

The Bookshelf by the Fire.

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IV.

Izaak Walton.

THERE are few books so fit for the quiet hour, few that have such power to make the hours quiet, as the little volumes that we owe to Izaak Walton. In reading them we seem as remote from the strife of tongues as at Bemerton with George Herbert, or at Little Gidding with Nicholas Ferrar. Less than two years before the first edition of *The Complete Angler* was published, the narrow streets of Worcester city were choked with the dead and dying, who fell when Cromwell won his 'crowning mercy'; yet perhaps nowhere in the whole world of books are such utter gentleness and peace to be found as in Walton's quiet page. It is rather surprising, therefore, to find so good a judge of books as Dr. George Saintsbury dismissing Walton with such curt and tepid praise. He admits, of course, his wide popularity, and the engaging character alike of the man and of his writings; but as literature he does not rate his books very high; they are, he thinks, 'neither above nor below the better work of their time in literary form.'¹ But this is a case in which, as Mr. Birrell would say, 'it does not matter a dump' what the Professors think, the fraternity of book-lovers, like the fraternity of anglers, has long ago made up its mind regarding honest Izaak, and in the hundred and sixty separate editions or issues of *The Complete Angler* which the industry of Mr. R. B. Marston has discovered,² it has registered a judgment from which there is no appeal. If there be such a thing as immortality for the writer of books, Izaak Walton can never die.

I.

Of Walton's life there is little to tell. Born in the same year as George Herbert and Nicholas Ferrar (1593), he outlived the former by fifty, and the latter by forty-six years. Yet his long life—

¹ *Elizabethan Literature*, p. 441.

² See his excellent and cheap edition issued by the Oxford University Press, 1915.

he died in 1683 at the age of ninety—has left but scanty material for his biographers. When he was born Elizabeth was on the throne; he lived all through the great Civil War; he saw the rise and fall of the Commonwealth, the execution of Charles and the death of Cromwell; when he died the Restoration was twenty-three years behind, the Revolution but five years ahead. But the fierce storms of the time, whose fury we can trace through the life of the century, as we trace the path of a tornado, seem to have left Walton almost wholly untouched. He made no secret of the warmth and strength of his Royalist sympathies; they find frequent voice in his books; but for the most part he was content to leave it to others to argue and scheme and fight. When the wild winds were laying low many things that he counted sacred and dear, he turned for solace to his rod and his pen, his books and his friends. Indeed, so retired and uneventful was Walton's life that his disciples to-day, in the absence of anything more exciting, are still disputing among themselves whether the shop which he kept in Fleet Street was a haberdasher's or an ironmonger's! It was probably the latter, but after all what matter which?

There are a few simple memorials which those who love Walton's memory will for his sake seek out as opportunity serves. A bust in St. Mary's Church, Stafford, recalls the place of his birth and his baptism. His shop in Fleet Street, two doors west of Chancery Lane, was long ago pulled down, but hard by is the church of St. Dunstan-in-the-West, where his friend John Donne was vicar, and, as a tablet on the outer wall records, himself for a time a vestryman. In the south transept of Westminster Abbey is a tablet to Isaac Casaubon, a scholar for whose rare learning Walton had a profound admiration, and scratched upon the stone may still be seen his monogram, with the date 1658. Of still greater interest is the tablet

to his second wife, in the Lady Chapel of Worcester Cathedral, the inscription of which was written by Walton himself, the original manuscript draft having been found on the fly-leaf of his Prayer-book. It runs as follows:

'Here lyeth buried so much as could dye, of ANNE, the wife of IZAAK WALTON, who was A woman of remarkable prudence and of the *Primitive Piety*, her great and generall knowledge being adorn'd with soe much *Christian meekness*, as made her worthy of a more memorable Monument. She dyed (Alas that she is dead!) the 17th of April 1662, Aged 52. Study to be like her.'

Walton himself is buried in the cathedral at Winchester, where a statue in the great screen witnesses to the affection of 'the Fishermen of England.' But perhaps the dearest spot of all, at least to those who 'go a-angling,' is Charles Cotton's little Fishing House—*piscatoribus sacrum*—in a bend of the Dove in Derbyshire, where two centuries and a half ago Cotton and Walton 'smoked their pipes and fried their trout, heedless of king's-man and Puritan and of all the civil strife which embroiled that unsettled period.'

But after all their pious pilgrimages it is always to Walton's writings that his disciples will turn to find his true memorial. Two small books—the *Lives* and *The Complete Angler*—have secured for him an abiding place in our literature, and of each of these something must now be said.

II.

The *Lives* consists of five short biographies written at widely separated intervals:

- 1640, John Donne.
- 1651, Sir Henry Wotton.
- 1665, Richard Hooker.
- 1670, George Herbert.

In the last-named year these four lives were collected and printed in one volume. Then, in 1678, when Walton was eighty-five, and when, as he justly says, age might have procured him 'a writ of ease,' the Life of Dr. Robert Sanderson was added.

These five miniature biographies, it is no exaggeration to say, have a place by themselves in our literature. Dr. Jessopp brackets together Walton's Life of Donne and the Life of Agricola by Tacitus as books that can never be super-

seded.¹ This does not mean, of course, that Walton's work is without spot or blemish. If he is discovered to be sometimes inaccurate in detail, that is only what might have been expected. As Dr. Jessopp admits, Walton was a hero-worshipper, who could not help idealizing his heroes. A few may even agree with Sir Leslie Stephen, who finds in Walton 'just a touch of the unctuous,' and 'a rather excessive subservience to the respectabilities';² and still more perhaps with Dean Church when he says that 'Walton's idea of humility and meekness, charming as are the pictures in which it is embodied, had in it something which often strikes a modern reader as one-sided and unreal.'³ Nevertheless, when a completer knowledge has corrected his errors, and criticism has said its last word, Walton's supremacy in his own line remains unchallenged even by the critics themselves.

Dr. Johnson's admiration of the *Lives* is well known; it was, Boswell tells us, one of his most favourite books. In his last illness he used often to recite the pathetic request with which Walton concludes his Life of Bishop Sanderson: 'Thus this pattern of meekness and primitive innocence changed this for a better life. 'Tis now too late to wish that my life may be like his, for I am in the eighty-fifth year of my age: but I humbly beseech Almighty God that my death may: and do as earnestly beg of every reader to say—Amen.' But the most delightful tribute to Walton's *Lives* that I know is to be found in George Gissing's *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, and I venture to transcribe the whole passage confident that if this be not sufficient to send the reader back to Walton for himself, nothing that I can say will be of any avail:

'Sitting in my garden amid the evening scent of roses, I have read through Walton's *Life of Hooker*; could any place and time have been more appropriate? Almost within sight is the tower of Heavitree Church—Heavitree, which was Hooker's birthplace. In other parts of England, he must often have thought of these meadows falling to the green valley of the Exe, and of the sun setting behind the pines of Haldon. Hooker loved the country. Delightful to me, and infinitely touching,

¹ See his *John Donne* in the 'Leaders of Religion' series, p. ix.

² *Hours in a Library*, vol. iii, pp. 185-186.

³ Introduction to Book I. of *Hooker's Ecclesiastical Polity*, p. viii.

is that request of his to be transferred from London to a rural living—"where I can see God's blessing spring out of the earth." And that glimpse of him where he was found tending sheep, with a Horace in his hand. It was in rural solitudes that he conceived the rhythm of mighty prose. What music of the spheres sang to that poor, vixen-haunted, pimply-faced man!

'The last few pages I read by the light of the full moon, that of afterglow having till then sufficed me. Oh, why has it not been granted me in all my long years of pen-labour to write something small and perfect, even as one of these lives of honest Izaak! Here is literature, look you—not "literary work." Let me be thankful that I have the mind to enjoy it; not only to understand, but to savour its great goodness.'

To which of the *Lives* shall we accord the first place? Dr. Johnson gave his vote for the Life of Donne. So also does Dr. Jessopp: 'Walton's Life of Donne,' he says, 'is the masterpiece of biographical literature.'¹ Gissing, on the other hand, seems to yield the palm to the Life of Hooker; and after a further re-reading, I agree with him unhesitatingly. But there! What matter our little likes and preferences? Let us read and enjoy all that Walton has given us, thankful, as Gissing says, that we are able not only to understand, but to savour its great goodness.

III.

Yet great as is the charm of the *Lives*, they probably get but one reader where the *Angler* gets ten.² It is said that Dr. Johnson once took Bishop Percy's little daughter on his knee, and asked her what she thought of the *Pilgrim's Progress*. The child said that she had not read it. 'No?' replied the Doctor, 'then I would not give one farthing for you'; and he set her down and took no further notice of her. And though Izaak Walton is the very last man in whose name one would want to excommunicate anybody, I do not think I would give much more for any one who could not enjoy *The Complete Angler*. To the

¹ *John Donne*, p. 167.

² It should be noted that a few editions of *The Complete Angler*—Mr. Austin Dobson's, for example, in the 'Temple Classics'—contain only Walton's own work. The second and much briefer part, written by his friend Charles Cotton, and added to the fifth edition of 1676, is usually included with it.

angler, I suppose, the book is his bible, his beads—I had almost said his rod and his staff. But this is a matter on which I have less than no right to speak. I note, however, that Mr. Marston, who speaks as one having authority, has no hesitation about the practical value of Walton's precepts. 'I have been,' he says, 'an enthusiastic angler for over half a century. I have read practically every work ever written about angling, and possess most of them, and yet I can truly say that I learned more about the ways of our British fish, and their haunts and their habits and how to catch them, from Walton and Cotton than from any subsequent writers.'³ Be it so; but once more, it does not matter. All the world is not a fish-pond, nor all the men and women merely fishers, and even those who are as innocent of the blood of worm, frog, or fish, as is the present writer, may still take old Izaak to their hearts, for his own and for his book's sake. One can hardly imagine Dr. Johnson in the goodly fellowship of anglers, but Mr. Marston tells us that he once saw a presentation copy of Walton's book in which Johnson had written, 'A mighty pretty book—a mighty pretty book.'⁴ Charles Lamb too, we are told, though he would sometimes take a rod, could never bring himself to fix the worms; yet this is how he writes to Coleridge: 'Among all your quaint readings, did you ever light upon Walton's *Complete Angler*? It breathes the very spirit of innocence, purity, and simplicity of heart; there are many choice old verses interspersed in it; it would sweeten a man's temper at any time to read it; it would Christianize every discordant angry passion; pray make yourself acquainted with it.' Lamb had pounced on his own copy—an early and valuable edition—in some ramshackle repository of marine stores, and used to tell how grievous had been his disappointment on finding that its unlikely looking owner knew as much of its mercantile value as himself.⁵ But Walton's fame is as independent of the professional bookman as it is of the professional angler. Mr. Marston records that a single one of the hundred and sixty editions on his list—that of Cassell's 'National Library'—has reached a circulation of eighty thousand copies.

The secret of this abiding popularity is not far

³ See p. xxi in the introductory notes of the edition referred to above.

⁴ *Ib.* p. xviii.

⁵ *Life of Charles Lamb*, by E. V. Lucas, pp. 103, 575, 591.

to seek. To begin with, *The Complete Angler* is written in a style that lays its spell on learned and simple alike. The quiet humour, the quaint phrasing, the happy quotations, the delicate flavour of scholarship—everything is Walton's and everything fits. The book is one with itself and with its author. There is nothing loud, nothing pungent, nothing forced; that is not Walton's way. He never says right out all that is in his mind; he expects you to understand from the twinkle of his eyes and the smile that plays about his lips. And there seems about it all such an unstudied ease and grace that the reader sometimes feels as if he himself were wandering by Piscator's side, listening to his pleasant talk and the mingling murmurs of the silver stream. Walton speaks somewhere of his 'artless pencil guided by the hand of Truth.' Yet let no beginner in the art of writing be deceived. Perfect simplicity is here, as so often, the last result of unremitting toil. Nearly a quarter of a century intervened between the publication of the first edition of *The Complete Angler* and the fifth; and during all this time Walton went on in his leisurely way adding to its completeness. Nor were the additions merely to the technical part: 'Happy quotations, new turns of phrase, songs, poems, and anecdotes were introduced as if the leisurely author who wrote it as a recreation had kept it constantly in his mind, and talked it over point by point, with his numerous brethren.'¹ And the same appears to be true of the *Lives*. The Life of Hooker, short as it is, cost him two years' labour; that of Herbert, he says, 'was not writ in haste.'

Further, *The Complete Angler* is an ideal companion not only for the brethren of the angle, but for all who love the life of the stream and the field and the hedgerow. The murmur of brooks, the rustle of the wind in the trees, the shower falling softly on the teeming earth, the sweet smell of the earth after rain, the shining of the sun on green spaces—I can think of no other book that gives us so deliciously the sense of all these things as does Walton's. There are some books, if I may illustrate by contrast, which affect us as *Obermann* affected Arnold:

A fever in these pages burns
Beneath the calm they feign;
A wounded human spirit turns,
Here on its bed of pain.

¹ Art. 'Walton,' in *Encyclopædia Britannica*, 11th edition.

Walton's book rather makes us feel 'amid the city's jar' that there exists a peace 'man did not make and cannot mar.' We have no more peaceful or peace-bringing book in our literature.

Again, who can resist Walton's whole-souled devotion to what he calls his 'art,' and the infectious enthusiasm with which he writes about it? That angling *is* an art Walton has no doubt, and the only question for the would-be angler is not whether the art is worth his learning, but whether he be capable of learning it, for anglers, like poets, are born not made. But once it is learned there is no life 'so happy and so pleasant as the life of a well-governed angler; for,' says Piscator to his scholar, 'when the lawyer is swallowed up with business, and the statesman is preventing or contriving plots, then we sit on cowslip banks, hear the birds sing, and possess ourselves in as much quietness as these silent silver streams, which we now see glide so quietly by us. Indeed, my good scholar, we may say of angling, as Dr. Boteler said of strawberries, "Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did"; and so, if I might be judge, God never did make a more calm, quiet, innocent recreation than angling.' Indeed, in Walton's mind, virtue and angling always seemed to go together. Anglers share with the meek in the possession of the earth. He brackets together 'the primitive Christians' and 'most anglers' as 'quiet men and followers of peace.' He reminds us that four out of the twelve apostles were fishermen. When he recalls a pious Dean who lived to be ninety-five, without any impairing of the faculties of his mind, he notes that 'it is said, that angling and temperance were great causes of these blessings.' When he has spoken of another deceased friend as 'an excellent angler,' his pen runs on to add as though by instinct 'now with God.' So that, though we may smile, we are quite ready, when the end of the book is reached, to listen to the angler's thanksgiving to 'Him that made that sun and us, and still protects us, and gives us flowers, and showers, and stomachs, and meat, and content, and leisure to go at fishing.'

Finally, we all love *The Complete Angler* for its genuine unaffected piety. Englishmen to-day are not a theological people. We shall never see in England a day like that of which Motley speaks, when 'the blacksmith's iron cooled on the anvil, the tinker dropped a kettle half mended, the

broker left a bargain unclinched, the Scheveningen fisherman in his wooden shoes forgot the cracks in his pinkie while each paused to hold high converse with friend or foe on fate, free-will, or absolute fore-knowledge.' Nevertheless, and notwithstanding all appearances to the contrary, Englishmen are essentially a religious people, with a very real regard for the real thing in religion. Now there is no mistaking the genuineness of Walton's piety. We may smile at the way in which he sometimes

uses Scripture, as, for example, in his reference to Solomon and 'the fishpools of Heshbon'; or at the quaint phrases through which his piety peeps out, as when, again, he tells us that the frog continues 'for at least six months without eating, but is sustained none but He whose name is Wonderful knows how.' But no one can read his book without feeling that he has been in a good man's company, and without learning a deeper reverence for God and all good things.

Contributions and Comments.

The Lord's Prayer.

THE righteous indignation which fills most of us nowadays when we read the morning papers induces the question, when we repeat the Lord's Prayer, 'Are we to forgive the Germans?'

'As we forgive those who trespass against us.' Does that include those who trespass against the youths and maidens of Lille, or the Danish children of the Udun, against sympathetic nurses and brave sea-captains; not to speak of helpless prisoners, military and civilian? I leave it to our appointed and ordained theologians to answer that question, which, I am sure, must trouble many consciences, and is one on which the Church ought to give a clear pronouncement. The Lord's Prayer does not seem to me to give any direction in this respect, for it enjoins on us only the forgiveness of those who have sinned against us personally.

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Matthew x. 11.

'And into whatsoever city or town ye shall enter,' etc.

THE parallel passage in Lk 9⁴ has 'whatsoever house,' and similarly Mk 6¹⁰. The occasion is the same in all three Gospels, and the words must originally have been the same also. It is, however, impossible to reduce the Greek to a common denominator. We must, therefore, have recourse to a presumed Aramaic or Hebrew original. In these the word for house (*oikia*) is regularly *beth*. Moreover, the Greek word for 'town' or village (*κώμη*) frequently in the LXX answers to the

Hebrew *bath* (daughter) in such phrases as 'and the villages thereof' after the name of some city (Nu 21³²). The expressions 'house' and 'town,' therefore, both point to a common Aramaic or Hebrew original. There remains the word 'city' (*πόλις*) to account for. This word in the LXX, besides answering to the Hebrew words for city or town, is also frequently used to render those for 'land' (Nu 21³¹), 'mountain' (2 Ch 21¹¹), 'king' (Jos 24¹²), the proper name of a town (Jer 52¹³), or some misreading or corruption of the Hebrew text (Ezk 16⁷). In one or two places it is used to translate the Hebrew *beth* (house): Jos 15¹⁰, 'city of the sun' for 'Bethshemesh'; 2 Ch 8¹¹, 'city of David' for 'house of David'; and sometimes stands apparently for the shortened Aramaic form *be* (Dt 20¹¹, Zec 8²¹, etc.). In Jg 8³², 1 K 2^{6.9} it is a scribal error for *πολιός*. It would thus appear that the three words house, town, and city, in the passage of the Gospels cited above, all go back to a common Aramaic 'house.' The point is not altogether unimportant, as it tends to show that the mission of the Twelve was of a semi-private house-to-house character as indicated in the second and third Gospels, and not a public one, as one would suppose from the Greek text of Matthew.

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1 Samuel xii. 11; Hebrews xi. 32.

I WONDER if any of your readers have ever considered the close connexion between these two passages. In the former, which belongs to