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Arthur Helps

Excerpt

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LIFE AND LABOURS OF THE LATE THOMAS BRASSEY.

INTRODUCTORY CHAPTER.

THE first endeavour for a writer should be to put himself in good relation with his readers. If he fail in doing this, he fails in a most important point. They may agree with him, or differ from him, as regards his conclusions; but they will almost always have gained some profit from his work, if he makes them sympathize with him, and understand his meaning and purpose. Both reader and writer have but one and the same object: namely, to get at the truth in regard to a person, or matter, about whom, or which, it is worth while to know the truth.

In writing the life of Mr. Brassey, I have undertaken a task for which I have no special qualifications; but the aid I have received from his family and from his many friends who do possess these special qualifications, has greatly lightened my labour, and will, I hope, make it effectual in bringing before the world the character and conduct of a very notable person.

Before commencing this biography in the ordinary way, by giving the birth, parentage, and education of Mr. Brassey, I shall begin by giving an account of my first acquaintance with him—an acquaintance which afterwards ripened into a sincere friendship, causing me to accept with pleasure the task of writing his life, when requested by his sons to do so. They would, no doubt, have done the work better and more amply; but then, what a son

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says of his father is always a little “suspect.” Notwithstanding the familiarity of converse which has grown up of late years between sons and fathers, sons are apt to be not the less proud, and perhaps even more fond, of their fathers than ever; and on that account not the less unfit to write their fathers’ lives.

I am confirmed in this view, by the life of an eminent man, written by his sons, which, though very well and certainly very dutifully written, failed to give the reader an adequate notion of those peculiarities in the hero of the tale, which are so valuable in making us really acquainted with him. This knowledge the reader did not, I think, attain until he came to a letter at the end of the book, written by Sydney Smith. It was a letter which thoroughly succeeded in bringing the man before you by means of such passages as the following: “Curran, the Master of the Rolls, said to Mr. Grattan, ‘You would be the greatest man of your age, Grattan, if you would buy a few yards of red tape, and tie up your bills and papers.’ This was the fault, or the misfortune, of your excellent father; *he never knew the use of red tape, and was utterly unfit for the common business of life.* That a guinea represented a quantity of shillings, and that it would barter for a quantity of cloth, he was well aware; but the accurate number of the baser coin, or the just measurement of the manufactured article to which he was entitled for his gold, he could never learn, and it was impossible to teach him.”¹ Now these are the kind of things which sons are too fond and too respectful to say of their fathers; and therefore I do not think that sons can ever make good biographers.

I now proceed to give an account of my first introduction to Mr. Brassey. I had to receive a visit from him on some official business of much importance and considerable difficulty. When one has heard a great deal of a man, but has not seen him, one cannot help forming some notion as to what manner of man he is.

When Mr. Brassey’s name was announced, I could not help supposing that I should see a hard, stern, forcible, soldierly sort of person, accustomed to sway armies of

¹ “Life of Mackintosh,” vol. ii. p. 500.

working men in an imperious fashion. Now this was very foolish of me; for I had, before, seen many great “captains of industry,” and had almost uniformly found them to be men of suave manners and courteous bearing.

Notwithstanding this experience, I was prejudiced and misled by the word “contractor,” and expected to find in Mr. Brassey a very different person from the one I did see. There entered an elderly gentleman of very dignified appearance, and of singularly graceful manners, suggesting at once the idea of what is called a “gentleman of the old school.”

He stated his case. No: I express myself wrongly; he did not state his case; he *understated* it; and there are few things more attractive in a man than that he should be inclined to understate rather than to overstate his own case. He was also very brief; not going over any part of the ground a second time, as is the habit of ninety-nine persons out of every hundred. After he had gone away, I thought to myself (for I knew the matter pretty well, in respect of which he had a grievance) that, had it been my case, I should not have been able to restrain myself so completely and to speak with so little attention to self-interest as he had done.

On thinking whom he resembled of the persons I had ever seen, I found that he reminded me most of the late Lord Herbert of Lea, a man who, even in a short and transient interview, never failed to impress you with a sense of his goodness and benevolence, and of his being one of the most perfect gentlemen you had ever seen.

This was my first interview with Mr. Brassey. The impression it produced upon me was that of respect and regard for him, which continued to increase as we became better acquainted.

I have also to add, that the life of Mr. Brassey has especial interest for the writer of it, as affording an example of skilful organization, as well as of the fulfilment of other functions, and the performance of other duties, which, though they especially concern Imperial Government, may be thoroughly exemplified in the conduct of private enterprise, when it assumes considerable magnitude and diversity.

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This work has been written in a very peculiar manner. Most of the persons who knew Mr. Brassey well, who had acted with him, or served under him, have kindly consented to be examined as witnesses, and to have their evidence taken down by a shorthand writer. Mr. Thomas Brassey has been the examiner. From his general knowledge of his father's affairs, no one could have fulfilled this office so well; and I gratefully acknowledge the immense assistance that I have derived from the mode in which he has conducted these examinations.

It may easily be conjectured that the amount of material thus collected has been very great indeed, and has been of the most interesting character. I have often regretted that want of space prevents me from giving to my readers as much as I should otherwise like to give of this valuable information.

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CHAPTER I.

A BRIEF OUTLINE OF MR. BRASSEY'S CHARACTER AS A
MAN OF BUSINESS.

Trustfulness in his agents.—Liberality and equanimity.—Powers of organization.—Delicacy in blaming.—Courtesy.—Presence of mind.—Hatred of contention.—Anxiety to have work well done.—Gangs taken into council.—Ruling passion.

IN a biography, it is a difficult matter to determine where one should introduce a description of the character of the person written about. I have come to the conclusion that the best plan is to give very early in the book a brief outline; then, as the occasions arise, to point out, in the narrative, illustrations of the character; and, finally, to take an opportunity of restating and enlarging the description.

The most striking point in Mr. Brassey's character, and that which I shall mention first, was his trustfulness. This virtue was carried to a great extent in him,—to an extent that may appear almost extreme. He chose his agents with great care, and with consummate judgment. After he had chosen them, he placed implicit trust in them. Then, though perfectly capable of exercising the most minute supervision and criticism of details, he never judged by details, but looked to results; not vexing or wearying those who served under him by minute and tiresome criticism.

He was exceedingly liberal in the conduct of his business, as will be seen from many instances in the following pages; and probably there never was a man who made so much money, caring so little for the money itself.

He was a man of a singularly calm and equable temperament. It was very rarely, indeed, that either success or failure—and even great failure was not a thing unknown

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to him—discomposed his complete serenity of mind. I do not mention this by way of praise. As regards this matter, there are two orders of men. There is the man whose anxieties never leave him, who cannot throw off his robe of office and say “Lie there, Lord Treasurer, or Lord Chancellor.” And there is the man who, having done his best, is satisfied with that best, and can dismiss anxiety as to the result. This is a great felicity of temperament. Those men who do possess it are often liable to be much misconstrued. The world is apt to think that the man who can throw off the burden of care, is, on that account, less caretaking than the man who is harrowed by perpetual anxiety, and who cannot conceal the constant pressure of that anxiety. Mr. Brassey did not take less care than these anxious men are wont to do; but, having given his best efforts to ensure success, was content to await the result, and to abide by it with perfect equanimity.

It is not requisite to do more here than to allude to the powers of perception, of calculation, and of organization, which Mr. Brassey possessed. These powers will inevitably reveal themselves in the course of the narrative, and may, indeed, almost be taken for granted as belonging to one who successfully carried out great undertakings in which these powers were absolutely indispensable.

There was not anything more noticeable in Mr. Brassey's conduct of business than his mode of blaming where blame was requisite. It was of the very lightest and gentlest kind; but not on that account less forcible or less instructive. To speak metaphorically, his little finger laid gently upon an error was more severely felt than the heavy hand so often put down by a coarse man when he blames his agents or his inferiors. Reluctant blame is the blame that goes to the hearts and consciences of men; and the greatest merit of it is, that while it condemns, it does not discourage.

So thoroughly beloved, and so thoroughly appreciated was Mr. Brassey by all the people who served under him, that his coming amongst them was looked forward to as a most joyful and festive event. When, for instance, he had any great work on hand in a foreign country, the thousands of people employed by him, from the highest to the lowest,

longed to see him amongst them. This could not have been the case had he not been utterly devoid of captiousness, and one of those generous employers of labour who recognize to the full all that is well done by those who work under them.

Indeed, in this respect, he reversed the relative positions of employer and employed. When any disaster occurred on the works, it was *he* who comforted and excused his agents, instead of receiving comfort or excuses from them.

It was a necessity of Mr. Brassey's career that he should live much with his dependents. Now, it may often be observed that the man who has undoubted authority over his fellow-men in one respect, is apt to endeavour to extend that authority to matters in which he has not any right whatever to interfere with those inferiors, or, otherwise than indirectly, to attempt to influence their opinions. The uniform testimony of those who, in any capacity, worked under Mr. Brassey, is, that he never sought to interfere with them, or their opinions, "out of school" as we may say. He was one of the least arrogant of men in his general converse with mankind, giving a respectful consideration to whatever anyone had to say to him. Even if people talked folly to him, his comment upon it was of the mildest kind. Once, indeed, when a man was talking largely, with very little substance or understanding in his talk, Mr. Brassey was heard to remark, "I think the peas are over-growing the sticks." But this was a rare instance of censure—so rare that it greatly attracted the attention of the hearers.

Mr. Brassey was gifted with much presence of mind. The first Napoleon used to say of himself, that few men were his equals in what he was wont to call "two o'clock of the morning" courage, which is in fact presence of mind on the announcement of unexpected danger and difficulty. Mr. Brassey was fortunate enough to possess this "two o'clock of the morning" courage in a high degree. If called up suddenly in the middle of the night upon some urgent peril or difficulty, he met the alarm with perfect coolness; sat down to consider and calculate what was the best mode of obviating the danger (danger seemed to stimulate his faculties, and not to overpower them); and, before the

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break of day, when he had to proceed to the scene of action, was ready with his plan. It may be easily imagined what confidence this presence of mind on the part of their employer, infused into his principal agents, and all those who were employed under him.

Mr. Brassey had a perfect hatred of contention. This quality of mind was, second only to his trustfulness, the main element of his success. It was soon discovered by anyone who had dealings with him that, should any matter of controversy arise, he would not only refuse to take any questionable advantage over the other side, but would rather even submit to be taken advantage of.¹ Now, there is not a more fruitful virtue in the world than this kind of generosity. It is nearly sure to elicit a kindred response. In most instances where overreaching is begun or continued, it derives its strength from contentiousness.

In the execution of any great undertaking Mr. Brassey's anxiety was that the work should be done quickly, and be done well. The minor questions as to who should bear the expense of minor matters, unprovided for by specific contract, he left to be settled afterwards; whereas, many men, perhaps I may say most men, would have insisted, beforehand, upon the question being settled as to who should bear the outlay. Mr. Brassey's name is a name not known in the Law Courts. He said to Mr. Giles one day: "I never had but one regular law-suit. It was in Spain about the Mataro Line, and that was against my will; but I was obliged to submit to it, as I had a partner. We got nothing by it; and I will never have another if I can help it, for I believe in nineteen cases out of twenty you either gain nothing at all, or what you do gain does not compensate you for the worry and anxiety the law-suit occasions you." If a dispute arose between his agents and the engineers of the company, for whom he was working, as to the best mode of proceeding with the work, he had an admirable way of settling the dispute. He would appear, perhaps unexpectedly, amongst the contending parties; would not back up his own agents, or enter into vexatious contention with the engineers of the company; but would, in the presence

¹ See Letter No. 1, in Appendix.

of them all, take the “gangers” into council, and ask them what was their opinion on the matter.

It was generally found that the gangers had a very clear opinion, and a very judicious one, as to how the work should proceed: and, at any rate, the contending parties felt that the opinion of those men, with whom the manual execution of the work rested, was an opinion which it was very desirable to defer to and to conciliate. This mode of reference and undefined arbitration was eminently characteristic of this great employer of labour. It did not vex or humiliate anybody; and it brought the matter to a definite conclusion.

Our immediate forefathers, in estimating the character of any man, were always anxious to point out what was his ruling passion. This may be seen in the poets of a former age. They could not conceive the idea of a man unswayed by a ruling passion, which indeed they would invent for him, if he were not blessed, or cursed, with such a motive for endeavour. I must confess that I think the idea is not altogether a bad one, and that most men have a ruling passion—strong in life, as in death. Now, in writing this memoir, I have endeavoured to find out what was Mr. Brassey’s ruling passion; what was the work that he, Mr. Brassey, supposed that he was sent into the world to further and to establish. He had none of the ordinary ambitions. Rank, title, social position had no attraction for him. He had no other objects than those connected with his business. His great ambition—his ruling passion, if I may so express it—was to win a high reputation for skill, integrity, and success in the difficult vocation of a contractor for public works; to give large employment to his fellow-countrymen; and by means of British labour and British skill to knit together foreign countries, and to promote civilization, according to his view of it, throughout the world.

Mr. Brassey was, in brief, a singularly trustful, generous, large-hearted, dexterous, ruling kind of personage; blessed with a felicitous temperament for bearing the responsibility of great affairs.

By giving at once this view which I have formed of Mr. Brassey’s character, I hope I may have sufficiently in-

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terested the reader to induce him to accompany me on my journey through the details, sometimes of a dry and technical character, which serve to illustrate the nature of a man who undoubtedly proved himself to be one of the foremost leaders of industry in the present age.