

## Obituary.

### MR. ROBERT BUCHANAN—SIR WALTER BESANT —LORD WANTAGE.

Death has been busy this week among some well-known men. Robert Buchanan and Sir Walter Besant both died last Sunday afternoon, and Lord Wantage on Monday morning.

#### ROBERT BUCHANAN—BY ONE WHO KNEW HIM.

By the death of Robert Buchanan a stormy and turbulent literary career has been closed. Seen through the public spectacles, he cannot be said to have presented a very amiable personality. He was aggressive, combative, sudden of quarrel, and he often seemed unnecessarily bitter of speech. But to his friends "Bob" Buchanan was a very different man—kindly, genial, and even over-hospitable in the tranquillity of his own home, and little concerned about his quarrels with the world once the street door had been closed upon them.

It was the harshness of his early struggles in literature that embittered Buchanan's life. A little over forty years ago, when a lad of seventeen, he left his father's office in Glasgow—the office of the old dead-and-gone newspaper, the *Sentinel*—where he made his beginnings in journalism. There, even as a boy, he used to be found lolling back in his father's easy chair with a smoking cap on his head and a long pipe in his mouth, thinking out plots and verses, and devising marvellous letters to literary celebrities in the hope that he might disclose his young genius to advantage in the high places of literature. In one letter to George Henry Lewes he demanded: "Am I, or am I not, a poet?" while in another to Philip Hamerton he made the formal declaration: "I mean, after Tennyson's death, to be Poet-Laureate." Such ambitions would not long permit "Bob" to remain in the stodgy old office of the *Sentinel*; so off to London he determined to go.

In this determination he was joined by three other youths from Glasgow. One was David Gray, the young poet, whose death was almost as tragic in its way as Chatterton's; Charles Gibbon and William Black, the novelists, were the others. Buchanan and Gray were to go by the same train, but somehow they missed each other, and for days they were kept apart in London. Half-a-crown apiece was all they possessed after paying their fares, and to save his humble capital Gray spent his first night under the stars in Hyde Park—an experience which cost him his life, for he caught a chill which sent him home to die. Buchanan, however, found better shelter than was offered by the Hôtel de Belle Etoile, and finally put up in a "dear old ghastly bankrupt garret" at 66, Stamford-street, Waterloo Bridge, for which he paid, when he had the money, seven shillings a week. Thither he bore his poor friend Gray, coughing piteously; and thither came such men as Monckton-Milnes, Laurence Oliphant, and Sydney Dobell to see the dying boy-poet.

Nevertheless it was a happy, though hungry, time; and Buchanan once described his splendid isolation, for he made no friends, in his manner: "What did my isolation matter when I had all the gods in Greece for company, to say nothing of the fays and trolls of Scottish Fairyland? Pallas and Aphrodite haunted that old garret; and on Waterloo Bridge, night after night, I saw Selene and all her nymphs; and when my heart sank low, the Fairies of Scotland sang me lullabies! It was a happy time. Sometimes, for a fortnight together, I never had a dinner—save perhaps, on Sunday, when the good-natured Hebe would bring me covertly a slice from the landlord's joint. My favourite place of refreshment was the Caledonian Coffee House in Covent Garden. Here, for a few coppers, I could feast on coffee and muffins—muffins saturated with butter, and worthy of the gods! Then, issuing forth, full-fed, glowing, oleaginous, I would light my pipe and wander out into the lighted streets."

Gradually, however, Buchanan made his way into literary journalism. Criticisms for the *Athenæum* brought him half-a-guinea a column, and work for the *Literary Gazette*, then edited by John Morley, fetched him about the same fee. Then he came into contact with Dickens, and contributed to *Household Words*. "Bob" Buchanan could never talk of Dickens without enthusiasm. Here is his memory of the great novelist: "Two or three times a week, walking, black bag in hand, from Charing Cross Station to the office of *All the Year Round* in Wellington-street, came the good, the only Dickens. From that good Genius the poor straggler from Fairyland got solid help and sympathy. Few can realise now what Dickens was then to London. His humour filled its

literature like broad sunlight; the Gospel of Plum-Pudding warmed every poor devil in Bohemia.

Buchanan's first book was a little volume of verse published in Glasgow; others followed in London, and he was in the fair way to making a name as a poet—a name which, judging from the standard of to-day, it is not extravagant to suppose might have given him the coveted Laureateship—when he suddenly became enamoured of fiction, and rushed into print with "The Shadow of the Sword" in 1870, followed by "A Child of Nature," "God and the Man," and others, wedged in with all sorts of plays—even a Mormon melodrama entitled "St. Abe and His Seven Wives." Some of Buchanan's French adaptation, however, made very good plays, notably "A Man's Shadow," produced by Mr. Beerbohm Tree, which was a version of "Roger La Honte." Notable also were his renderings into dramatic form of Fielding's "Tom Jones" and Richardson's "Clarissa Harlowe." His methods of adaptation were interesting. "I never translate and I never extract," he once told me. "I read the original through twice or perhaps three times, then close the book for ever, and write my play." He, however, also did a good deal of original work, and wrote a number of Adelphi dramas in collaboration with George R. Sims. "A Society Butterfly" was written for Mrs. Langtry.

Robert Buchanan, however, was by no means so conspicuous a figure in literature as he might have been had his talents been better directed. He seemed only to flirt with the muses, so that we have a composite figure of a poet-novelist-dramatist with no outstanding merit in the combination save that of uncommon versatility. He lacked definite aim in his work, and therein lay his failure to achieve the highest success. Then his frank outspokenness gave him in a large degree the gentle art of making enemies. He hated hero-worship; indeed, he had no love for gods of any kind, so that when Rudyard Kipling and Lord Kitchener became the heroes of their hours Buchanan must needs attack them—not with a modest rapier like a Christian, but with the sword Excalibur.

In his closing years he became sadly embittered with his stormy fortunes, and railed against the world. "It is a badly stage-managed world," he said to me scarcely more than a year ago. "Oh, it will be all right on the night," I replied, quoting from a well-known play. "Not a bit of it," said Buchanan; "it is not rehearsing it needs, but reconstruction."

#### SIR WALTER BESANT—BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH.

Sir Walter Besant, who had, perhaps, better than anyone else the sentiment of old London, was nevertheless a native of Portsmouth, where, in 1838, he first saw the light. Intended for the Church, he was educated at King's College, London, and Christ's College, Cambridge, where he graduated in high mathematical honours, a fact which does not prepare us for the statement that his first book was "Studies in Early French Poetry," which he produced in 1868. He had, however, in the meantime served as Senior Professor in the Royal College of Mauritius, a post from which he was driven by ill-health.

Early in life the story-telling instinct had manifested itself in Walter Besant; his earliest attempt at fiction, after causing the writer "labour infinite, hope exaggerated, and disappointment dire," was consigned to the flames. The outcome of literary work which got into the magazines was an invitation to join the late Mr. James Rice in the production of the novel entitled "Ready Money Mortiboy," and the success of this work resulted in a partnership as acceptable to the public as it was profitable to the writers.

"Ready Money Mortiboy" brought in from first to last £400, that is to say, £200 apiece. The two young unknown writers, however, seem to have had some difficulty in getting it published in volume form. *Once a Week* published it in instalments, paying for the privilege £100, but the authors afterwards had to print it themselves and sell it on commission through a publisher. They printed 600 copies, all of which were sold. The publisher secured about £60 profit—the authors about £100. Then the cheap form was sold to another firm for five years for £50, and finally all remaining rights were sold out for £100. This leaves £50 to be accounted for, that sum being represented by a cheque from an American firm, who sent it presumably for what are called early sheets.

Of the novels which Sir Walter published in his own name the best known are: "All Sorts and Conditions of Men," "All in a Garden Fair," "Children of Gibeon," "The World Went Very Well Then," "Katherine Regina," "Fifty Years Ago," "Herr Paulus," "Eulogy of Richard Jeffrie," "The Inner House," "For Faith and Freedom," "The Bell of St. Paul's," "To Call Her Mine," "The Holy Rose," "The Demoniac," "Armored of Lyonesse," "St. Katherine's by the Tower," "Verbena Camellia