

Barrie James Matthew

An Edinburgh Eleven: Pencil Portraits from College Life



James Barrie
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I. LORD ROSEBERY

The first time I ever saw Lord Rosebery was in Edinburgh when I was a student, and I flung a clod of earth at him. He was a peer; those were my politics.

I missed him, and I have heard a good many journalists say since then that he is a difficult man to hit. One who began by liking him and is now scornful, which is just the reverse process from mine, told me the reason why. He had some brochures to write on the Liberal leaders, and got on nicely till he reached Lord Rosebery, where he stuck. In vain he walked round his lordship, looking for an opening. The man was naturally indignant; he is the father of a family.

Lord Rosebery is forty-one years of age, and has missed many opportunities of becoming the bosom friend of Lord Randolph Churchill. They were at Eton together and at Oxford, and have met since. As a boy, the Liberal played at horses, and the Tory at

running off with other boys' caps. Lord Randolph was the more distinguished at the university. One day a proctor ran him down in the streets smoking in his cap and gown. The undergraduate remarked on the changeability of the weather, but the proctor, gasping at such bravado, demanded his name and college. Lord Randolph failed to turn up next day at St. Edmund Hall to be lectured, but strolled to the proctor's house about dinner-time. "Does a fellow, name of Moore, live here?" he asked. The footman contrived not to faint. "He do," he replied, severely; "but he are at dinner." "Ah! take him in my card," said the unabashed caller. The Merton books tell that for this the noble lord was fined ten pounds.

There was a time when Lord Rosebery would have reformed the House of Lords to a site nearer Newmarket. As politics took a firmer grip of him, it was Newmarket that seemed a long way off. One day at Edinburgh he realized the disadvantage of owning swift horses. His brougham had met him at Waverley Station to take him to Dalmeny. Lord Rosebery opened the door of the carriage to put in some papers, and then turned away. The coachman, too well bred to look round, heard the door shut, and, thinking that his master was inside, set off at once. Pursuit was attempted, but what was there in Edinburgh streets to make up on those horses? The coachman drove seven miles, until he reached a point in the Dalmeny parks where it was his lordship's custom to alight and open a gate. Here the brougham stood for some minutes, awaiting Lord Rosebery's convenience. At last

the coachman became uneasy and dismounted. His brain reeled when he saw an empty brougham. He could have sworn to seeing his lordship enter. There were his papers. What had happened? With a quaking hand the horses were turned, and, driving back, the coachman looked fearfully along the sides of the road. He met Lord Rosebery travelling in great good humor by the luggage omnibus.

Whatever is to be Lord Rosebery's future, he has reached that stage in a statesman's career when his opponents cease to question his capacity. His speeches showed him long ago a man of brilliant parts. His tenure of the Foreign Office proved him heavy metal. Were the Gladstonians to return to power, the other Cabinet posts might go anywhere, but the Foreign Secretary is arranged for. Where his predecessors had clouded their meaning in words till it was as wrapped up as a Mussulman's head, Lord Rosebery's were the straightforward despatches of a man with his mind made up. German influence was spoken of; Count Herbert Bismarck had been seen shooting Lord Rosebery's partridges. This was the evidence: there has never been any other, except that German methods commended themselves to the minister rather than those of France. His relations with the French government were cordial. "The talk of Bismarck's shadow behind Rosebery," a great French politician said lately, "I put aside with a smile; but how about the Jews?" Probably few persons realize what a power the Jews are in Europe, and in Lord Rosebery's position he is a strong man if he holds his own with them. Any fears on that

ground have, I should say, been laid by his record at the Foreign Office.

Lord Rosebery had once a conversation with Prince Bismarck, to which, owing to some oversight, the Paris correspondent of the *Times* was not invited. M. Blowitz only smiled good-naturedly, and of course his report of the proceedings appeared all the same. Some time afterward Lord Rosebery was introduced to this remarkable man, who, as is well known, carries Cabinet appointments in his pocket, and complimented him on his report. "Ah, it was all right, was it?" asked Blowitz, beaming. Lord Rosebery explained that any fault it had was that it was all wrong. "Then if Bismarck did not say that to you," said Blowitz, regally, "I know he intended to say it."

The "Uncrowned King of Scotland" is a title that has been made for Lord Rosebery, whose country has had faith in him from the beginning. Mr. Gladstone is the only other man who can make so many Scotsmen take politics as if it were the Highland Fling. Once when Lord Rosebery was firing an Edinburgh audience to the delirium point, an old man in the hall shouted out, "I dinna hear a word he says, but it's grand, it's grand!" During the first Midlothian campaign Mr. Gladstone and Lord Rosebery were the father and son of the Scottish people. Lord Rosebery rode into fame on the top of that wave, and he has kept his place in the hearts of the people, and in oleographs on their walls, ever since. In all Scottish matters he has the enthusiasm of a Burns dinner, and his humor enables him to pay compliments. When

he says agreeable things to Scotsmen about their country, there is a twinkle in his eye and in theirs to which English scribes cannot give a meaning. He has unveiled so many Burns statues that an American lecturess explains: "Curious thing, but I feel somehow I am connected with Lord Rosebery. I go to a place and deliver a lecture on Burns; they collect subscriptions for a statue, and he unveils it." Such is the delight of the Scottish students in Lord Rosebery that he may be said to have made the triumphal tour of the northern universities as their lord-rector; he lost the post in Glasgow lately through a quibble, but had the honor with the votes. His address to the Edinburgh undergraduates on "Patriotism" was the best thing he ever did outside politics, and made the students his for life. Some of them had smuggled into the hall a chair with "Gaelic chair" placarded on it, and the lord-rector unwittingly played into their hands. In a noble peroration he exhorted his hearers to high aims in life. "Raise your country," he exclaimed [cheers]; "raise yourselves [renewed cheering]; raise your university [thunders of applause]." From the back of the hall came a solemn voice, "Raise the chair!" Up went the Gaelic chair.

Even Lord Rosebery's views on imperial federation can become a compliment to Scotland. Having been all over the world himself, and felt how he grew on his travels, Lord Rosebery maintains that every British statesman should visit India and the colonies. He said that first at a semi-public dinner in the country – and here I may mention that on such occasions he has begun his

speeches less frequently than any other prominent politician with a statement that others could be got to discharge the duty better; in other words, he has several times omitted this introduction. On his return to London he was told that his colleagues in the Administration had been seeing how his scheme would work out. "We found that if your rule were enforced, the Cabinet would consist of yourself and Childers." "This would be an ideal cabinet," Lord Rosebery subsequently remarked in Edinburgh, "for it would be entirely Scottish," Mr. Childers being member for a Scottish constituency.

The present unhappy division of the Liberal party has made enemies of friends for no leading man so little as for Lord Rosebery. There are forces working against him, no doubt, in comparatively high places, but the Unionists have kept their respect for him. His views may be wrong, but he is about the only Liberal leader, with the noble exception of Lord Hartington, of whom troublous times have not rasped the temper. Though a great reader, he is not a literary man like Mr. Morley, who would, however, be making phrases where Lord Rosebery would make laws. Sir William Harcourt has been spoken of as a possible prime minister, but surely it will never come to that. If Mr. Gladstone's successor is chosen from those who have followed him on the home-rule question, he probably was not rash in himself naming Lord Rosebery.

Lord Rosebery could not now step up without stepping into the premiership. His humor, which is his most obvious faculty,

has been a prop to him many a time ere now, but, if I was his adviser, I should tell him that it has served its purpose. There are a great many excellent people who shake their heads over it in a man who has become a power in the land. "Let us be grave," said Dr. Johnson once to a merry companion, "for here comes a fool." In an unknown novel there is a character who says of himself that "he is not stupid enough ever to be a great man." I happen to know that this reflection was evolved by the author out of thinking over Lord Rosebery. It is not easy for a bright man to be heavy, and Lord Rosebery's humor is so spontaneous that if a joke is made in their company he has always finished laughing before Lord Hartington begins. Perhaps when Lord Rosebery is on the point of letting his humor run off with him in a public speech, he could recover his solemnity by thinking of the *Examiner*.

II.

PROFESSOR MASSON

Though a man might, to my mind, be better employed than in going to college, it is his own fault if he does not strike on some one there who sends his life off at a new angle. If, as I take it, the glory of a professor is to give elastic minds their proper bent, Masson is a name his country will retain a grip of. There are men who are good to think of, and as a rule we only know them from their books. Something of our pride in life would go with their fall. To have one such professor at a time is the most a university can hope of human nature; so Edinburgh need not expect another just yet. These, of course, are only to be taken as the reminiscences of a student. I seem to remember everything Masson said, and the way he said it.

Having, immediately before taken lodgings in a crow's nest, my first sight of Masson was specially impressive. It was the opening of the session, when fees were paid, and a whisper ran round the quadrangle that Masson had set off home with three hundred one-pound notes stuffed into his trouser pockets. There was a solemn swell of awestruck students to the gates, and some of us could not help following him. He took his pockets coolly. When he stopped it was at a second-hand bookstall, where he rummaged for a long time. Eventually he pounced upon a dusty,

dragged little volume, and went off proudly with it beneath his arm. He seemed to look suspiciously at strangers now, but it was not the money but the book he was keeping guard over. His pockets, however, were unmistakably bulging out. I resolved to go in for literature.

Masson, however, always comes to my memory first knocking nails into his desk or trying to tear the gas-bracket from its socket. He said that the Danes scattered over England, taking such a hold as a nail takes when it is driven into wood. For the moment he saw his desk turned into England; he whirled an invisible hammer in the air, and down it came on the desk with a crash. No one who has sat under Masson can forget how the Danes nailed themselves upon England. His desk is thick with their tombstones. It was when his mind groped for an image that he clutched the bracket. He seemed to tear his good things out of it. Silence overcame the class. Some were fascinated by the man; others trembled for the bracket. It shook, groaned, and yielded. Masson said another of the things that made his lectures literature; the crisis was passed; and everybody breathed again.

He masters a subject by letting it master him; for though his critical reputation is built on honesty, it is his enthusiasm that makes his work warm with life. Sometimes he entered the classroom so full of what he had to say that he began before he reached his desk. If he was in the middle of a peroration when the bell rang, even the back benches forgot to empty. There were the inevitable students to whom literature is a trial, and

sometimes they call attention to their sufferings by a scraping of the feet. Then the professor tried to fix his eyeglass on them, and when it worked properly they were transfixed. As a rule, however, it required so many adjustments that by the time his eye took hold of it he had remembered that students were made so, and his indignation went. Then, with the light in his eye that some photographer ought to catch, he would hope that his lecture was not disturbing their conversation. It was characteristic of his passion for being just that, when he had criticised some writer severely he would remember that the back benches could not understand that criticism and admiration might go together, unless they were told so again.

The test of a sensitive man is that he is careful of wounding the feelings of others. Once, I remember, a student was reading a passage aloud, assuming at the same time such an attitude that the professor could not help remarking that he looked like a teapot. It was exactly what he did look like, and the class applauded. But next moment Masson had apologized for being personal. Such reminiscences are what make the old literature class-room to thousands of graduates a delight to think of.

When the news of Carlyle's death reached the room, Masson could not go on with his lecture. Every one knows what Carlyle has said of him; and no one who has heard it will ever forget what he has said of Carlyle. Here were two men who understood each other. One of the Carlylean pictures one loves to dwell on shows them smoking together, with nothing breaking the pauses

but Mrs. Carlyle's needles. Carlyle told Masson how he gave up smoking and then took to it again. He had walked from Dumfriesshire to Edinburgh to consult a doctor about his health, and was advised to lose his pipe. He smoked no more, but his health did not improve, and then one day he walked in a wood. At the foot of a tree lay a pipe, a tobacco pouch, a match-box. He saw clearly that this was a case of Providential interference, and from that moment he smoked again. There the professor's story stops. I have no doubt, though, that he nodded his head when Carlyle explained what the pipe and tobacco were doing there. Masson's "Milton" is, of course, his great work, but for sympathetic analysis I know nothing to surpass his "Chatterton." Lecturing on Chatterton one day, he remarked, with a slight hesitation, that had the poet mixed a little more in company and – and smoked, his morbidness would not have poisoned him. That turned my thoughts to smoking, because I meant to be a Chatterton, but greater. Since then the professor has warned me against smoking too much. He was smoking at the time.

This is no place to follow Masson's career, nor to discuss his work. To reach his position one ought to know his definition of a man of letters. It is curious, and, like most of his departures from the generally accepted, sticks to the memory. By a man of letters he does not mean the poet, for instance, who is all soul, so much as the strong-brained writer whose guardian angel is a fine sanity. He used to mention John Skelton, the Wolsey satirist, and Sir David Lindsay, as typical men of letters from this point of

view, and it is as a man of letters of that class that Masson is best considered. In an age of many whipper-snappers in criticism, he is something of a Gulliver.

The students in that class liked to see their professor as well as hear him. I let my hair grow long because it only annoyed other people, and one day there was dropped into my hand a note containing sixpence and the words: "The students sitting behind you present their compliments, and beg that you will get your hair cut with the enclosed, as it interferes with their view of the professor."

Masson, when he edited *Macmillan's*, had all the best men round him. His talk of Thackeray is specially interesting, but he always holds that in conversation Douglas Jerrold was unapproachable. Jerrold told him a good story of his seafaring days. His ship was lying off Gibraltar, and for some hours Jerrold, though only a midshipman, was left in charge. Some of the sailors begged to get ashore, and he let them, on the promise that they would bring him back some oranges. One of them disappeared, and the midshipman suffered for it. More than twenty years afterward Jerrold was looking in at a window in the Strand when he seemed to know the face of a weatherbeaten man who was doing the same thing. Suddenly he remembered, and put his hand on the other's shoulder. "My man," he said, "you have been a long time with those oranges!" The sailor recognized him, turned white, and took to his heels. There is, too, the story of how Dickens and Jerrold made up their quarrel at the Garrick

Club. It was the occasion on which Masson first met the author of "Pickwick." Dickens and Jerrold had not spoken for a year, and they both happened to have friends at dinner in the strangers' room, Masson being Jerrold's guest. The two hosts sat back to back, but did not address each other, though the conversation was general. At last Jerrold could stand it no longer. Turning, he exclaimed, "Charley, my boy, how are you?" Dickens wheeled round and grasped his hand.

Many persons must have noticed that, in appearance, Masson is becoming more and more like Carlyle every year. How would you account for it? It is a thing his old students often discuss when they meet, especially those of them who, when at college, made up their minds to dedicate their first book to him. The reason they seldom do it is because the book does not seem good enough.

III.

PROFESSOR JOHN STUART BLACKIE

Lately I was told that Blackie – one does not say Mr. Cromwell – is no longer professor of Greek in Edinburgh University. What nonsense some people talk! As if Blackie were not part of the building! In his class one day he spoke touchingly of the time when he would have to join Socrates in the Elysian fields. A student cheered – no one knows why. "It won't be for some time yet," added John Stuart.

Blackie takes his ease at home, in a dressing-gown and straw hat. This shows that his plaid really does come off. "My occupation nowadays," he said to me recently, "is business, blethers, bothers, beggars, and backgammon." He has also started a profession of going to public meetings, and hurrying home to write letters to the newspapers about them. When the editor shakes the manuscript, a sonnet falls out. I think I remember the professor's saying that he had never made five shillings by his verses. To my mind they are worth more than that.

Though he has explained them frequently, there is still confusion about Blackie's politics. At Manchester they thought he was a Tory, and invited him to address them, on that understanding. "I fancy I astonished them," the professor said

to me. This is quite possible. Then he was mistaken for a Liberal. The fact is that Blackie is a philosopher, who follows the golden mean. He sees this himself. A philosopher who follows the golden mean is thus a man who runs zig-zag between two extremes. You will observe that he who does this is some time before he arrives anywhere.

The professor has said that he has the strongest lungs in Scotland. Of the many compliments that might well be paid him, not the least worthy would be this: that he is as healthy mentally as physically. Mrs. Norton begins a novel with the remark that one of the finest sights conceivable is a well-preserved gentleman of middle age. It will be some time yet before Blackie reaches middle age, but there must be something wrong with you if you can look at him without feeling refreshed. Did you ever watch him marching along Princes Street on a warm day, when every other person was broiling in the sun? His head is well thrown back, the staff, grasped in the middle, jerks back and forward like a weaver's shuttle, and the plaid flies in the breeze. Other people's clothes are hanging limp. Blackie carries his breeze with him.

A year or two ago Mr. Gladstone, when at Dalmeny, pointed out that he had the advantage over Blackie in being of both Highland and Lowland extraction. The professor, however, is as Scotch as the thistle or his native hills, and Mr. Gladstone, quite justifiably, considers him the most outstanding of living Scotsmen. Blackie is not quite sure himself. Not long ago I

heard him read a preface to a life of Mr. Gladstone that was being printed at Smyrna in modern Greek. He told his readers to remember that Mr. Gladstone was a great scholar and an upright statesman. They would find it easy to do this if they first remembered that he was Scottish.

The *World* included Blackie in its list of "Celebrities at Home." It said that the door was opened by a red-headed lassie. That was probably meant for local color, and it amused every one who knew Mrs. Blackie. The professor is one of the most genial of men, and will show you to your room himself, talking six languages. This tends to make the conversation one-sided, but he does not mind that. He still writes a good deal, spending several hours in his library daily, and his talk is as brilliant as ever. His writing nowadays is less sustained than it was, and he prefers flitting from one subject to another, to evolving a great work. When he dips his pen into an ink-pot, it at once writes a sonnet – so strong is the force of habit. Recently he wrote a page about Carlyle in a little book issued by the Edinburgh students' bazaar committee. In this he reproved Carlyle for having "bias." Blackie wonders why people should have bias.

Some readers of this may in their student days have been invited to the Greek professor's house to breakfast, without knowing why they were selected from among so many. It was not, as they are probably aware, because of their classical attainments, for they were too thoughtful to be in the prize-list; nor was it because of the charm of their manners or the fascination

of their conversation. When the professor noticed any physical peculiarity about a student, such as a lisp, or a glass eye, or one leg longer than the other, or a broken nose, he was at once struck by it, and asked him to breakfast. They were very lively breakfasts, the eggs being served in tureens; but sometimes it was a collection of the maimed and crooked, and one person at the table – not the host himself – used to tremble lest, making mirrors of each other, the guests should see why they were invited.

Sometimes, instead of asking a student to breakfast, Blackie would instruct another student to request his company to tea. Then the two students were told to talk about paulo-post futures in the cool of the evening, and to read their Greek Testament and to go to the pantomime. The professor never tired of giving his students advice about the preservation of their bodily health. He strongly recommended a cold bath at six o'clock every morning. In winter, he remarked genially, you can break the ice with a hammer. According to himself, only one enthusiast seems to have followed his advice, and he died.

In Blackie's class-room there used to be a demonstration every time he mentioned the name of a distinguished politician. Whether the demonstration took the professor by surprise or whether he waited for it, will never perhaps be known. But Blackie at least put out the gleam in his eye, and looked as if he were angry. "I will say Beaconsfield," he would exclaim (cheers and hisses). "Beaconsfield" (uproar). Then he would

stride forward, and, seizing the railing, announce his intention of saying Beaconsfield until every goose in the room was tired of cackling. ("Question.") "Beaconsfield." ("No, no.") "Beaconsfield." ("Hear, hear," and shouts of "Gladstone.") "Beaconsfield." ("Three cheers for Dizzy.") Eventually the class would be dismissed as – (1) idiots, (2) a bear garden, (3) a flock of sheep, (4) a pack of numskulls, (5) hissing serpents. The professor would retire, apparently fuming, to his anteroom, and five minutes afterward he would be playing himself down the North Bridge on imaginary bagpipes. This sort of thing added a sauce to all academic sessions. There was a notebook also, which appeared year after year. It contained the professor's jokes of a former session, carefully classified by an admiring student. It was handed down from one year's men to the next; and thus, if Blackie began to make a joke about haggis, the possessor of the book had only swiftly to turn to the H's, find what the joke was, and send it along the class quicker than the professor could speak it.

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