



THE ENEMIES OF BOOKS.



CHAPTER I.

FIRE.

HERE are many of the forces of Nature which tend to injure Books ; but among them all not one has been half so destructive as Fire. It would be tedious to write out a bare list only of the numerous libraries and bibliographical treasures which, in one way or another, have been seized by the Fire-king as his own. Chance conflagrations, fanatic incendiarism, Judicial bonfires, and even

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household stoves have, time after time, thinned the treasures as well as the rubbish of past ages, until, probably, not one thousandth part of the books that have been are still extant. This destruction cannot, however, be reckoned as all loss; for had not the “cleansing fires” removed mountains of rubbish from our midst, strong destructive measures would have become a necessity from sheer want of space in which to store so many volumes.

Before the invention of Printing, books were comparatively scarce; and, knowing as we do, how very difficult it is, even after the steam-press has been working for half a century, to make a collection of half a million books, we are forced to receive with great incredulity the accounts in old writers of the wonderful extent of ancient libraries.

The historian Gibbon, very incredulous in many things, accepts without questioning the fables told upon this subject. No doubt

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the libraries of MSS. collected generation after generation by the Egyptian Ptolemies became, in the course of time, the most extensive ever then known; and were famous throughout the world for the costliness of their ornamentation, and importance of their untold contents. Two of these were at Alexandria, the larger of which was in the quarter called Bruchium. These volumes, like all manuscripts of those early ages, were written on sheets of parchment, having a wooden roller at each end so that the reader needed only to unroll a portion at a time. During Cæsar's Alexandrian War, B.C. 48, the larger collection was consumed by fire and again burnt by the Saracens in A.D. 640. An immense loss was inflicted upon mankind thereby; but when we are told of 700,000, or even 500,000 of such volumes being destroyed we instinctively feel that such numbers must be a great exaggeration. Equally incredulous must we be when we read

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of half a million volumes being burnt at Carthage some centuries later, and other similar accounts.

Among the earliest records of the wholesale destruction of Books is that narrated by St. Luke, when, after the preaching of Paul, many of the Ephesians “which used curious arts brought their books together, and burned them before all men: and they counted the price of them, and found it 50,000 pieces of silver” (Acts xix, 19). Doubtless these books of idolatrous divination and alchemy, of enchantments and witchcraft, were righteously destroyed by those to whom they had been and might again be spiritually injurious; and doubtless had they escaped the fire then, not one of them would have survived to the present time, no MS. of that age being now extant. Nevertheless, I must confess to a certain amount of mental disquietude and uneasiness when I think of books worth 50,000 denarii—or, speaking

roughly, say £18,750,¹ of our modern money being made into bonfires. What curious illustrations of early heathenism, of Devil worship, of Serpent worship, of Sun worship, and other archaic forms of religion; of early astrological and chemical lore, derived from the Egyptians, the Persians, the Greeks; what abundance of superstitious observances and what is now termed “Folk-lore”; what riches, too, for the philological student, did those many books contain, and how famous would the library now be that could boast of possessing but a few of them.

¹ The received opinion is that the “pieces of silver” here mentioned were Roman denarii, which were the silver pieces then commonly used in Ephesus. If now we weigh a denarius against modern silver, it is exactly equal to ninepence, and fifty thousand times ninepence gives £1,875. It is always a difficult matter to arrive at a just estimate of the relative value of the same coin in different ages; but reckoning that money then had at least ten times the purchasing value of money now, we arrive at what was probably about the value of the magical books burnt, viz. : £18,750.

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The ruins of Ephesus bear unimpeachable evidence that the City was very extensive and had magnificent buildings. It was one of the free cities, governing itself. Its trade in shrines and idols was very extensive, being spread through all known lands. There the magical arts were remarkably prevalent, and notwithstanding the numerous converts made by the early Christians, the Ἐφέσια γράμματα, or little scrolls upon which magic sentences were written, formed an extensive trade up to the fourth century. These “writings” were used for divination, as a protection against the “evil eye,” and generally as charms against all evil. They were carried about the person, so that probably thousands of them were thrown into the flames by St. Paul’s hearers when his glowing words convinced them of their superstition.

Imagine an open space near the grand Temple of Diana, with fine buildings around. Slightly raised above the crowd, the Apostle,

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preaching with great power and persuasion concerning superstition, holds in thrall the assembled multitude. On the outskirts of the crowd are numerous bonfires, upon which Jew and Gentile are throwing into the flames bundle upon bundle of scrolls, while an Asiarch with his peace-officers looks on with the conventional stolidity of policemen in all ages and all nations. It must have been an impressive scene, and many a worse subject has been chosen for the walls of the Royal Academy.

Books in those early times, whether orthodox or heterodox, appear to have had a precarious existence. The heathens at each fresh outbreak of persecution burnt all the Christian writings they could find, and the Christians, when they got the upper hand, retaliated with interest upon the pagan literature. The Mohammedan reason for destroying books—"If they contain what is in the Koran they are superfluous, and

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if they contain anything opposed to it they are immoral," seems, indeed, *mutatis mutandis*, to have been the general rule for all such devastators.

The Invention of Printing made the entire destruction of any author's works much more difficult, so quickly and so extensively did books spread through all lands. On the other hand, as books multiplied, so did destruction go hand in hand with production, and soon were printed books doomed to suffer in the same penal fires, that up to then had been fed on MSS. only.

At Cremona, in 1569, 12,000 books printed in Hebrew were publicly burnt as heretical, simply on account of their language; and Cardinal Ximenes, at the capture of Granada, treated 5,000 copies of the Koran in the same way.

At the time of the Reformation in England a great destruction of books took place.

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The antiquarian Bale, writing in 1587, thus speaks of the shameful fate of the Monastic libraries :—

“A greate nombre of them whyche purchased those superstycyouse mansyons (*Monasteries*) reserved of those librarye bookes some to serve their jakes, some to scoure theyr candelstyckes, and some to rubbe theyr bootes. Some they solde to the grossers and sope sellers, and some they sent over see to y^e booke bynders, not in small nombre, but at tymes whole shyppes full, to y^e wonderynge of foren nacyons. Yea y^e Universtytees of thys realme are not alle clere in thys detestable fact. But cursed is that bellye whyche seketh to be fedde with suche ungodlye gaynes, and so depelye shameth hys natural conterye. I knowe a merchant manne, whych shall at thys tyme be namelesse, that boughte y^e contentes of two noble lybraries for forty shylynges pryce : a shame it is to be spoken. Thys stuffe hathe he occupied in y^e stede of greye paper, by y^e space of more than these ten yeares, and yet he hathe store ynoughe for as manye years to come. A prodygyous example is thys, and to be abhorred of all men whyche love theyr nacyon as they shoulde do. The monkes kepte them undre dust, y^e ydle-headed prestes regarded them not, theyr latter owners have most shamefully abused them, and y^e covetouse merchantes have solde them away into foren nacyons for moneye.”

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How the imagination recoils at the idea of Caxton's translation of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, or perhaps his "Lyf of therle of Oxenforde," together with many another book from our first presses, not a fragment of which do we now possess, being used for baking "pyes."

At the Great Fire of London in 1666, the number of books burnt was enormous. Not only in private houses and Corporate and Church libraries were priceless collections reduced to cinders, but an immense stock of books removed from Paternoster Row by the Stationers for safety was burnt to ashes in the vaults of St. Paul's Cathedral.

Coming nearer to our own day, how thankful we ought to be for the preservation of the Cotton Library. Great was the consternation in the literary world of 1731 when they heard of the fire at Ashburnham House, Westminster, where, at that time, the Cotton MSS. were deposited. By great exertions the