HOURS IN A LIBRARY.

I.

SIR THOMAS BROWNE.

"LET me not injure the felicity of others," says Sir Thomas Browne in a suppressed passage of the "Religio Medici," "if I say that I am the happiest man alive. I have that in me that can convert poverty into riches, adversity into prosperity, and I am more invulnerable than Achilles; fortune hath not one place to hit me." Perhaps, on second thoughts, Sir Thomas felt that the phrase savoured of that presumption which is supposed to provoke the wrath of Nemesis; and at any rate, he, of all men, is the last to be taken too literally at his word. He is a humourist to the core, and is here writing dramatically. There are many things in this book, so he tells us, "delivered rhetorically, many expressions therein

merely tropical, . . . and therefore also many things to be taken in a soft and flexible sense, and not to be called unto the rigid test of reason." We shall hardly do wrong in reckoning amongst them this audacious claim to surpassing felicity, as we may certainly include his boast that he "could lose an arm without a tear, and with few groans be quartered into pieces." And yet, if Sir Thomas were to be understood in the most downright literal earnest, perhaps he could have made out as good a case for his assertion as almost any of the troubled race of mankind. For, if we set aside external circumstances of life, what qualities offer a more certain guarantee of happiness than those of which he is an almost typical example? A mind endowed with an insatiable curiosity as to all things knowable and unknowable; an imagination which tinges with poetical hues the vast accumulation of incoherent facts thus stored in a capacious memory; and a strangely vivid humour that is always detecting the quaintest analogies, and, as it were, striking light from the most unexpected collocations of uncompromising materials: such talents are by themselves enough to provide a man with work for life, and to make all his work delightful. To them, moreover, we must add a disposition absolutely incapable of controversial bitterness; "a constitution," as he says of himself, "so

general that it consorts and sympathises with all things;" an absence of all antipathies to loathsome objects in nature—to French "dishes of snails, frogs, and toadstools," or to Jewish repasts on "locusts or grasshoppers;" an equal toleration—which in the first half of the seventeenth century is something astonishing—for all theological systems; an admiration even of our natural enemies, the French, the Spaniards, the Italians, and the Dutch; a love of all climates, of all countries; and, in short, an utter incapacity to "absolutely detest or hate any essence except the devil." Indeed, his hatred even for that personage has in it so little of bitterness, that no man, we may be sure, would have joined more heartily in the Scotch minister's petition for "the puir de'il"—a prayer conceived in the very spirit of his writings. A man so endowed—and it is not only from his explicit assertions, but from his unconscious self-revelation, that we may credit him with closely approaching his own ideal—is admirably qualified to discover one great secret of human happiness. No man was ever better prepared to keep not only one, but a whole stableful of hobbies, nor more certain to ride them so as to amuse himself, without loss of temper or dignity, and without rude collisions against his neighbours. That happy art is given to

few, and thanks to his skill in it, Sir Thomas reminds us strongly of the two illustrious brothers Shandy combined in one person. To the exquisite kindliness and simplicity of Uncle Toby he unites the omnivorous intellectual appetite and the humorous pedantry of the head of the family. The resemblance, indeed, may not be quite fortuitous. Though it does not appear that Sterne, amidst his multifarious pilferings, laid hands upon Sir Thomas Browne, one may fancy that he took a general hint or two from so congenial an author.

The best mode of approaching so original a writer is to examine the intellectual food on which his mind was nourished. He dwelt by preference in strange literary pastures; and their nature will let us into some secrets as to his taste and character. We will begin, therefore, by examining the strange furniture of his mind, as described in his longest, though not his most characteristic book—the "Inquiry into Vulgar Errors." When we turn over its quaint pages, we feel as though we were entering one of those singular museums of curiosities which existed in the pre-scientific ages. Every corner is filled with a strange, incoherent medley, in which really valuable objects are placed side by side with what is simply grotesque

and ludicrous. The modern man of science may find some objects of interest; but they are mixed inextricably with strange rubbish that once delighted the astrologer, the alchemist, or the dealer in apocryphal relics. And the possessor of this miscellaneous collection accompanies us with an unfailing flow of amusing gossip: at one moment pouring forth a torrent of out-of-the-way learning; at another, making a really passable scientific remark; and then lapsing into an elaborate discussion of some inconceivable absurdity; affecting the air of a grave inquirer, and to all appearance fully believing in his own pretensions, and yet somehow indulging himself in a half-suppressed smile, which indicates that the humorous aspect of a question can never be far removed from his mind. Mere curiosity is not yet differentiated from scientific thirst for knowledge; and a quaint apologue is as good a reward for the inquirer as the discovery of a law of nature. The numerous class which insists upon a joke being as unequivocal as a pistol-shot, and a serious statement as grave as a Blue-book, should therefore keep clear of Sir Thomas Browne. His most congenial readers are those who take a simple delight in following out any quaint train of reflections, careless whether it may culminate in a smile

or a sigh or in some thought in which the two elements of the sad and the ludicrous are inextricably blended. Sir Thomas, however, is in the "Inquiry" content generally with bringing out the strange curiosities of his museum, and does not care to draw any explicit moral. The quaintness of the objects unearthed seems to be a sufficient recompense for the labour of the search. Fortunately for his design, he lived in the time when a poet might have spoken without hyperbole of the "fairy tales of science." To us, who have to plod through an arid waste of painful observation, and slow piecing together of cautious inferences before reaching the promised land of wondrous discoveries, the expression sometimes appears to be ironical. Does not science, we may ask with a *primâ facie* resemblance of right, destroy as much poetry as it generates? To him no such doubts could present themselves, for fairyland was still a province of the empire of science. Strange beings moved through the pages of natural history, which were equally at home in the "Arabian Nights" or in poetical apologues. The griffin, the phœnix, and the dragon were not yet extinct; the salamander still sported in flames; and the basilisk slew men at a distance with his deadly glance. More commonplace animals indulged in the

habits which they had learnt in fables, and of which only some feeble vestiges now remain in the eloquence of strolling showmen. The elephant had no joints, and was caught by felling the tree against which he rested his stiff limbs in sleep; the pelican pierced its breast for the good of its young; ostriches were regularly painted with a horseshoe in their bills, to indicate their ordinary diet; storks refused to live except in republics and free states; the crowing of a cock put lions to flight, and men were struck dumb in good sober earnest by the sight of a wolf. The curiosity-hunter, in short, found his game still plentiful, and by a few excursions into Aristotle, Pliny, and other more recondite authors, was able still to display a rich bag for the edification of his readers. Sir Thomas Browne sets out on that quest with all imaginable seriousness. He persuaded himself, and he has persuaded some of his editors, that he was a genuine disciple of Bacon, by one of whose suggestions the "Inquiry" is supposed to have been prompted. Accordingly, as Bacon describes the idols by which the human mind is misled, Sir Thomas sets out with investigating the causes of error; but his introductory remarks immediately diverge into strange paths, from which it is obvious that the discovery of true scientific method

was a very subordinate object in his mind. Instead of telling us by what means truth is to be attained, his few perfunctory remarks on logic are lost in an historical narrative, given with infinite zest, of the earliest recorded blunders. The period of history in which he most delighted was the antediluvian—probably because it afforded the widest field for speculation. His books are full of references to the early days of the world. He takes a keen personal interest in our first parents. He discusses the unfortunate lapse of Adam and Eve from every possible point of view. It is not without a visible effort that he declines to settle which of the two was the more guilty, and what would have been the result if they had tasted the fruit of the Tree of Life before applying to the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Then he passes in review every recorded speech before the Flood, shows that in each of them, with one exception, there is a mixture of falsehood and error, and settles to his own satisfaction that Cain showed less "truth, wisdom, and reverence" than Satan under similar circumstances. Granting all which to be true, it is impossible to see how we are advanced in settling, for example, whether the Ptolemaic or the Copernican system of astronomy is to be adopted, or in extracting the grains of truth that may

be overlaid by masses of error in the writings of alchemists. Nor do we really learn much by being told that ancient authorities sometimes lie, for he evidently enjoys accumulating the fables, and cares little for showing how to discriminate their degree of veracity. He tells us, indeed, that Medea was simply a predecessor of certain modern artists, with an excellent "recipe to make white hair black;" and that Actæon was a spirited master of hounds, who, like too many of his ancestors, went metaphorically, instead of literally, to the dogs. He points out, moreover, that we must not believe on authority that the sea is the sweat of the earth, that the serpent, before the Fall, went erect like man, or that the right eye of a hedgehog, boiled in oil, and preserved in a brazen vessel, will enable us to see in the dark. Such stories, he moderately remarks, being "neither consonant unto reason nor correspondent unto experiment," are unto us "no axioms." But we may judge of his scepticism by his remarks on "Oppianus, that famous Cilician poet." Of this writer, he says that, "abating the annual mutation of sexes in the hyæna, the single sex of the rhinoceros, the antipathy between two drums of a lamb's and a wolf's skin, the informity of cubs, the venation of centaurs, and some few others, he may be read with delight and profit." Obviously, we shall find

in Sir Thomas Browne no inexorably severe guide to truth; he will not too sternly reject the amusing because it happens to be slightly improbable, or doubt an authority because he sometimes sanctions a mass of absurd fables. Satan, as he argues at great length, is at the bottom of most errors, from false religions down to a belief that there is another world in the moon; but Sir Thomas takes little trouble to provide us with an Ithuriel's spear; and, indeed, we have a faint suspicion that he will overlook at times the diabolic agency in sheer enthusiasm at the marvellous results. The logical design is little more than ostensible; and Sir Thomas, though he knew it not himself, is really satisfied with any line of inquiry that will bring him in sight of some freak of nature or of opinion suitable to his museum of curiosities.

Let us, however, pass from the anteroom, and enter this queer museum. We pause in sheer bewilderment on the threshold, and despair of classifying its contents intelligibly within any moderate space. This much, indeed, is obvious at first sight—that the title "vulgar errors" is to some extent a misnomer. It is not given to vulgar brains to go wrong by such complex methods. There are errors which require more learning and ingenuity than are necessary for discovering truths; and it is