

p. 1 INTRODUCTION.

I.

The last century was yet in its infancy when the author of *The Romany Rye* first saw the light in the sleepy little East Anglian township of East Dereham, in the county distinguished by Borrow as the one in which the people eat the best dumplings in the world and speak the purest English. "Pretty quiet D[ereham]" was the retreat in those days of a Lady Bountiful in the person of Dame Eleanor Fenn, relict of the worthy editor of the *Paston Letters*. It is better known in literary history as the last resting-place of a sad and unquiet spirit, escaped from a world in which it had known nought but sorrow, of "England's sweetest and most pious bard," William Cowper. But Destiny was weaving a robuster thread to connect East Dereham with literature, for George Borrow {1} was born there on July 5th, 1803, and, nomad though he was, the place was always dear to his heart as his earliest home.

In 1816, after ramblings far and wide both in Ireland and in Scotland, the Borrowes settled in Norwich, where George was schooled under a master whose name at p. 2 least is still familiar to English youth, Dr. Valpy (brother of Dr. Richard Valpy). Among his school-fellows at the grammar school were Rajah Brooke and Dr. James Martineau. George Borrow, a hardened truant from his earliest teens, was once horsed, to undergo a flogging, on the back of James Martineau, and he never afterwards took kindly to the philosophy of that remarkable man. We are glad to know that Edward Valpy's ferule was weak, though his scholarship was strong. Stories were current that even in those days George used to haunt the gipsy tents on that Mousehold Heath which lives eternally in the breezy canvases of "Old Crome," and that he went so far as to stain his face with walnut-juice to the right Egyptian hue. "Are you suffering from jaundice, Borrow," asked the Doctor, "or is it merely dirt?" While at Norwich, too, he was greatly influenced in the direction of linguistics by the English "pocket Goethe," William Taylor, the head of a clan known as the Taylors of Norwich, to distinguish them from a race in which the principle of heredity was even more strikingly developed — the Taylors of Ongar. In February 1824 his father,

the gallant Captain Thomas Borrow, died, and his articles in the firm of a Norwich solicitor having determined, George went to London to commence literary man, in the old sense of the servitude, under the well-known bookseller-publisher, Sir Richard Phillipps. In Grub Street he translated and compiled galore, but when the trees began to shoot in 1825 he broke his chain and escaped to the country, to the dingle, and to Isopel Berners.

p. 3To dwell upon the bare outlines of Borrow's early career would be a superfluously dull proceeding. We shall only add a few names and dates to the framework, supplied with a fidelity that is rare in much more formal works of autobiography, in the pages of *Lavengro*. From the same pages we may detach just a few of the earlier influences which went to make up the rare and complex individuality of the writer. Borrow's father, a fine old soldier, in revealing his son's youthful idiosyncrasy, projects a clear mental image of his own habit of mind. "The boy had the impertinence to say the classics were much over-valued, and amongst other things that some horrid fellow or other, some Welshman, I think (thank God it was not an Irishman), was a better poet than Ovid. {2} That a boy of his years should entertain an opinion of his own, I mean one which militates against all established authority, is astonishing. As well might a raw recruit pretend to offer an unfavourable opinion on the manual and platoon exercise. The idea is preposterous; the lad is too independent by half."

Borrow's account of his father's death is a highly affecting piece of English. The ironical humour blent with pathos in his picture of this ill-rewarded old disciplinarian (who combined a tenderness of heart with a fondness for military metaphor that frequently reminds one of "My Uncle Toby"), the details of the ailments and the portents that attended his infantile career, and, p. 4above all, the glimpses of the wandering military life from barrack to barrack and from garrison to garrison, inevitably remind the reader of the childish reminiscences of Laurence Sterne, a writer to whom it may thus early be said that George Borrow paid no small amount of unconscious homage. A homage of another sort, fully recognised and declared, was that paid to the great work of Defoe, and to the spirit of strange and romantic enterprise which it aroused in its reader.

After *Robinson Crusoe* there played across the disk of his youthful memory a number of weird and hairy figures never to be effaced. A strange old herbalist and snake-killer with a skin cap first whetted his appetite for the captivating confidences of roadside vagrants, and the acquaintanceship serves as an introduction to the scene of the gipsy encampment, where the young Sapengro or serpent charmer was first claimed as brother by Jasper Petulengro. The picture of the encampment may serve as an example of Borrowian prose, nervous, unembarrassed, and graphic.

One day it happened, being on my rambles, I entered a green lane which I had never seen before. At first it was rather narrow, but as I advanced it became considerably wider. In the middle was a drift-way with deep ruts, but right and left was a space carpeted with a sward of trefoil and clover. There was no lack of trees, chiefly ancient oaks, which, flinging out their arms from either side, nearly formed a canopy and afforded a pleasing shelter from the rays of the sun, which was burning fiercely above. Suddenly a group of objects attracted my attention. Beneath one of the largest of the trees, upon the grass, was a kind of low p. 5tent or booth, from the top of which a thin smoke was curling. Beside it stood a couple of light carts, whilst two or three lean horses or ponies were cropping the herbage which was growing nigh. . . .

As a pendant to the landscape take a Flemish interior. The home of the Borrowers had been removed in the meantime, in accordance with the roving traditions of the family, from Norman Cross to Edinburgh and from Edinburgh to Clonmel.

And to the school I went [at Clonmel], where I read the Latin tongue and the Greek letters with a nice old clergyman who sat behind a black oaken desk with a huge Elzevir Flaccus before him, in a long gloomy kind of hall with a broken stone floor, the roof festooned with cobwebs, the walls considerably dilapidated and covered over with stray

figures in hieroglyphics evidently produced by the application of a burnt stick.

In Ireland, too, he made the acquaintance of the gossoon Murtagh, who taught him Irish in return for a pack of cards. In the course of his wanderings with his father's regiment he develops into a well-grown and well-favoured lad, a shrewd walker and a bold rider. "People may talk of first love—it is a very agreeable event, I dare say—but give me the flush, the triumph, and glorious sweat of a first ride." {5}

At Norwich he learns modern languages from an old *emigri*, a true disciple of the *ancien cour*, who sets Boileau high above Dante; and some misty German p. 6 metaphysics from the Norwich philosopher, who consistently seeks a solace in smoke from the troubles of life. His father had already noted his tendency to fly off at a tangent which was strikingly exhibited in the lawyer's office, where "within the womb of a lofty deal desk," when he should have been imbibing Blackstone and transcribing legal documents, he was studying Monsieur Vidocq and translating the Welsh bard Ab Gwilym; he was consigning his legal career to an early grave when he wrote this elegy on the worthy attorney his master.

He has long since sunk to his place in a respectable vault, in the aisle of a very respectable church, whilst an exceedingly respectable marble slab against the neighbouring wall tells on a Sunday some eye wandering from its prayer-book that his dust lies below. To secure such respectabilities in death he passed a most respectable life, a more respectable-looking individual never was seen.

In the meantime as a sequel to his questionings on the subjects of reality and truth, the Author was asking himself "What is death?" and the query serves as a prelude to the first of the many breezy dialogues with that gipsy cousin-german to Autolycus, Jasper Petulengro.

"What is your opinion of death, Mr. Petulengro?"

"My opinion of death, brother, is much the same as that in the old song of Pharaoh . . . when a man dies he is cast into the earth and his wife and child sorrow over him. If he has neither wife nor child, then his father and mother, I suppose; and if he is quite alone in the world, p. 7why, then he is cast into the earth and there is an end of the matter."

"And do you think that is the end of man?"

"There's an end of him, brother, more's the pity."

"Why do you say so?"

"Life is sweet, brother."

"Do you think so?"

"Think so! there's night and day, brother, both sweet things; sun, moon and stars, brother, all sweet things; there's likewise a wind on the heath. Life is very sweet, brother: who would wish to die?"

"I would wish to die."

"You talk like a gorgio—which is the same as talking like a fool; were you a Romany chal you would talk wiser. Wish to die, indeed! a Romany chal would wish to live for ever."

"In sickness, Jasper?"

"There's the sun and stars, brother."

"In blindness, Jasper?"

"There's the wind on the heath, brother; if I could only feel that I would gladly live for ever. Dfta, we'll now go to the tents and put on the gloves, and I'll try to make you feel what a sweet thing it is to be alive, brother."

Leaving Norwich and his legal trammels, a few weeks after his father's death, in 1824, Lavengro reaches London—the scene of

Grub Street struggles not greatly relaxed in severity since the days of Newbery, Gardener and Christopher Smart. As the genius of Hawthorne was cooped up and enslaved for the American "Peter Parley," so that of Borrow was hag-ridden by a bookseller publisher of an even worse type, the radical alderman and philanthropic sweater, Sir Richard p. 8Phillipps. For this stony-hearted faddist he covered reams of paper with printers' copy; and we are told that the kind of compilation that he liked (and probably executed) best was that of *Newgate Lives and Trials*. He had well-nigh reached the end of his tether when he had the conversation with Phillipps's head factotum, Taggart, which we cite below and recommend feelingly to the consideration of every literary aspirant. Sordid and commonplace enough are the details; simple and free from every kind of inflation the language in which they are narrated. Yet how picturesque are these vignettes of London life! How vivid and yet how strange are the figures that animate them! The harsh literary impresario with his "drug in the market," who seems to have stalked straight out of Smollett, {8} the gnarled old applewoman, with every wrinkle shown, on her stall upon London Bridge, the grasping Armenian merchant who softened at the sound of his native tongue, the giddy young spendthrift Francis Ardry and the confiding young creature who had permitted him to hire her a very handsome floor in the West End, the gipsies and thimble-riggers in Greenwich Park—what moving and lifelike figures are these, stippled in with a seeming absence of art, yet as strange and as rare as a Night in Bagdad, a chapter of Balzac, or the most fantastic scene in the *New Arabian Nights*.

This brief recapitulation—in which it has been p. 9possible but just to touch upon a few of the inner springs of Borrow's life as revealed in the autobiographical *Lavengro*—brings us once again to that spring day in 1825—May 20th—when the author disposed of an unidentifiable manuscript for the sumptuous equivalent of #20. On May 22nd, after little more than a year's residence in London, he abandons the city. From London he proceeds to Amesbury, in Wiltshire, which he reaches on May 23rd; visits Stonehenge, the Roman Camp of Old Sarum and Salisbury; on May 26th he leaves Salisbury, and (after an encounter with the long-lost son of the old applewoman, returned from Botany Bay), strikes north-west. On the 30th he

has been walking four days in a northerly direction, when he arrives at the inn where the maid Jenny refreshes him at the pump, and he meets the author with whom he passes the night. On the 31st he purchases the horse and cart of Jack Slingsby, whom he had previously seen but once, at Tamworth, many years ago when he was little more than a child. On June 1st he makes the first practical experience of a vagrant's life, and passes the night in the open air in a Shropshire dell; on June 5th he is visited by Leonora Herne, the grandchild of the old "brimstone hag" who was jealous of the cordiality with which the young stranger had been received by the Petulengroes and initiated in the secrets of their gipsy tribe. Three days later, betrayed to the old woman by Leonora, he is drabbed (*i.e.* poisoned) with the manricli or doctored cake of Mrs. Herne; his life is in imminent danger, but he is p. 10 saved by the opportune arrival of Peter Williams. He passes Sunday, June 12th, with the Welsh preacher and his wife Winifred; on the 21st he departs with his itinerant hosts to the Welsh border. Before entering Wales, however, he turns back with Ambrose ("Jasper") Petulengro and settles with his own stock-in-trade as tinker and blacksmith at the foot of the dingle hard by Mumper's Lane, near Willenhall, in Staffordshire; here at the end of June 1825 takes place the classical encounter between the philologer and the flaming tinman—all this, is it not related in *Lavengro*, and substantiated with much hard labour of facts and dates by Dr. W. I. Knapp in his exhaustive biography of George Borrow? The allurements of his genius is such that the etymologist shall leave his roots and the philologer his Maeso-Gothic to take to the highway and dwell in the dingle with "Don Jorge."

Lavengro's triumph over the flaming tinman is the prelude to what Professor Saintsbury justly calls "the miraculous episode of Ysopel Berners," and the narrative of the author's life is thence continued, with many digressions, but with a remarkable fidelity to fact as far as the main issue is concerned, until the narrative, though not the life-story of the author, abruptly terminates at Horncastle, in August 1825. There follows what is spoken of as the veiled period of Borrow's life, from 1826 to 1833.

The years in which we drift are generally veiled from posterity. The system of psychometry carried to such perfection by Obermann and Amiel could at no time p. 11 have been exactly congenial to

Borrow, who spoke of himself at this period as "digging holes in the sand and filling them up again." Roughly speaking, the years appear to have been spent comparatively uneventfully, for the most part in Norfolk. In December 1832 he walked to London to interview the British and Foreign Bible Society, covering a hundred and twelve miles in twenty-seven hours on less than sixpennyworth of food and drink. He was thirty years old at the time, and the achievement was the pride of his remaining years. Six months later, on the strength of his linguistic attainments, he managed to get on the paid staff of the Society, to the bewilderment of Norwich "friends," who were inclined to be ironical on the subject of the transformation of the chum of hanged Thurtell and the disciple of godless Billy Taylor into a Bible missionary. In July 1833, then, Borrow sets out on his Eastern travels as the accredited agent of the Bible Society, goes to St. Petersburg, "the finest city in the world," and obtains the Russian imprimatur for a Manchu version of that suspicious novelty, the Bible. He carried this scheme into execution to the general satisfaction, and he returns to London in 1837; then to the south of Europe, whence he reappears, larger than life and twice as natural, in his masterly autobiographical romance of *The Bible in Spain*, the work which made his name, which was sold by thousands, which was eagerly acclaimed as an invaluable addition to "Sunday" literature, and pirated in a generous spirit of emulation by American publishers.

p. 12We are now come to the circumstance of the composition of *Lavengro*. *The Bible in Spain*, when it appeared in 1843, implied a wonderful background to the Author's experience, a career diversified by all kinds of wild adventures, "sorcery, Jews, Gentiles, rambles," gipsies, prisons, — what you will. {12}

The personal element in the book—so suggestive of mystery and romance—excited the strongest curiosity. Apart from this, however, the reading public of 1843 were not unnaturally startled by a book which seemed to profess to be a good, serious, missionary work, but for which it was manifest that *Gil Blas* and not Bishop Heber had been taken as a model. Not that any single comparison of the kind can convey the least idea of the complex idiosyncrasy of such a work. There is a substratum of *Guide Book* and *Gil Blas*, no doubt, but there are unmistakable streaks of Defoe, of Dumas, and of Dick-

ens, with all his native prejudices and insular predilections strong upon him. A narrative so wide awake amidst a vagrant population of questionable morals and alien race suggests an affinity with *Hajji Baba* (a close kinsman, we conceive, of the Borrovian picaro). But, above all, as one follows the author through the mazes of his book, one is conscious of two strangely p. 13 assorted figures, never far from the itinerant's side, and always ready to improve the occasion if a shadow of an opportunity be afforded. One, who is prolific of philological chippings, might be compared to a semblance of Max Miller; while the other, alternately denouncing the wickedness and deriding the toothlessness of a grim Giant Pope, may be likened, at a distance, to John Bunyan. About the whole—to conclude—is an atmosphere, not too pronounced, of the *Newgate Calendar*, and a few patches of sawdust from the Prize Ring. May not people well have wondered (the good pious English folk to whom *Luck* is a scandal, as the Bible Society's secretary wrote to Borrow),—what manner of man is this, this muleteer-missionary, this natural man with a pen in the hand of a prize-fighter, but of a prize-fighter who is afflicted with the fads of a philologer—and a pedant at that? The surprise may be compared to what that of a previous generation would have been, had it seen Johnson and Boswell and Baretti all fused into one man. The incongruity is heightened by familiarity with Borrow's tall, blonde, Scandinavian figure, and the reader is reminded of those roving Northmen of the days of simple medieval devotion, who were wont to signalise their conversion from heathen darkness by a Mediterranean venture, combining the characters of a piratical cruise and a pious pilgrimage.

That Curiosity exaggerated and was a marvel-monger we shall attempt to demonstrate. But, in the meantime, it was there, and it was very strong. As for Borrow, he was prepared to derive stimulus from it just as long p. 14 as it maintained the unquestioning attitude of Jasper Petulengro when he expressed the sentiments of gipsydom in the well-worn "Lor', brother, how learned you are!"

In February 1843 Borrow wrote to Murray that he had begun his *Life*—a "kind of biography in the Robinson Crusoe style,"—and was determined that it should surpass anything that he had already written. It had been contemplated, he added, for some months already, as a possible sequel to the *Bible in Spain* if that proved suc-

cessful. Hitherto, he wrote, the public had said "Good" (to his *Gypsies of Spain*, 1841), "Better" (to the *Bible in Spain*), and he wanted it, when No. 3 appeared, to say "Best." Five years rapidly passed away, until, in the summer of 1848, the book was announced as about to appear shortly, under the title of *Lavengro: An Autobiography*, which was soon changed to *Life: a Drama*. The difficulty of writing a book which should have "no humbug in it," proved, as may well be supposed, immense, and would in any case be quite sufficient to account for the long period of gestation. His perplexities may have often been very near akin to those ascribed to the superstitious author in the sixty-fifth chapter of *Lavengro*; his desire to be original sadly cramping the powers of his mind, his fastidiousness being so great that he invariably rejected whatever ideas he did not consider to be legitimately his own. As a substitute for the usual padding of humbug, sycophancy and second-hand ideas, he bethought himself of philology, and he set himself p. 15 to spring fragments of philological instruction (often far from sound) upon his reader in the most unexpected places, that his ingenuity could devise. He then began to base hopes upon the book in proportion to its originality. At the last moment, however, the Author grew querulous about his work, distrustful of the reception that would be given to it, and even as to the advisability of producing it at all. Much yet remained to be done, but for a long time he refused, not only to forward new copy to Albemarle Street, but even to revise the proofs of that which he had already written, and it required all the dunning that Murray and the printer Woodfall dare apply before *Lavengro* with its altered sub-title (for at the last moment Borrow grew afraid of openly avowing his identity with the speaking likeness which he had created) could be announced as "just ready" in the *Athenaeum* of Dec. 14th, 1850.

Lavengro; the Scholar, the Gypsy, the Priest, eventually appeared in three volumes on Feb. 7th, 1851. The autobiographical *Lavengro* stopped short in July 1825, at the conclusion of the hundredth chapter, with an abruptness worthy of the *Sentimental Journey*. The Author had succeeded in extending the area of mystery, but not in satisfying the public. Borrow's confidences were so very different in complexion from those which the critics seemed to have expected, that they were taken aback and declared to the public almost with

one accord that the writer's eccentricities had developed into mannerisms, that his theories of life were political manifestoes, that his dialects were gibberish, and his p. 16 defiance of the orthodox canons of autobiography scarcely less than an outrage upon the public taste.

From the general public came a fusillade of requests to solve the prevailing mystery of the book. Was it fact or fiction?—or, if fact and fiction were blended, in what proportions? Borrow ought to have been prepared for a question so natural in the mouths of literary busy-bodies at any time, and especially at a time when partisan spirit was rampant, and the vitality of the lampoon as a factor in politics so far from extinct. To show his contempt alike for the critical verdict and the popular curiosity, after a quarrel, or at least a sharp coolness with John Murray, he published in two volumes, in May 1857, *The Romany Rye*, which carries on the story of *Lavengro* for just about a month further, namely, down towards the end of August 1825, and there again stops dead. Whether we regard coherence or the rate of progress, no more attempt at amendment is perceptible than can be discerned in the later as compared with the earlier volumes of *Tristram Shandy*. The peculiarities of the earlier volume are, indeed, here accentuated, while the Author had evidently only been confirmed by the lapse of years in the political philosophy to which he had already given expression. At the end was printed an appendix (a sort of *catalogue raisonné* of Borrowian prejudices), satirising with unmeasured bitterness the critics of *Lavengro*.

The resumption of a story after an interval of over six years, with appendages so extravagant, whether we regard their tenor or their length, and with an indifference p. 17 so sublime to the popular desire that he should get along with his personal narrative, was hardly calculated to conciliate critical opinion; but it had one capital effect. It drew from Whitwell Elwin, himself a Norfolk man, and a literary critic of the widest grasp and knowledge, this remarkable testimony: that far from exaggerating such incidents as were drawn from his own experience (not a few, as he himself could verify), Borrow's descriptions were rather *within the truth than beyond it*. "However picturesquely they may be drawn, the lines are invariably those of nature. . . . There can be no doubt that the larger part,

and possibly the whole of the work, is a narrative of actual occurrences."

Here, then, is the heart of the mystery, or of the mystery that is apparent; the phenomenon is due primarily to the fact that Borrow's book is so abnormally true as regards the matter, while in manner of presentation it is so strikingly original. There are superficial traces, no doubt, of not a few writers of the eighteenth century. In some of his effects Borrow reproduces Sterne: essentially Sternean, for instance, is the interview between the youthful author and the experienced Mr. Taggart.

"Well, young gentleman," said Taggart to me one morning when we chanced to be alone, a few days after the affair of cancelling, "how do you like authorship?"

"I scarcely call authorship the drudgery I am engaged in," said I.

"What do you call authorship?" said Taggart.

"I scarcely know," said I; "that is, I can scarcely express what I think it."

p. 18 "Shall I help you out?" said Taggart, turning round his chair, and looking at me.

"If you like," said I.

"To write something grand," said Taggart, taking snuff; "to be stared at—lifted on people's shoulders."

"Well," said I, "that is something like it."

Taggart took snuff.

"Well," said he, "why don't you write something grand?"

"I have," said I.

"What?" said Taggart.

"Why," said I, "there are those ballads."

Taggart took snuff.

"And those wonderful versions from Ab Gwilym."

Taggart took snuff again.

"You seem to be very fond of snuff," said I, looking at him angrily.

Taggart tapped his box.

"Have you taken it long?"

"Three-and-twenty years."

"What snuff do you take?"

"Universal Mixture."

"And you find it of use?"

Taggart tapped his box.

"In what respect?" said I.

"In many — there is nothing like it to get a man through; but for snuff I should scarcely be where I am now."

"Have you been long here?"

"Three-and-twenty years."

"Dear me," said I; "and snuff brought you through? Give me a pinch — pah, I don't like it," and I sneezed.

"Take another pinch," said Taggart.

"No," said I; "I don't like snuff."

"Then you will never do for authorship; at least for this kind."

"So I begin to think. What shall I do?"

p. 19 Taggart took snuff.

"You were talking of a great work. What shall it be?"

Taggart took snuff.

"Do you think I could write one?"

Taggart uplifted his two forefingers as if to tap; he did not, however.

"It would require time," said I, with half a sigh.

Taggart tapped his box.

"A great deal of time. I really think that my ballads—"

Taggart took snuff.

"If published, would do me credit. I'll make an effort, and offer them to some other publisher."

Taggart took a double quantity of snuff.

Equally Sterne-like is the conclusion to a chapter: "Italy—what was I going to say about Italy?"

Less superficial is the influence of Cervantes and his successors of the Picaresque school, down to the last and most representative of them in England, namely Defoe and Smollett. Profoundest of all, perhaps, is the influence of Defoe, of whose powers of intense realisation, exhibited in the best parts of *Robinson Crusoe*, we get a fine counterpart amid the outcasts in Mumper's Lane. Bound up with the truthfulness and originality of the Author is that strange absence of sycophancy, which we may flatter ourselves is no exceptional thing, but which is in reality a very rare phenomenon in literature.

Apart from this independence of character which he so justly prized, and a monomania or two, such as his devotion to philology or detestation of popery, Borrow's mental peculiarities are not by any means so extravagant as has been supposed. His tastes were p. 20for the most part not unusual, though they might be assorted in a somewhat uncommon manner. He was a thorough sportsman in the best sense, but he combined with his sporting zeal an instinctive hatred of gambling, of bad language, and of tyranny or cruelty in any form. He entertained a love for the horse in the stable without bowing down to worship the stage-coachmen, the jockeys, and other ignoble heroes of "horsey" life. He loved his country and "the quiet, unpretending Church of England." He was ready to exalt the

obsolescent fisticuffs and the “strong ale of Old England,” but he was not blind either to the drunkenness or to the overbearing brutality which he had reason to fear might be held to disfigure the character of the swilling and prize-fighting sections among his compatriots. {20a}

Borrow was a master of whim; but it is easy to exaggerate his eccentricity. As a traveller who met with adventures upon the roads of Britain he was surpassed by a dozen writers that could be named, and in our own day—to mention one—by that truly eccentric being “The Druid.” {20b} The Druid had a special affinity with Borrow, in regard to his kindness for an old p. 21applewoman. His applewoman kept a stall in the Strand to which the Druid was a constant visitor, mainly for the purpose of having a chat and borrowing and repaying small sums, rarely exceeding one shilling. As an author, again, Borrow was as jealous as one of Thackeray’s heroines; he could hardly bear to hear a contemporary book praised. Whim, if you will, but scarcely an example of literary eccentricity.

Borrow developed a delightful faculty for adventure upon the high road, but such a faculty was far less singular than his gift—akin to the greatest painter’s power of suggesting atmosphere—of investing each scene and incident with a separate and distinct air of uncompromising reality. Many persons may have had the advantage of hearing conversation as brilliant or as wise as that of the dinner at Dilly’s: what is distinctive of genius is the power to convey the general feeling of the interlocutors, to suggest a dramatic effect, an artistic whole, as Boswell does, by the cumulative effect of infinitesimal factors. The triumph in each case is one not of opportunities but of the subtlest literary sense.

Similarly, Borrow’s fixed ideas had little that was really exceptional or peculiar about them. His hatred of mumbo-jumbo and priestcraft was but a part of his steady love of freedom and sincerity. His linguistic mania had less of a philological basis than he would have us believe. Impatience that Babel should act as a barrier between kindred souls, an insatiable curiosity, prompted by the knowledge that the language of p. 22minorities was in nine cases out of ten the direct route to the heart of the secret of folks that puzzled him—such were the motives that stimulated a hunger for

strange vocabularies, not in itself abnormal. The colloquial faculty which he undoubtedly possessed—for we are told by Taylor that when barely eighteen he already knew English, Welsh, Irish, Latin, Greek, Hebrew, German, Danish, French, Italian, and Portuguese—rarely goes with philological depth any more than with idiomatic purity. Borrow learnt some languages to translate, many to speak imperfectly. {22}

p. 23But as a comparative philologist, with claims to scientific equipment, his *Targum*, with its boasted versions from thirty languages or dialects, pales considerably before the almost contemporary *Philological Grammar*, based upon a comparison of over sixty tongues, by the Dorset poet William Barnes, who, like Borrow himself, was a self-taught man. To mention but two more English contemporaries of Borrow, there was Thomas Watts, of the British Museum, who could read nearly fifty languages, including Chinese; and Canon Cook, the editor of the *Speaker's Commentary*, who claimed acquaintance with fifty-four. It is commonly said of Cardinal Mezzofanti that he could speak thirty and understand sixty. It is quite plain from the pages of *Lavengro* itself that Borrow did not share Gregory XVI.'s high estimate of the Cardinal's mental qualifications, unrivalled linguist though he was. That a "word-master" so abnormal is apt to be deficient in logical sense seems to have been Borrow's deliberate opinion (with a saving clause as to exceptions), and I have often thought that it must have been Shakespeare's too, for does he not ascribe a command of tongues to the man who is perhaps the most consummate idiot in the whole range of Shakespearean portraiture?

p. 24Maria. That quaffing and drinking will undo you: I heard my lady talk of it yesterday, and of a foolish knight that you brought in here to be her wooer.

Sir Toby Belch. Who? Sir Andrew Ague-cheek?

Maria. Ay, he.

Sir Toby. He's as tall a man as any in Illyria.

Maria. What's that to the purpose?