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BROUGHT BACK FROM ELYSIUM.

J.M.Barrie 1890.

SCENE.- The Library of a Piccadilly club for high thinking and bad dinners. Time midnight. Four eminent novelists of the day regarding each other self-consciously. They are (1) a Realist, (2) a Romancist, (3) an Elsmirian, (4) a Stylist. The clock strikes thirteen, and they all start.

REALIST (staring at the door and drawing back from it. 'I thought I heard-something?')

STYLIST -I-the--(pauses to reflect on the best way of saying it was only the clock).

(A step is heard on the stair.)

ELSMERIAN.-Hark! It must be him and them. (Stylist shudders). I knew he would not fail us.

ROMANCIIST (nervously).-It may only be some member of the club.

ELSMERIAN The hall-porter said we would be safe from intrusion in the library.

REALIST I hear nothing now. (His hand comes in contact with a bookcase). How cold and clammy to the touch these books are. A. strange place, gentlemen, for an eerie interview. (To Elsmirian). You really think they will come? You have no religious doubts about the existence of Elysian Fields ?

ELSMERIAN. I do not believe in Elysium, but I believe in him.

REALIST Still if--

(The door is shaken and the handle falls off.)

ROMANCIIST Ah! Even I have never imagined anything so weird as this. See, the door opens!

(Enter an American novelist.)

OMNES only you!

AMERICAN (looking around him self-consciously).- I had always suspected that there was a library, though I have only been a member for a few months. Why do you look at me so strangely ?

ELSMERIAN (after whispering with the others).-We are agreed that since you have found your way here you should be permitted to stay; on the understanding, of course, that we still disapprove of your methods as profoundly as we despise each other.

AMERICAN But what are you doing here, when you might be asleep downstairs?

ELSMERIAN (impressively) -Have you never wished to hold converse with the mighty dead ?

AMERICAN I don't know them.

ELSMERIAN.-I admit that the adjective was ill-chosen, but listen: the ghosts of Scott and some other novelists will join us presently. We are to talk with them about their work.

REALIST And ours.

ELSMERIAN And ours. They are being brought from the Grove of Bay-trees in the Elysian Fields.

AMERICAN But they are antiquated, played out and, besides, they will not come.

ROMANCIIST You don't understand. Stanley has gone for them.

AMERICAN Stanley!

ELSMERIAN It was a chance not to be missed. (Looks at his watch). They should have been here by this time; but on these occasions he is sometimes a little late.

(Their mouths open as a voice rings through the club crying, "I cannot stop to argue with you; I'll find the way myself.")

REALIST It is he, but he may be alone. Perhaps they declined to accompany him?

ELSMERIAN (with conviction) He would bring them whether they wanted to come or not.

(Enter Mr. Stanley with five Ghosts.)

Mr. STANLEY Here they are. I hope the row below did not alarm you. The hall-porter wanted to know if I was a member, so I shot him. Waken me when you are ready to send them back.

(Sits down and sleeps immediately.)

FIRST GHOST. I am Walter Scott.

SECOND GHOST I am Henry Fielding.

THIRD GHOST My name is Smollett.

FOURTH GHOST Mine is Dickens.

FIFTH GHOST They used to call me Thack.

ALL THE GHOSTS (looking at the sleeper).-And we are a little out of breath.

AMERICAN (to himself).-There is too much plot in this for me.

ELSMERIAN (to the visitors).-Quite so. Now will you be so good as to stand in a row against that bookcase. (They do so.) Perhaps you have been wondering why we troubled to send for you ?

Sir WALTER We--

ELSMERIAN -You need not answer me, for it really doesn't matter. Since your days a great change has come over fiction-a kind of literature at which you all tried your hands-and it struck us that you might care to know how we moderns regard you.

REALIST And ourselves.

ELSMERIAN And ourselves. We had better begin with ourselves, as the night is already far advanced. You will be surprised to hear that fiction has become an art.

FIELDING I am glad we came, though the gentleman (looking at the sleeper) was perhaps a little peremptory. You are all novelists?

ROMANCIIST No, I am a Romancist, this gentleman is a Realist, that one is a Stylist, and--

ELSMERIAN We had better explain to you that the word novelist has gone out of fashion in our circles. We have left it behind us--

Sir WALTER I was always content with story-teller myself.

AMERICAN Story-teller! All the stories have been told.

Sir WALTER (wistfully). How busy you must have been since my day.

ROMANCIIST.-We have, indeed, and not merely in writing stories- to use the language of the nursery. Now that fiction is an art, the work of its followers consists less in writing mere stories (to repeat a word that you will understand more readily than we) than in classifying ourselves and (when we have time for it) classifying you.

THACKERAY But the term novelist satisfied us.

ELSMERIAN There is a difference, I hope, between then and now. I cannot avoid speaking plainly, though I allow that you are the seed from which the tree has grown. May I ask what was your first step toward becoming novelists.

SMOLLETT (with foolish promptitude) We wrote a novel.

THACKERAY (humbly) I am afraid I began by wanting to write a good story, and then wrote it to the best of my ability. Is there any other way?

STYLIST But how did you laboriously acquire your style?

THACKERAY I thought little about style. I suppose, such as it was, it came naturally.

STYLIST Pooh! Then there is no art in it.

ELSMERIAN And what was your aim?

THACKERAY Well, I had reason to believe that I would get something for it.

ELSMERIAN Alas! to you the world was not a sea of drowning souls, nor the novel a stone to fling to them, that they might float on it to a quiet haven. You had no aims, no methods, no religious doubts, and you neither analysed your characters nor classified yourselves.

AMERICAN And you reflected so little about your art that you wrote story after story without realising that all the stories had been told.

Sir WALTER But if all the stories are told, how can you write novels?

A.MERICAN The story in a novel is of as little importance as the stone in a cherry. I have written three volumes about a lady and a gentleman who met on a car.

Sir WALTER Yes, what happened to them?

AMERICAN Nothing happened. That is the point of the story.

STYLIST Style is everything. The true novelist does nothing but think:, think, think about his style, and then write, write, write about it. I daresay I am one of the most perfect stylists living. Oh, but the hours: the days, the years of introspection I have spent in acquiring my style!

THACKERAY (sadly). -If I had only thought more of style! May I ask how many books you have written ?

STYLIST Only one-and that I have withdrawn from circulation. Ah, sir, I am such a stylist that I dare not write anything. Yet I meditate a work.

Sir WALTER A story?

STYLIST No, an essay on style. I shall devote four years to it.

Sir WALTER And I wrote two novels in four months!

STYLIST Yes, that is still remembered against you. Well, you paid the penalty, for your books are still popular.

DICKENS But is not popularity nowadays a sign of merit?

STYLIST To be popular is to be damned.

Sir WALTER. I can see from what you tell me that I was only a child. I thought little about how novels should be written. I only tried to write them, and as for style, I am afraid I merely used the words that came most readily. (Stylist groans.) I had such an interest in my characters (American groans), such a love for them (Realist groans), that they were like living beings to me. Action seemed to come naturally to them, and all I had to do was to run after them with my pen.

ROMANCIIST In the dark days you had not a cheap press, nor scores of magazines and reviews. Ah, we have many opportunities that were denied to you.

FIELDING We printed our stories in books.

ROMANCIIST I was not thinking of the mere stories. It is not our stories that we spend much time over, but the essays, and discussions and interviews about our art. Why, there is not a living man in this room, except the sleeper, who has not written as many articles and essays about how novels should be written as would stock a library.

SMOLLETT But we thought that the best way of showing how they should be written was to write them.

REALIST (bitingly) And as a result, you cannot say at this moment whether you are a Realist, a Romancist, an American Analyst., a Stylist, or an Elsmerian! Your labours have been fruitless.

SMOLLETT What am I ?

ROMANCIIST -I refuse to include you among novelists at all, for your artistic views (which we have discovered for you) are different from mine. You are a Realist. Therefore I blot you out.

Sir WALTER (anxiously). I suppose I am a Romancist?

REALIST Yes, and therefore I cannot acknowledge you. Your work has to go.

AMERICAN It has gone. I never read it. Indeed, I can't stand any of you. In short, I am an American Analyst.

DICKENS (dreamily).-One of the most remarkable men in that country .

AMERICAN Yes, sir, I am one of its leading writers of fiction without a story-along with Silas K. Weekes, Thomas John Hillocks, William P. Crinkle, and many others whose fame must have reached the Grove of Bay-trees. We write even more essays about ourselves than they do in this old country.

ELSMERIAN Nevertheless, Romanticism, Realism, and Analysis are mere words, as empty as a drum. Religious doubt is the only subject for the novelist nowadays; and if he is such a poor creature as to have no religious doubts, he should leave fiction alone.

STYLIST Style is everything. I can scarcely sleep at nights for thinking of my style.

FIELDING This, of course, is very interesting to us who know so little, yet, except that it enables you to label yourselves, it does not seem to tell you much. After all, does it make a man a better novelist to know that other novelists pursue the wrong methods? 'You seem to despise each other cordially, while Smollett and I, for instance, can enjoy Sir Walter. We are content to judge him by results, and to consider him a great novelist because he wrote great novels.

ELSMERIAN You will never be able to reach our standpoint if you cannot put the mere novels themselves out of the question. The novelist should be considered quite apart from his stories.

REALIST It is nothing to me that I am a novelist, but I am proud of being a Realist. That is the great thing.

ROMANCIIST Consider, Mr. Smollett, if you had thought and written about yourself as much as I have done about myself you might never have produced one of the works by which you are now known. That would be something to be proud of. You might have written romances, like mine and Sir Walter's.

ELSMERIAN Or have had religious doubts.

STYLIST Or have become a Stylist, and written nothing at all.

REALIST And you, Sir Walter, might have become one of us.

THACKERAY But why should we not have written simply in the manner that suited us best? If the result is good, who cares for the label?

ROMANCIIST (eyeing Sir Walter severely) No one has any right to be a Romancist unconsciously. Romance should be written with an effort -as I write it. I question, sir, if you ever defined romance?

Sir WALTER (weakly) I had a general idea of it, and I thought that perhaps my books might be allowed to speak for me.

ROMANCIIST We have got beyond that stage. Romance (that is to say, fiction) has been defined by one of its followers as "not nature, it is not character, it is not

imagined history; it is fallacy, poetic fallacy; a lie, if you like, a beautiful lie, a lie that is at once false and true-false to fact, true to faith."

(The Ghosts look at each other apprehensively).

Sir WALTER Would you mind repeating that? (Romancist repeats it) And all my novels all that? To think of their being that, and I never knew! I give you my word, sir; that when I wrote "Ivanhoe," for example, I merely wanted to tell a story.

REALIST Still, in your treatment of the Templar, you boldly cast off the chains of Romanticism and rise to Realism.

ELSMERIAN. To do you justice, the Templar seems to have religious doubts.

STYLIST I once wrote a little paper on your probable reasons for using the word "wand" in circumstances that would perhaps have justified the use of "reed." I have not published it.

Sir WALTER This would be more gratifying to me if I thought that I deserved it.

AMERICAN I remember reading "Ivanhoe" before I knew any better; but even then I thought it poor stuff. There is no analysis in it worthy of the name. Why did Rowena drop her handkerchief? Instead of telling us that, you prance off after a band of archers. Do you really believe that intellectual men and women are interested in tournaments?

Sir WALTER You have grown so old since my day. Besides, I have admitted that the Waverley novels were written simply to entertain the public.

ELSMERIAN No one, I hope, reads my stories for entertainment. We have become serious now.

A.MERICAN I have thought at times that I could have made some- thing of "Ivanhoe." Yes, sir, if the theme had been left to me I would have worked it out in a manner quite different from yours. In my mind's eye I can see myself developing the character of the hero. I would have made him more like ourselves. The Rebecca, too, I would have reduced in size. Of course the plot would have had to go overboard, with Robin Hood and Richard, and we would have had no fighting. Yes, it might be done. I would call it, let me see, I would call it, "Wilfrid: a Study."

THACKERAY (timidly).- Have you found out what I am ?

AMERICAN You are intolerably prosy.

STYLIST Some people called Philistines maintain that you are a Stylist; but evidently you forgot yourself too frequently for that.

ROMANCIIST You were a cynic, which kills romanticism.

REALIST And men allow their wives to read you, so you don't belong to us.

AMERICAN (testily) No, sir, you need not turn to me. You and I have nothing in common.

DICKENS I am a--?

REALIST It is true that you wrote about the poor; but how did you treat them? Are they all women of the street and brawling ruffians? Instead of dwelling for ever on their sodden misery, and gloating over their immorality, you positively regard them from a genial standpoint. I regret to have to say it, but you are a Romancist.

ROMANCIIST No, no, Mr. Dickens, do not cross to me. You wrote with a purpose, sir. Remember Dotheboys Hall.

ELSMERIAN A novel without a purpose is as a helmless ship.

DICKENS (aghast) Then I am an Elsmerian?

ELSMERIAN Alas! you had no other purpose than to add to the material comforts of the people. Not one of your characters was troubled with religious doubts. Where does Mr. Pivkwick pause to ask himself why he should not be an atheist? You cannot answer. In these days of earnest self-communion we find Mr. Pickwick painfully wanting. How can readers rise from his pages in distress of mind? You never give them a chance.

THACKERAY No, there is nothing sickly about Pickwick.

ELSMERIAN Absolutely nothing. He is of a different world (I am forced to say this) from that in which my heroes move. Not, indeed, that they do move much. Give me a chair and a man with doubts, and I will give you a novel. He has only to sit on that chair--

STYLIST As I sit on mine, thinking, thinking, thinking about my style.

DICKENS Young people in love are out of fashion in novels nowadays, I suppose?

ELSMERIAN Two souls in doubt may meet and pule as one.

THACKERAY As a novelist I had no loftier belief than this-that high art is high morality, and that the better the literature the more ennobling it must be.

REALIST And this man claimed to be one of us!

DICKENS I wrote for a wide public (Stylist sighs), whom I loved (Realist sighs). I loved my characters, too (American sighs), they seemed so real to me (Romancist sighs), and so I liked to leave them happy. I believe I wanted to see the whole world happy (Elsmerian sighs).

Sir WALTER I also had that ambition.

THACKERAY. Do you even find Mr. Pickwick's humour offensive nowadays?

ROMANCIST To treat a character with humour is to lift him from his pedestal to the earth.

ELSMERIAN We have no patience with humour. In these days of anxious thought humour seems a trivial thing. The world has grown sadder since your time, and we novelists of today begin where you left off. Were I to write a continuation of "The Pickwick Papers," I could not treat the subject as Mr. Dickens did; I really could not.

STYLIST Humour is vulgar.

AMERICAN Humour, sir, has been refined and chastened since the infancy of fiction, and I am certain that were my humorous characters to meet yours mine would be made quite uncomfortable. Mr. Pickwick could not possibly be received in the drawing-room of Sara H. Finney, and Sam Weller would be turned out of her kitchen. I believe I am not overstating the case when I say that one can positively laugh at your humour.

DICKENS They used to laugh.

AMERICAN Ah, they never laugh at mine.

DICKENS But if I am not a Realist, nor a Romancist, nor an Elsmesian, nor a St--

AMERICAN Oh, we have placed you. In Boston we could not live without placing everybody, and you are ticketed a caricaturist.

DICKENS (sighing) I liked the old way best, of being simply a novelist.

AMERICAN That was too barbarous for Boston. We have analysed your methods, and found them puerile. You have no subtle insight into character. You could not have written a novel about a lady's reasons for passing the cruet. Nay, more, we find that you never drew either a lady or a gentleman. Your subsidiary characters alone would rule you out of court. To us it is hard work to put all we have to say about a lady and gentleman who agree not to become engaged into three volumes. But you never send your hero twelve miles in a coach without adding another half-dozen characters to your list. There is no such lack of artistic barrenness in our school.

SMOLLETT (enthusiastically) What novels do you who think so much about the art must write nowadays! You will let us take away a few samples?

(The live novelists cough.)

REALIST (huskily) You-you have heard of our work in the Grove of Bay-trees?

Sir WALTER (apologetically). You see we are not in the way of hearing-(politely). But we look forward to meeting you there some day.

THACKERAY And resuming this conversation. None of you happens to be the gentleman who is rewriting Shakespeare and Homer, I suppose? It is of no consequence; I only thought that if he had been here I would have liked to look at him. That is all.

FIELDING (looking at the sleeper) He said he would take us back.

(The novelists shake Mr. Stanley timidly, but he sleeps on.)

STYLIST (with a happy inspiration).- Emin--

Mr. STANLEY (starting to his feet). -You are ready ? Fall in behind me. Quick march--

Sir WALTER You won't mind carrying these books for us ?

(Gives Stanley samples of Realism, Elsmatism, &c.)

Mr. STANLEY. Right. I shall give them to the first man we meet in Piccadilly to carry.

ROMANCIIST (foolishly). He may refuse.

Mr. STANLEY (grimly) I think not. Now then--

ELSMERIAN (good-naturedly) A moment, sir. We have shown these gentlemen how the art of fiction has developed since their day, and now if they care to offer us a last word of advice.

Sir WALTER We could not presume.

THACKERAY As old-fashioned novelists of some repute at one time, we might say this: that perhaps if you thought and wrote less about your styles and methods and the aim of fiction, and, in short, forgot yourselves now and again in your stories, you might get on better with your work. Think it over.

Mr. STANLEY Quick march.

(The novelists are left looking at each other self-consciously.)

Enjoyed this? Why not join the J.M.Barrie Literary Society and be part of the movement to bring his work back into the public out of the shadows of *Peter Pan*

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