A student in arms

Hankey Donald William
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Author: Hankey Donald William

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Introduction

These letters of Donald Hankey tell their own story. They tell it very clearly, without affectation or disguise. Most of them were written to his family or to the innermost circle of his friends.

It seems neither necessary nor pertinent to explain them. But one may be permitted to express the conviction that they possess the essential quality of enduring literature. These quiet, humorous, and delightfully unselfconscious utterances of "a beholding and jubilant spirit" must appeal to the most casual reader as well worth collecting from the obscurity of private drawers, and giving the publicity of print and such permanency as the best of books secure. For they are true human documents, in their interests, in their emotions and in their expression, and they will be read long after many other Collections of Letters have outlived their day, or are read only as academic exercises.

For indeed these letters run up and down the whole gamut of life. Whether we read them for their literary distinction, or for their religious vision, or for their sheer human interest, they arrest and hold us. Is he describing his fellow-passengers, or chance acquaintances in an hotel? We can see them and hear them and laugh at their oddities as if Dickens himself presented them. Does he paint a tropical forest or a sunset? We see it glowing before our eyes. Is he discussing the great mysteries of life and death and human destiny? Then Deep calls to Deep: his sure insight enables us to catch glimpses into the Eternal.

The style is the man. Those who knew Donald Hankey say that to know him was to love him and
have a rare quality of hero-worship aroused. They felt the purity and dignity of "a soul beautifully poised upon itself."

These letters reflect this. They recall the writer vividly. "To read a letter from you," he wrote to his friend Mrs. Coppin, "is as good as talking with you." That is exactly what his correspondents felt about himself. "He would talk to you, or rather listen to you" (says an intimate friend), "all the evening, worrying over a problem of theology or sociology—and next day, or next week, a letter would come from him carrying on the conversation from the point where he had left it; throwing fresh light on the subject under discussion, approaching it from an altogether new angle, clearing away the dialectical dust, and presenting his point of view so convincingly that you wondered you had been so blind to it."

"He would talk, or rather listen." For he was better at listening than speaking. Even with his intimates, he had a difficulty, almost a hesitancy, in speech; save in those rare and luminous hours when the subject laid hold of him and his tongue was loosed and heart spoke to heart.

But this weakness ultimately made his strength, for he had to find expression and writing was his natural medium. His pen was more persuasive than his tongue. In his letters he expanded, "thinking aloud." This gives them all the charm of unpremeditated art. As we read on, passing the milestones of the years, we perceive a growing ease and grace: it is a far cry from Mauritius in 1894 to France in 1916. Of Hankey it might be said, as it was said of Stevenson, "He was
feeling his way all his life towards a fuller mastery of his means, preferring always to leave unexpressed what he felt he could not express perfectly.” Yet there is more in Hankey that reminds us of Scott’s forthright exuberance than of Stevenson’s meticulous sorting of words. “With a great price obtained I this freedom.” But Hankey could reply, “I was free-born.” Or, as he would put it to himself, “If you have nothing to say, say it! If you have something to say, say it and the right words will come.” We cannot picture him making a rough draft of his letters, like Lamb. Yet this is not to say that he was careless about the aptest word. His letters, as printed, come not far short of perfection, but some of the written pages are like palimpsests, with their numerous deletions and corrections. And he hardly pauses to correct: the spate rushes on, he is eager for the next sentence and only glances back, currente calamo, to alter a phrase. The result is that in these letters the reader is swept on, sometimes bewildered yet continuously charmed by their delicious naïve inconsequence, passing without a break from the profundities and immensities to pleasant gossip or clever nonsense or rollicking fun.

The editor has made very few alterations.

To quote a recent essayist, “As soon as a fine thought is born in the mind, all the beautiful words in the language come trooping to express it.” Donald Hankey’s mind was the home of beautiful thoughts, and beautiful words waited his bidding. This is the secret of the style of *A Student in Arms*.

Doubtless *The Student in Arms* owes no little of its
great success to the fact that it was written in the exalted mood of a Crusader. But Donald Hankey’s whole life was a Crusade, a warfare against ugliness and littleness. And his letters, written in the cloistered calm of Oxford, or the solitude of the Australian Bush, or on the deck of an emigrant ship, reveal a spirit serene and vital, finding much to laugh at on the way, yet all the time aware of “one clear call,” in obedience to which his life was moving onward to its climax.

As far back as 1906 he wrote to his sister and confidante, “it is quite hopeless my trying to scribble” (for the magazines); “it comes out all laboured and doesn’t interest me. Besides, what Benson says about writing down one’s ideas doesn’t apply, because when I have any I write them down most candidly in my letters to you. I am afraid the only thing to do will be to wait till I am a Bishop or a General, and then publish my letters to my sister; or to make a collection of them now, call them ‘maroon papers,’ and trust to the Public mistaking anonymity for celebrity veiled!” It was said in jest: about the same time he wrote to his father, “I have no incendiary ambitions with regard to the Thames. . . . The side street for me!” Fame, unsought and unexpected, came to the Student in Arms. His jesting promise is now fulfilled: his letters are published. Not anonymously. Yet though his name will attract many who would not look at an anonymous volume of letters, it is not too much to say that these Letters are so packed with human interest, and so full of charm that even unsigned and unacknowledged they would meet with instant and delighted appreciation. Edward Miller.
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