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Hesther Lynch Piozzi
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A N E C D O T E S
OF THE LATE
SAMUEL JOHNSON, LL.D.

DURING THE LAST
TWENTY YEARS OF HIS LIFE.
BY
HESTHER LYNCH PIOZZI.

THE FOURTH EDITION.

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P R E F A C E.

I HAVE somewhere heard or read, that the Preface before a book, like the portico before a house, should be contrived, so as to catch, but not detain the attention of those who desire admission to the family within, or leave to look over the collection of pictures made by one whose opportunities of obtaining them we know to have been not unfrequent. I wish not to keep my readers long from such intimacy with the manners of Dr. Johnson, or such knowledge of his sentiments as these pages can convey. To urge my distance from England as an excuse for the book's being ill written, would be ridiculous; it might indeed serve as a just reason for my having written it at all; because, though others may print the same aphorisms and stories, I cannot *here* be sure that they have done so. As the Duke says however to the Weaver, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, "Never excuse; if your play be a bad one, keep at least the excuses to yourself."

I am aware that many will say, I have not spoken highly enough of Dr. Johnson; but it will be difficult for those who say so, to speak more highly. If I have described his manners as they were, I have been careful to shew his superiority to the common forms of common life. It is surely no dispraise to an oak that it does not bear jessamine; and he who should plant honeysuckle round Trajan's column, would not be thought to adorn, but to disgrace it.

When I have said, that he was more a man of genius than of learning, I mean not to take from the one part of his character that which I willingly give to the other. The erudition of Mr. Johnson proved his genius; for he had not acquired it by long or profound study: nor can I think those characters the greatest which have most learning driven into their heads, any more than I can persuade myself to consider the river Jenisca as superior to the Nile, because the first receives near seventy tributary streams in the course of its unmarked progress to the sea, while the great parent of African plenty, flowing from an almost invisible source, and unenriched by any extraneous waters, except eleven nameless rivers, pours his majestic torrents into the ocean by seven celebrated mouths.

But I must conclude my Preface, and begin my book, the first I ever presented before the Public; from whose awful appearance in some measure to defend and conceal myself, I have thought fit to retire behind the Telamonian shield, and shew as little of myself as possible; well aware of the exceeding difference there is, between fencing in the school and fighting in the field.—Studious however to avoid offending, and careless of that offence which can be taken without a cause, I here not unwillingly submit my slight performance to the decision of that glorious country, which I have the daily delight to hear applauded in others, as eminently just, generous, and humane.

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TOO much intelligence is often as pernicious to Biography as too little; the mind remains perplexed by contradiction of probabilities, and finds difficulty in separating report from truth. If Johnson then lamented that so little had ever been said about Butler, I might with more reason be led to complain that so much has been said about himself; for numberless informers but distract or cloud information, as glasses which multiply will for the most part be found also to obscure. Of a life, too, which for the last twenty years was passed in the very front of literature, every leader of a literary company, whether officer or subaltern, naturally becomes either author or critic, so that little less than the recollection that it was *once* the request of the deceased, and *twice* the desire of those whose will I ever delighted to comply with, should have engaged me to add my little book to the number of those already written on the subject. I used to urge another reason for forbearance, and say, that all the readers would, on this singular occasion, be the writers of his life: like the first representation of the Masque of Comus, which, by changing their characters from spectators to performers, was *acted* by the lords and ladies it was *written* to entertain. This objection is however now at an end, as I have found friends, far remote indeed from literary questions, who may yet be

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diverted from melancholy by my description of Johnson's manners, warmed to virtue even by the distant reflexion of his glowing excellence, and encouraged by the relation of his animated zeal to persist in the profession as well as practice of Christianity.

SAMUEL JOHNSON was the son of Michael Johnson, a bookseller at Litchfield, in Staffordshire; a very pious and worthy man, but wrong-headed, positive, and afflicted with melancholy, as his son, from whom alone I had the information, once told me: his business, however, leading him to be much on horseback, contributed to the preservation of his bodily health, and mental sanity; which, when he staid long at home, would sometimes be about to give way; and Mr. Johnson said, that when his work-shop, a detached building, had fallen half down for want of money to repair it, his father was not less diligent to lock the door every night, though he saw that any body might walk in at the back part, and knew that there was no security obtained by barring the front door. "*This* (says his son) was madness, you may see, and would have been discoverable in other instances of the prevalence of imagination, but that poverty prevented it from playing such tricks as riches and leisure encourage." Michael was a man of still larger size and greater strength than his son, who was reckoned very like him, but did not delight in talking much of his family—"one has

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(says he) *so* little pleasure in reciting the anecdotes of beggary." One day, however, hearing me praise a favourite friend with partial tenderness as well as true esteem; "Why do you like that man's acquaintance so?" said he: Because, replied I, he is open and confiding, and tells me stories of his uncles and cousins; I love the light parts of a solid character. "Nay, if you are for family history (says Mr. Johnson good-humouredly), *I* can fit you: I had an uncle, Cornelius Ford, who, upon a journey, stopped and read an inscription written on a stone he saw standing by the way-side, set up, as it proved, in honour of a man who had leaped a certain leap thereabouts, the extent of which was specified upon the stone: Why now, says my uncle, I could leap it in my boots; and he did leap it in his boots. I had likewise another uncle, Andrew, continued he, my father's brother, who kept the ring in Smithfield (where they wrestled and boxed) for a whole year, and never was thrown or conquered. Here now are uncles for you, Mistress, if that's the way to your heart." Mr. Johnson was very conversant in the art of attack and defence by boxing, which science he had learned from this uncle Andrew, I believe; and I have heard him descant upon the age when people were received, and when rejected, in the schools once held for that brutal amusement, much to the admiration of those who had no expectation of his skill in such matters, from the sight of a figure which precluded all

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possibility of personal prowess; though, because he saw Mr. Thrale one day leap over a cabriolet stool, to shew that he was not tired after a chace of fifty miles or more, *he* suddenly jumped over it too; but in a way so strange and so unwieldy, that our terror lest he should break his bones, took from us even the power of laughing.

Michael Johnson was past fifty years old when he married his wife, who was upwards of forty; yet I think her son told me she remained three years childless before he was born into the world, who so greatly contributed to improve it. In three years more she brought another son, Nathaniel, who lived to be twenty-seven or twenty-eight years old, and of whose manly spirit I have heard his brother speak with pride and pleasure, mentioning one circumstance, particular enough, that when the company were one day lamenting the badness of the roads, he enquired where they could be, as he travelled the country more than most people, and had never seen a bad road in his life. The two brothers did not, however, much delight in each other's company, being always rivals for the mother's fondness; and many of the severe reflections on domestic life in *Rasselas*, took their source from its author's keen recollections of the time passed in his early years. Their father Michael died of an inflammatory fever, at the age of seventy-six, as Mr. Johnson told me: their mother at eighty-nine, of a gradual decay. She was slight in her person,

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he said, and rather below than above the common size. So excellent was her character, and so blameless her life, that when an oppressive neighbour once endeavoured to take from her a little field she possessed, he could persuade no attorney to undertake the cause against a woman so beloved in her narrow circle: and it is this incident he alludes to in the line of his *Vanity of Human Wishes*, calling her

The general favourite as the general friend.

Nor could any one pay more willing homage to such a character, though she had not been related to him, than did Dr. Johnson on every occasion that offered: his disquisition on Pope's epitaph placed over Mrs. Corbet, is a proof of that preference always given by him to a noiseless life over a bustling one; for however taste begins, we almost always see that it ends in simplicity; the glutton finishes by losing his relish for any thing highly sauced, and calls for his boiled chicken at the close of many years spent in the search of dainties; the connoisseurs are soon weary of Rubens, and the critics of Lucan; and the refinements of every kind heaped upon civil life, always sicken their possessors before the close of it.

At the age of two years Mr. Johnson was brought up to London by his mother, to be touched by Queen Anne for the scrophulous evil, which terribly afflicted his childhood, and left such marks as greatly disfigured a countenance naturally harsh

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and rugged, beside doing irreparable damage to the auricular organs, which never could perform their functions since I knew him; and it was owing to that horrible disorder, too, that one eye was perfectly useless to him; that defect, however, was not observable, the eyes looked both alike. As Mr. Johnson had an astonishing memory, I asked him, if he could remember Queen Anne at all? “He had (he said) a confused, but somehow a sort of solemn recollection of a lady in diamonds, and a long black hood.”

The christening of his brother he remembered with all its circumstances, and said, his mother taught him to spell and pronounce the words *little Natty*, syllable by syllable, making him say it over in the evening to her husband and his guests. The trick which most parents play with their children, of shewing off their newly-acquired accomplishments, disgusted Mr. Johnson beyond expression; he had been treated so himself, he said, till he absolutely loathed his father’s caresses, because he knew they were sure to precede some displeasing display of his early abilities; and he used, when neighbours came o’visiting, to run up a tree that he might not be found and exhibited, such, as no doubt he was, a prodigy of early understanding. His epitaph upon the duck he killed by treading on it at five years old,

Here lies poor duck
 That Samuel Johnson trod on;
 If it had liv’d it had been good luck,
 For it would have been an odd one;