

# The Phoenix Nest

## Hazlitt's False Death

**T**WO great English essayists, Charles Lamb and William Hazlitt, were close friends. Lamb was famous for sometimes crude high spirits in spite of a semi-tragic life. As a practical joke he once spread a report that Hazlitt had committed suicide. Considerably taken aback, but dissembling the fact, the latter replied with a "humble petition and remonstrance of William Hazlitt, showing that he is not dead," of which the following is an extract:

that he, the said W. Hazlitt, has regularly for the last month rang the bell at eleven at night, which

was considered as a sign for the girl to warm his bed, & this being done, he has gone to bed, & slept soundly for the next twelve or fourteen hours. Secondly, that every day about twelve or 1 o'clock he has got up, put on his clothes, drank his tea, & eat two platefulls of buttered toast, of which he had taken care to have the hard edges pared off as hurtful to the mouth & gums, & that he has then sat for some hours with his eyes steadfastly fixed upon the fire, like a person in a state of deep thought, but doing nothing . . . Also, that he has twice attempted to read some of his own works, but has fallen asleep over them . . . It should also be especially noted that within the last three weeks he has borrowed money of his friends, which was at all times his constant custom.

## How It Strikes a Contemporary

Inasmuch as the following concerns a book now regarded as one of the classics of European, and indeed of world, literature, it is somewhat paralyzing to read in the "Letters to an Incognita" of the French Academician, Prosper Mérimée, the following entry:

Cannes, January, 1863.—I have received the last novel by M. Gustave Flaubert, the author of "Madame Bovary," which I believe you have read, though you will not confess it. The new romance is "Salammbô," a crazy production; but the writer has talent which he fritters away under the pretext of realism.

## The Case of Caxton

It is strange to realize that the book first printed in the English language was not printed in England. In 1471 it came from a foreign press in Cologne. It was a translation of the "Recuyel of the Historyes of Troye" by Raoul le Févre," and it was at the same Cologne press that Caxton was initiated into the art of printing. At first he was but dubious of the success of the contrivance, and few commentators of the time seemed to notice it then. Caxton brought home with him from abroad, among others, two European printers whose names are now familiar to all booklovers, Wynkyn de Worde and Pynson. They lived in his house and became his successors after his death.

## Power of the Poet's Word

Two names famous in English poetry are those of the Earl of Surrey and Sir Thomas Wyatt. The former composed the first sonnets in the English language and also invented the first heroic blank verse. It is said of Wyatt, who was a wit, that he pro-

duced three great revolutions in England by three separate and casual remarks made in lighter vein. First, when at one time waiting upon King Henry VIII, he told him a comic story of curs baiting a butcher's dog, tangentially referring thereby to Cardinal Wolsey, as the butcher's son of Ipswich. This suggested a course of action to the King and brought about Wolsey's downfall. Second, when the king had grown very angry at the delay of his divorce, Wyatt broadly hinted, "Lord! that a man cannot repent of his sin but by the Pope's leave!"—which is said to have hastened the Reformation. Third, and last, as bluff King Hal was contemplating sudden seizure of the abbey lands, Wyatt satirically advised the division of such lands among the nobility and gentry by exclaiming, "Butter the rooks' nests!"

## Knives into Lords

John Gower, whom Chaucer acknowledged as his master in English poetry, lived in the time of Richard the Second, at the end of the fourteenth century, and satirized courts and courtiers. Nearly three centuries later, King Charles the First, upon a visit to the Marquess of Worcester at Ragland Castle, found a book of Gower's lying open on a table. The Marquess declared it to be the "book of books!" Asked then by the King to point out some particularly cogent passage, the noble read:

A king can kill, a king can save;  
A king can make a lord a knave;  
And of a knave, a lord also.

At this point certain newly-made lords were discovered rapidly scuttling from the room; and the king cried, laughing, "My lord, at this rate you will drive away all my nobility!"

## Gorgeous Lies

No one need advocate lying, particularly in a day when the European dictators have so usurped that privilege; but the great Sir Francis Bacon had this to say about it in his essay, "Of Truth":

A mixture of a lie doth ever add pleasure. Doth any man doubt that if there were taken out of men's minds vain opinions, flattering hopes, false valuations, imaginations as one would, and the like, but it would leave the minds of a number of men poor shrunken things, full of melancholy and indisposition, and unpleasing to themselves.

And who indeed would dispense with the magnificent fabrications of Sir John Maundeville, Benvenuto Cellini, or Baron Munchausen—or, indeed, concerning our own Paul Bunyan and others?

WILLIAM ROSE BENÉT



## Deliberate

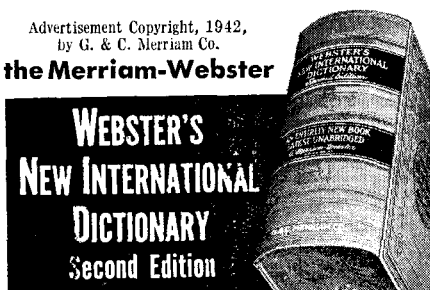
actually means  
"weighed in the scales"

**A** DELIBERATE decision is one based upon a weighing of the facts and arguments involved—and that is the literal meaning of the word *deliberate*. It is derived from the Latin *deliberatus*, formed from the verb *deliberare*, which is a combination of *de*, a prefix denoting "down," and hence "completely," and *librare*, "to weigh." *Librare* comes from *libra*, "a balance or pair of scales."

This is one of the thousands of interesting word origins given in the unabridged Merriam-Webster, WEBSTER'S NEW INTERNATIONAL DICTIONARY, Second Edition. This great reference book provides a wealth of general information. It contains 600,000 entries—122,000 more entries than any other dictionary. 12,000 terms illustrated; 3,350 pages. **WARNING:** The only genuine Webster is the Merriam-Webster. Look for the Merriam-Webster name and circular trade-mark on the cover. Ask your bookdealer to show it to you. Write for free illustrated booklet of interesting word origins to G. & C. Merriam Company, 928 Federal Street, Springfield, Massachusetts.

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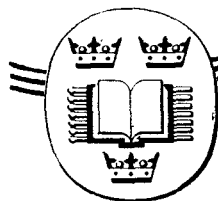
## American Letters

LIVING LETTERS FROM AMERICAN HISTORY. Edited by Francis Boykin. Garden City: Halcyon House. 1942. 376 pp. \$1.98.

Reviewed by ALLAN NEVINS

WANDERING several years ago through the Manuscript Division of the Library of Congress, Mr. Boykin was fascinated by two letters: André's appeal to Washington that as a British officer and man of honor, he might die before a firing-squad and not "on a gibbet," and General James Varnum's letter to Washington from Valley Forge declaring that the troops were starving—for three days had been without bread, for two days without meat. These letters had a poignancy not encountered in formal history. Mr. Boykin began to wonder if many others like them, expressive of the strongest emotions of historic personages, might not be found. He began a long hunt for earnest and vivid utterances, looking through libraries of printed books and through manuscript collections. The result is here before us in a collection which begins with Washington, Abigail Adams, and Franklin, and which ends with Woodrow Wilson and Theodore Roosevelt. They include, as the editor writes, "letters rich in drama, letters of sacrifice, letters of patriotism, letters of courage and despair, letters of treachery, letters from the scaffold, letters from the battlefields, letters of victory and defeat, letters breathing the American spirit of liberty and independence, letters . . . rich in the tradition of America."

The value of a book like this must depend, first, upon the possession of some guiding plan or theme, and second, upon the freshness or originality of its contents. Mr. Boykin's collection deserves praise on both accounts. He has not chosen letters from the enormous store available simply because they were written by illustrious men and women, or because they relate to famous events. He has required of each letter a high emotional content, the expression of deeply-aroused feeling; they must be "living" letters. This brings in such documents as John Adams's account of how the Declaration of Independence was written, Andrew Jackson's letter to Joel Poinsett on the suppression of Calhoun's "treason and rebellion" in South Carolina, and Lincoln's letter to Mrs. Bixby; but the test excludes the cold and polished epistles of Henry Adams. Mr. Boykin has contrived to touch American history at a great number of points where it kindled the feelings of actors to incandescence. Jefferson complaining to



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