OVER JOHNSON'S GRAVE.

A CAUSERIE.

BY WALTER BESANT.

ON the morning of Monday, December 20, 1784, the remains of Dr. Johnson were carried along Fleet Street and the Strand to Westminster Abbey in solemn procession, with a hearse and six, and a long train of mourning coaches. The Abbey was full of people, whose behavior, says the chronicle, "was marked by the decency suitable to the solemn occasion."

The Rev. Dr. Taylor, senior prebendary, rector of St. Margaret's, Westminster, and vicar of Ashbourne, who had been a school-fellow of Johnson's, read the service in the absence of the Dean. The pall-bearers were Johnson's old and much-loved friends, Edmund Burke, Sir Joseph Banks, Bennet Langton, Mr. Windham, Sir Charles Bunbury, and George Colman. Among the principal mourners stood Sir Joshua Reynolds, then sixty-one years of age, and with eight years more of life and work before him. The body was placed next to that of David Garrick, at the foot of the Shakespeare monument, in Poets' Corner.

When that coffin was lowered into the grave, one able to read the outward signs of coming change might have seen buried with it the whole of the eighteenth century literature, as Johnson understood literature, and not to speak of frivolous productions such as those of Fielding and Smollett, who had also gone before. After Johnson's name in the list of English poets, scholars, and essayists may be drawn a thick black line such as in railway guides they use to indicate that here the train stops. Johnson's train of literature, which started merrily with Pope, Addison, Steele, and a glorious company of wits, had been running slowly of late, and was now come to a final stop. Not only was the old order changing, as happens continually, by the laws of being, but it was completely dead, and its successor as yet was not born. There was to be no more literature of the old school: nothing worth reading on the old lines was to be published; the world must wait until the new men should begin their work with new thoughts, new ways of looking at things, and new forms of expression. Those who had been the leaders in the old order had all passed away before the middle of the century. Of their successors—Johnson being one—Richardson died in 1761, Thomson in 1748, Akenside in 1771, Collins in 1756, Goldsmith in 1774, Gray in the same year, Garrick in 1779, Hume in 1776, Churchill in 1767. Cowper's work was practically finished—the "Task" was already written, though not published till 1785; Sheridan's was also finished; Gibbon's, it is true, was only partly published, and Burke had still something to say; and far away in Scotland a country lad was singing as no Scot had ever sung before, but his song had not yet reached the southern ear. In sixteen years' time the new school would have begun with Wordsworth, Coleridge, and Southey; Walter Scott would be feeling his way with translations; Shelley and Byron would be boys at school; Keats, Carlyle, and Keble would be already born in the world.

Let us not concern ourselves in this place about literature and its history. Those who want to consider Johnson's place among English writers, and the characteristics of his style, may sit down and read Mr. Leslie Stephen's little book about him. Let us talk of smaller things; let us have a *causerie;* it shall be concerning the man and his friends, their ways and their times. As for the latter, the eighteenth century seems hundreds of years ago, so different are its ways compared with our ways, and its thoughts compared with ours. Between us lies the French Revolution, with—the most wonderful event in all history—the transference of power to the people. In Johnson's times the people were still only the Mob; a grub, wriggling, formless, without legs or wings, apparently without understanding, possessed of the simple appetites and elementary passions, certainly greedy and voracious, supposed by some to be dangerous, but hitherto dangerous only when, as in the Gordon riots, it could be got to act with one mind. To most men who discussed the subject the Mob was not dangerous, because it was too stupid, too ignorant, too apathetic, too brutish, to act in concert. What is it now?

It is like a dream to read of the things which happened and the things which

were said and thought in those years, because they are so far off, and now so impossible. And yet every man over fifty years of age may very well have talked with men who remembered these things, with men who may have stood in the Abbey and seen the coffin of the great scholar carried through the west gates. Why, I myself have talked with one who was a drummer-boy to La Rochejaquelin, and I have known men who fought with Nelson at Copenhagen and Trafalgar, and I have actually gazed upon one who was once a page to Marie Antoinette—he was too far gone in senile decay for speech—but I have never had the good fortune to meet with any who had talked with Johnson or seen any of his friends. Stay: once, in a country inn, an aged man told me at great length, and with an infinity of windings, turns, harkings back, and episodes, a story. He was once, a long time ago, he said, a child, and in the days of his childhood there was once, he remembered, some kind of *fête* or rejoicing at which he was present. A gentleman who was there took him into his arms and kissed him. "My dear," said the gentleman, kindly, "you will now be able to tell your children that you have been kissed by the great Boswell." "Pray, Mr. Boswell," said a lady (and I do think it was a most cruel thing to say)—"pray, Mr. Boswell, why are you great?" A story like this seems to give one a kind of connection, not granted to all the world, with the last century, because Boswell died in the year 1795.

In the year 1784, while Johnson was slowly and painfully breathing his last, a good many things, now curious and interesting to read of, are recorded to have happened. Thus, on July 7th of that year, William Bishopp, town crier (they spelled it "cryer") of the city, "attended by proper officers"—one can plainly see two beadles with wigs, gold-headed sticks, and long coats, and perhaps an officer in green and gold from the Lord Mayor's household—went to the Royal Exchange, and there by order read two royal proclamations. The first of these announced that a treaty of peace had been signed at Paris between Great Britain, France, and the United States of America. No doubt, after the history of the past ten years, any peace was welcome. The next proclamation called upon all the King's loyal subjects and citizens of London to observe a solemn day of thanksgiving on July 29th. That day was doubtless held with closed shops, ringing of church bells, and services. After church the 'Prentices most certainly made holiday. Since it is agreed among all nations that a *Te Deum* must be sung for a victory, something ought to be sung or said for defeat and shame, if only to thank Heaven that the thing is no worse, and to pray for statesmen with more wisdom. Perhaps there were in the city churches some clergymen who explained why we ought to thank Heaven at all times, even for wooden-headed ministers and an obstinate King who had forced rebellion upon the American colonists, and embroiled the country at the same time with France, Spain, and Holland; for generals who had made British armies lay down their arms; and for the judicial blindness which had fallen upon some of the best and wisest in the land—even upon Samuel Johnson. To my own mind, speaking as a plain Englishman, no misfortune that ever befell this nation approaches in magnitude our great misfortune in losing America. It will be amended and repaired some day: on that day—still, I fear, in the distant future—when there shall be set up for all time to come a great confederation of all English-speaking nations, when England and Scotland, the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and the Isles, will form one nation, as England and Scotland, or Illinois and California, form one nation. This confederation once formed, it seems as if it would matter nothing at all what was done outside. I wonder if that dream came to any of the sober citizens who heard that proclamation, and went to church on thanksgiving day to offer the sacrifice of praise and gratitude for shame and defeat? It is very well known that Johnson would hear of nothing but war and revenge. "I am willing to love all mankind *except an American*," he cried in 1778. "Rascals! robbers! pirates! I would burn and destroy them!" Quoth Miss Seward, who was present, "Sir, this is an instance that we are always most violent against those whom we have injured."

Again, in this year, they worked off very nearly a hundred convicts upon the shameful gallows-tree. On June 15th there was a grand field-day, when fifteen were hanged together before an enormous concourse of people. Twelve of them

were burglars; two had committed street robberies; one had obtained another man's pay under false pretences. The mind of the city must have been greatly comforted that day with the assurance that there were now fifteen burglars and thieves less in London. Those who were respited after the capital sentence were transported across the seas, and as the late unnatural conduct of the colonists now made Virginia no longer possible, they were sent to the Cape Coast.

As regards the literature and art of this year, the last of Johnson's life, the only books thought worthy of mention are three books of travels, viz., *Cook's Voyages*, *Coxe's Travels in Poland and Russia*, and *Swinburne's Travels in the Two Sicilies*. The Poet Laureate, to be sure, produced two or three immortal odes. That for the new year contains the following remarkable prophecy, the fulfilment of which we still await with anxious hope:

> "Two Britons through th' admiring world
> Shall wing their way with sails unfurled;
> Each from the other kindred state
> Avert by turns the bolts of fate;
> And acts of mutual amity endear
> The Tyre and Carthage of a wider sphere."

The Royal Academy was held as usual—how many of us remember that Johnson was its first Professor of Ancient Literature?—and a Handel commemoration was celebrated in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon, which produced the sum of £12,000.

There is no man who has ever lived whose life and opinions are so thoroughly well known as Johnson's. We seem to know exactly what he would think and what he would say at any given juncture. There was such a vein of prejudice and obstinacy in him that one feels certain he would always think substantially in the same way. Everybody, too, thinks he knows Johnson. Macaulay has written about him in a spirit horribly unjust to Bozzy; Carlyle has written about him; his life was written by Hawkins as well as by Boswell; Mrs. Piozzi published anecdotes of him; quantities of his letters have been published. This being so, it may naturally be supposed that there is nothing new to say about him. Let me, however, correct one false impression concerning him by reference to facts. I want, in fact, to destroy the common belief that Johnson for many years had to fight with the direst poverty. For five-and-twenty years, *i. e.*, between the years 1737 and 1761, Johnson lived mainly by his pen, but not quite. His patrimony, it is true, was but £20 in all, but his wife brought him the respectable sum of £800, which at five per cent. would produce £40 a year. Now at a time when, as is illustrated by the history of Johnson's friend the painter from Ireland, it was possible for a man to live, present a respectable appearance, and enjoy something of society for £30 a year, the addition of £40 a year to one's earnings could hardly be thought inconsiderable. Certainly its purchasing power in the year 1740 would be equivalent to that of £100 a year at the present day. Johnson himself tells us how cheaply it was possible to dine. He had beef and bread for sevenpence, and gave the waiter a penny. The other frequenters of the Pine-Apple, New Street, had wine as well, and so their dinner cost them a shilling. Remember, however, that these days of leanness were those of his first journey to town, when he was looking about him. When his wife joined him they took good lodgings, were always well housed, and we hear no more of eightpenny dinners. Breakfast on bread and milk might be had for a penny.

It was toward the close of 1737 that he settled in town. In 1738 he brought out his satire, "London," for which he received ten guineas. He got steady employment on the *Gentleman's Magazine* from the beginning, and appears to have received for the first eight months of his work the sum of £49 7*s.*, which is at the rate of £65 a year. His income, therefore, in his very first year of literary work amounted in all to a hundred guineas. I maintain that for the year 1738 this was a very respectable income for a beginner in any profession, and quite enough for a couple who had no children, no pretension of rank or style, and no more expensive establishment than a lodging of two rooms. Moreover, it does not appear that he ever did worse than this, but, on the other hand, did better and better every year. Johnson was certainly a hack, but he was not a starveling hack; he stepped at once above the level of the Grub Street poet. Why, only a year or two later we find him taking upon his own shoulders a debt of £12 due by his mother, and promising that it should be paid in two months. Is there ever a starveling young hack in modern Grub Street able to pay off a debt of £12—

that is to say, something like £40 of our money—in two months? As for his walking about the streets all night with Savage because they had no lodgings, that seems a ridiculous after-thought, because at least he had his wife's lodgings. It may certainly have been at the time when Mrs. Johnson was living at Hampstead, but so sensible a man as Johnson would have reflected that it is less fatiguing to walk four miles up the Tottenham Court Road, and so to bed, than to walk for the whole night round and round St. James's Square.

As regards the value of money at the time, a curious illustration is afforded by the history of what Bennet Langton's uncle, Peregrine Langton, achieved on £200 a year, which was his whole fortune. He lived in a house in Lincolnshire for which he paid a rent of £28 a year; there were attached to it two or three fields, which were a loss rather than a gain to him; his household consisted of his sister (who paid him £18 for her board), himself, two men-servants, and two maids. He kept as good a table as any plain country gentleman, with three or four dishes every day for dinner, he gave away the tenth of his income for charity, he saved some of his money, and he kept three horses in his stables. It is remarked, in part explanation of so much being got out of so little, that he was extremely careful to pay ready money for everything, and looked personally into his daily expenditure. Those two men-servants and maids, we may be sure, were not suffered to devour and to waste. Deducting the rent and tithe for charity, this good man had only £170 a year for everything, including three horses—about £3 5*s.* 4½*d.* a week, or less than ten shillings a day, for food, wine, dress, wages, and the daily small expenses of a household. Washing, baking, brewing, clothes, gardening, carpenter and house work generally, would all be done at home. The fields would supply hay for the horses; there would be cows for butter, milk, and cheese, pigs, fowls, turkeys, pigeons, geese, and ducks; but, all deductions made, how could the wages and the keep of these four servants be found, with the three or four dishes for the dinner, and the wine to set before company—no doubt home-made wines were used when there was none—out of £170 a year? Johnson, therefore, though he was never rich, could not have felt any real pinch of poverty; he never made a large income by literature, but enough to enable him to gratify any reasonable wish.

The much-abused "booksellers" of the day have, I think, had scant justice done them, when we consider the wretched stuff they published and paid for. One thing is greatly to their credit: they always did pay everybody whose work they produced, even if they paid him little. There *are* publishers at the present day who do not obey that golden rule. Goldsmith is said to have made in one year as much as £1800. Johnson bargained for £1575 for his Dictionary; he did in reality get more, but he had to pay his assistants, and the work was spread over seven years. During that period he brought out his *Irene*, and published the "Vanity of Human Wishes" and the *Rambler*. For the poem he received fifteen guineas; I do not know what he received for the *Rambler*. As for his *Irene*, it ran for thirteen nights. The author had the third, the sixth, and the ninth nights, producing in all £195 17*s.*; he also got £100 with the manuscript, so that his thirteen nights' run gave him close upon £300. At the present day, if he received five guineas a night, he would only get sixty-five guineas in all. But a play which now runs for thirteen nights only is a wretched failure. For the *Lives of the Poets* he himself asked two hundred guineas, which was probably much less than he might have asked and obtained. Dyer, for instance, received £200 for his revision of Plutarch; and Hawkesworth is said by Hawkins, but one cannot possibly believe it, to have received £6000 for his account of the South-sea Discoveries. Johnson had worked so long at low prices that he knew not his true value.

Of course Johnson was far above the level of the Grub Street hack. That is true as regards his method, his style, and the consideration with which he was regarded from the beginning. But yet he was a bookseller's hack nearly all his life, in the sense that he lived by finding out subjects which the public may be supposed to like, and writing on those subjects. The list of his writings is full of such things. It is hack-work pure and simple, undeniable hack-work, which, had it not been for necessity, would not have been written at all. A popular novelist, it may be generally observed, produces his books in a certain sandwich fashion: first,

a good book, showing art, study, and inspiration; then, a poor book, showing art without study and with no inspiration; then, another good book. In the one he is an artist, a Maker; in the other he is a hack. Johnson was nearly always the hack, who would have written few indeed of his productions had there not been the little pile of George II. guineas at the end of the work. Here, for instance, is a list of writings for the year 1741, when he should have been at his most anxious and ambitious time. He wrote in this year, all for the *Gentleman's Magazine*—I take it from Boswell's list:

"A Preface."

"Essay on the Account of the Conduct of the Duchess of Marlborough."

"An Account of the Life of Peter Burman."

"The Life of Sydenham."

"Proposals for Printing a Catalogue of the Library of the Earl of Oxford."

"Abridgment entitled Foreign History."

"Essay on the Description of China from the French of Du Halde."

There is hardly anything in the whole list, whether of this or following years, which we can suppose that he would have done from free choice. Lives of men in whom he was either not interested or not especially qualified to write, translations from the French, reviews of books, dedications, introductions, and prefaces: perhaps the only contributions to literature which appear to have been spontaneous were the *Rambler*, the *Idler*, *Rasselas*, "London," the "Vanity of Human Wishes" and *Irene*. As for the Dictionary, the editions of Shakespeare, and the *Lives of the Poets*, most assuredly not one of them would have been produced had not Johnson been compelled to prepare them. It seems to me, then, returning to the question of payment, that, considering the nature of the work done by Johnson—I mean that it was purely pot-boiling work—he was paid very well. We must also consider the time at which he wrote, and the money made in other professions. In the first half of the eighteenth century the country was poor; the great development of English trade was only beginning; no one was highly paid; the general standard of living, except for people of rank and wealth, was very simple. All government places were bestowed by interest and favor; some of them were bought and sold; the best of them were sinecures. As for the Church, its revenues were wasted among pluralists—any man might be a pluralist who was a Master of Arts. A man who entered the Church without family interest or connection would very possibly spend the whole of his days in the abject poverty of a country curacy. If he became a school-master, which no one would do unless compelled by poverty, he would have to become an usher, and live with the boys day and night, unless one could succeed with a private school, which Johnson made a feeble and unsuccessful attempt to do. As for medicine, there was as little opening then as now. The way to acquire a *clientèle* was first to take a political side—it mattered little which—to frequent the coffee-houses of your own party, to be seen daily, to learn and practise every obsequious and crawling art which dishonors a man, and so, by slow degrees, to attract and secure patrons. Then, to be sure, as now, if a man succeeded, he was enabled to make a very large income. Meade, for instance, used to clear £7000 a year by his profession. This, which is equivalent to a very much larger sum in our money, seems better than any living London physician is able to do. As a surgeon—but the history of Roderick Random teaches us how a young surgeon might fare. In his attempt to get private practice the young medical man had to face three rivals, who together were too much for him. These were the apothecary, the herbalist, and the quack.

If the Church, the school, and medicine presented no opening for a poor lad of parts, what remained? The law?—But the bar was as hopeless to one who had neither money nor friends as medicine. The lower branch of the profession?—I wish some one would throw light upon the kind of men who thus became attorneys, the cost of entering the profession, and the road to success. There are a good many attorneys in English literature toward the end of the eighteenth century, and they are not represented as a delightful body of men, but rather the reverse. The army?—But commissions and promotions in that most corrupt and venal of periods were entirely matters of favoritism and purchase. The navy?—You might remain for forty years a midshipman,

without interest. The colonies?—Emigration from England to America in the fifty years preceding the revolt of the colonies seems to have stopped almost altogether. Trade?—The city of London was the closest corporation in the world; no place where the young beginner would find it more difficult to start. Art?—There was always some chance, even in the dullest time, for a portrait-painter, but outside the "family piece," English patronage does not seem to have offered brilliant prospects to English painters. Acting?—The actor might succeed or he might not. If he did, he was not paid highly; if he did not, he starved. In either case his profession was regarded as hopelessly low, undignified, and unworthy. Johnson himself would never suffer Garrick to be made a member of the Literary Club. I am convinced that Johnson, with no family connections at all to help him, no degree, and no money, did, in adopting the profession of literature, better for himself than if he had taken orders, gone to the bar, become a physician, or remained a school-master. He was a bookseller's hack. But he was an honest workman, who retained his self-respect, and never advocated for money a cause which he did not approve.

Of his friends much has been written. He was a man who could not live without his friends. Love and sympathy were as necessary to this rough and rugged man as to any sentimental girl. But he gave far more than he received. He had friends of every degree, from the courtly Beauclerk, the scholarly Langton, Reynolds the painter, Thrale the brewer, down to Levett the quack doctor, and Frank Barber the negro. Nay, he had friends among the very unfortunates of the town, whose lives he rebuked, and whom he exhorted to turn from their ways while he relieved their wants from his ever open purse. He was always giving. If a man wanted advice, instruction, consolation, or money, he went to Johnson for it, and never came empty away. The eighteenth century is full of contrasts. There is nothing in it more wonderful than its inexhaustible benevolence side by side with its cruelties and brutalities. Pillory, stocks, the cruel lash, the hopeless debtor's prison, justice with tiger claws, the comprehensive gallows, and apparently unconscious of these things, ignorant that they need not be, Johnson, his great heart full of tender pity and sympathy, giving with both hands.

It is conventional to represent the eighteenth century as a time of leisure and quiet happiness; when a poet writes about this time he tries to breathe into his verse an atmosphere of peace; he does his best to throw into the poem a calm of the soul. Then people applaud the poet for catching so wonderfully the very spirit of the time. Well, I cannot, for my own part, find anywhere in England, during the last century, anything at all to justify this belief in the universal leisure. The eighteenth century was a desperately turbulent, dangerous, hard-working, poorly paid time; it was torn by continual contests and struggles, by party faction, and by civil wars; it began with a long war, and it ended with a long war. England had three civil wars: two at home and one in her colonies. The press-gang was busy in every port; the recruiting sergeant in every country town; the floggings, by which discipline was maintained, seem almost incredible; the iniquities of the government—not on this or that side, but on both sides—the jobbing, buying of places, sinecures, pluralities, nepotism, simony, as we read them now, appear simply intolerable. If there was no rest or peace without, there was little within. Religious men who were affected by a weakness of faith simply tortured their lives. Johnson, always praying and meditating, dreaded death with a constant fear which poisoned at least twenty years of his life. Cowper, after a life spent in religious exercises, died in "despair unutterable." No peace or quiet anywhere, save, perhaps, in some quiet cathedral close, where the canons, keeping aloof from controversy, dozed away their harmless lives as still they do; or outside the little country towns, where, to quiet women and retired men, the seasons passed then, as they may still pass, unvexed by questions, doubt, or thought of danger or of change. But as regards the life of action, the life among one's fellows, the only life worth having, the life of London, it must have been filled and perpetually troubled by the pain of witnessing continual injustice and needless suffering, the stupid engagements in war after war, with no end and no settlement, and the noisy struggle of opposing opinions, in which every man must play his part. But leisure, peace, and quiet—these things I cannot find.