


ARTHUR J. BALFOUR

IGHT HON. ARTHUR JAMES BALFOUR, P. C., M. P., D. C. L., a distinguished English statesman and author, first lord of the treasury in Lord Salisbury's cabinet, and leader of the House of Commons, was born in Scotland, July 25, 1848, and was educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge. He entered Parliament in 1874 as member for Hertford, which he represented till 1885, since which time he has sat for East Manchester. He was private secretary to his uncle, Lord Salisbury, 1878-80, and for a short period acted with a few Conservatives led by Lord Randolph Churchill, and known as the "Fourth Party." He was created a privy councillor in 1885, appointed secretary for Scotland, 1886-87, and chief secretary for Ireland, 1887-91, his Irish policy being not altogether to the liking of some of the Conservatives. He was first lord of the treasury, 1891-92, and again in 1895. He became Conservative leader of the House in 1891 and in the following year delivered many speeches against the Home Rule Bill. Mr. Balfour was lord rector of St. Andrew's University in 1880, and of Glasgow University in 1890. His writings comprise "A Defence of Philosophic Doubt" (1879); "Essays and Addresses" (1893); "The Foundations of Belief," a work which has attracted general attention (1895). He is a scholar, a metaphysician, and a brilliant debater.

THE PLEASURES OF READING

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TRULY it is a subject for astonishment that, instead of expanding to the utmost the employment of this pleasure-giving faculty, so many persons should set themselves to work to limit its exercise by all kinds of arbitrary regulations.

Some persons, for example, tell us that the acquisition of knowledge is all very well, but that it must be useful knowledge,—meaning usually thereby that it must enable a man to get on in a profession, pass an examination, shine in conversation, or obtain a reputation for learning. But even if they mean something higher than this—even if they mean that knowledge, to be worth anything, must subserve ulti-

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mately, if not immediately, the material or spiritual interests of mankind,—the doctrine is one which should be energetically repudiated.

I admit, of course, at once, that discoveries the most apparently remote from human concerns have often proved themselves of the utmost commercial or manufacturing value. But they require no such justification for their existence, nor were they striven for with any such object.

Navigation is not the final cause of astronomy, nor telegraphy of electro-dynamics, nor dye-works of chemistry. And if it be true that the desire of knowledge for the sake of knowledge was the animating motives of the great men who first wrested her secrets from nature, why should it not also be enough for us, to whom it is not given to discover, but only to learn as best we may what has been discovered by others?

Another maxim, more plausible but equally pernicious, is that superficial knowledge is worse than no knowledge at all. That "a little knowledge is a dangerous thing" is a saying which has now got currency as a proverb stamped in the mint of Pope's versification,—of Pope who, with the most imperfect knowledge of Greek, translated Homer; with the most imperfect knowledge of the Elizabethan drama, edited Shakespeare; and with the most imperfect knowledge of philosophy, wrote the "Essay on Man."

But what is this "little knowledge" which is supposed to be so dangerous? What is it "little" in relation to? If in relation to what there is to know, then all human knowledge is little. If in relation to what actually is known by somebody, then we must condemn as "dangerous" the knowledge which Archimedes possessed of mechanics, or Copernicus of astronomy; for a shilling primer and a few

weeks' study will enable any student to outstrip in mere information some of the greatest teachers of the past.

No doubt that little knowledge which thinks itself to be great many possibly be a dangerous, as it certainly is a most ridiculous, thing. We have all suffered under that eminently absurd individual who, on the strength of one or two volumes, imperfectly apprehended by himself and long discredited in the estimation of every one else, is prepared to supply you on the shortest notice with a dogmatic solution of every problem suggested by this "unintelligible world;" or the political variety of the same pernicious genus whose statecraft consists in the ready application to the most complex question of national interest of some high-sounding commonplace which has done weary duty on a thousand platforms, and which even in its palmy days was never fit for anything better than a peroration.

But in our dislike of the individual do not let us mistake the diagnosis of his disease. He suffers not from ignorance, but from stupidity. Give him learning, and you make him, not wise, but only more pretentious in his folly.

I say, then, that so far from a little knowledge being undesirable a little knowledge is all that on most subjects any of us can hope to attain, and that as a source, not of worldly profit, but of personal pleasure, it may be of incalculable value to its possessor.

But it will naturally be asked, "How are we to select from among the infinite number of things which may be known those which it is best worth while for us to know?" We are constantly being told to concern ourselves with learning what is important, and not to waste our energies upon what is insignificant.

But what are the marks by which we shall recognize the

important, and how is it to be distinguished from the insignificant? A precise and complete answer to this question which shall be true for all men cannot be given. I am considering knowledge, recollect, as it ministers to enjoyment, and from this point of view each unit of information is obviously of importance in proportion as it increases the general sum of enjoyment which we obtain from knowledge. This, of course, makes it impossible to lay down precise rules which shall be an equally sure guide to all sorts and conditions of men; for in this, as in other matters, tastes must differ, and against real difference of taste there is no appeal.

There is, however, one caution which it may be worth your while to keep in view,—Do not be persuaded into applying any general proposition on this subject with a foolish impartiality to every kind of knowledge. There are those who tell you that it is the broad generalities and the far-reaching principles which govern the world, which are alone worthy of your attention.

A fact which is not an illustration of a law, in the opinion of these persons, appears to lose all its value. Incidents which do not fit into some great generalization, events which are merely picturesque, details which are merely curious—they dismiss as unworthy the interest of a reasoning being.

Now, even in science, this doctrine in its extreme form does not hold good. The most scientific of men have taken profound interest in the investigation of facts from the determination of which they do not anticipate any material addition to our knowledge of the laws which regulate the universe. In these matters I need hardly say that I speak wholly without authority. But I have always been under the impression that an investigation which has cost hundreds of thousands of pounds; which has stirred on three occasions

the whole scientific community throughout the civilized world; on which has been expended the utmost skill in the construction of instruments and their application to purposes of research (I refer to the attempts made to determine the distance of the sun by observations of the transit of Venus), would, even if they had been brought to a successful issue, have furnished mankind with the knowledge of no new astronomical principle.

The laws which govern the motions of the solar system, the proportions which the various elements in that system bear to one another, have long been known. The distance of the sun itself is known within limits of error, relatively speaking, not very considerable. Were the measuring-rod we apply to the heavens, based on an estimate of the sun's distance from the earth, which was wrong by (say) three per cent, it would not, to the lay mind, seem to affect very materially our view either of the distribution of the heavenly bodies or of their motions. And yet this information, this piece of celestial gossip, would seem to be that which was chiefly expected from the successful prosecution of an investigation in which whole nations have interested themselves.

But though no one can, I think, pretend that science does not concern itself, and properly concern itself, with facts which are not in themselves, to all appearance, illustrations of law, it is undoubtedly true that for those who desire to extract the greatest pleasure from science, a knowledge, however elementary, of the leading principles of investigation and the larger laws of nature, is the acquisition most to be desired. To him who is not a specialist; a comprehension of the broad outlines of the universe as it presents itself to the scientific imagination, is the thing most worth striving to attain.

But when we turn from science to what is rather vaguely called history, the same principles of study do not, I think, altogether apply, and mainly for this reason,—that while the recognition of the reign of law is the chief amongst the pleasures imparted by science, our inevitable ignorance makes it the least among the pleasures imparted by history.

It is no doubt true that we are surrounded by advisers who tell us that all study of the past is barren except in so far as it enables us to determine the laws by which the evolution of human societies is governed. How far such an investigation has been up to the present time fruitful in results I will not inquire. That it will ever enable us to trace with accuracy the course which states and nations are destined to pursue in the future, or to account in detail for their history in the past, I do not indeed believe.

We are borne along like travellers on some unexplored stream. We may know enough of the general configuration of the globe to be sure that we are making our way towards the ocean. We may know enough by experience or theory of the laws regulating the flow of liquids, to conjecture how the river will behave under the varying influences to which it may be subject. More than this we cannot know. It will depend largely upon causes which, in relation to any laws which we are ever likely to discover, may properly be called accidental, whether we are destined sluggishly to drift among fever-stricken swamps, to hurry down perilous rapids, or to glide gently through fair scenes of peaceful cultivation.

But leaving on one side ambitious sociological speculations, and even those more modest but hitherto more successful investigations into the causes which have in particular cases been principally operative in producing great political

changes, there are still two modes in which we can derive what I may call "spectacular" enjoyment from the study of history.

There is first the pleasure which arises from the contemplation of some great historic drama, or some broad and well-marked phase of social development. The story of the rise, greatness, and decay of a nation is like some vast epic which contains as subsidiary episodes the varied stories of the rise, greatness, and decay of creeds, of parties and of statesmen. The imagination is moved by the slow unrolling of this great picture of human mutability, as it is moved by the contrasted permanence of the abiding stars. The ceaseless conflict, the strange echoes of long-forgotten controversies, the confusion of purpose, the successes which lay deep the seeds of future evils, the failures that ultimately divert the otherwise inevitable danger, the heroism which struggles to the last for a cause foredoomed to defeat, the wickedness which sides with right, and the wisdom which huzzas at the triumph of folly—fate, meanwhile, through all this turmoil and perplexity, working silently toward the predestined end,—all these form together a subject the contemplation of which need surely never weary.

But there is yet another and very different species of enjoyment to be derived from the records of the past, which require a somewhat different method of study in order that it may be fully tasted. Instead of contemplating, as it were, from a distance, the larger aspects of the human drama, we may elect to move in familiar fellowship amid the scenes and actors of special periods.

We may add to the interest we derive from the contemplation of contemporary politics, a similar interest derived from a not less minute and probably more accurate knowledge of

some comparatively brief passage in the political history of the past. We may extend the social circle in which we move—a circle perhaps narrowed and restricted through circumstances beyond our control—by making intimate acquaintances, perhaps even close friends, among a society long departed, but which, when we have once learnt the trick of it, it rests with us to revive.

It is this kind of historical reading which is usually branded as frivolous and useless, and persons who indulge in it often delude themselves into thinking that the real motive of their investigation into bygone scenes and ancient scandals is philosophic interest in an important historical episode, whereas in truth it is not the philosophy which glorifies the details, but the details which make tolerable the philosophy.

Consider, for example, the case of the French Revolution. The period from the taking of the Bastille to the fall of Robespierre is of about the same length as very commonly intervenes between two of our general elections. On these comparatively few months libraries have been written. The incidents of every week are matters of familiar knowledge. The character and the biography of every actor in the drama has been made the subject of minute study; and by common admission, there is no more fascinating page in the history of the world.

But the interest is not what is commonly called philosophic, it is personal. Because the Revolution is the dominant fact in modern history, therefore people suppose that the doings of this or that provincial lawyer, tossed into temporary eminence and eternal infamy by some freak of the revolutionary wave, or the atrocities committed by this or that mob, half-drunk with blood, rhetoric and alcohol, are of transcendent importance.

In truth their interest is great, but their importance is small. What we are concerned to know as students of the philosophy of history is, not the character of each turn and eddy in the great social cataract, but the manner in which the currents of the upper stream drew surely in toward the final plunge, and slowly collected themselves after the catastrophe, again to pursue, at a different level, their renewed and comparatively tranquil course.

Now, if so much of the interest of the French Revolution depends upon our minute knowledge of each passing incident, how much more necessary is such knowledge when we are dealing with the quiet nooks and corners of history—when we are seeking an introduction, let us say, into the literary society of Johnson or the fashionable society of Walpole! Society, dead or alive, can have no charm without intimacy, and no intimacy without interest in trifles which I fear Mr. Harrison would describe as “merely curious.”

If we would feel at our ease in any company, if we wish to find humor in its jokes and point in its repartees, we must know something of the beliefs and the prejudices of its various members—their loves and their hates, their hopes and their fears, their maladies, their marriages, and their flirtations. If these things are beneath our notice, we shall not be the less qualified to serve our queen and country, but need make no attempt to extract pleasure out of one of the most delightful departments of literature.

That there is such a thing as trifling information, I do not of course question; but the frame of mind in which the reader is constantly weighing the exact importance to the universe at large of each circumstance which the author presents to his notice, is not one conducive to the true enjoyment of a picture whose effect depends upon a multitude of slight and seem-

ingly insignificant touches, which impress the mind often without remaining in the memory.

The best method of guarding against the danger of reading what is useless is to read only what is interesting,—a truth which will seem a paradox to a whole class of readers, fitting objects of our commiseration, who may be often recognized by their habit of asking some adviser for a list of books, and then marking out a scheme of study in the course of which all these are to be conscientiously perused.

These unfortunate persons apparently read a book principally with the object of getting to the end of it. They reach the word “*Finis*” with the same sensation of triumph as an Indian feels who strings a fresh scalp to his girdle. They are not happy unless they mark by some definite performance each step in the weary path of self-improvement. To begin a volume and not to finish it would be to deprive themselves of this satisfaction; it would be to lose all the reward of their earlier self-denial by a lapse from virtue at the end. The skip, according to their literary code, is a form of cheating: it is a mode of obtaining credit for erudition on false pretences; a plan by which the advantages of learning are surreptitiously obtained by those who have not won them by honest toil. But all this is quite wrong. In matters literary, works have no saving efficacy. He has only half learned the art of reading who has not added to it the even more refined accomplishments of skipping and of skimming; and the first step has hardly been taken in the direction of making literature a pleasure, until interest in the subject, and not a desire to spare (so to speak) the author’s feelings, or to accomplish an appointed task, is the prevailing motive of the reader.