What's the Use of Latin?

…….. You cannot learn Latin, again, without learning some Roman history, and that brings in English History at once; we gain a new interest in our Roman remains and our museums, and we see that we are not unique and isolated, but one link in a great chain of generations which are all connected together. We cannot scrap the past, and make a new pattern on a clean sheet, and all the rest of that nonsense. As Landor said: "The present, like a note in music, is nothing but as it appertains to what is past and what is to come."

The schoolboy soon learns who the Romans were, and sees with a new understanding their magnificent roads, and their castles and villas, and their noble Wall, and the picture of settled peace which made England happy for centuries. He will have a new understanding of his own England, and a pride in the pax Britannica and its rein of justice and honesty. If it leads him to read the history of India, he will see peace and justice brought into a continent which had been torn from the beginning of time by internecine feuds and bloodshed, by ambition and fanaticism, and he will understand his duty not to let loose their wild passions again, for they are all there. He will have found his union with one of the three great nations who have moulded our life: Rome with her order, Greece with her imagination, Israel with her religion; and he will hear echoes of all three in his worship, Alleluia, Kyrie Eleison, Stabat Mater. Consider how such things may kindle his thoughts, and lift them high above the turmoil of life.

Besides this, the boy will make acquaintance with many of the great men who left their legacy of wisdom and beauty, or the lighter gifts of gaiety and wit. He will have read and learnt pieces of Catullus "the natural singer", whom a few short verses have made immortal; of Horace, the noble spokesman of patriot devotion and the pleasant jester; of Virgil, most lovely and most lovable of poets; of Martial, with his stinging wit; of Livy, with his incomparable stories; of Tacitus, grim and gloomy subject of tyranny such as we would pray to be saved from; Tacitus who wrote a fine book about our own England; of Caesar the master of war, and the great statesman, who tells us of the strange tribes which are akin to us; of Cicero, the eloquent orator, the racy letter-writer, who tells us our duties in such attractive stories, the foe of injustice, the statesman who was not always right but knew how to die for his principles. It is true, the schoolboy will not learn much of those, but they will be more than names to him; and he may learn later to know them better and to love them. One of the most gratifying things I can remember in my life, was when a boy who left school at sixteen to join Vickers Maxims, wrote home in the first week to ask for his Horace. I have had plenty of evidence that boys do not forget.

But the full harvest can be reaped only by those who make classics their chief subject at school, and do their three years' special study before they leave. That does not mean a narrow education, for it takes only about one-third of their time, the rest being given to English, French and German, Science and mathematics if they wish, to balance their studies and to carry on what they have been learning before.

Now at last they begin really to enjoy the riches of antiquity. And let me remind you, that there is only one way to do that: you must read it in the original, for translations are not enough. A plain statement of fact can be translated, the dry bones of history, a book of research like Pliny the Elder, which is little more than the Stores Catalogue; but poetry cannot be translated, nor can the beauties of style in any kind. The matter may be there, but the manner is lost: and when the author desires to convince us of truth, or to attract and persuade us, the manner is more important than the matter. The effect desired can only be brought about if we hear the speaker using the words he thought fittest, not ruled by reason, and I hope it never will be; it is ruled by feeling, by sentiment, and that is moved by the words of great authors. Since what is preserved from antiquity is nearly

always the best, whereas the rubbish has perished, our feelings are moved to the best issues. And we read everything aloud in the original, so that the effect is made as the authors meant it to be made. We read in large quantity also, not ten or twenty lines at a time, but 200 to 300 in double lessons of ninety minutes each. In the three years we read, of Latin: all Virgil and Horace, a book or two of Lucretius, four plays of Plautus, parts of Lucretius, Catullus, Ovid, Juvenal with Martial, all Caesar's Gallic War, parts of Livy, Tacitus, and Cicero; of Greek: all the Iliad or the Odyssey (sometimes both), three plays of Aeschylus, three of Sophocles, two or three of Aristophanes, parts of Theocritus and lyric poets, two books at least of Thucydides, parts of Herodotus, twelve speeches of Demosthenes, a great deal of Plato, some Xenophon and a little Aristotle and Lucian. These are the regular stock: besides there are always a lot of oddments which occasion may suggest.

And what has the boy gained from these? First, as to the form: he has made acquaintance with perfection, or at least with standards which will help him to judge of everything else he reads - the first and best works of epic, drama, narrative, history, philosophy, oratory, and lyric. As to the matter, he has learnt the thoughts of some of the best minds in the world on the chief problems of religion, morals and manners, not to mention law, government and politics, for they all come up sooner or later. And these are presented to him in an atmosphere free from prejudice. He can ponder the wisdom of ancient days on its merits, without asking whether it be orthodox or unorthodox, church or chapel, liberal or Tory; he can how the old sages satisfied their souls, solved or did not solve their perplexities; he can examine the effects of strict law and laxity, or limited monarchy or tyranny, mob-rule or class-rule; he can see innumerable experiments in self-government, every kind and degree of excess or defect, and he can take warning by past experience. He will find that while manners differ, principles do not, and that ought to strengthen his hold on his own; and above all, he can see the relations and the limits of religion and science. Good conduct and high ideals are usually not preached to him; when they are told, it is in Cicero's genial way, by stories which he can admire and remember, or by Aristotle's cold reason which discusses the Chief Good of man. But most of what he learns is truth embodied in a tale.

But to get the good out of Latin and Greek you must let the poor languages have a chance of living and not kill them at birth. You must not begin Latin with exercises on the first declension, and so on to the fifth, so that your matter is determined by the scientific grammar. If so, you begin with queens, whom your boys are not likely to meet, and goddesses, whom they will not see until they are seventeen, and tables, and I love (a word they don't use); and go on to Labienus and his legions, and faith, hope and charity. All that is unreal, dead to them in fact. No language can be learnt that way; but the right way to learn it is as they learnt their own English, by talking about what they see around them, and what they do, and what they want. Learn Latin not by talking about it, but by using it. Here are some aphorisms from the experience of an accomplished teacher of many languages.