



THE INVENTOR OF A NEW LANGUAGE.

HO that has heard of George Psalmanazar, the arch-impostor, the audacious inventor of an imaginary language, an imaginary people, an imaginary country, and has paused over that strange name as it floats across the pages of Boswell's "Life of Johnson," amid all those names which are as familiar to us as our own, knows anything of the extraordinary incidents of his extraordinary career?—how from a profligate vagabond he became "one of the best Christians in London;" how at sixteen a shuffling and shameless mendicant, he became at sixty the universally respected philanthropist of Old Street; how, when a young man, he was a degraded opium-paralysed sensualist, distinguished for nothing but his unparalleled ability for lying; how, when an old man, he became almost an ascetic, distinguished for nothing so much as for his indomitable energy, and for a veracity so unimpeachable that Dr. Johnson said he would as soon think of contradicting a bishop as of contradicting him. At sixteen the chosen companion of the worst people of the worst paths of life; at sixty the valued friend of the sternest and most exacting of English moralists: at twenty the impudent fabricator of the most extraordinary fictions which ever imposed on the credulity of mankind; at fifty the most valued contributor to one of the most accurate and conscientious historical works in the eighteenth century. Surely a strange career this, and one which, if read aright, is instructive too. We have fortunately the fullest materials for tracing it, for unravelling its perplexities, for explaining its paradoxes. Psalmanazar has told his own story. As his *Memoirs*, however, is a decidedly rare volume, and as his style is not remarkable either for precision or terseness, we shall, we doubt not, be conferring a real service on our readers by laying before them the main incidents of his romantic life. These *Memoirs* were mainly written with the intention of making a full confession to the world of the shameful imposition of which their author had been guilty in his youth. He had represented himself as being a native of Formosa; he had given a fabulous account of that island; he had described at length its institutions, its habits, its customs; he had given accounts of the scenery which surrounded it, had entered into the minutest details with respect to its commerce and its legal procedure, had drawn elaborate parallels between its polity and the politics of Europe, had described its manufactures, and made proposals about encouraging and introducing them into England. Nor was this all. He had invented a language for his imaginary island, an alphabet, a grammar, a vocabulary, and, by a miracle of inventive ingenuity, he would probably have gone on to invent a literature for it also. With an impudence

at once portentous and grotesque, he had proposed to the Bishop of London that funds should be raised to convert this airy island to Christianity, and that a stop should be put to the frightful massacres which he represented as going on every year to feed the altars of the gods with human victims—the only means, so he said, the people thought, of appeasing their angry deities. The *History of Formosa* must always hold the first place among apocryphal narratives, and the *Formosan Grammar* the first place among literary forgeries.

One of the most interesting, but at the same time melancholy, chapters in the varied annals of literary history, is assuredly that which records the triumphs and the failures of such perverted ingenuity as this, for they were triumphs which brought no glory, and they were failures which taught no lessons.

Though Psalmanazar would never tell either his real name, or where he was born, or to what country he belonged, that he might not throw any discredit on the nation which produced such an impostor, it was conjectured that he first saw the light in some part of Languedoc, as his pronunciation of French had a strong Gascoigne accent about it. His father, who belonged to a good family, had fallen deeply into debt, and had been obliged to separate from his wife, so that young Psalmanazar—to call him by the name he afterwards adopted—was left pretty much to his own devices. His mother, however, watched over him with affectionate interest, and to her pious care he owed that strong religious instinct which, often obscured and sometimes all but obliterated, guided him at last into the paths of rectitude.

But, while a mere child, he was put into a monastery to be educated; he became a great favourite with the principal monk, began to learn Latin, and made good progress with his studies, which were, however, occasionally interrupted by some school-boy freaks very amusingly described in his *Memoirs*. One afternoon, it seems, he and his school-fellows had a holiday given them. Not far off there was a girls' school, and young Psalmanazar, gallantly thinking that it was only fair that they should have a holiday too, persuaded some of his school-fellows to join him in procuring one for them. Accordingly the youths started off, and not being able to effect their purpose with words, proceeded to force. They turned the school-mistress and the young ladies out of the school-room, and then locked the doors and decamped. The next day he was called up before the monastic authorities to answer for the freak of which he had been the ring-leader, and it required all the influence of the good monk, who was so fond of him, to prevent his expulsion. He stayed at this monastery for upwards of two years, and was then entered at a Jesuits' College. In addition to Greek and Latin, for which he had a natural taste, he proceeded to master the dry and repulsive logic of the schoolmen, for which, like Swift and Goldsmith, he soon entertained unmiti-

gated contempt. Before long he discovered that his teacher knew as little as himself, so after master and pupil had blundered on together for some time they took to reading heraldry, geography, and the art of fortification instead. Much time was wasted; but this was not the worst. The college was situated near a large city (in accordance with his usual practice, he does not say what city it was), and here the young student became initiated in dissipation, and contracted a restless habit of mind, which materially impaired his powers of study. He grew dissatisfied with the monotony of collegiate life, and as his mother was unable to continue the allowance necessary for his maintenance at the monastery, he was glad to embrace the opportunity of getting out into the world. He took a tutorship in a private family, and here, for the first time, he began to contract a habit of lying and to practise systematic hypocrisy. He did it, he tells us, to ingratiate himself with the mother of his pupil; for he thought, poor fellow, his "sheepishness," slovenly appearance, and want of address would only insure contempt, unless he could counterbalance their unfavourable effect by creating the impression that he was an ascetic intent only on religion. Such deceit is soon seen through, and Psalmanazar only stayed in the house six months.

And now began his wanderings and real miseries. First he betook himself to Avignon, whither he had gone just after he left the Jesuit College, and lived on the charity of a poor widow and some kind-hearted friars; thence to Beaucaire, in Languedoc, where he found a large fair going on. Here the young mendicant came upon some merchants from his native town, who gave him a little money, and a great deal of good advice. The money was of course soon spent, and the good advice met with its usual fate. It now struck him that it would be a good thing to set up for a wandering pilgrim, to pretend that he was a sufferer for religion's sake, and to claim alms in the name of ecclesiastical charity. But he had no staff and no cloak, nor had he the means of buying them. This difficulty he solved by an act of sacrilege. He deliberately marched into a city chapel, one day at noon, saw what he wanted, "threw the cloak over his shoulders," and "walked with a sanctified gravity with the staff in his hand till he had got out of the city." He no longer employed the French language in his appeals to charity, but took to begging in Latin, taking care only to address ecclesiastics. After some unimportant adventures, and some very natural hesitations, he determined now to visit his mother. She was overjoyed at seeing him, though not a little puzzled, poor soul, to account for his garb. Being herself unable to help him, she persuaded him to pay a visit to his father, and see if he could do anything to assist him; though, as she confessed, she was not very sanguine. He gives a very interesting account of his journey, which lay in the direction of Lyons. He found his father, whom he describes as a great traveller and an accomplished linguist, very sympathetic, very polite, and, like the good merchants whom he had met before, very full of good advice,

but quite unable to relieve his necessities. It was at this period in his career that he conceived the idea of passing himself off for a native of the East, thinking he could make money by pretending that he had become converted to Christianity. He began, therefore, to lay the foundation of the marvellous series of fabrications which were destined to confer on him a scandalous immortality, and to put him in the foremost rank of literary forgers. First he invented an alphabet, and arguing from the analogy of Hebrew and other Oriental languages, that it would be necessary to represent the inhabitants of his imaginary country as writing from right to left, he began to practise himself in doing so. He then went on—studiously concealing his efforts from his father, who he felt sure would never become a party to such an infamous fraud—to invent a calendar which divided the year into twenty months, a new system of religion, and a whole social and political régime, all of which were to be palmed off as Japanese originals. He made some way also in formulating a new grammar and a new language, and before he left his father's roof he had not only acquired perfect facility in writing his feigned characters from right to left, but a singularly retentive memory, aided by a pregnant and inexhaustible imagination, had enabled him to complete the materials afterwards worked up in his Formosan history.

It now became necessary for him to leave his father, who could support him no longer, and so with many tears he took leave, intending to make his way into the Low Countries. He wrote to his mother acquainting her with his purpose, but he never saw either of his parents again. "Both of them," he touchingly says, "have bewailed my loss at a much greater rate than I deserved, if it did not prove the means of shortening their days." From this time he represented himself as a Japanese "converted to Christianity by some Jesuit missionaries."

Then, afterwards, we find him the waiter at a fashionable coffee-house at Aix-la-Chapelle, amusing the habitués with his pretended Japanese experiences. True to his restless disposition he soon abandoned this comfortable situation, and proceeded to visit the cities on the Rhine. At one of these places, where he was again invited to enlist, he made the acquaintance of a "good old Capuchin," who, hearing that he was a Japanese, was anxious to convert him to Roman Catholicism; but the honest monk was no match for the cunning and sophisticated young vagabond, who found at this stage in his career that it paid better to be a heathen. When he came afterwards, however, to write his Memoirs, while alluding to this time of his life, he makes a very just reflection—"Where religion and reason have unhappily lost their influence, or yielded it to a predominant and ungovernable passion, how easily the indulging of it will by degrees come to quench all remorse and conviction, and, unless the Divine grace interposes, hurry a man into utter perdition!" At a place called Landau he prevailed on a Dr. James, the chaplain of a Scotch regiment, to "convert him to Christianity," and he went through the impious farce with his usual hypocritical ability.

We cannot stop to follow him through his subsequent wanderings, adventurous and interesting though they are, but must hurry on to his meeting with Dr. Innes. This odious man was, with sorrow we write it, a member of the Church of England. He was a shrewd man of the world, and he very soon saw through Psalmanazar's pretensions, assuring himself by a very ingenious stratagem. He took one of Cicero's works, and asked his young friend to translate a passage from it into Formosan, and then to construe his version into English; this Psalmanazar found no difficulty in doing. Innes, suffering a short time to elapse, bade him to repeat the same process, without giving him the opportunity of committing the first version to memory. The result was that there were not above one-half of the words in the second that there were in the first, and the imposition was patent. But Innes had his own purpose to serve, and, instead of reprimanding and exposing his friend, he merely warned him to be more careful in future. They henceforth worked together. Innes, knowing that the then Bishop of London, the amiable and venerable Dr. Compton, was always a liberal patron of those ministers who could succeed either in converting pagans to Christianity or in restoring to the true fold the luckless souls who had strayed from it, thought that he would introduce Psalmanazar to him, pretending at the same time that he had converted him to Christianity. Accordingly, they both came to London. The good bishop was delighted with Innes' zeal. Psalmanazar was not only introduced to him, but to all the scientific men of the day; and Innes encouraged him to translate the Catechism into Formosan, to compose his Formosan Grammar, and to write his History of Formosa. These monstrous fabrications were greedily received by people naturally anxious to hear about a country whose very name was hardly known to them. Though some sensible people, like the celebrated Dr. Mead, suspected imposture, nobody could prove it, and the majority believed in him, for it seemed impossible that a youth who had not yet completed his twentieth year could be so accomplished an impostor. With the assistance of Bishop Compton and others, he was sent to study at Oxford. There he took to opium-eating, and to idleness, leaving a light burning in his window all night, that it might be supposed that he was deep in study; and leaving his bed untouched while he slept in his chair, that his servant might spread wonderful tales of his indefatigable industry. It is painful to have to follow him through this degrading career of complicated hypocrisy. Suffice it that he soon left Oxford, repeated for awhile in England his Continental experiences, and became a party to many wicked impositions—particularly that of introducing into this country a white sort of japan, invented by one Patten-den, as a Formosan piece of vertu. At length he came across two religious books—Nelson's "Method of Devotion," and Law's "Serious Call"—a work which first roused Dr. Johnson to a sense of his spiritual responsibilities. These made him realise his degradation and unworthiness. He began to read the Bible: he betook himself to the study of

Hebrew. The wonderful abilities which he had for so long a time been systematically abusing were at last applied to a legitimate end, and Psalmanazar made himself by degrees an accomplished Hebrew scholar. He became acquainted with a Mr. Palmer, a well-known printer, and this put him in the way of getting literary work. The first thing he was engaged on was a History of Printing, and as he gave great satisfaction in this, and succeeded also in gaining the confidence of his employers, he was invited to assist in the compilation of the Universal History. This furnished him with occupation for a considerable time, and gave him the means of gaining an honest livelihood. Still, however, he did not break entirely clear from the consequences of his old life, for he had incurred an infamous notoriety from his wicked fabrications, which still submitted him to many insults and many mortifications. He was also the slave to a pernicious habit, contracted originally from motives of mere vanity—that of opium-eating. But he struggled manfully with it, and very nearly succeeded in altogether emancipating himself from its tyrannical fetters. Every year he lived he became a better man, and, as the light of religion burnt more purely and steadily, his remorse for his past offences weighed heavily upon him. He could not rest till he had made a full confession, and so he wrote his Memoirs to undo, as far as lay in his power, the evil that he had done, to deter others from treading the same perilous path of deception, and to show how, by the mercy of God, a man may retrieve himself even when ruin seems imminent, and utter perdition sure. It is noticeable that he has attributed many of his miseries and vices to "indolence, vanity, and bad economy." In the insolence of youth, and amid the vanities of early manhood, he had forgotten the lessons which he had learnt at his mother's knee; but long after she, who had done her duty so faithfully by her child, had passed away—conscious, perhaps, only of failure—the good seed she had sown came to bear its fruit. And so we may learn two great lessons from this strange life—not to despair of any one who has abused great abilities, and wandered from the path of rectitude, but to do all that lies in our power to recall him to a sense of his real position, and to win him once more to what is pure and true, however hopeless such a task may seem. And, secondly, we may learn how important it is to embue the plastic mind of childhood with the great truths of religion, in reasonable hope that in spite of the thwarting accidents of life such a training can never be thrown away, and may unexpectedly ripen into a rich harvest long after we who sowed it have gone to our rest. George Psalmanazar died full of years, and universally respected by all who knew him, in 1763. He left directions in his will that his body should not be enclosed in any kind of coffin, "but only decently laid in what is called a shell, of the lowest value, and without lid or other covering which may hinder the natural earth from covering it all round"—a pathetic testimony to the sincerity with which he realised his former errors.

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