AUTHORS' BLUNDERS.

THE RIDICULOUS MISTAKES MADE BY FAMOUS WRITERS.

Errors in Science and Art—The Moon a Source of Confusion—Anachronisms that Would Shame a Schoolboy — Queer Blunders Perpetrated by Dramatists and Artists.

The general unreliability of the human memory, even in matters in which it believes itself infallible, is so remarkable that, instead of an occasional mistake here and there in the works of well-known authors, the marvel is that blunders of statement and fact are not more numerous. Among its other peculiarities, the mind has one of being often quite certain of its own knowledge, even when that knowledge is far from reliable, and this statement is constantly illustrated in the writings of leading historians and historical writers, who often err very gravely by taking for granted something which, on examination, turns out to be a misconception of fact. Sometimes the blunder is that of the writer himself; sometimes it is that of the authority from which he obtained his information; but in either case the fault arose from a lack of pains taken to verify the statement, the neglect being the result of overconfidence in one's own information.

In this way a thousand myths, which had but the remotest basis of truth, if any, for a foundation, have been industriously repeated and conscientiously believed by thousands. Thus the yarn about George Washington and his little hatchet, which was originally a pure fabrication, is as religiously believed by young Americans, as was the story about Romulus and Remus being suckled by a wolf by the young Romans a couple of thousand years ago. So also in England it is the fashion to believe that, at the battle of Waterloo, the Iron Duke said "Up, guards, and at them," though the Duke himself testified that he said nothing of the kind, being too busy praying that Blucher or night might come before Napoleon thrashed his army all to pieces. The idea that George III. was a cruel, bloodthirsty tyrant, who went about his place with a Fee-Foo-Fum aspect, sniffing the blood of Americans, was sedulously inculcated by the Declaration of Independence, when, on the contrary, he was a mild mannered old gentleman, who would not have hurt anybody's feelings for the world, and who would turn over in his grave did he but know how grossly he has been misrepresented on this side of the water. But history is full of just such blunders and in spite of the fact that Curtius did not leap into the gulf, nor did Mucius Scaevola plunge his hand into the fire, nor the Horatii put up the gallant fight credited to them, nor did Nero fiddle while Rome was burning, nor the priest of Louis XVI. say, "Son of St Louis, ascend to heaven." People will go on believing these things, though they be disproved a hundred times, simply because the historians have got into the fashion of telling them, and they look pretty when put in type.

If blunders like these are perpetuated in history simply by dint of the public stupidity, greater accuracy in matters of statement and closer adherence to the probabilities are not to be expected of the novelist. The writer of fiction creates his own history, for, to him, the characters he presents are as real as any that ever lived; the scenes he depicts are, for the moment, as true as any that ever appeared on the stage of life's action. He is, in fact, writing history as it should be; but as he is under the necessity of manufacturing it as he goes, it is not wonderful that lapses of memory should here and there occur and his pictures be blurred by his own forgetfulness. Of all sinners in this respect Thackeray confesses himself to be the chief. In writing on the subject, he owns up to a score of delinquencies. He said: "As sure as I read a page of my own composition, I find a fault or two, half a dozen. Jones is called Brown. Brown, who is dead, is brought to life. Aghast, and months after the number was printed I saw I had called Philip Firmin, Clive Newcome. Now, Clive Newcome is the hero of another story by the reader's most obedient servant. The two men are as different in my mind's eye as Lord Palmerston and Mr. Disraeli."

When novelists makes such blunders in dealing with the creatures of their own brains, it is not wonderful that when scientific accuracy is demanded they should err even more egregiously. The catastrophe in the "Mill on the Floss" is brought on by a scientific blunder. The gifted author gives her readers to understand that the boat in which the heroine and her brother were floating was overwhelmed by a huge mass of debris which was travelling down stream at a more rapid rate than the frail craft. Of course, then, it overtook the boat and sank it by the force of the collision. The incident is dramatic enough to satisfy the most critical, but scientifically it is an absurdity, for if the two were borne along by the same stream the pile of wreckage went as fast as the boat, and not a whit faster, no matter what might be the needs of the situation. Equally open to scientific criticism is that appalling scene in "Bleak House," where the unfortunate drunkard died a horrible death from spontaneous combustion. No doubt he deserved to get out of the world in some such dreadful fashion, and Dickens, having read of cases of drunkards who went to bed in a normal condition and were found a few hours later a pile of charred flesh and cinders, considered that he had accomplished a master stroke in bringing about such a result in the case of his own particular drunkard, but the fact remains that no matter how rum-soaked a human being may become, no one ever died of spontaneous combustion, and, so long as the human system is more than three-fourths water, no one ever will.

Many a novelist, as well as historian, has come to grief by not taking the pains to consult a geography or atlas when dealing with some particular in his story that demanded more than a general knowledge. Charles Lever in "Charles O'Malley," speaks of Andalusia as a province of Portugal and puts Valencia on the wrong side of Spain, while Dean Swift, in writing of Pennsylvania, declares that the cold winds from Hudson's Bay blow directly down upon it and render it one of the most inhospitable regions on the globe. This, however, is but a trifle in ignorance compared to that shown by Amelia B. Edwards, author of "Hand and Glove" who compares one of her characters to "an overseer on a Massachusetts cotton plantation." It should not be forgotten, however, that the densest ignorance in regard to American geography, politics and matters in general is very English, even Thackeray, who really liked America and Americans, making some exceedingly comical blunders when dealing with American topics, placing close together cities that are separated by a distance of hundreds of miles. But when the descent is made from the great writers to the small fry of literature, the density of ignorance becomes appalling. One has his hero take a run on the railroad train from New York to Chicago in one afternoon, as though the two were as close together as London and Margate, while another evidently believes New Orleans to be a suburb of Washington, and still another makes the Mississippi flow past the national capital into the Atlantic Ocean. These are the well-informed; those who do not pretend to knowledge of American topics dilate on the danger of the unwary being scalped by the Indians, if, too venturesome, they go out of sight of the stockades of Boston, and make their heroes hunt tigers in the jungles of Delaware.

The worst blunder along every line was the great dramatist whose name is at the head of every list of creative and imaginative writers, and one of the chief arguments against the theory of the Baconian origin of the immortal plays ought to be that it was impossible for a scholar like Bacon to make as many blunders as are found in the writings credited to Shakespeare Among other things he alludes to cannon in the reign of King John, whereas these deadly implements did not come into use until 150 years after John had succumbed to the distress caused by the loss of his money and baggage during the war with the barons; he puts printing as early as the reign of Henry II., and speaks of a striking clock in the days of Julius Cæsar. His Hector is familiar with the writings of Aristotle and his Coriolanus refers to Cato and incidentally also to Alexander. He fits up Cleopatra's palace with a billiard table, makes Bohemia a country with a sea coast and marine commerce; he regards Delphos as an island and places Naples and Tunis so far apart that none but a madman would attempt the voyage from one to the other. It is true that some freedom should be allowed a dramatist, and Shakespeare should not, therefore, be held to the same rigid accountability as a novelist of equal rank, if there were such a one but when a playwright, like Lee, speaks of Hannibal's men playing cards, or, like D'Urfey, makes the ancient Britons ridicule the Puritans, it seems as though a line ought to be drawn somewhere, even if the play had to be cut.

But there are worse blunders than these to be found on the pages even of the authors of high repute. No writer in our literature stands higher than Chaucer, and yet, in the tale of Troilus, a narrative of an event supposed to take place at the siege of Troy, Pandarus, one of the charactors, refers to Robin Hood as to an individual perfectly well known by those to whom he is speaking. So stupendous an anachronism seems impossible of occurrence, and yet it is but one of the many like it to be found on the pages of our earliest great poet. The temptation to work into a poem or imaginative narrative allusions to more recent times is almost irresistible. There are, indeed, few imaginative writers who take the trouble necessary to put themselves back in the time in which the tale they are contriving is supposed to happen, and, indeed, no little research is necessary in order to avoid such blunders as that just mentioned of Chaucer. Bad as this is, however, one made by Fletcher in his religio-heroic poem "Christ's Victory," is worse, for he describes the tempter as approaching the Redeemer in the garb of a monk, telling his beads and reciting his prayers as he slowly paced along. The plays of the last quarter of the seventeenth century are full of such blunders. In one, Dido speaks to Æneas of a London cockney, in another, Alexander the Great in a battle with the Persians, laments the fact that his artillery did not arrive in time for the engagement.

The same period presents on the stage a number and variety of anachronisms that would make a scholar turn pale. Blunders of history and geography are too numerous to be noted, nor did they probably attract the least attention from the audience, for if the latter could tolerate the incongruities in costume that were constantly thrust on their notice, mistakes in historical matters could be easily overlooked. But the audiences of those days were far from critical; indeed, at even a much later age, the construing of the stage characters was a matter in which little or no attention was paid to antiquity, the actors wearing what they thought proper and the audience being satisfied to abide by the judgment of the stage people in the matter of dress as in everything else. So when an actor played the part of Æneas in a cocked hat and knee-breeches, or when Cleopatra appeared on the stage in enormous hoops, or Coriolanus came in, dressed in a red coat and a plumed helmet, when Hannibal's army, arrayed as French soldiers, annihilated the Romans dressed in a nondescript military costume, by the help of an old field-piece borrowed from the junk yard for the evening, no one felt or seemed to feel any surprise whatever. In the matter of scenery, the playwrights of those days left much to the imagination of the audience, and so far as costume was concerned, when the people had been informed that the half dozen men on the stage represented an army, nothing more was deemed necessary.

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