

# OF LITERARY COTERIES

HELEN S. WICKENDEN

EVER since I, as a child, smelled a strange fragrance of blooms in spring and watched umbels turn to amber and vermilion in fall, I have had a fondness for rowan-trees. Recently, I set out to plant a promising shoot in my lawn. The aged gardener, who lives across the street, ran to me, in consternation.

"Please, don't!" he cried. "Ash-trees are sociable. If you do not put in two or three, they're bound to be spindling—puny and spindling!"

I laid the shoot in my basket, the trowel beside it. How like us they are, wanting company, needing to bend to the same breeze as their neighbors, opening their clusters with apparent agreement about summer and sun, shaking their leaves, as though in an effort to communicate to the group over the way! English literature is full of stories of writers who have met in small groups. They talked of ideas which were budding in their minds, encouraged each other and blended knowledge, becoming, as Dr. Johnson said, "an assembly of good fellows meeting together".

The earliest groups were writers of miracle plays, which they themselves acted at Coventry and Durham. If only we might have seen those stirring meetings, where the qualities of mind and spirit were considered until they became personified! Beaumont and Fletcher, whose minds so often worked together that they earned the title "The double star of our poetical firmament", came soon after. Had either chosen solitude, we should not have had so human a stanza, so conversational a style, so live a line! At about that time, the old "Bread Street Club" was meeting at "The Mermaid". This included among its numbers "Our gentle Master, William Shakespeare". I like to imagine him rising before Donne, Fletcher and the courtly Sir Walter Raleigh, saying dramatically a line or two which had not yet been set on paper,—perhaps those in his Sonnet, No. 108,—

"What's in the brain that ink may character. . . .  
Which hath not figured to thee my true spirit?  
What's new to speak, what new to register  
That may express my love, or thy dear merit?"

When we know so little about the life of Shakespeare, it is very significant that we have several references to this club. It may account for the feeling we have of the great writer talking directly to us, trying to lift our hearts into his joyous outlook, or asking us to share his tender love.

Small coffee-house and wayside inns were usual meeting places for writers' groups. Fielding delineated some of these. "The Scriblerus Club" met at "Will's Coffee House". I like to imagine Pope, not yet twenty, creeping in to listen to the famous Dryden, and I hear Dryden chuckle over the young man who hardly ate a bite or drank a cup of tea "without a stratagem". Later, when Gay, Arbuthnot and Swift met with Dryden and Pope, the mention of Dryden's translation of the poems of Vergil set Pope studying Ovid and was, doubtless, the start of the twelve long years spent with Homer's *Odyssey*. How conversation and controversy must have enlivened that group, especially when Swift was "Martin Scriblerus", and when Addison added meat to wit, begging them to be serious and to strive against "the short idea"!

Dr. Johnson and the faithful Boswell watched human nature from "The Mitre", or the more ample settle at "The Devil's Tavern". If old tables could talk, what tales would be heard! His philosophy was unique. He said, "Remember the solitary mortal is certainly luxurious, probably superstitious and possibly mad."

What a plea that authors be clubable! Art and letters met in his "Literary Club". He would have liked to form it on the Roman model where at least forty seats were reserved, the matrons' section being apart and called "the little senate",—but perhaps the merriment of his gathering made it difficult in its ordering. It was there that the doctor, as *rector scholarum*, particularly enjoyed himself. His knowledge was so wide and his words so witty, that it was said of him that, even though his books were forgotten, he would live through his talks. "more intimately known than any of our contemporaries". No tact was needed in calling his group together. The Muse drew them. Sir Joshua Reynolds frequented these meetings. Again and again, he took out his notebook to sketch an expression on the face of the doctor, and he developed these sketches into portraits. Finally, he sketched them all, sitting at ease around one table, Edmund Burke with his shrewd eye, Gibbon, Garrick, and the rest, adding his own picture, trumpet to ear, lest he miss one word. I like to compare this with Rembrandt's

doctors in clinic, and I fancy I see in the faces of the former a certain likeness in forehead, build of cranium, set of eye, curve of shoulder, ease of figure, that give a deeper reason for their flocking as do the birds, or growing together as bushes of one order.

Sterne said he would never have published anything if he had not talked with John Hall Stevenson and a few friends at Skelton Castle about books. He went forty miles for these meetings. He and Stevenson began to publish the same year, both late in life. Even when living in Paris, he joined with other writers there and said in a letter,

“Be it known I Shandy it away fifty times more than I was wont.”

Goldsmith and his friends gathered at “Dolly’s Chop-house”, a place in keeping with his simple taste. Many of his friends were those of Johnson, but they admired him for his pen. “Noll wrote like an angel, but he talked like poor Poll,” declared Garrick.

The *Essays of Elia* lie open on my desk. Running over the pages, I see them all: Charles Lamb, Hazlitt, Coleridge, Manning, all gathered in a small dining-room, feasting on meat and good talk. I see Leigh Hunt, with a drawing rolled up in his arm, coming in to join them. What a charmed circle! Coleridge found there the sympathy he needed when the world failed to give it. Leigh Hunt discovered that the pen and brush were brothers. Lamb, encompassed by those he loved, radiated humor, and Hazlitt found so clear a voice that it was said of him,

“Other men speak like books, but Hazlitt’s books speak like men.”

Theirs was the true fellowship that brought out the slumbering thought, the significant declaration. They fraternized, with book and pipe, finding such fellowship the best of bondage.

Sometimes literary cliques were very small. In small towns one cannot find always those who wish to impart, or to learn of, the spirit. The Brontë sisters had each other. Each is said to have had her own lady’s desk in the kitchen, and when the sewing for the missionary basket was done, Emily, Anne and Charlotte scribbled till bed-time. Quill pens sang like kettles, yet none would presume to show her manuscript to the other. Still, I believe they spurred each other on by the very feeling that they were intellectually creative together.

The work of the Wesley brothers is another example of the lambent fires of the mind being kindled conjointly. What a pleasurable state, when brothers have this abiding sympathy!

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood was an interesting circle. Rossetti, Woolner the sculptor, the critic Stephens, Millais and Holman Hunt met, talked of the various phases of poetry, prose and art, and by discussion came to understand each other. They started a small magazine which was sold for sixpence, a matter of small account. In it occur a poem by Coventry Patmore, another by Christina Rossetti, and in the second issue are the beautiful lines of *The Blessed Damozel*. The circle widened soon, including William Morris, who occasionally gave them a ballad, and Burne-Jones, artist-dreamer. As with many literary coteries, the critic was not far off. Ruskin was ready to praise and to chide, warning Rossetti against his love of an eraser, declaring he would have no more of his things if rubbed out more than nine times. However, theirs was the conversation that could hold them enthralled through the night till day broke in triumphant gold.

It was no far call from these societies when the Brook Farm authors joined together. I should like to have seen them, Emerson, Hawthorne "with a sunbeam in his face", Margaret Fuller, lady-philosopher, Dana of *The New York Sun*, George William Curtis, coming to dinner at "The Hive", an old house near the woods, sitting on benches around a rough table, eating simple fare grown and prepared by themselves, calling it ambrosia and milk from Paradise. Alcott and Thoreau were visitors, though the latter was not always in sympathy. He saw the difference in temperaments and avowed, as he retreated to solitude,

"Friends should meet not only in harmony, but in melody."

However, the author of *The House of Seven Gables*, though he too appreciated a certain amount of quiet, was glad to stay for some months, signing his letters, "N. Hawthorne, Ploughman", and another member of the group wrote he had found there that good writing must come as the flower of simple living and in companionship, adding,

"Such a delectable way of life has never been seen on earth since the days of the early Christians."

I often wonder if Shelley would have written so seriously, when he went to Cumberland with his young wife, Harriet,

both so sensitive to despair, had he not been drawn into the circle of Southey, Wordsworth, de Quincey and Wilson. Surely, in such company, thought and fancy were transferred from mind to mind, each transmuted it into his own gold. In Italy, Shelley had Lord Byron and I believe his zeal was the stronger after climbing the hill above the river to enquire of the prolific poetizer how many stanzas he had completed that morning. So was Pegasus urged on, and so we have

"Jewels, five words long  
That on the stretched finger of all time  
Sparkle forever."

In each group one discerns a keen pleasure in writing that he who works entirely in solitude may lose. There is courage given the younger ones, tolerance to the unattractive and kindness to the forgotten of the world. Coleridge, when he was like a wind-wrecked tree, came to the gatherings of the Lake Poets and was received not without honor. He was sensitive to this, and the spirit was reflective, for Wordsworth admitted that he was able to finish *Tintern Abbey* in four days only, after a word with Coleridge. When Browning met Walter Savage Landor on the streets of Vienna, Landor admitted that he had not a place to lay his head, then white with years. Browning took him to his home, only to find his advice a precious thing. When Francis Thompson came into the sitting-room of the Meynell house, a gathering place for men of letters of that time, Mr. Meynell pushed back his pile of manuscripts to make room for him, while the gentle Alice persisted in speaking to him of Heaven.

One can scarcely leave these coteries without mentioning that little pre-war meeting of Rupert Brooke, John Drinkwater, Wilfrid Gibson and, possibly, Flecker. Feeling must have been tense. It was not easy for artists, or writers, to turn their thoughts to the busy lines in France. The conflict of the spirit was theirs; the war of the Word, their war. Then Brooke, whose eyes saw a land beyond the Dardanelles, left them. In his own words, he

"Sweeps out to darkness, triumphing in his goal,  
Out of the fire, out of the little room."

The English Poetry Society is significant in that it has brought out such men as Alfred Noyes and Siegfried Sassoon. It has a motto, "a clearer, deeper sense of the best in poetry".

Its gatherings are for spoken and written verse. Its thoughts, like dandelion seeds, fly through the world.

In Canada, a band of young men met some years ago and foresaw a writing fellowship that should extend from coast to coast, deciding that we should not be as dark lanterns, shining to ourselves. Bliss Carman, Dr. Lighthall and Dr. Roberts, with the aid of the distinguished William Sharp, formed the new brotherhood which became the Canadian Authors' Association of to-day. Like the rowan-trees, we are glad to grow with other trees, lifting small branches into the light, sometimes by larger branches, glad together of bud and flower and simple fruit.

In the words of that comrade of all poets,

“In and in they all draw in,  
A streaming flock together,  
From the lone and monstrous waste of sea  
By a single tether.”