

I

INTRODUCTION—THE AUTHOR

THERE is a fashion in our days for authors, like other persons dependent on the favour of the public, to court its interest by posing before the cameras of its curiosity. The catalogues of their works are headed by simpering or studiously reflective portraits; their addresses, clubs, recreations are communicated in works of reference; interviewers are made welcome in their homes; and flattering biographies of them, while still living, are taken for a seal of distinction. With this fashion the present writer is out of sympathy, holding that the humblest craftsman has a right to keep his life private, at least to put up the shutters after business hours. Yet for once he must take leave to speak frankly about himself, by way of proving his title to speak of other authors.

In these pages, the reader's humble servant celebrates his jubilee as a maker of books. It is more than half a century, indeed, since he first got into print, to wit, with some verses hailing the volunteer movement, which were recommended to a well-known newspaper by their topical interest. At a very early age he took to scribbling like a duck to water; and most of us ducklings, whether or no we turn out swans in the end, are apt to begin by quacking in rhyme. There are

many who might confess like myself to wasting paper before they got into their teens. Before I was out of them I had written and made money by a real book, published without my real name, as now I am glad to think—"look on't again I dare not!" Still earlier came my first "honorarium" in shape of permission to make toffee for the whole house, an admiring schoolmaster's reward for a description of a school picnic, sweet reminiscence that brings me almost to a diamond jubilee of authorship.

Success fell to me too soon on this precocious career. I had not, like many authorlings, to serve seven years for the Leah of publication, and seven more for the Rachel of profit. I was scarcely of age, when I made something of a hit in the literary arena. My turn being for the realistic rather than the romantic, I had soon abandoned imitations of Scott and Byron for prose, and took to writing accounts of school life, as the only life I knew much about. While still at college, I wrote a medley of crude ideas on education and things in general, set forth in the feigned personality of an old schoolmaster. This was partly inspired by a vague dissatisfaction with what had been called my education and by eagerness to unpack my heart of swelling grudges against a world I found ill arranged to my mind; but its model was suggested by a book that shortly before had brought into note one of the masters at my old school—D'Arcy W. Thompson's *Day Dreams of a Schoolmaster*. The deserved success of this book moved an enterprising publisher who had heard by chance what I was at, to ask for a look at my manuscript, and he published it at his own expense, with a promise of profit to the author, which proved rather a mirage in the cold light of publishing accounts.

So easily I slipped into authorship, and with too flattering result. My *Book about Dominies* was published anonymously as by "a member of the profession," for which the only justification was that, while at Edinburgh University, I had been acting as a sort of tutor under my old schoolmaster, who had conceived a too high opinion of my literary gifts, and by an offer of partnership with himself, encouraged me to think of schoolmastership, when I shrank from what seemed the bonds of the Bar and the Church, professions to a choice of which I had been destined. But I always set my mind on being an author, none the less fixedly for the surprising success of that first serious attempt, and I have never taken to any other craft unless in the way of amateur experiment.

The *Book about Dominies* took with the press and the public; it was well reviewed, went into several editions, and came even to be quoted by grave writers on education, who never quite forgave me when they found out how they had been tricked by a youthful sentimentalist. Soon, indeed, the secret of its authorship began to leak out, which I had sense enough to try to keep bottled up as a chief asset of my effectual imposture. I followed it up with a *Book about Boys*, to which I now affixed the half-transparent pseudonym of "Ascott R. Hope." This book, as far as I can remember, was still more favoured by readers, though some critics took occasion to punish me for having once deceived them.

In this theme, I was still more of an outsider than in the other. I never was a right schoolboy, but passed from an imaginative and sensitive childhood into a precociously reflective hobble-de-hoyhood, driven in upon myself by the contempt of more healthily brutal natures. I made but a tainted

wether of that flock, butted at for being helplessly short-sighted, a crime that brought trouble on me since the days when I got whipped by my nurse as a naughty little story-teller because I denied seeing a landmark well within her range of vision. Withal, on the moral and intellectual world I had long-sighted glimpses that made me pass for mad among thoughtless school-fellows. So my writing with a gush of sympathy about Boys was rather an expression of revolt against the hardness and meanness that pained me in Man: boys were to my blind eyes what the noble savage was to the school of Rousseau. Yet this sentimental philosophastering struck a responsive chord in many hearts, as I learned by sympathetic and appreciative letters from various parts of the English-speaking world; and I was led on to write stories of school-life that had some vogue in their day, as well as other essays in which like a young colt I took my fling at the world that seemed to me so unsatisfactory.

Well is it for a youth with such dispositions to grow up among those able to direct them, bred, like Oliver Wendell Holmes, among books as a stable-boy among horses. That was not my case, in a home more familiar with horses and dogs, of which I did not so much care to learn. For my sins against the Muses, I may plead "I had no mother and I fell." My father's outlook on the world of books was bounded by the adventures of Mr. Pickwick and Mr. Jorrocks. The only thing like a literary judgment I recall from him was his wonder what people saw in *Adam Bede*, then rising on the literary horizon. At one time, probably moved by well-meant advice, he found fault with my reading so many of the standard novels that chiefly filled his bookshelves, and would have had me apply myself to graver works, but could not particularize

on this head with authority. He did indeed put into my hands some French memoirs which he understood to be historically instructive, among them those of the Count de Grammont and the Duchess d'Abrantès, to the horror of a better informed teacher when I innocently took those works to school as the proper place for such study. Other books of the kind, indeed, I had looked into for myself without being the wiser or the worse for their scandalous implications.

My kind father never quite knew what to make of me, divided between a certain doubtful pride in gifts which he inclined to exaggerate, and distrust of a turn for wandering from the beaten paths of worldly success. The only author I saw at home in the flesh, was held up to me as an awful example of one who had no other means of livelihood than that of writing for papers and magazines; and intimacy with such a disreputable neighbour was so little encouraged that I cannot even remember his name. My mother having died before I knew her, my father also was taken too soon, leaving me precociously independent. In the family, literary aspirations found little fellowship; irreverent youngsters jeered, prudent elders frowned or pooh-poohed; but there was nobody able to guide or control my bent. The schoolmaster, already mentioned, who fostered it more kindly than discreetly, was not a man of high culture, nor did he much succeed in getting me to devote my holiday hours to the study of *Josephus* and Gibbon's *Decline and Fall*; he was more fortunate in forcing on my attention Carlyle's *Sartor* and Buckle's *History of Civilization*, that went to colour a somewhat drumly trickle of thought. Not till I had left school, did I fall into the hands of sympathetic and discriminating teachers able to direct my reading, in which the like of me is not very

ready to be directed. As with a good many other idle pupils, I can tell how my true teachers were the books which I read much at random, to stir up one frothy ferment after another in my mind, till by and by it could settle down into something like clearness. In short, almost the whole craft of authorship I had to learn for myself as best I could ; and that is a tale too many of us have to tell.

All this I have written with downcast looks on a cutty-stool of repentance ; but now I stand up to avow something to my own credit. Before the public had done patronizing those green sprouts of fancy, I recognized their insipidity, and strove to root them out like weeds. Having luckily not parted with the copyright of most of them, I was able to withdraw several of my early books from publication, as I did at some expense. As far as I could, I buried them fathoms deep in what I would fain make an ocean of oblivion ; and only to myself in dark hours can the literary wild oats of my youth rise up in rebuke against me. When I can no longer keep their tomb inviolate, cursed be he that thinks it worth while to move those bones !

My slate thus wiped half-clean, I attempted fresh designs with rather more consideration. The picturing of school-life having so far succeeded with me, I cast about for models and methods. I served some terms of hard labour as assistant-master at a school, learning at least as much as I taught. I read everything I could find on the subject ; I made volumes of notes and *mémoires pour servir* ; I studied that phase of human nature in which the evolving savage is rapidly fitted with fetters of civilization ; as an outsider I caught the humorous as well as the moral aspects of youth. Thus better equipped, I wrote

fresh stories of school-life, which I think worth much more than my first ones, while the public that buys such books has not agreed with me. I am not going to argue with the many-headed on its want of appreciation ; but this much, since no one does it for me, I will take leave to boast, that I am not only the most voluminous author in this sort, but the one who has treated the subject most fully from various points of view. Nearly all the rivals who have eclipsed me content themselves, I note, with describing one particular kind of school presumably familiar to them. My study of the matter was more external. Never but once had I in view, and then for a brief glance, the school at which my years were spent. All school life I have taken for my province, as no one else has done, so far as I know. Some of my stories deal with English public schools, a sort of institution in which I have hardly set foot ; but here I had the secret help of a friend,—*selig* !—whose services and influence I must always remember with gratitude. With more first-hand knowledge, I have described the life of grammar-school, as well as of private boarding-schools, the latter, indeed, almost a *terra incognita* to me. Also, I have laid my scene in the humblest class of schools, and among rustic lads ; and would willingly have done so oftener, but for lack of encouragement. In books for this market, anything like liveliness or truth to nature falls flat, other qualities being required by the clerical or official patrons that are the distributors of such wares.

Nor have my yarns been spun out of green hemp alone. I once wrote a novel : it was a very poor one, that rests in peace. I have made notes and studies on the subject, as materials from which I hoped to do better one day, were not life so short and art so long.

Sometimes, in reading the popular success of the hour in this kind, I feel ready to take up again that ambition, which is soon sobered as often as I turn to a novel by Fielding or Scott, by Jane Austen or George Sand, by Spielhagen or Cherbuliez. But indeed it would take a volume as large as this, were I to give an account of all the books I have outlined or planned, enough to fill the working hours of a Methuselah.

While writing books for young readers, I was twisting other strings to my bow, so as by and by to take a shot at the interest of elders. It has been my lot to go a good deal about the world from an early age. After a boyish visit to Paris, my travels began with a cruise in the Mediterranean and a stay in Italy, still heaving from Garibaldi's exploits. A regret I feel in looking back on my life is not having travelled more while I could ; but in fact I have proved immune to the mosquitoes of four continents. At home, too, my short-sightedness drove me from other recreations to the quiet ones of walking, or riding, making observations through spectacles that put me on a level with other men. Such observations I could turn to account by writing on topographical subjects. For one thing, I have edited, that is mainly written, or re-written, some dozens of guide-books, most of them appearing in successive editions. For another, among my literary baggage are geographies used in schools over half the world. Several of my books have been translated into foreign languages ; and nearly a dozen of them are adapted as English reading books in German and Dutch schools. And I have been able to translate other people's writings from half a dozen languages, which I learned for myself, largely in steam-boats, trains and omnibuses, a course of study not recommended by oculists.

My worst enemy, then, could not accuse me of having led an idle life. I shrink from making a census of my productions; but what with story-books, school-books, picture-books, historical and topographical books and miscellaneous writings, under half a dozen different names, they cannot come far short of two hundred volumes, perhaps above that number, at all prices from pennies to pounds. For more than forty years I have been an author of all work, what the contemptuous call a hack; but I never went well in harness, which accounts for the fact that no great proportion of my output is lost in newspapers and magazines, though I have written leading articles, reviews and paragraphs in my day, and alas! obituary notices of most of the writers with whom I have had much to do, as rival or colleague. Now that I am somewhat turned out to grass, I can chew the cud of recollection that in one year, as author, editor, translator or contributor, I was concerned with the preparation of a score of volumes. In another year, I brought forth a dozen or so all my own, some of them, indeed, rather dwarfish. My largest book was the main work of years, a geographical compendium in six quarto volumes, which, revised and brought up to date every year or two, alone makes such a testimonial of industry that I find sometimes doubted the fact of my having written it all myself—save one page. From first to last I must have shed as much ink with my own hand as there was blood in Duncan's body, or in Falstaff's. It has been calculated that if all the sheets I have blotted were set end to end, they would reach, I forget whether it is to Peking or Petersburg. My volumes piled up would form a column from which Marconi might telegraph to Mars. Or is it that this mass of paper would keep all the buttermen in Britain supplied

for six weeks? Boasting, indeed, is excluded, when one compares the contemporaneous output of more esteemed writers like Miss Braddon and Mrs. Oliphant, not to speak of Anthony Trollope, who in a letter to Alfred Austin expresses some doubt of being happy in heaven, since there the beatified spirits may not subscribe to circulating libraries.

In the course of half a century, I have taken at least three separate tries at literary success, with a fair result in two of them. But I do not mean to extol my own industry, only to point out that after having had so much to do with book-making for so long,—not to speak of reading innumerable volumes dealing with books and bookmen—I should be dull indeed not to have picked up some knowledge of the business, as of my fellow-practitioners.

This book, about a subject I cannot but understand, I have written as a penance for that youthful sin of writing in ignorance. What it costs me thus to stand in a self-imposed pillory, like Dr. Johnson in the Lichfield market-place, nobody knows so well as myself. Such an avowal may be questioned by hasty readers who find in other books of mine an air of intrusive egoism, as if I loved exposing my personality to public view. But that was only the trick of the conjuror who poses as taking spectators into his confidence, while keeping the card well hidden up his sleeve. I always had a bent for assuming some personality, under which I have generally been able to deceive the public, yea the very elect, for I have a letter from such an expert as Sir J. M. Barrie, in which he remarks of a story of mine that it is evidently a personal reminiscence, yet in fact it was a newspaper paragraph worked up by my own fancy upon an imaginary scene. When I brought out my first successful book, in the character

of an old schoolmaster, few guessed it to come from an inexperienced youth. On the next generation, I repeated the same imposture, with more skill but less applause, in a book called *Cap and Gown Comedy*, the hero of which, partly modelled this time on a real character who was not in a position to recognize himself, related his experiences in several schools, all of a kind unfamiliar to me: this book, when published anonymously, was taken for genuine autobiography, and some reviewers laughed at the way in which the author seemed to reveal his own weaknesses. So too another fiction of mine, describing from materials supplied me the life of an Argentine settler, passed hardly doubted for fact. With more or less success, I have thus played various parts before my readers, inviting them to apparent intimacy with a character in disguise.

These are tricks of the trade. But all along I have cared to hold my real self out of sight, while pulling the strings of my puppets. I have even a whimsical dislike to seeing my true name in print; and hardly ever appeared in public without some fig-leaf of pseudonymity, writing under several aliases, or sometimes blankly anonymous. All the more for displaying a fictitious face so freely, I have been shy as to keeping my real personality in the background. I have tried to stand stiffly upon a point of literary manners now much neglected, that the public has no right to peep under any mask which an author may choose to wear; so I sympathized with "Lewis Carroll" in his resentment against an editor who took his true name as advertised *urbi et orbi*. My own motto has always been "No foot over threshold of mine!" This privilege proves hard to secure, where every journalist now thinks it fair to tickle the public with

allusions to the privacy of its entertainers, who are invited to set forth a sketch of their own recreations and antecedents, along with their resorts and addresses. Out of the works of reference that give such information, I did my best to keep my name till the conductor of one such took me by force, and a German editor evolved an account of me from his inner consciousness. It is most reluctantly, then, that for once I write what I would rather have left unprinted till I should no longer be able to read it. Thus then

The man hath penance done,
And penance more will do.

More than one publisher has invited me to write my reminiscences of literary life, as is done nowadays by many writers. But "story, God bless you, I have none to tell, sir," or next to none worth telling. Of the famous authors of my time, I can say but *vidi tantum*, for the most part as a subaltern beholds plumed and prancing generals. My lines of work, indeed, seldom brought me much into contact with fellow-workmen; still less have I cultivated what is called smart society, whose sayings and doings froth out so much printed gossip. I have had little intimacy with notable personages of any kind to turn into copy. I never held any public post or charge, unless as a volunteer officer or a coroner's jurymen. I have made awkward attempts at more than one handicraft, with the view of gathering straw for literary bricks; in Canada I have tried to follow the plough, but soon found myself wending a homeward way from this amateur pursuit. My view of the world's affairs has been mainly that of a looker-on, who, to be sure, may have his chance of seeing the game. I have lived my life in my own way, not a way that leads to moving

accidents by flood or field ; and all my accomplished work has been reading and writing.

What reminiscences of mine might interest others, have been to a great extent scattered through books already written. Now, instead of collecting them into an insipid memoir, I offer the public a string of reflections, observations, readings and experiences picked up in my half century and more of being concerned with different sorts of authorship. It seems to me that this may interest some readers and writers, as it certainly interests myself.

All this about myself, to explain why I have written it. So far has been pure *Wahrheit* ; in the following pages I may fall into *Dichtung*, holding myself free to do so here and there, should I mention names or matters in which there might be offence to any now living ; but as a rule I shall avoid naming writers still at work. The shamefaced author now resumes his mask to speak more resonantly of authors in general.