

I. ORIGINS

The late Mr. J. R. Planché, dramatist, antiquary, Somerset Herald, and I believe excellent person generally, was not such a good poet as Dante or as Tennyson; and when he wrote, very late in life, in an address to Youth,

1 “I can do almost all that you can do,
 And I have what you have not, the Past,”

he might be thought to be blaspheming the doctrine of “Nessun
2 maggior dolore” and

 “ That a sorrow’s crown of sorrow is remembering happier
3 things.”

4 But after all he had Horace with “Non tamen irritum,” and Dryden with his magnificent adaptation,

4 “For what has been, has been, and I have had my hour,”

on his side. At any rate, the other doctrine of “make the best of it,” if base when applied to sublimer things, is grateful and com-

forting in the case of the lesser outrages of Fortune; and, if you have lost your cellar, there is still some satisfaction to be got out of your cellar-book.

The external aspect of this particular record, as it lies before its owner, is, like that of many other things of some internal preciousness, not imposing. It is merely an ordinary “exercise book” cloth-backed, with mottled-paper sideboards outside, and unruled leaves within, undecked with the pompous printed page-headings for different bins and vintages, and the dispositions for entering consumption and keeping an eye on the butler, which the regular cellar-book boasts. It had been one, I think, of a batch, most of which were devoted to base purposes of lecture-notes, translations of ancient and modern authors, etc., etc. But it happened to be at hand and still blank when that owner first came into possession of a cellar, better deserving the name than the cupboards which do duty in most middle-class London houses; and so it was promoted. The actual entries in it cover, with some intervals due to domestic accidents, a period of exactly thirty-one years (the duration of some agricultural leases, I think), from 1884 to 1915. But the cellar, in the sense of the collection of wine which it represents, was some years older in formation than the record, and was founded in a great year for many things, wine itself included, the year 1878. The foundation, I think I may say without vanity, or (since it has ceased to be) without undue provocation to Nemesis, took place under fair auspices, though it was then but a little one, extending only to a few dozen of various kinds besides ordinary claret. I started it with purchases from a certain excellent firm, then established on the north side of Pall Mall, who supplied my club, and with whom I had had a very few dealings before I came back to London. The managing partner was an old Scotsman, whose ideas were very sound and whose manners could be very agreeable. We discussed the firm’s wine-list for some considerable time;

—1878.
[FIGURE]
Figure 4
near here.



FIGURE 4. Saintsbury's cellar book (Michael Broadbent, *Saintsbury the Progenitor* [London: privately printed, 1993]).

and when I had made my scanty but careful selection, he accompanied me not merely to the door of his room but to that of the outer office. As we shook hands on the threshold he said to me, with the little bow which has almost disappeared:—"Mr. Saintsbury, Sir, if ye ask anyone to dinner and tell them where ye get your wine, we shall not be ashamed." No doubt these things are, in two senses, vanity; but I confess that the wings of peace fluttered and flattered my soul as I walked past Marlborough House. Only, such speeches impose. I felt that I had a new duty on me; never to insult the pure society of these liquids by introducing unworthy companions to it. To say this is, of course, like publishing banns; it invites any unkind person to get up and say, "You gave *me* bad wine." But I trust I should find compurgators.

The cellar-book, as I have said, did not start for a few years after this, and when it did, most of the good wines which had earned me that compliment had done their good office. Only two, I think, survived. One was a Burgundy—Richebourg '69—of which my friend in Pall Mall had remarked: "It ought to be good. The man we get it from sits up at night with a thermometer before it is bottled." And, so far as I remember, that thermometer was justified of its information.

This wine was not more than nine years' old when I bought it; but Burgundy is quick in maturing. The other was of a far older vintage, and one of the three or four most remarkable juices of the grape, not merely that I ever possessed but that I ever tasted.

As to this point my merchant and mentor, despite his general approval of my judgment, and despite also the fact that the wine was the most expensive I bought from him, did not quite agree. "Yes, it's great in its way; but it's a *coorse* wine," he said. But I understood this as merely a piece of chivalrous partisanship, for he was (and no shame to him) a devotee of Bordeaux, and when he wanted anything heavier, of Port: and this was a red Hermitage of 1846. The Hermitage of the year before must have been made just before I was born; and I thought it very nice of the vines, whose ancestors are said to have been of Shiraz stock imported by the Crusaders, to have kept this produce till I was alive and ready for my first birthday present. For it was really a wonderful wine. When the last bottle of it was put on the table before I again broke up my household in London for a time, it was just forty years old. Now most red wines, if not all with the exception of Port, are either past their best, or have no best to come to, at that age. And with all respect to the late Mr. George Meredith and some other persons of less distinction, I think that even those who have forty years' old Port in their cellars had much better drink it. But my Hermitage showed not the slightest mark or presage

of enfeeblement. It was, no doubt (to translate, without “betraying,” my friend’s harsh epithet mildly), not a delicate wine; if you want delicacy you don’t go to the Rhone or anywhere in France below Gascony. But it was the *manliest* French wine I ever drank; and age had softened and polished all that might have been rough in the manliness of its youth.

You had to be careful of it in some ways; one of the best-known of all my friends had very remarkable experiences as a consequence of neglecting my warnings, and consuming whisky instead of brandy with his soda after it. But there is no good in any man, woman or wine that will allow liberties to be taken with them. To champagne before it, it had no objection; nor, as hinted just now, to brandy afterwards. But it was uncompromisingly Gallic in its patriotism. They had only about a dozen and a half of it left in the wine merchant’s cellars, and I bought the whole of it. But with a small supply like this and the certainty of nothing more like it (for it must be remembered that this was pre-oidium and pre-phyloxera wine, and that the vineyards, by the time we drank it, had been ruined and replanted), it was rather a “fearful joy” to take a bottle of it from the dwindling company. However, I was not in a position to give dinner parties every week, nor, to speak frankly, did my company always deserve to have it set before them; so it lasted some years. It had, like all its congeners, a heavy sediment, and required very careful decanting; but when properly brought to table it was glorious. The shade of its colour was browner (people used, *vide* Thackeray, to call the red hocks “brown”) than most of the Hermitages I have seen; but the brown was flooded with such a sanguine as altogether transfigured it. The bouquet was rather like that of the less sweet wall-flower. And as to the flavour one might easily go into dithyrambs. Wine-slang talks of the “finish” in such cases, but this was so full and so complicated that it never seemed to come to a finish. You could meditate on

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it; and it kept up with your meditations. The “gunflint” which, though not so strong in the red as in the white wines of the district, is supposed to be always there, was not wanting; but it was not importunate and did not intrude too much on the special Hermitage touch, or on that general “red wine” flavour which in some strange way is common to every vintage from Portugal to Hungary, vary as they may in character and merit otherwise. I do not say it was the best wine I ever had; that position I may be able to allot later.

Perhaps I may add something, though it may seem trivial or fantastic. I tried it with various glasses, for it is quite wonderful what whimsies wine has as to the receptacles in which it likes to be drunk. The large, slightly pinched-in “dockglass,” half filled, suited it as indeed it does almost any wine. But whether it was mere whimsy on my own part or not, I always thought it went
 15 best in some that I got in the early seventies from Salviati’s, before they became given to gaudiness and rococo. They were glasses of about the ordinary claret size, but flat-bottomed, and with nearly straight sides, curly-stemmed, with a white but rather
 16 cloudy body, an aventurine edge (very light) and deep blue knobs, small and sparsely set, in one row below it. They were good for all the great French red wines, but better for Burgundy than for Claret, and better for Hermitage or Côte Rotie than for Burgundy.

Alas!

The wine is gone, and with the wine went they, though many years after it. But of some other wines that they held and saw at the same time or later, we may talk further in other chapters.

Perhaps, however, a word or two on some matters connected with the above may not be offensive or superfluous. As may be supposed, I was not exactly a novice when I went to Pall Mall in 1878.

17 I think I must have acquired some knowledge of good wine and
 an unlimited horror of bad from my father; for though he died
 when I was very young, and in his later years drank very little
 (chiefly, as I may again mention later, the modest Marsala, which
 used to suffice professional and city men of the mid-nineteenth
 century, and but a glass or two of that), I possess, among my few
 memories of him, a cellar-book of earlier date with quite re-
 spectable entries. When I went to Oxford I joined no regular Wine
 Club for some private reasons, but used to give modest port and
 sherry “wines” in my own rooms, *not* imitating one of my most
 distinguished and amiable instructors, who was said as a freshman
 to have produced two bottles, taken them up to the table, shaken
 them both, and then said, “This is port and this is sherry; which
 will ye have?” One had one’s share too of those feasts at certain
 more or less famous hostelries, where the bills used to run with a
 combination of detail and laconism: “To share of dinner, sherry,
 hock, champagne, claret, port, brandy *and breakages*—£- -s. -d.” I
 do not think I ever bought much wine in Oxford, remembering
 18 Dr. Portman’s caution about “the other shop,” and having deal-
 ings with an old friend of my father’s in town. But I remember a
 19 good brown sherry of Guy & Gammon’s.

20 From Oxford, after a brief interval at Manchester, with nei-
 21 ther time nor means to invest in the gifts of Bacchus, I moved to
 22 Guernsey, where, as I have endeavoured to acknowledge else-
 where, things were as agreeable in this respect as in all others. Not
 only was liquor cheap, but it was *not* nasty.* I have mentioned some

—Gammon’s.
 [FIGURE]
 Figure 5 near
 here.

* Except some smuggled German potato spirit which an intelligent Customs officer, as he told us afterwards at whist, took from a newly planted cabbage bed. It was said to be all but absolute alcohol, and in taste “more frightful than words can say,” as poets observe in their unimaginative moments.



FIGURE 5. Elizabeth College, Guernsey, where Saintsbury was classics master from 1868 to 1874 (author's collection).

specialties in later chapters, and I will only add here that while my six years of sojourn there convinced me that plenty and cheapness of alcoholic liquor did not tempt to abuse of it, they also showed me that this same cheapness was a remarkable preservative of quality. The genuine article was so moderate in cost, and the possible profit on selling it was so limited, that adulteration was hardly at all tempting. Let me add that as the islanders included an unusually large proportion of persons of fair income, ancestral houses, and gentle blood, hospitality was abundant and the means of exercising it excellent. There can be no insult in recalling the fact that during the quarter-century of the great French wars the Channel Islands were the chief entrepôt of foreign-made drink—never mind whether in connection with what

is called smuggling or not. Barely half a century more had passed when I went to Guernsey, and I do not think the last bottle of the old stocks had been drunk out.

23 But if Guernsey treated me well, Elgin, to which I went for
 24 some two years in 1874–6, treated me in this respect almost bet-
 25 ter; though of course one had to pay more for one’s actual pur-
 26 chases. In that blameless Hyperborean district, what my prede-
 27 cessor at Edinburgh, Professor Masson, was soon after to call “the
 28 savage observance of whisky toddy” (though this was only hu-
 29 morous irony like Lamb’s on tobacco) lacked not observers. And
 30 the worship of the wine of the country did not exclude that of
 31 other cheerers. I never drank better claret or champagne than I
 had given to me “up there”; and it was there that I began, on a
 very small scale and interrupted by the shortness of my stay, to
 form a sort of cellaret though not a cellar, and to study the sub-
 ject as well as others in a manner worthy of it and of them. Alas!
 my first library and my first cellar had to be relinquished, as my
 last cellar and my last library were, in the same country of Scot-
 land, forty years later. But it was in Elgin that I made my first
 separate study of a great English writer—Dryden; in Elgin that
 I began to read Elizabethan literature more than sporadically,
 and in Elgin that I laid the foundation of a real cellar, by se-
 lecting, not merely buying as offered, a “classed” claret in the
 shape of ’64 Ducru-Beucaillou and a special champagne in that
 of ’65 Krug.

My larger adventure there, like so many others, did not flour-
 ish (for reasons quite unconnected with the cellar), and vicissitudes
 followed, till, setting Chaucer at nought, I “fled to the Press,” not
 from her, was most agreeably welcomed, and became in case to
 start a new collection of books and wines in the good year ’78—
 the year of the second *Poems and Ballads*, and of the best Léoville

32 Barton I ever drank (though Anthony Trollope thought '64 the *ne plus ultra* thereof); the year, finally, of which the Judicious Poet wrote to somebody or something unnamed:

A year there was of glory,
 Of promise false and fair
 When Downing Street was Tory,
 And England foiled the Bear;
 When all the wine succeeded
 From Douro to Moselle,
 And all the papers needed
 The wares I had to sell;
 When, friends with love and leisure,
 Youth not yet left behind,
 I worked or played at pleasure,
 Found god—and goddess—kind;
 Played my last rubber cosy,
 Took my last miss at loo,
 When all my world was rosy,
 But when I knew not—You!

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And certainly, though one did know the *Poems and Ballads* in the year itself, one did *not* yet know the Léoville. So perhaps the poem was written to *it*, and not to a lady-love, as might seem more likely to hasty observers.