

THE BOY POET'S HOME.

BRISTOL PEOPLE HATE THE NAME OF CHATTERTON.

Edgar Wakeman Visits the Scenes of the Struggles of the Ambitious Lad who Started the World—Where He Lived and Died and Got His Inspiration.

The name, the birth-spot and the shrine of Chatterton are all that will ordinarily impel the traveller to turn aside from pleasanter English sights and scenes to loiter in the matter-of-fact old city of Bristol, England.

Above its hard, dark streets, its grimy smoke-stacks and harbor spars, at the whim of the Severn tides overtopping its tallest war-houses or again disappearing below its mossy, crumbling quays, the one name, more sad and clear and luminous than all other acts or facts in its history, seems to conjure all else of civic, commercial, ecclesiastic or literary interest in the ancient seaport's moldy past.

And what a marvelous proof is here of the overshadowing quality of literary fame. It seems to me to furnish one of the most impressive illustrations known to men.

Chatterton died August 24, 1770, before he was eighteen years of age. Yet this stripling, starved in Bristol and hounded to death by indifference and desperation in London, in what had been done by his pen from the time he was ten years old, to the morning they found him dead in the London garret and pitched his poor body into the Shoe Lane workhouse potter's field, cut higher and deeper niches in the adamant walls of fame than all others of the millions who have lived and died in Bristol. More has been felt, said and written about this one delicate lad, his misfortunes and achievements, than altogether has ever been produced or compiled by or concerning Bristol or Bristol folk.

This Bristol and these Bristol folk, save in a few shining exceptions, have never been pleased with this. The old town has always seemed to wish the glamor of immortality on its own account; for its wiggled puggles of rulers, its wicked old slave traders, its old-time pedantic and hypocritical merchant princes, its churches, docks and warehouses; and recent to this day the pilgrim's coming to the one shrine which the whole world has forced upon the place in spite of itself, as if to retrieve it from infamy and contempt.

Something like the canny and almost brutal suspicion and watchfulness of Chatterton's attorney master of infamous memory, John Lambert, has always pervaded the town, in its attitude to the memory of Chatterton, and to those strangers who came to Bristol with sad and tender thoughts of the boy poet. From the first vindictive efforts to uphold the curish Walpole's defamations of the dead boy, in his own defense, to almost the latest Bristol publications on Chatterton, the effort has been ceaseless to befoul his character and disparage his achievements.

Ecclesiastical consistories, animated by inconceivable venom, hunted the very memory of the lad to perditionary finality, as far as their little power could go, fighting bitterly to the last the erection of a monument to his name in the churchyard of Redcliffe church, until nearly 100 years had elapsed from the time of the poet's death before this paltry requit was forced upon Bristol; while ten thousand travellers every year come here, and especially to the beautiful church of St. Mary of Redcliffe, because of Chatterton's association with the latter, to one who comes to see Bristol or Redcliffe on their own account; and still the hard old civic and ecclesiastic heads are blind to the world's judgment of themselves and Chatterton.

Mournfully ludicrous does this feeling display itself to strangers, even to this day. If you are in charge of guide or friend, he will insist on your visiting the potteries; the Downs; the docks; the Avon bridge; the place where Sir Humphrey Davey had charge of the Pneumatic Institution in Dowry Square; the Council house, rich in ancient parchment lore, unique old charters and somber pictures by Kneller and Vandyck; the museum and a peep at the famous miniature likeness on ivory of Oliver Cromwell; the ancient stone images of Brennus and Belinus, Bristol's tutelary deities removed from an ancient church to their present place in the old city gateway arch in the 14th century; to that wonderful old Norman archway in the gateway leading into the lower College Green; and to scores more places and objects of modern and antiquarian interest. But he will never have a word or a moment to devote to your longings regarding the personality of and objects associated with Chatterton.

At last you humbly beg to know of these, his interest in your interest is at an end. Even your landlord will regard you with contempt if you mention the name of Chatterton. If you attempt to penetrate the dust-mounds of the local antiquarians, everything is at your disposal until that unfortunate name is heard. They are then all as instantly dead, voiceless and mummified as the moldy old stuff upon which their lives are passed. Happening into several old bookstores with the hope of finding odds and ends regarding the poet and his birth-spot, after the inevitably unsuccessful search was made, timid inquiry after what I wished invariably put to flight the wearied habitués of the place, as though pestilence came with the breath that formed the name.

But most curious of all was the conduct of the verger of the Redcliffe church, which owes its chief notoriety and its richest offerings to its hateful hostility to Chatterton, his trifling association with its old monument room and the miserly Chatterton cenotaph within its churchyard close. He labored three mortal hours to impress the wonders of Redcliffe church upon me. Inconceivable eloquence flowed from his fervent lips. I would occasionally pleasantly intimate that I believed it all; was willing to credit more; but most wished to visit the old monument-room; whereupon the storms of descriptive eloquence would break forth anew. Something in the hushed quiet of the place, the hopelessness of ever coming to see what I longed for most, and the sustained notes of his breath about the worthless whose dust was beneath us and their wondrous deeds and gifts to St. Mary's, furnished an uncontrollable somnolence. I finally sank into a pew in an attitude of deferential interest, bulged my eyes to the limit of

human endurance, and with this wonderful human talking machine in regular pulsations growing to giant's size and diminishing to the stature of a pigmy declaiming before me, refreshing slumber came. I awoke with a start as the verger shook me and upbraided me with the charge that he could not interest me in this "prince of English churches." I pressed a halt crown upon him and again timorously hinted something about "the Chatterton monument room." As if in a frenzy of despair at the perversity of all humankind, he flung me a key, motioned tragically toward the inner stairway leading to above the north porch, covered his heated face with his hands and actually burst into tears.

Poor old man! thought I, as I groped my way over brasses, beneath effigies, and in and through gleaming chanceries to the winding stone stairway, on his weak and burdened shoulders also rests the same old mountain pretense and lie of a century's belittlement of that one little lad who alone has given them all something of the radiated effulgence of his deathless name.

But at last I stood alone within what seems to me to be the most tenderly interesting relic in Bristol. It is entered through two massive narrow doors from the stairway. The room is hexagonal in form, low, perhaps 25 feet in diameter, and lighted by 40 narrow, unglazed windows. The stone floor rests on the groined arches of the exquisite porch below; and huge beams of well preserved oak form and support the ceiling.

It did not seem a dismal spot to me. On the contrary, one could imagine a no more reposeful and retired place for his own day-dreams or those of such a genius as Chatterton. Pleasantly came the sounds of the street through the open windows; sweeter still were now and then waited the organ notes and voices of the singers engaged below in vesper service. The open, rotting and discarded monument coffers, or *coffres*, are still here. No one knows their age. It must be very great. But these veritable ancient chests were the ones whose contents, first largely pilfered and scattered by the parish authorities themselves, furnished Chatterton with the impulse and means of attracting public attention to his own compositions, to appear in the guise of antique manuscripts from the pen of the fictitious monk Rowley, the whole the creation of his own fertile brain.

One must confess to a strange sense of nearness to this poor ambitious boy when standing among these empty old coffers. The picture of his pale, eager face half hidden among the musty parchments, flashes upon one almost as it with certain recognition. Here he came times without number, and delved and toiled and dreamed.

There are few other Chatterton memorials in Bristol. The Colston Hospital or school, where he had secured nomination as a charity scholar, was removed to the old episcopal place at Stapleton over a quarter of a century ago. The building in which were located the offices of John Lambert, attorney, to whom Chatterton was articled as apprentice, is still standing on Corn street. The place where the boy-poet was born, in Pile street near its junction with Thomas street, is immediately opposite the north side of Redcliffe church. It is a dreary, mildewed spot to-day, though the old buildings are supplanted by others. A free school is still conducted at the place by a weakened spinster. The yard is narrow, damp and dank; the structure is damp, and dank and narrow; and the little tots whom I saw leaving the place are ragged, pinched and squalid.

Between this place and the church opposite, upon the hill, within the churchyard, though not within "consecrated" ground—for though churches sing the boy-poet's hymns, and this church received the Colston boy into its saving embrace through confirmation, ecclesiastic intolerance insists upon his damnation on the ground that he died by his own hand and an "infidel"—stands the monument to his memory. Redcliffe church, more dishonored to it, forbade its erection within the edifice, where lie in pompous state the remains of libertines and traders in their fellow men.

After the bitterest of struggles on the part of the poet's friends, this cenotaph was finally put in place, outside the church, between the tower and the monument room, so intimately associated with his youthful dreams and struggles. But repairs upon the north porch, soon gave an excuse for its removal, for it was discovered that the monument impinged on "consecrated" ground. Then it was taken to pieces and bundled away.

After years of further struggles with bigoted consistories it was finally reerected where it now stands, near the northeast entrance, just within the churchyard green. But even then these fine folk of the cloth turned the face of the statue surmounting the cenotaph away from Redcliffe church. And that was well. Chatterton, with his back to Redcliffe church, his tiny face half in smiles, gazing affectionately down upon the birthplace across the way, is fitting enough satire, while stone may last, upon the intolerance and vindictiveness thus so aptly recalled and emphasized.

The figure is represented in the habitations of a Colston schoolboy; a muffin cap with band and ball; a coat with long plaited skirt; a leathern belt, corduroy knee-breeches, and rough ribbed stockings. The left hand holds an open scroll upon which is written, "Ella, a Tragedy." In one of the monument's niches is a torn or severed scroll, with the legend, "The Poems of Rowley." While the chief panel bears the words from the poet's own pen, written half in jest half in earnest but incomparable in their aptitude; "To the Memory of Thomas Chatterton. Reader, judge not, if thou art a Christian. Believe that he shall be judged by a superior Power. To that Power alone is he now answerable."

If something like a resentfulness and heartache did not come at every turn when seeking for kindly Chatterton shrines, one would be deeply charmed and interested in the antiquarian, historic and literary reminiscences of this fine old Bristol town.

Cabot, who should be equally honored with Columbus, sailed on his voyage of American discovery from this port. The *Great Western*, the first steam craft to successfully demonstrate the practicability of steam navigation between the two continents, was built and manned at Bristol. The Great Burke, "friend of America," represented the city in parliament; and the unhappy ex-Empress Eugenie was once a school girl here.

EDGAR L. WAKEMAN.

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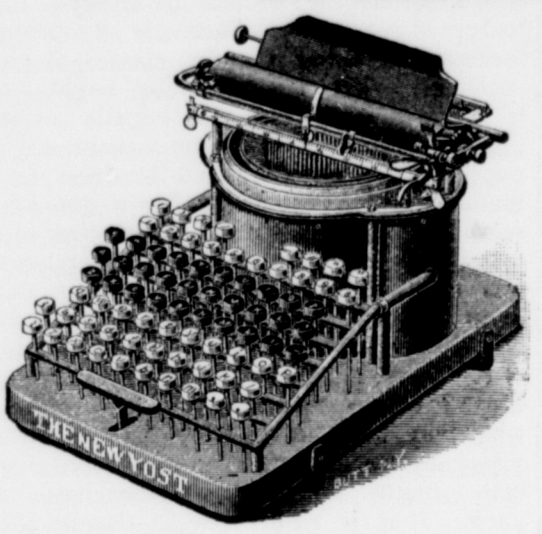
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