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Sir Walter Besant

ON the last page of "Ready-Money Mortiboy," Messrs. Besant and Rice describe the inscriptions on Dick Mortiboy's monument. One of these is perhaps the best that could be chosen for the tomb of the great-hearted man of letters who passed away on June 9—only a day, as it happened, before the passing of another well-known English novelist. This is the epitaph—Abou ben Adhem's: "Write me as one who loves his fellow-men."

Sir Walter Besant was a man of brains and a man of cultivation; a delightful story-teller, and an accomplished biographer and historian. But what is mourned to-day and will be remembered in the years to come is the big warm heart that made it impossible for its owner to see oppression or injustice without working valiantly to correct it. Neither in subject nor in treatment is *All Sorts and Conditions of Men* the most charming and artistic of the stories he wrote, either singly or in collaboration; yet it is likely to be the first recalled when Sir Walter's name is spoken. For it was in this book that he told of the Palace of Delight which he dreamt of as a means to relieve the sordidness of life in the "Joyless City," East London. Certain friendly advisers told him that the story was impossible. What did he do in face of this criticism? Modify his tale, in the interest of plausibility? Not he! He merely gave it a subtitle—"An Impossible Story." And when people read it, means were forth-coming to make it possible. And for years, now, the People's Palace has done more than any other agency to mitigate the joylessness of life in East London.

Since the author made his solitary trips in quest of local color for this novel—the first he had written for ten years without the assistance of his friend and literary partner, James Rice—the great overgrown city he explored has added hundreds of thousands to its population of industrious poor; yet substantially the same conditions are described in his work, *East London*, published only last winter, as were recorded in this story of 1882. If the people of that vast region were capable of uniting for any common purpose, they might most fittingly erect a statue to the man who knew them so well, and wrote of them in a spirit so kindly and appreciative. But he himself might advise them, if he could, to put their money to a more practical use.

Another notable achievement of Sir Walter's was the foundation of the Incorporated Society of Authors—an association to which almost every English author of distinction belongs, though it is designed, as were almost all of its founder's activities, to be of service not to the prosperous, but to those who needed help—the sort of help, in this case, that the experienced maker of books could give to the beginner. In its early days the work of the society had somewhat the appearance of a crusade against the publishing fraternity; yet no one suspected its spokesman of any personal ill will against the objects of his assaults, or supposed him envious of the meed awarded to a certain ruler who ordered a publisher shot. It was for such disinterested labors as he undertook in this connection, and partly in memory, no doubt, of what he had done for East London, that knighthood was conferred upon him in 1895.

The latest work of an altruistic character into which he threw his energies was

the establishment of the so-called Atlantic Union. The object of this association is the bringing together of travelling Englishmen and Americans, with a special view to their seeing something of the homes of the two countries, instead of judging each other by what they see in hotels and on the street. He had accepted an invitation to attend a meeting of the union held in the evening of the day after his death, and to propose the toast, "English-speaking Communities." He had visited the United States (notably at the time of the World's Fair at Chicago); and many Americans, including the present writer, recollect his cordial hospitality when at home.

Sir Walter was born at Portsmouth, in August, 1836, and passed from King's College, London, to Christ's College, Cambridge. He excelled in mathematics, but was destined for the Church. His tastes ran in other directions, however, and after leaving the university, he accepted a professorship in the Royal College of Mauritius. The climate drove him back to England before long, and he had since pursued literature as a calling. His first books dealt with early French poetry, French humor, etc. For many years he was secretary of the Palestine Exploration Fund, and collaborated on a history of Jerusalem with Professor E. H. Palmer, of whom, when he was murdered in the desert, Sir Walter prepared a memoir. He edited the *Survey of Western Palestine* in those days, and for many years before his death was engaged in editing and bringing up to date Stow's monumental *Survey of London*, originally executed three centuries ago. No one, perhaps, knew London better than he, or turned his knowledge to better account, as well in his novels as in such historical and descriptive works as *London, East London, South London*, and *Westminster*, an edition of De Foë's *Plague in London*, etc.

During his ten years' association with Mr. Rice, who was editing *Once a Week* when Sir Walter became a contributor to that periodical, many popular novels were produced—*Ready-Money Mortiboy*, *The Chaplain of the Fleet*, *By Celia's Arbor*, *The Golden Butterfly*, etc.—and readers wondered what share each had in the work. One boldly asked the senior partner how they did it. "Oh, Rice uses a gold pen; mine is a steel one," was all the satisfaction he could get. It was a happier partnership than that of Eckmann-Chatrion, in that it was broken only by death. And the world marvelled that the surviving partner continued to produce entertaining works of fiction as prolifically and as successfully as before the dissolution of the firm. The list of his later writings is too long to be given in full; it is enough to name *All Sorts and Conditions*, *The World Went Very Well Then*, and *Beyond the Dreams of Aarice*, to show that whatever share Mr. Rice may have had in the preparation of the earlier novels, Sir Walter was but slightly dependent on outside aid in writing them.

Sir Charles Withycomb's portrait, as painted in the opening pages of *All in a Garden Fair*, would serve in some respects as a portrait of the author himself in the last few years of his life—"a ruddy cheek and a twinkling eye, a cheerful face and a ready smile, an old gentleman who might not be very wise, but who was certainly kind of heart."
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