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A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR.

BY GRANT ALLEN.

I knew James Runciman but little, and that little for the most part in the way of business. But no one could know that ardent and eager soul at all, no matter how slightly, without admiring and respecting much that was powerful and vigorous in his strangely-compounded personality. His very look attracted. He had human weaknesses not a few, but all of the more genial and humane sort; for he was essentially and above everything a lovable man, a noble, interesting, and unique specimen of genuine, sincere, whole-hearted manhood.

He was a Northumbrian by birth, "and knew the Northumbrian coast," says one of his North-Country friends, "like his mother's face." His birthplace was at Cresswell, a little village near Morpeth, where he was born in August, 1852, so that he was not quite thirty-nine when he finally wore himself out with his ceaseless exertions. He had a true North-Country education, too, among the moors and cliffs, and there drank in to the full that love of nature, and especially of the sea, which forms so conspicuous a note in his later writings. Heather and wave struck the keynotes. A son of the people, he went first, in his boyhood, to the village school at Ellington; but on his eleventh birthday he was removed from the wild north to a new world at Greenwich. There he spent two years in the naval school; and straightway began his first experiences of life on his own account as a pupil teacher at North Shields Ragged School, not far from his native hamlet.

"A worse place of training for a youth," says a writer in *The Schoolmaster*, "it would be hard to discover. The building was unsuitable, the children rough, and the neighbourhood vile—and the long tramp over the moors to Cresswell and back at week ends was, perhaps, what enabled the young apprentice to preserve his health of mind and body. His education was very much in his own hands. He managed in a few weeks to study enough to pass his examinations with credit. The rest of his time was spent in reading everything which came in his way, so that when he entered Borough-road in January, 1871, he was not only almost at the top of the list, but he was the best informed man of his year. His fellow candidates

remember even now his appearance during scholarship week. Like David, he was ruddy of countenance, like Saul he towered head and shoulders above the rest, and a mass of fair hair fell over his forehead. Whene'er he took his walks abroad he wore a large soft hat, and a large soft scarf, and carried a stick that was large but not soft."

To this graphic description I will add a second one. "He was a splendid all-round athlete," says another friend, who knew him at this time, in the British and Foreign School Society's London college. "Six feet two or three in height, and with a fine muscular development, he could box, wrestle, fence, or row with all comers, and beat them with ridiculous ease. No one could have been made to believe that he would die, physically worn out, before he was forty. His intellectual mastery was as unquestioned as his physical superiority; he always topped the examination lists, to the chagrin of some of the lecturers, whom he teased sadly by protesting against injustice the moment it peeped out, by teaching all the good young men to smoke prodigiously, by scattering revolutionary verses about the college, and finally by collecting and burning in one grand bonfire every copy of an obnoxious text-book under which the students had long suffered."

This was indeed the germ of the man as we all knew him long afterwards.

Runciman left the college to take up the mastership of a London Board School in a low part of Deptford; and here he soon gained an extraordinary influence over the population of one of the worst slums in London. Mr. Thomas Wright, the "Journeyman Engineer," has already told in print elsewhere the story of Runciman's descent into the depths of Deptford, how he set about humanising the shoeless, starving, conscience-little waifs who were drafted into his school, and how, before many months had passed, he never walked through the squalid streets of his own quarter without two or three loving little fellows all in tatters trying to touch the hem of his garment, while a group of the more timid followed him admiringly afar off. From the children, his good influence extended to the parents; and it was an almost every-day occurrence for visitors from the slums to burst into the school to fetch the master to some coster who was "a-killin' his woman." The brawny young giant would dive

into the courts where the police go in couples, clamber rickety stairs, and "interview" the fighting pair. "His plan was to appeal to the manliness of the offender, and make him ashamed of himself; often such a visit ended in a loan, whereby the 'barrer' was replenished and the surly husband set to work; but if all efforts at peace-making were useless, this new apostle had methods beyond the reach of the ordinary missionary—he would (the case deserving it) drop his mild, insinuating, persuasive tones, and not only threaten to pulp the incorrigible blackguard into a jelly, but proceed to do it."

Runciman, however, was much more in fibre than a mere schoolmaster. He worked hard at his classes by day; he worked equally hard by night at his own education, and at his first attempts at journalism. He matriculated at London University, and passed his first B.Sc. examination. At one and the same time he was carrying on his own school, in the far East End, contributing largely to an educational paper, *The Teacher*, and writing two or three pages a week in *Vanity Fair*, which he long sub-edited. His powers of work were enormous, and he systematically overtaxed them.

It is not surprising that, under this strain and stress, even that magnificent physique showed signs of breaking down, like every other writer's. A long holiday on the Mediterranean, and another at Torquay, restored him happily to his wonted health; but he saw he must now choose between schoolmastering and journalism. To run the two abreast was too much, even for James Runciman's gigantic powers. Permanent work on *Vanity Fair* being offered to him on his return, he decided to accept it; and thenceforth he plunged with all the strength and ardour of his fervid nature into his new profession.

"It was during this period of insatiable greed for work," says the correspondent of a Nottingham journal, "that I first knew him. You may wonder how he could possibly get through the tasks which he set himself. You would not wonder if you had seen him, when he was in the humour, tramp round the room and pour out a stream of talk on men and books which might have gone direct into print at a high marketable value. The London correspondent of a Nottingham paper says that Runciman was justly vain of the speed of his pen. That is true. He considered that a journalist ought to be able to dictate an article at the rate of 150 words a minute to a shorthand writ-

er. I doubt whether anybody can do that, but Runciman certainly thought he could. He loved to settle a thing off on the instant with one huge effort. Here is an authentic story that shows his method. It is a physical performance, but he tackled journalistic obstacles in the same spirit:

"A parent, who fancied he had a grievance, burst furiously into the schoolroom one day, and startled its quietness with a string of oaths. 'That isn't how we talk here,' said Runciman, in his quiet way. 'Will you step into my room if you have anything to discuss?' Another volley of oaths was the reply, and the unwary parent added that he wasn't going out, and nobody could put him out. Runciman was not the man to allow such a challenge of his authority and prowess to be issued before his scholars and to go unanswered. Without another word, he took the man by the coat-collar with one hand, by the most convenient part of his breeches with the other hand, carried him to the door, gave him a half-a-dozen admonitory shakings, and chucked him down outside. Then he returned and made this cool entry in the school log-book: 'Father of the boy — — came into the school to-day, and was very disorderly. I carried him out and chastised him.'"

It was while he was engaged on *Vanity Fair* that I first met Runciman—I should think somewhere about the year 1880. He then edited (or sub-edited) for a short time that clever but abortive little journal, *London*, started by Mr. W.E. Henley, and contributed to by Andrew Lang, Robert Louis Stevenson, Edmund Gosse, and half a dozen more of us. Here we met not infrequently. I was immensely impressed by Runciman's vigorous personality, and by his profound sympathy with the troubles and trials and poverty of the real people. He called himself a Conservative, it is true, while I called myself a Radical; but, except in name, I could not see much difference between our democratic tendencies. Runciman appeared to me a most earnest and able thinker, full of North-country grit, and overflowing with energy.

His later literary work is well known to the world. He contributed to the *St. James's Gazette* an admirable series of seafaring sketches, afterwards reprinted as "The Romance of the North Coast." He also wrote "special" articles for the *Standard* and the *Pall Mall*, as well as

essays on social and educational topics for the *Contemporary* and the *Fortnightly*. The humour and pathos of pupil-teaching were exquisitely brought out in his "School Board Idylls" and "Schools and Scholars"; his knowledge of the sea and his experience of fishermen supplied him with materials for "Skippers and Shellbacks" and for "Past and Present." He was always a lover of his kind, so his work has almost invariably a strong sympathetic note; and perhaps his best-known book, "A Dream of the North Sea," was written in support of the Mission to Fishermen. He produced but one novel, "Grace Balmaign's Sweetheart"; but his latest work, "Joints in our Social Armour," returned once more to that happier vein of picturesque description which sat most easily and naturally upon him.

The essays which compose the present volume were contributed to the columns of the *Family Herald*. And this is their history:—For many years I had answered the correspondence and written the social essays in that excellent little journal—a piece of work on which I am not ashamed to say that I always look back with affectionate pleasure. Several years since, however, I found myself compelled by health to winter abroad, and therefore unable to continue my weekly contributions. Who could fill up the gap? Who answer my dear old friends and questioners? The proprietor asked me to recommend a substitute. I bethought me instinctively at once of Runciman. The work was, indeed, not an easy one for which to find a competent workman. It needed a writer sufficiently well educated to answer a wide range of questions on the most varied topics, yet sufficiently acquainted with the habits, ideas, and social codes of the lower middle class and the labouring people to throw himself readily into their point of view on endless matters of life and conduct. Above all, it needed a man who could sympathise genuinely with the simplest of his fellows. The love troubles of housemaids, the perplexities as to etiquette, or as to practical life among shop-girls and footmen, must strike him, not as ludicrous, but as subjects for friendly advice and assistance. The fine-gentleman journalist would clearly have been useless for such a post as that. Runciman was just cut out for it. I suggested the work to him, and he took to it kindly. The editor was delighted with the way he buckled up to his new task, and thanked me warmly afterwards for recommending so admirable and so gentle a workman. Those who do not know the

nature of the task may smile; but the man who answers the *Family Herald* correspondence, stands in the position of confidant and father-confessor to tens of thousands of troubled and anxious souls among his fellow-countrymen, and still more his fellow-countrywomen. It is, indeed, a *sacerdoce*. The essays are usually contributed by the same person who answers the correspondence; and the collection of Runciman's papers reprinted in this little volume will show that they have often no mean literary value.

For many years, however, Runciman had systematically overworked, and in other ways abused, his magnificent constitution. The seeds of consumption were gradually developed. But the crash came suddenly. Early in the summer of 1891, he broke down altogether. He was sent to a hydropathic establishment at Matlock; but the doctors discovered he was already in a most critical condition, and four weeks later advised his wife to take him back to his own home at Kingston. His splendid physique seemed to run down with a rush, and when a month was over, he died, on July — th, a victim to his own devouring energy — perhaps, too, to the hardships of a life of journalism.

"This was a man," said his friendly biographer, whom I have already quoted. No sentence could more justly sum up the feeling of all who knew James Runciman. "Bare power and tenderness, and such sadly human weakness" — that is the verdict of one who well knew him. I cannot claim to have known him well myself; but it is an honour to be permitted to add a memorial stone to the lonely cairn of a fellow-worker for humanity.

G.A.

AN INTRODUCTORY WORD ABOUT THE BOOK.

BY W.T. STEAD.

James Runciman was a remarkably gifted man who died just about the time when he ought to have been getting into harness for his life's work. He had in him, more than most men, the materials out of which an English Zola might have been made. And as we badly need an English Zola, and have very few men out of whom such a genius could be fashioned, I have not ceased to regret the death of the author of this volume. For Zola is the supreme type in our day of the novelist-journalist, the man who begins by getting up his facts at first-hand with the care and the exhaustiveness of a first-rate journalist, and who then works them up with the dramatic and literary skill of a great novelist. Charles Reade was something of the kind in his day; but he has left no successor.

James Runciman might have been such an one, if he had lived. He had the tireless industry, the iron constitution, the journalist's keen eye for facts, the novelist's inexhaustible fund of human sympathy. He was a literary artist who could use his pen as a brush with brilliant effect, and he had an amazing facility in turning out "copy." He had lived to suffer, and felt all that he wrote. There was a marvelous range in his interests. He had read much, he improvised magnificently, and there was hardly anything that he could not have done if only—but, alas! it is idle mooning in the land of Might-Have-Beens!

The collected essays included in this volume were contributed by Mr. Runciman to the pages of *The Family Herald*. In the superfine circles of the Sniffy, this fact is sufficient to condemn them unread. For of all fools the most incorrigible is surely the conventional critic who judges literary wares not by their intrinsic merit or demerit, but by the periodical in which they first saw the light. The same author may write in the same day two articles, putting his best work and thought into each, but if he sends one to *The Saturday Review* and the other to *The Family Herald*, those who relish and admire his writing in the former would regard it as little less than a *betise* to suggest that the companion article in *The Family Herald* could be anything but miserable commonplace, which no one with any reputation to lose in "literary circles" would venture to read. The same

arrogance of ignorance is observable in the supercilious way in which many men speak of the articles appearing in other penny miscellanies of popular literature. They richly deserve the punishment which Mr. Runciman reminds us Sir Walter Scott inflicted upon some blatant snobs who were praising Coleridge's poetry in Coleridge's presence. "One gentleman had been extravagantly extolling Coleridge, until many present felt a little uncomfortable. Scott said, 'Well, I have lately read in a provincial paper some verses which I think better than most of their sort.' He then recited the lines 'Fire, Famine, and Slaughter' which are now so famous. The eulogist of Coleridge refused to allow the verses any merit. To Scott he addressed a series of questions—'Surely you must own that this is bad?' 'Surely you cannot call this anything but poor?' At length Coleridge quietly broke in, 'For Heaven's sake, leave Mr. Scott alone! I wrote the poem'" (p. 39).

Such lessons are more needed now than ever. Only by stripes can the vulgar pseudo-cultured be taught their folly.

The post of father-confessor and general director to the readers of *The Family Herald* which Mr. Runciman filled in succession to Mr. Grant Allen is one which any student of human nature might envy. There is no dissecting-room of the soul like the Confessional, where the priest is quite impalpable and impersonal and the penitent secure in the privacy of an anonymous communication. The ordinary man and woman have just as much of the stuff of tragedy and comedy in their lives as the Lord Tomnoddy or Lady Fitzboodle, and as there are many more of them—thank Heaven!—than the lords and ladies, the masses afford a far more fertile field for the psychological student of life and character than the classes. They are, besides, much less artificial. There are fewer apes and more men and women among people who don't pay income tax than among those who do. As Director-General of the Answers to Correspondents column of *The Family Herald* Mr. Runciman was brought into more vitalising touch with the broad and solid realities of the average life of the average human being, with all its wretched pettiness and its pathetic anxieties, its carking cares and its wild, irrational aspirations, than he would have been if he had spent his nights in dining out in May-fair and lounged all day in the clubs of Pall Mall.

The essays which he contributed to *The Family Herald* were therefore adjusted to the note which every week was sounded by his innumerable correspondents. He was in touch with his public. He did not write above their heads. His contributions were eminently readable, bright, sensible, and interesting. He always had something to say, and he said it, as was his wont, crisply, deftly, and well. And through the chinks and crevices of the smoothly written essay you catch every now and then glimpses of the Northumbrian genius whose life burnt itself out at the early age of thirty-nine.

For James Runciman was anything but a smug, smooth, sermonical essayist. He was a Berserker of the true Northern breed, whose fiery soul glowed none the less fiercely because he wore a large soft hat instead of the Viking's helmet and wielded a pen rather than sword or spear. Like the war-horse in Job, he smelled the battle afar off, the thunder of the captains and the shouting. His soul rejoiced in conflict, in the storm and the stress of the struggle both of nature and of man. It was born in his blood, and what was lacking at birth came to him in the north-easter which hurled the waves of the Northern Sea in unavailing fury against the Northumbrian coast. He lived at a tension too great to be maintained without incessant stimulus. It was an existence like that of the heroes of Valhalla, who recruited at night the energies dissipated in the battles of the day by quaffing bumpers of inexhaustible mead. In these essays we have the Berserker in his milder moods, his savagery all laid aside, with but here and there a glint, as of sun-ray on harness, to remind us of the sinking in the glory and pride of his strength.

The essays abound with traces of that consummate mastery of English which distinguished all his writings. He, better than any man of our time, could use such subtle magic of woven words as to make the green water of the ocean surge and boil into white foam on the printed page. As befitted a dweller on the north-east coast, he passionately loved the sea. The sea and the sky are the two exits by which dwellers in the slums of Deptford and in North Shields can escape from the inferno of life. He was a close observer of nature and of men. In his pictures of life in the depths he was a grim and uncompromising realist, who, however, was kept from pessimism by his faith in good women and his knowledge of worse men in the

past than even "the Squire" and the valet-keeping prize-fighters of our time.

There was a sensible optimism about James Runciman, Conservative though he styled himself,—although there are probably few who would suspect that from such an essay as the bitter description of English life in "Quiet Old Towns" or his lamentation over the unequal distribution of wealth. His sympathy with the suffering of the poor—of the real poor—was a constant passion, and he showed it quite as much by his somewhat Carlylean denunciation of the reprobate as by his larger advocacy of measures that seemed to him best calculated to prevent the waste of child-life.

More than anything else there is in these essays the oozing through of the bitter but kindly cynicism of a disillusioned man of the world. His essay, for instance, entitled "Vanity of Vanities," is full of the sense of vanity of human effort. And yet against the whole current of this tendency to despondency and despair, we have such an essay as "Are we Wealthy?" in which he declared the day of declamation has passed, but that all things are possible to organisation. "In many respects it is a good world, but it might be made better, nobler, finer in every quarter, if the poor would only recognise wise and silent leaders, and use the laws which men have made in order to repair the havoc which other men have also made." But he reverts to the note of sad and kindly cynicism as he contemplates this supreme ironic procession of life with the laughter of gods in the background, even although he hastens to remind us that much may be made of it if we are wise.

These prose sermons by a tamed Berserker remind us somewhat of a leopard in harness. But they are good sermons for all that, veritable *tours de force* considering who is their author and how alien to him was the practice of preaching. His essay entitled "A Little Sermon on Failures" might be read with profit in many a pulpit, and "Vanity of Vanities" would serve as an admirable discourse on Ecclesiastes. They illustrate the manysidedness of their gifted author not less than his sympathetic treatment of distress and want in "Men who are Down."

These fragments snatched from the mass of his literary output need no introduction from me. Mr. Grant Allen has written with

friendly appreciation of the man. I gladly join him in paying a tribute of posthumous respect and admiration to James Runciman and his work.

W.T.S.

SIDE LIGHTS.

I.

LETTER-WRITERS.

Since old Leisure died, we have come to think ourselves altogether too fine and too busy to cultivate the delightful art of correspondence. Dickens seems to have been almost the last man among us who gave his mind to letter-writing; and his letters contain some of his very best work, for he plunged into his subject with that high-spirited abandonment which we see in "Pickwick," and the full geniality of his mind came out delightfully. The letter in which he describes a certain infant schoolboy who lost himself at the Great Exhibition is one of the funniest things in literature, but it is equalled in positive value by some of the more serious letters which the great man sent off in the intervals of his heavy labour. Dickens could do nothing by halves, and thus, at times when he could have earned forty pounds a day by sheer literary work, he would spend hours in answering people whom he had never seen, and, what is more remarkable, these "task"-letters were marked by all the brilliant strength and spontaneity of his finest chapters. He was the last of the true correspondents, and we shall not soon look upon his like again. With all the contrivances for increasing our speed of communication, and for enabling us to cram more varied action into a single life, we have less and less time to spare for salutary human intercourse. The post-card symbolises the tendency of the modern mind. We have come to find out so many things which ought to be done that we make up our minds to do nothing whatever thoroughly; and the day may come when the news of a tragedy ruining a life or a triumph crowning a career will be conveyed by a sixpenny telegram. In the bad old days, when postage was dear and the means of conveyance slow, people who could afford to correspond at all sat down to begin a letter as though they were about to engage in some solemn rite. Every patch of the paper was covered, and every word was weighed, so that the writer screwed the utmost possible value for his money out of the post-office. The letters written in the last century resembled the deliberate and lengthy communications of Roman gentlemen like Cicero: and there is little wonder that the good folk made the most of their paper and their time. We find Godwin casually mentioning the fact that he paid twenty-one shillings and eightpence for the postage of a letter from Shelley; readers of *The Antiquary* will remember that Lovel paid

twenty-five shillings postage for one epistle, besides half a guinea for the express rider. *Certes* a man had good need to drive a hard bargain with the Post Office in those pinching times! Of course the "lower orders" — poor benighted souls — were not supposed to have any correspondence at all, and the game was kept up by gentlemen of fortune, by merchants, by eager and moneyed lovers, and by stray persons of literary tastes, who could manage to beg franks from members of Parliament and other dignitaries. One gentleman, not of literary tastes, once franked a cow and sent her by post; but this kind of postal communication was happily rare. The best of the letter-writers felt themselves bound to give their friends good worth for their money, and thus we find the long chatty letters of the eighteenth century purely delightful. I do not care much for Lord Chesterfield's correspondence; he was eternally posing with an eye on the future — perhaps on the very immediate future. As Johnson sternly said, "Lord Chesterfield wrote as a dancing-master might write," and he spoke the truth. Fancy a man sending such stuff as this to a raw boy — "You will observe the manners of the people of the best fashion there; not that they are — it may be — the best manners in the world, but because they are the best manners of the place where you are, to which a man of sense always conforms. The nature of things is always and everywhere the same; but the modes of them vary more or less in every country, and an easy and genteel conformity to them, or rather the assuming of them at proper times and proper places, is what particularly constitutes a man of the world, and a well-bred man!" All true enough, but how shallow, and how ineffably conceited! Here is another absurd fragment — "My dear boy, let us resume our reflections upon men, their character, their manners — in a word, our reflections upon the World." It is quite like Mr. Pecksniff's finest vein. There is not a touch of nature or vital truth in the Chesterfield letters, and the most that can be said of them is that they are the work of a fairly clever man who was flattered until he lost all sense of his real size. If we take the whole bunch of finikin sermons and compare them with the one tremendous knock-down letter which Johnson sent to the dandy earl, we can easily see who was the Man of the pair. When we return to Walpole, the case is different. Horace never posed at all; he was a natural gentleman, and anything like want of simplicity was odious to him. The age lives in his charming letters; after going