

## SIR LESLIE STEPHEN

How great a man went from among us when Leslie Stephen died becomes apparent if we think for a moment how much might appropriately be said in this place of him and his work, and then think how large a part of him and his work would still remain unnoticed. If, as perhaps we ought, we try to leave out of sight the critic, the essayist, the biographer, if we shut our eyes to the 'Sunset from Mont Blanc,' refuse to listen to the 'Praise of Walking,' and endeavour to forget the 'Forgotten Benefactors,' we still see the historian of philosophic thought, the scientific moralist, the rational assailant of theology, the organizer of the grandest historical enterprise that the England of our age has seen. But if ever man was one and indivisible, that man was Leslie Stephen: a great contemner of boundaries, whom no scheme of the sciences, no delimitation of departments, would keep in the highway if he had a mind to go across country. And across country he would go, thinking freely and speaking plainly.

Leslie Stephen was born on Nov. 28, 1832. He was younger by three and a half years than his brother the future Sir James Fitzjames. One contrast between them soon disclosed itself. Leslie was a very delicate child. It long was doubtful whether he would ever be capable of any strenuous exertion of mind or body. To stimulate his intellect or his imagination was unnecessary; on the contrary, doctors prescribed life in the open air and a strict abstention from poetry, for poetry went to his head like wine. Even stories of adventure were too exciting. When he was eight years old he for about a year attended a school at Brighton, but only as a day boy. In the spring of 1842 he went to Eton, but again only as a day boy. He left Eton when he had just turned fourteen. Though he had not much bullying to complain of, he could afterwards recall the sufferings of 'a pale, delicate boy with thin limbs and spider fingers, and a sensitive organization, set down amidst some hundreds of lads as mischievous and thoughtless as monkeys—a poor little fragment of humanity, kicked contemptuously aside, and heartily ashamed of himself for his undeniable atrocity.' He had shown ability and diligence in his school work, especially in such mathematics as were

taught at Eton; but his tutor 'spoke strongly of his want of success in composition,' and his father removed him, thinking that time enough had been wasted in an unsuccessful attempt to produce Etonian elegiacs. For a short time he went to a school at Wimbledon, but only as a day boy, and afterwards for about two years he was by way of going to King's College, London, but his attendance there was intermittent, and two winters had to be passed in the warmth of Torquay. In the October of 1850, when he was not yet eighteen, he began his career at Cambridge as an undergraduate at Trinity Hall. By this time his robust brother was finishing his course at Trinity. A small college—it was then a very small college—was chosen for Leslie, because it was thought that the examinations at Trinity would be too severe a tax for his strength, and Trinity Hall was chosen as being the college of which his father, who by this time had quitted the Colonial Office, and become Professor of Modern History, was a distinguished member. Leslie became enamoured of Cambridge. His health was rapidly improving. He read mathematics diligently, and in the tripos of 1854 was twentieth wrangler: he was a very young competitor, and to the last was being warned against overwork.

Before the end of the year a certain 'bye fellowship,' which was in effect a sort of chaplaincy, was bestowed upon him, and in the spring of 1856 he became one of the two 'presbyter fellows' and tutors of Trinity Hall, having been ordained a deacon in December, 1855. By this time he had become a vigorous, though not in all respects a strong man, keenly enjoying all manner of sports and capable of some wonderful feats of endurance. His first visit to the Alps he paid in 1857, and very soon he was in the front rank of English mountaineers. The prospect of a career at Cambridge was extremely attractive to him, and though, as he afterwards said, 'he took a good deal upon trust,' there is no reason whatever to doubt that his religious opinions lay well within the limits of Anglican orthodoxy, even in 1859 when he became a priest. As a college tutor he was brilliantly successful. Pupils of his say that it must be doubtful whether any tutor has been more 'worshipped,' and attribute to him a decisive influence upon the rapid growth of Trinity Hall. While admitting that his enthusiastic encouragement of rowing and other sports was one main cause of their worship, they speak with no less warmth of more serious matters. Those who were very intimate with him knew, for example, that on his long walks he could recite poetry by the mile. When therefore in 1862 he said that he could no longer read the service in chapel and resigned the tutorship, he was

abandoning a career that he dearly loved, and his courageous resolution was the outcome of an acutely painful struggle. He was very uncertain whether he was likely to succeed in any other walk of life. Beyond translating Berlepsch's *Alps* (1861) for the purpose of improving his German, he had done nothing in the literary way, and he was then and ever afterwards exceedingly diffident. He could not at once tear himself from Cambridge. He lingered there for two years and a half, reading philosophy and political economy, examining in the moral sciences, straying further and further from the paths of orthodoxy, writing an article for *Macmillan's* which was rejected, and another on 'An American Economist' which was accepted, walking matches against runners, championing his friend Henry Fawcett in divers electoral enterprises, serving as editor, sub-editor, and staff of a 'campaign newspaper' (the *Brighton Election Reporter*), pamphleteering about 'The Poll Degree,' and ardently advocating the cause of the North against all comers with 'outbursts of burning eloquence,' which have not been forgotten by those who heard them. His enthusiasm for the northern cause induced him to visit America in 1863. He went as far west as St. Paul and St. Louis, slept under canvas with Meade's army in Virginia, had some words with Seward and a word with Lincoln, his object being the collection of powder and shot for the warfare in which he was engaged at Cambridge; but incidentally he saw Lowell, Longfellow, Emerson, Hawthorne, Holmes, and other men of letters. Lowell and he became from that moment fast friends, and this friendship, as also that with Professor C. E. Norton, were of the greatest service to Stephen when a few years later he was diffidently making his first serious efforts as an author. Few incipient authors have stood in greater need of encouragement. A more proximate result of the journey to America was a spirited onslaught upon the *Times*, which took the form of a pamphlet published by 'L. S.' in 1865. In 1864 he was still hesitating. He had to earn his living; his Fellowship, which he yet retained, would expire if he married. At the end of the year he resolved to settle in London, and try his hand at journalism.

His diffidence is the more remarkable because by this time his brother had been ten years in London, and, while labouring successfully at the bar, had already done an immense amount of writing for newspapers and magazines. Leslie at once found favour with the editor of the *Saturday Review*, who was willing to take all that he would write, if it were not about politics or religion. Then the *Pall Mall Gazette* was founded (1865), and among his first contributions to it were the 'Sketches from Cambridge by a Don' which

in the same year appeared as his first book. It is less generally known that in 1866 he became the English correspondent of the *New York Nation*, and that to it for some seven years he sent a fortnightly letter dealing with current politics as well as other events. He attended important debates in Parliament and had strong opinions about what went on there. Indeed, it was not because he was no politician, but rather because he was an uncompromising politician, that he did not seek employment as a writer of 'leaders.' Among magazines *Fraser* and the *Cornhill* were open to him, and *Fraser* was willing to receive outspoken articles about religious matters such as he was desirous of writing. He left Cambridge with the idea of a great book in his mind. It was to have been a work on political theory; but, as he read, the history of religious speculation became more and more interesting to him, and politics fell into the background. Though he read deeply as well as widely, he could hardly find time for the composition of a lengthy book. He was desirous of freeing himself from journalistic drudgery; but by this time he was married (1867) and had lost his fellowship. He was even compelled to think of being called to the bar, and began 'eating dinners' at one of the Inns of the Court. However, in 1871 he acquired a little more liberty by becoming editor of the *Cornhill*. Then came book after book: from 1871 the *Playground of Europe*; from 1873 *Free thinking and Plain speaking*; from 1874, 1876, and 1879 the *Hours in a Library*. Meanwhile in 1876 the *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* had conclusively proved that, besides being an admirable essayist and a vigorous thinker, he had become a man of unusual learning. When this heavy piece of work was off his hands, he began to meditate the *Science of Ethics*, which was not published until 1882. In rapid succession he wrote *Johnson*, *Pope*, and *Swift* for the series of 'English Men of Letters,' to which he afterwards added the *George Eliot* and posthumously the *Hobbes*. His mastery in books of this order was admitted on all hands. A request that he would write the life of his friend Henry Fawcett was answered affirmatively by return of post, and the book that was then written was surely a model for all biographers. Meanwhile, however, towards the end of 1882, he took charge of the projected *Dictionary of National Biography*. He was hard at work upon it for two years before the first volume was published. Gradually he discovered that the task was far more laborious than he had expected, and when it became apparent that the Dictionary, however highly it might be praised, was not going to be a financial success, this only made

Stephen the more anxious to do with his own hand all that he possibly could. The incessant work began to tell upon a frame which had its weak as well as its strong points. In 1888 there was an alarming illness, directly attributable to mental strain; there was another in 1889. In 1891 the editorship was transferred to Mr. Sidney Lee, who from the beginning had been Stephen's right-hand man and in 1890 had become joint editor. From that time onward Stephen could only work at what he regarded as half pressure, and sorrows came upon him thick and fast; but the tale of what he did is amazing. He had projected a sequel to his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century*. Often it had to be laid aside and as often it was resumed. It at length appeared in 1900 as three volumes on the *English Utilitarians*. To this we must add the *Agnostic's Apology* (1893), which some think the best of all his books, the life of his brother Fitzjames, which is worthy to stand by the side of the life of Fawcett, two volumes called *Social Rights and Duties* (1896), four volumes called *Studies by a Biographer* (1900 and 1902), the *Letters of J. R. Green* (1901), the Ford Lectures for 1903, which he was not strong enough to deliver and which were published a few days before his death, and the *Hobbes* (1904), which he never saw in print. He wrote until he could no longer hold a pen and read until his eyes closed. It is a splendid record.

In his last days he would sometimes say that he had 'scattered himself' too widely, that he was jack of all trades and master of none, not a scholar, not a philosopher, not an historian, only an amateur. Possibly in these pages it ought to be admitted that there is a particle of truth in this judgement, and fairly certain it is that if Leslie Stephen had done less, he would seem to have done more, for we are apt to think that anything that he does is bye-work lying outside his proper province. But such an amateur, if that be the right term, such a contemner of the conventional boundaries, so untrammelled a thinker, so sincere a speaker is worth more to the world than many professionals, especially if he is as incapable of affectation as he is incapable of pedantry. So much might be allowed by those who knew Leslie Stephen only upon paper. Those who knew the man have another tale to tell of a noble life, of tender love and warm-hearted friendship, of heavy sorrows gallantly borne, and of last days that were like some glorious sunset—even the Sunset from Mont Blanc.

F. W. MAITLAND.