



THROUGH THE MAGIC DOOR

ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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I



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

It is our familiarity also which has lessened our perception of the miraculous good fortune which we enjoy. Let us suppose that we were suddenly to learn that Shakespeare had returned to earth, and that he would favour any of us with an hour of his wit and his fancy. How eagerly we would seek him out! And yet we have him—the very best of him—at our elbows from week to week, and hardly trouble ourselves to put out our hands to beckon him down. No matter what mood a man may be in, when once he has passed through the magic door he can summon the world's greatest to sympathize with him in it. If he be thoughtful, here

are the kings of thought. If he be dreamy, here are the masters of fancy. Or is it amusement that he lacks? He can signal to any one of the world's great story-tellers, and out comes the dead man and holds him enthralled by the hour. The dead are such good company that one may come to think too little of the living. It is a real and a pressing danger with many of us, that we should never find our own thoughts and our own souls, but be ever obsessed by the dead. Yet second-hand romance and second-hand emotion are surely better than the dull, soul-killing monotony which life brings to most of the human race. But best of all when the dead man's wisdom and strength in the living of our own strenuous days.

Come through the magic door with me, and sit here on the green settee, where you can see the old oak case with its untidy lines of volumes. Smoking is not forbidden. Would you care to hear me talk of them? Well, I ask nothing better, for there is no volume there which is not a dear, personal friend, and what can a man talk of more pleasantly than that? The other books are over yonder, but these are my own favourites—the ones I care to re-read and to have near my elbow. There is not a tattered cover which does not bring its mellow memories to me.

Some of them represent those little sacrifices which make a possession dearer. You see the line of old, brown volumes at the bottom? Every one of those represents a lunch. They were bought in my student days, when times were not too affluent. Threepence was my modest allowance for my midday sandwich and glass of beer; but, as luck would have it, my way to the classes led past the most fascinating bookshop in the world. Outside the door of it stood a large tub filled with an ever-changing litter of tattered books, with a card above which announced that any volume therein could be purchased for the identical sum which I carried in my pocket. As I approached it a combat ever raged betwixt the hunger of a youthful body and that of an inquiring and

omnivorous mind. Five times out of six the animal won. But when the mental prevailed, then there was an entrancing five minutes' digging among out-of-date almanacs, volumes of Scotch theology, and tables of logarithms, until one found something which made it all worth while. If you will look over these titles, you will see that I did not do so very badly. Four volumes of Gordon's "Tacitus" (life is too short to read originals, so long as there are good translations), Sir William Temple's Essays, Addison's works, Swift's "Tale of a Tub," Clarendon's "History," "Gil Blas," Buckingham's Poems, Churchill's Poems, "Life of Bacon"—not so bad for the old threepenny tub.

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

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

If I had to choose the one book out of all that line from which I have had most pleasure and most profit, I should point to yonder stained copy of Macaulay's "Essays." It seems entwined into my whole life as I look backwards. It was my comrade in my student days, it has been with me on the sweltering Gold Coast, and it

formed part of my humble kit when I went a-whaling in the Arctic. Honest Scotch harpooners have addled their brains over it, and you may still see the grease stains where the second engineer grappled with Frederick the Great. Tattered and dirty and worn, no gilt-edged morocco-bound volume could ever take its place for me.

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

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

I am filled with admiration and wonder at the alternate power of handling a great subject, and of adorning it by delightful detail—just a bold sweep of the brush, and then the most delicate stippling. As he leads you down the path, he for ever indicates the alluring side-tracks which branch away from it. An admirable, if somewhat old-fashioned, literary and historical education might be effected by working through every book which is alluded to in the Essays. I should be curious, however, to know the exact age of the youth when he came to the end of his studies.

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

"As we close it, the club-room is before us, and the table on which stand the omelet for Nugent, and the lemons for Johnson. There are assembled those heads which live for ever on the canvas of Reynolds. There are the spectacles of Burke, and the tall thin form of Langton, the courtly sneer of Beauclerk and the beaming smile of Garrick, Gibbon tapping his snuff-box, and Sir Joshua with his trumpet in his ear. In the foreground is that strange figure which is as familiar to us as the figures of those among whom we have been brought up—the gigantic body, the huge massy face, seamed with the scars of disease, the brown coat, the black worsted stockings, the grey wig with the scorched foretop, the dirty hands, the nails bitten and pared to the quick. We see the eyes and mouth moving with convulsive twitches; we see the heavy form rolling; we hear it puffing, and

then comes the 'Why, sir!' and the 'What then, sir?' and the 'No, sir!' and the 'You don't see your way through the question, sir!'"

It is etched into your memory for ever.

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

My four-volume edition of the History stands, as you see, to the right of the Essays. Do you recollect the third chapter of that work—the one which reconstructs the England of the seventeenth century? It has always seemed to me the very high-water mark of Macaulay's powers, with its marvellous mixture of precise fact and romantic phrasing. The population of towns, the statistics of commerce, the prosaic facts of life are all transmuted into wonder and interest by the handling of the master. You feel that he could have cast a glamour over the multiplication table had he set himself to do so. Take a single concrete example of what I mean. The fact that a Londoner in the country, or a countryman in London, felt equally out of place in those days of difficult travel, would seem to hardly require stating, and to afford no opportunity of leaving a strong impression upon the reader's mind. See what Macaulay makes of it, though it is no more than a hundred other paragraphs which discuss a hundred various points—

"A cockney in a rural village was stared at as much as if he had intruded into a kraal of Hottentots. On the other hand, when the lord of a Lincolnshire or Shropshire manor appeared in Fleet Street, he was as easily distinguished from the resident population as a Turk or a Lascar. His dress, his gait, his accent, the manner in which he gazed at the shops, stumbled into gutters, ran against the porters, and stood under the waterspouts, marked him out as an excellent subject for the operations of swindlers and banterers. Bullies jostled him into the kennel, Hackney coachmen splashed him from head to foot, thieves explored with perfect security the huge pockets of his horseman's coat, while he stood entranced by the splendour of the Lord Mayor's Show. Money-droppers, sore from the cart's tail, introduced themselves to him, and appeared to him the most honest friendly gentlemen that he had ever seen. Painted women, the refuse of Lewkner Lane and Whetstone Park, passed themselves on him for countesses and maids of honour. If he asked his way to St. James', his informants sent him to Mile End. If he went into a shop, he was instantly discerned to be a fit purchaser of everything that nobody else would buy, of second-hand embroidery, copper rings, and watches that would not go. If he rambled into any fashionable coffee-house, he became a mark for the insolent derision of fops, and the grave waggery of Templars. Enraged and mortified, he soon returned to his mansion, and there, in the homage of his tenants and the conversation of his boon companions, found consolation for the vexations and humiliations which he had undergone. There he was once more a great man, and saw nothing above himself except when at the assizes he took his seat on the bench near the Judge, or when at the muster of the militia he saluted the Lord Lieutenant."

On the whole, I should put this detached chapter of description at the very head of his Essays, though it happens to occur in another volume. The History as a whole does not, as it seems to me, reach the same level as the shorter articles. One cannot but feel that it is a brilliant piece of special pleading from a fervid Whig, and that there must be more to be said for the other side than is there set forth. Some of the Essays are tinged also, no doubt, by his own political and religious limitations. The best are those which get right away into the broad fields of literature and philosophy. Johnson, Walpole, Madame D'Arblay, Addison, and the two great Indian ones, Clive and Warren Hastings, are my own favourites. Frederick the Great, too, must surely stand in the first rank. Only one would I wish to eliminate. It is the diabolically clever criticism upon Montgomery. One would have wished to think that Macaulay's heart was too kind, and his soul too gentle, to pen so bitter an attack. Bad work will sink of its own weight. It is not necessary to souse the author as well. One would think more highly of the man if he had not done that savage bit of work.

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

upon the glorious "Lays," where he calls out "is this poetry?" after quoting—

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

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

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

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

This is one of the things which human society has not yet understood—the value of a noble, inspiring text. When it does we shall meet them everywhere engraved on appropriate places, and our progress through the streets will be brightened and ennobled by one continual series of beautiful mental impulses and images, reflected into our souls from the printed thoughts which meet our

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

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

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

However, all this has nothing to do with Macaulay's glorious lays, save that when you want some flowers of manliness and patriotism

you can pluck quite a bouquet out of those. I had the good fortune to learn the Lay of Horatius off by heart when I was a child, and it stamped itself on my plastic mind, so that even now I can reel off almost the whole of it. Goldsmith said that in conversation he was like the man who had a thousand pounds in the bank, but could not compete with the man who had an actual sixpence in his pocket. So the ballad that you bear in your mind outweighs the whole bookshelf which waits for reference. But I want you now to move your eye a little farther down the shelf to the line of olive-green volumes. That is my edition of Scott. But surely I must give you a little breathing space before I venture upon them.