

BARRIE—A REMINISCENCE

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IN his remarkable address on "Courage" which he delivered as rector of St. Andrews University in 1922 the late Sir James Barrie, so deeply lamented, said: "This is my first and last public appearance, and I never could or would have made it except to a gathering of "Scottish Students."

But surely his memory must have failed him, or else he considered that the eulogy he expressed concerning his great friend, Robert Louis Stevenson, at the memorial meeting in Edinburgh shortly after the demise of that charming novelist, was not a public appearance.

To be sure, he was not the only speaker on the rare occasion, but it was a public meeting and largely attended. I forget the hall in which it was held, but I well remember that the late Earl of Rosebery was in the chair, and upon the platform were a number of Stevenson's friends and admirers. Among them were Sir Sidney Colvin, who was to write his biography; S. R. Crockett, the well-known author of Scottish lore, and James Barrie (not yet honoured with knighthood.)

In finely chosen language, for which Lord Rosebery was so noted, the late Earl paid a splendid tribute to his fellow countryman. And in the course of his address he said something that came as a bit of a shock to some of the clergy who were present. In referring to the form which the memorial should take, he said he trusted that it would not be a statue, at any rate like most of those that were intended to adorn but certainly did not adorn Princes street!

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It is notorious that these same statues are, to say the least, not exactly masterpieces. Indeed, many consider them very crude creations. And so when the speaker went on to say that, so far as he was concerned, he would wish that the evil spirits might enter into them and they would rush down into the Firth of Forth and be choked, the audience, not to mention the clerics, certainly "sat up."

But that was, after all, but a side issue. The whole tenor of this address was so fine, so appreciative, so sympathetic that the audience listened in rapt admiration.

Sir Sidney Colvin and S. R. Crockett followed with delightful reminiscences of Stevenson: of his idiosyncrasies, his whimsicalities, his wonderful high spirits, even though his life, like that of Pope, was one long disease. Then Barrie arose. A little man, for, like Zaccheus, he was little of stature but with a more than ordinarily large head! And this is the way he began:

I have been watching very closely to see what our chairman (Lord Rosebery), while speaking, did with his hands, but really I have been unable to decide just what he did with them. But as for myself, if you don't mind, I shall stick them in my pockets.

And forthwith, to the accompaniment of a chuckle on the part of his hearers, he promptly poked them in his coat pockets. It was obvious he was both very shy and very nervous, evidently quite unaccustomed, in fact, to addressing a public audience.

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But fortunately he soon forgot himself, as he recalled his experiences of his great friend, Robert Louis Stevenson. Like the other speakers, he placed Stevenson above all contemporary writers in beauty of style, in richness of imagination and in absorbing interest. "We always looked up to him", he said, "and regarded him as our master."

One of his amusing reminiscences had reference to Stevenson's old hat. He always wore the same somewhat burglarious looking hat, and in spite of expostulations, in spite of the many criticisms and the much ridicule of his companions, he steadily continued to wear it. So one day Barrie and another friend schemed to get him into a haberdasher's to purchase him a hat, "but it simply did not work", said Barrie. "We got him interested in conversation and steered him in all right, but he so enthralled us with his own conversation that presently we found ourselves out again and on our way, having forgotten all about the hat."

That was but another evidence of the singular charm that was Stevenson to all his intimate friends. There was much more in the same vein from Barrie, and the others who testified that day of all that this brilliant author had meant to them.

I forget what form the memorial did take, but later I learned that a fine bronze tablet was placed in that ancient pile, St. Giles Cathedral. And to that sanctuary no doubt, year in and year out, many pilgrimages are made by lovers of Stevenson from all parts of the English-speaking world.