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The Glory of English Prose

Letters to my Grandson

By

The Hon. Stephen Coleridge

"The chief glory of every people arises from its authors" *Dr. Johnson*

PREFACE

If you have read, gentle reader, the earlier series of *Letters to my Grandson on the World about Him*, you are to understand that in the interval between those letters and these, Antony has grown to be a boy in the sixth form of his public school.

It has not been any longer necessary therefore to study an extreme simplicity of diction in these letters.

My desire has been to lead him into the most glorious company in the world, in the hope that, having early made friends with the noblest of human aristocracy, he will never afterwards admit to his affection and intimacy anything mean or vulgar.

Many young people who, like Antony, are not at all averse from the study of English writers, stand aghast at the vastness of the what seems so gigantic an enterprise.

In these letters I have acted as pilot for a first voyage through what is to a boy an uncharted sea, after which I hope and believe he will have learned happily to steer for himself among the islands of the blest.

S.C.

THE FORD, CHOBHAM.

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LETTERS TO MY GRANDSON

1

MY DEAR ANTONY,

The letters which I wrote "On the world about you" having shown you that throughout all the universe, from the blazing orbs in infinite space to the tiny muscles of an insect's wing, perfect design is everywhere manifest, I hope and trust that you will never believe that so magnificent a process and order can be without a Mind of which it is the visible expression.

The chief object of those letters was to endorse your natural feeling of reverence for the Great First Cause of all things, with the testimony of your reason; and to save you from ever allowing knowledge of how the sap rises in its stalk to lessen your wonder at and admiration of the loveliness of a flower.

I am now going to write to you about the literature of England and show you, if I can, the immense gulf that divides distinguished writing and speech from vulgar writing and speech.

There is nothing so vulgar as an ignorant use of your own language. Every Englishman should show that he respects and honours the glorious language of his country, and will not willingly degrade it with his own pen or tongue.

"We have long preserved our constitution," said Dr. Johnson; "let us make some struggles for our language."

There is no need to be priggish or fantastic in our choice of words or phrases.

Simple old words are just as good as any that can be selected, if you use them in their proper sense and place.

By reading good prose constantly your ear will come to know the harmony of language, and you will find that your taste will unerringly tell you what is good and what is bad in style, without your

being able to explain even to yourself the precise quality that distinguishes the good from the bad.

Any Englishman with a love of his country and a reverence for its language can say things in a few words that will find their way straight into our hearts, Antony, and make us all better men. I will tell you a few of such simple sayings that are better than any more laboured writings.

On the 30th of June, 1921, in the *Times* In Memoriam column there was an entry:—

"To the undying memory of officers, non-commissioned officers and men of the 9th and 10th battalions of the K.O.Y.L.I.^[1] who were killed in the attack on Fricourt in the first battle of the Somme"; and below it there were placed these splendid words:—

"Gentlemen, when the barrage lifts."

In February of 1913 news reached England of the death, after reaching the South Pole, of four explorers, Captain Scott, their leader, among them.

Shortly before the end, Captain Oates, a man of fortune who joined the expedition from pure love of adventure, knowing that his helplessness with frozen feet was retarding the desperate march of the others towards their ship, rose up and stumbled out of the tent into a raging blizzard, saying, "I dare say I shall be away some time."

This was greatly said. His body was never found; but the rescue party who afterwards discovered the tent with the others dead in it, put up a cairn in the desolate waste of snow with this inscription:—

"Hereabouts died a very gallant gentleman, Captain L.E.G. Gates, Inniskilling Dragoons, who, on their return from the Pole in March, 1912, willingly walked to his death in a blizzard to try and save his comrades beset with hardship."

All this was done, said, and written, very nobly by all concerned.

In St. Paul's Cathedral there lies a recumbent effigy of General Gordon, who gave his life for the honour of England at Khartoum, and upon it are engraven these words:—

"He gave his strength to the weak, his substance to the poor, his sympathy to the suffering, his heart to God."

Even the concentrated terseness of Latin cannot surpass these examples of the power of the simplest and shortest English sentences to penetrate to the heart.

English can be used, by those who master it as an organ of expression, to convey deep emotion under perfect control, than which nothing is more moving, nothing better calculated to refine the mind, nothing more certain to elevate the character.

Whenever a man has something fine to communicate to his fellow-men he has but to use English without affectation, honestly and simply, and he is in possession of the most splendid vehicle of human thought in the world.

All the truly great writers of English speak with simplicity from their hearts, they all evince a spirit of unaffected reverence, they all teach us to look up and not down, and by the nobility of their works which have penetrated into every home where letters are cultivated, they have done an incalculable service in forming and sustaining the high character of our race.

Clever flippant writers may do a trifling service here and there by ridiculing the pompous and deflating the prigs, but there is no permanence in such work, unless—which is seldom the case—it is totally devoid of personal vanity.

Very little such service is rendered when it emanates from a writer who announces himself as equal if not superior to Shakespeare, and embellishes his lucubrations with parodies of the creeds.

"A Gentleman with a Duster," has in his "Glass of Fashion" shown us that the Society depicted in the books of Colonel Repington and Mrs. Asquith is not the true and great Society that sustains England in its noble station among civilised peoples, and we may be sure that neither do these books in the faintest degree represent the true and living literature of the times. They will pass away and be forgotten as utterly as are the fashion plates and missing-word competitions of ten years ago.

Therefore, Antony, be sure that the famous and living literature of England, that has survived all the shocks of time and changes of modern life, is the best and properest study for a man to fit him for life, to refine his taste, to aggravate his wisdom, and consolidate his character.

Your loving old
G.P.

[1]

King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry.

2

MY DEAR ANTONY,

I alluded, in my first letter to you about English literature, to the necessity of your learning from the beginning the wide distinction between what is good and what is bad style.

I do not know a better instance of a display of the difference between what is fine style and what is not, than may be made by putting side by side almost any sentence from the old authorised translation of the Bible and the same sentence from *The Bible in Modern Speech*.

I will just put two quotations side by side:—

"Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin: and yet I say unto you, That even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these."

"Learn a lesson from the wild lilies. Watch their growth. They neither toil nor spin, and yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his magnificence could array himself like one of these."

Here you can feel the perfect harmony and balance of the old version and the miserable commonplaceness of the effort of these misguided modern men.

Again:—

"Repent ye: for the kingdom of heaven is at hand."

This is mauled into: —

"Repent, he said, for the kingdom of the heavens is now close at hand."

These examples are perfectly suited to illustrate the immense difference that separates what is noble and fine in style and what is poor and third rate.

If you recite the old version aloud you cannot escape the harmony and balance of the sentences, and nothing dignified or distinguished can be made of the wretched paraphrases of the two desecrators of the splendid old text.

And, Antony, I would have you know that I, who have spent a long life in precious libraries, loving fine literature with all my heart, have long ago revered the old version of the Bible as the granite corner-stone upon which has been built all the noblest English in the world. No narrative in literature has yet surpassed in majesty, simplicity, and passion the story of Joseph and his brethren, beginning at the thirty-seventh and ending with the forty-fifth chapter of Genesis. There is surely nothing more moving and lovely in all the books in the British Museum than the picture of Joseph when he sees his little brother among his brethren: —

"And he lifted up his eyes, and saw his brother Benjamin, his mother's son, and said, Is this your younger brother, of whom ye spake to me? And he said, God be gracious unto thee, my son.

"And Joseph made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother: and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there."

The whole of the forty-fifth chapter is touching and beautiful beyond all criticism, transcending all art. To read it is to believe every word of it to be true, and to recognise the sublimity of such a relation.

No narrative of the great Greek writers reaches the heart so directly and poignantly as does this astonishing story. It moves swiftly and surely along from incident to incident till Joseph's loving soul can contain itself no more: —

"Then Joseph could not refrain himself before all of them that stood by him; and he cried, Cause every man to go out from me.

"And there stood no man with him, while Joseph made himself known unto his brethren.

"And he wept aloud: and the Egyptians and the house of Pharaoh heard.

"And Joseph said unto his brethren, I am Joseph; doth my father yet live? And he fell upon his brother Benjamin's neck, and wept; and Benjamin wept upon his neck. Moreover he kissed all his brethren and wept upon them.

"And after that his brethren talked with him."

And this wonderful chapter ends thus:—

"And they went up out of Egypt, and came unto the land of Canaan unto Jacob their father, and told him, saying, Joseph is yet alive, and is governor over all the land of Egypt.

"And Jacob's heart fainted, for he believed them not.

"And they told him all the words of Joseph, which he had said unto them: and when he saw the wagons which Joseph had sent to carry him, the spirit of Jacob their father revived:

"And Israel said, It is enough; Joseph my son is yet alive: I will go and see him before I die."

If you read the story of Joseph through from start to finish, you will see that it is a perfect narrative of the life of a man without fault, who suffered much but without resentment, was great of heart in evil days, and, when Fortune placed him in a position of glory and greatness, showed a stainless magnanimity and a brotherly love that nothing could abate. It is the first and most perfect story in literature of the nobility of man's soul, and as such it must remain a treasured and priceless possession to the world's end.

In the short Book of Ruth there lies embalmed in the finest English a very tender love story, set in all the sweet surroundings of the ripening corn, the gathered harvest, and the humble gleaners. Nothing can be more delightful than the direction of Boaz, the great land-

owner, to his men, after he had espied Ruth in her beauty gleaning in his fields: —

"And when she was risen up to glean, Boaz commanded his young men, saying, Let her glean even among the sheaves, and reproach her not:

"And let fall also some of the handfuls on purpose for her, and leave them, that she may glean them, and rebuke her not."

This little gem in the books of the Bible inspired Hood to write one of his most perfect lyrics: —

"She stood breast high amid the corn
Clasped by the golden light of morn,
Like the sweetheart of the sun,
Who many a glowing kiss had won.
Thus she stood amid the stocks,
Praising God with sweetest looks.
Sure, I said, Heaven did not mean
Where I reap thou should'st but glean;
Lay thy sheaf adown and come,
Share my harvest and my home."

That the Bible was translated into English at the time when the language was spoken and written in its most noble form, by men whose style has never been surpassed in strength combined with simplicity, has been a priceless blessing to the English-speaking race. The land of its birth, once flowing with milk and honey, has been for long centuries a place of barren rocks and arid deserts: Persians and Greeks and Romans and Turks have successively swept over it; the descendants of those who at different times produced its different books are scattered to the ends of the earth; but the English translation has for long years been the head cornerstone in homes innumerable as the sands of the sea in number.

No upheavals of the earth, no fire, pestilence, famine, or slaughter, can ever now blot it out from the ken of men.

When all else is lost we may be sure that the old English version of the Bible will survive. "Heaven and earth shall pass away, but my words shall not pass away."

Do not think it enough therefore, Antony, to hear it read badly and without intelligence or emotion, in little detached snippets, in church once a week.

Read it for yourself, and learn to rejoice in the perfect balance, harmony, and strength of its noble style.

Your loving old
G.P.

3

MY DEAR ANTONY,

I could write you many letters like my last one about the Bible, and perhaps some day I will go back to that wonderful Book and write you some more letters about it; but now I will go on and tell you about some of the great writers of English prose that came after the translation of the Bible.

Those translators were the great founders of the English language, which is probably on the whole the most glorious organ of human expression that the world has yet known.

It blends the classic purity of Greek and the stately severity of Latin with the sanguine passions and noble emotions of our race.

A whole life devoted to its study will not make you or me perfectly familiar with all the splendid passages that have been spoken and written in it. But I shall show in my letters, at least some of the glorious utterances scattered around me here in my library, so that you may recognise, as you ought, the pomp and majesty of the speech of England.

One of the great qualities that was always present in the writings of Englishmen from the time of Elizabeth down to the beginning of the nineteenth century was its restraint.