"THE LIBERRY"

By IAN HAY

"The Liberry"

"THE LIBERRY"

BY

IAN HAY

WITH FRONTISPIECE BY

KLEBER HALL

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1924

The Riverside Press

CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS

PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

"The Liberry"

"THE LIBERRY"

I

I FIRST met Mr. Baxter at the fourpenny box outside Mr. Timpenny's second-hand bookshop in High Street, and was attracted at once by the loving care with which he handled its contents. Dirty and dog's-eared as most of them were, he never snatched one up or threw it down, after the common fashion of patrons of inexpensive literature, but would gently extract a more than usually disreputable volume from its heap, blow the dust off, straighten the warped cover, and smooth out the wrinkled pages before dipping into the subject-matter. In fact, the last operation struck me as interesting him least of all.

Becoming aware of my presence, he moved aside with a courtly little bow. He was a dusty old gentleman, in a very

shabby frock-coat. He looked as if he lived in the fourpenny box himself.

"Am I preventing you from selecting a volume, sir?" he inquired.

I hastened to reassure him. I had no special designs on the fourpenny box, or indeed on any. I was merely idling.

"I am waiting for the druggist to make up a prescription," I said.

"Then you don't do your own dispensing, sir?"

"As a rule, yes. I have run out of this particular drug, though. But you know me?"

"Yes, sir; by sight. We do not take long in Broxborough to get to know every one by sight. You succeeded to Dr. Wiseman's practice, I think?"

"Yes."

"A good old man, sir, and a lover of books, like myself."

"You're right about yourself," I said. "You handle a book as I would a delicate patient."

"A very apt comparison, sir. To me,

in a manner of speaking, a book is a human thing. A dilapidated book *is* a patient; I like to repair its broken back and gum in its loose pages. In fact, the late Archdeacon used to rally me upon the subject, sir. He insisted that I cared more for a book, as a book, than for what was inside it."

I ventured, with immediate success, to draw him out upon the subject of the late Archdeacon.

"Archdeacon Belford, sir. He died many years ago, and few remember him now. A great scholar and gentleman. I was associated with him almost continuously in my younger days. It was he who assisted me to found my library."

"Your library?"

"Yes, sir." The old gentleman's mild blue eyes suddenly glowed with pride. "Nothing very pretentious, of course; but I take my little pleasure in it. And it grows — it grows." He picked a small tattered volume out of the box — it looked like an ancient school prize —

and turned down a few dog's-ears with a distressed expression.

"A sweet little edition," he said, examining the text, "but small print. I have left my glasses at home. Would you very kindly indicate to me the nature of its contents, sir?"

I read a few lines aloud to him — poetry.

"I don't know it," I confessed. "Poetry is not much in my line. Let me look at the title-page. Ah — Robert Southey."

"I rather thought it was Southey," said Mr. Baxter immediately.

"I fancy you are more widely read than I am," I remarked.

"I make a point of reading aloud a passage out of one of my books every day, sir. I acquired the habit under the late Archdeacon. We read together constantly. He had very definite views on the value of reading. 'A man with books about him,' he used to say, 'is a man surrounded by friends far more in-

teresting and distinguished than any he is likely to meet when he dines with the Bishop. A man with a library of his own, however small, is at once a capitalist who can never go bankrupt and an aristocrat who moves in circles to which the common herd cannot penetrate. In other words, a man with a library is a man respected!' That was why I founded my own, sir. The Archdeacon himself contributed the first few volumes."

"Is it a large library?" I asked, glancing furtively at my wrist-watch.

"No, sir; of very modest dimensions. But it is sufficiently large to be utilized by nearly all my friends."

"You lend them books, then?"

"Oh, no, sir. I would not do that. My books are everything to me — and you know what book-borrowers are! My friends are welcome to tap my literary resources, but it must be through me as medium."

"I don't quite understand," I said, noting out of the corner of my eye that

Mr. Pettigrew, the druggist next door, had emerged from behind the carved wooden screen which masks the mysteries of his dispensing department from the layman's eye, and was now visible through the shop window, busy with white paper and sealing-wax.

"When a seeker after knowledge calls upon me," explained the indefatigable Mr. Baxter, "I select from my library the appropriate volume and read, or recite, to him such passages as appear to me most applicable to his case. In this way I ensure the safety and cleanliness of my literary property —"

"So here you are! I thought so. Have you been buying another of those dirty things?"

A small, alert, slightly shrewish girl of about fifteen had suddenly appeared from nowhere, and was now transfixing my flinching companion with the eye of the Ancient Mariner.

"Only fourpence, my dear," replied Mr. Baxter deferentially.

"That's right. Throw money about!" said the young lady. "Have you *got* fourpence?" she added, with a slight softening of manner.

"Well, to be exact, I rather think all I have at the moment is threepence."

The Ancient Mariner produced a penny.

"Here you are," she said, handing him the coin with a not altogether successful attempt at an indulgent smile. "You haven't bought anything for a fortnight. Go in and pay for it, and then come home to dinner, do!"

"Good-morning, Mr. Baxter! How's the library this morning?"

The druggist was standing in his doorway, with a facetious twinkle in his eye. Evidently Mr. Baxter's library was an accepted target for local humour.

Mr. Baxter took no notice, but disappeared into the bookshop. Mr. Pettigrew handed me my bottle.

"One of our characters, that old fellow," he said, with that little air of civic

pride which marks the country-townsman booming local stock. "Quite a poor man, but possesses an extensive library — *quite* extensive. His learning is at the service of his fellow-citizens. He likes to be called The Oracle. Supposing you want to know something about Shakespeare, or Julius Cæsar, or Wireless Telegraphy, or Patagonia, you go to Baxter. You press the button and he does the rest! Lives a bit in the clouds, of course; and I wouldn't go so far as to say that his information is always infallible. In fact" — Mr. Pettigrew tapped his forehead significantly — "his upper storey —"

"Who made up a wrong prescription. and poisoned a baby?" demanded an acid voice immediately under the humourist's elbow. He swung round. The small girl, crimson with wrath, but with her emotions well under control, stood gazing dispassionately before her, apparently talking to herself.

"Whose wife gave a party," she con-

tinued — "and nobody came? Whose daughter wants to marry the curate — and he won't? Who —"

"That'll do," announced Mr. Pettigrew, shortly, and retired in disorder into his shop. Simultaneously The Oracle emerged from the bookshop with Robert Southey under his arm, and with a stately inclination in my direction departed down the street, under the grim and defiant escort of his infant guardian.

II

One morning about three months later, my butler, footman, valet-de-chambre, chauffeur, and general supervisor, McAndrew, thrust his head round the dining-room door as I sat at breakfast and announced:

"There's a wee body in the hall."

I have known McAndrew for seven years now, and I understand his vernacular. We met in that great rendezvous of all time, the Western Front, on a day when I took command of a Field Ambulance in which McAndrew was functioning as a stretcher-bearer. When our unit was demobilized in Nineteen Nineteen, McAndrew came before me and announced that he had relinquished all intention of resuming his former profession of "jiner" in his native Dumbarton, and desired henceforth to serve me in the capacity mentioned above for the joint term of our natural lives. I