

RICHARD MIDDLETON

THE MAN AND HIS WORK

BY
HENRY SAVAGE

WITH PORTRAITS AND OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

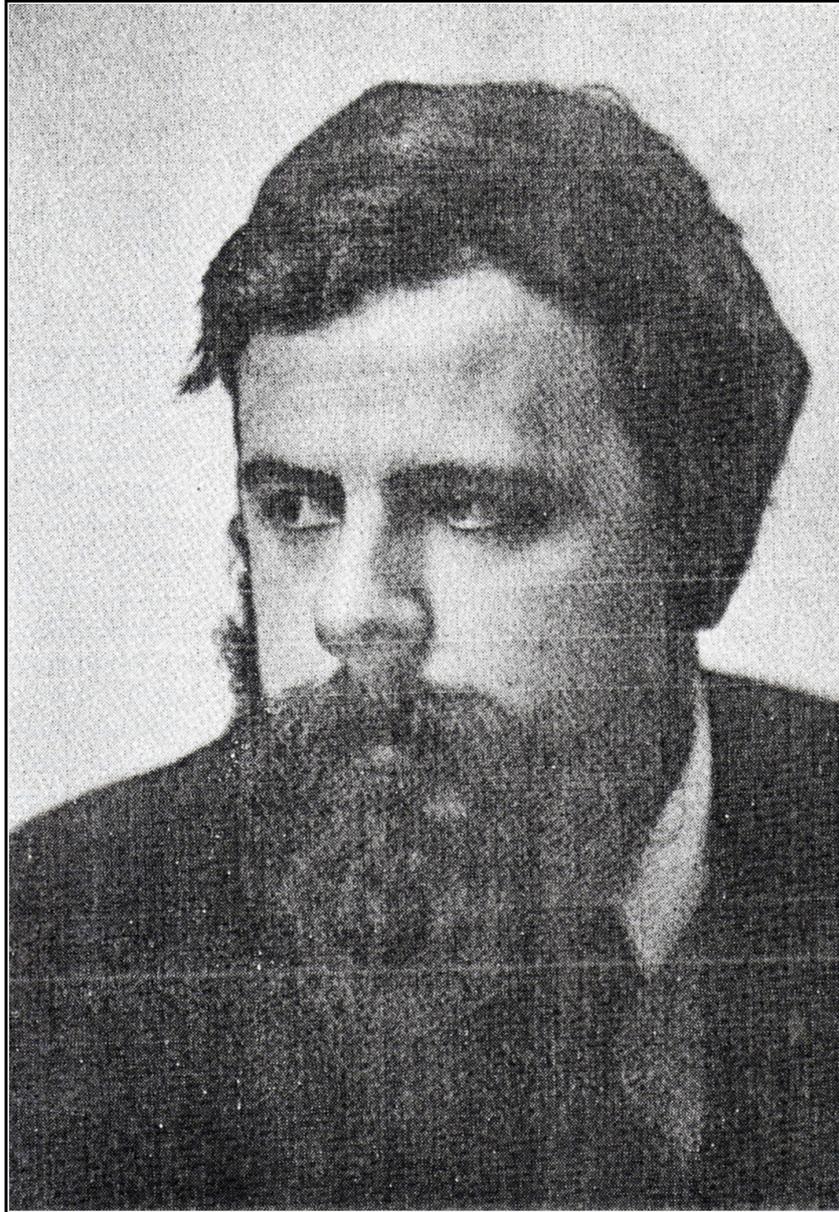
“ Well I loved, but they who knew
What my laughing heart could be,
What my singing lips could do,
Lie a-dreaming here with me.
I can feel their finger-tips
Stroke the darkness from my face....”
Pagan Epitaph



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RICHARD MIDDLETON.
Camera Portrait by E.O. Hoppé.

“. . . He” (Carlyle) “did not fall into the vulgar error of despising hero-worshippers because they are content not to be heroes. Yet as I write it seems to me that the very name ‘heroworshipper’ has been spoilt by sneering lips; we are asked to believe that they are only weak-minded enthusiasts with a turn for indiscriminating praise, and that they swallow their heroes, as a snake swallows a rabbit, bones and all.

“Personally I think this is a bad way in which to eat rabbits, but the best possible way in which to take a great man. I detest the cheese-paring enthusiasm that accepts the Olympian head and rejects the feet of human clay. Until Frank Harris taught me better I thought Shakespeare’s sonnets were capable of but one probable interpretation; but I did not wag my head with the moralist Browning and cry, ‘The less Shakespeare he!’ To-day I do not find Shakespeare less great because he loved Mary Fitton; it seems impossible that anyone should. Yet Moore burnt Byron’s autobiography, Ruskin would not write a Life of Turner because of the nature of his relationship with women, Stevenson abandoned an essay on Hazlitt because of the ‘Liber Amoris’ —Stevenson whose essay on Burns ‘swells to heaven’! In the face of such spectacles as these it is surely permissible to pine for the blind generosity of the enthusiast, that incautious fullness of appreciation that lifts great men with their due complement of vices and follies on to a higher plane where the ordinary conventions of human conduct no longer apply.” —*Monologues*, p.224.

PREFACE

A brief Preface is needed to acknowledge indebtedness to three of my friends—Herbert Garland, Louis J. McQuilland and Arthur Machen—all of whom knew Middleton in the fresh, and who have been good enough to advise me in the preparation of this memoir. MacQuilland, who read the memoir in proof, tells me I should have dealt more fully with Middleton as a writer of fiction. I have to some small extent remedied the deficiency by making additions to the bibliographical notes. Much with me, in writing the book, was the desire to make more widely known Middleton's excellence as a poet. His prose fantasy, *The Ghost Ship*, is now generally acknowledged to be one of the best short stories in the English language, but it seems to me that he is too much considered as the author of that story and at the expense of his poetry. I hope I have done a little towards arousing a wider interest in *Poems and Songs*, though very conscious that the expression has fallen short of the dream.

H. S.

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RICHARD MIDDLETON

CHAPTER I

CHILDHOOD AND EARLY DAYS

RICHARD BARHAM MIDDLETON was born of English parentage at Staines, in Middlesex, on the 28th of October, 1882. In a letter referring to money earned in his early days as a journalist he makes jocose mention of a Scottish ancestry, but whether or no he had Scots blood in his veins is not within my knowledge. While we were acquainted I had not only no inclination to gather facts relating to him, but an excessive contempt for facts in general. This memoir may suffer accordingly, as, again, it may suffer from my having made no effort to obtain information from his family since he died. As to that, however, I must leave others to judge. Middleton himself was no fact-lover. He preferred fancies, such as that he may have descended from an Elizabethan pirate. "I have an ancestor," he says (*Monologues*, p.210), "so runs the dearest of my family traditions, who was hanged as a pirate at Port Royal. How much of that priceless piratical blood the centuries may have transmitted to me I do not know, but if I were his very reincarnation I could hardly hoist the Jolly Roger in an age that may believe in fairies but certainly does not believe in pirates." Fancy apart, his more immediate ancestors, like Stevenson's, were engineers. "My father's firm shuts up for good in a fortnight after going for about 100 years," he writes under date August 16th, 1907. "My great-grandfather founded it. This day will be published a new volume entitled *The Fall of the House of Middleton.*" And he ends jauntily, "but we shall always be true to our Tory traditions."

On his mother's side he was a distant relative of the Rev. Thomas Barham, the author of *The Ingoldsby Legends*, a blood-tie of which he was, proud, but less so, I think, than of the buccaneer legend. Noteworthy also is the fact that, according to his own statement to me,

there was, some insanity in the family, an aunt being, thus afflicted. How far this taint affected his mind, if at all, it would be difficult to determine. He does not seem to have struck any of his acquaintance as being insane, and certainly he never struck me as being so. Louis J. McQuilland, the poet and critic, who knew him well and has a serene wisdom of his own, in reply to some scurrility published after he died, stated that he was "one of the sanest men I have ever encountered. In character he was reserved, and in judgment accurate and well-balanced." It is safe to say that never at any time in his life, except, perhaps, during his last few days, would a mental specialist have certified him as insane. I dwell upon this point because of the manner of his end. In Brussels, on the 1st of December, 1911, soon after his twenty-ninth birthday, he committed suicide by taking poison.

His childhood, always allowing for his having been an abnormal youngster, as will be seen presently, seems to have been outwardly much akin to that of most children with brothers and sisters and a comfortable home. "A simple up-and-down April existence," he calls it in *The Day before Yesterday*, where appear most of his recollections of the period; recollections, however, in all probability less of its rain than its sunshine, for, as he tells us:

It is to be supposed that there are few men and women who do not occasionally look back on the days of their childhood with regret. The responsibilities of age are sometimes so pressing, its duties so irksome, that the most contented mind must travel back with envy to a period when responsibilities were not, and duties were merely the simple rules of a pleasing game, the due keeping of which was sure to entail proportionate reward.

And this being so, and the delights of the Golden Age always being kept in the back of our mind, as a favourable contrast to the present state of things, it is hardly surprising that in course of time the memory of the earlier days of our life is apt to become gilded and resplendent, and very unlike the simple up-and-down April existence that was really ours. The dull, wet days, the lessons and the tears are all forgotten; it is the, sunshine and the laughter and the play that remain.

Elsewhere, in an unpublished fragment of autobiography, the time is painted in darker colours.

My own childhood I do not lament, and I hope I shall never have to endure that state of aggrieved helplessness again. I had some good games and some good dreams. But on the whole the atmosphere was charged with ugly mysteries like an Ibsen play, and I was too introspective to be a happy child.

When writing that passage he perhaps had less his boyhood in mind than the earlier period. In any case the distinction is of no great consequence. What may chiefly impress the reader of *The Day before Yesterday* is the extraordinary imagination its youthful hero must have possessed. Most of us who are grown up have presumably forgotten how we thought and felt when we were children.

If we saw

a world in a grain of sand
And a heaven in a wild flower

we cannot tell what sort of world it was or what sort of heaven. But Middleton could vividly remember his early dreamings. The young brain would people an empty cupboard or send its fortunate possessor voyaging from China to Peru on a drawing-room rug. That “enchanted place which our elders contemptuously called the ‘mouse-cupboard,’ ” a favourite refuge where could be found “solitude and darkness in which to scheme deeds of revenge and actions of a wonderful magnanimity turn by turn,” was not long in becoming a smuggler’s cave, the haunt, successively, of such heroes as Aladdin, Robinson Crusoe, Ben Gunn and Tom Sawyer, and ultimately—some one having discovered what it really resembled—the cabin of a ship.

The fact that our cabin lacked portholes and was of an unusual shape did not trouble us. We could hear the water bubbling against the ship’s side in a neighbouring cistern, and often enough the wind moaned and whistled. . . . Beneath us the waters chuckled restlessly, and sometimes we heard the feet of the watch overhead, and now and again the clanging of the great bell. In such an hour it was not difficult to picture the luminous tropic seas

through which the *Black Margaret* was making her way. The skies of irradiant stars, the desert islands like baskets of glowing flowers, and the thousand marvels of the enchanted ocean—we saw them one and all.

The Day Before Yesterday is of the Kenneth Grahame order of books—books such as *Dream Days and The Golden Age*, which have faithfully recaptured the thoughts and feelings' of childhood. Few other modern writers can give such vivid glimpses of their “trailing clouds of glory,” though Stevenson, with his *A Child's Garden of Verses*, may be said to be of the company. Their books should be known not only to lovers of *belles-lettres*, but to those “Olympians” Who, as Middleton puts it, “always seemed so sensible and yet could not understand.” And of the three, he, perhaps, is the least sophisticated. He was childlike himself in many ways—one reason why he is so difficult to visualise. “How plainly you must see him, your Villon!” said Pierre Champion, admiringly, to Marcel Schwob, after the latter had devoted years to the study of the erratic French poet; and “See him?” replied Schwob; “I see but his little finger!” So is it with me. A fascinating and baffling personality Middleton had, and has been a puzzle to me since I first met him in 1905. Childlike, I said. That is the chief clue to him. “Children,” he remarks in one of his essays, “sometimes flatter me by treating me as an equal.” Edgar Jepson, another writer who knew him in the flesh, wrote after he died: “I cannot possibly tell the children. We all had a real affection for him, and here he was always at his best.” “What struck me about Middleton,” says yet another friend, a lady, “was that he always did the nice thing—that and his great sympathy. . . . He never grew up, knew about everything and told you in a baby way.” The view has points in common with that of Frank Harris: “There was in him a curious mixture of widest comprehension with a child's acceptance of vice and suffering and abnormalities. I say a child's because it was purely curious and without any tinge of ethical judgment.” That Harris's portrait, however, is not too reliable is proved if only by his finding “curious” the mixture to which he alludes. “Shaggy Peter Pan with a briar pipe” that Middleton was—it is McQuilland's phrase, and McQuilland of all his

acquaintance has perhaps written the most illuminative account of him—he might have toughly exercised the wits of a Blake or a Swinburne. What he saw of himself in this connection may be gleaned from his own writings.

In age to wish for youth is full as vain
As for a youth to turn a child again,

he quotes from Denham in *The Day Before Yesterday* ; and in the same book we find :

I see the children go trooping by with their calm eyes, not, as is sometimes said, curious,*¹ but rather tolerant of life, and I know that for them the universe is merely an aggregate of details, some agreeable and some stupid, while I must needs depress myself by regarding it as a whole. And this is the proved distinction between juvenile and adult philosophies, if we may be allowed to regard a child's very definite point of view as the effect of a philosophy.

Again, in his unpublished *The Autobiography of a Poet*, he says:

Of all my shadows these are the least substantial; at a touch they fade one into the other and are recreated with a disconcerting interchange of features, so that George will wear Manxie's eyes and Melanie will have Arthur's twisted smile. But nevertheless, through all these whimsical metamorphoses they remain my very loyal and affectionate friends. . . . Looking back on my days I can say that I do not regret a single hour that I have passed in the company of children. It was not that their wayward hands spared my always vulnerable vanity; but they struck without malice, and their blows were as welcome as the rebukes of conscience.

So, as in a glass darkly, certain glimpses of him. Look at his photograph. What may be gathered from that ? The eyes haunt me. Thoughtful eyes they are, proud, sad and watchful. The mouth shows just a little resentment. He has a striking phrase for his mouth in *A Monologue on Love Songs*: “His thick lower lip gleams like a wet cherry between his moustache and his beard.” That beard I never quite

^{*1} This conception of children invites comparison with that of Frank Harris: “I say a child's because it was purely curious.”

understood why he grew, so young a man as he was. He had an illness, I believe, at about the time when most men begin to shave. He may have let it grow, partly to *épater le bourgeois*, partly not liking that "thick lower lip." What the photograph does not bring out are the deep folds which furrowed the massive forehead. They are apparently whitened over. He must have been born with them. A lifetime of thinking would not have made them so deep.

One more quotation may serve to complete this sketch of his childhood:

One sunny afternoon [he says in an unpublished fragment of MS.] my little sister and I found two long slender poles in the garden, and passed a pleasant hour or two carving the bark in beautiful spiral patterns. When we had finished I realised that we had there two magnificent lances, and that all we lacked was a foeman worthy of our steel. So when one of my brothers came out into the garden, I picked up my lance, and tilted at him gallantly. For some reason or other—perhaps governesses had been scolding him—he was in no mood for romance, so he caught my lance in his hands and broke it across his knee. Lost in my dream of chivalry, I could not recover from my illusion in a moment. I seized my sister's lance, and as my brother stood there with the broken pieces of mine in his hands, I bore at him again. Alas ! it went the same way as my own, and this time he crowned my ignominy by boxing my ears. I retreated to the shrubbery, followed by my sister, and gave way to my passionate sorrow. She tried to comfort me, patting my back with her little hands, but she could not know that my grief was founded on more than the destruction of our lances or a few paltry cuffs. Poor Don Quixote ! How long will the world continue to find the history of your sufferings amusing, how long must we laugh at anyone because he ["thinks," "hopes," both crossed out in MS.] too nobly of mankind ? Since that afternoon it has often been my lot to attack the brutalities of life with the slender weapons of my dreams, and I have always been defeated. Can it be wondered at that at the last I have become a cynic ?

That fragment gives us as memorable a picture, and tells us as much

of him, of a brother, and of a loving sister, as any passage from his prose in general. Miss Middleton I remember as goodness itself. Doubtless at many another time besides that recorded she, figuratively speaking, “patted him on his back with her little hands.”



RICHARD MIDDLETON AT THE AGE OF 7.

The story of his boyhood is to be found chiefly in *A Drama of Youth* and *The New Boy*, two autobiographical studies in *The Ghost Ship*. He was sent to a day school,^{*2} there to become more than ever the slave of the ugliness he hated. Farringdon Meat Market, through which he had to pass on his way, seems particularly to have nauseated him:

Æsthetic butchers made the market hideous with mosaics of the intestines of animals, as if the horrors of suety pavements and bloody sawdust did not suffice. . . . I saw the greasy, red-faced men with their hands and aprons stained with blood . . . the masses of entrails, the heaps of repulsive hides; but most clearly of all I saw an ugly sad little boy with a satchel of books on his back set down in the midst of an enormous and hostile world.

Such unpleasant realism from the pen of, say, Bernard Shaw, who eschews flesh, would create no surprise, but from one who liked nothing better than a rich juicy steak it seems something of an inconsistency. Middleton was no nut-eater. Dreamers with the fond notion that poets live delicately like butterflies would have viewed with mixed feelings the way in which he could attack a good dinner. In Baudelaire's *Lettres* there is a passage referring to Proudhon which bears a remarkable resemblance to his manner at table:

Il jasa beaucoup, violemment, amplement . . . et lâchant involontairement, pour ainsi dire, urte foule de bons mots. J'observai que ce polémiste mangeait enormément. . . . *Pour un homme de lettres*, lui dis-je, *vous* mangez étonnement.—*C'est que j'ai de grandes choses à faire*, me répondit-il, avec une telle simplicité que je ne pus deviner s'il parlait sérieusement ou s'il voulait bouffonner.

That was Middleton all over. Though not what could be called

^{*2} I have no exact knowledge of the names of the various schools at which Middleton was educated. In London he seems to have gone both to St. Paul's and Merchant Taylors', the former of which was probably the scene of *A Drama of Youth*. Among the records in my possession are four certificates. One, dated Mid-summer, 1893, from the College of Preceptors, mentions him as being a pupil at Quernmore House, Bromley, Kent. Some part of his school life he certainly spent at Cranbrook Grammar School. He matriculated as a student in the University of London, and was placed in the first division on July 19th, 1899; and in July, 1900, passed the Oxford and Cambridge Higher Certificate Examination, the subjects including elementary and additional mathematics (trigonometry and dynamics), English, and natural philosophy.

Gargantuan of appetite, he ate with relish, with gusto. And it may be added, that to a curious inquirer he would have returned just such another reply as that of Proudhon's. But, with mischief twinkling in those fine eyes of his, no question of his simplicity could have arisen.

Forcibly realistic, again, is the description of his life at school:

The weariness of inventing lies that no one believed to account for my lateness and neglected homework, and the monotonous lessons that held me from my dreams without ever for a single instant capturing my interest—all these things made me ill with repulsion. Worst of all was the society of my cheerful, contented comrades, to avoid which I was compelled to mope in deserted corridors, the prey of a sorrow that could not be enjoyed, a hatred that was in no way stimulating. At the best of times the atmosphere of the place disgusted me. Desks, windows, and floors, and even the grass in the quadrangle, were greasy with London soot, and there was nowhere any clean air to breathe or smell. I hated the gritty asphalt that gave no peace to my feet and cut my knees when my clumsiness made me fall. I hated the long stone corridors whose echoes seemed to me to mock my hesitating footsteps when I passed from one dull class to another. I hated the stuffy malodorous class-rooms, with their whistling gas-jets and noise of inharmonious life. I would have hated the yellow fogs had they not sometimes shortened the hours of my bondage. That five hundred boys shared this horrible environment did not abate my sufferings a jot; for it was clear that they did not find it distasteful, and they therefore became as unsympathetic for me as the smell and noise and rotting stones of the school itself.

He is to be found next at a boarding school, his first introduction to which was marked by an event startlingly unexpected to one whose experiences had developed in him a stubborn hatred of all life outside his beloved dreams. A boy came up to him and broke down his carefully-prepared defences with words of sympathy. "You'll be all right, you know," the stranger concluded after a few preliminary inquiries: "They're not a bad lot of chaps." And says our astonished Ishmael:

I think it was the first time in my life a boy had spoken kindly to me. The revulsion nearly brought on a catastrophe, for the tears rose to my eyes and I gazed after him with a swimming head. I had prepared myself to receive blows and insults, but I had no armour with which to oppose the noble weapons of sympathy and good fellowship.

Further surprises of the kind were in store. His grim philosophy was to be pleasantly disturbed and altered. A master and one of the head boys both evinced a sympathetic understanding of his difficulties, the former leading him to see that he was unfortunate rather than criminal, and the latter that it was "a jolly good thing to be different." He began now to take pleasure in certain phases of school life. Football he already liked well enough, and the sensuous beauty of the church services on Sunday and the reading of the Scriptures each night in the school chapel also vastly appealed to him. Incidentally, his last message before death has a very significant quotation from the Psalms. But of that later. The new school-day view of things does not appear to have abated his habit of introspection. With the approach of the holidays we find him speculating upon their disadvantages.

It seemed to me that a younger brother's portion of freedom would compare but poorly with the measure of intellectual liberty that I had secured for myself at school. My brothers were all very well in their way, but I would be expected to take my place in the background and do what I was told. . . . I should miss my sense of being superior to my environment, and my intensely emotional Sundays would no longer divide time into weeks. The more I thought of it the more I realised that I did not want to go home.

On the last night of the term, when the dormitory had at length become quiet, I considered the whole case dispassionately in my bed. The labour of packing my playbox and writing labels for my luggage had given me a momentary thrill, but for the rest I moved amongst my insurgent comrades with a chilled heart. I knew now that I was too greedy of life, that I had always thought of the pleasant side of things when they were no longer within my grasp; but at the same time my discontent was not wholly unreasonable.

I had learnt more of myself in three months than I had in all my life before, and from being a nervous, hysterical boy I had arrived at a complete understanding of my emotions, which I studied with an almost adult calmness of mind. I knew that in returning to the society of my healthy, boyish brothers, I was going back to a kind of life for which I was no longer fitted. I had changed, but I had the sense to see that it was a change that would not appeal to them, and that in consequence I would have another and harder battle to fight before I was allowed to go my own way.

I saw further still. I saw that after a month at home I would not want to come back to school, and that I should have to endure another period of despondency. I saw that my whole school life would be punctuated by these violent uprootings^{*3}, and that the alternatives of term time and holidays would make it impossible for me to change life into a comfortable habit, and that even to the end of my schooldays it would be necessary for me to preserve my new found courage.

As I lay thinking in the dark I was proud of the clarity of my mind, and glad that I had at last outwitted the tears that had made my childhood so unhappy. . . . All that I had to do was to watch myself ceaselessly, and to be able to explain to myself everything that I felt and did. In that way I should always be strong enough to guard my weaknesses from the eyes of the jealous world in which I moved.

Well ! there is the boy depicted largely by himself, and a remarkable picture it must be admitted it is. His years when he had arrived at this “complete understanding of his emotions ” and “almost adult calmness of mind ” I do not know with exactitude, but should judge, from the record of his various schools already noted, that he was no more than between ten and eleven. Most of the later extracts already given in this chapter are taken from *The Drama of Youth* and *The New Boy*, both of which essays are now to be found in *The Ghost Ship*. He contemplated a book of studies on the same lines as these, but it was

^{*3} “Do you remember the end of my *New Boy* where he realised that all his life he would be uprooted and flung back and so would find no peace ? It’s awful true of my life. Up and down, up and down. Only when I seem to be going up I am falling, and when I seem to fall I climb into my kingdom of heaven. . . .”—*Letter*, November 5th, 1911.

never completed. Writing from Brussels under date April 28th, 1911, "The Book," he says,

is quite simply *The Autobiography of a Young Man*. Sections 1, 2, 3: My childhood compiled from articles already written for different papers. Section 4: *The Drama of Youth*. Section 5: *The New Boy* (half written); and Section 6: *The Choice of a Career*, wholly conceived, will deal with my life and development at school. Section 7: *The Office*, which nobody has done properly before. After that there are a few sections of Blackfriars, Raynes Park, St. Albans, doing the life of an artist from within, and a final section at Brussels, with philosophies on the whole business and a prophecy of my new birth. And of course, there will be a *Preface* !

Here's a book I think I can write, and I mean to take my time over it, and make it as good as *The Drama of Youth*, which is good whatever the damned critics are saying. Two or three at least of the sections should do for Harrison, if he cares to have them, as they will all be more or less complete in themselves, but the artist business done frankly will be great fun anyhow. . . .

The Harrison alluded to was Austin Harrison, of the *English Review*, who published a deal of his work in that periodical. His quarrel with the critics arose out of some disparaging remarks regarding his fine poem, *The Last Serenade*, which had been described as "not rising above the level of magazine verse."^{*4} Exception had also been taken to one or other of the prose pieces. When it came to editing his work it was clear that sections 1, 2 and 3 (the childhood studies) were not so realistic in tone as the others. They were, therefore, made into the separate volume *The Day before Yesterday*. I have not quoted much

^{*4} This drew the retort On a Critic in one of his note-books:

"How shall the little breath
Of man suffice to vex me,
Having the thought of death
Eternally to perplex me;
Knowing my best endeavour
Shall not endure for ever !
"I do but live my days—
And though my song be lonely
I need no critic's bays,
Being a poet, only.
The dog may eat his vomit,
I get no sorrow from it."

from this last, because it seems to bear less upon his character than does his realism. But aesthetically considered, there are two passages to mind, both from the one essay, *Children and the Sea*, to detach which may give some impression of its charm and send the reader desirous of further pleasure to the volume itself.*⁵ One reader at least the following has always pleased:

A child would take a sample of it [the sea] in a bucket, and consider that in all its aspects; and then it would know that the sea is a great many bucketfuls of water, and further that by an odd freak of destiny this water is not fit to drink. Storms and ships and sand-castles and lighthouses and all the Other side-shows would follow later; but in the meantime the child would have seen the sea in a bucket, as it had previously seen the moon in a looking-glass, so would know all about it. The moon is a variable and interesting kind of lamp; the sea is buckets and buckets and buckets full of water. I think the stars are holes in a sort of black curtain or ceiling, and the sun is a piece of brightness, except at sunset or in a mist, when it is a whole Dutch cheese. The world is streets and fields and the seaside and our house.

Now, is that not delightful? For myself, I may be wrong, but I see no reason why it should not please in the dim future as now it pleases to day. And take the other passage:

A seaside child is no creature to be petted and laughed over; it were as easy to pet the tireless waters, and to laugh over the grave of a little cat; children whom one has known very well indeed in town will find new playing fields by the sea into which it is impossible to follow them. Dorothy weighs five stone four pounds at Maida Vale; at Littlehampton the sea wind blows her along like a feather; she is become a wispy, spiritual thing, a faint, fair creature a-dance on light feet that would make a fairy-girl of a poet's dream

*⁵ "Your article, *The Magic Pool*" [originally published in the *Academy* under Cecil Cowper's editorship and now included in *The Day before Yesterday*] "as I have told Cowper, is simply divine. Why don't you do a book of these things, man? They would give you a higher reputation than Grahame's and higher than Barrie's. I call for a book, and as soon as the brute public read it they will call for more too. . . . You must write a book of these prose fancies. Why not *A Poet's Boyhood* or some such title? You might put that divine poem of the *Naked Boy*" [*The Bathing Boy: Poems and Songs*] "at the beginning of it. Come man, work! I want to read more of these things. They are simply beautiful. Harrison complains that you do not send him any stuff. Why don't you? I have just sent him the *Academy* with your article."—*Letter, Frank Harris to R. M.*, February 6th, 1911.

seem clumsy by comparison. She is nearer to us when she paddles. The warm sand creeping up through her toes, the silver thread of coolness about her legs, these things are within our comprehension though they fall no more within our experience. But when she flings herself along the beach with the wild hair and loose limbs and the song of an innocent Bacchante, when she bids the gold sands heave up and support her body, tired with play, when she stoops to gather diamonds and pearls from the shore made wet and smooth by the retreating waves, she is as far from us and our human qualities as a new-awakened butterfly. There have been sea-washed moments when I should not have been astonished if she had flung out a pair of mother-of-pearl wings and stood in the blue sky, like a child saint in a stained-glass window.

The style, good as it is, is not impeccable, not quite so rhythmical or balanced as it might be, but how moving, how human, is the matter ! I give the two passages because they have impressed themselves upon me, but conscious of an imperfect interpretation and that they may not reveal the best essential qualities of the whole volume. These are likely to be found in essays under titles such as *The Magic Carpet*, *On Going to Bed*, *On Digging Holes*, *On Children's Gardens*, and the like. In the book is the wonder of childhood and its dreams, its simple joys and sorrows; all that country, in short, so remote and mysterious—a Lost Atlantis—to those of us who have settled in other and perhaps less desirable lands, or are still afloat, drifting we know not whither, but with the conviction that, evil notwithstanding, a Wisdom, fathomable or unfathomable, is behind this veil of things.

CHAPTER II

LIFE IN A CITY OFFICE

THERE is some slight evidence of the boy's precocity as a writer. A humorsome essay in *The Day before Yesterday* begins :

I cannot remember how old I was when I wrote the thrilling poem about the tiger who swallowed the horse, nor am I quite certain that it was my first literary effort, but I know that I was still at the tight knickerbocker stage, and that my previous poems, if there had been any, had remained secrets of my own.

Whilst at school he also contributed to *The Cranbrookian*, and extant, too, is a poem in MS. of no merit, marked "My first poem, in my brother's handwriting," and beginning, characteristically :

As I was walking upon the plain,
Alone, because I liked it . . .

As the appended editorial letter proves, at an early age he even bearded the lions of the periodical press. The letter should be inserted here if only as exhibiting a rare sympathy with literary adventurers.

I am afraid we can't use your story [it runs] though thank you very much for submitting it. The faults are perhaps that it is a little crude in conception, that the tragedies follow each other in bewildering sequence without any apparent reason except the exigencies of the story, and that there is all through a tendency to strain after effect. These are the faults of every young writer, and as I judge from the fact of your being at school that you are not far up in years you will perhaps pardon my putting it in this way. You have evidently some gift with the pen, and if you want to persevere as a story writer, may I suggest to you that you give yourself a little longer to gain experience of life, in the meantime setting your

thoughts on more cheerful happenings than death, debauchery, and broken hearts ?

But evident as it is that he must have indulged dreams of becoming an author, he does not seem to have opposed parental wishes in the adoption of a “commonsense” profession. Early in 1901 he was engaged as a temporary clerk in the offices of the Royal Exchange Assurance Corporation, and nine months later was appointed to the staff. With this company he served some five years before taking to journalism. Clerking was not congenial employment. He was a conscientious worker and considered a valuable servant, but the vocation could not be other than obnoxious to a young poet and dreamer. Under date May 14th, 1907, soon after resigning his post, he writes that he “never thought that life could be so unredeemably good as it has been for the last six weeks—and after the hell of the office.” His leisure while with the Corporation was mainly spent in bookshops or underground cafés, or in entertaining parties of children, references to whom are frequent in a journal he kept at this period. With his customary introspectiveness he reasons that his is not a character likely to be generally popular. “The world is liable rather to judge a man by his bad humours than by striking a happy mean between those and his happier moments.” Consequently, “I must be content to choose my friends amongst children, who always see me at my best. And what better friends could I want ?” In the same journal we hear of him, at the age of twenty-one, as “always thinking a great deal too much about my own mind and doings. In others I dislike chiefly the defects that are most prominent in my own character. I have an unsatisfactory habit of thinking the right thing and doing the wrong one. I am always watching myself, and consequently am inclined to behave as though I was always walking the stage.” An earlier entry, dated 1901, bears witness to his having been to the theatre ninety-seven times in one year ! He seems, nevertheless, to have worked hard at his writing. Contributions flowed into Fleet Street and flowed back again. Not until 1905, when the *Morning Leader* awarded him a prize of five guineas for a short story, did he first taste the joy of acceptance. It seems hardly necessary to add that he read omnivorously. A passage in the journal

for 1908 somewhat remorsefully records that “the only books I take much delight in nowadays are those which treat of the lives and letters of authors. . . . Last night I read a *Life of Heine* which affected me greatly.” Other intimate companions were the Elizabethans and—of the moderns—chiefly Stevenson, Barrie and Andrew Lang. In a letter written in 1907, “I think I like reading the works of artists better than those of men of genius,” he observes. “That is why Browning is my favourite poet, that is why I love my Stevenson.” The classification is careless, but will serve to indicate earlier influences. That of Stevenson was to some extent ethical. “We are not damned for doing wrong but for not doing right,” was an aphorism frequently on his lips. And again : “In moments of effort we learn to do the easy things that people like.” As to the “favourite poet,” there is a Browningsque terminology in some of his immature verse. But, with the possible exception of *The Coffin Merchant*, one of the stories in *The Ghost Ship* with a Stevensonian flavour, it would be hard to detect the influence of other authors in his published work.

Some account of his office life is given in *The Autobiography of a Poet* already mentioned. I select the following passage : —

At the time when I first took my desire to express myself seriously I was nominally employed in the city during the day. When I got home at night with a fresh mind and a body none the better for consuming innumerable cups of coffee, I would sit at a little table inconveniently heaped with books and write blank verse plays after the manner of the minor Elizabethan dramatists, while Sylvia [his sister Margaret] played the piano to me, Grieg and Mendelssohn and Chopin, such music as my emotions could understand. Save that they were quite as outspoken as their models these compositions had no particle of original merit, but as they provided really valuable practice in the handling of words, I am sure those evenings were not wasted. Also they were amongst the most enjoyable that I have spent in my life. The æsthetic charm of music when heard by lamplight, the atmosphere of high endeavour, and, since youth derives certain advantages from its birthright of folly, the proud fever of great accomplishment sent me to bed pulsing



RICHARD MIDDLETON IN FANCY DRESS.

with happiness. I would stand before the mirror looking with an interest beyond vanity at the face of the man who had wrought such miracles. . . . And if my days were hardly worthy of their evenings they had their charm nevertheless. All the money that I did not lose backing horses I spent on books, and I passed many delightful hours browsing in the shop of Messrs. Jones and Evans of Queen St., the best bookshop I have ever known, where one might discover all sorts of queer little publications that never seemed to see the light anywhere else. Then there were languorous afternoons spent in underground cafes where the sun never shone, and there was a rapturous welcome for the rare customer. Of the city as a place wherein business was transacted I knew nothing then and know but little now. Sometimes I used to write some figures in a great book, add them up and rule a double line underneath to prove that some task of infinitesimal significance had been completed. It may surprise the reader to learn that I did this to the satisfaction of those I served, and was considered to have a reasonably bright future before me, until on a fine spring morning I put leaves in my hair and walked out to return no more. As offices go we were rather cultured. We all belonged to Mudie's and we all liked to look at the pictures in the "Studio," yet I believe my fellow-clerks were astonished at my folly in leaving the city on my mad quest for Parnassus. Personally, I think it was probably the only sensible thing I have ever done in my life, for if I did not reach the blessed mountain, I have been privileged to behold it close at hand, and it was worth going to see.

My only contribution to the practical side of business was the proposal that instead of starting clerks at a low salary and raising it by slow degrees with more regard to their age than to their ability, their salary should commence at the maximum and be subject to an annual reduction. This would enable them to marry before they were senile, and would encourage them to beget children to earn handsome salaries when that of their fathers was reduced to a pittance. Also they would have money when they were young enough to enjoy it as money should be enjoyed. This

proposal was welcomed by the clerks of my own age, but only met with a cold reception from the older men. . . .

The pleasing humour of that last paragraph serves to remind me that even his most despondent letters were seldom without some witty or humorous observation. It was not so much that, like Figaro, he made haste to laugh from fear of being compelled to weep, but because he was naturally a man of wit and humour. This will be seen presently in his correspondence rather than in particular conversational *mots* I can remember. “His brilliancies,” as McQuilland says happily, “were scattered as the little jewels of Buckingham.”

CHAPTER III

BOHEMIAN DAYS AND NIGHTS

TOWARDS the close of the year 1905 the following advertisement appeared in that literary review of many vicissitudes, the *Academy*^{*1} :

The New Bohemians, an unexpected society, mainly devoted to the encouragement of intelligent conversation among journalists, bookmen, critics, artists, and others, is prepared to consider the admission of aspirants. The curious may make written application to the secretary, *Academy* office (Advt. Dept.), 12, Southampton St., Strand. University men are not necessarily disqualified. Acquaintanceship with Omar, Rabelais, Pepys, Lamb, Stevenson and Whistler will be regarded as an asset, but literary heresies are not considered unprthodox.

A more tempting appeal to a young man with literary ambitions and hungry for the society of his kind would be difficult to conceive. It aroused the curiosity of only some half a dozen persons, Middleton and I being of the company. The story of his application will be best told in the words of his sister, who, with faith in her brother's "future," took upon herself at times the *rôle* of a loving Boswell. One extract has been preserved of what must have been an excellent excursion into biography :

He saw an advertisement of a club that sounded as if it would be congenial to him. He wrote a lively letter . . . "owing to the folly of

^{*1} The *Academy* was founded in 1869 by John Murray, its first editor being Dr. Appleton. I do not know if it passed out of Murray's hands between that time and 1896, when it was acquired by John Morgan Richards, the father of John Oliver Hobbes. Sidney Colvin edited it for a time, I believe. Under Richards, Lewis Hind held the editorship until the days of Alfred Douglas and Crosland. Douglas sold it for £2,500 to Earl Fitzwilliam and Lord Howard de Walden, but when, in 1915, it had fallen on evil days, I secured it for a five-pound note. Crosland and I then ran it for some six months, though how we ran it, with Europe ablaze and no money behind us, heaven alone knows. Its full history would make entertaining reading, and may be told in another place.

editors I am one of the 'others' ; for the rest I can claim acquaintanceship with all the gentlemen mentioned, and especially do I delight in R. L. S., who is my little tin god. I am twenty-three years of age and have grown a beard. If this tempts you I shall be glad to have further particulars of your esteemed society. If not, I shall have wasted my penny stamp."

The letter did tempt them, and he had a letter in reply that left him with mingled feelings. The names of the former members (Mr. Chesterton, Mr. Hilaire Belloc) filled him with terror, a terror half assumed. Indeed, under a somewhat conceited manner he concealed great modesty as to his intellectual attainments. In the letter from the secretary inviting him to The Prince's Head (to be initiated into the mysteries !) there was a split infinitive. He wrote accepting, pointing out the split infinitive and using one himself. He noticed it, however. I was very anxious on the night of his trial and left a note on his supper table imploring him to write a line telling me how he enjoyed it. He did. "If they don't kick me out I shall be late every Thursday."

I have not written this at all as I meant to. I have not shown his tremors, his "Lord, I am such an ignorant man," his "when I think of all those chaps they'll all know more than I do," his "I feel like an impostor" ; and then, "if they don't accept me I'll write them such letters they'll be bound to have me. I will tell them that to be unexpected they ought to kick out all the eligible men."

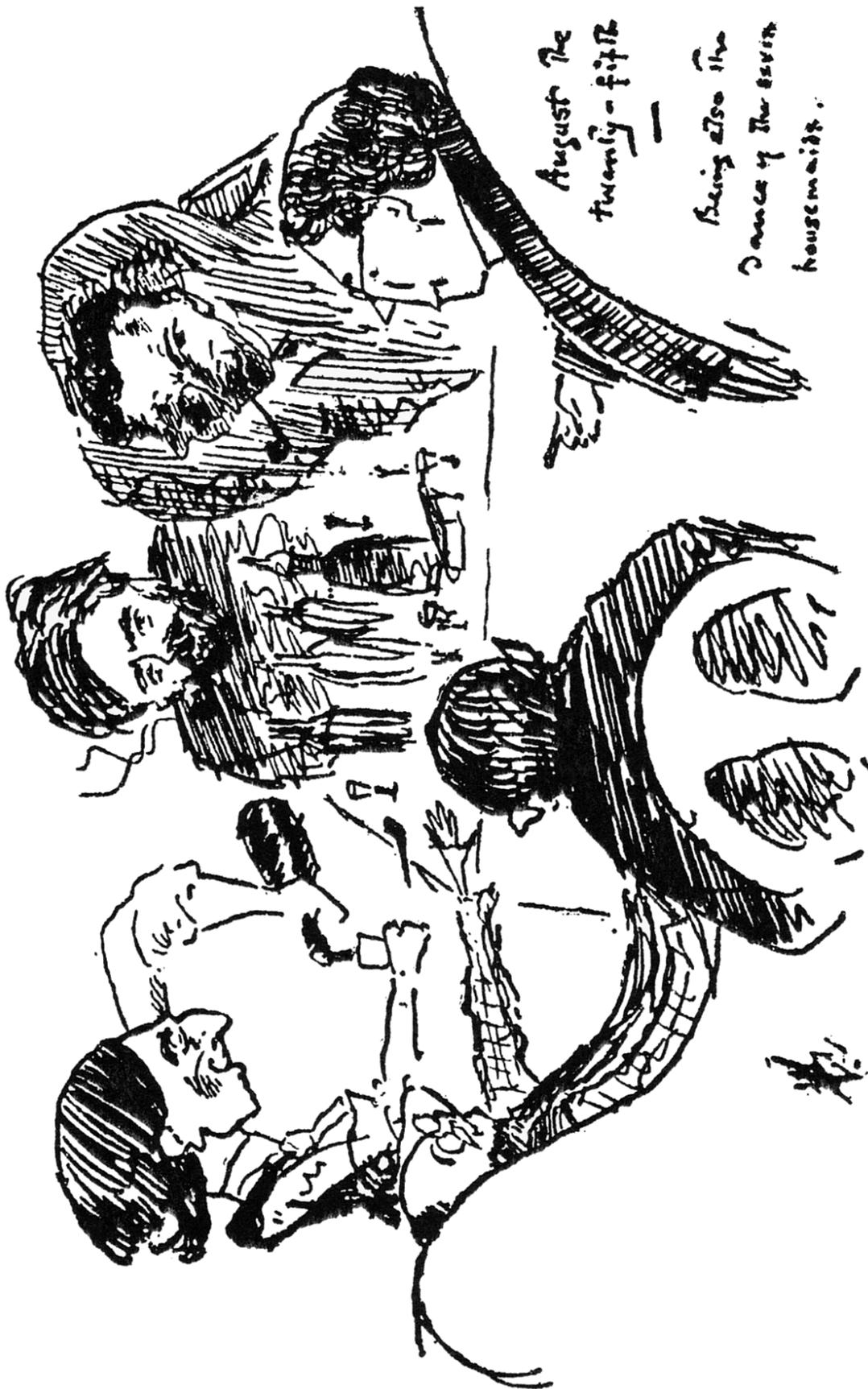
There was no occasion for tremors. As the then secretary, McQuilland, observes : "He made an instantaneous appeal by his youth and charm of intellect to a group of men not too jaded to appreciate a fresh new gift." I myself sat next to him on that first evening, and, not knowing that he had a talent for *blague*, was mystified by his undertaking a defence of a famous newspaper magnate. On the whole, however, he said but little ; was reserved rather than loquacious. After the party broke up we discovered that our respective homes were reached by the same railway—a chance which had much to do with the development of our friendship—and, as in due course we were accepted as members of the society, we were both of us for a long time "late every Thursday."

The process by which undesirable applicants were eliminated was very simple. An invitation was posted twice, and if it was not thought politic to issue a third the would-be member had to swallow his mortification as best he could. There was no subscription, and the expenses other than those incurred for liquor were nil, the room allotted us being rent free. We sat around a large table on which was a slitted cigar-box for the reception of moneys towards a common fund for the evening's drink bill. In the rare event of a deficit when the proceedings ended, the balance was made up by the wealthier members, a superfluity at any time being the perquisite of the Hebe who waited on us. At their leisure members signed their names in the minute book, sketched in it, or took it home to record impressions of the evening or anything in verse or prose that the whim dictated. The "first fine careless rapture" of those early days of bohemian company recalls Beaumont's lines :

What things have we seen
Done at the Mermaid !

Around the tavern table we drank and smoked and upheld the Society's motto, "Talk for talk's sake" ; laughing, lunging and parrying with all the good-will imaginable. Verses were read, sketches and caricatures were drawn and passed round ; anecdotes, quotations, views of the last new book or play, all served to swell the evening's enjoyment. At closing time (half-past twelve in those days) members reluctant to cry "Enough!" wandered about the streets, talking, joking, chanting verses, enlivening the moments of homeless folk at coffee stalls. Or we would seek out the lodgings of some boon companion and there carouse till dawn. "Oh God, night and day, night and day !" as somebody's poor servant girl moaned once when called up at three o'clock in the morning to be asked where the beer had been put.

I sometimes think, when I get out of bed
On Friday morning, that the Prince's Head
Is not so big as mine—but let it pass !
The soul of me was greatly comforted.



A BOHEMIAN GATHERING
(Sketch by Herbert Garland)

There were days, too, other than Thursdays, when some of us would meet to walk together. Hampstead was a favourite objective. What a night was that on which Christopher Wilson, the composer, tore down the moonlit hill with me, both of us chanting Swinburne's *A Ballad of Life* and wholly at one in our ecstasy! Good, life-loving Wilson is dead now, but for me at least he lives in the spirit for those rapturous moments. "Where's your Socialism now?" he exclaimed exultantly one early morning in his rooms after reading a long passage from the *Eikon Basilike*. I didn't know where it was, being no Socialist, but there was no doubt about Wilson's enthusiasm—that was the thing that mattered. Once we played a cricket match at Raynes Park, thereafter in the cool of evening to drink beer out of quart pewter pots in a garden. On another night, after closing time, a troop invaded the sacred precincts of the National Liberal Club, led there by an intrepid young man who took us in as his guests. When a polite attendant, our drinks being consumed, said, "I beg your pardon, Sir Charles, but your name does not appear to be on our list of members," we retired with what dignity we could muster while our host "carried it off" with the somewhat perturbed officials. I think he explained that he had entered the premises under the impression that they were those of the Athenæum.

It was a time when, as Stevenson puts it, "Youth, taking fortune by the beard, demands joy as a right." Middleton, also, has something to say on the matter. In his essay, *The True Bohemia (Monologues)* he speaks of

that effort to obtain from every moment of existence a perfect expression of life, which stirs the Bohemian to a constant sense of his own vitality, and lends his most trivial actions an air of unconsciousness so manifest that they must needs be interpreted by the sleepers and the half-dead as fragments of an indecently scornful pose. Full of a sense that he is making history for his old age, he tastes life as a man tastes wine, and he mixes his drinks; so that if you see him roystering in a tavern to-day you may depend upon it he will be reading fairy stories to a nurseryful of babies to-morrow.

At the next meeting he produced verses inspired by his first evening with the Society. They have not been published, and, with other work of the kind to follow, are included in these earlier pages, not because they are of much account as poetry but as being characteristic of him.

It was a Friday, halfway down the Strand,

I saw a maiden selling pretty posies,
And, loveliest of all, was in her hand

A bunch of crimson roses.

“Where gather you these lovely flowers,” I said,

“Sweet maid, these blossoms thus your hand adorning ?”

She smiled, “I get them from the Prince's Head,

Sir, every Friday morning.

“For there they tell me of a Thursday night

They hear brave laughter set the windows ringing,
Or with a gentler fullness of delight,

Voices of poets singing.

And in the room where these great hearts have passed,

Under the stars they capture with their laughter,
Forth from the fullness of their riches cast

Are found these blossoms after.”

I took the buds, and from the jealous sky,

Lest the gods smote me, bore them closely shaded
Glad to my home, and now the roses lie

Sweet in my heart unfaded.

Then pardon me that I a man alone,

No god to whom the sky its song discloses,
Am come to-night to see these flowers grown,

Having no crimson roses.

There was no danger that the author of the above lines would not receive his third invitation. They have, as I say, no great poetic merit, but their flattering appeal was not to be resisted. I see the men now as they bent over the MS. after he had read them. “Under the stars they capture with their laughter,” murmured one of the party ; “that's a fine line.” And so, it must be owned, it is.

Two of his poems we were never tired of calling for at our gatherings ; both of them, truth to tell, received with an interest which in after days was not always accorded his more beautiful efforts. One runs as follows :

In the brave year nineteen fifty
 When the snow has kissed our locks,
 And our books in milky vellum
 Nestle in the penny box ;
 And our lives are in the papers
 With our photographs aged two—
 May I wander to this tavern
 And renew my youth with you.

Not for fame we worked and waited,
 Not for guineas sang our song,
 But because the nights were starry
 And because the world was wrong.
 Though we sometimes sighed for roses
 And the kingcups on the lawn,
 Yet we bore and suffered Harmsworth
 With our eyes towards the dawn.

In the brave year nineteen fifty
 Though our sun is down the sky,
 May we show the world together
 That Bohemia does not die.
 Though our songs are sung by pirates
 And our names are in Who's Who—
 May I wander to this tavern
 And renew my youth with you.

Worse ditties have been written. The other, a piece of gay cynicism he called *The Rubáiyât*, was even more popular :

The soft white hand of a woman
 Set with little pink nails,
 The curling handle of a clean pint pot

And beer in pails.
 The soft red lips of a woman
 To kiss and say Amen,
 The cold round edge of a clean pint pot
 To kiss and kiss again.
 The soft bright eyes of a woman,
 The salt salt tears that set 'em,
 And once again a clean pint pot
 In which one may forget 'em.

Always sure of appreciation was this morsel. That a spirit of originality breathes in it and in the other verses must be granted by the least amiably disposed critic of his work. It did not occur to me, however, to think of him primarily as a poet until, some months after our first meeting, he sent me a copy of his *The Last Cruise*, since published in *Poems and Songs*. Before then his personality only had impressed me ; it impressed, indeed, everybody with whom he came into contact. To quote McQuilland again :

How can one describe him but as a Personality, as a man who convinced without effort ? It can be said with absolute certainty that no one ever met Richard Middleton, even in in the most casual and fugitive measure, without being impressed by his force. His effects were obtained not by mere outward eccentricity or mannerisms, though he was, indeed, the most unconventional of men, but by sheer flashing originality.

The Last Cruise thrilled me. A new planet had swam into my ken, and I remember writing to him with prophecies of a great future. My heart, how young we were ! Later, in the days of his disillusionment, he was to confess :

Those were great nights when we used to read each other's verses and congratulate the world on its possession of our united genius. That is really the poet's hour, his rich reward for years of unprofitable labour, when the poets of his own unripe age receive his work with enthusiasm—an enthusiasm which in all honesty and all modesty he shares himself. Unhappily he is paid in

advance ; sooner or later he wakes to find that he is worshipping before the shrine of his own genius, and the shrine is empty. That is why I am half pleased and half melancholy when young men tell me that Antony Starbright, aged twenty, is the greatest poet since Keats. If they only knew that I too in my hour was one of a group of greatest poets who all wrote poems to Pan and Hylas, when on summer nights that sometimes stretched far into summer mornings we were all hero-worshippers together and we ourselves were the heroes. *2

They were good days, truly ; “le bon temps,” as Anatole France puts it, “quand nous n'avions pas le sens commun.” But here is the poem :

The stars were out overhead and “Lo !” I cried, “nevermore,
 Nevermore shall the palace know me,” and high on the masts
 The white sails trembled as skyward the good good ship bore
 Her cargo of shadows.

Never a word of regret as I stood on her moonlit poop
 And sang not of old past things but of wonders to be ;
 And saw great birds with a glory of plumage swoop
 Down the sea's meadows.

Ah ! the wind on my forehead that might not blow on the earth,
 Surely the gates were open and I might forget
 The quiet eyes of the past that seemed life's worth,
 That were but seeming.

I saw the lights of a ship march slowly over the sea,
 And the land fell away behind me, and into the night
 That covereth all things and passeth no more for me,
 My heart went dreaming.

Good poetry is that. Who that has seen ships at sea by night but must recognise the truth of the image,

I saw the lights of a ship march slowly over the sea.

The word “march”—the *mot juste*—makes poetry of the line where with “pass” or some other word it would be mere verse. What colour, again,

*2 *Monologues*, p. 230. The same thought is expressed in that fine essay *The Great Man (The Gholt Ship)*.

is suggested by those great birds with their glory of plumage ! And how quietly the poem ends, or, rather, fades out. Dreamer and dreamship pass like the gentlest of airs, merged in what calm of the spirit. That Middleton could write like this I had not for one moment imagined. He was a man to be with, and I had long lived among people who cared nothing for literature and whose humanity did not at that time compensate for their philistinism. With no faith or philosophy of life of my own, I must needs look up to one who apparently knew his own mind. I was a snob, too, where men who could “do things” were concerned. Above all, perhaps, I admired him in that he had no petty meannesses, he was not little of soul. Here, then, was a hero made to my hand. We quarrelled of course ; bitterly at times ; but long letters would follow on the subject of such eruptions, and they would end in our being better friends than ever. “Man, if you only knew my pride !” he exclaimed one day, friendly relations having been resumed after a difference. We had sat for some two hours in the same room in mutual hatred. It was perhaps the only occasion on which I ever felt deep resentment against him. For once I gave up probing for causes, and relieved myself by writing a sonnet while he raged silently at another table. In the main, however, his “nonsense suited my nonsense.” We got on very well together ; were attracted to the same ideals and pleasures ; were good friends in short.

There are many references to the New Bohemians in our earlier letters. His were seldom dated, but while I was still being addressed by my surname I find him writing :