

with clothes; so they who are defective in matter endeavor to make amends with words."*

Plutarch possessed the art of delineating the more delicate features of mind and minute peculiarities of conduct, as well as the foibles and defects of his heroes, all of which is necessary to faithful and accurate portraiture. "To see him," says Montaigne, "pick out a light action in a man's life, or a word, that does not seem to be of any importance, is itself a whole discourse." He even condescends to inform us of such homely particulars as that Alexander carried his head affectedly on one side; that Alcibiades was a dandy, and had a lisp, which became him, giving a grace and persuasive turn to his discourse; that Cato had red hair and gray eyes, and was a usurer and a screw, selling off his old slaves when they became unfit for hard work; that Cæsar was bald and fond of gay dress; and that Cicero (like Lord Brougham) had involuntary twitchings of his nose.

Such minute particulars may by some be thought beneath the dignity of biography, but Plutarch thought them requisite for the due finish of the complete portrait which he set himself to draw; and it is by small details of character—personal traits, features, habits, and characteristics—that we are enabled to see before us the men as they really lived. Plutarch's great merit consists in his attention to these little things, without giving them undue preponderance, or neglecting those which are of greater moment. Sometimes he hits off an individual trait by an anecdote, which throws more light upon the character described than pages of rhetorical descriptions would do. In some cases he gives us the

* Montaigne's Essay (book i., chap. xxv.), "Of the Education of Children."

favorite maxim of his hero; and the maxims of men often reveal their hearts.

Then, as to foibles, the greatest of men are not usually symmetrical. Each has his defect, his twist, his craze; and it is by his faults that the great man reveals his common humanity. We may, at a distance, admire him as a demigod; but as we come nearer to him, we find that he is but a fallible man, and our brother.*

Nor are the illustrations of the defects of great men without their uses; for, as Dr. Johnson observed, "If nothing but the bright side of characters were shown, we should sit down in despondency, and think it utterly impossible to imitate them in any thing."

Plutarch himself justifies his method of portraiture by averring that his design was not to write histories, but lives. "The most glorious exploits," he says, "do not always furnish us with the clearest discoveries of virtue or of vice in men. Sometimes a matter of much less moment, an expression or a jest, better informs us of their characters and inclinations than battles with the slaughter of tens of thousands, and the greatest arrays of armies or sieges of cities. Therefore, as portrait-painters are more exact in their lines and features of the face and the expression of the eyes, in which the character is seen, without troubling themselves about the other parts of the body, so I must be allowed to give my more particular attention to the signs and indications of the souls of men; and while I endeavor by these

* "Tant il est vrai," says Voltaire, "que les hommes, qui sont au-dessus des autres par les talents, s'en rapprochent presque toujours par les faiblesses; car pourquoi les talents nous mettraient-ils au-dessous de l'humanité."—*Vie de Moliere*, Didot ed., xiii.

means to portray their lives, I leave important events and great battles to be described by others."

Things apparently trifling may stand for much in biography as well as history, and slight circumstances may influence great results. Pascal has remarked that if Cleopatra's nose had been shorter, the whole face of the world would probably have been changed. But for the amours of Pepin the Fat, the Saracens might have overrun Europe, as it was his illegitimate son, Charles Martel, who overthrew them at Tours, and eventually drove them out of France.

That Sir Walter Scott should have sprained his foot in running round the room when a child, may seem unworthy of notice in his biography; yet "Ivanhoe," "Old Mortality," and all the Waverley novels, depended upon it. When his son intimated a desire to enter the army, Scott wrote to Southey, "I have no title to combat a choice which would have been my own, had not my lameness prevented." So that, had not Scott been lame, he might have fought all through the Peninsular War, and had his breast covered with medals; but we should probably have had none of those works of his which have made his name immortal and shed so much glory upon his country. Talleyrand also was kept out of the army, for which he had been destined, by his lameness; but directing his attention to the study of books, and eventually of men, he at length took rank among the greatest diplomatists of his time.

Byron's club-foot had probably not a little to do with determining his destiny as a poet. Had not his mind been embittered and made morbid by his deformity, he might never have written a line—he might have been the noblest fop of his day. But his misshapen foot stimulated his mind,

roused his ardor, threw him upon his own resources—and we know with what result.

So, too, of Scarron, to whose hunchback we probably owe his cynical verse; and of Pope, whose satire was in a measure the outcome of his deformity—for he was, as Johnson described him, "protuberant behind and before." What Lord Bacon said of deformity is doubtless, to a great extent, true. "Whoever," said he, "hath any thing fixed in his person that doth induce contempt hath also a perpetual spur in himself to rescue and deliver himself from scorn; therefore, all deformed persons are extremely bold."

As in portraiture, so in biography—there must be light and shade. The portrait-painter does not pose his sitter so as to bring out his deformities; nor does the biographer give undue prominence to the defects of the character he portrays. Not many men are so outspoken as Cromwell was when he sat to Cooper for his miniature: "Paint me as I am," said he, "warts and all." Yet, if we would have a faithful likeness of faces and characters, they must be painted as they are. "Biography," said Sir Walter Scott, "the most interesting of every species of composition, loses all its interest with me when the shades and lights of the principal characters are not accurately and faithfully detailed. I can no more sympathize with a mere eulogist than I can with a ranting hero on the stage."*

Addison liked to know as much as possible about the person and character of his authors, inasmuch as it increased the pleasure and satisfaction which he derived from the perusal of their books. What was their history, their experience, their temper and disposition? Did their lives re-

* "Life," 8vo. ed., p. 102.

semble their books? They thought nobly—did they act nobly? “Should we not delight,” says Sir Egerton Brydges, “to have the frank story of the lives and feelings of Wordsworth, Southey, Coleridge, Campbell, Rogers, Moore, and Wilson related by themselves?—with whom they lived early; how their bent took a decided course; their likes and dislikes; their difficulties and obstacles; their tastes, their passions; the rocks they were conscious of having split upon; their regrets, their complacencies, and their self-justifications?”*

When Mason was reproached for publishing the private letters of Gray, he answered, “Would you always have my friends appear in full-dress?” Johnson was of opinion that, to write a man’s life truly, it is necessary that the biographer should have personally known him. But this condition has been wanting in some of the best writers of biographies extant.† In the case of Lord Campbell, his personal intimacy with Lords Lyndhurst and Brougham seems to have been a positive disadvantage, leading him to dwarf the excellencies and to magnify the blots in their characters. Again, Johnson says: “If a man profess to write a life, he must write it really as it was. A man’s peculiarities, and even his vices, should be mentioned, because they mark his character.” But there is always this difficulty—that while minute details of conduct, favorable or otherwise, can best

* “Autobiography of Sir Egerton Brydges, Bart.,” vol. i., p. 91.

† It was wanting in Plutarch, in Southey (“Life of Nelson”) and in Forster (“Life of Goldsmith”); yet it must be acknowledged that personal knowledge gives the principal charm to Tacitus’s “Agricola,” Roper’s “Life of Moore,” Johnson’s “Lives of Savage and Pope,” Boswell’s “Johnson,” Lockhart’s “Scott,” Carlyle’s “Sterling,” and Moore’s “Byron.”

be given from personal knowledge, they can not always be published, out of regard for the living; and when the time arrives when they may at length be told, they are then no longer remembered. Johnson himself expressed this reluctance to tell all he knew of those poets who had been his contemporaries, saying that he felt as if “walking upon ashes under which the fire was not extinguished.”

For this reason, among others, we rarely obtain an unvarnished picture of character from the near relatives of distinguished men; and, interesting though all autobiography is, still less can we expect it from the men themselves. In writing his own memoirs a man will not tell all that he knows about himself. Augustine was a rare exception; but few there are who will, as he did in his “Confessions,” lay bare their innate viciousness, deceitfulness, and selfishness. There is a Highland proverb which says that, if the best man’s faults were written on his forehead, he would pull his bonnet over his brow. “There is no man,” said Voltaire, “who has not something hateful in him—no man who has not some of the wild beast in him. But there are few who will honestly tell us how they manage their wild beast.” Rousseau pretended to unbosom himself in his “Confessions;” but it is manifest that he held back far more than he revealed. Even Chamfort, one of the last men to fear what his contemporaries might think or say of him, once observed: “It seems to me impossible, in the actual state of society, for any man to exhibit his secret heart, the details of his character as known to himself, and, above all, his weaknesses and his vices, to even his best friend.”

An autobiography may be true so far as it goes; but in communicating only part of the truth, it may convey an impression that is really false. It may be a disguise—some-

times it is an apology—exhibiting not so much what a man really was as what he would have liked to be. A portrait in profile may be correct, but who knows whether some scar on the off-cheek, or some squint in the eye that is not seen, might not have entirely altered the expression of the face if brought into sight? Scott, Moore, Southey, all began autobiographies, but the task of continuing them was doubtless felt to be too difficult as well as delicate, and they were abandoned.

French literature is especially rich in a class of biographic memoirs of which we have few counterparts in English. We refer to their *Memoires pour servir*, such as those of Sully, De Comines, Lauzun, De Retz, De Thou, Rochefoucauld, etc., in which we have recorded an immense mass of minute and circumstantial information relative to many great personages of history. They are full of anecdotes illustrative of life and character, and of details which might be called frivolous, but that they throw a flood of light on the social habits and general civilization of the periods to which they relate. The *Memoires* of Saint-Simon are something more; they are marvellous dissections of character, and constitute the most extraordinary collection of anatomical biography that has ever been brought together.

Saint-Simon might almost be regarded in the light of a posthumous court-spy of Louis the Fourteenth. He was possessed by a passion for reading character, and endeavoring to decipher motives and intentions in the faces, expressions, conversation, and by-play of those about him. "I examine all my personages closely," said he—"watch their mouth, eyes, and ears, constantly." And what he heard and saw he noted down with extraordinary vividness and dash. Acute, keen, and observant, he pierced the masks of the

courtiers, and detected their secrets. The ardor with which he prosecuted his favorite study of character seemed insatiable, and even cruel. "The eager anatomist," says Sainte-Beuve, "was not more ready to plunge the scalpel into the still-palpating bosom in search of the disease that had baffled him."

La Bruyere possessed the same gift of accurate and penetrating observation of character. He watched and studied everybody about him. He sought to read their secrets; and, retiring to his chamber, he deliberately painted their portraits, returning to them from time to time to correct some prominent feature—hanging over them as fondly as an artist over some favorite study—adding trait to trait, and touch to touch, until at length the picture was complete and the likeness perfect.

It may be said that much of the interest of biography, especially of the more familiar sort, is of the nature of gossip; as that of the *Memoires pour servir* is of the nature of scandal, which is no doubt true. But both gossip and scandal illustrate the strength of the interest which men and women take in each other's personality; and which, exhibited in the form of biography, is capable of communicating the highest pleasure, and yielding the best instruction. Indeed biography, because it is instinct of humanity, is the branch of literature which—whether in the form of fiction, of anecdotal recollection, or of personal narrative—is the one that invariably commends itself to by far the largest class of readers.

There is no room for doubt that the surpassing interest which fiction, whether in poetry or prose, possesses for most minds arises mainly from the biographic element which it contains. Homer's "Iliad" owes its marvellous popularity

to the genius which its author displayed in the portrayal of heroic character. Yet he does not so much describe his personages in detail as make them develop themselves by their actions. "There are in Homer," said Dr. Johnson, "such characters of heroes and combination of qualities of heroes, that the united powers of mankind ever since have not produced any but what are to be found there."

The genius of Shakspeare, also, was displayed in the powerful delineation of character, and the dramatic evolution of human passions. His personages seem to be real—living and breathing before us. So, too, with Cervantes, whose Sancho Panza, though homely and vulgar, is intensely human. The characters in Le Sage's "Gil Blas," in Goldsmith's "Vicar of Wakefield," and in Scott's marvellous muster-roll, seem to us almost as real as persons whom we have actually known; and De Foe's greatest works are but so many biographies, painted in minute detail, with reality so apparently stamped upon every page that it is difficult to believe his Robinson Crusoe and Colonel Jack to have been fictitious persons instead of real ones.

Though the richest romance lies inclosed in actual human life, and though biography, because it describes beings who have actually felt the joys and sorrows, and experienced the difficulties and triumphs, of real life, is capable of being made more attractive than the most perfect fictions ever woven, it is remarkable that so few men of genius have been attracted to the composition of works of this kind. Great works of fiction abound, but great biographies may be counted on the fingers. It may be for the same reason that a great painter of portraits, the late John Phillip, R.A., explained his preference for subject-painting, because, said he, "Portrait-painting does not pay." Biographic portrait-

ure involves laborious investigation and careful collection of facts, judicious rejection and skillful condensation, as well as the art of presenting the character portrayed in the most attractive and life-like form; whereas, in the work of fiction, the writer's imagination is free to create and to portray character, without being trammelled by references, or held down by the actual details of real life.

There is, indeed, no want among us of ponderous but lifeless memoirs, many of them little better than inventories, put together with the help of the scissors as much as of the pen. What Constable said of the portraits of an inferior artist—"He takes all the bones and brains out of his heads"—applies to a large class of portraiture, written as well as painted. They have no more life in them than a piece of wax work, or a clothes-dummy at a tailor's door. What we want is a picture of a man as he lived, and lo! we have an exhibition of the biographer himself. We expect an embalmed heart, and we find only clothes.

There is doubtless as high art displayed in painting a portrait in words as there is in painting one in colors. To do either well requires the seeing eye and the skillful pen or brush. A common artist sees only the features of a face, and copies them; but the great artist sees the living soul shining through the features, and places it on the canvas. Johnson was once asked to assist the chaplain of a deceased bishop in writing a memoir of his lordship; but when he proceeded to inquire for information, the chaplain could scarcely tell him any thing. Hence Johnson was led to observe that "few people who have lived with a man know what to remark about him."

In the case of Johnson's own life, it was the seeing eye of Boswell that enabled him to note and treasure up those

minute details of habit and conversation in which so much of the interest of biography consists. Boswell, because of his simple love and admiration of his hero, succeeded where probably greater men would have failed. He descended to apparently insignificant, but yet most characteristic, particulars. Thus he apologizes for informing the reader that Johnson, when journeying, "carried in his hand a large English oak stick;" adding, "I remember Dr. Adam Smith, in his rhetorical lectures at Glasgow, told us he was glad to know that Milton wore latches in his shoes instead of buckles." Boswell lets us know how Johnson looked, what dress he wore, what was his talk, what were his prejudices. He painted him with all his scars, and a wonderful portrait it is—perhaps the most complete picture of a great man ever limned in words.

But for the accident of the Scotch advocate's intimacy with Johnson, and his devoted admiration of him, the latter would not probably have stood nearly so high in literature as he now does. It is in the pages of Boswell that he really lives; and but for Boswell he might have remained little more than a name. Others there are who have bequeathed great works to posterity, but of whose lives next to nothing is known. What would we not give to have a Boswell's account of Shakspeare? We positively know more of the personal history of Socrates, of Horace, of Cicero, of Augustine, than we do of Shakspeare. We do not know what was his religion, what were his politics, what were his experiences, what were his relations to his contemporaries. The men of his own time do not seem to have recognized his greatness; and Ben Jonson, the court poet, whose blank-verse he was content to commit to memory and recite as an actor, stood higher in his day than Shakspeare. We

only know that he was a successful theatrical manager, and that in the prime of life he retired to his native place, where he died, and had the honors of a village funeral. The greater part of the biography which has been constructed respecting him has been the result, not of contemporary observation or of record, but of inference. The best inner biography of the man is to be found in his sonnets.

Men do not always take an accurate measure of their contemporaries. The statesman, the general, the monarch, of to day fills all eyes and ears, though to the next generation he may be as if he had never been. "And who is king to-day?" the painter Greuze would ask of his daughter, during the throes of the first French Revolution, when men, great for the time, were suddenly thrown to the surface, and as suddenly dropped out of sight again, never to reappear. "And who is king to-day? After all," Greuze would add, "Citizen Homer and Citizen Raphael will outlive those great citizens of ours, whose names I have never before heard of." Yet of the personal history of Homer nothing is known, and of Raphael comparatively little. Even Plutarch, who wrote the lives of others so well, has no biography, none of the eminent Roman writers who were his contemporaries having so much as mentioned his name. And so of Correggio, who delineated the features of others so well, there is not known to exist an authentic portrait.

There have been men who greatly influenced the life of their time, whose reputation has been much greater with posterity than it was with their contemporaries. Of Wickliffe, the patriarch of the Reformation, our knowledge is extremely small. He was but as a voice crying in the wilderness. We do not really know who was the author