

Francis Bacon.

We go away from singing skylarks to find the next character that I shall cull out from these Elizabethan times to set before you: this is Lord Bacon—or, to give him his true title, Lord Verulam—there being, in fact, the same impropriety in saying Lord Bacon (if custom had not “brazed it so”) that there would be in saying Lord D’Israeli for Lord Beaconsfield.

Here was a great mind—a wonderful intellect which everyone admired, and in which everyone of English birth, from Royalty down, took—and ever will take—a national pride; but, withal, few of those amiabilities ever crop out in this great character which make men loved. He can see a poor priest culprit come to the rack without qualms; and could look stolidly on, as Essex, his special benefactor in his youth, walked to the scaffold; yet the misstatement of a truth, with respect to physics, or any matter about which truth or untruth was clearly demonstrable, affected him like a galvanic shock. His biographers, Montagu and Spedding, have padded his angularities into roundness; while^[251] Pope and Macaulay have lashed him in the grave. I think we must find the real man somewhere between them; if we credit him with a great straight-thinking, truth-seeking brain, and little or no capacity for affection, the riddle of his strange life will be more easily solved. Spedding,^[97] who wrote a voluminous life of Bacon—having devoted a quarter of a century to necessary studies—does certainly make disastrous ripping-up of the seams in Macaulay’s rhetoric; but there remain certain ugly facts relating to the trial of Essex, and the bribe-takings, which will probably always keep alive in the popular mind an under-current of distrust in respect to the great Chancellor.

He was born in London, in 1561, three years before Shakespeare, and at a time when, from his father’s^[252] house in the Strand he could look sheer across the Thames to Southwark, where, before he was thirty, the Globe Theatre was built, in which Shakespeare acted. He was in Paris when his father died; there is no grief-stricken letter upon the event, but a curious mention that he had dreamed two nights before how his father’s house was covered with black mortar—so intent is he on mental processes.

He had a mother who was pious, swift-thoughted, jealous, imperious, unreasonable, with streaks of tenderness.

“Be not speedy of speech,” she says in one of her letters—“nor talk suddenly, but when discretion requireth, and that soberly then. Remember you have no father; and you have little enough—if not too little, regarded your kind, no-simple mother’s wholesome advice.”

And again: “Look well to your health; sup not, nor sit not up late; surely I think your drinking near to bedtime hindereth your and your brother’s digestion very much: I never knew any but sickly that used it; besides ill for head and eyes.” And again, in postscript: “I trust you, with yr

servants, use prayers twice in a day, having been where reformation is. Omit it not for any.”

And he responds with ceremony, waiving much of her excellent advice, and sometimes suggesting some favor she can do him,—

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“It may be I shall have occasion to visit the Court this Vacation [he being then at Gray’s Inn], which I have not done this months space. In which respect, because carriage of stuff to and fro spoileth it, I would be glad of that light bed of striped stuff which your Ladyship hath, if you have not otherwise disposed it.”

Sharpish words, too, sometimes pass between them; but he is always decorously and untouchingly polite.

Indeed his protestations of undying friendship to all of high station, whom he addresses unctuously, are French in their amplitude, and French, too, in their vanities. He presses sharply always toward the great end of self-advancement—whether by flatteries, or cajolment, or direct entreaty. He believed in the survival of the fittest; and that the fittest should struggle to make the survival good—no matter what weak ones, or timid ones, or confiding ones, or emotional ones should go to the wall, or the bottom, in the struggle. His flatteries, I think, never touched the Queen, though he tried them often and gave a lurid color to his flatteries. She admired his parts as a young man; she had honored his father; she accepted his services with thanks—even the dreadful services which he[254] rendered in demonstrating the treason of the gallant and generous, but headstrong Earl of Essex. He never came into full possession of royal confidences, however, until James I. came to the throne: by him he was knighted, by him made Lord Chancellor, by him elevated to the peerage; and it was under him that he was brought to trial for receiving bribes—was convicted, despoiled of his judicial robes, went to prison—though it might be only for a day—and thereafter into that retirement, at once shameful and honorable, where he put the last touches to those broad teachings of “Philosophy,” which the world will always cherish and revere: not the first nor the last instance in which great and fatal weaknesses have been united to great power and great accomplishment.

But lest you may think too hardly of this eminent man, a qualifying word must be said of that stain upon him—of receiving bribes: it was no uncommon thing for high judicial personages to take gifts; no uncommon thing for all high officers of the Government—nay, for the Government itself, as typified in its supreme head. And, strange as it may seem, Bacon’s sense of justice[255] does not appear to have been swayed by the gifts he took. Spedding has demonstrated, I think, that no judgment he rendered was ever reversed by subsequent and farther hearing.[98] He was not in the ordinary sense a money-lover; but he did love the importance and consideration which money gave, yet was always in straits; and those unwise receivings of his went to supply

the shortcomings in a very extravagant and disorderly home-life. His servants plundered him; his tradespeople fleeced him; nor do I think that the mistress of the Chancellor's household was either very wary or very winning. Almost the only time there is mention of her in his letters occurs previous to his marriage (which did not take place till he was well in middle age), and then only as "the daughter of an alderman who will bring a good dot" with her. His mother-in-law, too, appears to have been of the stage sort of [256] mother-in-law, whom he addresses (by letter) in this fashion:—

"Madam," he says, "you shall with right good-will be made acquainted with anything that concerneth your daughters, if you bear a mind of love and concord: Otherwise you must be content to be a stranger to us. For I may not be so unwise as to suffer you to be an author or occasion of dissension between your daughters and their husbands; having seen so much misery of that kind in yourself."

This looks a little as if the mother-in-law found the "grapes sour" in the Bacon gardens. I do not think there was much domesticity about him, even if home influences had encouraged it: he was without children, and not one to read poetry to his wife in a boudoir; yet his essays concerning marriage and concerning children and concerning friendship and concerning extravagance, are full of piquant truths.

Indeed two distinct lines of life ran through the career of this extraordinary man. In one he loved parade, ceremony, glitter; he stooped ungraciously to those who ranked him in factitious distinctions; was profuse and heartless in his adulation; taking great gifts with servile acknowledgment; shunning friends who were falling; courting [257] enemies who were rising: and yet through all this, and looking out from the same keen inscrutable eyes was the soul of a philosopher cognizant of all humanities, searching sharply after the largest and broadest truths; too indifferent to small ones; weighing his own shortcomings with bitter remorse; alive to everything in science that should help the advancement of the world, and absorbed in high ranges of thinking which the animosities and cares and criminalities and accidents of every-day life did not seem to reach or to disturb.

In such mood he wrote those essays, of some of which I have spoken—wonderfully compact of thought, and as wonderfully compact of language—which one should read and read again. No private library of a hundred English books is complete without a copy of Bacon's Essays. The keen sagacity and perdurable sense of his observations always engage one. Thus of Travel, he says,—

"Let him [the Traveller] sequester himself from the company of his countrymen, and diet in such places where there is good company of the nation where he travelleth. He that travelleth into a country before he hath some entrance into the language, goeth to school and not to travel."

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Of Friendship:—"This communicating of a man's self to his friend, works two contrary efforts; for it redoubleth joys and cutteth griefs in halves." Again, of the advantages of talk with a friend:—"Certain it is, that whosoever hath his mind fraught with many thoughts, his wits and understanding do clarify and break up, in the communicating and discoursing with another; he tosseth his thoughts more easily; he marshalleth them more orderly; he seeth how they look when they are turned into words; finally, he waxeth wiser than himself: and that more by an hours discourse than by a days meditation."

Thus I could go on for page after page of citations which you would approve, and which are so put in words that no mending or shortening or deepening of their force seems anyway possible. And yet this book of Essays—with all its sagacities, its ringing terseness, its stanch worldly wisdom—is one we do not warm toward. Even when he talks of friendship or marriage, death or love, a cold line of self-seeking pervades it. Of sacrifice for love's sake, for friendship's sake, or for charity's sake, there is nothing; and in that Essay on "Parents and Children"—what iciness of reflection—of suggestion! A man might talk as Bacon talks there, of the entries in a "Herd-book."

As for the *Novum Organum* and the *Augmentis*[259] *Scientiarum*—you would not read them if I were to suggest it: indeed, there is no need for reading them, except as a literary excursus, seeing that they have wrought their work in breaking up old, slow modes of massing knowledge, and in pouring light upon new ways;—in serving, indeed, so far as their reach went, as a great logical lever, by which subsequent inquirers have prised up a thousand hidden knowledges and ways of knowledge to the comprehension and cognizance of the world.

And the two lines of life in Francis Bacon were joined by a strange hyphen at last: He got out of his coach (which was not paid for), and in his silk stockings walked through the snow, to prosecute some scientific post-mortem experiment upon the body of a chicken he had secured by the roadside, near to London. He caught cold—as lesser men would have done; and he died of it. This date of his death (1626) brings us beyond Elizabeth's time—beyond James' time, too, and far down to the early years of Charles I. He was born, as I said, three years before Shakespeare, three years after Elizabeth came to the throne; and the *Novum Organum* was published in the same year in which[260] the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock—a convenient peg on which to hang the date of two great events.

He was buried in the old town of St. Alban's, of whose antiquities I have already spoken, and near to which Gorhambury, the country home of Bacon, was situated. The town and region are well worth a visit: and it is one of the few spots whither one can still go by a well-appointed English stage-coach with sleek horses—four-in-hand, which starts every morning in summer from the White Horse Cellar, in Piccadilly, and spins over the twenty miles of intervening

beautiful road (much of it identical with the old Roman Watling Street) in less than two hours and a half. The drive is through Middlesex, and into “pleasant Hertfordshire,” where the huge Norman tower of the old abbey buildings, rising from the left bank of the Ver, marks the town of St. Alban’s. The tomb and monument of Bacon are in the Church of St. Michael’s: there is still an Earl of Verulam presiding over a new Gorhambury House; and thereabout, one may find remnants of the old home of the great Chancellor and some portion of the noble gardens in which he took so much delight,[261] and in which he wandered up and down, in peaked hat and in ruff, and with staff—pondering affairs of State—possibly meditating the while upon that most curious and stately Essay of his upon “Gardens,” which opens thus:—

“God Almighty first planted a garden. And, indeed, it is the purest of human pleasures. It is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man, without which building and palaces are but gross handyworks: and a man shall ever see, that when ages grow to civility and elegancy, men come to build stately, sooner than to garden finely; as if gardening were the greater perfection.”

Surely, we who grow our own salads and “graff” our own pear-trees may take exaltation from this: and yet I do not believe that the great Chancellor ever put his hand, laboringly, to a rake-stave: but none the less, he snuffed complacently the odor of his musk-roses and his eglantine, and looked admiringly at his clipped walls of hedges.

Source: : English Lands Letters and Kings: From Celt to Tudor by Donald Grant Mitchell