

AMICUS PLATO

By Stephen Finch



F the multiplication of interests adds really to the value of life, then it must be confessed that the last hundred years have added almost incalculably to the goodwill of human existence, regarded as a going concern. It has become almost trite to say that every department of activity is now-a-days highly specialized in view of these interests, and tends to become further divided and sub-divided. The minute philosopher and practitioner are called for more and more, and such higher mental abilities as are qualified for the profession of the specialist, in whatever department of industry, are not likely to lie idle or to go without their reward for many generations to come. Knowledge adds to the complexities of civilisation, and civilisation, as it increases its complexities, makes further demand upon knowledge. We have really very little need to ask what we shall do with the more intelligent and capable of our children, whether boys or girls. The answer may well be: Train them for specialists in that subject wherein you observe that their interest has been awakened, or along the lines of which it seems possible to awaken their interest. The departments are innumerable; they are all wage-earning, and in many of them there are high rewards possible. Naturally, they lie outside the common fields of the educational curriculum; they are not comprised in the classical or commercial course; and education itself, as it rises to meet the demand for particular and extraordinary knowledge in given directions, will tend to become specialised, as it is indeed already tending. Outside the practical advantage that knowledge means daily bread, there is one of a

higher order, for it is purely intellectual. The field of discovery is always in front of the specialist, and he can scarcely fail to enter in its promised land, by whatever path he travels. He is ever on the threshold of that unknown which is also ever passing into the known. There is, however, unfortunately another side to the picture. The eye which looks in one direction only, loses sight of the wide horizon; the mind which works solely upon a single department of knowledge, loses the greater issues; and it is to this extent an open question whether the multiplication of interests has added capital value to life, or has simply split up its investments.

The speculative question in any case is not without importance at this day, when side by side with the specialisation of knowledge, research and industry there is found also the growing conviction that man's best interests do not lie in these directions. In the old days of the schoolman there were those who argued from particulars to universals, following roughly what was called the Aristotelian method, and there were those who argued from universals to particulars, which they used to call the Platonic method. These two classes find their representatives even in the modern spirit of this 20th Century, and by taking a glance at the age as it is, it may be possible to forecast somewhat broadly and very roughly, bearing these two tendencies in mind, how matters are likely to stand in respect of them after the lapse of another hundred years.

There is a safe assumption at the outset, and this is that the gigantic tasks have been already achieved; in science, in literature, in art the statement holds equally. The possibilities of differentiation are infinite, but the great things have been discovered, said and done.

To affirm this is not to put a limit upon human capacity but to define the unavoidable bounds of the existing order of things. Once and for all—unless another flood should again reduce the race to the unit of a single family and all knowledge perish in the catastrophe—earth and sea have had their Christopher Columbus and the new world cannot be discovered for a second time. It is more than probable that the North Pole will be reached before this century has passed, and he who reaches it will be counted among the immortal adventurers; but he will not be so great a discoverer as Columbus, though the latter's task was infinitely more simple, because his success means less to the world. In a word, earth and sea have been so far reduced within the province of our knowledge that all further explorations are necessarily of secondary importance, and in two or three generations it seems reasonable to suppose that nothing worth speaking of will remain to be done in this direction, but the differentiation and specialisation of our knowledge in every corner of the world will of course go on indefinitely.

In all departments of science the same stage appears to have been reached, subject to one important qualification. The surface of the globe is so well known that there is no reason why it should not ultimately be explored from end to end, but along the broad tracks of the general sciences a certain great progress brings us to limits which the human mind cannot overstep. Biology, for example, is practically a creation of the 19th Century, but its irremovable landmarks have been established, its great discoveries made, and though enormous differentiation is still possible, and innumerable by-ways are still open to research, the mystery of life has been pursued in one sense to its finish, to the point, that is to say, where we lose it, at that beginning for which we cannot account and which bids fair to remain unaccountable. In astronomical observation, to take another instance, the great fields are explored and the additions to the stock of knowledge accumulated from year to year, though highly important in their own degree, are of the nature of minutiae and do not

materially assist towards a better theory of the stellar universe, while as regards those fields of investigation which lie outside the rectification and extension of the star maps, here also the tendency is to recognise, reluctantly enough, the approach of knowledge to those limits at which the word Impassable is written. However widely distinguished in themselves, the other sciences convey the same message: there is no important outlook in mathematics: in physiology, the barriers rise up everywhere; even in chemistry it is doubtful, should a further disintegration of substances previously regarded as elementary enable us to convert one metal into another, whether this would be regarded as a really great discovery in view of the science as it stands. It is, nevertheless, in the domain of the chemist, if anywhere, and in the investigation of the latent and concealed forces of the universe, that the great hope of invention lies.

That which is true of science seems true also of literature, of history, of religion—understood in the ordinary sense—and of the field of speculation which assumes to itself in a more particular manner the name of philosophy.

No questioning of culture would elicit an expectation of another Homer or of a second Shakspeare; as literary monuments the scriptures of Jewry and Christendom are so great that a right instinct regards them—outside all theological considerations—as not only for their own age, but all time, and this in such a manner that time is unlikely to produce their parallel. And at this period in particular we are not in the age of great names, but in that of differentiation and specialisation of literary gifts, with a highly increased standard of average talent everywhere; while round about the horizon of literature the old Titans stand impassable as those barriers which say to the biologist, the astronomer, the chemist: Thus far shalt thou go and no farther. If other records of the past be challenged, it will be found that as little hope of great things to come is cherished by the historian, although the yearning eye may be turned to Lhasa of Thibet, and the heart still hope for something,

so far undemonstrable, in the land of the Pharaohs. The voices of the records are in all men's ears; they have been made to speak everywhere; but beyond this there is the dumbness of the great unknown, which looks so mournfully unknowable. There is, however, that lesser unknown, ever responding to research and multiplying minute knowledge in the hands of special investigation—like other specialities, highly important in its ways, profoundly interesting, but offering nothing to the intellectual notion of greatness. In such a connection as the present it is only possible to touch upon matters of religion in those aspects which lie outside the region of its divine sanction, and then it is a part of history, a part of literature, a domain of criticism, a controversial region, a science of the higher laws of conduct, the principles and limits of which have been fixed long ago, leaving only departmental issues, but these innumerable, in which it is possible to create new epochs. And around the whole horizon of these issues, far above and beyond them, stand the giants which were on earth in those days, the great theologians, the great commentators, the great controversialists, and—may it be respectfully added—the great saints of old, to compel reverence if they do not inspire obedience or engage assent, and to offer an overwhelming assurance that the force of Nature cannot further go. It would seem almost idle to mention a second time that arrogant word philosophy, because the mantle of this Elijah has not passed to any later servants, but avoiding the enumeration of names, and admitting that great schools of thought have originated in the last two centuries, the highest tribunal of ultimate appeal can only confirm the judgment of the mere wayfaring man, that on all the great speculations the schools of thought change, but the problems remain, and that the root-questions are unanswerable.

It follows, therefore, that the interests of the age are fixed all along the lesser degrees for at least a century to come; that they will go on multiplying, and that discovery and increase of know-

ledge will be incessant within these limits. It follows also that as in science, understood in its widest and most embracing sense, so in literature, the production will increase, and that good books will go on multiplying as the average of talent rises; but that in either case the great sum of interest and real value does not stand towards appreciation, and it is questionable whether this outlook offers real consolation to the mind. An inexpensive process for the extraction of radium so that it may be utilized for domestic purposes will be an immense convenience; the cure of cancer and consumption a great amelioration for a suffering section of humanity; the discovery of the bases of gold very interesting and possibly highly valuable, even if it upsets the currency; and since these few instances may be taken to stand for thousands, let it be asked: What next, Muse of Science, and what for the twenty-first century? Or, if nothing next, what then! So also, if Egypt permits her explorers to disinter still earlier dynasties; if Buddhist monasteries lift up some corner of the veil which covers the mysteries of the East; if the remnants of an undreamed-of civilisation are found in Australasia; if another Gospel should be discovered; if the exact area of the circle should no longer baffle mathematics; if some new motion should be distinguished in the solar system; if psychology should establish some of the disputed points in mental philosophy; will it not still be true that "knowledge comes but wisdom lingers" and that the path of these particulars, these details, wonderful as they may be, is not the path which leads to the things that are universal, while it is these only in the last resource which lend value to life and can alone be truly added to the heritage of man?

And if this be so, the great question which arises is whether there is another way, for an answer to which, if indeed there be an answer possible, recourse must be had to the ground of those convictions previously mentioned, that man has other interests which are quite distinct from anything that is

attained or attainable by the faculties of external observation. In the nature of things these convictions are not open to experimental demonstration by the way of physical science. They baffle empirical psychology in the same way that the ultimate nature of life baffles the biologist, but they exist as life exists, and they are older than the prophecies of Isaiah, the religious epics of India, and the Egyptian Book of the Dead. They are precisely that element which constitutes the greatness of Plato in philosophy; of the fourth gospel, as it can be appraised by the literary sense; of Dante and Spenser in poetry; of St. Thomas in theology; of Jeremy Taylor in personal religion; of Francis Bacon at his greatest, though essentially he was an experimental philosopher; and, despite the apparent jumble of this enumeration of certain old books of knight-errantry and other mirrors of the romantic spirit. But if this element has found its expression thus diversely in literature, it is no less evident in Gothic architecture; in the early Italian masters; and in such "great tone poets" as Sebastian Bach. The ground of the conviction must not be understood as religion in the conventional meaning of the word, and yet it can be defined only as the sense of the infinite. It is the deficiency of this sense which has taken greatness out of modern poetry and has reduced the modern novel to an involved study of character, of situation and of manners. It is the sense of this deficiency and the desire of this lost consciousness which have brought about the revival of romanticism in literature. It is the realisation of the truth that man does not live by bread alone, and that for the same reason his mental nourishment does not or should not consist exclusively of facts; that he is not really better or worse for the discovery of a new star in the constellation *Lyra*, or for the household adaptation of radium; and that the prevention of cancer and con-

sumption though an enormous safeguard for his body, does not really console his heart.

But if the ground of this conviction, that there are better things possible than the providence of science can confer, is to be sought in the sense of the infinite, by the presence of which some men and women have been great in all ages and have left imperishable monuments, does it not seem to follow that there is a side of consciousness which calls for cultivation, and has been neglected amidst the rapid methods and specialisation of modern life? Man in the last resource is that which he thinks; he grows wicked by thinking evil, but if he thinks that which is good, the good fills him entirely. And if amidst the multiplication around him of all those pressing yet lesser interests which make modern life so complex and so differentiated, he can learn how to detach himself occasionally and revert to those things which are simple and not differentiated; if, in the crowded city, he can remember the great world; if he can embrace the larger interests which are not of one age but of all time, will he not, amidst the full appreciation of all that science and research have effected in his interest, and the full enjoyment of their benefits, gain something also of that larger consciousness, that contact with things immeasurable which gave us Plato and Dante. There will in this way be effected a certain marriage between the interests which are universal and the interests which are particular, and seeing that at the beginning of the twentieth century the want of some such union is finding a voice everywhere, is written everywhere in our literature, our painting, our music, and finds a dumb expression even in our painful reproduction of Gothic architecture, it is not a rash forecast to affirm that the twentieth century will accomplish it, and that art and thought and letters will receive the new voice which they are certainly demanding.