A WORD UPON INDEXES*

Index-making has been held to be the driest as well as lowest species of writing. We shall not dispute the humbleness of it; but since we have had to make an index ourselves,** we have discovered that the task need not be so very dry. Calling to mind indexes in general, we found them presenting us a variety of pleasant memories and contrasts. We thought of those to the Spectator, which we used to look at so often at school, for the sake of choosing a paper to abridge. We thought of the index to the Pantheon of Fabulous Histories of the Heathen Gods, which we used to look at oftener. We remember how we imagined we should feel some day, if ever our name should appear in the list of Hs; as thus, Home, Howard, Hume, Huniades,—. The poets would have been better, but then the names, though perhaps less unfitting, were not so flattering; as for instance, Halifax, Hammond, Harte, Hughes,—. We did not like to come after Hughes.

We have just been looking at the indexes to the Tatler and Spectator, and never were more forcibly struck with the feeling we formerly expressed about a man’s being better pleased with other writers than with himself. Our index seemed the poorest and most secondhand thing in the world after theirs; but let any one read theirs, and then call an index a dry thing if he can. As there “is a soul of goodness in things evil,” so there is a soul of humour in things dry, and in things dry by profession. Lawyers know this, as well as index-makers, or they would die of sheer thirst and aridity. But as grapes, ready to burst with wine, issue out of the most stony places, like jolly fellows bringing Burgandy out of a cellar; so an index, like the Tatler’s, often gives us a taste of the quintessence of his humour. For instance,—

“Bickerstaff, Mr. account of his ancestors, 141. How his race was improved, 142. Not

in partnership with Lillie, 250. Catched writing nonsense, 47.

“Dead men, who are to be so accounted, 247.”

Sometimes he has a stroke of pathos, as touching in its brevity as the account it refers to; as,

“Love-letters between Mr. Bickerstaff and Maria, 184—186. Found in a grave, 289.”

Sometimes he is simply moral and graceful; as,

“Tenderness and humanity inspired by the Muses, 256. No true greatness of mind without it ibid.”

At another he says perhaps more than he intended; as,

“Laura, her perfections and excellent character, 19. Despised by her husband, ibid.”

The index to Cotton’s Montaigne, probably written by the translator himself, is often pithy and amusing. Thus in Volume 2d,

“Anger is pleased with, and flatters itself, 618.

“Beasts inclined to avarice, 225.

“Children abandoned to the care and government of their fathers, 613.

“Drunkenness, to a high and dead degree, 16.

“Joy, profound, has more severity than gaiety in it.

“Monsters, are not so to God, 612

“Voluptuousness of the Cynics, 418.”

Sometimes we meet with graver quaintnesses and curious relations, as in the index to Sandys’s Ovid,

“Diana, no virgin, scoff at by Lucian, p. 55.

“Dwarfs, an Italian Dwarfe, carried about in a parrot’s cage, p. 113.

“Echo, at Twilleries in Paris, heard to repeat a verse without failing in one syllable, p. 58.

“Ship of the Tyrrhenians miraculously stuck fast in the sea, p. 63.

“A Historie of a Bristol ship stuck fast in the deep Sea by Witchcraft; for which twenty-five Witches were executed, ibid.”

From Hunt (L.), The Indicator, pt. 2. London, Tegg, 1865. Referred to by H. B. Wheatley in his How to make an index as a ‘charming little paper’.

** To the original edition of The Indicator.