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James Branch Cabell

OF REVERTING TO OLD FRIENDSHIPS*

To the books in which once upon a time I delighted I return with frank trepidation. They but rarely, as we say, hold up.

Now and then, as with Thackeray and Dickens, it is as though I were revisiting a mansion in which I was once a guest, and in which a dear host of ancient inveterate friends yet greet me. More often, as with Sir Walter Scott, I—stultified, stunned, shocked, flabbergasted—I can but dazedly wonder that anybody, even so gullible a person as memory convicts me of having been upon occasions beyond numbering, could have viewed with seriousness any such balderdash, or could ever have accepted without a frenzy of protest any such stilted and clumsy writing or so many persistently inaccurate substitutes for human speech and human behavior.

And it would be facile here to list never so many yet other time-devastated idols, deserted now and left unhonored in the jungles of literature, so far as goes my personal homage, those writers in whom I once found enjoyment—along with all perfection, too, sometimes— but whom, nowadays, I regard with more or less of the same half-wistful bemuddlement.

Yet one should not be thankless. There was a time, a not unvividly remembered if callow time, when I adjudged well-nigh every one of the Waverly Novels to be magic-haunted. I have followed with a delighted concern the fortunes of Nigel So-and-So (about whose surname I confess my complete ignorance nowa-

*An extract from a forthcoming volume entitled, *Quiet Please*.

days) in virtually all quarters of Jacobean London; and of Quentin Durward in and about Plessis les Tours and the city of Liège when sinister King Louis the Eleventh and the Wild Boar of Ardennes were misbehaving in these two vicinities. And, with deep zest, I have banqueted at Kenilworth Castle, through the courtesy of the Earl of Leicester, as well as with Saladin, King of Kings, after that more than chivalrous heathen monarch had turned out not, after all, to be the skilled leech Something-or-Other, whose exact physicianary name I, at the instant, forgot. I believe it was El Hakim, but I elect not to brave the present-day tediums of *The Talisman* in order to make sure.

Then at Ashby I have broken a lance or so amongst plaudits, and the castle of Torquilstone I have defended with an heroic stubbornness. But above all, throughout an allegedly bonny Scotland which I have never visited in the flesh (nor which, in this special case, has anybody else either) my excursions, once, were no less frequent than extensive, covering as they did a half-dozen centuries and every known class of society, from a peasantry somewhat overgiven to pietism and dialect to royalty en famille. And I believed every stolid, stodgy, pompous paragraph of it, not noticing that I hobnobbed with wax works.

What improbabilities, what dullnesses, though, in my time have I not read with a sincere faith and admiration! One's mind, being merely human, recoils from a guess at through exactly how many trillion miles of type my young and as yet unspectacled eyes once travelled, joyously, athwart the pages of William Harrison Ainsworth, and of Captain Frederick Marryat, and of Bulwer Lytton—and of Maurice Hewlett, even in his latter maunderings, yea, even of George Eliot likewise—and of so very, very many other writers whom today I find to be as sad twaddle as a Congressional Record or as effusions of the late Gertrude Stein and James Joyce. Yet in all these writers (excluding with shrill emphasis the last-named pair) I at one season or another delighted. And the pleasure which they gave me was wholly real, no matter how flimsy and unenduring may have been its foundations.

For that pleasure I stay indebted. It may have been due to the merits of these aforementioned writers (whom I have named at random from a huge host of their fellows in my present-day dis-

esteem), to merits as to which sense-slackening time has blinded me; or it may have been over-colored by my then over-ardent imaginings, which—a very vast while ago—were over-ready to detect, as Charles Kingsley has put it, in every goose a swan. I do not know.

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And that, in passing, is a phrase which I use with timidness. I admit it to be archaic and fallen into desuetude, among in any event all the persons with whom I may pretend, with a pretence which nowadays stays more or less self-conscious, to be familiar.

But for myself, I—nowadays—I derive a pusillanimous, base comfort from saying, "I do not know." And I dare, too, to look back with a shamestruck wondering upon the huge number of years it took me to learn this so comfortable, magic-working and unhuman formula.—For I used to resemble the more sane and wholesome majority of my fellow creatures in that I also once knew everything, or at least in that, but a few decades ago, uncertainty stayed to me, by and large, a stranger.

And my fellow creatures, so do I reflect, they still keep on doing it, to every side of me, alike in social converse, and in their orations (howsoever remote I may observe to be my fellowhood with orators), and in their books, and in their newspapers, and in their state documents, and in their sermons, and in their manifest obligations as a loving wife, and in all yet other arenas of human arrogance, uplifted and well fortified by, so the phrase runs, the courage of their convictions. I alone seem not to be thoroughly and wholly informed as to all affairs concerning politics, and military deployments, and religion, and racial inequalities, and the intentions of Russia, and business conditions, and the unworth of arguing about it any longer (when it is just as plain as the nose on your face) in one's family circle, and vitamins, and the future of communism and of American letters— and in fact, concerning the future of everything else—I alone of a race who, more normally, are gifted with omniscience. It is a reflection which at times depresses me, almost.

Yet I continue to say meekly, as to these and yet many other high matters, "I do not know." And I am thus revolutionary in conduct simply because, if just now and then, I grow over-con-

scious, nowadays, of not really knowing anything whatever, not with conviction, about any doings anywhere except only that which may, at the moment, be going on inside my own personal and private, if scantily thatched, skull. —Besides which, this eccentric admission saves me a great deal of argument and of trouble in general.

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However! the point from which I have divagated (with so very over-much of uncalled-for and of an egoistic garrulousness, you may well observe) is but that in youth, or to my experience of youth, one takes it for granted that the writer of a printed book speaks with authority and knows what he is talking about. That which he tells you as to human life and concerning human beings the self-conscious inexperience of a youthful reader accepts as veracious. But I am afraid that should this so remuneratively humble-minded reader consort a bit later on with writers, or perhaps even concoct a volume or two himself, then he and his inestimable faith must part company, willy-nilly.

He will notice that, in drear point of fact, the professional writer is apt to know so remarkably little about *Homo sapiens* (of which mammal I take him to rank as what the learned in medicine term a diverticulum) as to be unable to get along in peace with any other representative of his species—at close quarters, that is—for more than a rather brief while.

So very ill indeed does the more highly gifted writer understand human conditions that well-nigh always he permits his own private life to be wrecked by them. He turns to an excess of alcohol, or of women, or of boys, or of petty squabbles, almost inevitably. He makes use of his acquaintances without scruple; he wheedles, and he backbites, unceasingly; and he stays forever, even in his more conscientious and zealous approaches toward sincerity in speech and action, an habitual liar.

* * * * *

Nor is this catalogue of undesirable vices, I submit, unnatural. All writers, even those who bask in the splendor of a fifteenth reprinting, remain mentally unbalanced, in that they devote their brains to a pursuit for which the human brain, no matter what may

have been the first purpose of this dubious gift, was beyond question not designed primarily. They in fine become psychopathic cases; and they, quite properly, tend to behave as such.

In brief, I esteem it the hall-mark of a literary genius not ever to sympathize with our human living here, and not ever to arrange with it a satisfying compromise, whether in his personal overtransitory flesh or in print. Rather is it his vocation, his exalted calling —or it may be, his mania—to invent an expurgated and a re-colored and a generally improved version of life's botcheries, a version which he handles with paternal affection, because he and none other begot this version; and to communicate to us, at least partially, the delights which he got out of its engendering. He in short induces, if but temporarily, a collection of high-hearted day-dreams to which, temporarily, we grant belief.