

HAZLITT has proved his own best analyst. We can argue round and round his character, admire it or get furious with it, till doomsday without coming nearer to a diagnosis than this:—

I am not, in the ordinary acceptation of the word, a good-natured man—that is, many things annoy me besides what interferes with my own ease and interest. I hate a lie. A piece of injustice wounds me to the quick, though nothing but the report of it reach me. Therefore I have many enemies and few friends.

He scored many other bulls with himself as the target, while his enemies' arrows all went wide of the mark. "I should be an excellent man on a jury. I might say little, but I should starve the other eleven obstinate fellows out." An angular man, a body with razor edges. Again, "I have brooded over an idea till it has become a substance in my brain." One idea, a dominating idea, in the brain of this Jacobinical son of the French Revolution was Napoleon, and it became so thickened and hardened by years of brooding that it could not be prized out, even if a well-meaning friend had used for the operation the surgical instrument of Oliver Wendell Holmes's imagination—the earth's equator straightened out for a crowbar. He could only cure it by writing it out—and he died in the act. Napoleon became the touchstone for any test in politics. It created other symbols: Napoleon—liberty, Pitt—tyranny, Southey—renegade, Gifford—toadyism, Cobbett—staunchness.

TWO OBSESSIONS

The wonder and the pity of it is that high political principles, keen sympathy with oppressed peoples everywhere, should have been so twisted and overpowered by such a callous spirit as Napoleon's, which he would have hated in any other aggressor. There are few better reasoners in our literature than Hazlitt, and none clearer, until he drops his incomparable rapier and begins to lay about him with Napoleon as a bludgeon. The stream of his mind ran with sparkling clarity; there were but two obstructions in its flow, and round them the water swirled in a whirl of

darkness—Napoleon and the "snake-like" charmer Sarah Walker. Hazlitt was not the only English author whose views were sent awry by Napoleon, only on the others he had the reverse effect: they were forgiven because they turned the respectable corner from revolution to reaction. As for the enchantment of the tailor's daughter, Hazlitt is not the only man of genius to become temporarily deranged by a pretty face. He worked out the Sarah obsession also by writing a book—"Liber Amoris," a pre-Freudian essay in liberation and one of the strangest love stories in the annals of frenzy.

LIFE OF NAPOLEON

It is sad that the cathartic process of writing the "Life of Napoleon" was delayed till he was wasted by illness and the end was near. And it is time a word was said even for the work on his hero: it is not surprising that it angered Hazlitt's contemporaries (most of them spluttered with bad temper and slander whatever he wrote); it is not surprising that its blindness to the continental misery in the wake of Napoleon's ambition should fret our patience in these overburdened days, which have had more than enough of dictatorship; but it is surprising that a work of such literary power should remain a closed book. It is good reading indeed. The momentum of Hazlitt's words, his pertinacity, hurries our sympathies over—it may be better to say cheats them over—the boundaries of reason and renders the transition mere common sense.

There is magic in the style that can do that; and it is the same magic that can give a gay touch to a grammar book; make us spectators at the fives-court when Jack Cavanagh beat four capital players together; see the Indian jugglers making brass balls chase one another like sparkles of fire; re-visit with him, as if ourselves renewing our youth, the table, the chair, the window where he learned to construe Livy, the chapel where his father preached; re-tread the "ribbed sea-sands" near Porlock with Coleridge when the poet's flame was brightest. And, with Napoleon out of the scene, he dealt with politics too like an artist. "The Spirit of the Age" is packed with hard thinking—wit and prejudice, also, in good measure. But as portraiture of famous figures, and some illustrious obscure, of the time it gives us more than the National Portrait Gallery can, for Hazlitt, trained as a painter, also carried an X-ray apparatus in his head. William Gifford has acquired immortality as a victim: there he is for ever, preserved in Hazlitt's scorn like a fly in amber. These things make Hazlitt, they are his mark, his symbol, what he lives and will live by.

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HAZLITT WITH HIS DOG
STALWART IN THE WAR OF LIBERATION
AN AUTHOR GOES INTO BATTLE

The Love Story of a Genius

By WILSON MIDGLEY

HIGH among the curiosities of literature stands Hazlitt's *Liber Amoris* (The Book of Love), and the new life of the great writer brings it into notice again. Most writers about Hazlitt find it an awkward stumbling-block. Only a few weeks ago I heard it spoken of in a tone which sent a kind of shamefaced shudder through the group who listened. But few things about Hazlitt are as bad as they are painted, and the self-confession of a genius who in middle-age clutched at and missed the kind of happiness which would have suited a boy should stir something more in us to-day than the contempt with which it has often been dismissed.

The story begins when Hazlitt and his wife agreed to end their loveless co-habitation and he went to live in lodgings in Southampton Row overlooking the garden of Staple Inn, still beautiful to-day. The house was that of a tailor, and his wife and daughters, with the help of a maid, looked after several lodgers. On the third day his breakfast was brought to Hazlitt by Sarah, the second daughter, a girl about nineteen, less than half the age of the new lodger. She has too often been dismissed as a common nonentity and assumed to be a "bad girl." There is abundant evidence to the contrary. Hazlitt saw her with the eyes of a painter and a sentimentalist, but others have drawn pictures of her substantially agreeing with his, though his was more highly coloured. She had a beautiful slim figure, curling hair, a quiet voice, a downcast look, a gentle demeanour, a manner that was strangely cold, but in her circumstances extremely wise. Her walk impressed everybody, and it was her quiet appearance in his room which smote Hazlitt. Sarah Walker, in fact, was more like an Ibsen heroine than a slut.

The Puritan son of a Nonconformist father, when she turned on him a peculiarly blinding gaze that others later noticed, lost his head—and in doing so perhaps lost his chance of happiness. He asked her if he might go to her room. Sarah, with that calm which has puzzled commentators and which bewildered Hazlitt, merely replied that her sister slept with her. Hazlitt became his own man again and for two years thought no more on those lines. The friendship deepened. Sarah was often in trouble for the time she spent in his room. She said she liked his conversation. She sat on his knee and he petted her. She gave him "endearments," unlikely word she used for kisses and caresses, and Hazlitt went on with his work and his fives (the only great English writer to be addicted to manly games) and to meeting his friends, living in a state of happiness that this reckless crusader had never known since he was a boy.

The first part of the famous book

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consists of dialogues between the great lecturer and writer and the unknown girl. And this is how he recalled their talks.

S.: Mrs. E— has called for the book, Sir.

H.: Oh, it is there. Let her wait a minute or two. I see this is a busy day with you. How beautiful your arms look in those short sleeves!

S.: I do not like to wear them.

H.: Then it is because you are merciful and would spare frail mortals who might die with gazing.

S.: I have no power to kill.

H.: You have, you have. Your charms are irresistible as your will is inexorable. I wish I could see you always thus. But I would have no one else see you so. I am jealous of all eyes but my own. . . . You smile. Well, if you were to be won by fine speeches—

S.: You could supply them!

True, Hazlitt is the reporter, but he never makes this storm-struck child say anything that is not as sensible, as self-controlled, as quiet, in answer to a man who writes down that he said: "When I let go thy hand I stagger on a precipice: out of thy sight the world is dark and comfortless."

From yours Respectfully

S. Walker

Sarah could not always live in these high after-breakfast regions. She descended to a common nineteenth-century kitchen life when she went downstairs, and one day passing the kitchen door Hazlitt heard some talk about trousers in which he furiously accused her of joining, and, like many another lover, went on from a quarrel to talk of closer bonds. Sarah never for a moment agreed to go beyond what she called friendship. Hazlitt was astounded, bewildered, enraged. He was in process of arranging a Scottish divorce, and he simply could not understand why Sarah should not fall in with such a high and honourable suggestion as marriage. Here the tragedy begins to take a steeper dive.

NOTHING is hid in the details of the painful story, for in the next part of the book Hazlitt reprints letters he wrote to Patmore, father of the poet, while he was pursuing the divorce proceedings in Glasgow. Twice he had written to Sarah. She answers with perfect self-possession.

Sir, I should not have disregarded your injunction not to send you any more letters that might come to you, had I not promised the gentleman who left the enclosed to forward it at the earliest opportunity, as he said it was of consequence. Mr. P— (Patmore himself) called the day after you left town. . . .

The handwriting as well as the style

provide an adequate comment on those who ever since 1822 have tried to make her common with cheap words.

One after another letters pour from him to Patmore, in which he unpacks his heart with words which express the infatuation of a schoolboy in phrases of genius. Moment after moment of their painful story lives before us, struck off in sentences of white heat. "Her hatred of me must be great since my love of her could not overcome it." "I never had any pleasure like love with anyone but her." "How indeed could I offer her the least insult when I worshipped her very footsteps; and even now pay her divine honours from my inmost heart. . . ." But he also had to write truthfully: "I ask you first in candour whether the ambiguity of her behaviour with respect to me, sitting and fondling a man sometimes for half a day together and then declaring she had no love for him, was not enough to excite my suspicions." And here the poison was beginning to work, for the commonest emotions of the illiterate began to torture the mind of this master of words. He began to suspect that what she had done with him, she had done with others, and then he began to believe she was a wanton, and began almost to hope so,

for in that he saw the only way of deliverance from "the *hystero passio* which comes upon me and threatens to unhinge my reason."

It had been bad for Sarah to have her affairs discussed in the house. To have them discussed outside was nothing to Hazlitt, all his writings were full of his own experiences and memories. But to Sarah it was the last straw, and in view of a new friendship she had been forming, it turned her definitely from being a neutral and ended even the chance of friendship. The door thus banged was bolted when in an essay *On Great and Little Things*, using one of his "love-names" for Sarah, he had written:—

But, shouldst thou ever, my Infelice, grace my home with thy loved presence, as thou hast cheered my hopes with thy prevailing gentleness, and I will show the world what Shakespeare's women were.

PART three of *Liber Amoris* consists of letters written to Sheridan Knowles. They pick up the story where he returns from Scotland, divorced, with his little son. She met him with silence or evasion. She refused to stay in the room, and as he tried to kiss her when she left she refused for the first time in her life. "I gave way to all the fury of disappointed hope and jealous passion. . . . I shrieked curses on her name and on her false love. . . . the scream I uttered (so pitiful and piercing was it, that the sound of it terrified me) instantly brought the whole house. . . . into the room. They thought I was destroying her and



Hazlitt at forty-two.

myself." The tailor listened to him quietly, said that Sarah must decide for herself, and "so we parted."

He dashed back to Scotland, and then came back again. She let him hold her hand. She put new frills on his shirt, and when he pleaded with her, "Have pity on me, have pity on me and save me if you can," she made no answer, stole with that graceful gliding motion of hers to the door, looked at him with her particular staring, startling look for the last time and vanished.

He waited in a fever to ask her again to marry him, and then one evening her sister said that Sarah had gone out (as she rarely did) to see her grandmother at Somers Town. Hazlitt followed her and at last found his cure. He passed her walking with a tall young man who had lived across the street and had moved away to escape the temptation to marry her or do something worse. They told each other the same tale, and Hazlitt was cured. "I had not only lost her for ever—but every feeling I had ever had towards her—respect, tenderness, pity—all but my fatal passion was gone," and then, this strange, foolish, mad book comes to an end.

WHY was it published? Proctor, one of Hazlitt's friends, perhaps answered it when he said: "For a time, I think that on this point he was substantially insane." He wandered from one friend to another buttonholing them, as the Ancient Mariner did, to tell them the whole tale. He had written most of his experiences into his writings and the ghost of this one might be laid when it, too, had been written down. He disguised it, as he thought, by describing the author as a North Briton who had fled to Holland and there died, but there was no keeping such an open secret. While Hazlitt was living through and describing this experience, he had been writing some of his finest work during this period of madness, and perhaps the wisest thing any of us can do is to forget *Liber Amoris* and read some of those imperishable essays again.

What is the moral? This one seems plain, that all those, including writers like Lord Houghton, Richard le Gallienne and Augustine Birrell, who have commented on it in strangely varying terms seem to have judged themselves more than they judged Hazlitt in what they said about him, and so perhaps shall we.