In The Three Greatest Libraries

by James H. Canfield
Librarian of Columbia University
and Dorothy Canfield

With Pictures and Decorations by
Edward Edwards

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The British Museum

RIGHT in the heart of London stands the British Museum. Nothing could more perfectly misrepresent the greatest collection of books in England than this name, for it is not a museum, though in the same building with one, and it is most decidedly not British. Perhaps no other one human institution is so cosmopolitan and universal. Not only are its books gathered from every land under the sun, but the motley crowd that assembles to read them is composed of members of every known nationality.

That is what strikes the reader new to the British Museum the first time he sits down under the immense dome of the reading-room. He has worked with a Russian sociologist on one side of him and a Japanese student of music on the other. He has heard every language he ever knew, and some strange to him. He has come in contact with every class of society. There is something very exhilarating about the atmosphere created by this enormous diversity of origin fused into a common world. All the marks of superficial differences of race and color and training fall away, and the student feels that he is one of a vast community apart from the world with its surface distinctions, homogeneous and one in purpose. In the first place, the equipment is as nearly perfect as anything human can be. Every reader has a desk with ink and blotter, a shelf for his reference-books, an ingeniously arranged rest for books too large to hold, the most luxurious of large leather-padded chairs, and a footstool. Once ensconced in this agreeable nest, the reader has the world of books at his command; as a matter of fact, two million. The service is astonishingly quick and sure, and the immense catalogue almost absolutely complete.

If a reader does not find his book listed in the catalogue of the reading-room, he knows it must be in the Manuscript Room or Newspaper Room, as there are so many ways in which the classification of books may overlap. So he goes at once to one or the other of these, sure that the most priceless of manuscripts will be put into his hands freely and without hindrance—or that he will find any and every newspaper file that can possibly aid him in his work. The location of the library in the same building with the enormous collections of the British Museum is of great value.

Once he has the book he needs, and as many more as he can possibly use, he settles to his work with an ardor partly due to his surroundings. The great circular room is almost perfectly still except for the rustling of a forest of paper leaves; the attendants step quickly about, laden with books, and the great dome showers down a soft, diffused light on a company of silent figures bowed over their desks.

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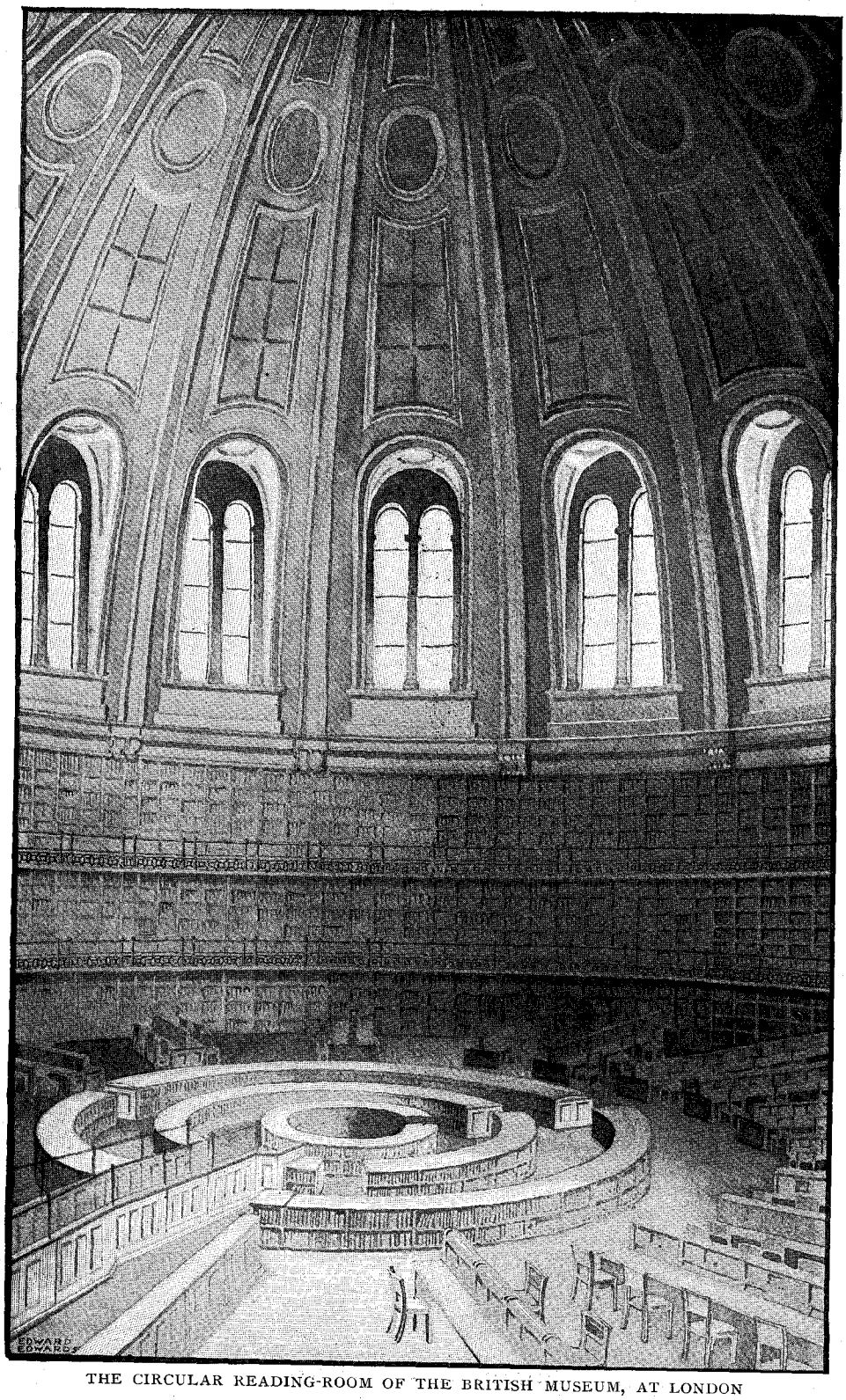

THE CIRCULAR READING-ROOM OF THE BRITISH MUSEUM, AT LONDON

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The National Library at Paris

PARIS is the home of the great French library. But it is really a national library; a storehouse of material for the study of every subject relating to France. Not that it is restricted to these subjects, or even weak in other lines—far from it—but these are the ones so commonly sought for here as to give the dominating note. The number of books on French history alone is 440,000. There are here, as in the British Museum, students of many nationalities—but here they are almost always from some country of Europe. No such numbers of Oriental students are to be seen here as in the institution across the Channel. Moreover, the diversity of nationality is here brought into a closer unity than in the British Museum by the fact that the majority of students are working along lines that have much in common—French art, history, language, literature, economics, religion, music.

The contents are catalogued completely only from books printed in 1875 (foreign) and 1882 (French). To all the rest of the enormous collection of 2,600,000 books the reader applies the time-honored formula of, "If you don't see what you want, ask for it!" As this is necessarily a vague process, he must expect to wait a long time to receive his books. The attendants are wonderfully adroit in looking up books and newspaper files asked for in this indeterminate manner and in utilizing the slightest of clues, but often they are gone several hours and the student must learn to keep on hand material enough to occupy him for most of the morning till he gets the book he called for on his entrance. This delay, which would irk beyond endurance the eager workers in the British Museum, is not so discordant a note in the Bibliothèque Nationale. What is perhaps in every one's mind at the mention of the French library is the enormously rich collection of mediæval manuscripts as yet unedited. For such slow, laborious work as this pioneering in unknown fields much time is required, and the student feels himself in an atmosphere of patient, scholarly research.

The treasures of charts and maps and illuminated manuscripts and rare bookbindings are admirably arranged in one or two collections. In some respects the restriction of these collections to objects that have a certain unity is an advantage as compared with the confusing universality of the British Museum.

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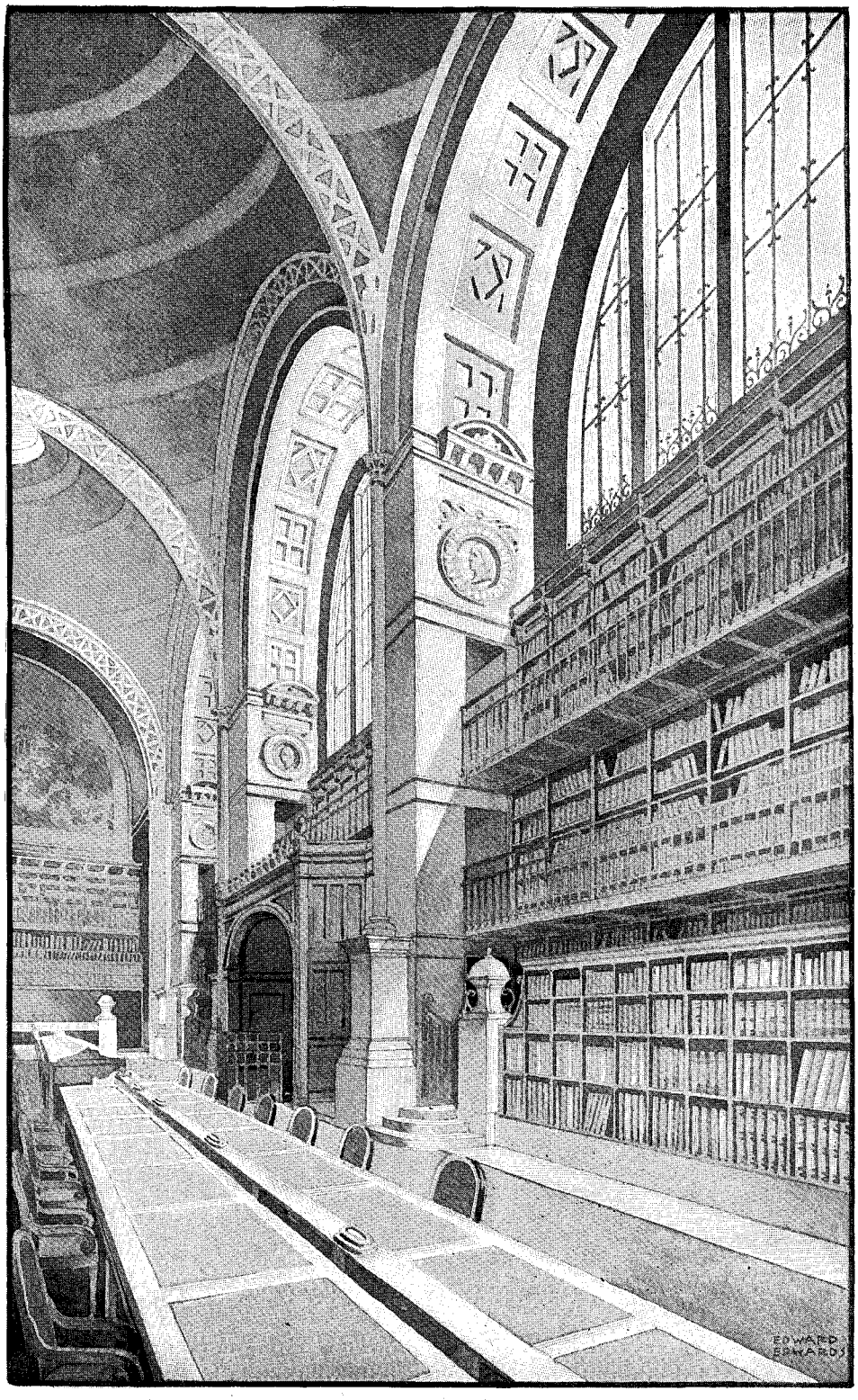

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY AT PARIS

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The Imperial Public Library of Russia

THE great library of Russia—the Imperial Public Library at St. Petersburg—brings another corroboration to the statement that libraries have individuality and above all nationality. It is as typical of Russia as the Bibliothèque Nationale is of France or the British Museum of England.

Astonishingly rich in some departments and astonishingly poor in others, unusually open to the public and unusually hard to use when once entered, in its management and contents it is full of the apparently impossible contradictions that strike the Western mind in the Russian nation as a whole. The books that are most accessible in other countries cannot be secured here, and, on the other hand, very valuable ones which a Western librarian would hesitate to intrust to a scholar are given to any applicant.

One trait this Slavonic institution has in common with the Bibliothèque Nationale—the insufficiency of its catalogues. Gaps and lacunæ of all kinds abound and the delays are extraordinary. There are not even enough of what inadequate catalogues there are, and at some times in the day it is impossible to secure one without a long wait. If the book called for is not in the nearest part of the library, the student is told that he must wait till three o'clock in the afternoon or until the next morning. As the library is open in the evening, however, this is not so positive a hardship as it would be in the Bibliothèque Nationale, which closes at dark.

Such a serious drawback as this is offset by the great ease of access to the library. Any one who presents a card with his name and address is admitted to free use of the 1,380,000 books—that is, as free as any one else has. Another primitive feature of this Russian collection is that the books are not brought to the student by the attendants. They are deposited on a central counter and must from there be transferred to the individual desks by the readers themselves. The inconvenience and difficulty of this arrangement can easily be imagined.

The class of books most used in general are here shut away from the public. Almost the entire field of belles-lettres is forbidden ground. This seemingly illogical and benighted measure is explained in a truly Russian manner. It is considered necessary because otherwise a frivolous, novel-reading public would flood the great reading-room and crowd out the workers in serious lines. There are a great many of these latter, as is not surprising when the wealth of certain departments is known. The Slavonic and Oriental manuscripts are rare and valuable beyond price, and great numbers of them as yet unedited. Hebrew documents of all kinds, Biblical codices, and Samaritan manuscripts are the specialties of the place. The collection of early Russian printed books is remarkably fine and complete.

In general, the library may be said to be distinctively Slavonic in its tendencies. It is, perhaps, on this account that it is so little known and used by European scholars.

E. E.

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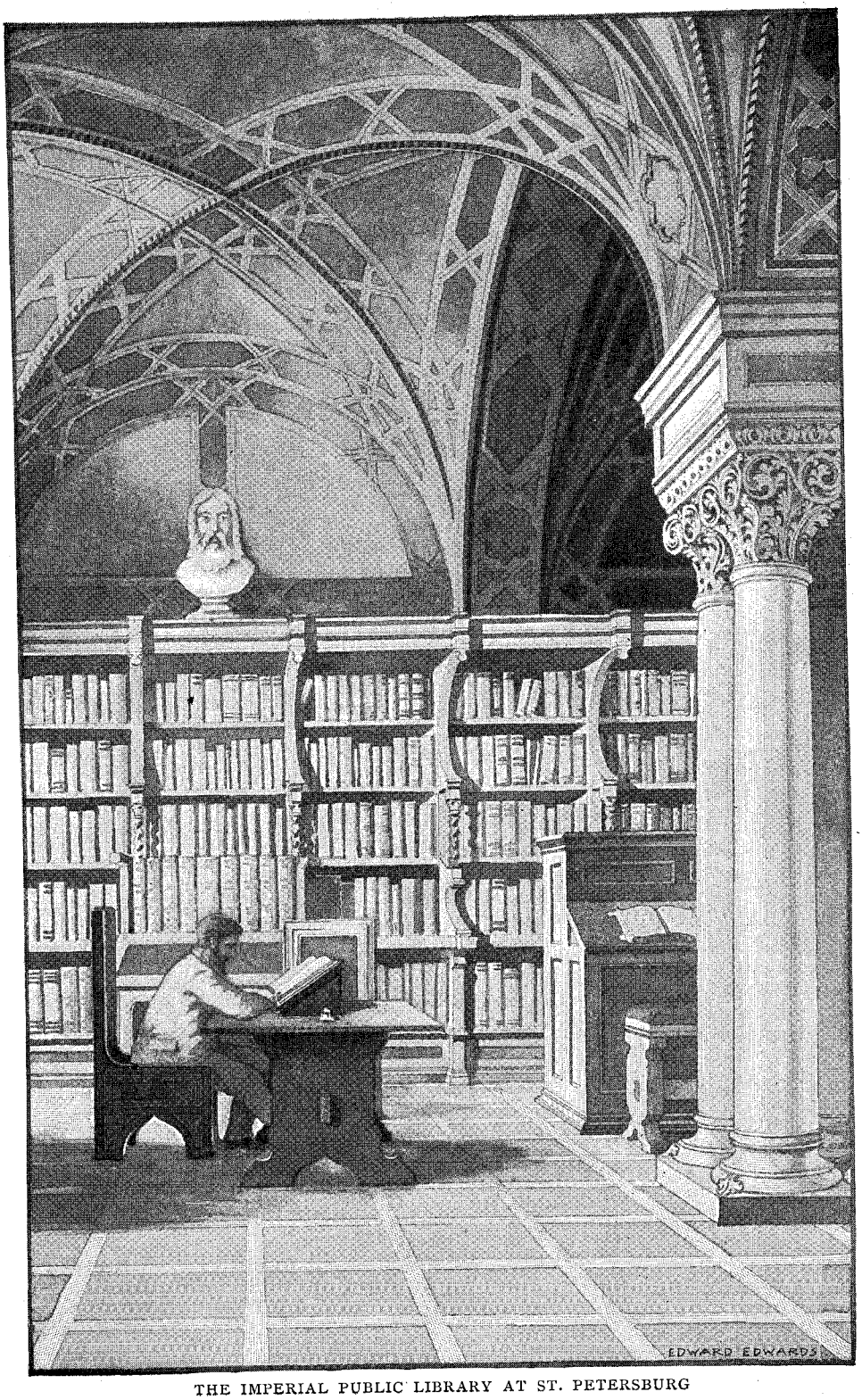

THE IMPERIAL PUBLIC LIBRARY AT ST. PETERSBURG

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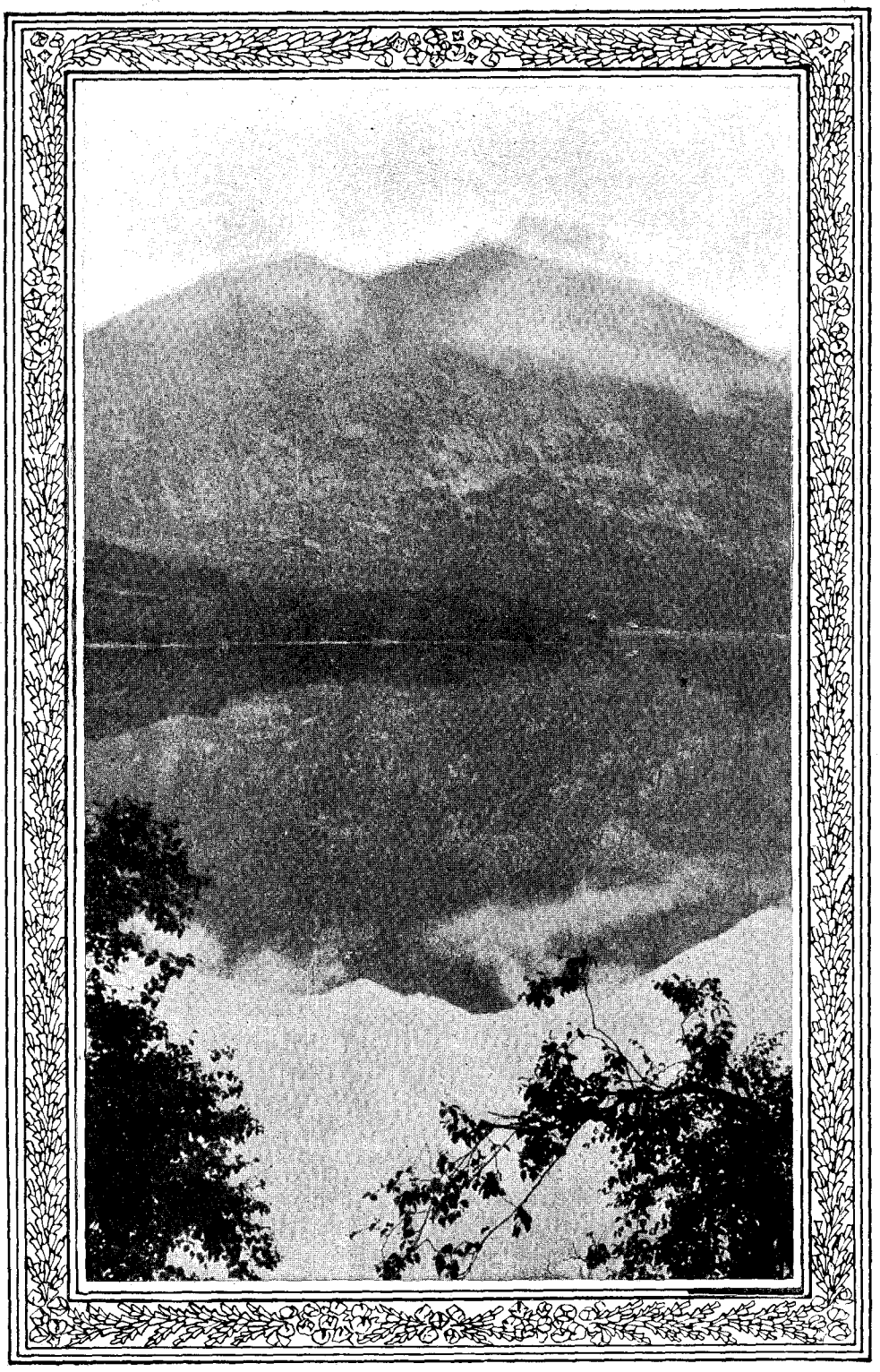

LOCH ACHRAY AND BEN VENUE

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THE LAND OF SCOTT

By Hamilton Wright Mabie

MR. LANG has said that, often as it has been his fortune to write about Sir Walter Scott, he has never sat down to do so without a sense of happiness and elation. "It is," he writes, "as if one were meeting a dear friend, or at least were to talk with other friends about him. This emotion is so strong, no doubt, because the name and memory and magic of Sir Walter are entwined with one's earliest recollections of poetry, and nature, and the vines and hills of home." It is easy, and of late years it has been a kind of literary convention, to emphasize the defects in Scott's work; its loose and often awkward construction, the verbosity of the style, the lack of selection and the consequent overcrowding of the story, the carelessness of a born raconteur who has more incidents at command than he can wisely use. There is something humorous in the patronizing attitude of a little group of very modern, deft, expert framers of sentences toward this large, friendly, affluent mind, this warm, generous, gracious spirit, who shares with Shakespeare, Lope de Vega, Dumas, and Victor Hugo the indifference of the possessor of a great fortune to the details of his bequests to his kind. Scott ought to have been more studious of form, more fastidious of style; he ought to have written with more deliberation and revised with more rigor; but when all these defects are charged up against him, how heavily the language and the race remain indebted to him, and how painfully lacking in perception is the criticism which reports the shadows but ignores the light which streams from this great-hearted man!

If the claim of the author of "Quentin Durward" to a large place in the literature of the English-speaking peoples could not be established by putting his works in evidence, the charm of his personality and the story of his heroic struggle to die with honor would invest him with a human and romantic interest of the kind which gives wings to certain names and sends them on a level flight with time.

The sensitiveness to form as form, the delicacy of taste in detail, the nice feeling for the subtle relations between thought and speech, the light touch on the magical elements in language, which constitute the artistic equipment of Poe, De Maupassant, Pater, and Henry James, are not to be found in Scott; he belongs to another order of artists, another class of those who minister to the needs of the spirit. Even these accomplished writers present large arid surfaces, and are at times unconscionable offenders against the very taste they cultivate. Poe permits himself the most repulsive detail in the introduction of horrors from which the sensitive instinctively

[1] Copyright, 1903, by the Outlook Company. This article, with others of a similar nature from Mr. Mabie's pen, is included in the volume entitled "Backgrounds of Literature," just published by the Outlook Company, New York.

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