

FROM AN ORIEL WINDOW

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I HAVE just drawn an armchair into the inviting recess whence now I am looking out upon an alluringly peaceful scene. The soft fresh verdure of a closely-cropped lawn invites and rests the eye. One can almost hear the rippling of the Thames as it flows close at hand, moving slowly towards the sea. And, inside this window, peace reigns too. The work of a strenuous day is ended. The light of a purpling dusk is peculiarly soothing. Sitting where I do, I am bathed in the rays of a really superb sunset,—my open casement, even in mid-winter, framing such a vision as in other days enkindled the genius of Turner and Whistler and not a few others of that *debonnaire* and artistic fraternity.

Unfortunately it will not be long before darkness comes, with its demand for artificial light and the drawing of the curtains. Nevertheless, some available moments remain. My writing pad is lying beside me, and my pen pleads that it may indulge a more playful mood during this brief respite from its ordinary and exacting tasks. It shall have its way.

There are many things of which I might write, as I am thinking for the moment of Halifax and of my happy college days in old Dalhousie. One topic, however, harmonizing exactly with my feelings, easily outbids the rest. At the end of two years spent in hotels, and in travelling to and fro by land and sea, a triple satisfaction fills me this evening with the calm of a great content.

I.

There is the joy of being re-established in a settled abode, sheltered beneath one's own roof-tree, and gladdened by the resumption of undertakings which can now be faced under conditions more favourable for their worthy accomplishment.

When it was decided that our home was to be transferred from Eastbourne to Chelsea, many a warning was uttered that it would not be possible to secure there the sort of dwelling we required. The houses erected in that part of London, still regarded as a highly-favoured district, are of course mostly of a type which necessitates considerable re-modelling. The old-world atmosphere which they preserve is coupled with certain disadvantages against which the

modern mind rebels. However, we were not easily discouraged. In the course of a persistent search, a good many artists' studios were visited,—each of which, in turn, was transformed in imagination into a bookman's retreat; but, unfortunately, not one of them seemed fitted to serve our purpose. Basement kitchens, climbing stairways, and innumerable dark corners, naturally failed to enlist our good opinion.

It was only later on, when the outlook had become decidedly perplexing, that the thought presented itself—why not build the house you need? Up to that point I had supposed it would be impracticable to purchase a vacant lot, upon which I could erect a dwelling providing ample space for my books, detached and not too lofty, thoroughly modern in its appointments, and well lighted on all its sides. In some such place, made cozy with beckoning inglenooks, I fairly longed to settle down again and resume my literary pursuits.

This dream has at last been realized. I have ventured to add yet one more to the multifarious structures of London. Within a well-planned dwelling there have now been re-assembled all those treasured belongings which contribute to the equipment of a "Home". It was certainly a singular piece of good fortune which enabled me ultimately to secure this quiet resting-place, and to find that it is as free from noise and other city distractions as if one were living in the garden of some secluded *dulce domum* in the country.

II.

Another satisfaction is due to the circumstance that, while sitting beside this window, I am surrounded by my library. On every hand long shelves, heavily weighted, meet the eye. They mount tier above tier, rising literally from floor to ceiling. And the fading light lends some of them the charm of its own rare beauty:

The sunset calls the red and gold and green
Of tooled morocco to his carnival.

Only one who is really fond of books, and who for a considerable time has been precluded from seeing and handling them, can understand the joy and respond to the thrill with which these inspiring companions are now viewed and daily greeted anew.

Volumes which one has never owned are able, upon occasion, to bring the bookman under their subtle and ingratiating spell. I recall now the experiences I have often enjoyed, when preaching for friends in England or Scotland. The opportunity thrown in

my way of exploring at such times the resources of some well-stocked library has proved a genuine delight. On Saturday evening, and again on Monday forenoon, I have passed from bookcase to bookcase, browsing and gleaning in a treasure-house of literary spoils. When I was a student in Edinburgh, I was privileged by its owner to learn a good deal about the contents of the late Professor Flint's library; and later, when a Commissioner from Canada to the United Free Church Assembly in Glasgow some twenty years ago, I obtained at least a glimpse through Sir George Adam Smith's fine working collection of books. That lure has held me, in ever growing strength, down to this hour.

But the personal ownership of a book adds immensely to its value. One's own library differs from all others. It speaks with a characteristically individual authority. The marked passages, the annotations, the brief pencilled criticisms,—all these additions lend warmth and life to the impassive printed page. Further, every volume is known quite apart from all the rest. Every volume makes its own mute appeal. Every volume conveys its separate message in its own distinctive way. It is for this reason, no doubt, that outgrown and superseded expositions, when additional book-space must be found, are given up not only with regret but with many an evidence of shy irresolution.

So I am not alone, as I sit here. No faintest thought of loneliness has even once dimmed my happiness this evening. On the contrary, I recognise that I am surrounded at this moment by a host of congenial friends. I am touching shoulders with them on every side. The sweet companionship of books,—who has yet praised its solace and inspiration in adequate terms? In my own case, the patience and trustworthiness of these encircling comrades have been guaranteed by many a searching test. Some of these silent helpers I learned to esteem while I was still a citizen of Canada; others continually revive memories of the countries, far away beyond Eastern seas, where they were severally acquired; others are gifts which recall often the faces of their donors; others are as yet unread, because thus far no opportunity to sample their contents has presented itself. On a table, close by, there rest the latest theological and philosophical reviews; though they accumulate in embarrassing numbers, not one of them is unwelcome or in any danger of being ultimately overlooked. These numerous counsellors, speaking in many languages, differ widely of course in the measure of the help they impart. Yet—though one is forced at times to question the advice which some of them tender, and even occasionally to resist the conclusions they so ardently seek to

enforce—the opinions expressed, in so far as they reveal honest conviction and purpose, are fully entitled to the hearing for which in good faith they ask.

III.

My final and supreme satisfaction, as once more I glance around me, is due to the knowledge that I have been able to build up a specialist's library. Books are lodged all over the house, in halls and rooms and on the stairways; but practically all the books which are *here* belong to a single group. They help to elucidate a single theme. They describe the successive stages in man's ineradicable search for God, and the different avenues along which (during thousands of years) he has sought to find and worship the One Father of us all.

A quest of profound interest, it is also a sobering discipline to trace the way in which enlightened religious opinion has advanced by groping steps towards a fuller illumination. It is a veritable inspiration to glance along these crowded bookshelves, and to recall the dauntless courage which is enshrined in the conclusions reached and registered in these accumulated publications. The authors of some of these books died for their faith; some, it is now generally admitted, were martyrs by mistake. Others, still with us and at work, circumscribe their authority by attempting too much, or by endorsing theories which lack sufficient warrant. A generation ago, many writers undertook single-handed to present a survey of the whole world of religions. Textbooks professed to enlighten the student concerning the intricacies of all the divergent beliefs of mankind. Individual authors occasionally apply themselves to this huge task still; and, where a popular exposition is all that is aimed at, they often achieve their purpose exceedingly well.

Barton's *The Religions of the World* (1917), Soper's *The Religions of Mankind* (1921), and Cave's *The Living Religions of the East* (1921) are excellent instances in point. More ambitious treatises however (e. g., Moore's *History of Religions*. 2 vols., 1914-1920) are not generally so successful. It is now recognised that no single authority is competent to estimate and expound the whole circle of the faiths which differ from his own. Teachers are beginning to restrict themselves, therefore, not merely to individual systems of belief, but to those selected portions of some system which they have personally mastered. Macdonald's *Aspects of Islam* (1911), Farnell's *The Higher Aspects of Greek Religion* (1912), Margoliouth's *The Early Development of Mohammedanism* (1914), and Carpenter's

Phases of Early Christianity (1916) may be cited here. This fact necessitates, of course, the more rapid expansion of one's library, and a further demand for additional shelving; but it means also that enlargement of intimate and accurate knowledge which is one of the greatest needs of our time.

Many of the age-long beliefs associated with literally *every* faith have been modified, and often completely transformed, in the course of passing centuries. It is not too much to affirm that every faith has been remodelled, both consciously and unconsciously, to an extent undreamed of by the majority of those who profess it. Religions, it can be demonstrated, are closely inter-related; and Christianity, which is commonly reputed to be the most original among many contemporaries and predecessors, would appear to have been the greatest borrower of them all. Well, the books which to-night surround me trace the history of the changes which time and environment have inevitably wrought. They dispel, wholly or in part, the mystery of the origin, development, and interaction of some of the subtlest factors which enter into the spiritual history of mankind.

Can any study be more fascinating than researches in Comparative Religion? Does any enquiry seem likely to be more far-reaching in its ultimate influence upon studious and thoughtful men? And, at the end of a long *Wanderlust*, where could one discharge this task more pleasantly than in an old-world garden, surrounded by books which offer themselves daily as willing and accredited guides?