Sunny Memories of Foreign Lands Volume 2

By

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LETTER XIX.

May 19.

Dear E.:--

This letter I consecrate to you, because I know that the persons and things to be introduced into it will most particularly be appreciated by you.

In your evening reading circles, Macaulay, Sidney Smith, and Milman have long been such familiar names that you will be glad to go with me over all the scenes of my morning breakfast at Sir Charles Trevelyan's yesterday. Lady Trevelyan, I believe I have said before, is the sister of Macaulay, and a daughter of Zachary Macaulay--that undaunted laborer for the slave, whose place in the hearts of all English Christians is little below saintship.

We were set down at Welbourne Terrace, somewhere, I believe, about eleven o'clock, and found quite a number already in the drawing room. I had met Macaulay before, but as you have not, you will of course ask a lady's first question, "How does he look?"

Well, my dear, so far as relates to the mere outward husk of the soul, our engravers and daguerreotypists have done their work as well as they usually do. The engraving that you get in the best editions of

his works may be considered, I suppose, a fair representation of how he looks, when he sits to have his picture taken, which is generally very different from the way any body looks at any other time. People seem to forget, in taking likenesses, that the features of the face are nothing but an alphabet, and that a dry, dead map of a person's face gives no more idea how one looks than the simple presentation of an alphabet shows what there is in a poem.

Macaulay's whole physique gives you the impression of great strength and stamina of constitution. He has the kind of frame which we usually imagine as peculiarly English; short, stout, and firmly knit. There is something hearty in all his demonstrations. He speaks in that full, round, rolling voice, deep from the chest, which we also conceive of as being more common in England than America. As to his conversation, it is just like his writing; that is to say, it shows very strongly the same qualities of mind.

I was informed that he is famous for a most uncommon memory; one of those men to whom it seems impossible to forget any thing once read; and he has read all sorts of things that can be thought of, in all languages. A gentleman told me that he could repeat all the old Newgate literature, hanging ballads, last speeches, and dying confessions; while his knowledge of Milton is so accurate, that, if his poems were blotted out of existence, they might be restored simply from his memory. This same accurate knowledge extends to the Latin and Greek classics, and to much of the literature of modern Europe. Had

nature been required to make a man to order, for a perfect historian, nothing better could have been put together, especially since there is enough of the poetic fire included in the composition, to fuse all these multiplied materials together, and color the historical crystallization with them.

Macaulay is about fifty. He has never married; yet there are unmistakable evidences in the breathings and aspects of the family circle by whom he was surrounded, that the social part is not wanting in his conformation. Some very charming young lady relatives seemed to think quite as much of their gifted uncle as you might have done had he been yours.

Macaulay is celebrated as a conversationalist; and, like Coleridge, Carlyle, and almost every one who enjoys this reputation, he has sometimes been accused of not allowing people their fair share in conversation. This might prove an objection, possibly, to those who wish to talk; but as I greatly prefer to hear, it would prove none to me. I must say, however, that on this occasion the matter was quite equitably managed. There were, I should think, some twenty or thirty at the breakfast table, and the conversation formed itself into little eddies of two or three around the table, now and then welling out into a great bay of general discourse. I was seated between Macaulay and Milman, and must confess I was a little embarrassed at times, because I wanted to hear what they were both saying at the same time. However, by the use of the faculty by which you play a piano with both hands, I

got on very comfortably.

Milman's appearance is quite striking; tall, stooping, with a keen black eye and perfectly white hair--a singular and poetic contrast. He began upon architecture and Westminster Abbey--a subject to which I am always awake. I told him I had not yet seen Westminster; for I was now busy in seeing life and the present, and by and by I meant to go there and see death and the past.

Milman was for many years dean of Westminster, and kindly offered me his services, to indoctrinate me into its antiquities.

Macaulay made some suggestive remarks on cathedrals generally. I said that I thought it singular that we so seldom knew who were the architects that designed these great buildings; that they appeared to me the most sublime efforts of human genius.

He said that all the cathedrals of Europe were undoubtedly the result of one or two minds; that they rose into existence very nearly contemporaneously, and were built by travelling companies of masons, under the direction of some systematic organization. Perhaps you knew all this before, but I did not; and so it struck me as a glorious idea. And if it is not the true account of the origin of cathedrals, it certainly ought to be; and, as our old grandmother used to say, "I'm going to believe it."

Looking around the table, and seeing how every body seemed to be enjoying themselves, I said to Macaulay, that these breakfast parties were a novelty to me; that we never had them in America, but that I thought them the most delightful form of social life.

He seized upon the idea, as he often does, and turned it playfully inside out, and shook it on all sides, just as one might play with the lustres of a chandelier--to see them glitter. He expatiated on the merits of breakfast parties as compared with all other parties. He said dinner parties are mere formalities. You invite a man to dinner because you must invite him; because you are acquainted with his grandfather, or it is proper you should; but you invite a man to breakfast because you want to see him. You may be sure, if you are invited to breakfast, there is something agreeable about you. This idea struck me as very sensible; and we all, generally having the fact before our eyes that we were invited to breakfast, approved the sentiment.

"Yes," said Macaulay, "depend upon it; if a man is a bore he never gets an invitation to breakfast."

"Rather hard on the poor bores," said a lady.

"Particularly," said Macaulay, laughing, "as bores are usually the most irreproachable of human beings. Did you ever hear a bore complained of when they did not say that he was the best fellow in the

world? For my part, if I wanted to get a guardian for a family of defenceless orphans, I should inquire for the greatest bore in the vicinity. I should know that he would be a man of unblemished honor and integrity."

The conversation now went on to Milton and Shakspeare. Macaulay made one remark that gentlemen are always making, and that is, that there is very little characteristic difference between Shakspeare's women. Well, there is no hope for that matter; so long as men are not women they will think so. In general they lump together Miranda, Juliet, Desdemona, and Viola,

"As matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
And best distinguished as black, brown, or fair."

It took Mrs. Jameson to set this matter forth in her Characteristics of Women; a book for which Shakspeare, if he could get up, ought to make her his best bow, especially as there are fine things ascribed to him there, which, I dare say, he never thought of, careless fellow that he was! But, I take it, every true painter, poet, and artist is in some sense so far a prophet that his utterances convey more to other minds than he himself knows; so that, doubtless, should all the old masters rise from the dead, they might be edified by what posterity has found in their works.

Some how or other, we found ourselves next talking about Sidney Smith;

and it was very pleasant to me, recalling the evenings when your father has read and we have laughed over him, to hear him spoken of as a living existence, by one who had known him. Still, I have always had a quarrel with Sidney, for the wicked use to which he put his wit, in abusing good old Dr. Carey, and the missionaries in India; nay, in some places he even stooped to be spiteful and vulgar. I could not help, therefore, saying, when Macaulay observed that he had the most agreeable wit of any literary man of his acquaintance, "Well, it was very agreeable, but it could not have been very agreeable to the people who came under the edge of it," and instanced his treatment of Dr. Carey. Some others who were present seemed to feel warmly on this subject, too, and Macaulay said,--

"Ah, well, Sidney repented of that, afterwards." He seemed to cling to his memory, and to turn from every fault to his joviality, as a thing he could not enough delight to remember.

Truly, wit, like charity, covers a multitude of sins. A man who has the faculty of raising a laugh in this sad, earnest world is remembered with indulgence and complacency, always.

There were several other persons of note present at this breakfast, whose conversation I had not an opportunity of hearing, as they sat at a distance from me. There was Lord Glenelg, brother of Sir Robert Grant, governor of Bombay, whose beautiful hymns have rendered him familiar in America. The favorite one, commencing "When gathering

clouds around I view," was from his pen. Lord Glenelg, formerly Sir Charles Grant, himself has been the author of several pieces of poetry, which were in their time quite popular.

The historian Hallam was also present, whose Constitutional History, you will remember, gave rise to one of Macaulay's finest reviews; a quiet, retiring man, with a benignant, somewhat sad, expression of countenance. The loss of an only son has cast a shadow over his life. It was on this son that Tennyson wrote his "In Memoriam."

Sir Robert H. Inglis was also present, and Mr. S. held considerable conversation with him. Knowing that he was both high tory and high church, it was an agreeable surprise to find him particularly gentle and bland in manners, earnest and devout in religious sentiment. I have heard him spoken of, even among dissenters, as a devout and earnest man. Another proof this of what mistakes we fall into when we judge the characters of persons at a distance, from what we suppose likely to be the effect of their sentiments. We often find the professed aristocrat gentle and condescending, and the professed supporter of forms spiritual.

I think it very likely there may have been other celebrities present, whom I did not know. I am always finding out, a day or two after, that I have been with somebody very remarkable, and did not know it at the time.

After breakfast we found, on consulting our list, that we were to lunch at Surrey parsonage.

Of all the cities I was ever in, London is the most absolutely unmanageable, it takes so long to get any where; wherever you want to go it seems to take you about two hours to get there. From the West End down into the city is a distance that seems all but interminable. London is now more than ten miles long. And yet this monster city is stretching in all directions yearly, and where will be the end of it nobody knows. Southey says, "I began to study the map of London, though dismayed at its prodigious extent. The river is no assistance to a stranger in finding his way; there is no street along its banks, and no eminence from whence you can look around and take your bearings."

You may take these reflections as passing through my mind while we were driving through street after street, and going round corner after corner, towards the parsonage.

Surrey Chapel and parsonage were the church and residence of the celebrated Kowland Hill. At present the incumbent is the Rev. Mr. Sherman, well known to many of our American clergy by the kind hospitalities and attentions with which he has enriched their stay in London. The church maintains a medium rank between Congregationalism and Episcopacy, retaining part of the ritual, but being independent in its government. The kindness of Mr. Sherman had assembled here a very

agreeable company, among whom were Farquhar Tupper, the artist Cruikshank, from whom I received a call the other morning, and Mr. Pilatte, M. P. Cruikshank is an old man with gray hair and eyebrows, strongly marked features, and keen eyes. He talked to me something about the promotion of temperance by a series of literary sketches illustrated by his pencil.

I sat by a lady who was well acquainted with Kingsley, the author of Alton Locke, Hypatia, and other works, with whom I had some conversation with regard to the influence of his writings.

She said that he had been instrumental in rescuing from infidelity many young men whose minds had become unsettled; that he was a devoted and laborious clergyman, exerting himself, without any cessation, for the good of his parish.

After the company were gone I tried to get some rest, as my labors were not yet over, we being engaged to dine at Sir Edward Buxton's. This was our most dissipated day in London. We never tried the experiment again of going to three parties in one day.

By the time I got to my third appointment I was entirely exhausted. I met here some, however, whom I was exceedingly interested to see; among them Samuel Gurney, brother of Elizabeth Fry, with his wife and family. Lady Edward Buxton is one of his daughters. All had that air of benevolent friendliness which is characteristic of the sect.

Dr. Lushington, the companion and venerable associate of Wilberforce and Clarkson, was also present. He was a member of Parliament with Wilberforce forty or fifty years ago. He is now a judge of the admiralty court, that is to say, of the law relating to marine affairs. This is a branch of law which the nature of our government in America makes it impossible for us to have. He is exceedingly brilliant and animated in conversation.

Dr. Cunningham, the author of World without Souls, was present. There was there also a master of Harrow School.

He told me an anecdote, which pleased me for several reasons; that once, when the queen visited the school, she put to him the inquiry, "whether the educational system of England did not give a disproportionate attention to the study of the ancient classics." His reply was, "that her majesty could best satisfy her mind on that point by observing what men the public schools of England had hitherto produced;" certainly a very adroit reply, yet one which would be equally good against the suggestion of any improvement whatever. We might as well say, see what men we have been able to raise in America without any classical education at all; witness Benjamin Franklin, George Washington, and Roger Sherman.

It is a curious fact that Christian nations, with one general consent, in the early education of youth neglect the volume which they consider

inspired, and bring the mind, at the most susceptible period, under the dominion of the literature and mythology of the heathen world; and that, too, when the sacred history and poetry are confessedly superior in literary quality. Grave doctors of divinity expend their forces in commenting on and teaching things which would be utterly scouted, were an author to publish them in English as original compositions. A Christian community has its young men educated in Ovid and Anacreon, but is shocked when one of them comes out in English with Don Juan; yet, probably, the latter poem is purer than either.

The English literature and poetry of the time of Pope and Dryden betray a state of association so completely heathenized, that an old Greek or Roman raised from the dead could scarce learn from them that any change had taken place in the religion of the world; and even Milton often pains one by introducing second-hand pagan mythology into the very shadow of the eternal throne. In some parts of the Paradise Lost, the evident imitations of Homer are to me the poorest and most painful passages.

The adoration of the ancient classics has lain like a dead weight on all modern art and literature; because men, instead of using them simply for excitement and inspiration, have congealed them into fixed, imperative rules. As the classics have been used, I think, wonderful as have been the minds educated under them, there would have been more variety and originality without them.

With which long sermon on a short text, I will conclude my letter.