

*Poets, Philosophers, and Artists, Made by Accident*

ACCIDENT has frequently occasioned the most eminent geniuses to display their powers. "It was at Rome," says Gibbon, "on the 15th of October, 1764, as I sat musing amidst the ruins of the Capitol, while the bare-footed friars were singing vespers in the Temple of Jupiter, that the idea of writing the decline and fall of the City first started to my mind."

Father Malebranche having completed his studies in philosophy and theology without any other intention than devoting himself to some religious order, little expected the celebrity his works acquired for him. Loitering in an idle hour in the shop of a bookseller, and turning over a parcel of books, *L'Homme de Descartes* fell into his hands. Having dipt into some parts, he read with such delight, that the palpitations of his heart compelled him to lay the volume down. It was this circumstance that produced those profound contemplations which made him the Plato of his age.

Cowley became a poet by accident. In his mother's apartment he found, when very young, Spenser's Fairy Queen; and, by a continual study of poetry, he became so enchanted by the Muse, that he grew irrecoverably a poet.

Dr. Johnson informs us, that Sir Joshua Reynolds had the first fondness for his art excited by the perusal of Richardson's Treatise.

Vaucanson displayed an uncommon genius for mechanics. His taste was first determined by an accident: when young, he frequently attended his mother to the residence of her confessor; and while she wept with repentance, he wept with weariness! In this state of disagreeable vacation, says Helvetius, he was struck with the uniform motion of the pendulum of the clock in the hall. His curiosity was roused; he approached the clock case, and studied its mechanism; what he could not discover, he guessed at. He then projected a similar machine; and gradually his genius produced a clock. Encouraged by- this first success, he proceeded in his various attempts; and the genius which thus could form a clock, in time formed a fluting automaton.

"If Shakespeare's imprudence had not obliged him to quit his wool trade, and his town; if he had not engaged with a company of actors, and at length, disgusted with being an indifferent performer, he had not turned author, the prudent wooseller had never been the celebrated poet."

“Accident determined the taste of Molière for the stage. His grandfather loved the theatre and frequently carried him there. The young man lived in dissipation: the father observing it, asked in anger, if his son was to be made an actor. ‘Would to God,’ replied the grandfather, ‘he were as good an actor as Monrose.’ The words struck young Molière; he took a disgust to his tapestry trade; and it is to this circumstance France owes her greatest comic writer.”

“Corneille loved; he made verses for his mistress, became a poet, composed *Mélite*, and afterwards his other celebrated works. The discreet Corneille had else remained a lawyer.”

“Thus it is, that the devotion of a mother, the death of Cromwell, deer-stealing, the exclamation of an old man, and the beauty of a woman, have given five illustrious characters to Europe.”

We owe the great discovery of Newton to a very trivial accident. When a student at Cambridge, he had retired during the time of the plague into the country. As he was reading under an apple-tree, one of the fruit fell, and struck him a smart blow on the head. When he observed the smallness of the apple, he was surprised at the force of the stroke. This led him to consider the

accelerating motion of falling bodies; from whence he deduced the principle of gravity, and laid the foundation of his philosophy.

Ignatius Loyola was a Spanish gentleman, who was dangerously wounded at the siege of Pampeluna. Having heated his imagination by reading the Lives of the Saints, which were brought to him in his illness, instead of a romance, he conceived a strong ambition to be the founder of a religious order: whence originated the celebrated society of the Jesuits.

Rousseau found his eccentric powers first awakened by the advertisement of the singular annual subject which the Academy of Dijon proposed for that year, in which he wrote his celebrated Declamation against the arts and sciences. A circumstance which determined his future literary efforts.

La Fontaine, at the age of twenty-two, had not taken any profession, or devoted himself to any pursuit. Having accidentally heard some verses of Malherbe, he felt a sudden impulse, which directed his future life. He immediately bought a Malherbe, and was so exquisitely delighted with this poet, that after passing the nights in treasuring his verses in his memory, he would run in the day-time to the woods, where concealing himself,

he would recite his verses to the surrounding dryads.

Flamsteed was an astronomer by accident. He was taken from school on account of his illness, when Sacrobosco's book *de Sphæra* having been lent to him, he was so pleased with it, that he immediately began a course of astronomic studies. Pennant's first propensity to natural history was the pleasure he received from an accidental perusal of Willoughby's work on birds: the same accident, of finding on the table of his professor, Reaumur's *History of Insects*, of which he read more than he attended to the lecture, and having been refused the loan, gave such an instant turn to the mind of Bonnet, that he hastened to obtain a copy, but found many difficulties in procuring this costly work; its possession gave an unalterable direction to his future life; this naturalist indeed lost the use of his sight by his devotion to the microscope.

Dr. Franklin attributes the cast of his genius to a similar accident. "I found a work of De Foe's, entitled an 'Essay on Projects,' from which perhaps I derived impressions that have since influenced some of the principal events of my life."

I shall add the incident which occasioned Roger Ascham to write his *Schoolmaster*, one of the most curious and useful treatises among our elder writers.

At a dinner given by Sir William Cecil, during the plague in 1563, at his apartments at Windsor, where the queen had taken refuge, a number of ingenious men were invited. Secretary Cecil communicated the news of the morning, that several scholars at Eton had run away on account of their master's severity, which he condemned as a great error in the education of youth. Sir William Petre maintained the contrary; severe in his own temper, he pleaded warmly in defence of hard flogging. Dr. Wootton, in softer tones, sided with the Secretary. Sir John Mason, adopting no side, bantered both. Mr. Haddon seconded the hardhearted Sir William Petre, and adduced, as an evidence, that the best schoolmaster then in England was the hardest flogger. Then was it that Roger Ascham indignantly exclaimed, that if such a master had an able scholar it was owing to the boy's genius, and not the preceptor's rod. Secretary Cecil and others were pleased with Ascham's notions. Sir Richard Sackville was silent, but when Ascham after dinner went to the queen to read one of the orations of Demosthenes, he took him aside, and frankly told him that though he had taken no part in the debate, he would not have been absent from that conversation for a great deal; that he knew to his cost the truth Ascham had supported; for it was the perpetual flogging

of such a schoolmaster that had given him an unconquerable aversion to study. And as he wished to remedy this defect in his own children, he earnestly exhorted Ascham to write his observations on so interesting a topic. Such was the circumstance which produced the admirable treatise of Roger Ascham.