

The Papers of Basil Fillimer

By H. D. Traill

MY name is Johnson, just plain John Johnson—nothing more subtle than that ; and my individuality is, as they say, “in a concatenation accordingly.” In other words, the character of my intellect is exactly what you would expect in a man of my name. This was well known to my old friend, schoolmate, and fellow-student at Oxford, the late Basil Fillimer ; a man of the very subtlest mind that I should think has ever housed itself in human body since the brain of the last mediæval schoolman ceased to “distinguish.” Yet Basil Fillimer must needs appoint me—*me* of all men in the world—his literary executor, and charge me with the duty of making a selection from his papers and preparing them for publication. They include a series of “Analytic Studies,” a diary extending over several years, and a three-volume novel turning on the question whether the hero before marrying the heroine was or was not bound to communicate to her the fact that he had once unjustly suspected her mother of circulating reports injurious to the reputation of his aunt.

Basil knew, I say—he must have known—that I was quite unable to follow him in these refined speculations. Hence I can only suppose that at the time when his will was drawn he had not yet discovered my psychological incompetence, and that after he

had made that discovery his somewhat sudden death prevented him from appointing some one of keener analytical acumen in my place.

It would not be fair to the novel, in case it should ever be published, to give any specimens of it here ; it might discount the reader's interest in the development of the plot. But this is the sort of thing the diary consists of :

“ June 15.—Went yesterday to call on my aunt Catherine and found her more troubled than ever about the foundations of her faith. It is a singular phenomenon this awakening of doubt in an elderly mind—this ‘St. Martin’s summer’ of scepticism if I may so call it ; an intensely curious and at the same time a painful study. For me it has so potent a fascination, that I never say or do anything, even in what at the time seems to me perfect good faith, to invite a continuance of my aunt’s confidences, without afterwards suspecting my own motives. My first inclination was to divert her mind to other subjects. Why, I asked myself, should an old lady of seventy-two who has all her life accepted the conventional religion without question be encouraged to what the French call *faire son âme* at this extremely late hour of the day ? Still you can’t very well tell any old lady, even though she is your aunt, that you think she is too old to begin bothering herself with these high matters. You have to put it just the other way, and suggest that she has probably many years of life before her, and will have plenty of time for such speculations later on. But the first sentence I tried to frame in this sense reminded me so ludicrously of Mrs. Quickly’s consolations of the dying Falstaff, that I had to stop for fear of laughing, and allow her to go on. For reply I put her off at the time with commonplaces, but she has since renewed the conversation so often that I feel I shall be obliged to disclose
some

some of my own opinions, which are of course of a much more advanced scepticism than hers. I have considered the question of disguising or qualifying them, and have come without doubt—or I think without much doubt—to the conclusion that I am not justified in doing so. I have never believed in the morality of—

Leave thou thy sister, when she prays,
 Her early Heaven, her happy views ;
 Nor thou with shadowed hint confuse
 A life that leads melodious days.

“ Besides, there is no interpretation clause at the end of *In Memoriam* to say that the term ‘sister’ shall include ‘maiden aunt.’ Moreover, I have every reason to suspect that my aunt Catherine has ceased to pray, and I am sure her days are anything but ‘melodious’ just now, poor old soul. It is all very well to respect other people’s religious illusions as long as they remain undisturbed in the minds of those who harbour them. So long the maxim *Wen Gott betrügt ist wohl betrogen* undoubtedly applies. But what if the Divine Deceiver begins to lose his power of deceiving? Is it the business of any of his creatures to come to his assistance?

“ June 20.—I have just returned from an hour’s interview with my aunt, who almost immediately opened out on the question of her doubts. She spoke of them in tones of profound, indeed of almost tragic agitation; and I could not bring myself to say anything which would increase her mental anguish, as I thought might happen if I confessed to sharing them. I accordingly found myself reverting after all to the old commonplaces,—that ‘these things were mysteries’ and so forth (which of course is exactly the trouble), and the rest of the ‘vacant chaff well meant for grain.’ It had a soothing effect at the time, and I returned home well pleased

pleased with my own wise humanity, as I thought it. But now that I look back upon it and examine my mixed motives, I am forced to admit that there was more of cowardice than compassion in the amalgam. I was not even quite sincere, I now find, in pleading to myself my aunt's distress of mind as an excuse for the concealment, or rather the misrepresentation, of my opinions. I knew at the time that she had had a bad night and that she is suffering severely just now from suppressed gout. In other words, I was secretly conscious at the back of my mind that the abnormal excess of her momentary sufferings was due to physical and not mental causes, and would yield readily enough to colchicum or salicylic acid, which no one has ever ranked among Christian apologetics. Yet I persuaded myself for the moment that it was this quite exceptional and transitory state of my aunt's feelings which compelled me to keep silence.

"*June 23.*—To-day I have had what seems—or seemed to me, for I have not yet had time for a thorough analysis—a clear indication of my only rational and legitimate course. My aunt Catherine said plainly to me this afternoon that as she had gathered from our conversations that my views were strictly orthodox, she would not pain me in future by any further disclosures of her own doubts. At the same time, she added, it was only right to tell me that my pious advice had done her no good, but, on the contrary, harm, since there was to her mind nothing so calculated to confirm scepticism as the sight of a man of good understanding thus firmly wedded to certain received opinions of which nevertheless he was unable to offer any reasonable defence or even intelligible explanation whatsoever. Upon this hint I of course spoke. It was clear that if my silence only increased my aunt's trouble, and that if, further, it threatened to convict me unjustly of stupidity, I was clearly entitled, as well on altruistic as on self-regarding grounds, to reveal my

my true opinions. In fact, I thought at the time that I had never acted under the influence of a motive so clearly visible along its whole course from Thought to Will, and so manifestly free from any the smallest fibre of impulse having its origin in the subliminal consciousness. Yet now I am beginning to doubt.

“*June 24.*—On a closer examination I feel that my motive was *not*, as I then thought, compounded equally of a legitimate desire to vindicate my own intelligence and of a praiseworthy anxiety not to add to my aunt’s spiritual perplexities, but that it was subtly tainted with an illegitimate longing to continue my study of her curious case. Consequently, I cannot now assure myself that if I had not known that further concealment of my opinions would arrest my aunt’s confidences and thus deprive me of a keen psychological pleasure (which I have no right to enjoy at her expense) the legitimate inducements to candour that were presented to me would of themselves have prevailed.”

There is much more of the same kind; but I will cut it short at this point, not only to escape a headache, but to ask any impartial reader into whose hands this apology may fall, whether, I—who as I said before am not only John Johnson by name but by nature—am a fit and proper person to edit the posthumous papers of Basil Fillimer.

I come now, however, to what I consider my strongest justification for declining this literary trust. Though I had, and indeed still retain, the highest admiration for Basil Fillimer’s intellectual subtlety, and though, confessing myself absolutely unable to follow him into his refinements of analysis, I hazard this opinion with diffidence, I do not think that, except in their curiosity as infinitely delicate and minute mental processes, his speculations are of any value to the world. I have formed this opinion in my rough-and-ready way from a variety of circumstances;

stances ; but in support of it I rely mainly upon an incident which occurred within a few months of my lamented friend's death, and which formed to the best of my knowledge the sole passage of sentiment in his intensely speculative career.

To say that he fell in love would be to employ a metaphor of quite inappropriate violence. He "shaded off" from a colourless indifference to a certain young woman of his acquaintance through various neutral tints of regard into a sort of pale sunset glow of affection for her. Eleanor Selden was a first cousin of my own. We had seen much of each other from childhood upwards, and I knew—or thought I knew—her well. She was a lively, good-natured, commonplace girl, without a spark of romance about her, and all a woman's eye to the main chance. I don't mean by this that she was more mercenary than most girls. She merely took that practical view of life and its material requirements which has always seemed to me (only I am not a psychologist) to be so much more common among young people of what is supposed to be the sentimental sex, than of the other. I daresay she was not incapable of love—among appropriate surroundings. Unlike some women, she was not constitutionally unfitted to appear with success in the matrimonial drama ; but she was particular about the *mise-en-scène*. "Act I., A Cottage," would not have suited her at all. She would have played the wife's part with no spirit, I feel convinced. As to "Act V., A Cottage," with an "interval of twenty years supposed to elapse" between that and the preceding act, I doubt whether she would ever have reached it at all.

I imparted these views of mine as delicately as I could to my accomplished friend, but they produced no impression on him. He told me kindly but firmly that I was altogether mistaken. He had, he said, made a particularly careful study of Eleanor's
character

character and had arrived at the confident conclusion that absolute unselfishness formed its most distinctive feature. Nor was he at all shaken in this opinion by the fact that when a little later on he informed her of the nature of his sentiments towards her, he found that she agreed with him in thinking that his then income was not enough to marry upon, and that they had better wait until the death of an uncle of his from whom he had expectations. I felt rather curious to know what passed at the interview between them, and questioned him on the subject.

"As to this objection on the ground of the insufficiency of your income, did it come from you," I asked, "or from her?"

"What a question," said Basil, contemptuously. "From me of course."

"But at once?"

"How do you mean, at once?"

"Well, was there any interval between your telling her you loved her and your adding that you did not think you were well enough off to marry just at present?"

"Any interval? No, of course not. It would have been obviously unfair and ungenerous on my part to have made her a declaration of love without at the same time adding that I could not ask her to share my present poverty and——"

"Oh," I interrupted, "you said that at the same time, did you? Then she had nothing to do but to agree?"

"Well, no, of course not," said Basil. "But, my dear fellow," he continued, with his usual half-pitying smile, "you don't see the point. The point is, that she agreed reluctantly—indeed with quite obvious reluctance."

"Did she press you to reconsider your decision?"

"Well, no, she could hardly do that, you know. It would not be quite consistent with maidenly reserve and so forth. But she

she again and again declared her perfect readiness to share my present fortunes."

"Ah! she did that, did she?"

"Yes, and even after she must have seen that my decision was inflexible."

"Oh! *even* after that: but not before? Thank you, I think I understand."

And I thought I did, as also did Basil. But I fancy our reading of the incident was not the same.

A closer intimacy now followed between the two. They were not engaged; Basil had been beforehand in insisting that her future freedom of choice should not be fettered, and she again "reluctantly, —indeed with quite obvious reluctance," had agreed. They were much in each other's company, and Basil, who used to read her some of the most intricate psychological chapters in his novel, in which she showed the greatest interest, conceived a very high idea of her intellectual gifts. "She has," he said, "by far the subtlest mind for a woman that I ever came in contact with."

"Do you ever talk to her about your uncle?" I asked him one day.

"Oh yes, sometimes," he replied. "And, by the way," he added, suddenly, "that reminds me. To show you how unjust is the view you take of your cousin's motives, as no doubt you do of human nature generally like most superficial students of it (excuse an old friend's frankness), I may tell you that although there have been many occasions when she might have put the question with perfect naturalness and propriety, she has never once inquired the amount of my uncle's means."

"It is very much to her credit," said I.

"It is true," he added, after a moment's reflection and with a half-laugh, "I could not have told her if she had. His money is all in personalty, and he is a close old chap."

"Oh,"

“Oh,” I said, “have you ever by chance mentioned that to her?”

“Eh? What?” answered Basil, absently, for, as his manner was, he was drifting away on some underground stream of his own thoughts. “Mentioned it? I don’t recollect. I daresay I have. Probably I must have done. Why do you ask?”

“Well,” said I, “because if she knew you could not answer the question that might account for her not asking it.”

But he was already lost in reverie, and I did not feel justified in rousing him from it for no worthier purpose than that of hinting suspicion of the disinterestedness of a blood relation.

In due time—or at least in what the survivors considered due time, though I don’t suppose the poor old gentleman so regarded it—Basil’s uncle died, and the nephew found himself the heir to a snug little fortune of about £900 a year. As soon as he was in possession of it he wrote to Eleanor, acquainting her with the change in his circumstances, and renewing his declaration of love, accompanied this time with a proposal of immediate marriage. I happened to look in upon him at his chambers on the evening of the day on which the letter had been despatched, and he told me what he had done.

“Ah!” said I, “now, then, we shall see which of us is right. But no,” I added, on a moment’s reflection, “after all, it won’t prove anything; for I suppose we both agree that she is likely to accept you now, and I can’t deny that she can do so with perfect propriety.”

Basil looked at me as from a great height, a Gulliver conversing with a Lilliputian.

“Dear old Jack,” he said, after a few moments of obviously amused silence, “you are really most interesting. What makes you think she will say Yes?”

“What!”

"What!" I exclaimed in astonishment. "Don't you think so yourself?"

"On the contrary," replied Basil, with that sad patient smile of his, "I am perfectly convinced that she will say No."

I did not pursue the conversation, for my surprise at his opinion had by this time disappeared. It occurred to me that after all it was not unnatural in a man who had conceived so exalted an estimate of Eleanor's character. No doubt he thought her too proud to incur the suspicion which might attach to her motives in accepting him after this accession to his fortunes. I felt sure, however, that he was mistaken, and it was therefore with renewed and much increased surprise that I read the letter which he placed in my hand with quiet triumph a few days afterwards.

It was a refusal. Eleanor thanked him for his renewal of his proposal, said she should always feel proud of having won the affection of so accomplished a man, but that having carefully examined her own heart, she felt that she did not love him enough to marry him.

Basil, I feel sure, was as fond of my cousin as it was in his nature to be of anybody; but he was evidently much less disappointed by her rejection than pleased with the verification of his forecast. I confess I was puzzled at its success.

"How did you know she would refuse you?" I asked. "I must say that I thought her sufficiently alive to her own interests to accept you."

Basil gently shook his head.

"But I suppose *you* thought that she would reject you for fear of being considered mercenary."

Basil still continued to shake his head, but now with a provokingly enigmatic smile.

"No?"

"No? But confound it," I cried, out of patience, "there are only these two alternatives in every case of this kind."

"My dear Jack," said Basil, after a few moments' contemplation of me, "you have confounded it yourself. You are confusing act with motive. It is true there are only two possible replies to the question I asked Miss Selden; but the series of alternating motives for either answer is infinite."

"Infinite?" echoed I, aghast.

"Yes," said Basil, dreamily. "It is obviously infinite, though the human faculties in their present stage of development can only follow a few steps of it. Would you really care to know," he continued kindly, after a pause, "the way in which I arrived at my conclusion?"

"I should like it of all things," I said.

"Then you had better just take a pencil and a sheet of paper," said Basil. "You will excuse the suggestion, but to any one unfamiliar with these trains of thought some aid of the kind is positively necessary. Now, then, let us begin with the simplest case, that of a girl of selfish instincts and blunt sensibilities, who looks out for as good a match, from the pecuniary point of view, as she can make, and doesn't very much care to conceal the fact."

("Eleanor down to the ground," I thought to myself.)

"She would have said Yes to my question, wouldn't she?"

"No doubt."

"Very well, then, kindly mark that *Case A*."

I did so.

"Next, we come to a girl of a somewhat higher type, not perhaps indifferent to pecuniary considerations, but still too proud to endure the suspicion of having acted upon them in the matter of marriage. She would answer No, wouldn't she?"

"Yes,"

"Yes," said I, eagerly. "And surely that is the way in which *you* must explain Eleanor's refusal."

"Pardon me," said Basil, raising a deprecating hand, "it is not quite so simple as that. But have you got that down? If so, please mark it *Case B*. Thirdly, we get a woman of a nobler nature who would have too much faith in her lover's generosity to believe him capable of suspecting her motives, and who would welcome the opportunity of showing that faith. Have you got that down?"

"Yes, every word," said I. "But, my dear fellow, that is a woman whose answer would be Yes."

"Exactly," replied Basil, imperturbably. "Mark it *Case C*. And now," he continued, lighting a cigarette, "have the goodness to favour me with your particular attention to this. There is a woman of moral sensibilities yet more refined who would fear lest her lover should suspect her of being actuated by motives *really* mercenary, but veiled under the *pretence* of a desire to demonstrate her reliance on his faith in her disinterestedness, and who would consequently answer No. Do you follow that?"

"No, I'll be damned if I do!" I cried, throwing down the pencil.

"Ah," said Basil, sadly, "I was afraid so. Nevertheless, for convenience of reference, mark it *Case D*. There are of course numberless others; the series, as I have said, is infinite. There is *Case E*, that of the woman who rises superior to this last-mentioned fear, and says Yes; and there is *Case F*, that of the woman who fears to be suspected of only feigning such superiority, and says No. But it is probably unnecessary to carry the analysis further. You believe that Miss Selden's refusal of me comes under *Case B*; I, on the other hand, from my experience of the singular subtlety and delicacy of her intellectual operations, am persuaded
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that it belongs to the D category. Her alleged excuse is, of course, purely conventional. Her plea that she is unable to love me," he added with an indescribable smile, "is, for instance, absurd. I will let a couple of months or so elapse, and shall then take steps to ascertain from her whether it was the motive of Case B or that of Case D by which she has been really actuated."

The couple of months, alas! were not destined to go by in Basil's lifetime. Three weeks later my poor friend was carried off by an attack of pneumonia, and I was left with this unsolved problem of conduct on my mind.

I was, however, determined to seek the solution of it, and the first time I met Eleanor I referred it to herself. I had taken the precaution to bring my written notes with me so as to be sure that the question was correctly stated.

"Nelly," said I, for, as I have already said, we were not only cousins, but had been brought up together from childhood, "I want you to tell me, your oldest chum, *why* you refused Basil Fillimer. Was it because you were too proud to endure the suspicion of having married for money, or was it—now for goodness' sake don't interrupt me just here," for I saw Nelly's smiling lips opening to speak; "or was it," I continued, carefully reading from my paper, "because you feared lest he should suspect you of being actuated by motives *really* mercenary but veiled under the *pretence* of a desire to demonstrate your reliance on his faith in your disinterestedness?"

The smile broke into a ringing laugh.

"Why, you stupid Jack," cried Eleanor, "what nonsense of poor dear old Basil's have you got into your head? Why did I refuse him? You who have known me all my life to ask such a question! Now did you—*did* you think I was the sort of girl to marry a man with only nine hundred a year?"

Candidly,

Candidly, I did not. But poor Basil did. And that, as I said before, is one and perhaps the strongest among many reasons why I think that his studies of human character and analyses of human motive, though intellectually interesting, would not be likely to prove of much practical value to the world.