

## CHAPTER XXIII

### APPRECIATION FROM FOREIGNERS

*23rd December 1885.*—This day I enter my seventy-fourth birthday. I was reminded of this at last Sunday's service—the 20th morning of the month. “The days of man are but as grass: for he flourisheth as a flower of the field. For as soon as the wind goeth over it, it is gone: and the place thereof shall know it no more.” Alas! I am growing old, and the time is rapidly coming when I too must depart and join the majority. And yet how many things have I yet to do, or at least designed to do. Many of these I must leave to others. I have generally had work enough mapped out to fill at least ten years of life. This, I suppose, has arisen from my habits of forethought and industry.

How different is my feeling of a birthday now, from what it was when I was a boy. Then the days dragged along slowly: they seemed to tarry; and I longed to be a man, and doing man's work. Now the years seem to fleet like the wind, and succeed each other far too rapidly. Does this mean that I lead a happy life? Even as a man, I felt it like a pastime to grow old; but now it is different. How many things to do; how many things left undone. Fontenelle said, “*Si je recommençais ma carrière, je ferais tout ce que j'ai fait.*” I cannot agree with

this view of life. I have spent much of my time carelessly and foolishly; missed many opportunities for improvement; wasted powers, indulged in false hopes, and wandered after meteoric follies. I wish I had the power to retouch my life, as the artist retouches his picture. But I cannot do so. My life must stand or fall by what I have done, not by what I have dreamt. I have been getting together, page by page, that which is good or bad. It has become stereotyped in me, and must remain there so long as I live. My past deeds often come before me, like a succession of pictures. Things long forgotten come up again one by one; and often those which occurred in the early portion of my life, come back the clearest and most distinct. In the course of a few more birthdays, the whole story will be told, and the book will be finally closed, so far as this life is concerned.

I have indeed many things to be thankful for. A good constitution, which has enabled me to stand a considerable amount of brain work—and even to recover from my attack of paralysis fourteen years ago, and since then to do a little more work for the benefit of others; a fair amount of intellect, which, however, could only be brought into action by much perseverance, as will be seen from the preceding pages—“perseverance” which, as Carlyle says, “is the hinge of all the virtues.” I have also been blessed in my home life—first in my bringing-up by my devoted mother, and next by the affection and prudence of an excellent wife. I could reveal much about this; but it will be enough to say that the results—in the growth, and culture, and moral development of our children—with whom she had much more to do than myself—have proved everything that I could have wished; for they have been

our joy and comfort from childhood to manhood and womanhood; and now my grandchildren gather about me in clusters.

Another thing has given me pleasure. I have made friends, through my occasional works, in many foreign countries—though my correspondents have never seen me, nor I them. They have judged me merely by my writings. My pen has been a sort of electric wire that has bound us together. Some of my foreign correspondents asked for my photograph, and I sent it—in one case to a medical gentleman in practice at Nagy-Károly, in Hungary. Its arrival seemed to cause a sort of enthusiasm in his family. In answering my letter, he asked to be excused for his delay.

“The physician in practice,” he said, “is perhaps less master of his time than any one. It is all the more necessary that I should ask your pardon for my offence against duty and good manners, because I fear that you will find it difficult to believe what great joy your kind present has created for me and my little family. The arrival of your letter was a fête-day for us. Even my little eight-year-old boy jumped round with joy, and could not look at the picture enough. Accept our heartfelt thanks, and be assured that both letter and portrait will be preserved by us as a precious memento. I can say with a certain amount of satisfaction, that I have never thought of you as otherwise than your portrait shows you. True genius and mind are pictured as clearly in your works as in your features. Darwin is right once more. . . . When you wrote your books with the wish that you might spread the good and the true in the world, bringing help and energy to others, I can assure you that you have reached your aim, and may think of the future with calm. I know of no single book in literature, out of which so much good may be drawn as out of yours, and I have never found in your works a single sentence that, even in error, could be taken as anything leading towards immorality. How few authors could pride themselves on this!”

The book which he particularly mentioned was *Self-Help*, and although a translation had been published in the Magyar language five years before, containing illustrations from Hungarian history, he thought that a better translation might be made, which he proposed to publish in the periodical of a committee to which he belonged (Szatmármegyei Közlöng) under the title of "Smiles's Pearls." This he afterwards did, and sent me the numbers of the periodical in which the translations appeared, though to me they were in an unknown tongue. In sending them, Dr Franz Takecbouzts said, "It will be a child of your own, and will perhaps be gladly received in its Hungarian dress."

Another enthusiastic Croat, in words of praise which I cannot repeat, desired to have my sanction for his translation of *Character*. I may, however, quote the following: "Your *Character*," he said, "is a real treasure for anyone, but particularly for the young. Each boy, each girl, should read this book, to find in it great men and women as examples for guidance in their own journey through life." I had much pleasure in giving my sanction to his translation. He had read the work in the Italian, but in order to do his work from the quick, he set to work and learnt English, and afterwards addressed to me his first letter written in the English language. The young man, Mirko Turic, was then living at Agram, a student of philosophy; and he afterwards sent me a copy of the translated work.

Another gentleman, V. E. Mourek, a professor at the Royal Imperial College at Budweis, in Bohemia, addressed me as to the proposed translation of *Character* into Czech. I agreed, and the work was published in parts, and afterwards in a completed

book. He told me that the work had been very favourably received. He quoted, from the many reviews, an extract from the *Komensky*, a paper devoted to educational interests. "This excellent, golden book is indeed worth a whole library. And if it is, as it deserves to be, for every individual a sort of practical Bible, which ought to be read again and again, it is above all important for the educators of youth, for, as it says, 'Nations are gathered out of nurseries, and they who hold the leading strings of children may even exercise a greater power than those who hold the reins of government.' . . . Smiles's book is written in such a flowing, easy, and agreeable style, that whoever reads it, finds not only instruction and elevation of thought, but also the most agreeable mental repose and pleasure. His theoretical explanations are full of flashing thoughts and grains of gold, which by their proverb-like character will be easily and for ever impressed upon the memory. . . . We wish that everybody who knows how to read might own this golden book, that it might help to educate indefatigable workers, upright, unselfish, and energetic characters for our own nation, which more than any other stands in need of them." Professor Mourek also translated *Self-Help* and *Thrift* for Bohemian readers, I understand, with equally happy results.

I had another application of a similar character from Sarazios in Bosnia. The writer seemed to be an Englishwoman—Adeline Paulina Irby. She said in her letter :—

"SIR,—

"An able and hard-working Dalmatian Slav, the son of a peasant, who by his merit and industry has attained the position of a local official, has sent me two MS. chapters of his translation into the Serbo-Croat language of your valuable work

*Thrift.* He says the translation is nearly finished, and he wishes to publish it as soon as possible in the Cyrillic and Latin characters, that it may be read both by Serbs and Croats. He has translated from the English original with the help of the German and Italian translations. The style is excellent. This Dalmatian, Nicola Vackovic, an Austrian official at Zara, writes to ask me if I could obtain for him the permission of the author to translate the book. I venture to forward his request, being very anxious that this book should be made accessible to Serbs and Croats, for whom such works are very desirable."

I granted the necessary permission, but what became of the translation I do not know, as I do not think I was favoured with a copy of it.

Although I derived no benefit from these various translations, yet I was satisfied that these little books—the results of the occupation of my leisure hours—must have been of some value to others, otherwise they would never have been thought worthy of being published in other languages. My reputation with foreign translators and foreign readers—who knew nothing of me, nor I of them—might in some measure be regarded as a sort of reputation with contemporary posterity. The supposed value of the thoughts in the books were the only ties between myself and my translators.

A generation must have passed since I wrote the first of them—that is, the first of my books that anyone would read—and they cannot fail to have made a considerable impression on the rising generation. *Self-Help* was published in 1859, and a generation has grown up since then. Boys who read the book then—and 20,000 copies of it were disposed of in the first year—are men now. I have met some of them, and they have thanked me

heartily for my words of encouragement. One, whom I met at dinner with my friend Mrs Songton, took me to one side, and said, "I have often wished to meet you, and to thank you for the good your books have done me. When a young man, I was on the slide downward. I was careless, thoughtless, and a searcher after pleasure. Some one made me a present of your *Self-Help*, and it saved me from the downward course. It became my manual: I read it constantly, in the morning and at night. I read it during a long railway journey. And then I endeavoured to put its lessons into practice. It gave me courage; it gave me strength. I became sober, punctual, attentive, and trustworthy. I worked perseveringly; at length I was taken as a partner into the firm with which I am connected, and now I am a prosperous man." I have seen the gentleman since, and he is still profuse in his congratulations.

Only a year ago an Indian, of Bombay, Dhanjibhái Dorábji Gilder, writing to me requesting permission to translate *Self-Help, Character, Thrift, and Duty*, into Gujerati, said, "I have read your invaluable work *Self-Help* at least half a dozen times, and am greatly charmed with it." Another correspondent, a medical man near London, says he writes to me out of sheer gratitude, thanking me for the help and cheerfulness which my books have infused into his life. "I wish," he says, "that every young man might read them, and be stimulated to further endeavours to do his duty to God and man." Another, a curate in a country church, says, "I should like to say what an immense help your books *Self-Help* and *Character* have been to myself, from the age of eighteen. I think I may say, next to the Bible, I have read them more than any other works,

and am always indebted to them for the stimulus which I obtain from them. I find them invaluable for illustrations in my addresses and sermons." Another young fellow, whom I greatly esteem, has sentences from my books stuck up in ornamental characters on the wall of his bedroom, which he studies every day, and endeavours to carry into practice. There is a fine memorial to a good man, which I saw in the Church of St Maria degli Angeli (which opens from the Diocletian Baths) at Rome, which I hope might be mine. I think the words run as follows :—

" Virtute vixit,  
 Memoria vivit,  
 Gloria vivet."

Notwithstanding such words of praise, I have, as already stated, been taken pretty sharply to task for not having said anything about those who failed. One writer said that the greatest of men as well as the Son of God failed and was crucified. Another writer—a poet—has recently repeated the same idea, in some fine verses : \*—

" Behold the leader of a vanquished cause,  
 His arms extended on the bitter Cross !"

I think this scarcely fair. A great deed of sacrifice, destined from all eternity, should not be put in comparison with the little deeds of man on this transitory earth. But was the sacrifice of Christ really a failure, and was Christianity a vanquished cause? I have no wish to discuss the question. The virtues of constancy, energy, perseverance, industry, patience, accuracy, cheerfulness, hope, self-denial, self-culture, self-respect, power of good example, nobility of

\* *Spectator*, 19th December 1885—"On last looking into Smiles's *Self-Help*."

character, which form the subjects and illustrations of my book, are not only compatible with Christianity, but, in my opinion, form the essential characteristics of it. I did not pretend to teach divinity, but to lay down a few of the more important lessons, as guides to this daily work-a-day life; so very important while it lasts, though so soon to come to an end.

One of the above writers asked, "Why should not Failure have its Plutarch as well as Success?" The poet asked, "Is there no Homer for the beaten side?" There is no reason whatever why those who fail should not have their Plutarch and their Homer. The world of letters is wide, and the task is there for those who choose to take it up. But I have already given a sufficient answer to this charge in the preface to the last edition of *Self-Help*, and there is no need to pursue it.

I might, however, illustrate the subject by a little anecdote. Two ministers of the Church of Scotland were deputed to visit some congregations in the Highlands. In the course of their tour, they had to cross a ferry. They entered the boat, which was rowed by a single oarsman. The ferry was wide: in fact, it was a loch or fiord running up among the mountains. The winds are very treacherous in those parts. When the boat had got half-way across a heavy storm arose, the waves dashed over the passengers, and they thought they might be lost. One of the ministers proposed to offer up a prayer. The Highland boatman overheard him, and said, "The wee ane may pray, but the big ane maun tak an oar." The ministers prayed and worked together. The strong arms of the "big ane," with the help of the Highlandman, sent the boat rapidly through the water, and they reached the opposite shore in safety.

“Weel done, the big ane,” said the boatman. The “big ane” was the late Dr Norman Macleod.

One of those who failed, wrote to me, a few years ago, the following very touching letter:—

“DEAR SIR,—

“A modern Quixote (who has, however, more serious foes than windmills to contend with) humbly asks for a few words of friendly advice and encouragement from a true friend: for such have you been to me (without your knowledge, it is true), but not unintentionally, for I am one of the monster generation now struggling into manhood, and to that you have been talking for years, by means of your delightful books. I have this minute laid aside your *Self-Help*—a faithful, though, I fear, a much neglected companion for years, and I was much struck by a passage referring to *mutual support*, combined with which you quote those words of Wordsworth, where he says that manly dependence and manly independence go hand in hand to form true manhood.

“It immediately occurred to me how much a few lines of advice might help me on my way, and in the face of the tenets of this ‘age of stone’—where the spirits of the departed must materialise ere we believe in them—I dare to write to one *personally* a perfect stranger, but *intellectually* one of my greatest friends. I am ‘a miserable idler’; over twenty years of age; and my ignorance is lamentable. With fairly average abilities, I see others passing me daily in the race. I *cannot* work, and yet I am *miserable* in consequence. I am not, I trust, as yet enslaved in vice, but the agony and despair my idleness entails upon me, must soon guide me to the bourne from whence it is hard to return.

“The only happy time I know is when I have some *compulsory* employment. I see others equally idle with myself, but they are happy in some mysterious manner; their consciences do not seem to annoy them; and I, I fear, losing all ambition, will soon become the same—like the fabled Lotus eaters—without hope and without care. A pleasant life,

forsooth, for a *man*—a creature endowed with so many wonderful ideas.

“Sometimes I sit down for a short time, perhaps to write, perhaps to some sterner and more clearly-defined duty; but soon my foe seeks me out, and suggests that I defer the duty (perchance a congenial one) to some other day, which, of course, means indefinitely.

“To think, with all my opportunities, how much I might know, how high up I might stand in my profession, how my wages might be doubled, if I had only chosen to work—instead of frittering away my time upon some trivial objects, or succumbing to a horrible oblivion, a death in life, total paralysis of the mind, a body without a soul, a life all the more terrible from momentary glimpses of a better life. And now, Sir, it is to you that I now take the great liberty of writing and further requesting a few lines of advice and encouragement to one who is almost without hope.

“It cannot be entirely from physical causes, as I live quietly enough. I take it, that it is from early novel reading, and a too warm imagination, with a strong mixture of vanity, etc. Pardon my writing, dear Sir, and if ever I become known to you, I trust that your advice has not been thrown to the wind, but has taken root in ground not wholly bad, and has blossomed in eternity. Faithfully yours, in *secrecy*,  
— — —.”

I do not give the name and address, as I do not know whether the poor fellow who wrote the above letter is alive. I answered it, but what could I say? I could only urge him to persevere, to get into the right path and keep there, for he had evidently plenty of ability, and should have had enough of self-respect and self-control to back it. I filled up my letter with thoughts like these; but it never reached him. In a few days it was returned through the Dead Letter Office, with the words written on it, “not known.” Yet I addressed my letter according to the exact address he had given me.

I have often been amazed and distressed to find what a number of helpless and idle creatures exist in this busy world. Some of them think that it is want of "luck" that attends them; but when I make inquiry, I find that it is oftener carelessness and indifference, idleness and a tendency to viciousness; and very often the break-down of character of these unhappy people comes from their devotion to drink and its sordid accompaniments. It is not so much the want of mental powers as the lack of will and self-help. They will do nothing for themselves, but expect other people to help them; and when they have been put in a position to make an honest living, they suddenly break down, and then they have to begin again at the beginning. Not exactly at the beginning, for they have put themselves back in the world, and (their character being deteriorated by their previous failure) they have to start again from a lower level than before. Sometimes they send round begging letters; their story is miserable—a wife, children, and no money; the rent to pay, and nothing to pay it with; otherwise the furniture will be seized, and they will be left destitute. It is difficult to refuse such applications, and when once you have yielded, you are thought cruel if you afterwards refuse. I have known many men who might have made themselves independent through the exercise of moderate frugality and self-control, yet who have been under the necessity of descending to these degrading conditions. I am disposed to agree with Conversation Sharpe, a man of large experience, who said:—

“Untoward actions will sometimes happen; but after many years of thoughtful experience, I can truly

say, that nearly all those who began life with me have succeeded as they deserved to succeed, or they have failed as they deserved to fail."

Carlyle, too, has said a great word for Perseverance.

"Perseverance," he says, "I particularly respect: it is the hinge of all the virtues. On looking over the world, the cause of nine-tenths in ten of the lamentable failures which occur in men's undertakings, and darken and degrade so much of their history, lies not in the want of talents or the will to use them, but in the vacillating and desultory mode of using them; in flying from object to object, in starting away at each little disgust, and thus applying the force which might conquer any difficulty to a series of difficulties that no human force can conquer. . . . Commend me, therefore, to the Dutch virtue of perseverance. Without it, all the rest are little better than fairy gold, which glitters in your purse, but when taken to market proves to be only slate or cinders."

*February* 1887.—I little thought when I last left Rome, that I should ever again visit the eternal city. There is a tradition that if you drink the waters of the fountain of Trevi, and hide some money there before departing, you are sure to return. The tradition has, at all events, proved true in my case, for on a fine moonlight evening I drank the waters, hid some coin, and after eight years' absence, I am in Rome again.\*

We returned to London on the 5th of May.

Everything was then far advanced towards the celebration of the Queen's Jubilee. I was born in the reign of George III. I remember that king's

\* There follows in the MS. a long account of Dr Smiles's second visit to Italy, and of the hospitality and attention with which he was received. It is, however, only a note of travels, which it has been thought better to omit.—ED.

death, and the accession of his son George IV. I saw that monarch during his visit to Edinburgh in 1822. William IV. followed, and reigned for several years; and then came the accession of the noble, virtuous, and ever to be esteemed Victoria—the mother of her people.

I did not intend to take any part in the celebration of the Jubilee, except lighting up my windows on the 21st of June. But the Lord Mayor sent me an invitation to the “Banquet to Representatives of Literature, Science, and Art,” held on the Saturday preceding the commemoration, and I had the pleasure of attending that specially interesting meeting. Still more agreeable was the invitation which I received from Lord Lathom, the Lord Chamberlain, to attend Her Majesty’s Jubilee Thanksgiving Service in Westminster Abbey on Tuesday the 21st of June. The procession from Buckingham Palace to Westminster Abbey was distinguished principally for the admirable behaviour of the immense crowd which assembled along the streets to witness the procession. The procession was too much divided to be imposing: it was not to compare with that of the King of Italy’s birthday. But it made up in spirit and cheers what it wanted in music and military effect.

The commemoration in Westminster Abbey was much more important. But I need not describe that memorable event. The concourse of people was remarkable, including as it did, princes and royalties; men and women of mark from all parts of the world; the Queen and her illustrious Royal Family, not the least of whom were her eldest daughter the Crown Princess of Prussia, and her noble husband the Crown Prince, who looked every inch a king. Pens better than mine have described that great event. The

ceremony, especially the last part of it, when the Queen called her sons and daughters to her side, and gave them severally her kiss and her blessing, was of the most touching description. All honour to that thoroughly good, humane, and noble woman, the best of wives and the best of mothers. She has maintained the virtue of her court, ruled her people wisely, and ever constitutionally, during her reign of fifty years, and will always be remembered as the best and wisest Queen that has ever sat upon the British throne.

After the commemoration of the Queen's Jubilee, London rapidly emptied. At the end of July, my wife and I went over to Belfast to see my son, his wife, and my numerous grandchildren there—eight in one family. We were most royally entertained, and saw much of that vigorous town, so celebrated for its flax manufactures, its shipbuilding, and its manifold industries. There we renewed many old friendships, and made many new ones, and thence, we went across the Irish Sea to Barrow—a place that has grown from a village to the dimensions of a city during my lifetime. Then to Brent How, to see a dear friend, and witness the annual sports at Grasmere. We had seen them some seventeen years ago. Then, it was a simple village festival: now, it is like a racecourse with four-in-hands, stage-coaches from Windermere, barouches, waggonettes, gigs of all sorts, and a multitude of people. What would Wordsworth have thought if he had been alive?

After a visit to Lancashire we journeyed to Harrogate to drink the nectar of that famous watering-place, and returned home after about six weeks' absence.