



HOW GREAT MEN WORK.

NE of the most interesting chapters in literary history would, undoubtedly, be that which should record the whims and eccentricities of men of genius when engaged in the active pursuit of their calling. First, because it is always pleasant to know how works, which have taught and delighted whole generations of readers, have been produced; and secondly, because such little personal traits, if not directly instructive, are, at any rate, suggestive and curious. But, strange to say, this chapter remains unwritten; and among all the "curiosities of literature" these, the greatest of all its curiosities, are by some inadvertency passed over unnoticed. Such an omission is very much to be regretted, for the author possessed singular qualifications for the task, as well from his enormous reading as from his custom of collecting and noting down such minutiae when he encountered them in scattered biographical or autobiographical notices, where alone they can be found.

The methods of authors in the course of composition have been singular, and though no two of them have worked alike, they have, most of them, illustrated the old proverb that genius is labour, and that few great works have been produced which have not been the result of unwearied perseverance as well as of brilliant natural powers. Some men have undoubtedly possessed astonishing facility and readiness both of conception and expression, as we shall presently see; but, as a rule, the writings of such men, except in the case of Shakespeare, are not so valuable as they might have been, and are marred by crudities which might otherwise have been finished beauties, by deformities which should have been graces. First among the sons of literary toil stands Virgil. He used, we are told, to pour out a large number of verses in the morning, and to spend the rest of the day in pruning them down; he has humorously compared himself to a she-bear, who licks her cubs into shape. It took him three years to compose his ten short Eclogues; seven years to elaborate his *Georgics*, which comprise little more than 2,000 verses; and he employed more than twelve years in polishing his "*Æneid*," being even then so dissatisfied with it, that he wished before his death to commit it to the flames. Horace was equally indefatigable, and there are single odes in his works which must have cost him months of labour. Lucretius' one poem represents the toil of a whole life; and so careful was Plato in the niceties of verbal collocation, that the first sentence in his "*Republic*" was turned in nine different ways. It must have taken Thucydides upwards of twenty years to write his history, which is comprised in one octavo

volume. Gibbon wrote the first chapter of his work three times before he could please himself; and John Foster, the essayist, would sometimes spend a week over one sentence. Addison was so particular that he would stop the press to insert an epithet, or even a comma; and Montesquieu, alluding in a letter to one of his works, says to a correspondent, "You will read it in a few hours, but the labour expended on it has whitened my hair." The great French critic, St. Beuve, expended incredible pains on every word, and two or three octavo pages often represented a whole week's incessant effort. Gray would spend months over a short copy of verses; and there is a poem of ten lines in Waller's works which, he has himself informed us, took him a whole summer to formulate. Miss Austen, Charlotte Brontë, Hume, and Fox have all recorded the trouble they took. Tasso was unwearied in correcting; so were Pope and Boileau. Even Macaulay, with all his fluency, did not disdain the application of the file; and there are certain passages in the first chapter of his history which represent months of patient revision. There is a good tale told of Malherbe, the French poet, which illustrates very amusingly the elaborate care he took with his poems. A certain nobleman of his acquaintance had lost his wife, and was anxious that Malherbe should dedicate an ode to her memory, and condole with him in verse on the loss he had sustained. Malherbe complied, but was so fastidious in his composition, that it was three years before the elegy was completed. Just before he sent it in, he was intensely chagrined to find that his noble friend had solaced himself with a new bride; and was, consequently, in no humour to be pestered with an elegy on his old one. The unfortunate poet, therefore, lost both his pains and his fee. So morbidly anxious was Cardinal Bembo about verbal correctness, that every poem he composed is said to have passed successively through forty portfolios, which represented the various stages towards completeness. The great Pascal affords another instance of similar literary conscientiousness. What he especially aimed at was brevity. He once apologised to a friend for writing him a long letter, on the ground that he had had no time to make it shorter—and the result is that his "*Provincial Letters*" scarcely yield to Tacitus, or to the "*Letters of Junius*," in concise epigrammatic brilliancy.

Some authors have rapidly sketched the plan of their intended work first, and have reserved their pains for filling out the details. The great French novelist, Balzac, followed this method. He sent off to the printer the skeleton of the intended romance, leaving pages of blank paper between for conversations, descriptions, &c.; as soon as that was struck off he shut himself up in his study, eat and drank nothing but bread and water till he had filled up the blank spaces, and in this way laboriously completed his book. Godwin wrote his "*Caleb Williams*" backwards—beginning, that

is to say, with the last chapter, and working on to the first. Richardson produced his ponderous novels by painfully elaborating different portions at different times. Burton, the author of the "Anatomy of Melancholy;" the great scholars Barthius and Turnebus; Butler, the author of "Hudibras;" Locke; Fuller, the "witty" divine; Bishop Horne, Warburton, Hurd, and many others kept common-place books, which may account for the copious and apposite illustrations which enrich their volumes. Sheridan and Hook were always on the alert for bits of brilliant conversation and stray jokes, which they took good care to jot down in their pocket-books for future use. The great Bentley always bought editions of classical authors with very broad margins, and put down the observations which might occur to him in the course of his reading—which is the secret of his lavish erudition. Pope scribbled down stray thoughts for future use whenever they struck him—at a dinner-table, in an open carriage, at his toilet, and in bed. Hogarth would sketch any face that struck him on his finger-nail, hence the marvellous diversity of feature in his infinite galleries of portraits. Swift would lie in bed in the morning, "thinking of wit for the day;" and Theodore Hook generally "made up his impromptues the night before." Washington Irving was fond of taking his portfolio out into the fields, and laboriously manipulating his graceful periods while swinging on a stile. Wordsworth and De Quincey did the same. It would be easy to multiply instances of the pain and labour expended on compositions which to all appearance bear no traces of such effort.

But it is now time to reverse the picture, and to mention meritorious pieces produced against time and with extraordinary facility. Lucilius, the Roman satirist, wrote with such ease, that he used to boast that he could turn off 200 verses while standing on one leg. Ennius was quite as fluent. Of Shakespeare we are told, "His mind and hand went together, and what he thought he uttered with that easiness that we (the editors of the First Folio) have scarce received from him a blot in his papers." When the fits of inspiration were on Milton, his amanuensis could scarcely keep pace with the fast-flowing verses; but we must remember that the poet had been brooding over his immortal work for years before a line was committed to paper. The most marvellous illustrations of this facility in writing are to be found in the two Spanish poets Calderon and Lope de Vega. The latter could write a play in three or four hours; he supplied the Spanish stage with upwards of 2,000 original dramas, and Hallam calculates that during the course of his life he "reeled off" upwards of 21,300,000 lines! Of English writers, perhaps the most fluent and easy have been Dryden and Sir Walter Scott. In one short year Dryden produced four of his greatest works—namely, the first part of "Absalom and Achitophel," "The Medal," "Mac Flecknoe," his share in the second part of "Absalom and Achitophel," and the "Religio Laici." He was less than three years in translating the whole of Virgil. He composed his elaborate parallel between poetry and painting in twelve morn-

ings. "Alexander's Feast" was struck out at a single sitting. Indeed, he says himself that, when he was writing, ideas thronged so fast that the only difficulty he had was in selection. Everybody knows the extraordinary literary facility of Sir Walter Scott—how his amanuensis, when he employed one, could not keep pace with the breathless speed with which he dictated his marvellous romances. If we can judge from the many original MSS. of his novels and poems which have been preserved to us, it would seem that he scarcely ever recast a sentence or altered a word when it was committed to paper. The effect of this is that both Dryden and Scott have left a mass of writings valuable for the genius with which they are instinct, but defaced with errors, with grammatical blunders, and with many pleonasm and tautologies, the consequence of their authors not practising what Pope calls—

"The first and greatest art, the art to blot."

Dr. Johnson's "Rasselas" was written in a week, to defray the expenses of his mother's funeral. Horace Walpole wrote nearly all the "Castle of Otranto" at a sitting, which terminated not by mental fatigue, but by the fingers becoming too weary to close on the pen. Beckford's celebrated "Vathek" was composed by the uninterrupted exertion of three whole days and two whole nights, during which time the ecstatic author supported himself by copious draughts of wine. What makes the feat more wonderful is, that it was written in French, an acquired language, for Beckford was of course an Englishman. Mrs. Browning wrote her delightful poem, entitled "Lady Geraldine's Courtship," a long elaborate romance in a difficult metre, in twelve hours, while the printer was waiting to put it into type. It is comparatively easy to understand the rapidity with which these compositions were produced, because, being works of imagination couched in a style essentially bold and free, choice phraseology, careful rhythm, and copious illustration were not so much needed; but when we learn that Ben Jonson completed his highly-wrought comedy of the "Alchymist" in six weeks, and that Dr. Johnson could throw off forty-eight octavo pages of such a finished composition as his "Life of Savage" at a sitting, one is indeed lost in bewildering admiration, and perhaps half-inclined to doubt the author's word. However much we may wonder at feats like these, we should not forget Sheridan's witty remark, that very easy writing is generally very hard reading; and comfort our common-place selves with the thought that, in nine cases out of ten, genius in literature is like genius in practical life, little else than honest indefatigable labour fortunately directed. The wise Lord Bacon has observed that prodigies, of what kind soever they may be, belong to what is monstrous in nature, and as they are not produced in accordance with the laws which determine man's condition, ought neither to be sought out nor imitated. But we must turn now to our third point—the strange circumstances under which celebrated works have been produced.

It is curious that two of the greatest historical works in the world were written while their authors were in

exile—the “History of the Peloponnesian War,” by Thucydides; the “History of the Rebellion,” by Lord Clarendon. Fortescue, the Chief Justice in Henry VI.’s reign, wrote his great work on the laws of England under the same circumstances. Locke was a refugee in Holland when he penned his memorable “Letter concerning Toleration,” and put the finishing touches to his immortal “Essay on the Human Understanding.” Lord Bolingbroke had also “left his country for his country’s good” when he was engaged on the works by which he will be best remembered. Everybody knows Dante’s sad tale, and his miserable wanderings from city to city while the “Divine Comedy” was in course of production. Still more melancholy is it to review the formidable array of great works which were composed within the walls of a prison. First came the “Pilgrim’s Progress” and “Don Quixote;” the one written in Bedford Gaol, the other in a squalid dungeon in Spain. James I. (of Scotland) penned his sweet poem, “The Kynge’s Quhair,” while a prisoner in Windsor Castle; and the loveliest of Lord Surrey’s verses were written in the same place, under the same circumstances. Sir Walter Raleigh’s “History of the World” was composed in the Tower. George Buchanan executed his brilliant Latin version of the Psalms while incarcerated in Portugal. “Fleta,” one of the most valuable of our early law works, took its name from the fact of its having been compiled by its author in the Fleet Prison. Boethius’ “Consolations of Philosophy,” De Foe’s “Review” and “Hymn to the Pillory,” Voltaire’s “Henriade,” Howel’s “Familiar Letters”—to which we have recently directed attention—Dr. Dodd’s “Prison Thoughts,” Grotius’ “Commentary on St. Matthew,” and the amusing “Adventures of Dr. Syntax,” all these were produced

in the gloomy cells of a common prison. Tasso wrote some of the loveliest of his sonnets in a mad-house, and Christopher Smart his “Song to David”—one of the most eloquent sacred lyrics in our language—while undergoing confinement in a similar place. Poor Nathaniel Lee, the dramatist, is said to have revolved some of his tragedies in lucid intervals within the walls of a lunatic asylum. Plautus fabricated some of his Comedies in a bakehouse. The great Descartes, Berni the Italian poet, and Boyse the once well-known author of “The Deity,” usually wrote while lying in bed. Hooker meditated his “Ecclesiastical Polity” while rocking the cradle of his child; and Richardson slowly elaborated his romances among the compositors of his printing-office. Byron composed the greater part of “Lara” while engaged at his toilet-table, and his “Prologue at the Opening of Drury Lane Theatre” in a stage-coach. Moore’s gorgeous Eastern romance, “Lallah Rookh,” was written in a cottage blocked up with snow, with an English winter roaring round it. Burns dreamed one of his lyrics, and wrote it down just as it came to him in his sleep. Tartini’s “Devil’s Sonata” was another inspiration from Morpheus; and so also was Coleridge’s “Tubla Khan.”

Such were the extraordinary circumstances attending the composition of works which have amused and instructed thousands of people; such have been some of the methods, and such some of the habits of authors. Various and unintelligible often are the forms in which human genius will reveal itself; but quite as various, and perhaps quite as unintelligible, at first sight, are the ways in which it has surmounted the obstacles which opposed it, asserted its claims, and effected its development.

THE FUTURE OF MY BOYS.



A GREAT writer has said that “a child should be treated as a live tree, and helped to grow, not as dry dead timber, which is to be carved into this or that shape, and to have certain mouldings grooved upon it.” This is true enough, but the difficulty for parents is to find out what is the

kind of tree. It is said that when Dr. Watts was a child he was exceedingly fond of verse-making. His father, a stern and rather strait-laced schoolmaster, was very much annoyed at this, and did all in his power to keep the boy from indulging his taste. According to the well-known story, on one occasion he threatened

to flog him severely the next time he found him making rhymes, upon which little Isaac fell upon his knees exclaiming—

“Oh, father! do some pity take,
And I will no more verses make.”

Yet the son followed his bent, and has come to be regarded now as one of the first of English hymn-writers.

Numberless instances might be given of the same sort of thing—fathers and mothers failing utterly to discover their children’s peculiar bent.

Kepler, the astronomer, was brought up as a waiter in a German public-house; Shakespeare is supposed to have been a wool-comber, or a scrivener’s clerk; Ben Jonson was a mason, and worked at the building of Lincoln’s Inn; Lord Clive, one of the greatest warriors and statesmen that England can boast, was a clerk; Inigo Jones, the architect, was a carpenter; Turner, the greatest of English landscape painters, was a barber; Hugh Miller, the geologist, was a