly men begin to be alienated

Page 126

from the clerical profession, it will end in a complete indifference on the part of the nation to religion at all. The fault lies largely, I believe, with the seminaries. They have set up so exotic a standard, screwed up the ecclesiastical tone so high, that few but timid, unintellectual, cautious, and sentimental people will embrace a vocation where so many pledges have to be given. The type of old-fashioned village clergyman, who was at all events a man among men, kindly, generous, hospitable, tolerant, and sensible, seems doomed to extinction, and I cannot help thinking that it is a grievous pity. The new type of clergyman would think, on the other hand, that their disappearance is an unmixed blessing. They would say that they were sloppy, self-indulgent, secular persons, and that the improvement in tone and standard among the clergy was a pure gain; it all depends upon whether you put the social or the priestly functions of the clergyman highest. I am inclined to rate their social value very high, but then I prefer the parson to the priest. I dislike the idea of a priestly caste, an ecclesiastical tradition, a body of people who have the administering of mysterious spiritual secrets. I want to bring religion home to ordinary people, not to segregate it. I would rather have in every parish a wise and kindly man with the same interests as his neighbours, but with a good simple standard of virtuous and brotherly living, than a man endowed with spiritual powers and influences, upholding a standard of life that is subtle, delicate, and refined indeed, but which is neither simple nor practical, and to which the ordinary human being cannot conform, because it lies quite outside of his range of thought. To my mind, the essence of the Gospel is liberty and simplicity; but the Gospel of ecclesiasticism is neither simple nor free.

XLI

It was a pleasant, fresh autumn day, and the philosopher was in a good temper. He was my walking companion for that afternoon. He is always in a good temper, for the matter of that, but his temper has different kinds of goodness. He is always courteous and amiable; but sometimes he has a gentle irony about him and evades all attempts to be serious—to-day, however, he was both benevolent and expansive; and I plunged into his vast mind like a diver leaping headlong from a splash-board.

Let me describe my philosopher first. He is not what is called a social philosopher, a pretentious hedonist, who talks continuously and floridly about himself. I know one such, of whom an enthusiastic maiden said, in a confidential moment, that he seemed to her exactly like Goethe without any of his horrid immorality. Neither is he a technical philosopher, a dreary, hurrying man, travel-stained by faring through the ultimate, spectacted, cadaverous, uncertain of movement, inarticulate of speech. No, my philosopher is a trim, well-brushed man of the world, rather scrupulous

Page 127

about social conventions, as vigorous as Mr. Greatheart, and with a tenderness for the feebler sort of pilgrims. To-day he was blithe and yet serious; he allowed me to ask him questions, and he explained to me technical terms. I felt like a child dandled in the arms of a sage, allowed to blow upon his watch till it opened, and to pull his beard. "No," he said, "I don't advise you, at your age, to try and study philosophy. It requires rather a peculiar kind of mind. You will have to divest words of poetical associations and half-meanings, and arrive at a kind of mathematical appreciation of their value. You had much better talk to me, if you care to, and I will tell you all I can. Besides," he added, "much modern philosophy is a criticism of methods; it has become so special a business that we have most of us drifted quite beyond the horizon, like the higher mathematicians, into questions that have no direct meaning for the ordinary mind. We want a philosopher with a power of literary expression, who can make some attempt to translate our results into ordinary language." "Why could you not do it?" I said, "Ah," said he, "that is not my line! It needs a certain missionary spirit. The thing amuses and interests me; but I don't feel sure that it can be made intelligible—and moreover, I do not think it would be wholly profitable either. We have not determined enough; besides, ordinary people had better act by intuition rather than by reason. There are, too, many data missing, and perhaps the men of science will some day be in a position to give us some, but they have not got far enough yet."

And then we plunged into the subject; but I will not attempt to reproduce what was said, because I cannot remember it, and I should no doubt grossly misrepresent my master. But he led me a fine dance.

It was like a walk I took the other day when I was staying in a mountain country. A companion of mine, tired like myself of inaction, went off with me, and we climbed a high mountain. For some hours we walked in the clouds, in a close-shifting circle of mist, seeing nothing but the little cairns that marked the way, and the bleak grasses at our feet. Now and then we crossed a cold stream that came bubbling into our dim circle, and raved hoarsely away in fretted cataracts. Once we passed a black and silent tarn, with leaden waves lapping among the stones. Once or twice, as we descended, the skirts of the cloud drew up suddenly, and revealed black crags and rocky bastions, and down below a great valley, with sheep grazing, pastures within stone enclosures, little farms, and mountain bases red with fern.

That was like my mental excursion to-day. It was very cold and misty on the heights of my friend's mind. I recognised sometimes familiar things, but all strangely enlarged and transfigured. Once or twice, too, the whole veil flew up, and disclosed a familiar scene, which I felt had some dim connection with the chill and vaporous height, but I could not discern what it was; and when we came down again, the heights were still impenetrably shrouded.

Page 128

Once indeed my friend emitted a flash of scorn, which was when I mentioned the religious commonplace that the desire of men's hearts to be assured of the continuity of identity was a proof that such a craving must find its fulfilment. "A pleasant dream!" he said. "One might as well affirm that the universal desire for wealth and health was a proof that all would be ultimately healthy and wealthy."

But though I understood little, and remembered less, I felt somehow that it did me good to be brought face to face with these austere problems. It had a bracing effect to have my comfortable intuitions plucked from me, and to be bidden to walk alone. It was vaguely inspiring to look into the misty world that lies behind history and religion and science, the world where one can perhaps be sure of nothing except of one's own consciousness, and not too sure of that. Bracing I say, because of its bareness and precariousness, its sense of ultimate insecurity. I came back to earth not discouraged or dismayed, but more conscious than ever of the urgency of practical problems and the actuality of life. And so, as I say, out of my breathless ramble among ultimate causes and conceptions, I came back to the world with a great sense of zest and relief, as the diver of whom I spoke sees the water grow paler and greener before his swimming eyes, and next moment feels the sunlight about him and sees the willows and the river-bank. I came back filled with a sense of far-off possibilities, and yet more sure than ever that we must neither idle nor despair, but walk swiftly and patiently and help each other along. Not only did I feel my duty to my fellows to be more clear and sure; but my own need of help, my own insignificance, to be more pleasantly insistent. Out of the world where I was only sure of my own consciousness I came down into the world where I am no less practically sure of the presence of millions of similar souls, very blind and weak, perhaps, but very real and dear. On those cloudy hills I had gone astray as a sheep that is lost; and then suddenly there was the sense of the shepherd walking near me—the shepherd himself!—for the philosopher was only a lesser kind of angel bearing a vial in his hands; the blessed sense of being searched for and guided and tenderly chidden and included in the welcome fold. I hope that my philosopher may yet walk on the hills with me, if only for the sake of the love I bear the green valleys; and when I see the great stream passing silently from translucent pool to pool, overhung by rowans and sun-warmed rocks, I shall be glad to think that I have walked on the heights where it was gathered and drawn, and that I have heard it talk hoarsely to itself, cold and uncomforted, among the bleak and dripping stones.

XLII

I have just returned from a few days in town, feeling that it is good to have been there, if only for the sake of the return to the cool silence of these solitary fields. I am not ungrateful for all the kindness which I have received, but I cannot help thinking of the atmosphere which I have left with a kind of horror.

Page 129

The friend with whom I have been staying is a man of considerable wealth. He has no occupation but the pursuit of culture. He is married to a charming wife, also wealthy; but they are childless, and the result is that they have nothing to expend their energies upon except books and art and society. At long intervals my friend produces a tiny volume, beautifully printed and bound, which he presents to his friends. Last year it was an account of some curious religious ceremonies which he came across in a tour in Brittany. I dare say I am wrong, but it seems to me that the only charm of these grotesque and absurd rites is that country people should practise them quietly and secretly, as a matter of old and customary tradition. The moment that the cultivated stranger comes among them with his philological and sociological explanations, their pretty significance seems to me to be gone. I do not care a brass farthing what they are all about; they are old, they are legendary; as performed by people who have grown up among them, and seen them practised from childhood as a matter of course, they have a certain grace of congruity about them, as the schoolmen say. But printed gravely in a book they seem to me to be nothing but barbarous and foolish games of childish import.

Another year he found some Finnish legends when he was on a yachting cruise, which he translated into an ungainly English. The tales are utterly worthless, not a spark of romance from beginning to end, only typical of an age which I humbly thank God we have left behind.

This year he is full of Balearic music; he played me a number of dreary and monotonous tunes, which he said were so characteristic. But if they were characteristic, and I have no reason to doubt his word, they only seem to me to prove that those islanders are destitute of musical taste and instinct to a quite singular degree.

While I was up in town, my friends certainly did their best to amuse me; they had agreeable people of a literary type to luncheon, tea, and dinner. We heard some music, we went to a play or two, we went to look at some pictures. But I confess to having laboured under an increasing depression, because the whole thing was conducted by rule and line, and in a terribly businesslike way; we knew beforehand exactly what we were to look out for. We did not go in a liberal and expectant spirit, hoping that we might find or see or hear some unexpectedly beautiful thing, but we went in a severely critical spirit, to see if we could detect how the painters and musicians, whose art we were to inspect, deviated from received methods. We went, indeed, not to gain an impression of originality and personality, but to look out for certain tabulated qualities; it depressed me too, perhaps unduly, to hear the jargon with which these criticisms were heralded. The triumph appeared to be to use a set of terms, appropriate to one art, of the effects produced by the others; thus in music we went in search of colour

Page 130

and light, of atmospheric effect and curve; in painting it seemed we were in search of harmony, rhythm, and tone. I should not have minded if I had felt that these words really meant anything in the minds of those who used them; but it seemed to me that the critics were more in love with their terminology than with the effects themselves; and still more, that they went not to form novel impressions, but to search for things which they had been told to expect.

It was the same with the treatment of literature; it all seemed reduced to a game played with counters. There was no simplicity of apprehension; the point seemed to be to apply a certain set of phrases as decisively as possible. I never heard a generous appreciation of a book; what I rather heard was trivial gossip about the author, followed by shallow, and I thought pedantic, judgments upon an author's lack of movement or aerial quality. If one of the approved authors under discussion seemed to me painfully sordid and debased, one was told to look out for his tonic realism and his virile force. How many times in those sad hours was I informed that the artist had no concern with ethical problems! If I maintained that an artist's concern is with any motives that sway humanity, I was told smilingly that I wanted to treat art in the spirit of a nursery governess. If, on the other hand, a book appeared to me utterly unreal and false, I was told that it was typical and spiritual, and that the conception of the artist must not be limited by his experience, but that he arrived at correct intuitions by the force of penetrating insight and by the swift inference of genius.

What seemed to me to be absent from it all was the spirit of liberty, of frank enjoyment, of eager apprehension. I do not say that my friends seemed to me to admire all the wrong things; they had abundant appreciation for certain masters, both in art and music; but I felt that they swallowed masters whole, without any discrimination, and that the entire thing was a matter of tradition and rule and precept and authority, not of irresponsible and ardent enjoyment. It was all systematised and regulated; there was no question of personal preferences. The aim of the perceptive man was to find out what was the correct standard of good taste, and then to express his agreement with it in elaborate phrases. Most of the party were of the same type. Not that they were oddly-dressed, haggard, affected women or long-haired, pretentious, grotesque men. I have been at such coteries, too, where they praised each other's work with odd, passionate cries and wriggling, fantastic gestures. That is terrible too, because that is culture which has turned rancid. But at my friend's house it was not rancid at all, it was simply unassimilated. My friend himself handed out culture in neat pieces, carefully done up, as a vendor of toffee might hand it out to purchasers; and the people who came there, well-dressed, amiable,

Page 131

quiet, courteous people, would have been delightful if they had not been so cultivated. Culture lay about in lumps; it had never soaked in. The result was that I felt I could never get to know any of these agreeable people at all. One tried to talk, and one was met with a proffer of a lump of culture. Then, as I say, it was all in pieces; it was not part of a plan or an attitude of mind; it had all been laboriously collected, and it was just as it had been discovered; it did not seem to have undergone any mental process.

And then, further, I felt that it was all too comfortable—it was all built on a foundation of comfort; that lay really at the bottom of it all. The house was too full of beautiful things; the dinner was too long and too good; the wine was too choice. I am not going to pretend that I do not like comfort; but I do not like luxury, and this was luxurious. I do not want to have a long and elaborate dinner; it should be *simplex munditiis*, as Horace said. And beautiful pictures and furniture are more beautiful if there is not too much of them. One felt, in this warm, fragrant house, with every room and wall crammed with charming objects, with every desire anticipated, the dinner-table bright with flowers and silver, with “orient liquor in a crystal glass,” as if one stifled under a load of delights; I yearned for plainer rooms and simpler fare, and for freer and more genuine talk. One felt that the aim of the circle was satisfaction rather than beauty; to be sheltered and caressed rather than to be invigorated and tranquillised.

I was standing in a drawing-room one night before dinner, already sated with the food, the talk, the music, and the art of the day, as the guests began to arrive: such clean, brilliant men, faultlessly appointed; such beautiful and delicate women, with a vague sense of fragrance and jewels, came stealing in. Suddenly among the company there came stalking in a great literary man, an old friend of my own; handsome, too, and well-appointed enough, but with a touch of roughness and vigour that made him, I thought, like a chieftain among courtiers; and wearing the haggard air of the man who toils at his art, and cannot achieve his incommunicable hopes or capture his divine dreams. He came up to me, smiling, in a secluded corner. “Hullo,” he said, “*mon vieux!* who would have thought of finding you here in the island of Circe?”

“I might ask the same question,” I said. “But perhaps I have the sacred herb, *moly*, the ‘small unsightly root’ in my bosom, to guard me against the spells.”

“The leaf has prickles on it,” he said, with a smile; “there is nothing prickly about our friends here.”

This was mere sword-play, of course, not real talk; and then we had five minutes’ talk which I will not put down, because I should betray secrets, and secrets too in their rough, uncut form, the gems of art, which must be cut before they are presented. But I got more out of those five minutes than I did out of the rest of my visit.

Page 132

Presently we went in to dinner, and the performance began. How skilfully it was all guided and modulated by our host, who was in his best form. What delicate flies he threw over his fish; how softly they rose to them. The talk flashed to and fro; the groups formed, broke, re-formed. But it was a shallow stream; there was no zeal or vehemence; it was all polished, deft, superficial, conventional. It was like playing an agile and elaborate game; and I felt that those who took part in it were congratulating themselves on the brilliance of the affair. Education, religion, art, poetry, music—we had something to say about all; and yet I felt that no light had been thrown upon anything. A lady of high rank gave me her views upon the writing of English prose, with the air of one speaking condescendingly from Olympus, which, as we know, was above even Parnassus. In the middle I caught the eye of the great man, who was opposite me; he gave me a mournful smile, and I read his thoughts. When the ladies had withdrawn, my host, with a determined air as of a man above prejudice, started the conversation on rather more virile lines; and the result was a certain amount of delicately *risque* talk. But even here we felt that it was not human nature that was revealed. It was Voltairean rather than Rabelaisian; and I dislike both. Then afterwards we sank into luxurious chairs in the rich perfumed drawing-room; we talked low and impressively to charming ladies; there was some exquisite music, so pure and sweet that it seemed to me to put to shame the complex and elaborate pageant of life in which we took part; and outside, one remembered, there were the rain-splashed streets, the homeless wind; and the toiling multitudes that made such delights possible, and gave of their dreary, sordid labour that we might sit thus at ease. The whole thing seemed artificial, soulless, hectic, unreal. One could not help thinking of Dives and Lazarus, that strange parable that has so stern a moral. “But now he is comforted and thou art tormented.” It is not suggested there that vice is punished and virtue rewarded; merely that wealth is penalised and poverty compensated.

Well, it is a great mystery. No uneasy doubt as to the rightness of things, as they are, ever troubled the mind of my serene host or his gracious wife. The following morning I went away; I was sped on my way with courteous kindness; but all the attention I received lies somewhat heavy on my heart. I do not know how I could express to my friends what I felt; they would not understand it if I tried to explain it. They think of me as a queer rustic being, fond of a lonely life; they feel, unconsciously enough, that they are conferring a benefit upon me by enabling me to set foot in so cultured a circle; and there is no sense of patronage about this—nothing but real kindness. But they feel that they are in possession of the higher and more beautiful life, and I have no sort of doubt that they believe I regard

Page 133

their paradise with envy; that I would live the same life if I had the means. I fully admit that I am not nearly so perfectly equipped with culture as my friends. I have not got a quarter of their stock or of their experience; but yet I am as absolutely sure that I, with all my deficiencies and ignorances, negligences, incompletenesses, am inside the sacred circle of art, as I am certain that they are without it. To me beauty is a holy and bewildering passion; a divine spirit, that sometimes heaps treasures upon me with both hands, and sometimes denies the least hint of her influence. But they, I feel, mistake craftsmanship and accomplishment and technique for the inner spirit of art; they have never felt the awful rapture, the overwhelming impulse. And thus, as I say, I return with a sense of weary gratitude to my lonely house with its austere rooms; to my old piano, my old books; to my wide fields and leafless trees, as of one returning home to worship at a quiet shrine, after being compelled to play a part in a pageant which is not concerned with the things of the soul.

XLIII

It must have been just about a year ago to-day that I received one morning a letter from an old acquaintance of mine, Henry Gregory by name, telling me that he was staying in my neighbourhood—might he come over to see me? I asked him to come to luncheon.

I do not remember how I first came to know Gregory, but I was instrumental in once getting him a little legal work to do, since when he has shown a dangerous disposition to require similar services of me, and even to confide in me. I am quite incapable—not on principle, but from a sort of feeble courtesy—of rejecting such overtures. It does more harm than good, because I am unable to help him in any way; and the result of our talks is only to send him away disappointed and annoyed, and to leave me both bored and compassionate, with that wholly ineffectual compassion which is a mere morbid sentiment. Judge between him and me! I will tell the whole story.

Gregory is a man of real ability, conscientious, clear-headed, accurate. He was one of a large family; his father a country solicitor, I think. He was at a public school and at the University; he has a small income of his own, perhaps £150 a year; and he drifted to the bar. I don't think he ever made friends with anyone in his life—he is constitutionally incapable of friendship. I have seen him in the company of one or two unaccountably dreary men, himself the dreariest of the party. He is long-winded, exact in statement, ponderous. He has no sort of imagination, and no touch of humour. He can be depended upon to give you a mass of detailed information on almost any point, and every subject that he touches turns to lead before your eyes. One has a sense of mental indigestion for a day or two after one has seen him, until one has forgotten his statements. If I desired to think ill of a writer, I should ask

Page 134

Gregory his opinion of him; he would extinguish once and for all my interest in the subject. He has been wholly unsuccessful at the bar; he lives in London lodgings, and I cannot conceive how he employs his time. There is a club I sometimes visit (I fear I should visit it oftener if Gregory were not a member), where he sits like a moulting condor in a corner, or wanders about seeking a receptacle for his information. I got him, as I have said, a piece of legal work; it was done, I believe, admirably; but the solicitor whom I referred to Gregory has since told me that he cannot employ him again. "I simply have not the time," he said; "our consultations took longer than I could have conceived possible; there was not a single contingency in heaven and earth that Gregory did not foresee and describe!"

This has gone on until Gregory has reached the mature age of fifty-five. He has no work and no friend. His relations cannot tolerate him. He is a deeply aggrieved man, bitterly conscious of his failure, and the worst of it is that it has never yet occurred to him that he may be himself to blame. He is so virtuous, so laborious, so just, so entirely free from faults of every kind, that he cannot possibly have even the grim satisfaction of self-censure. He has instinctively obeyed every copy-book maxim that was ever written; he is one of the very few men who cannot sincerely join in the Confession, because it is impossible for him to say that he has done those things that he ought not to have done; and yet, with all his powers and virtues, he is simply a tragic failure. No one has a word to say for him; he can get no work; he is an absolutely unnecessary person. Yet there are positions which he could have held with credit. He would have been an excellent clerk, and a competent official. But now he is simply a briefless barrister, without a friend in the world.

He arrived very punctually to luncheon. He is a small, sturdy man, with a big head, of a uniform, dull tint, as if it were carved out of a not very successfully boiled chicken. He is bald, and wears spectacles. He was rather primly dressed, and everything about him gave a sense of careful and virtuous economy, from the uncompromising hardness of his heavy grey suit to the emphatic solidity of his great boots. I had two rather lively young men staying with me, and they behaved with remarkable kindness. But Gregory put the garden-roller over us all in a very few minutes. One of my young friends asked a silly question about current politics. Gregory looked at him blankly, and said, "I am afraid that that question betrays a very superficial acquaintance with the elements of political economy. May I ask if you picked that up at Cambridge?" He gave a short mirthless laugh, and I understood that he was trying his hand at a little light social badinage. However, it flattened out my young friend, while Gregory ruthlessly told us the elements, and a good deal more

Page 135

than the elements, of that science. He was diverted from his lecture by the appearance of some ham. Gregory commented upon the inferiority of English hams, and described the process of curing hams in Westphalia, which, unfortunately for us, he had personally witnessed. So it went on. It was impossible to stop him or to divert him. When he ceased for a moment, to swallow a mouthful, I interjected a remark about the weather. Gregory replied, "Yes; and then they have a method of packing the hams which is said to have the effect of retaining their flavour in a remarkable degree. Imagine a strip of sacking revolving upon two metal objects somewhat resembling fishing-reels." So it continued; and it was delivered, moreover, in a tone of voice which it was somehow impossible to elude; it compelled a sort of agonised attention. After luncheon, while we were smoking, one of my young friends, who could bear passivity no longer, played a few chords of Wagner on a piano. Gregory poured into the gap like a great cascade, and we had a discourse on the origins of the Wagnerian librettos.

After it was over and we were trying to banish the subject from our minds, I sent the other two out for a walk—this had been agreed upon previously—and prepared to face the music alone. But they only just escaped, for Gregory followed them to the gate, determined that they should take a particular walk, to notice the geological formation of the country. We then went out for a stroll together, and Gregory said that he must talk business, and drew a strip of paper from his pocket. This contained a series of commissions for me to execute.

I was to get him some introductions to editors or Members of Parliament; I was to propose him at a club; I was to find him some pupils in law; I was to read a manuscript for him and place it. I raised feeble objections. "You seem to make a great number of unnecessary difficulties," said Gregory. "I don't think that any of my requests can be called unreasonable. You know enough of me to be able to say that I should discharge any duty I undertook thoroughly and competently." "Yes, I know," I said; "but one cannot force people's hands in these matters." "I don't ask you to force their hands," said Gregory; "I merely ask you to give me these introductions, and to write a perfectly truthful account of me." Perhaps I ought to have been more firm; but I could not find any adequate reason for objecting. I could not tell him that the all-embracing and all-sufficing reason against his possibility of success was that he was himself. When it came to placing his manuscript, I said that such things did not go by favour—and plucking up a desperate courage, said that we all had to make our own position in literature. I suggested that he must send his articles to editors like anyone else, and that they were only too anxious to secure the sort of things they wanted, "No," said Gregory; "there is an element of uncertainty

Page 136

about that which will not do for me. I have tried editor after editor, and have invariably had my articles returned. I will venture to say—and I do not think you will contradict me—that they are all thorough, sound, and accurate pieces of work, far more reliable than much of the stuff which appears every day; all I want is just the personal touch with an editor or two; but, of course, if you will not help me, I must try elsewhere—but I must confess that I am very much disappointed,” He looked drearily at me, leaning on his stick. I do not think he had any idea where we were, nor had he seen any single object which we had passed; but at this moment he noticed a flower in the hedge, and looked tenderly at it. “Ha! there is *ailanthus vulgaris*,” he said—“very unusual. Excuse my interrupting you, but botany is rather a passion of mine. It may interest you to hear...” and I had a few minutes’ botany thrown in. “But we must return to our muttons,” he said, after a short pause, with a convulsion of the jaw that was meant for a smile; and we did. He went over the whole ground again—and then suddenly came a human *cri du coeur* which gave me one of those fruitless pangs which are the saddest things in the world. He was dusting the sleeve of his coat, and I could not help feeling with what unnecessary conscientiousness he was doing it. He turned to me, “Do help me, if you can. I really have done my best, but I can’t get any work to do. I have not the position to which I may fairly say my abilities and diligence entitle me. I don’t understand why it is—I can’t see where I am to blame.” Of course I promised to do what I could, and Gregory handed me a corresponding slip of paper to his own which he had prepared for me.

We drew near to the little wayside station where he was to catch a train. It was a summer day of extraordinary loveliness. The great green fen slept peacefully in the sun, and the low green hills beyond lay quivering in the haze. Gregory, lost in bitter musings, in his careful threadbare clothes, rather unpleasantly hot, hopelessly bewildered as to his place in the universe, conscious of virtue, equipped with information, desiring neither pity nor affection, but only work and due recognition, was a sad blot upon nature. The whole business of his creation and preservation seemed an ugly and a heartless one, and his redemption beyond the power of imagination. The train came in, and he got wearily in, shook hands, and immersed himself in a book. He said no more, made no sign, waved no hand of farewell. He did not feel any sentimental emotion; he had come on business, and he went away on business.

Of course it was of no use. I wrote a few letters, read Gregory’s manuscript, and had to take a course of Sherlock Holmes in order to obliterate the nauseous memory of its dulness. Nothing came of it all, except a very offensive letter from Gregory about my ineffectiveness and general duplicity.

Page 137

Why do I venture, it may be asked, to print this dreadful sketch of a man who may see it and recognise it? He will not see it, and for the best of sad reasons. But on reflection I do not know that the reason is a sad one. Gregory died rather suddenly in his lodgings a few months later, and so the curtain came down upon rather a dismal comedy, or a deplorable tragedy, according to one's taste in classification. The only marvel is why the sad drama was ever put on the stage, and why it was allowed to have so long a run. There is hope in this world for the Prodigal, who has a sharp and evil lesson, and comes crawling home to claim the love he had despised; but for the elder brother, with his blameless service and his chilly heart, what hope is there for him? He must content himself—and perhaps it is not so lean a benediction after all—with the tender words, “Son, thou art ever with me, and all that I have is thine.”

XLIV

There has been staying with me for the last few days a perfectly delightful person; an old man—he is nearly eighty—who is exactly what an old man ought to be, and what one would desire to be if one were to grow old. Old people are not as a rule a very encouraging spectacle. One is apt to feel, after seeing old people, that it is rather a tragic thing when life outruns activity, and to hope that one may never have the misery of octogenarianism. Sometimes they are peevish and ill-at-ease, disagreeably afflicted and obviously broken; and even when they bear their affliction bravely and courageously, it is a melancholy business. It seems a sad kind of spitefulness in nature that persons should have so much trouble to bear when they are tired and faint-hearted and only wish for repose. One feels then that it ought to be somehow arranged that people should have their share of trouble in youth or manhood, when trouble is not wholly uninteresting, and when there is even a sort of grim pleasure in fighting it; but when it comes to having no distractions, to being obliged to sit still and suffer with no hope of alleviation; when affection dies down like an expiring flame, and the failing nature seems involved in a helpless sort of selfishness, planning for little comforts, enjoying tiny pleasures with a sort of childlike greediness, it is a very pitiful thing, I remember an old lady who lived with her son in a small parsonage full of boisterous children. They were very good to her, but she was sadly in the way. She herself had lost almost all interest in life; she was deaf and infirm and cross. She was condemned to eat the plainest of food; and I used to see her mumbling little slices of stale bread, and looking with malignant envy at the children eating big hunches of heavy cake. It was impossible to give her any pleasure, and she had no sort of intention of pleasing anyone else. It was so difficult to see what kind of effect this dismal purgatory was meant to have on any human soul.

Page 138

She was not improved by suffering—she grew daily more callous and spiteful before one's eyes. One of her few pleasures was to sit in the garden pretending to be asleep, when all the family were out, and tell tales of the gardener for neglecting his work, and of the maid-servants for picking the strawberries. Yet she had been a shrewd and kindly woman once, and had brought up her children well. If she had died a dozen years before she would have been truly and tearfully mourned, and now when everyone tacitly felt that she had outstayed her welcome, she lingered on. She had a bad illness at one time, and when I saw her, for the first time after her recovery, in the family circle, and said something commonplace about being glad to see her so well, "Yes," she said, looking round with an air of malicious triumph, "they can't get rid of me just yet—I know that is what they all feel, but they have to pretend to be glad I am better."

And then, too, there is another type of age which is hardly less painful, and that is the complacent and sententious old person, intolerably talkative and minutely confidential, who lays down the law about everything, and takes what he calls the privileges of age, a sort of professional patriarch, ruddy and snowy-haired and wide-awake, a terrible specimen of a well-made machine, which goes on working long after heart and brain alike are atrophied. I have known an old man of this kind. He insisted on everything being done for his convenience. He breakfasted very late, and would allow no one to have any food earlier, saying that it did young people good to wait; that he had always done work before breakfast, and that there was nothing like an empty stomach for keeping the head clear. He would not allow the morning paper to be opened till he came down; and he sate an intolerable time after breakfast reading extracts from it, often stopping in the middle of a sentence because some other paragraph had caught his eye. He had a horrible way of saying, "Guess what has happened to one of our friends; I will give you ten guesses each"; and he would insist on all kinds of conjectures being hazarded, while he chuckled over the absurdities suggested. He took a frank pleasure in the death of his contemporaries, and an even franker pleasure in the deaths of his juniors. Then he had one of his long-suffering daughters to write letters for him, and would dictate long, ungrammatical sentences to her; but he would permit of no erasures, and letter after letter would have to be torn up and re-written. He made all the party walk with him before luncheon, and at his pace, the same little walk every day. I think he mostly slept in the afternoon, or read his banking book; his talk was almost wholly about himself, his virtues, his astonishing health, his perspicacity; and he used to lecture comparative strangers about their duties with incredible insolence. The clergyman's life was made a burden to him, and the doctor's as well. Though he was

Page 139

the most luxurious and comfort-loving old wretch, his great text was the value of Spartan discipline for everyone else. If any dish was not exactly to his mind, he would allow no one to taste it, send it away, and complain bitterly that even his simple wants could not be supplied. Even when he got more infirm and took most of his food in seclusion, he ordered the meals for the rest of the household; he could not bear to think of their having anything to eat of which he did not himself approve. He used to make everyone go to bed before him, and would even look into their rooms to see that they were not reading in bed. It was all so virtuous and sensible that it was impossible to argue with him, and I used to suffer from an insane desire to pull his chair away from under him while he sate lecturing the company about the way to attain old age. Here, too, it was impossible to see the purpose with which the unhappy old man was being encouraged by nature and destiny to this hideous and tyrannical self-deception, this ruthless piling up of the materials for disillusionment in a higher sphere. It seemed as if he were being by his very vigour and virtue deliberately trained for ineradicable conceit and complacency. If his relations came to see him, they were lectured on their inefficiency; if they stayed away, they were reproached for their want of natural affection. It seemed absolutely impossible to bring any conception home to him, wrapped as he was in armour of impenetrable self-satisfaction.

But the old friend of whom I spoke is entirely removed from either of these shadows of age. He is infirm, but not ill; he is infinitely courteous and gracious, grateful for the smallest kindness, determined not to interfere with anyone's convenience. My servants simply adore him, welcome him like an angel, and see him depart with tears. He knows all about them, and keeps all the details of their families in his mind. He never talks of himself, but has a perfectly genuine and unaffected interest in other people. He is endlessly tolerant and sweet-tempered; and sometimes will drop a little sweet and mellow maxim, the ripest fruit of sunny experience. One feels in his presence that this is what life is meant to do for us all, if it were not for the strange admixture of irritabilities and selfishnesses, so natural and yet so ugly, which lie in wait for so many of us. One of the most beautiful things about him is his tenderness. He talks of his old friends who have taken their departure before him with a perfect simplicity, while I have seen the tears gather and suddenly overbrim his eyes. He seems to have no personal regrets or hopes; but to have transferred them all to other people. Yet he does not keep his friends in mind in a professional way as a matter of duty; his thoughts are simply full of them. He does no work, writes few letters, reads a little; he sometimes smilingly accuses himself of being lazy; and yet his presence and his unconscious sweetness are the most powerful

Page 140

influence for good I have ever seen. He makes it appear unreasonable and silly to fret or fuss or fume; and yet he is shrewd and humorous, and enjoys the display of human weaknesses. He is never shocked at anything, nor ashamed of anyone. He likes people to follow their bent and to do things in their own way. He never seems in the way; he loves to have children about him, and they talk to him as they talk to each other. One has no sense of rigid morality or righteousness in his presence; it only seems the most beautiful thing in the world to be good and kind, as well as the easiest. I do not think that he was always a very happy man; he had an anxious and rather sombre temperament. He said to me once, laughing, that the lines:

“There’s not a joy the world can give
Like those it takes away,”

were, in his experience, quite untrue, and he added that his own old age had been like a pleasant holiday to him.

It is strange to reflect how seldom such a figure of gracious age has ever been represented in a book. I cannot recall a single instance. In Dickens the old are generally either malignant or hypocritical, or simply imbecile; in Thackeray they are either sentimental or of the wicked fairy type, full of indomitable relish for life. In Shakespeare they are shadowy and broken; in Wordsworth they relentlessly improve the occasion. What one desires to see depicted is some figure that has gained in gentleness and tolerance without losing, shrewdness and perception; who is as much interested as ever in seeing the game played, without being enviously desirous to take a hand. The thing is so perfectly beautiful when it occurs in real life that it is hard to see why it should not be represented.

XLV

I seem to remember having lately seen at the Zoo a strange and melancholy fowl, of a tortoise-shell complexion, glaring sullenly from a cage, with that curious look of age and toothlessness that eagles have, from the overlapping of the upper mandible of the beak above the lower; it was labelled the *Monkey-eating Eagle*. Its food lay untasted on the floor; it much preferred, no doubt, and from no fault of its own, poor thing, a nice, plump, squalling baboon to the finest of chops without the fun!

But the name set me thinking, and brought to mind a very different kind of creature, from whom I have suffered much of late, the *Eagle-eating Monkey* by which I mean the writer of bad books about great people. I had personally always supposed that I would rather read even a poor book about a real human being than the cleverest of books about imaginary people; at least I thought so till I was obliged to read a large number of

memoirs and biographies, written some by stupid painstaking people, and some by clever aggravating people, about a number of celebrated persons.

Page 141

The stupid book is tiresome enough, because it ends by making one feel that there is a real human being whom one cannot get at behind all the tedious paragraphs, like some one stirring and coughing behind a screen—or even more like the outline of a human figure covered up with a quilt, so that one can just infer which is the head and which the feet, but with the outlines all overlaid with a woolly padded texture of meaningless words. Such biographers as these are hardly eagle-eating monkeys. They are rather monkeys who would eat a live eagle if they could catch one, and will mangle a dead one if they can find him. The marvel is that with material at their command, with friends of their victim to interrogate, and sometimes even with a personal knowledge of him, they can yet contrive to avoid telling one anything interesting or characteristic. The only points which seem to strike them are the points in which their hero resembled other people, not the points in which he differed from others. They tell you that they remember an interesting conversation with the great man, and go on to say that no words could do justice to the charm of his talk. Or they will tell you his views on Free Trade or the Poor Law, and quote long extracts from his speeches and public utterances. But they never admit one behind the scenes, either because they were never there themselves, or did not know it when they were. Or, worse still, they will say that they do not think it decorous to violate the privacy of his domestic circle, with the result that there comes out a figure like the statue of a statesman in a public garden, in bronze frock-coat and trousers, with a roll of paper in his hand, addressing the world in general, with the rain dripping from his nose and his coat-tails.

That is a very bad kind of biography; and the worst of it is that it is often the result of a pompous consciousness of virtue and fidelity, which argues that because a man disliked personal paragraphs about his favourite dishes and his private amusements, when he was alive, he would therefore resent a picture of his real life being drawn when he was dead; and this inconvenient decorum arises from a deep-seated poverty of imagination, which regards death as converting all alike into a species of angels, and which can only conceive of heaven as a sort of cathedral, with the spirits of eminent men employed as canons in perpetual residence. Thus it is bad biography because it is false biography, emphasising virtues and omitting faults, and, what is almost worse, omitting characteristic traits.

But it is not the worst kind of biography. The joy of the real eagle-eating biographer is to do what Tennyson bluntly described as ripping up people like pigs, and violating not privacy but decency; sweeping together odious little anecdotes, recording meannesses and weaknesses and sillinesses, all the things of which the subject himself was no doubt heartily ashamed and discarded as eagerly as possible. Such biographies

Page 142

give one the sense of a man diving in sewers, grubbing in middens, prying into cupboards, peeping round corners. To try as far as possible to surprise your hero, and to catch him off his guard, is a very different thing from being frank and candid. I remember once coming upon the track of one of these ghouls. He was writing a Life of a somewhat eccentric politician, and wrote to me asking me to obtain for him a sight of a certain document. I forwarded his letter to the relatives of the man in question. What was my surprise when they replied that the biographer was not only wholly unauthorised by themselves, but that they had written to him to remonstrate against his expressed intention, and to beg him to desist. I forwarded the letter to him, and added some comments of my own. The only result was that he replied regretting the opposition of the relatives, saying that the life of a public man was public property, and that he thought it his duty to continue his researches. The book appeared, and a vile rag-bag it was, like the life of a man written by a private detective from the reminiscences of under-servants. The worst of it is that such a compilation brings a man money, because there are always plenty of people who like to dabble in mud; and a ghoul is the most impervious of beings, probably because a ghoul of this species regards himself merely as an unprejudiced seeker after truth, and claims to be what he would call a realist.

The reason why such realism is bad art is not because the details are untrue, but because the proportion is wrong. One cannot tell everything in a biography, unless one is prepared to write on the scale of a volume for each week of the hero's life. The art of the biographer is to select what is salient and typical, not what is abnormal and negligible; what he should aim at is to suggest, by skilful touches, a living portrait. If the subject is bald and wrinkled, he must be painted so. But there is no excuse for trying to depict his hero's toe-nails, unless there is a very valid reason for doing so. And there is still less excuse for painting them so big that one can see little else in the picture! *Ex ungue leonem*, says the proverb; but it is a scientific and not an artistic maxim.

One sometimes wonders what will be the future of biographies; how, as libraries get fuller and records increase, it will be possible ever to write the lives of any but men of prime importance. I suppose the difficulty will solve itself in some perfectly simple and obvious manner; but the obstacle is that, as reading gets more common, the circle of trivial people who are interested in trousers and toe-nails and in little else does undoubtedly increase. Moreover, instead of fewer biographies being written, more and more people seem to be commemorated in stodgy volumes; and further, the selection could not be made by authority, because the kind of lives that are wanted are not the lives of dull important people, but the lives of interesting

Page 143

and unimportant people who have given their vividness and originality to life itself, to talk and letters and complex relationships; we do not want the lives of people who have prosed on platforms and bawled at the openings of bazaars. They have said their say, and we have heard as much as we need to hear of their views already. But I know half-a-dozen people, of whose words and works probably no record whatever will be made, whose lives, if they could be painted, would be more interesting than any novel, and more inspiring than any sermon; who have not taken things for granted, but have made up their own minds; and, what is more, have really had minds to make up; who have said, day after day, fine, humorous, tender, illuminating things; who have loved life better than routine, and ideas-better than success; who have really enriched the blood of the world, instead of feebly adulterating it; who have given their companions zest and joy, trenchant memories and eager emotions: but the whole process has been so delicate, so evasive, so informal, that it seems impossible to recapture the charm in heavy words. A man who would set himself to write the life of one of these delightful people, instead of adding to the interminable stream of tiresome romances which inundate us, might leave a very fine legacy to the world. It would mean an immense amount of trouble, and the cultivation of a Boswellian memory—for such a book would consist largely of recorded conversations—but what a hopeful and uplifting thing it would be to read and re-read!

The difficulty is that to a perceptive man—and none but a man of the finest perception could do it,—an eagle-eating eagle, in fact—it would seem a ghoulish and a treacherous business. He would feel like an interviewer and like a spy. It would have to be done in a noble, self-denying sort of secrecy, amassing and recording day by day; and he would never be able to let his hero suspect what was happening, or the gracious spontaneity would vanish; for the essence of such a life and such talk as I have described is that they should be wholly frank and unconsidered; and the thought of the presence of the note-taking spectator would overshadow its radiance at once.

There is a task for a patient, unambitious, perceptive man! He must be a man of infinite leisure, and he must be ready to take a large risk of disappointment; for he must outlive his subject, and he must be willing to sacrifice all other opportunities of artistic creation. But he might write one of the great books of the world, and win a secure seat upon the Muses' Hill.

XLVI

Page 144

I have been reading all the old Shelley literature lately, Hogg and Trelawny and Medwin and Mrs. Shelley, and that terrible piece of analysis, *The Real Shelley*. Hogg's *Life of Shelley* is an incomparable book; I should put it in the first class of biographies without hesitation. Of course, it is only a fragment; and much of it is frankly devoted to the sayings and doings of Hogg; it is none the worse for that. It is an intensely humorous book, in the first place. There are marvellous episodes in it, splendid extravaganzas like the story of Hogg's stay in Dublin, where he locked the door of his bedroom for security, and the boy Pat crept through the panel of the door to get his boots and keep them from him, and a man in the room below pushed up a plank in the floor that he might converse, not with Hogg, but with the man in the room above him; there is the anecdote of the little banker who was convinced that Wordsworth was a poet because he had trained himself to write in the dark if he woke up and had an inspiration. There is the story of the Chevalier D'Arblay, and his departure to France; and the description of his correspondence, in which he said for years that he was inconsolable and suffering inconceivable anguish at being obliged to absent himself from his wife; yet never able to assign any reason for his stay. Then, too, the whole book is written in the freshest and most crisp style, with a rare zest, that gives the effect of the conversation of an irrepressibly impudent and delightful person. The picture of Shelley himself is delightfully drawn; it is a perfect mixture of rapturous admiration of Shelley's fine qualities, with an acute perception of his absurdities. The picture of Shelley at Oxford, asleep before the fire, toasting his little curly head in the heat, or reading the *Iliad* by the glow of the embers, seems to bring one nearer to the poet than anything else that is recorded of him. I cannot think why the book is not more universally known; it seems to me one of the freshest pieces of biography in the language.

Trelawny's Memorials are interesting, and contain the solemn and memorable scene of the cremation of Shelley's remains—one of the most vivid and impressive narratives I know. Then there are the chapters of Leigh Hunt's Autobiography which deal with Shelley, a little overwrought perhaps, but real biography for all that, and interesting as bringing out the contrast between the simplicity and generosity of Shelley and the affectation, bad breeding, and unscrupulous selfishness of Byron. Medwin's Biography and Mrs. Shelley's Memorials are worthless, because they attempt to idealise and deify the poet; and then there is *The Real Shelley*, which is like a tedious legal cross-examination of a highly imaginative and sensitive creature by a shrewd and boisterous barrister.

Page 145

It would be very difficult to compose a formal biography of Shelley, because he was such a vague, imaginative, inconsistent creature. The documentary evidence is often wholly contradictory, for the simple reason that Shelley had no conception of accuracy. He did not, I am sure, deliberately invent what was not true; but he had a very lively imagination, and was capable of amplifying the smallest hints into elaborate theories; his memory was very faulty, and he could construct a whole series of mental pictures which were wholly inconsistent with facts. It seems clear, too, that he was much under the influence of opium at various times, and that his dreams and fancies, when he was thus affected, presented themselves to him as objective facts. But, for all that, it is not at all difficult to form a very real impression of the man. He was one of those strange, unbalanced creatures that never reach maturity; he was a child all his short life; he had the generosity, the affection, the impulsiveness of a child, and he had, too, the timidity, the waywardness, the excitability of a child. If a project came into his mind, he flung himself into it with the whole force of his nature; it was imperatively necessary that he should at once execute his design. No considerations of prudence or common-sense availed to check him; life became intolerable to him if he could not gratify his whim. His abandonment of his first wife, his elopement with Mary Godwin, are instances of this; what could be more amazing than his deliberate invitation to his first wife, after his flight with Mary, that she should come and join the party in a friendly way? He preserved, too, that characteristic of the child, when confronted with a difficult and disagreeable situation, of saying anything that came into his head which seemed to offer a solution; the child does not invent an elaborate falsification; it simply says whatever will untie the knot quickest, without reference to facts. If we bear in mind this natural and instinctive childlikeness in Shelley, we have the clue to almost all his inconsistencies and entanglements. Most people, as they grow up, and as the complicated fabric of society makes itself clear to them, begin to arrange their life in sympathy with conventional ideals. They learn that if they gratify their inclinations unreservedly, they will have a heavy price to pay; and on the whole they find it more convenient to recognise social limitations, and to get what pleasure they can inside the narrow enclosure. But Shelley never grasped this fact. He believed that all the difficulties of life and most of its miseries would melt away if only people would live more in the light of simple instinct and impulse. He never had any real knowledge of human beings. The history of his life is the history of a series of extravagant admirations for people, followed by no less extravagant disillusionments. Of course, his circumstances fostered his tendencies. Though

Page 146

he was often in money difficulties, he knew that there was always money in the background; indeed, he was too fond of announcing himself as the heir to a large property in Sussex. One cannot help wondering what Shelley's life would have been if he had been born poor and obscure, like Keats, and if he had been obliged to earn his living. Still more curious it is to speculate what would have become of him if he had lived to inherit his baronetcy and estates. He was anticipating his inheritance so fast that he would probably have found himself a poor man; but, on the other hand, his powers were rapidly maturing. He would have been a terrible person to be responsible for, because one could never have known what he would do next; all one could have felt sure of would have been that he would carry out his purpose, whatever it might be, with indomitable self-will. It is also curious to think what his relations would have been with his wife. Mrs. Shelley was a conventional woman, with a high ideal of social respectability. A woman who used to make a great point of attending the Anglican services in Italy was probably morbidly anxious to atone, if possible, for the one error of her youth. It is difficult to believe that Shelley would have continued to live with his wife for very long. Even his theory of free love was a very inconsistent one. The essence of it is that the two parties to the compact should weary of their union simultaneously. Shelley seems to have felt that he had a right to break off relations whenever he felt inclined; how he would have viewed it if his partner had insisted on leaving him for another lover, while his own passion was still unabated, is not so clear. He would no doubt have overwhelmed her with moral indignation.

But in spite of all his faults there is something indescribably attractive about the personality of Shelley. His eager generosity, his loyalty, his tenderness are irresistible. One feels that he would have always responded to a frank and simple appeal. A foil for his virtues is provided by the character of Byron, whose nauseous affectations, animal coarseness, niggardliness, except where his own personal comfort was involved, and deep-seated snobbishness, makes Shelley into an angel of light. Shelley seems to have been almost the only person who ever evoked the true and frank admiration of Byron, and retained his regard. On the other hand, Shelley, who began by idolising Byron, seems to have gradually become aware of the ugly selfishness of his character.

But Shelley himself evokes a sort of deep compassionateness and affection, such as is evoked by an impulsive, headstrong, engaging child. One desires to have sheltered him, to have advised him, to have managed his affairs for him; one ends by forgiving him all, or nearly all. His character was essentially a noble one; he hated all oppression, injustice, arrogance, selfishness, coarseness, cruelty. When he erred, he erred like a child, not coldly and unscrupulously,

Page 147

but carried away by intensity of desire. It may seem a curious image, but one cannot help feeling that if Shelley had been contemporary with and brought into contact with Christ, he would have been an ardent follower and disciple, and would have been regarded with a deep tenderness and love; his sins would have been swiftly forgiven. I do not wish to minimise them; he behaved ungratefully, inconsiderately, wilfully. His usage of his first wife is a deep blot on his character. But in spite of his desertion of her, and his abduction of Mary Godwin, his life was somehow an essentially innocent one. It is possible to paint his career in dark colours; it is impossible to say that his example is an inspiring one; he is the kind of character that society is almost bound to take precautions against; he was indifferent to social morality, he was regardless of truth, neglectful of commercial honesty; but for all that one feels more hopeful about the race that can produce a Shelley. We must be careful not to condone his faults in the light of his poetical genius; but for all that, if Shelley had never written a line of his exquisite poetry, I cannot help feeling that if one had known him, one would have felt the same eager regard for him. One cannot draw near to a personality by a process of logic. But one fact emerges. There is little doubt that one of the most oppressive, injurious, detestable forces in the world is the force of conventionality, that instinct which makes men judge a character and an action, not by its beauty or by its merits, but by comparing it with the standard of how the normal man would regard it. This vast and intolerable medium of dulness, which penetrates our lives like a thick, dark mist, allowing us only to see the object in range of our immediate vision, hostile to all originality, crushingly respectable, that dictates our hours, our occupations, our amusements, our emotions, our religion, is the most ruthless and tyrannical thing in the world. Against this Shelley fought with all his might; his error was to hate it so intensely as to fail to see the few grains of gold, the few principles of kindness, of honesty, of consideration, of soberness, that it contains. He paid dearly for his error, in the consciousness of the contempt and infamy which were heaped upon his quivering spirit. But he did undoubtedly love truth, beauty, and purity. One has to get on the right side of his sins and indulgences, his grotesque political theories, his inconsistencies; but when once one has apprehended the real character, one is never in any doubt again.

XLVII

Page 148

There can surely be few pieces of literary portraiture in the world more unpleasant than the portrait drawn of Byron in 1822 by Leigh Hunt. It gave great offence to Byron's friends, who insisted upon his noble and generous qualities, and maintained that Leigh Hunt was taking a spiteful revenge for what he conceived to be the indignity and injustice with which Byron had treated him. Leigh Hunt was undoubtedly a trying person in some ways. He did not mind dipping his hand into a friendly pocket, and he had a way of flinging himself helplessly upon the good nature of his friends, a want of dignity in the way he accepted their assistance, which went far to justify the identification of him with the very disagreeable portrait which Dickens drew of him, as Harold Skimpole in *Bleak House*. But for all that he was an affectionate, candid, and eminently placable person, and if it is true that he darkened the shadows of Byron's temperament, and insisted too strongly on his undesirable qualities, there is no reason to think that the portrait he drew of Byron was not in the main a true one; and it may be added that a vast amount of generosity and nobility require to be thrown into the opposite scale before Byron can be rehabilitated or made worthy of the least admiration and respect.

Byron had invited Leigh Hunt out to Italy, with the design of producing, with his assistance, a monthly Review of a literary type. Leigh Hunt came out with his wife and family, and accepted quarters under Byron's roof. Byron had already tired of the scheme and repented of his generosity. Leigh Hunt avers that Byron was an innately avaricious man, and that, though he occasionally lavished money on some favourite scheme, it was only because, though he loved money much, he loved notoriety more. The good angel of the situation was Shelley, who really made all the arrangements for Hunt's sojourn and presented him with the necessary furniture for his rooms. Shelley was certainly entirely indifferent to money, and profusely generous. He had begun by admiring Byron, with all the enthusiasm of hero-worship, but a closer acquaintance had revealed much that was distasteful and even repugnant to him, and it may safely be said that if he had lived he would soon have withdrawn from Byron's society. Shelley's ideas of morality were not conventional; his affection and enthusiasm for people burnt fiercely and waned, yet when he sinned, he sinned through a genuine passion. But Byron, according to Leigh Hunt, was a cold-blooded libertine, and had no conception of what love meant, except as a merely animal desire, which he abundantly gratified.

The awkward *menage* was established. Byron was at the Casa Lanfranchi at Pisa, and gave Leigh Hunt the ground floor. Leigh Hunt describes him as lounging about half the day in a nankeen jacket and white duck trousers, singing in a swaggering fashion, in a voice at once "thin and veiled," a boisterous air of Rossini's, riding out with pistols accompanied by his dogs, and sitting up half the night to write *Don Juan* over gin and water. He was living at the time with the Countess Guiccioli, who had married a man four times her age, had obtained a separation, and now lived as Byron's mistress, with her father and brother in the same house.

Page 149

That Hunt should have been willing to bring his wife and a growing family under the same roof does not reflect much credit on him, especially when he found that Byron was not averse to saying cynical and even corrupting things to Hunt's boys, when Hunt himself was absent. Mrs. Leigh Hunt took a stronger line; she cordially disliked Byron from the first. On one occasion when Byron said to her that Trelawny had been finding fault with his morals, Mrs. Leigh Hunt said trenchantly that it was the first time she had ever heard of them.

Leigh Hunt soon perceived that he and Byron had very little in common. Byron disliked his familiarity and his airs of equality; while he himself was not long in discovering Byron to be egotistical to the verge of insanity, childishly vain of his rank, ill-natured, jealous, coarse, inconsiderate, disloyal, a blabber of secrets, mean, deceitful. But the glamour of Byron's fame, the romance that surrounded him, his rank, which Leigh Hunt valued almost pathetically, kept the amiable invalid—for such Leigh Hunt was at this time—hanging on to Byron's skirts and claiming his protection. The Review began with a flourish of trumpets, but soon broke down; and finally the very uncongenial partnership was dissolved.

One cannot pardon Leigh Hunt at any stage. He ought never to have accepted the original invitation; he ought never to have retained the undignified position of a sort of literary parasite. He endeavoured to protect his own self-respect by adopting a tone of easy familiarity with Byron, which only resulted in galling his host; and he ought not to have written his very damaging reminiscences of the period, though it is quite clear that he felt under no obligation whatever to Byron.

Still it is a deeply interesting piece of portraiture, and probably substantially accurate. The painful fact is that Byron was a very ill-bred person. He had drawn a prize in the lottery of life, and had obtained, so to speak, by accident of birth, a position that gave him fortuitously the consequence which numbers of ambitious men spend their lives in trying to obtain. And then, too, we must not lose sight of Byron's genius, though it is abundantly clear that all there was of noble and beautiful in Byron's nature was entirely given to his art, and that outside of his art there remained nothing but a temperament burdened with all the ugliest faults of the artistic nature, artificially forced and developed by untoward circumstance. There remains the perennial mystery of genius, which can put into glowing words and exquisite phrases emotions which it can conceive but cannot feel. Leigh Hunt's deliberate view of Byron is that he did everything for effect, that his vanity was boundless and insatiable, and that even his raptures were stage raptures. There is little reason to doubt it. Byron's tumultuous agonies of soul were little more than the rage of the spoilt child, who cannot bear that things should go contrary to its desires.

Page 150

Byron, by concealing the causes of his melancholy, and attaching to it a nobler motive, made himself into a Hamlet when he was in reality only a Timon. What view are we to take of Byron's intervention in the affairs of Greece? To fling oneself into a revolutionary movement, to sacrifice money and health, to suffer, to die, is surely an evidence of enthusiasm and sincerity? Leigh Hunt would have us believe that this, too, was nothing but a pose. He tells us how the gift of ten thousand pounds to the Greek Revolutionaries, which was publicly announced by Byron's action, was reduced to a loan of four thousand. He tells the story of the three gilded helmets, bearing the family motto, "Crede Byron," which the poet offered to show him, that he had had made for himself and Trelawny and Count Pietro Gamba. The conclusion is irresistible that there was a large infusion of vanity in the whole scheme, and that Byron had his eye upon the world, here as elsewhere. The Greek expedition would exhibit him in a chivalrous and romantic light; it might provide him with some excitement, though Leigh Hunt maintains that Byron was physically and morally a coward; and indeed, judging from what one knows of Byron, it is hard to believe that his enthusiasm was an unselfish one, or that he was deeply stirred with patriotic emotions, though he was perhaps swayed by a certain artistic sympathy.

It may be asked, is it not better to put the most generous construction upon Byron's acts, to believe that his was a nature of high enthusiasms as well as of violent passions, and that the needle fluctuated between the two?

All depends upon the mood in which one approaches a character. I confess myself that the one thing which seems to me important and interesting is to get at the truth about a man. In the investigation of character there is nothing to be said for being a partisan and for indulging in special pleading, so as to minimise faults and magnify virtues. My own belief is that Byron was an essentially worthless character, the prey of impulse, the slave of desire, thirsting for distinction above everything. There is nothing in his letters or in his recorded speech that would make one think otherwise; his life was devoted to the pursuit of pleasurable excitement, and he cared little what price he paid for it. He never seems to me to have admired gentleness or self-restraint or modesty, or to have desired to attain them. Indeed, I think he gives the lie to all the theories that assert that genius and influence must be based on some essential worthiness and greatness of soul.

XLVIII

Page 151

It is often said that poets have no biographies but their own works, but that is only a half-truth. It is to me one of the most delightful things in the world to follow the footsteps of a poet about, in scenes perhaps familiar to myself; to see how the simple sights of earth and sky struck fire from his mind, to realise what he thought about under commonplace conditions. I have often stayed, for instance, at Tan-yr-allt in North Wales, where Shelley spent some months, and where the strange adventure of the night-attack by the assassin occurred—a story never satisfactorily unravelled; it was a constant pleasure there to feel that one was looking at the fine crags which Shelley loved, so nobly weather-stained and ivy-hung, that one was threading the same woodland paths, and rambling on the open moorland where he so often paced. The interest, the inspiration of the process comes from the fact that one sees how genius transmutes the dull elements of life, those elements which are in reach of all of us, into thoughts rich and strange. I often think of the plum-tree in the tiny garden of Wentworth Place, where Keats, one languid spring day, sate to hear the nightingale sing, and scribbled the *Ode* on loose half-sheets of paper, careless if they were preserved or no. It makes one discern the quality of genius to realise how there is food for it everywhere, and how little right one has to blame one's surroundings for not being more suggestive. Indeed, I cannot help feeling that the very vulgarity of Keats' circle, with its ill-flavoured jokes, its provincial taint, is even more impressive than the romance in which Shelley lived, because it marks his genius more impressively. Shelley was at least in contact with interesting personalities, while Keats' circle was on the whole a depressing one.

But the point which has been deeply borne in upon me, and which we are apt, in reflecting on the posthumous glories of men of genius, to forget, is the reflection how extraordinarily scanty was the recognition which both Keats and Shelley met with in their lifetime. Keats was nothing more than an obscure poetaster; he had a few friends who believed in him, but which of them would have dared to predict the volume and magnitude of his subsequent fame? Shelley was in even worse case, for he was regarded by ordinary people as a monster of irreligion and immorality, the custody of whose children had been denied him by the most respectable of Lord Chancellors, on account of his detestable opinions and the infamy of his mode of life. There are, I will venture to say, a hundred living English writers who have more, far more, of the comfortable sense of renown, and its tangible rewards, than either of these great poets enjoyed in their lifetime. Byron himself, who by the side of Shelley cuts so deplorable a figure, had at least the consciousness of being an intensely romantic and mysterious figure, quickening the emotional temperature of the world and

Page 152

making its pulse beat faster. But Keats and Shelley worked on in discouragement and obscurity. It is true that they judged their own work justly, and knew within themselves that there was a fiery quality in what they wrote. But how many poets have fed themselves in vain on the same hopes, have thought themselves unduly contemned and slighted! There is hardly a scribbler of verse who has not the same delusion, and who has not in chilly and comfortless moments to face the fact that he does not probably count for very much, after all, in the scheme of things. How hard it is in the case of Keats and Shelley to feel that they had not some inkling of all the desirous worship, the generous praise, that has surrounded their memory after their death! How hard it is to enter into the bitterness of spirit which fell upon Shelley, not once nor twice, at the acrid contempt of reviewers! How hard it is to put oneself inside the crushing sense of failure that haunted Keats' last days, with death staring him in the face! Of course, one may say that a writer ought not to depend upon any consciousness of fame; that he ought to make his work as good as he can, and not care about the verdict. That is a fine and dignified philosophy; but at the same time half of the essence of the writer's work lies in its appeal. He may feel the beauty of the world with a poignant emotion; but his work is to make others feel it too, and it is impossible that he should not be profoundly discouraged if there is no one who heeds his voice. It is not that he craves for stupid and conventional praise from men who can only applaud when they see others applauding. What he desires is to express the kinship, the enthusiasm of generous hearts, to make an echo in the souls of a few like-minded people. He may desire this—nay, he must desire it, if he is to fulfil his own ideal at all. For in the minds of poets there is the hope of achievement, of creation; he dedicates time and thought and endeavour to his work, and the test of its fineness and of its worth is that it should move others. If a man cannot have some faint hope that he is doing this, then he had better sink back into the crowd, live the life of the world, earn a wage, make a place for himself. Indeed, he has no justification for refusing to shoulder the accustomed burden, unless he is sure that the task to which he devotes himself is better worth the doing; a poet must always be haunted by the suspicion that he is but pleasing himself and playing indolently at a pretty game, unless he can believe that he is adding something to the sum of beauty and truth. These visions of the poet are very faint and delicate things; there is little of robust confidence about them, while there are plenty of loud and insistent voices on every side of him to tell him that he is shirking the work of the world, and that he is not lifting a finger in the cause of humanity and progress. There are some self-conscious artists who would say that the cause of humanity and progress is not the concern of the artist at all; but, on the other hand, you will find but few of the great artists of the ages who have not been thrilled and haunted with the deep desire to help others, to increase their peace and joy, to interpret the riddle of the world, to give a motive for living a fuller life than the life of the drudge and the raker of stones and dirt.

Page 153

But this very absence of recognition and fame was what made the lives of these two great poets so intensely beautiful; there is hardly a great poet who has achieved fame who has not been in a degree spoilt by the consciousness of worth and influence. Tennyson, Pope, Byron, Wordsworth—how their lives were injured by vanity and self-conceit! Even Scott was touched by the grossness of prosperity, though he purged his fault in despair and tears. But such poets as did not guess their own greatness, and remained humble and peaceable, how much sweeter and gentler is their example, walking humbly in the company of the mighty, and hardly seeming to guess that they are of the happy number. And thus we may rank it amongst the greatest gifts that were given to Keats and Shelley, though they did not know their own felicity, that they were never overshadowed by the approbation of the world, and had no touch of the complacent sense of greatness that so disfigures the spirit of a mortal.

XLIX

I have been reading all to-day the Letters of Keats, a thing which I do at irregular intervals. Perhaps what I am going to say may sound affected, but it is perfectly true: it is a book that always has a very peculiar effect on me, not so much a mental effect as what, for want of a better word, I will call a spiritual effect. It sets my soul on flame. I feel as though I had drawn near to a spirit burning like a fiery lamp, and that my own torpid and inert spirit had been kindled at it. That flame will burn out again, as it has burnt out many times before; but while the fire still leaps and glances in my heart I will try to put down exactly what it makes me feel I believe there are few books that give one, in the first place, more of the author's own heart. Is there in the world any book which gives so fully the youthful, ebullient thoughts of a man of the highest poetical genius as this? I cannot recall any. Keats, to his brothers, his sister, and to one or two intimate friends, allowed his long, vague letters to be an absolutely intimate diary of what he was thinking. You see his genius rise and flush and blaze and grow cold again before your eyes. Not to multiply instances, take the wonderful letter written in October 1818 to Richard Woodhouse, where he sketches his own poetical temperament, differentiating it from what he calls the "Wordsworthian Character—the egotistically sublime." He goes on to say that he feels that he has no identity of his own, but that he is a kind of sensitive mirror on which external things imprint themselves for a lucid moment and are gone again; he says that it is a torture to him to be in a room with other people, because the identity of everyone presses on him so insistently. He adds in a fine elation that "the faint conceptions that he has of poems to come, bring the blood frequently into his forehead."

Page 154

Such a letter as this admits one to the very penetralia of the supremely artistic mind—but the wonder of Keats' confession is that he saw himself as clearly and distinctly as he saw everyone else. And further, I do not think that there is anything in literature that gives one a sharper feeling of the reality of genius than to find the immortal poems, such as *La Belle Dame sans Merci*, copied down in the middle of a letter, as an unconsidered trifle which may amuse his correspondent.

Now, in saying this, I do not for a moment say that Keats was an entirely admirable or even a wholly lovable character—though his tenderness, his consideration, his affectionateness constantly emerge. He had strongly marked faults: his taste is often questionable; his humour is frequently deplorable. He makes and repeats jokes which cause one to writhe and blush—he was, and I say it boldly, occasionally vulgar; but it is not an innate vulgarity, only the superficial vulgarity which comes of living among second-rate suburban literary people. One cannot help feeling every now and then that some of Keats' friends were really impossible—but I am glad that *he* did not feel them to be so, that he was loyal and generous about them. There have been great critics, of whom Matthew Arnold was one, who have said frankly that the aroma of Keats' letters is intolerable. That does not seem to me a large judgment, but it is quite an intelligible one. If one has been brought up in a certain instinctive kind of refinement, there are certain modes of life, certain ways of looking at things, which grate hopelessly upon one's idea of what is refined; and perhaps life is not long enough to try and overcome it, to try and argue oneself out of it. I think it is quite possible that if one had only known Keats slightly, one might have thought him a very underbred young man, as when he showed himself suspicious and ill at ease in the company of Shelley, because of his social standing. "A loose, slack, ill-dressed youth," was Coleridge's impression of Keats, when he met him in a lane near Highgate. But I honestly believe that this would have been only an external and superficial feeling. Again, Keats as a lover is undeniably disconcerting. His zealousness, his uncontrolled luxuriance of passion, though partly attributable to his fevered and despondent condition of health, are lacking in dignity. But as a friend, Keats seems to me almost above praise; and I can imagine that if one had been of his circle, and had won his regard, it would have been difficult not to have idealised him. He seems to me to have displayed that frank, affectionate brotherliness, untainted by sentimentality, which is the essence of equal friendship; and then, too, he gave his heart and his thoughts and his dreams to his friends so prodigally and lavishly—not egotistically, as some have given—with no self-absorption, no lack of sympathy, but in the spirit of the old fisherman in Theocritus, who says

Page 155

to his comrade, "Come, be a sharer of my dreams as of my fishing," and then tells his pretty vision. With no lack of sympathy, I say, because the lavish generosity with which Keats bestowed his money upon his friends, when he had but a small store left and when financial difficulties were staring him in the face, is one of the finest things about him. There is a correspondence with that strange, selfish spendthrift Haydon, which shows the endless trouble Keats would take to raise money for a friend when he was in worse straits himself. Haydon treated him with insolent frankness, and hinted that Keats was parsimonious and ungenerous; even so, Keats never lost his temper, but described with perfect simplicity the extraordinary difficulties he was himself involved in, with as much patience and good-humour as though he had been himself the borrower; and the delicious letters that he wrote, all through his own anxieties, to his little sister Fanny, then a girl at a boarding-school, reveal, like nothing else, the faithful and-tender spirit of the boy—for he was hardly more than a boy. Of course there are letters, like those of Lamb and FitzGerald, which bring one very close to the spirit of the writer; but with this difference, that they rarely seem to lay bare their inmost thought; but Keats had no reserve with his best friends. He put into words the very things that we most of us are ashamed, from a fear of being accused of pose and affectation, to reveal—his loftiest hopes and aspirations, the wide remote prospects seen from the hills of life, the deep ambitions, the exaltations of spirit, the raptures of art. I do not mean that one can share these in their fulness; but Keats seems to have experienced daily and hourly, in his best days, those august shocks of experience and insight of which any man who loves and worships art, however fitfully, can register a few. There is a little picture of Keats, done, I think, after his death by Severn, which represents him sitting in the tiny parlour of Wentworth Place, with the window open to the orchard, where, under the plum-tree, he wrote the *Ode to the Nightingale*. He sits on one chair, with his arm on the back of another, his hand upon his hair, reading a volume of Shakespeare with a smile of satisfaction. He is neatly dressed, and has pumps with bows on his feet. That picture, like the letters, seems to bring Keats curiously near to life; I always fancy-that Severn must have had in his mind a charming passage in one of Keats' letters to his sister Fanny, where he says he would like to have a house with a big bow-window with some stained glass in it, looking out on the Lake of Geneva, with a bowl of gold-fish by his side, where he would sit and read all day, like a portrait of a gentleman reading. The picture is somehow so characteristic that one feels for a moment in his presence.

Well, what do I deduce from all this? Partly that Keats was a man of incomparable genius; partly that he was a man whom one could have loved for himself; partly, too, that one ought not to be ashamed of one's far-reaching thoughts, if one is fortunate enough to have them, and that one receives and gives more good by telling them frankly and unsuspectingly than if one keeps them to oneself for fear of being thought a fool.

Page 156

Of course the whole career of Keats opens a door to a host of uneasy speculations. If the purpose of our Creator is to educate the world on certain lines, if he desires by the memory and the utterance of men of high genius to kindle the human spirit to fine and generous dreams and to the appreciation of beauty, it is terribly hard to discern why he should have created a spirit so fiery-sweet as that of Keats, and then cut short his career by a series of hard strokes of misfortune and disease just when he was finding fullest utterance. One looks round upon the world, and one sees temperaments of all kinds—religious, artistic, philosophical temperaments on the one hand; commercial; commonplace, animal, selfish temperaments on the other. The percentage of the higher spirits is few and does not seem to increase; yet the human race owes much of its advance in purity, nobility, and kindliness to them. We cannot be wholly mistaken in thinking that it is these rare spirits which sustain, enliven, and enrich the world. And yet they seem to be regarded with no special favour by the Creator; they have to contend with insuperable obstacles; the very sensitiveness of their spirit is a torturing disability. The selfish, worldly, hard, brutal temperaments have almost invariably a far better time of it in the world; yet both the exalted spirit and the brutal spirit are undeniable facts; the lofty, unselfish, pure spirit is as real and existent as the vile and sensual spirit. Are we all under a lamentable mistake in the matter? Is the heart of God more on the side of what is noble and pure and enthusiastic than it is on the side of what is base and vile; or is it only the enthusiasts who think so? If an enlightened nation is engaged in a war with a brutal nation, do not the patriots on both sides pray with equal fervour and hope to God to protect what they call the right? Do not both sides hope and believe that he will support them and confound their opponents?

These are dark mysteries of thought; but if we argue in the cold light of reason we dare not, it seems, think that God has any favourites in the battle. He silences the poet, he smites the preacher down; while he sustains in wealth and comfort and honour the man of low and selfish ambitions. The Psalmist said that he saw the wicked flourishing like a green bay-tree, and he was pleased to observe a little after that he was gone and that his place was no more to be found. If he had looked a little closer he might have seen the virtuous man oppressed, and presently removed as indifferently as the wicked. One cannot feel the justice or the mercy in the case of Keats. He was made to give utterance to a certain pure and delicate music of the mind, which has refreshed and inspired many a yearning spirit; but he was swept away ruthlessly at the very height of his genius, and it is still more bewildering to reflect that his life was probably sacrificed to his devoted tendance on his consumptive brother.

Page 157

Perhaps these are but fruitless reveries! but it is hard to resist them. The only course is to hold fast to one's faith in what is pure and beautiful, and to give thanks that such spirits as the spirit of Keats are allowed to pass in flame across the dark heaven, calling from horizon to horizon among the interstellar spaces; and to be sure that the glow, the ardour, the aspirations that they impart to the soul are real and true—an essential part of the mind of God, however small a part they may be of that Eternal and all-embracing Will.

L

I saw this morning in the paper, half with amusement and half with shame, a letter signed by a long list of the sort of people whom a schoolboy would designate as “buffers,” inviting the public to come forward and subscribe for the purchase of the house where Keats died at Rome, in order to make it a sort of Museum, sacred to him and Shelley. I was amused, because of the strange ineptitude and clumsiness of the proposal. In the first place, to make a shrine of pilgrimage for two of our great English poets in *Rome*, of all places—that is fantastic enough; but to select the house which Keats entered a dying man, and where he spent about four months in horrible torture of both mind and body, from which he wrote to his friend Brown, “I have an habitual feeling of my real life having passed, and that I am leading a posthumous existence,”—could anything be more inappropriate? It is not too much, in fact, to say that the house selected to enshrine his memory is the house where he was less himself than at any other period of his short life. If the house in Wentworth Place, Hampstead, which I believe has been lately identified with absolute certainty, could have been purchased,—the house where, on the verge of disaster and doom, Keats spent a brief ecstatic interval of life,—there would have been some meaning in that; but one might almost as well purchase the inn at Dumfries where Keats once spent a few nights as the house at Rome; in fact, if the Dumfries inn had been purchased, it might have been made a Keats-Burns museum, if the idea was to kill two birds with one stone—for to associate Shelley with Keats in the house at Rome is another piece of well-meaning stupidity. Their acquaintance was really of the slightest, though Shelley was extraordinarily kind and generous to Keats, offering to receive him into his own house as an invalid, and of course regarding him with the deepest admiration, as the *Adonais* testifies. But Keats never took very much to Shelley, and was always a little suspicious that he was being patronised; and consequently he never opened his heart and mind to Shelley as he did to some of his friends. Indeed, Shelley knew very little of Keats, and supposed him to be a very different character to what he really was. Shelley supposed that Keats had had both his happiness and his health undermined by severe

Page 158

criticism; as a matter of fact Keats had been, for a young and unknown poet, respectfully enough criticised—and his letters show how extremely indifferent he was to external criticism of any kind. Keats said—and there is no reason to doubt the truth of the words, because they are borne out by many similar sayings in his most candid and most intimate letters—that his own perception of his poetical deficiencies had given him far more pain than the strictures of any critic could possibly do. The fact that the two poets both happened to die in Italy is no reason for selecting Italy as the place in which to give them a permanent *joint* memorial.

But one can excuse the inappropriateness and the tactlessness of commemorating the two poets together in Italy, because it is so well-meant and sincere an attempt to do them honour. What one finds it harder to do is to pardon the solemnity, the snobbishness, of the whole proceeding. The names of those eminent people who have signed the letter include a certain number of eminent men of letters, but they include also the names of people like the Headmaster of Eton, presumably because Shelley was at Eton. When one remembers how Shelley was treated at Eton, and the sentiments which he entertained about the place, one cannot help recalling the verse about the men who built the sepulchres of the prophets whom their forefathers had stoned. An almost incredible instance of this occurred at Oxford. Shelley, as is well known, was at University College. He lived his own life there, tried his chemical experiments, took long walks in the neighbourhood, in the company of Hogg, for the purpose of practising pistol-shooting or sailing paper boats. No one took the slightest trouble to befriend or advise him, though he was one who responded eagerly to affectionate interest. When he published his atheistical pamphlet, which was the whim of a clever, fantastic, and isolated young man, the authorities expelled him with scorn and fury; and now that he has become a great national poet; they have commemorated him there by setting up a very beautiful figure of a drowned youth in a state of nudity, though Shelley's body was naturally found clothed when it was recovered on the seabeach—indeed it is recorded that he had a volume of Keats and a Sophocles in his pocket. This figure is placed in a singular shrine, lighted by a dome, that somehow contrives to suggest a mixture between a swimming-bath and the smoking-room of a hotel. Well, it may be said that the least we can do is to give posthumous honour to those whom we bullied and derided in their lifetime. A memorial placed in a seat of learning and education is a sort of stimulus to the young men who are trained there to go and do likewise; but do the worthy men who placed this memorial at Oxford really wish their students to emulate the example of Shelley? If a sensitive young man of wild ideas went up to Oxford now, how would he be treated? Probably nowadays some virtuous and enthusiastic young tutor would feel a certain sense of responsibility for the young man. He would endeavour to influence him; he would implore him to play games, to go to lectures, to attend early chapel. He would do his best to check any symptom of originality or free thought. He would try to make him dutiful and orthodox, and to discourage all his fantastic theories.

Page 159

Which of these eminently respectable gentlemen who have brought before the public the necessity of commemorating two great poets are on the lookout for talent of the kind that Keats and Shelley exhibited? How many of them, if they came across a latter-day young poet, indolent, unconventional, crude, fantastic, would encourage him to be true to his ideas and to work out his own salvation on his own lines? Which of them, if they had been confronted with our two poets in the flesh, would have encouraged Keats to be Keats and Shelley to be Shelley? Would they not rather have done their best to inculcate into them their own tamer conceptions of culture and righteousness?

Of course there is something impressive in the posthumous fame of these two men of genius collecting in their wake a crowd of adoring respectabilities, like the people in the German story who touch the magic spear carried by the young hero, and are unable to withdraw their hands, but trot grotesquely behind their conqueror through street and market-place. The melancholy part of the situation is that one feels that these excellent people, for all their admiration, have not learnt the real lesson of the incident in the least. They would be prepared to browbeat and condemn originality just as vigorously as their predecessors. They would speak of a modern Keats as a self-indulgent dilettante; of a modern Shelley as an immoral Republican. The fact that the two have stepped silently into Parnassus, receiving nothing but contempt and neglect from those whose duty it was to encourage them, does not seem to enlighten the minds of those who are ready enough to applaud as soon as they find the world applauding. Of course teachers are in a difficult position. There are always at school and college a certain number of wild, fantastic, crude young men, who indulge in unconventional speculations, who have not the genius of Keats and Shelley in the background, but who share their distaste and disgust for the conventionality, the tameness, the vulgarity of the world. It is the duty, no doubt, of people who are responsible for the education of these young men to try and turn them into respectable citizens. Sometimes the process is successful; sometimes it is not. Often enough these visionary, perverse people are misunderstood and shunted till they make shipwreck of their lives. The path of originality is even harder than the path of the transgressor, because the stakes for which the man of genius plays are so tremendous. It is the applause of a nation, the approbation of connoisseurs, the heart-felt gratitude of idealists if you win; and if you fail, a contemptuous pity for gifts wasted and misapplied. But one of the reasons why we are so unintellectual, so conventional, so commonplace a nation is because we do not care for ideas, we do not admire originality, we do not want to be made to think and feel; what we admire is success and respectability; and if a poet can so far force himself upon the attention

Page 160

of timid idealists, who worship beauty in secret, as to sell large editions of his works and make a good income, then we reward him in our clumsy way with glory and worship. It is horrible to reflect that if Shelley had succeeded to his father's baronetcy he would probably have had at once an increased circulation. If Keats had been a peer like Byron, he would have been loaded with vapid commendation. We still cling pathetically in our seats of education to the study of Greek, but whenever the Greek spirit appears, that insatiable appetite for impressions of beauty, that intense desire for mental activity, we think it rather shocking and disreputable. We are at heart commercial Puritans all the time; we loathe experiments and originality and independence; we think that God rewards respectability, because we believe that material rewards—wealth, comfort, position—are the only things worth having. We call ourselves Christians, and we crucify the Christ-like spirit of simplicity and liberty. But let us at least make up our minds as to what we desire, and not try to arrive at a disgusting compromise. Our way is to persecute genius living and to crown it dead. Can we not make a sincere attempt to recognise it when it is among us, to look out for it, to encourage it, instead of acting in the spirit of Pickwickian caution, and when there are two mobs, to shout with the largest?

L

I have been reading the Memoir of J.H. Shorthouse, and it has been a great mystery to me. It is an essentially commonplace kind of life that is there revealed. He was a well-to-do manufacturer—of vitriol, too, of all the incongruous things. He belonged to a cultivated suburban circle, that soil where the dullest literary flowers grow and flourish. He lived in a villa with small grounds; he went off to his business in the morning, and returned in the afternoon to a high tea. In the evening he wrote and read aloud. The only thing that made him different from other men was that he had the fear of epileptic attacks for ever hanging over him; and further, he was unfitted for society owing to a very painful and violent stammer. I saw him twice in my life; remote impressions of people seen for a single evening are often highly inaccurate, but I will give them for what they are worth. On the first occasion I saw a small, sturdily built man, with a big, clerical sort of face with marked features, and, as far as I can recollect, rather coppery in hue. There was a certain grotesqueness communicated to the face by large, thin, fly-away whiskers of the kind that used to be known as “weepers” or “Dundrearies.” He had then just dawned upon the world as a celebrity. I had myself as an under-graduate read and re-read and revelled in *John Inglesant*, and I was intensely curious to see him and worship him. But he was not a very worshipful man. He gave the impression of great courtesy and simplicity; but his stammer

Page 161

was an obstacle to any sense of ease in his presence. I seem to recollect that instead of being brought up, as most stammerers are, by a consonant, it took the form with Shorthouse of repeating the word “Too—too” over and over again until the barrier was surmounted; and in order to help himself out, he pulled at his whiskers alternately, with a motion as though he were milking a cow. Some years after I saw him again; he was then paler and more worn of aspect. He had discarded his whiskers, and had grown a pointed beard. He was a distinguished-looking man now, whereas formerly he had only been an impressive-looking one. I do not remember that his stammer was nearly so apparent, and he had far more assurance and dignity, which had come, I suppose, from his having been welcomed and sought after by all kinds of eminent people, and from having found that eminent people were very much like any other people, except that they were more simple and more interesting. I was still conscious of his great kindness and courtesy, a courtesy distributed with perfect impartiality.

But the mystery about him is this. The *Life* reveals, or seems to reveal, a very commonplace man, cultivated, religious, “decent not to fail in offices of tenderness” like Telemachus, but for all that essentially parochial. His letters are heavy, uninteresting, banal, and reveal little except a very shaky taste in literature. The *Essays* which are reproduced, which he wrote for Birmingham literary societies, are of the same quality, serious, ordinary, prosaic, mildly ethical.

Yet behind all this, this pious, conscientious man of business contrived to develop a style of quite extraordinary fineness, lucid, beauty-haunted, delicate and profound. *John Inglesant* is not a wholly artistic hook, because it is ill-proportioned and the structure is weak—the middle is not in the centre, and it leaves off, not because the writer appears to have come to the end, but because it could not well be longer. There is no balance of episodes. It has just the sort of faults that a book might be expected to have which was written at long intervals and not on any very carefully conceived plan. It looks as if Shorthouse had just taken a pen and a piece of paper and had begun to write. Yet the phrasing, the cadence, the melody of the book are exquisite. I do not think he ever reached the same level again, though his other books are full of beautiful passages, except perhaps in the little introduction to an edition of George Herbert, which is a wonderfully attractive piece of writing.

Shorthouse had an extraordinary gift for evoking a certain sort of ecclesiastical scene, a chapel buried in spring-woods, seen in the clear and fresh light of the early morning, the fragrant air, with perhaps a hint of dewy chilliness about it, stealing in and swaying the flames of the lighted tapers, made ghostlike and dusky by the touch of dawn; the priest, solemnly vested, moves about with a quiet deliberateness, and the words of the Eucharist seem to fall on the ear with a soft and delicate precision, as from the lips of one who is discharging a task of almost overwhelming sweetness, to which he consecrates the early purity of the awakening day.

Page 162

Such was Shorthouse's best and most romantic hour. He had a deep-seated love of ritual; in spite of his inherited quietism—but for all that he was a very liberal Churchman, of the school of Kingsley rather than of the school of Pusey. Ritual was to him a beautiful adjunct; not a symbolical preoccupation.

The mystery is why this very delicate and unique flower of art should have sprung up on this particular soil. The most that one hopes for, in the way of literary interest, from such surroundings, is a muddled optimism, rather timidly expressed, based on the writings of Robert Browning and Carlyle. Instead of this, one gets this *precieux* antique style, based upon the Bible and John Bunyan, and enriched by a transparent power of tinging modern English with an ancient and secluded flavour.

It shows how very little surroundings and influences have to do with the growth of an artistic instinct, because in the case of Shorthouse it seems to have been a purely spontaneous product. He followed no one; he had the advantage of no trained criticism; because it seems that his only critic was his wife, and though Mrs. Shorthouse appears in these pages as a very courageous, loyal, and devoted woman, it is clear from the record that she had no special literary gift.

The rarity of the thing is part of its wonder. It is possible to tell upon the fingers of one hand, or at all events on the fingers of two hands, the names of all the nineteenth-century writers who have handled prose with any marked delicacy. There are several effective prose-writers, but very few artists. Prose has been employed in England till of late merely as a straightforward method of enforcing and expressing ideas, in a purely scientific manner. Literary craftsmen have turned rather to verse, and here the wonder grows, because one or two specimens of Shorthouse's verse are given, which reveal an absolute incapacity for the process, without apparently the smallest instinct for rhyme, metre, or melody,—the very lowest sort of slipshod amateur poetry.

After Shorthouse had once tasted the delights of publication and the pleasures of fame he wrote too much, and fiddled rather tediously upon a single string. Moreover, he attempted humorous effects, not very successfully; because one of the interesting points about, *John Inglesant* is that there is hardly the slightest touch of humour from beginning to end, except perhaps in the fantastic mixture of tragedy and comedy in the carnival scene, presided over by the man who masquerades as a corpse; and even here the humour is almost entirely of a *macabre* type.

Page 163

Of course one would not assign to Shorthouse a very high place in English literature, beautiful as his best work is. But a writer may have an interest which is out of proportion to the value of his writings. The interest of Shorthouse is the interest which attaches to the blooming of a curious and exotic flower in a place where its presence is absolutely unaccountable; he probably will not maintain his hold upon the minds of a later generation, because there is no coherent system of thought in his book. Inglesant is a mere courtly mirror, the prey of his moods and his surroundings, in which beautiful tones of religious feeling are engagingly reflected. But to all who study the development of English prose, Shorthouse will have a definite value, as a spontaneous and lonely outcrop of poetical prose-writing in an alien soil; an isolated worker foreshowing in his secluded and graceful talent the rise of a new school in English literature, the appearance of a plant which may be expected in the future, if not in the immediate future, to break into leaf and bloom, into colour and fragrance.

LII

I found myself the other day in the neighbourhood of Wells. I had hitherto rather deliberately avoided going there, because so many people whose taste and judgment are wholly unreliable have told me that I ought to see it. The instinct to disagree with the majority is a noble one, and has perhaps effected more for humanity than any other instinct; but it must be cautiously indulged in.

In this case I resisted the instinct to abstain from visiting Wells; and I was glad that I did so, because, in spite of the fact that most people consider Wells to be a very beautiful place, it is undoubtedly true that it is most beautiful. Wells and Oxford on a large scale, Burford and Chipping Campden on a small scale, are in my experience the four most beautiful places in England, as far as buildings go. There are other places which are full of beautiful buildings; but there is a harmony about these four places which is a very rare and delightful quality.

Wells, as a matter of fact, is almost impossibly beautiful, and incredibly romantic. It is an almost perfectly mediaeval place, with the enormous advantage that it is also old, a quality which we are apt to forget that mediaeval places, when first built, did not possess. I do not think that Wells, when first built, was probably more than just a beautiful place. But it has now all grown old together, undisturbed, unvisited. It has crumbled and weathered and mellowed into one of the most enchanting places in the world.

Page 164

God forbid that I should attempt to describe it; and indeed I am not sure that the things that are most admired about it are the most admirable. The west front of the Cathedral, for instance, has been temporarily ruined by the restoration of the little marble shafts, which now merely look like a quantity of india-rubber tubing, let in in pieces. The choir of the Cathedral, again, is an outrage. The low stone stalls, like a row of arbours designed by a child, the mean organ, the comfortable seats, have a shockingly Erastian air; there is not a touch of charm or mystery about it; I cannot imagine going there to pray. The Vicars' Close, which is foolishly extolled, has been made by restoration to look like a street in a small watering-place.

But, on the other hand, the Bishop's Palace, with its moat full of swans, its fantastic oriels and turrets, its bastions and towers, wreathed with ivy and creepers, is a thing which fills the mind with a sort of hopeless longing to possess the secret of its beauty; one desires in a dumb and bewildered way to surrender oneself, with a yearning confidence, to whatever the power may be which can design and produce a thing of such unutterable loveliness.

By the favour of an ecclesiastical friend I was allowed to wander alone in a totally unaccountable paradise of gardens that lies to the east of the Cathedral. It was impossible to conceive whom it belonged to, or what connection it had with the houses round about. It was all intersected with pools and rivulets of clear water. Here was a space of cultivated ground with homely vegetables. Here stood a mysterious ancient building, which proved on examination to contain nothing but a gushing well of water. Here was a lawn with a trim gravel walk bordered with roses; while a few paces away was a deserted thicket of sprawling shrubs, elders, and laurels, with a bit of wild rough meadow in the heart of the copse; and here was a sight that nearly brought me to my knees. Beside an ancient wall, with the towers and gables of the Cathedral looking solemnly over, a great spring broke up out of the ground from some secret channel into a little pool surrounded by rich water plants, and flowed away in a full channel; not one, but three of these astonishing fountains were to be seen in this little space of grass and copse.

These are the Wells themselves, the *Aquae Solis*, as the Romans called them, fed by some hidden channel from the hills, sent gushing up day and night for the delight and refreshment of men. I wish that the mediaeval builders had built the great church over instead of near these wells, and had let them burst up in a special chapel, so that the church might have been musical with the sound of streams; and so that the waters might have flowed from the door of the house, as Ezekiel saw them flow eastward from the threshold of the holy habitation to Engedi and Eneglaim to gladden the earth.

Then as I wandered in a place of dark leaves, beside the moat under the frowning towers, I saw a kingfisher sit on a bough, his back powdered with sapphires, his red breast, his wise head on one side, watching the stream. In a moment he plunged and

disappeared; in an instant he was back again on his perch, flashing, like Excalibur, over the stream, his prey in his bill.

Page 165

For a long morning I wandered about, dizzied with beauty, gazing, wondering, desiring I knew not what.

Then came the strange thought that this place of dreamful beauty should be in the hands of a few simple ecclesiastical persons; the town is little more than a village; century by century it has lived a little, quiet provincial life. It has produced, so far as I know, no great man. This soft air, this humid climate, sheltered from the wind, full of warm sunlight, fed with dew, seems favourable to a long, comfortable, indolent life. The beauty of the place seems to have had no particular effect upon the people who live there. It has never been a centre of thought or activity. It ought, one would have thought, to have produced a certain kind of poetical temper, even though it were a temper of indolent enjoyment rather than of creative force. But not even a beauty born of murmuring sound—and the air is full of murmurs—seemed to have passed into the faces of the simple townsfolk who make it their home. I could not gather that the exquisite loveliness of the place had any particular effect upon the dwellers there, except a mild pleasure in the fact that so many strangers should come to see the place. I do not exactly grudge strangers the sight of it, though I should like better to think of it all as standing in an enchanted valley hard to penetrate. But it is difficult to see exactly for whom it all exists. It seems to be a place that ought to have a dreamful, appreciative, emotional life of its own, a place where a few worthy natures might live in a serene, joyful, impassioned mood; a place where there is nothing that need remind the dweller of ugliness or vulgarity, of progress or statistics; a place for elect souls and fine natures.

One does not want to be fantastic or absurd in such reveries as these; but it is sad to think that scattered about England in mean towns, perhaps in sordid houses, are natures that could live in a place like Wells with a perpetual delight, a constant drinking at the sources of beauty, while most of the actual inhabitants have come there almost by chance, and do not appear to be particularly conscious of their blessings or particularly affected by their surroundings. It seems indeed a curious wastefulness, that the Power who rules the world should have heaped in this tiny place among the hills such a treasure of delicate beauty, with such an indifference as to whether it should be perceived or discerned by congenial spirits.

The type of ecclesiastic whom I would like to see in a place like this would be a man deeply sensitive to art and music, with a strong mystical sense of wonder and desire; visionary perhaps, and what is called unpractical, believing that religion was not so much a matter of conduct as a matter of mood; in whom conduct would follow mood, as a rush bends in the stream. I do not say that this is the most vital form of religion. It is not the spirit of Luther or of John Wesley; it lives more among hopes

Page 166

than certainties; it desires to see God rather than to proclaim His wrath. Such a man, tenderly courteous to all, patient, wise, sad with a hopeful sadness, living in an atmosphere of uplifted prayer, hearing the ripple of the spring or the bird's song among the thickets, his heart rising in ecstasy upon the holy music, upborne by the grave organ-thunders, speaking sometimes out of a full heart of the secrets of God, would lead a life that would be shepherded by his Lord in a green pasture; led by waters of comfort and in paths of righteousness, with a table indeed prepared. Such a life is apt nowadays to be viewed contemptuously by the virile man, by the practical philanthropist; but it is such a spirit as this that produced the Psalms, the Book of Job, the Apocalypse. It is a type of religion that even those who base their faith upon the open Bible are apt to despise and condemn; if so, their Bible is not an open one, but sealed with many seals of ignorance and dulness. Such a life should be full of energy, of faith, of purity. It should speak to those that had ears to hear in secret chambers, even though it did not cry from the house-tops. In this stupid and hypocritical age, that mistakes money for wealth, excitement for pleasure, interference for influence, fame for wisdom, speed for progress, volubility for eloquence, such a life is despised, if not actually condemned.

Yet such lives might break from underground, in a place of greensward and bushes, among the voices of birds and the mellow murmur of bells, even as the fountains themselves spring forth. In these bustling days we are apt to think that streams have no work but to turn mills and make light for cities, to bear merchandise, to sweep foulness to the sea; we forget that they pass through woodland places, feeding the grasses and the trees, quenching the thirst of bird and beast, that they sparkle in the sun, gleam wan in the sunset, reflecting the pale sky. Oh, perverse and forgetful generation, that knows better than God what the aim and goal of our pilgrimage is; that will not hear His murmured language, or see His patient writing on the wall! That in teaching, forget to learn, and in prophesying, have no leisure to look backwards! It is we that have despised life and beauty and God; it is we that make graven images, and worship the fire till we cannot see the sun, who pray daily for peace, and cast the jewel in the mire when it is put in our foolish hands.

And after all, though we shelter our lives and seclude them as we may, we have all of us a heavy burden to bear. These mouldering walls, these soaring towers, the voice of many waters, teach me this, if they teach me nothing else, that peace and beauty are dear to the heart of God; that he sets them where he can; that we can perceive them and love them; and that if our life is a learning of some great and dim lesson, these sweet influences may sustain and comfort us at least as well as the phantoms which so many of us pursue.

Page 167

LIII

I am sure that it is an inspiring as well as a pleasant thing to go on pilgrimage sometimes to the houses where interesting people and great people have lived and thought and written. It helps one to realise, that "they were mortal, too, like us," but it makes one realise it gratefully and joyfully; it is good to feel, as one comes to do by such visits, that such thoughts, such words, are not unattainable by humanity, that they can be thought in rooms and fields and gardens like our own, and written down in chairs and on tables much the same as others. Tennyson went once to see Goethe's house at Weimar, and was more transported by seeing a room full of his old boots and medicine-bottles than by anything else that he saw; and it is a wise care that keeps dear Sir Walter's old hat and coat and clumsy laced shoes in a glass case at Abbotsford. Of course one must not go in search of old boots and bottles, as many tourists do, without caring much about the hero to whom they belonged. One must have grown familiar first with every detail of the great man's life, have read his letters and his biography, and the letters written about him, and his Diary if possible, and all his books; one must have grown to admire him and desire his presence, and hate the thought of the grave that separates him from oneself; until one has come to feel that the place where he slept and ate and walked and talked and wrote is like the field full of stones at Luz, where the ladder was set up from heaven to earth, and where Jacob, shivering in his chilly slumbers, saw, in a moment of dreamful enlightenment, that the heavenly staircase may be let down in a moment at any place or hour, and that the angels may descend, carrying bright thoughts and secret consolations from its cloudy head.

And thus there can be for any one man but a few places to which he owes such a pilgrimage, because, in the first place, the thing must not be too ancient and remote; it is of little use to see the ruined shell of a great house in a forest, because such a scene does not in the least recall what the eyes of one's hero saw and rested upon. There must be some personal aroma about it; one must be able to see the garden-paths where he walked, the furniture which he used, and to realise the place in some degree as it appeared to him.

And then, too, there must be some sense of a personal link, an instinctive sympathy, between the soul of the writer and one's own spirit. It is not enough that he should have just written famous books; they must be books that have fed one's own heart and mind, have whispered some delicious hope, have thrilled one with a responsive tenderness—the writer must be one whom, unseen, we love. It is not enough that one should recognise his genius, know him to be great; he must be near and dear as well; one must visit the scene as one would draw near to the grave of a father or a brother, with a sense of love and loss and spiritual contact. It should be like visiting some familiar scene. One must be able to say: "Yes, this is the tree he loved and wrote about; there is the writing-table by the window that gave him the glimpse he speaks of, of lake and

hill; these are the walls on which he liked to see the firelight darting on dark winter evenings.”

Page 168

It is strange, if one considers carefully what houses they are that one would thus wish to visit, to reflect how many of them are homes of poets, and after them of novelists. It is the personal, the imaginative, the creative touch that weaves the spell, I do not think that one would travel far to see the house of a historian or a philosopher, however eminent; I do not personally even desire to see the houses of generals or statesmen or philanthropists. I would rather visit Rydal Mount than Hughenden; I should experience a greater exaltation of soul at Haworth than at Strathfieldsaye. I would rather see the lane where Tennyson wrote "Break, break, break," than Mr. Gladstone's library at Hawarden. Not that the houses of statesmen and generals are not interesting; I would take some trouble to visit them if I were in the neighbourhood of them; but it would be a mental rather than a spiritual pleasure, and when one was there one would tend to ask questions rather than contemplate the scene in silent awe. It may be a sentimental thing to say, but I should hope to visit Brantwood and Somerby Rectory with my heart full of prayer and my eyes full of tears, just as I should visit some old and well-loved house that had been the scene for me of happy days and loving memories.

What I find to regret in these latter days is—I say it with shame—that there is no house of any living writer which I should visit with this sense of awe and desire and sacredness. There are writers whom I honour and admire greatly, whose work I reverence and read, but there is no author alive a summons to whose presence I should obey with eager solemnity and devout expectation. That is perhaps my own fault, or the fault perhaps of my advancing years; but, to put it differently, there is no author now writing whose book I should order the moment I saw it announced, and await its arrival with keen anticipation. There are books announced that I determine I will see and read, but no books that I feel are sure to hold some vital message of truth and beauty. I cannot help feeling that this is a great loss. I remember the almost terrible excitement with which I saw Tennyson stalking out of Dean's Yard at Westminster, with his dark complexion, his long hair, his strange, ill-fitting clothes, his great glasses, his dim yet piercing look. I recollect the timid expectation with which I went to meet Robert Browning—and the disappointment which I endured in his presence at his commonplace bonhomie, his facile, uninteresting talk. I remember, as an undergraduate, begging and obtaining an introduction to Matthew Arnold, who stood robed in his scarlet gown at an academical garden-party; and I shall never forget the stately and amiable condescension with which he greeted me. But what seer of high visions, what sayer of ineffable things, transforming the commonplace world into a place of spirits and heavenly echoes, now moves and breathes among us? The result of our present conditions of life seems to be to develop a large number of effective and accomplished people, but not to evolve great, lonely, majestic figures of indubitable greatness.

Page 169

Perhaps there are personalities whom the young and ardent as whole-heartedly desire to see and hear as I did the gods of my youth. But at present the sea and the depth alike concur in saying, "It is not in me."

But I do not cease to hope. I care not whether my hero be old or young; I should like him better to be young; and if I could hear of the rise of some great and gracious personality, full of fire and genius, I would make my way to his presence, even though it involved a number of cross-country journeys and solitary evenings in country inns, to lay my wreath at his feet and to receive his blessing.

LIV

The other day I was at Peterborough, and strolled into the Close under a fine, dark, mouldering archway, to find myself in a romantic world, full of solemn dignity and immemorial peace. There in its niche stood that exquisite crumbled statue that Flaxman said summed up the grace of mediaeval art. The quiet canonical houses gave me the sense of stately and pious repose; of secluded lives, cheered by the dignity of worship and the beauty of holiness. And then presently I was in the long new street leading out into the country; the great junction with its forest of signals, where the expresses come roaring in and out, and the huge freight-trains clank north and south. The street itself, with its rows of plane-trees, its big brick-built chapels, its snug comfortable houses, with the electric trams gliding smoothly under the crossing wires—what a picture it gave of the new democracy, with its simple virtues, its easy prosperity, its cheerful lack of taste, of romance! Life runs easily enough, no doubt, in these contented homes, with their regular meals, their bright ugly furniture, their friendly gossip, their new clothes; for amusement the bicycle, the gramophone, the circulating novel. I have no doubt that there is abundance of wholesome affection and camaraderie within, of full-flavoured, local, personal jests, all the outward signs and inner resources of sturdy British prosperity. A certain civic pride exists, no doubt, in the ancient buildings, in the influx of visitors, the envious admiration of Americans. But, at first sight, what a difference between the old and the new! The old, no doubt, stood for a few very wealthy and influential people, priests and barons, with a wretched and down-trodden poor, labouring like the beasts of the field for life. The new order stands for a few wealthy people whose hearts are in their amusements and social pleasures; a great, well-to-do, busy, comfortable middle class, and a self-respecting and, on the whole, prosperous artisan class. No one, surveying the change from the point of view of human happiness, can doubt for an instant that the new order is far richer in happiness, in comfort, and in contentment than the old.

Page 170

And then, too, how easy it is to make the mistake of thinking that all the grace of antiquity and mellowness that hangs about the old buildings was part of the mediaeval world. Go back in fancy for a little to the time when that great front of the Cathedral, with its forests of towers and pinnacles, its three vast portals, was brand-new and white, all free from the scaffolding, and fitting on so strangely to the Norman work behind. I can well imagine that some one who loved what was old and quiet might have thought it even then a very bustling modern affair, and heaved a sigh over the progress that had made it possible.

Moreover, looking closely at that great grey front, with its three portals, I am almost sure that the design is an essentially vulgar one. It is much of it a front with no back to it; it is crowded with useless and restless ornament. The rose-windows, for instance, in the gables, give light to nothing but the rafters of the roof. The designer was evidently afraid of leaving any surface plain and unadorned; he felt impelled to fill every inch with decoration. Indeed, I cannot doubt that if one saw the West Front reproduced now, the connoisseurs, who praise it so blandly in its mellow softness, would overwhelm it with disapproval and stern criticism.

Whatever that front, those soaring towers, may mean to us now, they stood then for a busy and eager activity. What one does desire to know, what is really important, is whether the spirit that prompted that activity was a purer, holier, more gracious spirit than the spirit that underlies the middle-class prosperity of the present day. Did it all mean a love of art, a sacrifice of comfort and wealth to a beautiful idea, a radiant hope? Did the monks or the great nobles that built it, build it in a humble, ardent, and loving spirit—or was it partly in a spirit of ostentation, that their church might have a new and impressive front, partly in the spirit indicated by the hymn:

“Whatever, Lord, we lend to Thee,
Repaid a thousand-fold will be”?

Was it an investment, so to speak, made for the sake of improving their spiritual prosperity?

It is very difficult to say. The monks in their earlier missionary times were full of enthusiasm and faith, no doubt. But when the Abbeys were at the full height of their prosperity, when they were vast landowners and the Abbot had his place in parliament, when the monastic life was a career for an ambitious man, was the spirit of the place a pure and holy one? That they submitted themselves to a severe routine of worship does not go for very, much, because men very easily accommodate themselves to a traditional and a conventional routine.

And thus one is half inclined to believe that the spirit of the monks in their prosperous days was not very different from the spirit that prompts railway extension, and that builds a railway terminus with an ornamental facade.

Page 171

And so when one sees prosperity spreading wider and lower, and the neat villa residences begin to cluster round the knot of ancient buildings, we must not conclude too hastily that our new wealth has swamped ancient ideals; probably the ideals of prosperous people do not vary very much, whether they are monks or railway officials. The monks in their decadent days have no abounding reputation for virtue or austerity. One likes to think of them as lost in splendid dreams of God's glory and man's holiness, but there is little to show that such was the case.

I do not want to decry the ideas of the monks in order to magnify our modern middle-class ideals. I do not for a moment pretend to think that our national ideals are very exalted ones nowadays. I wish I could believe it; but there is no sign of any particular interest in religion or cultivation or art or literature or romance. We have a certain patriotism, of a somewhat commercial type; we have a belief in our honesty, not, I fear, wholly well-founded. We claim to be plain people who speak our mind; which very often does not mean more than that we do not take the trouble to be polite; we should all say that we valued liberty, which means little more than that we resent interference, and like to do things in our own way. But I do not think that we are at present a noble-minded or an unselfish nation, though we are rich and successful, and have the good humour that comes of wealth and success.

Peterborough is to me a parable of England; it stands for a certain pride in antiquity, coupled with a good-natured contempt for the religious spirit—for, though these cathedrals of ours are well cared for and well-served, no one can say that they have any very deep influence on national life. And it stands, too, for the thing that we do believe in with all our hearts—trim, comfortable material prosperity; a thing which bewilders a dreamer like myself, because it seems to be the deliberate gift and leading of God to our country, while all the time I long to believe that he is pointing us to a far different hope, and a very much quieter and simpler ideal. How little we make of Christ's blessing on poverty, on simplicity, on tenderness! How ready we are to say that his strong words about the dangers of wealth were only counsels given to individuals! The deepest article of our creed, that a man must make his way, fight for his own hand, elbow himself to the front if he can—how little akin that is to the essential spirit of Christ, by which a man ought to lavish himself for others, and quit the world poorer than he entered it!

I turn again into the great, shadowy, faintly lit church, with all its interlaced arches, its colour, its richness of form; I see the figures of venerable, white-robed clergy in their tabernacled stalls, a—little handful of leisurely worshippers. The organ rises pouring sweet music from its forest of pipes. Hark to what they are singing to the rich blending of artful melodies:—

Page 172

“He hath put down the mighty from their seat, and hath exalted the humble and meek. He hath filled the hungry with good things; but the rich He hath sent empty away.”

What a message to thrill through this palace of art, with the pleasant town without, and all the great trains thundering past! To whom is it all addressed? The spirit of that meek religion seems to sit shivering in its gorgeous raiment, heard and heeded of none. Yet here as everywhere there are quiet hearts that know the secret; there are patient women, kind fathers, loving children, who would think it strange and false if they were told that over their heads hangs the bright aureole of the saints. What can we do, we who struggle faintly on our pilgrimage, haunted and misled by hovering delusions, phantoms of wealth and prosperity and luxury, that hide the narrow path from our bewildered eyes? We can but resolve to be simple and faithful and pure and loving, and to trust ourselves as implicitly as we can to the Father who made us, redeemed us, and loves us better than we love ourselves.

LV

I have had a fortnight of perfect weather here—the meteorologists call it by the horrible and ugly name of “anticyclone,” which suggests, even more than the word “cyclone” suggests, the strange weather said by the Psalmist to be in store for the unrighteous—“Upon the ungodly he shall rain snares, fire and brimstone, storm and tempest.” I have often wondered what the fields would look like after a rain of snares! The word “cyclone” by itself suggests a ghastly whorl of high vapours, and the addition of “anti” seems to make it even more hostile. But an anticyclone in the springtime is the opening of a door into paradise. Day after day the fields have lain calm beneath a cool and tranquil sun, with a light breeze shifting from point to point in the compass. Day after day I have swept along the great fen-roads, descending from my little hill-range into the flat. Day by day I have steered slowly across the gigantic plains, with the far-off farms to left and right across acres of dark plough-land, rising in dust from the feet of horses dragging a harrow. Every now and then one crosses a great dyke, a sapphire streak of calm water between green flood-banks, running as straight as a line from horizon to horizon. One sweeps through a pretty village at long intervals, with its comfortable yellow-brick houses, and an old church standing up grey in the sun. It was on a day always to be marked with letters of gold in my calendar that I found the house of Bellasyze in a village in the fen. Imagine a great red-brick wall running along by the high road, with a pair of huge gate-posts in the centre, with big stone wyverns on the top. Inside, a little park of ancient trees, standing up among grass golden with buttercups. A quarter of a mile away in the park, an incredibly picturesque house of red brick, with an ancient turreted gate-house, innumerable brick

Page 173

chimney-stacks, gables, mullioned windows, and oriels, rising from great sprawling box-trees and yews. By a stroke of fortune, the young kindly squire was coming out at the gate as I stood gazing, and asked me if I would care to look round. He led me up to the gate-house, and then into a great hall, with vast doors of oak, flagged with stone.

"There is our ugliest story!" he said, pointing to the flags. I do not profess to explain what I saw; but there was in one place a stain looking like dark blood just sopped up; and close by, outlined in a damp dimness, the rough form of a human body with outstretched arms, just as though a warm corpse had been lying on the cold stones.

"That was where the young heir was killed by his father," said the squire; "his blood fell down here—he was stabbed in the back—and he stumbled a pace or two and fell; we can't scrub it out or dry it out." "I suppose you are haunted?" I said. He laughed.

"Well, it is a great convenience," he said. "I only live here in the summer; I have a little house which is more convenient in the winter, a little distance away. I can never get a caretaker here for the winter—but, bless you, if I left every door and window open, there is not a soul in the place that would come near it!" He led me through ranges of rooms panelled, recessed, orieled—there were staircases, turret-chambers, galleries in every direction. I think there must have been nearly fifty rooms in the house, perhaps half-a-dozen of them inhabited. At one place he bade me look out of a little window, and I saw below a small court with an ancient chapel on the left, the windows bricked up. It had a sinister and wicked air, somehow. The squire told me that they had unearthed a dozen skeletons in that little yard as they were laying a drain, and had buried them in the neighbouring churchyard. But the back of the house was still more ravishing than the front; surrounded by great brick walls, curving outwards, lay a grassy garden, with huge box-trees at the sides, and in the centre many ancient apple-trees in full bloom. The place was bright with carelessly ordered flowers; and behind, the ground fell a little to some great pools full of sedge, some tumbled grassy hillocks covered with blackthorns, and a little wood red with buds and full of birds, called by the delicious name of "My Lord's Wood." The great flat stretched for miles round.

One of the singular charms of the place was that it had never undergone a restoration; it had only been carefully patched just as it needed it. I never saw a place so soaked with charm from end to end, its very wildness giving it a grace which trimness would have utterly destroyed. I stood for a while beside the pool, with a woodpecker laughing in the holt, to watch the long roofs and huddled chimneys rise above the white-flowered orchard. Perhaps in a stormy, rugged day of November it would be sad and mournful enough in its solitary pastures; but on this spring

Page 174

day, with the sun lying warm on the brickwork, it seemed to have a perfection of charm about it like the design of a mind intent upon devising as beautiful a thing as could be made. The old house seemed to have grown old and mellow like a rock or crag; to have sprung up out of the ground; and nature, working patiently with rain and sun and wind, drooping the stonecrop from the parapet, fringing the parapets with snapdragons and wallflowers, touching the old roofs with orange and grey lichens, had done the rest. No one shall learn from me where the House of Bellasyze lies; but I will revisit it spring by spring, like a hidden treasure of beauty.

The result of these perfect days, full of life and freshness, with all the loveliness and without the languors of spring, is to produce in me a perfectly inconsequent mood of happiness, which is better than any amount of philosophical consolation. The air, the breeze, the flying hour are all full of delight. Everything is touched with a fine savour and quality, whether it be the wide view over the dappled plain, the blue waters of the lonely dyke, the old farm-house blinking pleasantly among its barns and outbuildings, the tall church-tower that you see for miles over the flat, the busy cawing of rooks in the village grove; the very people that one meets wear a smiling and friendly air, from the old labourer trudging slowly home, to the jolly, smooth-faced ploughboy riding a big horse, clanking and plodding down the highway. One sees the world as it was meant to be made; a life in the open air, labour among the wide fields, seems the joyful lot of man. The very food that one eats by the quick-set thorn on the edge of a dyke, where the fish poise and hang in dark pools, has a finer savour, and is like a sacrament of peace; hour after hour, from morning to sunset, one can range without weariness and without care, one's thoughts reduced to a mere flow of gentle perceptions, murmuring along like a clear stream. Pleasant, too, is the return home when one swings in at the familiar gate; and then comes the quiet solitary evening when one recounts the hoarded store of delicate impressions. Then follow hours of dreamless sleep, till one wakes again upon a bright world, with the thrushes fluting in the shrubbery and the morning sun flooding the room.

LVI

It was by what we clumsily call *chance* but really by what I am learning to perceive to be the subtlest and prettiest surprises of the Power that walks beside us, that I found myself in Ely yesterday morning—the first real day of summer. The air was full of sunshine, like golden dust, and all the plants had taken a leap forward in the night, and were unfurling their crumpled flags as speedily as they might. I came vaguely down to the river, guided by the same good spirit, and there at the boat-wharf I found a little motor-launch lying, which could be hired for the day. I took it, like the Lady of Shalott; but I did not write my name on the prow, because it had already some silly, darting kind

of name. A mild, taciturn man took charge of my craft; and without delay we clicked and gurgled out into the stream.

Page 175

I wish I could describe the day, for it was sweeter than honey and the honeycomb; and I should like to pour out of my stored sweetness for others. But I can hardly say what happened. It was all just like the tale of Shalott, with this difference, that there was no shadow of doom overhanging me; I felt more like a fairy prince with some pretty adventure awaiting me as soon as the town, with gardens and balconies, should begin to fringe the stream; perhaps a hand would be waved from the lawn, embowered in lilacs, of some sequestered house by the water-side. There was no singing aloud of mournful carols either, but my heart made a quiet and wistful music of its own.

I thought that I should have liked a more grave and ancient mode of conveyance; but how silly to desire that! The Lady of Shalott's boat was no doubt of the latest and neatest trim, fully up to her drowsy date; and as for quaintness, no doubt a couple of hundred years hence, when our river-craft may be cigar-shaped torpedoes of aluminium for all I know, a picture of myself in my homely motor-boat, with antiquated hat and odd grey suit, will appear quaint and old-timed enough. And, anyhow, the ripple gurgled under the prow, the motor ticked tranquilly, and the bubbles danced in the wake. We went on swiftly enough, and every time that I turned the great towers had grown fainter in the haze; we slid by the green flood-banks, with here and there a bunch of kingcups blazing in glory, the elbows of the bank full of white cow-parsley, comfrey, and water-dock. I heard the sedge-warbler whistle drily in the willow-patch, and a nightingale sang with infinite sweetness in a close of thorn-bushes now bursting into bloom; blue sky above, a sapphire streak of waterway ahead, green banks on either side; a little enough matter to fill a heart with joy. Once I had a thrill when a pair of sandpipers flicked out of a tiny cove and flew, glancing white, with pointed wings ahead of us. Again we started them, and again, till they wearied of the chase and flew back, with a wide circuit, to their first haunt. A cuckoo in a great poplar fluted solemnly and richly as we murmured past; the world was mostly hidden from us, but now and then a church tower looked gravely over the bank, and ran beside us for a time, or the lowing of cattle came softly from a pasture, or I heard the laughter of unseen children from a cottage garth. Once or twice we passed an inn, with cheerful, leisurely people sitting smiling together on a lawn, like a scene out of a romance; and then at last, on passing Baitsbite lock, we slipped into a merrier world. Here we heard the beat of rowlocks, the horse-hoofs of a coach thudded on the bank, and a crew of jolly young men went gliding past, with a cox shouting directions, just as I might have been doing thirty years ago! Thirty years ago! And it seems like yesterday, and I not a scrap older or wiser, though, thank God, a good deal happier. Even so we drift on to the unseen. Then we passed

Page 176

a village, the thatched cottages with their white gables rising prettily from the blossoming orchards. Ditton on its little hill; and the old iron bridge thundered and clanked with a passing train; then came the rattle of the grinds; and the mean houses of Barnwell; and soon we were gliding up among the backs, under the bridge of St. John's, by the willow-hung walks of Trinity, by the ivied walls and trim gardens of Clare, past the great white palace-front of King's, and so by the brick gables and oriels of Queens' into the Newnham mill-pool. It was somehow not like Cambridge, but like some enchanted town of palaces; and I would not break the spell; so we swung about, made no stay, and then slowly reversed the whole panorama again, through the long, still afternoon.

The old life of Cambridge—it was all there, after the long years, just the same, full of freshness and laughter; but I came into it as a *revenant*, and yet with no sense of sadness, rather of joy that it should all be so continuous and bright. I did not want it back; I did not desire any part in it, but was merely glad to watch and remember. I thought of myself as a fitful boy full of dreams and hopes, some fulfilled, some unfulfilled; those that I have realised so strangely unlike what I expected, those unrealised still beckoning with radiant visage. I did not even desire any companionship, any interchange of thought and mood. Was it selfish, dull, unenterprising to be so content? I do not think so, for a stream of gentle emotion, which I know was sweet and which I think was pure, lapsed softly through my mind all day. It is not always thus with me, and I took the good day from the hands of God as a perfect gift; and though it would be easy to argue that I could have been better employed, a deeper instinct said to me that I was meant to be thus, and that, after all, God sends us into the world to live, though often enough our life tosses like a fretful stream among rocky boulders and under troubled skies. God can give and he can withhold; I do not question his power or his right; I mourn over the hard gifts from his hand; but when he sends me a sweet gift, let me try to realise, what I do not doubt, that indeed he wishes me well.

Once in the afternoon we stayed our boat, and I climbed to the top of the flood-bank and sate looking out over the wide fen; I saw the long dykes run eastward, the far-off churches, the distant hazy hills; and I thought of all the troubles that men make for each other, adding so wantonly to the woes of the world. And I wondered what was this strange fibre of pain so inwoven in the life of the world, wondered wistfully and rebelliously, till I felt that I drew nearer in that quiet hour to the Heart of God. I could not be mistaken. There was peace hidden there, the peace that to-day brooded over the kindly earth, all carpeted with delicate green, in the cool water lapping in the reeds, in the green thorn-bush and the birds' sudden song, even in this restless heart that would fain find its haven and its home.

Page 177

LVII

To-day was oppressively hot, brooding, airless; or rather, not so much without air, as that the air was thick and viscous like honey, without the thin, fine quality. One drank rather than breathed it. Yet nature revelled and rejoiced in it with an almost shameless intoxication; the trees unfolded their leaves and shook themselves out, crumpled by the belated and chilly spring. The air was full of clouds of hurrying, dizzy insects, speeding at a furious rate, on no particular errand, but merely stung with the fierce joy of life and motion. In the road crawled stout bronze-green beetles, in blind and clumsy haste, pushing through grass-blades, tumbling over stones, waving feeble legs as they lay helpless on their backs, with the air of an elderly clergyman knocked down by an omnibus—and, on recovering their equilibrium, struggling breathlessly on. The birds gobbled fiercely in all directions, or sang loud and sweet upon the hedges. I saw half-a-dozen cuckoos, gliding silvery grey and beating the hedges for nests. Everything was making the most of life, in a prodigious hurry to live.

Indeed, I was very well content with the world myself as I sauntered through the lanes. I found a favourite place, an old clunch-quarry, on the side of a hill, where the white road comes sleepily up out of the fen. It is a pretty place, the quarry; it is all grass-grown now, and is full of small dingles covered with hawthorns. It is a great place for tramps to camp in, and half the dingles have little grey circles in them where the camping fires have been lit. I did not mind that evidence of life, but I did not like the cast-off clothing, draggled hats, coats, skirts, and boots that lay about. I never can fathom the mystery of tramps' wardrobes. They are never well-dressed exactly, but wherever they encamp they appear to discard clothing enough for two or three persons, clothing which, though I should not personally like to make use of it, still appears to be serviceable enough. I suppose it is a part of the haphazard life of the open air, and that if a tramp gets an old coat given him which is better than his own, he just leaves the old one behind him at the next halting-place.

The chalk-pit to-day was full of cowslips and daisies, the former in quite incredible profusion. I suppose it is a cowslip year. The common plants seem to have cycles, and almost each year has a succession of characteristic flowers, which have found, I suppose, the particular arrangements of the season suit them; or rather, I suppose that an outburst of a particular flower in a particular year shows that the previous year was a good seeding-time. This year has been remarkable for two plants so far, a sort of varnished green ground-weed, with a small white flower, and a dull crimson dead-nettle; both of them have covered the ground in places in huge patches. This is both strange and pleasant, I think.



Page 178

I loitered about in my chalk-pit for a while; noted a new flower that sprinkled the high grassy ledges that I had never seen there before; and then sate down in a little dingle that commanded a wide view of the fen. The landscape to-day was dark with a sort of indigo-blue shadows; the clouds above big and threatening, as though they were nursing the thunder—the distance veiled in a blue-grey haze. Field after field, with here and there a clump of trees, ran out to the far horizon. A partridge chirred softly in the pastures up above me, and a wild screaming of sparrows came at intervals from a thorn-thicket, where they seemed to be holding a fierce and disorderly meeting.

I should like to be able to recover the thread of my thoughts in that quiet grassy place, because they ran on with an equable sparkle, quite without cause or reason. I had nothing particularly pleasing to think about; but the mood of retrospect and anticipation seemed to ramble about, picking sweet-smelling flowers from the past and future alike. I seemed to desire nothing and to regret nothing. My cup was full of a pleasant beverage, neither cloying nor intoxicating, and the glad spring-time tempered it nicely to my taste. There seemed to brood in the air a quiet benevolence as of a Father watching His myriad children at play; and yet as I saw a big blackbird, with a solemn eye, hop round a thorn-bush with a writhing worm festooned round his beak, I realised that the play was a deadly tragedy to some of the actors. I suppose that such thoughts ought to have ruffled the tranquil mood, but they did not, for the whole seemed so complete. I suppose that man walks in a vain shadow; but to-day it only seemed that he disquiets himself in vain. And it was not a merely selfish hedonism that thrilled me, for a large part of my joy was that we all seemed to rejoice together. As far as the eye could see, and for miles and miles, the flowers were turning their fragrant heads to the light, and the birds singing clear. And I rejoiced with them too, and shared my joy with all the brave world.

LVIII

One of the most impressive passages in Wordsworth's poems describes how he rowed by night, as a boy, upon Esthwaite Lake, and experienced a sense of awestruck horror at the sight of a dark peak, travelling, as the boat moved, beyond and across the lower and nearer slopes, seeming to watch and observe the boy. Of course it may be said that such a feeling is essentially subjective, and that the peak was but obeying natural and optical laws, and had no concern whatever with the boy. That there should be any connection between the child and the bleak mountains is, of course, inconsistent with scientific laws. But to arrive at a scientific knowledge of nature is not at all the same thing as arriving at the truth about her; one may analyse everything, peak and lake and moonlight alike, into its component elements, and show that it is all matter animated and sustained by certain forces. But one has got no nearer to knowing what matter or force is, or how they came into being.

Page 179

And then, too, even from the scientific point of view, the subjective effect of the contemplation of nature by the mind is just as much a phenomenon; it is there—it demands recognition. The emotions of man are a scientific fact, too, and an even more complicated scientific fact than matter and force. When Wordsworth says that he was

“Contented if he might enjoy
The things that others understand,”

he is but stating the fact that there is a mystical poetical perception of nature as well as a scientific one. Perhaps when science has done her work on elemental atoms and forces, she will turn to the analysis of psychological problems. And meanwhile it must suffice to recognise that the work of the scientist is as essentially poetical, if done in a certain spirit, as the work of the poet. It is essentially poetical, because the deeper that the man of science dives into the mystery, the darker and more bewildering it becomes. Science, instead of solving the mystery, has added enormously to its complexity by disposing of the old comfortable theory that man is the darling of Nature and that all things were created for his use. We know now that man is only a local and temporary phenomenon in the evolution of some dim and gigantic law; that he perhaps represents the highest development which that law has at present evolved, but that probably we are rather at the threshold than at the climax of evolution, and that there will be developments in the future that we cannot even dimly apprehend. If the contemplation of nature and the scientific analysis of nature are meant to have any effect upon humanity at all, it seems as though both were intended to stimulate our wonder and to torture us with the desire for solving the enigma.

Perhaps the difference between the poetical view and the scientific view of nature is this—that while scientific investigation stimulates a man to penetrate the secret as far as he can, with the noble desire to contribute what minute discoveries he may to the solution of the problem, the poetical contemplation of nature tends to produce in the mind a greater tranquillity of emotion. The scientist must feel that, even when he has devoted his whole life to investigation, he has but helped on the possibilities of solution a little. There can be no sense of personal fruition as long as the abyss remains unplumbed; and therefore nature is to him like a blind and blank mystery that reveals its secrets slowly and almost reluctantly, and defies investigation. Whereas the poet may rather feel that he at this precise point of time may master and possess the emotion that nature can provide for his soul, and that he is fully blessed if the sight of the mountain-head above the sunset cloud-banks, the green gloom of the summer woodland, the lake lashed with slanting storm, gives him a sense of profound emotion, and fills him to the brim with the pure potion of beauty. He may rest in that, for the time; he may feel that this is the message of nature to him, thus and now; and that the more perfectly and passionately that the beauty of nature comes home to him, the nearer he comes to the thought of God.

Page 180

This does not, either in the case of the man of science or the poet, solve the further mystery—the mystery of complex human relationships. But the investigation of science ardently pursued is more likely to tend to isolate the explorer from his kind than the poetical contemplation of nature, for the simple reason that the scientist's business is not primarily with emotion but with concrete fact; while to the poet the emotions of love and friendship, of patriotism and duty, will all tend to be the object of impassioned speculation too. Both alike will be apt to be somewhat isolated from the ordinary life of the world, because both to the poet and the man of science the present condition of things, the problems of the day, will be dwarfed by the thought of the vast accumulation of past experience; both alike will tend to minimise the value of human effort, because they will both be aware that the phenomenon of human activity and human volition is but the froth and scum working on the lip of some gigantic forward-moving tide, and that men probably do not so much choose what they shall do, as do what they are compelled to do by some unfathomable power behind and above them. This thought may seem, to men of practical activity, to weaken the force of effective energy in both poet and scientist. But they will be content to be misunderstood on this point, because they will be aware that such activity as they manifest is the direct effect of something larger and greater than human volition, and that the busiest lives are as much the inevitable outcome of this insuperable force as their own more secluded, more contemplative lives.

The Mareway is an old track or drift-road, dating from primitive times, which diverges from the Old North Road and runs for some miles along the top of the low chalk downs which bound my southern horizon. Its name is a corruption of the word Mary—Mary's way—for there was an ancient shrine of pilgrimage dedicated to the Virgin Mary that stood on the broad low bluff still known as Chapel Hill, where the downs sink into the well-watered plain. No trace of the shrine exists, and it is not known where it stood. Perhaps its walls have been built into the little irregular pile of farm-buildings which stands close to where the way ends. In a field hard by that spot, the leaden seal of a Pope, the *bull* that gives its name to a Pope's bull, was once ploughed up; but the chapel itself, which was probably a very humble place, was unroofed and wrecked in an outburst of Puritanical zeal, with a practical piety which could not bear that a place should gather about itself so many hopes and prayers and holy associations. Well, it is all history, both the trust that raised the shrine and the zeal that destroyed it; and we are the richer, not the poorer, for our losses as well as for our gains.

Page 181

The Mareway passes through no villages, and only gives access to a few lonely, wind-swept farms. The villages tend to nestle along the roots of the down, in sheltered valleys where the streams break out, the orchard closes and cottage gardens creeping a little way up the gentle slopes; and thus when the time came for the roads to be metalled there was little use for the high ridgeway; for its only advantage had been that it gave in more unsettled times a securer and more secluded route for the pack-horse of the pilgrim—a chance of seeing if danger threatened or risk awaited him.

And so the old road keeps its solitary course, unfrequented and untrimmed, along the broad back of the down. Here for a space it is absorbed into a plough-land, there it melts with a soft dimple into the pasture; but for the most part it runs between high thorn hedges, here with deep ruts worn by heavy farm-carts, there trodden into miry pools by sheep. In places it passes for a space through patches of old woodland, showing by the deep dingles, the pleasant lack of ordered planting, that it is a tract of ancient forest-land never disparked. Here you may see, shouldering above the irregular copse, the bulk of some primeval oak, gnarled and hollow-trunked, spared partly because it would afford no timber worth cutting, and partly, we may hope, from some tender sense of beauty and veneration which even now, by a hint of instinctive tradition haunting the rustic mind, attends the ancient tree and surrounds it with a sense of respect too dim to be called a memory even of forgotten things. To right and left green roads dip down to the unseen villages, and here and there the way itself becomes a metalled road leading to some larger highway; but even so, you can soon regain the grassy tract, following the slow curve of the placid down.

There is no sweeter place to be found on a hot summer day than the old drift-road. The hedges are in full leaf, and the undergrowth, sprinkled with flowers, weaves its tapestry over the barer stems of the quicksets. The thrushes sing clear in the tiny thickets, and the blackbird flirts with a sudden outcry in and out of his leafy harbourage. Here the hedge is all hung with briony or traveller's joy; there is a burst of wild-roses, pale discs of faintest rose-jacinth, each with a full-seeded heart. The elder spreads its wide cakes of bloom, and the rich scent hangs heavy on the air. One seems in a moment to penetrate the very heart of the deep country-side, and even the shepherd or the labourer whom one passes shares the silence of the open field, and the same immemorial quality of quiet simplicity and primitive work. It is then that there flashes upon one a sense of the inexplicable mystery of these inexpressive lives, toiling to live and living to toil, half pathetic, half dignified, wholly mysterious in the lie that they give, by their meek persistence, to restless ambitions and dreams of social amelioration. For, whatever happens,

Page 182

such work must still be done until the end of time; and the more that mind and soul awake, the less willing will men be to acquiesce in such uncheered drudgery. If one could but educate the simpler hearts into a joyful and tranquil consent to conditions which, after all, are simple and wholesome enough; if one could implant the contented love of field and wood, wide airs and flying clouds life, love, ease, labour, sorrow—all that is best in our experience—could be tasted here and thus; while the troubles bred by the covetous brain and the scheming mind would find no place here. It is a better lot, after all, to live and feel than to express life and feeling, however subtly and ingeniously, and I for one would throw down in an instant all my vague dreams and impossible hopes, my artificial cares and fretful ambitions, for a life unconscious of itself and an unimpaired serenity of mood. The dwellers in these quiet places neither brood over what might have been nor exercise themselves over what will be. They live in the moment, and the moment suffices them.

In the winter weather the Mareway, in its dreary and sodden bareness, is to my mind an even more impressive place. The wind comes sharply up over the shoulder of the down. The trees are all bare; the pasture is yellow-pale. The water lies in the ruts and ditches. The silence in the pauses of the wind is intense. You can hear the soft sound of grass pulled by the lips of unnumbered browsing sheep behind the hedgerow, or the cry of farmyard fowls from the byre below, the puffing of the steam-plough on the sloping fallow, the far-off railway whistle across the wide valley. The rooks stream home from distant fields, and discuss the affairs of the race with cheerful clamour in the depth of the wood. The day darkens, and a smouldering sunset, hung with gilded clouds streaked with purple bars, begins to burn behind the bare-stemmed copse.

But what is, after all, the deepest charm that invests the old road is the thought of all the sad and tender associations clothing it in the minds of so many vanished generations. Even an old house has a haunting grace enough, as a place where men have been born and died, have loved and enjoyed and suffered; but a road like this, ceaselessly trodden by the feet of pilgrims, all of them with some pathetic urgency of desire in their hearts, some hope unfulfilled, some shadow of sickness or sin to banish, some sorrow making havoc of home, is touched by that infinite pathos that binds all human hearts together in the face of the mystery of life. What passionate meetings with despair, what eager upliftings of desirous hearts, must have thrilled the minds of the feeble and travel-worn companies that made their slow journeys along the grassy road! And one is glad to think, too, that there must doubtless have been many that returned gladder than they came, with the burden shifted a little, the shadow lessened, or at least with new strength to carry the familiar

Page 183

load. For of this we may be sure, that however harshly we may despise what we call superstition, or however firmly we may wave away what we hold to have been all a beautiful mistake, there is some fruitful power that dwells and lingers in places upon which the hearts of men have so concentrated their swift and poignant emotions—for all, at least, to whom the soul is more than the body, and whose thoughts are not bounded and confined by the mere material shapes among which, in the days of our earthly limitations, we move uneasily to and fro.

EPILOGUE

A blunt and candid critic, commenting on Keats' famous axiom, "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty," said: "Then what is the use of having two words for the same thing?" And it is true that words cease to have any real meaning when they are so loosely applied. The same mistake is often made about happiness. It is supposed to be, not a quality, but a condition, or rather an equipoise of qualities and conditions. It is spoken of and thought of as if it were a sort of blend of virtue and health and amusement and sunshiny weather, and no doubt it is often found in combination with these things. But it is a separate quality, for all that, and not merely a result of faculties and circumstances. It is strangely and wilfully independent of its surroundings, and it is not inconsistent with the gravest discomfort of body and even affliction of mind. A ruinous combination of distressing circumstances does not by any means inevitably produce unhappiness. The martyr who sings at the stake among the flames is presumably happy. It may be said that he balances one consideration against another, and decides that his condition is, on the whole, enviable and delightful; but I do not believe that it is a mental process at all, and if the martyr is happy, he is so inevitably and instinctively. Some would urge that happiness is only an effect, like colour. There is no colour in the dark, but as soon as light is admitted, a thing that we call green, such as a leaf or a wall-paper, has the power of selecting and reflecting the green rays, and rejecting all rays that are not green. But the leaf or the paper is not in itself green; it has only a power of seizing upon and displaying greenness. So some would urge that temperaments are not inherently happy, but have the power or the instinct for extracting the happy elements out of life, and rejecting or nullifying the unhappy elements. But this I believe to be a mistake; the happy temperament is not necessarily made unhappy by being plunged in misfortune, while the unhappy temperament has the power of secreting unhappiness out of the most agreeable combination of circumstances. Every one must surely recollect occasions in their own lives when, by all the rules of the game, they ought to have been unhappy, while as a matter of fact they were entirely tranquil and contented. I have been happy in a dentist's

Page 184

chair, and by far the happiest holiday I ever spent in my life was under surroundings of discomfort and squalor such as I never before or since experienced. Those surroundings were certainly not in themselves productive of happiness; but neither did they detract from it. The pathos of the situation is that we all desire happiness—it is merely priggish to pretend that it is otherwise—and that we do not know in the least how to attain it. Some few people go straight for it and reach it; some people find it by turning their back upon what they most desire, and walking in the opposite direction. I had a friend once who made up his mind that to be happy he must make a fortune. He went through absurd privations and endured intolerable labours; he did make a fortune, and retired upon it at an early age, and immediately became a thoroughly unhappy man, having lost all power of enjoying or employing his leisure, and finding himself hopelessly and irremediably bored. Of course, boredom is the surest source of unhappiness, but boredom is not the result of the things we do or avoid doing, but some inner weariness of spirit, which imports itself into occupation and leisure alike, if it is there. There is no nostrum, no receipt for taking it away. A kindly adviser will say to a bored man, “All this discontent comes from thinking too much about yourself; if only you would throw yourself a little into the lives and problems of others, it would all disappear!” Of course it would! But it is just what the bored man cannot do; and the advice is just as practical as to say encouragingly to a man suffering from toothache, “If the pain would only go away, you would soon be well.” Ruskin was once consulted by an anxious person, who complained that he was unhappy, and said that he attributed it to the fact that he was so useless. Ruskin replied with trenchant good sense: “It is your duty to try to be innocently happy first, and useful afterwards if you can.”

What, then, can we do in the matter? How are we to secure happiness? The answer is that we cannot; that we must take it as it comes, like the sunshine and the spring. Few of us are in a position to alter at a moment's notice the course of our lives. It is more or less laid down for us what paths we have to tread, and in whose company. We can to a certain extent, taught by grim experience of the habits, thoughts, tempers, passions, anticipations, retrospects, that disturb our tranquillity, avoid occasions of stumbling. We can undertake small responsibilities, which we shall be ashamed to neglect; we can, so to speak, diet our minds and hearts, avoiding unwholesome food and debilitating excesses. To a certain extent, I say, for the old fault has a horrid pertinacity, and even when felled in fair fight, has a vile trick of recovering its energies and leaping on us from some ambush by the way, as we saunter, blithely conscious of our victory. It may be a discouraging and an oppressive thought, but the only hope lies in good sense and patience. There are no short cuts; we have to tread every inch of the road.

Page 185

But we may at least do one thing. We may speak frankly of our experiences, without either pose or concealment. It does us no harm to confess our failures, and it puts courage into other pilgrims, who know at least that they are not alone in their encounters with the hobgoblins. And no less frankly, too, may we speak of the fine things that we have seen and heard by the way, the blue hills and winding waters of which we have caught a glimpse from the brow of the windswept hill, the talk and aspect of other wayfarers whom we have met, the noble buildings of the ancient city, the stately avenue which the dull road intersects unaware, the embowered hamlet, the leafy forest dingle, the bleat of sheep on the dewy upland, the birds' song at evening—all that strikes sharp and clear and desirable upon our fresh or tired sense.

For one thing is certain, that the end is not yet; and that there is something done for the soul both by the morning brightness and the evening heaviness which can be effected in no other way. And in this spirit we may look back on our mistakes, sad as they were, and on our triumphs, which are sometimes sadder still, and know that they were not mere accidents and obstacles which might have been otherwise—they were rather the very stuff and essence of the soul showing through its enfolding garb.

And then, too, if we have suffered, as we all must suffer if we have any heart or blood or brain at all, we can learn the blessed fact of the utter powerlessness of suffering to hurt or darken us. Its horror lies in the continuance of it, in the shuddering anticipation of all we may yet have to endure; but once over, it becomes instantly either like a cloud melting in the blue of heaven, or, better still a joyful memory of a pain that braced and purified. No one ever gives a thought, except a grateful one, to past suffering. If it leaves its handwriting on brow and cheek, it leaves no shadow on the spirit within. It is so easy to see this in the lives of others, however hard it is to realise it for oneself. What interest is there in the record of the life of a perfectly prosperous and equable person? And what inspiration is equal to that which comes when we read the life of one who suffered much, when we see the hope that rose superior to thwarted designs and broken purposes, and the joy that came of realising that not through easy and graceful triumph is the soul made strong? Why does one ask oneself about the dead hero, when his life rounds itself to the view, not whether he had enough of prosperity and honour to content him, but whether he had enough of pain and self-reproach to perfect his humanity? Suffering is no part of the soul; the soul has need to suffer, but it is made to rejoice; and when it has earned its joy, it will abide in it.

And now a word of personal experience. This book is a record of an experiment in happiness. I had the opportunity, and I took it, of arranging my life in every respect exactly as I desired. It was my design to live alone in joy; not to exclude others, but to admit them for my pleasure and at my will. I thought that by desiring little, by sacrificing quantity of delight for quality, I should gain much. And I will as frankly confess that I did not succeed in capturing the tranquillity I desired. I found many pretty jewels by the way, but the pearl of price lay hid.

Page 186

And yet it would be idle to say that I regret it. I may wish that it had all fallen out otherwise, that things had been more comfortably arranged, that I had been allowed to dream away the days in my hermitage; but it was not to be; and I have at least learned that not thus can the end be attained. The story of my failure cannot be told here, but I hope yet to find strength and skill to tell it. At present I have but endeavoured to catch the texture of the pleasant days, before my visions began to fade about me. And indeed I can say sincerely that those days were happy; but the root of the mistake was this: I have by nature a very keen appetite for the subtle flavours of life, a sense of beauty in simple things, a relish for the absurdities and oddities as well as for the beauties and finenesses of temperament, a critical appreciation of the characteristic qualities of landscapes and buildings, a sense which finds satisfaction as well in such commonplace things as the variety of grotesque vehicles that go to compose a luggage train, or the grass-grown, scarped, water-logged excavations of a brick-field, as in the sharp rock-horns of some craggy mountain, impulsive as a frozen flame, or the soft outlines of fleecy clouds that race over a sapphire heaven. If one is thus endowed by nature, it seems such an easy thing to seclude oneself from life, and to find endless joy in sight and hearing and critical appreciation. Instead of mingling with the throng, marching and fighting, fearing and suffering, it seems easy to stand apart and let nature and art and life unfold itself before one in a rich panorama. But not on such terms can life be lived. One hopes to avoid suffering by aloofness; but there falls upon the spirit a worse sickness than the weariness of toil—the ache of pent-up activities and self-tortured mystifications. The soul becomes involved in a dreary metaphysic, wondering fruitlessly what it is that mars the sweet and beautiful world. The fact is that one is purloining experience instead of paying the natural price for it, estimating things by the outside instead of from the inside, and growing thus to care more for the strangeness, the contrast, the picturesqueness of it all, than for the love and the hope and the elemental forces, of which the world is but the garb and scene.

Here in this book the mind turns from itself and its rest, when it has satisfied its first delight in creating the home, the setting, the scenery, so to speak, of the drama; turns to the men and women who cross the stage, surveys their gestures and glances, interprets their movements and silences; and then winds out into the further distance, the towns, the buildings, the roads, that stand for the designs and desires of pilgrims that have passed into the unknown country, leaving their provender for later hands to use. But the whole book, if I may say it, is the prelude to the further scene, the silent entry of Fate, the coming of the Master to survey the servant's work.

Page 187

Those pleasant days have a savour of their own for this one reason—that they were not spent in a mere drifting indolence or a luxurious abandonment. They were deliberately planned, intently lived, carefully employed; behind the pleasures lay a great tract of solid work, very diligently pursued. That was to have been the backbone of the whole; and it is for this that I have no sense of regret or contrition about it. It was an experiment; and if in one sense it failed, because it did not take account of energies and elements unused, in another sense it succeeded, because one cannot learn things in this world by hearsay, but only by burning one's fingers in what seemed so comfortable a flame. It was done, too, on the right lines, with the desire not to be dependent upon diversion and stir and business, but to approach life simply and directly, practising for the days of loneliness and decline; and this was the error, that it tried to mould life too much, to select from its material, to reject its dross and debris, to rifle rather than to earn the treasure, to limit hopes, to dip the wings of inconvenient desires.

But it is difficult, without experiment, to realise the strain of living life too much in one mood and in one key. Neither is it the sign of a healthy appetite to be particular about one's food. This I freely admit. I came to see that, trained as I had been in certain habits of life and work, habituated to certain experiences, the savour of the interludes had owed their pungency to their economy and rarity.

And so, like some weft of opalescent mist, the sweet mirage melted in the noonday. What I then saw I will leave to be told hereafter; but it was not what I desired nor what I expected.

What, then, remains of the time of plenty? Not, I am thankful to say, either vanity or vexation of spirit. It was what remains to the ruffled bird, as he shivers in the leafless tree, in which he had sung so loud in the high summer, embowered in greenness and rustling leafage. No sense of the hollowness or sadness of life; but rather a quickened knowledge of its delight and its intensity. It is the same feeling that one has when one speeds swiftly in a train near to some place where one lived long ago, and sees glimpses of familiar woods and roads and houses. One knows well that others are living and working, sauntering and dreaming, in the rooms, the gardens, the paths where one's own energies once ran so swiftly; yet the old life seems to be there all the time, hidden away behind the woods and walls, if one could but find it! But I no more wish my experience away, or wish it otherwise, than I wish I had never loved one who is gone from me, or that I had never heard a strain of sweet music, because it has died upon the air. Because I did not find what I was in search of, or only found a shadow of it, I do not believe that it is not there—the wheat-flour and the honey are in the hand of God. I should have tasted them if I had but walked in His way! Nay, I did taste them; and when He gives me grace to hearken, I shall be fed and satisfied._

Page 188

Printed by BALLANTYNE, HANSON & Co. Edinburgh & London

Works by Arthur G. Benson, C.V.O.

MEMOIRS OF ARTHUR HAMILTON.

ARCHBISHOP LAUD: A Study.

POEMS.

LYRICS.

ESSAYS.

LORD VYET and Other Poems.

FASTI ETONENSES.

LIFE OF ARCHBISHOP BENSON.

THE PROFESSOR and Other Poems.

THE SCHOOLMASTER.

THE HOUSE OF QUIET.

TENNYSON (Little Biographies Series).

SELECTIONS FROM WHITTIER.

THE HILL OF TROUBLE.

THE ISLES OF SUNSET.

ROSSETTI (English Men of Letters Series).

PEACE and Other Poems.

EDWARD FITZGERALD (English Men of Letters Series).

THE UPTON LETTERS.

THE THREAD OF GOLD.

WALTER PATER (English Men of Letters Series).

FROM A COLLEGE WINDOW.

THE GATE OF DEATH.

BESIDE STILL WATERS.

THE ALTAR FIRE.

AT LARGE.

POEMS (Collected).

THE SILENT ISLE.

RUSKIN: A Study in Personality.

THE LEAVES OF THE TREE.

THE CHILD OF THE DAWN.

PAUL THE MINSTREL and Other Stories.

THY ROD AND THY STAFF.

ALONG THE ROAD.

With H.F.W. Tatham

MEN OF MIGHT.

Edited, with Viscount Esher

SELECTIONS FROM THE CORRESPONDENCE OF QUEEN VICTORIA.