

FRATER AVE ATQUE VALE

A PERSONAL APPRECIATION OF THE LATE KENNETH GRAHAME

by Clayton Hamilton

NO OTHER place on earth could be further in feeling from the English countryside than the Grand Cañon of the Colorado, in the state of Arizona.

Several years ago, I visited the Grand Cañon of the Colorado. Having seen it, I am relieved of any desire to see it again. It is the most gigantic chasm in the surface of the earth and is, of course, impressive because of its immensity. Its ever-changing multi-coloured iridescence is fantastically beautiful. But it is a lonely place, devoid of any human interest. Nobody, in historic or in prehistoric times, has ever lived in the Grand Cañon. Though many of its pinnacles and buttes take on at times the look of towered castles, they have been sculptured only by uncounted centuries of wind and show no touch of mortal hands. That dizzying immensity is empty of all human memories and offers nothing to stimulate the sense of drama or romance.

Yet my visit to the Grand Cañon was not wasted; for, in the midst of that stupendous loneliness, I met a human being.

Perched upon the edge of the great chasm, at the outset of Bright Angel Trail, I found a little bookshop. Its stock in trade consisted mainly of picture-books descanting on the beauties of Arizona and New Mexico and the sort of fiction which celebrates the great open spaces where men are men. Yet, in the very middle of the center table, isolated in that place of honour, I was startled to dis-

cover a copy of *The Wind in the Willows*. Impulsively I picked it up; and, with a suddenness that might possibly have been interpreted as rude, I said to the proprietor, "What, in the name of heaven, is this doing here?"

She was a quiet woman, with grey hair. Her answer, as I learned a little later, was completely logical, though, at the moment, it scarcely seemed to fit the question. "I am very pleased to meet you," she remarked.

She then went on to tell me that in 1908, when *The Wind in the Willows* had just been given to the world, she had been a saleswoman in Chicago, at McClurg's, and that then and there she had registered a vow that if ever she should have a bookshop of her own there must always be a copy of that classic in the place of honour. "It helps me to retain my self-respect", she added, "while I am selling to the daily tourists at El Tovar the sort of fiction that they read in Pullman cars.

"I have another motive also, which you, of course, will understand. It is rather lonely here in Arizona. Most of the people who drift into my shop are merely tourists—you know the type. But I can always tell a real person by the look that comes into his eyes when he sees *The Wind in the Willows* in the center of my table. I do not need to ask his name or anything about him; but I know at once that he is one of the elect, who love the loveliness of words. You, for instance,

are the first real person who has come here in three months and seventeen days. That is why I said at once that I was pleased to meet you."

This encounter in itself was surprisingly exciting; but it took on an added tensiety when I told her, "I know Kenneth Grahame personally. Some years ago, I spent a week-end at his farm in Berkshire. We still exchange letters now and then. I shall write to him about you".

She looked upon me with an expression that was almost tremulous. "Then, you have actually shaken hands with Kenneth Grahame?"

"Not once, but many times."

She wavered toward me with a thrilling hesitance, like one envisaging a vast adventure. "Would you mind", she asked, and then the strengthened impulse swept her forward, "Would you mind if I grasped you by the hand?"

This was on the edge of the Grand Cañon of the Colorado, at the outset of Bright Angel Trail. No other place on earth could be further in feeling from the English countryside.

II

In the spring of 1910, I moved to London, in order to prepare my little volume, *On the Trail of Stevenson*, under the admonitory eyes of Sidney Colvin, Edmund Gosse, and Andrew Lang. I had hoped that one of Stevenson's friends would be able to introduce me to Kenneth Grahame; and I was both disappointed and surprised when each of them told me in turn that they had not seen him in a dozen years. It appeared that upon resigning his secretarial position at the Bank of England he had retired to a farm in Berkshire; he rarely came to town, he never went anywhere or saw anybody—he

had adopted, in effect, the life of a recluse. Each of them—particularly Andrew Lang—spoke very highly of Kenneth Grahame, not only as an artist but also as a person, and gave voice to an expression of regret that they never saw him any more. Thereupon I wrote to Kenneth Grahame and sent him a copy of a review of *The Wind in the Willows* which I had written when the book was first published in this country. By return mail I received a cordial invitation to come down to Berkshire for a week-end, penned with that meticulous chirography which looked as if it had been graven on a copper plate.

He lived in a farm-house known ancestrally as Boham's, in the hamlet of Blewbury, adjacent to the railway station of Didcot, in Berkshire. As I jogged down in the dilatory train, his elaborate address attuned itself to the rhythm of the wheels and moved me to the composition of a series of preposterous couplets, such as:—

Boham's, Blewbury, Didcot, Berks,
Fell in the sea and was bitten by sharks.

One is not at one's keenest on a railway journey.

At Didcot, on the railway platform, Kenneth Grahame stood awaiting me. He was very tall and very broad—a massive figure, but with no spare flesh. At that time he was fifty years of age. His hair was white, but his face was almost beatifically young, and he had the clear and roseate complexion of a healthy child. He was dressed in knickerbockers, a soft shirt, and a baggy coat of tweeds. One could see at a glance that he was one of the rare people in the world who look like themselves. I felt a desperate necessity to say something unimportant; and I told him how the rhythm of the railway wheels had churned his long address within

my mind to jiggery. I reminded him that an American poetess, that season, had just won a prize at Stratford-on-Avon for her play, *The Piper*, and suggested that

Boham's, Blewbury, Didcot, Berks,
might serve as an appropriate address for

Josephine Preston Peabody Marks.

"Yes, indeed," he countered; "and

At Boham's, Blewbury, Didcot, Berks,
She would wake in the morning and listen to
larks."

That was our introduction to each other.

III

Boham's was a brick farm-house, with a heavily thatched roof; it dated from early Tudor times. The latest proprietor had deftly managed to introduce such modern excrescences as a bath-tub and electric lights without disturbing the historic atmosphere of the ancient edifice. He said to me a little later, "In England, we may choose from any of a dozen different centuries to live in; and who would select the twentieth century when he might live more simply in the spacious times of great Elizabeth?"

Certainly life seemed spacious as we sat in the little court-yard, surrounded by the rural erections of that ancient Saxon whose name had happened to be Boham. By comparison, it seemed a little cramped when we went indoors for meals. The household consisted only of Mrs. Grahame (Elsbeth) and a lovely little boy whose face was like a Maxfield Parrish illustration. I believe that the actual name of the little boy was Alastair; but, in the household, he was known familiarly as Mouse. Even with the addition of myself, the company did not constitute a crowd; and yet, before the second day was finished, I became aware of a delicate and

somewhat strange phenomenon. It was simply, but emphatically, this—that Kenneth Grahame was not at home beneath a roof. Indoors, he would lapse into a silence that might endure an hour, for—as I observed with gratitude—he felt no social compulsion whatsoever to keep talking in the presence of a visitor; but, as soon as we started out upon a ramble across country, he would break into an easy current of cheery conversation.

I had known, of course, for years, that all of Kenneth Grahame's work had been posited upon the opening stanza of that great Ode of Wordsworth which is one of the saddest, as it is one of the wisest, utterances of mankind. It was, therefore, not merely for information that I asked him why he had written mainly—almost only—about children and about animals. I cannot, of course, report his words with absolute fidelity; but I can recover at least the gist of his reply.

"The most priceless possession of the human race is the wonder of the world. Yet, latterly, the utmost endeavours of mankind have been directed toward the dissipation of that wonder. Everybody seems to cry out for a world in which there shan't be any Santa Claus. Science analyzes everything to its component parts, and neglects to put them together again. A barefoot boy cannot go wading in a mountain stream without being told that he must no longer spell the fluid that sings trickling round his feet by the age-old school-house lettering of W-A-T-E-R, but must substitute, for the sake of scientific exactitude, the symbol H_2O . Nobody, any longer, may hope to entertain an angel unawares, or to meet Sir Launcelot in shining armour on a moonlit road. But what is the use of living in a world devoid of wonderment? You have quoted Wordsworth:—'It is not now as it has been before'. But the

poet began by reminding us that, "There was a time". . . . It is *that* time which I have attempted to recapture and commemorate in *Dream Days* and *The Golden Age*.

"Granted that the average man may live for seventy years, it is a fallacy to assume that his life from sixty to seventy is more important than his life from five to fifteen. Children are not merely people: they are the only really living people that have been left to us in an over-weary world. Any normal child will instinctively agree with your own American poet, Walt Whitman, when he said: 'To me every hour of the day and night is an unspeakably perfect miracle'.

"In my tales about children, I have tried to show that their simple acceptance of the mood of wonderment, their readiness to welcome a perfect miracle at any hour of the day or night, is a thing more precious than any of the laboured acquisitions of adult mankind. . . .

"As for animals, I wrote about the most familiar and domestic in *The Wind in the Willows* because I felt a duty to them as a friend. Every animal, by instinct, lives according to his nature. Thereby he lives wisely, and betters the tradition of mankind. No animal is ever tempted to belie his nature. No animal, in other words, knows how to tell a lie. Every animal is honest. Every animal is straightforward. Every animal is true—and is, therefore, according to his nature, both beautiful and good. I like most of my friends among the animals more than I like most of my friends among mankind. Do you wonder at that? . . . Come, and let me show you."

Thereupon he led me on a ramble to all the other farms in Blewbury and introduced me individually to each of the domestic animals of that rural district. During the course of these social calls upon innumerable horses,

dogs, cats, pigs, cows, rabbits, hens, and sheep, I was reminded of the lament of Andrew Lang that he never saw Kenneth Grahame any more.

This particular adventure culminated in Grahame's declaration that his favourite among all animals was the domestic pig. With an almost childish sense of triumph, he took me, as a climax, to a formal meeting with his favourite sow; and, as we leaned upon the ancient railings of the pen, he discounted upon the virtues of the grunting individual before us in language as eloquent as that which he had used erstwhile in writing to celebrate the beauties, in *The Magic Ring*, of Coralie and Zephyrine.

When we came back to the thatched-roofed farm-house—known ancestrally as Boham's—I noticed that three or four of Maxfield Parrish's coloured illustrations for *The Golden Age* were hanging on the walls of the living-room. I said something about the illustrator. Thereupon I learned that Kenneth Grahame had never laid eyes on Maxfield Parrish. When he found that I had met the artist, he asked me eagerly, "Tell me—but I am almost afraid to ask—does he look—does he look like the sort of man who ought to paint such pictures?"

"Maxfield Parrish", I replied, "is one of the handsomest men in the United States. He has a beautiful face, especially in profile. He looks exactly as any lover of his work would wish."

"I am glad, I am very glad to hear you tell me that," said Kenneth Grahame. "People really ought to look like themselves. Keats did, and so did Shelley. But so few of them do, so few of them do."

And out of a slight corner of an eye, I looked upon a face that was beatifically young beneath its coronal of silver hair, a great head poised upon a frame that might

be called heroic; and I listened to the cadence of a voice that contained the music of larks in the morning air.

"You have spoken truthfully," I said.

IV

The Berkshire landscape, although generally level, was diversified here and there by hummocks which had been heaped up by the Danes—heaven knows how many centuries ago—and were known in that locality as barrows. One day we were sitting on the summit of a Danish barrow, to take the wind and talk without disturbance of a roof.

"I have come here to pick a quarrel with you," I began. "*The Golden Age*, if I remember rightly, was published in 1896, and *Dream Days* in 1898. At any rate, I recall that I flunked a college examination in 1899 when I was asked to write a dissertation (in general) about English Prose and insisted upon writing, instead, a dissertation (in particular) on Kenneth Grahame. Then ten years elapsed—*ten years*—before the publication of *The Wind in the Willows*. That ten years was too long. We were told, of course, that you were busy at the Bank of England: but that excuse no longer holds. My quarrel with you is precisely this: I cannot wait another decade for another book from you. Don't keep me waiting. I mean this very simply, however silly it may sound. I happen to be gifted—or cursed—with an obsolescent sense that formerly was called an ear. English prose is English prose, and has been, ever since Sir Thomas Browne. But R. L. S. is dead. You, and only you, remain alive—to make majestic music to the ear in a period that has become eye-minded and tone-deaf. I do not really wish to quarrel with you. I ask only that you shall give me, very quickly, something more to read; and, when I say *that*, I mean, of course, to read *aloud*."

Upon the windy summit of the Danish barrow, an appreciable silence passed before the large man with the boyish face said anything at all. At last he spoke, seriously and almost carefully; again I give his meaning but not his exact words.

"What you have said has touched me very deeply, because I know it is sincere. And yet, I doubt very much if I shall ever write another book. . . . A certain amount of what a countryman of yours called *life* must go into the making of any page of prose. The effort is enormous."

"But everybody praises you", I interjected, "for your graceful ease."

"A sentence that is easy to read may have been difficult to put together. Perhaps the greater the easiness in reading, the harder that task in composition. Writing is not easy: I need not tell you that. There is always a pleasure in the exercise; but, also, there is always an agony in the endeavour. If we make a formula of those two motives, I think we may define the process. It is, at its best, a pleasurable agony."

"I am not a professional writer. I never have been, and I never will be, by reason of the accident that I don't need any money. I do not care for notoriety: in fact, it is distasteful to me. If I should ever become a popular author, my privacy would be disrupted and I should no longer be allowed to live alone."

"What, then, is the use of writing, for a person like myself? The answer might seem cryptic to most. It is merely that a fellow entertains a sort of hope that, somehow, sometime, he may build a noble sentence that might make Sir Thomas Browne sit upward once again in that inhospitable grave of his in Norwich."

"But language—before this ancient world grew up and went astray—was intended to

be spoken to the ear. We are living now in an eye-minded age, when he who runs may read and the average person glimpses his daily reading on the run. What is the use, any longer, of toying with the pleasurable agony of attempting stately sentences of English prose? Apart from you and myself, who sit alone upon this ancient barrow, there are not more than six men in the United Kingdom who have inherited an ear for prose. I would set Austin Dobson at the top of the list; he is endowed with a delicate and dainty sense of rhythm. Rudyard Kipling knows his King James Bible, and that means very much—now that John Ruskin has passed away. But, tell me, in *your* country, is there anyone at all who still entertains an ear for English prose?"

I mentioned one. His name—till then unknown—was Brian Hooker.

"And all that agony, for half a dozen readers."

"The lovers of *The Wind in the Willows* have been counted by the thousands," I objected. "All of them are eagerly awaiting another book by the same author."

"They liked the subject-matter," he replied. "They did not even notice the source of all the agony, and all the joy. A large amount of what Thoreau called life went into the making of many of those playful pages. To toil at making sentences means to sit indoors for many hours, cramped above a desk. Yet, out of doors, the wind may be singing through the willows, and my favourite sow

may be preparing to deliver a large litter in the fullness of the moon."

V

The month of July, in 1932, was a time of grievous trouble in the world. The Prime Minister of Great Britain was presiding over a conference at Lausanne which had to do with international finance. Other leaders of the English-speaking world were busy at Geneva in a conference which had to do with armaments. The United States was noisy with politics and all of the absurd tumult incidental to the initiation of a Presidential campaign. The newspapers were crowded with accounts of meaningless excursions and alarms.

Under these circumstances, little attention was attracted by a simple item of news which was telegraphed to the Associated Press on the date of the sixth of July. It read:

Kenneth Grahame died today, at Pangbourne, on the Thames, at the age of seventy-two.

I doubt if anybody took the trouble to deliver this dispatch to Mr. Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister of Great Britain. I am certain that no one hauled the British ensign to half-mast, in Westminster or Geneva or Lausanne. And yet it is a truth that, on that day, the translators of the King James version of the Bible, seated at an eternal council-table, admitted to their fellowship the last great master of English prose, and that Great Britain lost the loveliest of all her living souls.

THE BOOKMAN'S SURVEY
OF THE NEW BOOKS

A Selected Shelf

76

THE VICTORIAN SUNSET *by Esmé Wingfield-Stratford*—ETRUSCAN PLACES *by D. H. Lawrence*—AMID THESE STORMS *by Winston S. Churchill*—A GUIDE THROUGH WORLD CHAOS *by G. D. H. Cole*—THE PERSONAL MEMOIRS OF JOFFRE *translated by Colonel T. Bentley Mott*—SEX IN THE ARTS: A SYMPOSIUM—RICHARD WAGNER *by Guy de Pourtalès*—OUT OF THE PAST OF GREECE AND ROME *by Michael I. Rostovtzeff*—TWILIGHT OF ROYALTY *by Alexander, Grand Duke of Russia*—SOUTH AMERICAN MEDITATIONS *by Count Hermann Keyserling*

Five Novels

REVIEWED BY DOROTHEA BRANDE

86

WOMEN AGAINST MEN *by Storm Jameson*—YOUNG WOMAN OF 1914 *by Arnold Zweig*—BEFORE THE FACT *by Francis Iles*—BRED IN THE BONE *by Eden Phillpotts*—TRISTAN AND ISOLDE *by John Erskine*

Keeping up with the Novelists

89

NEVER ASK THE END *by Isabel Paterson*—IN TRAGIC LIFE *by Vardis Fisher*—DEATH AND THE LOVER *by Hermann Hesse*—THE ANXIOUS DAYS *by Philip Gibbs*—THE HEARTLESS LAND *by James Stern*—FORGIVE US OUR TRESPASSES *by Lloyd C. Douglas*

The Bookman's Guide to Fiction

96

A handy annotated check-list of current fiction, including novels reviewed in the previous two sections.

At a Glance

98

Compressed notes on publications in various fields of non-fiction to which THE BOOKMAN desires to draw attention.

A SELECTED SHELF

THE VICTORIAN SUNSET by *Esmé Wingfield-Stratford* (MORROW. \$3.50)

MR. Wingfield-Stratford slays no giants in this book and discovers no heroes: his aim is to present, with all the graces of modern social history, an impartial survey of England during the last three decades of the nineteenth century. But beneath the lightness of his presentation, the reader can scarcely fail to discern a tragic and sombre text.

That heavy Victorian summer, which had arisen in the forties, was now beginning to fade: Mr. Wingfield-Stratford does not consider these seventies Victorian in the true sense—already the first signs of autumn were in their skies, already the promise of a long winter. But the public in general was convinced that this summer would never die. Everything was on the increase—wealth, children, cities, ships, inventions, and the guidance of everything could be left to Science, the new God, the God who took no account at all of the human good.

The Church, preoccupied with a sort of trench-warfare between High and Low, scarcely noticed that her Bible was being openly questioned in good society, or cared that her people were content to let a new inhuman God do all the thinking and all the dreaming for them. Here lay the real tragedy. Upon a fearful illusion of Progress—an illusion that things could go on multiplying themselves forever—these Victorians founded their conviction of security: and to a world whose face was rich and startling they made no spiritual adjustment whatsoever.

But though they felt that nothing could harm this security, its realities were not enlivening; and some escape had to be contrived from the monotony of daily life. So the great middle class, hitherto satisfied with itself, began to ape its betters; and Matthew Arnold's Mr. Bottles, that stolid Philistine, visibly shrank into Charles Dickens's Mr. Veneering, about whom everything was new—house, wife, baby, friends, clothes, gentility.

Nor was this all. Like an omen too vast for interpretation, the Queen emerged from her underworld at Balmoral—a fully-fledged goddess, with the Crown of India upon her head: and all sorts and conditions of Englishmen, under Disraeli's guidance, began to spin dreams of empire—dreams which, so history could have told them, were laden with disaster. England the self-satisfied had become England the self-conscious.

In the eighties, Mr. Wingfield-Stratford points us to a more profound social change. With the rise of a literate proletariat (heralded by the new popular press under Newnes and Harmsworth) Society was prepared to make some protective advances to the middle class: and the old Philistine died once and for all. Just as Mr. Bottles had shrunk to Mr. Veneering, so Mr. Veneering swelled again into *Punch's* Mrs. Ponsonby de Tomkyns, who desired nothing less than the society of duchesses, and might have it after a fashion so long as she could pay. Suburbia, which could not pay, set up its own imitation of Belgravia; and middle-class men and women, discontented with their secure life, took refuge in little games of lords and ladies.