CLASSICS TO GO

NOT THAT IT MATTERS

A. A. MILNE

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The Pleasure of Writing

Sometimes when the printer is waiting for an article which really should have been sent to him the day before, I sit at my desk and wonder if there is any possible subject in the whole world upon which I can possibly find anything to say. On one such occasion I left it to Fate, which decided, by means of a dictionary opened at random, that I should deliver myself of a few thoughts about goldfish. (You will find this article later on in the book.) But to-day I do not need to bother about a subject. To-day I am without a care. Nothing less has happened than that I have a new nib in my pen.

In the ordinary way, when Shakespeare writes a tragedy, or Mr. Blank gives you one of his charming little essays, a certain amount of thought goes on before pen is put to paper. One cannot write "Scene I. An Open Place. Thunder and Lightning. Enter Three Witches," or "As I look up from my window, the nodding daffodils beckon to me to take the morning," one cannot give of one's best in this way on the spur of the moment. At least, others cannot. But when I have a new nib in my pen, then I can go straight from my breakfast to the blotting-paper, and a new sheet of foolscap fills itself magically with a stream of blue-black words. When poets and idiots talk of the pleasure of writing, they mean the pleasure of giving a piece of their minds to the public; with an old nib a tedious business. They do not mean (as I do) the pleasure of the artist in seeing beautifully shaped

"k's" and sinuous "s's" grow beneath his steel. Anybody else writing this article might wonder "Will my readers like it?" I only tell myself "How the compositors will love it!"

But perhaps they will not love it. Maybe I am a little above their heads. I remember on one First of January receiving an anonymous postcard wishing me a happy New Year, and suggesting that I should give the compositors a happy New Year also by writing more generously. In those days I got a thousand words upon one sheet 8 in. by 5 in. I adopted the suggestion, but it was a wrench; as it would be for a painter of miniatures forced to spend the rest of his life painting the Town Council of Boffington in the manner of Herkomer. My canvases are bigger now, but they are still impressionistic. "Pretty, but what is it?" remains the obvious comment; one steps back a pace and saws the air with the hand; "You see it better from here, my love," one says to one's wife. But if there be one compositor not carried away by the mad rush of life, who in a leisurely hour (the luncheon one, for instance) looks at the beautiful words with the eye of an artist, not of a wage-earner, he, I think, will be satisfied; he will be as glad as I am of my new nib. Does it matter, then, what you who see only the printed word think of it?

A woman, who had studied what she called the science of calligraphy, once offered to tell my character from my handwriting. I prepared a special sample for her; it was full of sentences like "To be good is to be happy," "Faith is the lode- star of life," "We should always be kind to animals," and so on. I wanted her to do her best. She gave the morning to it, and told me at lunch that I was "synthetic."

Probably you think that the compositor has failed me here and printed "synthetic" when I wrote "sympathetic." In just this way I misunderstood my calligraphist at first, and I looked as sympathetic as I could. However, she repeated "synthetic," so that there could be no mistake. I begged her to tell me more, for I had thought that every letter would reveal a secret, but all she would add was "and not analytic." I went about for the rest of the day saying proudly to myself "I am synthetic! I am synthetic! I am synthetic!" and then I would add regretfully, "Alas, I am not analytic!" I had no idea what it meant.

And how do you think she had deduced my syntheticness? Simply from the fact that, to save time, I join some of my words together. That isn't being synthetic, it is being in a hurry. What she should have said was, "You are a busy man; your life is one constant whirl; and probably you are of excellent moral character and kind to animals." Then one would feel that one did not write in vain.

My pen is getting tired; it has lost its first fair youth. However, I can still go on. I was at school with a boy whose uncle made nibs. If you detect traces of erudition in this article, of which any decent man might be expected to be innocent, I owe it to that boy. He once told me how many nibs his uncle made in a year; luckily I have forgotten. Thousands, probably. Every term that boy came back with a hundred of them; one expected him to be very busy. After all, if you haven't the brains or the inclination to work, it is something to have the nibs. These nibs, however, were put to better uses. There is a game you can play with them; you

flick your nib against the other boy's nib, and if a lucky shot puts the head of yours under his, then a sharp tap capsizes him, and you have a hundred and one in your collection. There is a good deal of strategy in the game (whose finer points I have now forgotten), and I have no doubt that they play it at the Admiralty in the off season. Another game was to put a clean nib in your pen, place it lightly against the cheek of a boy whose head was turned away from you, and then call him suddenly. As Kipling says, we are the only really humorous race. This boy's uncle died a year or two later and left about £80,000, but none of it to his nephew. Of course, he had had the nibs every term. One mustn't forget that.

The nib I write this with is called the "Canadian Quill"; made, I suppose, from some steel goose which flourishes across the seas, and which Canadian housewives have to explain to their husbands every Michaelmas. Well, it has seen me to the end of what I wanted to say—if indeed I wanted to say anything. For it was enough for me this morning just to write; with spring coming in through the open windows and my good Canadian quill in my hand, I could have copied out a directory. That is the real pleasure of writing.

Acacia Road

Of course there are disadvantages of suburban life. In the fourth act of the play there may be a moment when the fate of the erring wife hangs in the balance, and utterly regardless of this the last train starts from Victoria at 11.15. It must be annoying to have to leave her at such a crisis; it must be annoying too to have to preface the curtailed pleasures of the play with a meat tea and a hasty dressing in the afternoon. But, after all, one cannot judge life from its facilities for playgoing. It would be absurd to condemn the suburbs because of the 11.15.

There is a road eight miles from London up which I have walked sometimes on my way to golf. I think it is called Acacia Road; some pretty name like that. It may rain in Acacia Road, but never when I am there. The sun shines on Laburnum Lodge with its pink may tree, on the Cedars with its two clean limes, it casts its shadow on the ivy of Holly House, and upon the whole road there rests a pleasant afternoon peace. I cannot walk along Acacia Road without feeling that life could be very happy in it—when the sun is shining. It must be jolly, for instance, to live in Laburnum Lodge with its pink may tree. Sometimes I fancy that a suburban home is the true home after all.

When I pass Laburnum Lodge I think of Him saying good-bye to Her at the gate, as he takes the air each morning on his way to the station. What if the train is crowded? He has

his newspaper. That will see him safely to the City. And then how interesting will be everything which happens to him there, since he has Her to tell it to when he comes home. The most ordinary street accident becomes exciting if a story has to be made of it. Happy the man who can say of each little incident, "I must remember to tell Her when I get home." And it is only in the suburbs that one "gets home." One does not "get home" to Grosvenor Square; one is simply "in" or "out."

But the master of Laburnum Lodge may have something better to tell his wife than the incident of the runaway horse; he may have heard a new funny story at lunch. The joke may have been all over the City, but it is unlikely that his wife in the suburbs will have heard it. Put it on the credit side of marriage that you can treasure up your jokes for some one else. And perhaps She has something for him too; some backward plant, it may be, has burst suddenly into flower; at least he will walk more eagerly up Acacia Road for wondering. So it will be a happy meeting under the pink may tree of Laburnum Lodge when these two are restored safely to each other after the excitements of the day. Possibly they will even do a little gardening together in the still glowing evening.

If life has anything more to offer than this it will be found at Holly House, where there are babies. Babies give an added excitement to the master's homecoming, for almost anything may have happened to them while he has been away. Dorothy perhaps has cut a new tooth and Anne may have said something really clever about the baker's man. In

the morning, too, Anne will walk with him to the end of the road; it is perfectly safe, for in Acacia Road nothing untoward could occur. Even the dogs are quiet and friendly. I like to think of the master of Holly House saying good-bye to Anne at the end of the road and knowing that she will be alive when he comes back in the evening. That ought to make the day's work go quickly.

But it is the Cedars which gives us the secret of the happiness of the suburbs. The Cedars you observe is a grander house altogether; there is a tennis lawn at the back. And there are grown-up sons and daughters at the Cedars. In such houses in Acacia Road the delightful business of love-making is in full swing. Marriages are not "arranged" in the suburbs; they grow naturally out of the pleasant intercourse between the Cedars, the Elms, and Rose Bank. I see Tom walking over to the Elms, racket in hand, to play tennis with Miss Muriel. He is hoping for an invitation to remain to supper, and indeed I think he will get it. Anyhow he is going to ask Miss Muriel to come across to lunch to-morrow; his mother has so much to talk to her about. But it will be Tom who will do most of the talking.

I am sure that the marriages made in Acacia Road are happy. That is why I have no fears for Holly House and Laburnum Lodge. Of course they didn't make love in this Acacia Road; they are come from the Acacia Road of some other suburb, wisely deciding that they will be better away from their people. But they met each other in the same way as Tom and Muriel are meeting; He has seen Her in Her own home, in His home, at the tennis club, surrounded by the

young bounders (confound them!) of Turret Court and the Wilderness; She has heard of him falling off his bicycle or quarrelling with his father. Bless you, they know all about each other; they are going to be happy enough together.

And now I think of it, why of course there is a local theatre where they can do their play- going, if they are as keen on it as that. For ten shillings they can spread from the stage box an air of luxury and refinement over the house; and they can nod in an easy manner across the stalls to the Cedars in the opposite box— in the deep recesses of which Tom and Muriel, you may be sure, are holding hands.

My Library

When I moved into a new house a few weeks ago, my books, as was natural, moved with me. Strong, perspiring men shovelled them into packing-cases, and staggered with them to the van, cursing Caxton as they went. On arrival at this end, they staggered with them into the room selected for my library, heaved off the lids of the cases, and awaited orders. The immediate need was for an emptier room. Together we hurried the books into the new white shelves which awaited them, the order in which they stood being of no matter so long as they were off the floor. Armful after armful was hastily stacked, the only pause being when (in the curious way in which these things happen) my own name suddenly caught the eye of the foreman. "Did you write this one, sir?" he asked. I admitted it. "H'm," he said noncommittally. He glanced along the names of every armful after that, and appeared a little surprised at the number of books which I hadn't written. An easy-going profession, evidently.

So we got the books up at last, and there they are still. I told myself that when a wet afternoon came along I would arrange them properly. When the wet afternoon came, I told myself that I would arrange them one of these fine mornings. As they are now, I have to look along every shelf in the search for the book which I want. To come to Keats is no guarantee that we are on the road to Shelley. Shelley, if

he did not drop out on the way, is probably next to How to Be a Golfer Though Middle-aged.

Having written as far as this, I had to get up and see where Shelley really was. It is worse than I thought. He is between Geometrical Optics and Studies in New Zealand Scenery. Ella Wheeler Wilcox, whom I find myself to be entertaining unawares, sits beside Anarchy or Order, which was apparently "sent in the hope that you will become a member of the Duty and Discipline Movement"—a vain hope, it would seem, for I have not yet paid my subscription. What I Found Out, by an English Governess, shares a corner with The Recreations of a Country Parson; they are followed by Villette and Baedeker's Switzerland. Something will have to be done about it. But I am wondering what is to be done. If I gave you the impression that my books were precisely arranged in their old shelves, I misled you. They were arranged in the order known as "all anyhow." Possibly they were a little less "anyhow" than they are now, in that the volumes of any particular work were at least together, but that is all that can be claimed for them. For years I put off the business of tidying them up, just as I am putting it off now. It is not laziness; it is simply that I don't know how to begin.

Let us suppose that we decide to have all the poetry together. It sounds reasonable. But then Byron is eleven inches high (my tallest poet), and Beattie (my shortest) is just over four inches. How foolish they will look standing side by side. Perhaps you don't know Beattie, but I assure you that he was a poet. He wrote those majestic lines:—

"The shepherd-swain of whom I mention made
On Scotia's mountains fed his little flock;
The sickle, scythe or plough he never swayed—
An honest heart was almost all his stock."

Of course, one would hardly expect a shepherd to sway a plough in the ordinary way, but Beattie was quite right to remind us that Edwin didn't either. Edwin was the name of the shepherd- swain. "And yet poor Edwin was no vulgar boy," we are told a little further on in a line that should live. Well, having satisfied you that Beattie was really a poet, I can now return to my argument that an eleven-inch Byron cannot stand next to a four-inch Beattie, and be followed by an eight-inch Cowper, without making the shelf look silly. Yet how can I discard Beattie— Beattie who wrote:—

"And now the downy cheek and deepened voice
Gave dignity to Edwin's blooming prime."

You see the difficulty. If you arrange your books according to their contents you are sure to get an untidy shelf. If you arrange your books according to their size and colour you get an effective wall, but the poetically inclined visitor may lose sight of Beattie altogether. Before, then, we decide what to do about it, we must ask ourselves that very awkward question, "Why do we have books on our shelves at all?" It is a most embarrassing question to answer.

Of course, you think that the proper answer (in your own case) is an indignant protest that you bought them in order to read them, and that yon put them on your shelves in order that you could refer to them when necessary. A little

reflection will show you what a stupid answer that is. If you only want to read them, why are some of them bound in morocco and half-calf and other expensive coverings? Why did you buy a first edition when a hundredth edition was so much cheaper? Why have you got half a dozen copies of The Rubaiyat? What is the particular value of this other book that you treasure it so carefully? Why, the fact that its pages are uncut. If you cut the pages and read it, the value would go.

So, then, your library is not just for reference. You know as well as I do that it furnishes your room; that it furnishes it more effectively than does paint or mahogany or china. Of course, it is nice to have the books there, so that one can refer to them when one wishes. One may be writing an article on sea-bathing, for instance, and have come to the sentence which begins: "In the well-remembered words of Coleridge, perhaps almost too familiar to be quoted"—and then one may have to look them up. On these occasions a library is not only ornamental but useful. But do not let us be ashamed that we find it ornamental. Indeed, the more I survey it, the more I feel that my library is sufficiently ornamental as it stands. Any reassembling of the books might spoil the colour-scheme. Baedeker's Switzerland and Villette are both in red, a colour which is neatly caught up again, after an interlude in blue, by a volume of Browning and Jevons' Elementary Logic. We had a woman here only yesterday who said, "How pretty your books look," and I am inclined to think that that is good enough. There is a careless rapture about them which I should lose if I started to arrange them methodically.

But perhaps I might risk this to the extent of getting all their heads the same way up. Yes, on one of these fine days (or wet nights) I shall take my library seriously in hand. There are still one or two books which are the wrong way round. I shall put them the right way round.

The Chase

The fact, as revealed in a recent lawsuit, that there is a gentleman in this country who spends £10,000 a year upon his butterfly collection would have disturbed me more in the early nineties than it does to-day. I can bear it calmly now, but twenty-five years ago the knowledge would have spoilt my pride in my own collection, upon which I was already spending the best part of threepence a week pocket-money. Perhaps, though, I should have consoled myself with the thought that I was the truer enthusiast of the two; for when my rival hears of a rare butterfly in Brazil, he sends a man out to Brazil to capture it, whereas I, when I heard that there was a Clouded Yellow in the garden, took good care that nobody but myself encompassed its death. Our aims also were different. I purposely left Brazil out of it.

Whether butterfly-hunting is good or bad for the character I cannot undertake to decide. No doubt it can be justified as clearly as fox- hunting. If the fox eats chickens, the butterfly's child eats vegetables; if fox-hunting improves the breed of horses, butterfly-hunting improves the health of boys. But at least, we never told ourselves that butterflies liked being pursued, as (I understand) foxes like being hunted. We were moderately honest about it. And we comforted ourselves in the end with the assurance of many eminent naturalists that "insects don't feel pain."

I have often wondered how naturalists dare to speak with such authority. Do they never have dreams at night of an after-life in some other world, wherein they are pursued by giant insects eager to increase their "naturalist collection"—insects who assure each other carelessly that "naturalists don't feel pain"? Perhaps they do so dream. But we, at any rate, slept well, for we had never dogmatized about a butterfly's feelings. We only quoted the wise men.

But if there might be doubt about the sensitiveness of a butterfly, there could be no doubt about his distinguishing marks. It was amazing to us how many grown-up and (presumably) educated men and women did not know that a butterfly had knobs on the end of his antennae, and that the moth had none. Where had they been all these years to be so ignorant? Well-meaning but misguided aunts, with mysterious promises of a new butterfly for our collection, would produce some common Yellow Underwing from an envelope, innocent (for which they may be forgiven) that only a personal capture had any value to us, but unforgivably ignorant that a Yellow Underwing was a moth. We did not collect moths; there were too many of them. And moths are nocturnal creatures. A hunter whose bed-time depends upon the whim of another is handicapped for the night-chase.

But butterflies come out when the sun comes out, which is just when little boys should be out; and there are not too many butterflies in England. I knew them all by name once, and could have recognized any that I saw—yes, even Hampstead's Albion Eye (or was it Albion's Hampstead

Eye?), of which only one specimen had ever been caught in this country; presumably by Hampstead—or Albion. In my day-dreams the second specimen was caught by me. Yet he was an insignificant-looking fellow, and perhaps I should have been better pleased with a Camberwell Beauty, a Purple Emperor, or a Swallowtail. Unhappily the Purple Emperor (so the book told us) haunted the tops of trees, which was to take an unfair advantage of a boy small for his age, and the Swallowtail haunted Norfolk, which was equally inconsiderate of a family which kept holiday in the south. The Camberwell Beauty sounded more hopeful, but I suppose the trams disheartened him. I doubt if he ever haunted Camberwell in my time.

With threepence a week one has to be careful. It was necessary to buy killing-boxes and setting-boards, but butterfly-nets could be made at home. A stick, a piece of copper wire, and some muslin were all that were necessary. One liked the muslin to be green, for there was a feeling that this deceived the butterfly in some way; he thought that Birnam Wood was merely coming to Dunsinane when he saw it approaching, and that the queer-looking thing behind was some local efflorescence. So he resumed his dalliance with the herbaceous border, and was never more surprised in his life than when it turned out to be a boy and a butterfly-net. Green muslin, then, but a plain piece of cane for the stick. None of your collapsible fishing-rods—"suitable for a Purple Emperor." Leave those to the millionaire's sons.

It comes back to me now that I am doing this afternoon what I did more than twenty-five years ago; I am writing an