

**THE HOUSE OF  
QUIET: AN  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY**

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The House of Quiet: An Autobiography by Arthur Christopher Benson

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**ARTHUR CHRISTOPHER BENSON**

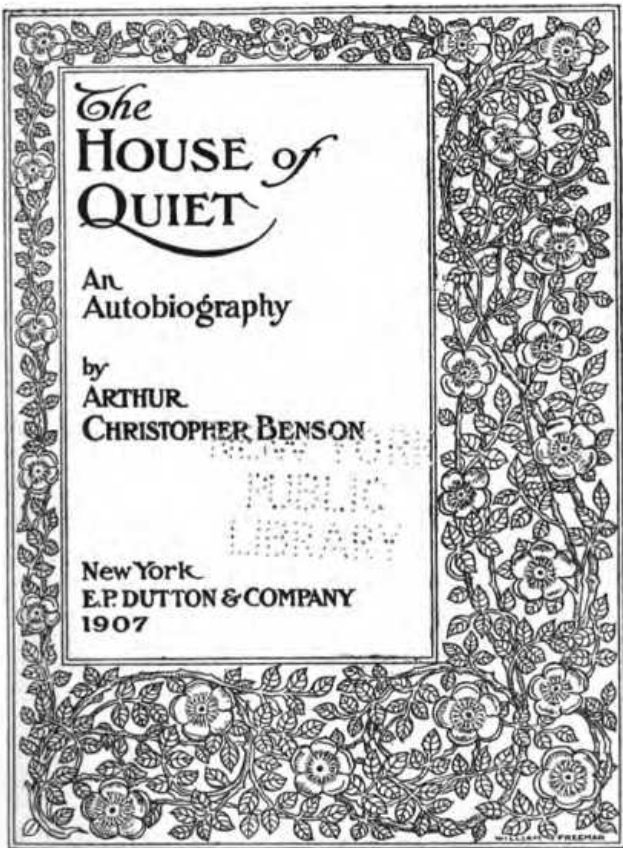
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## PREFACE

I HAVE been reading this morning a very pathetic and characteristic document. It is a paper that has lurked for years in an old collection of archives, a preface, sketched by a great writer, who is famous wherever the English language is spoken or read, for the second edition of a noble book. The book, on its first appearance, was savagely and cruelly attacked; and the writer of it, hurt and wounded by a mass of hateful and malevolent criticisms, piled together by an envious and narrow mind, tried, with a miserable attempt at jaunty levity, to write an answer to the vicious assailant. This answer is deeply pathetic, because, behind the desperate parade of cheerful *insouciance*, one seems to hear the life-blood falling, drop by drop; the life-blood of a dauntless and pure spirit, whose words had been so deftly twisted and satanically misrepresented as to seem the utterances of a sensual and cynical mind.

In deference to wise and faithful advice, the preface was withheld and suppressed; and one is thankful for that; and the episode is further

1925

TRANSFER FROM C. Q. APR

a tender lesson for all who have faithfully tried to express the deepest thoughts of their heart, frankly and sincerely, never to make the least attempt to answer, or apologise, or explain. If one's book, or poem, or picture survives, that is the best of all answers. If it does not survive, well, one has had one's say, thought one's thought, done one's best to enlighten, to contribute, to console; and, like millions of other human utterances, the sound is lost upon the wind, the thought, like a rainbow radiance, has shone and vanished upon the cloud.

The book which is here presented has had its share both of good and evil report; and it fell so far short of even its own simple purpose, that I should be the first to hold that it had been blamed *justly*. I have no sort of intention of answering my critics; but I would wish to make plain what the book itself perhaps fails to make plain, namely, what my purpose in writing it was. The book grew rather than was made. It was, from the first, meant as a message to the weak rather than as a challenge to the strong. There is a theory of life, wielded like a cudgel by the hands of the merry and high-hearted, that the whole duty of man is to dash into the throng, to eat and drink, to



love and wed, to laugh and fight. That is a fine temper; it is the mood of the sailor-comrades of Odysseus—

“That ever with a frolic welcome took  
The thunder and the sunshine, and opposed  
Free hearts, free foreheads.”

Such a mood, if it be not cruel, or tyrannous, or brutal, or overbearing, is a generous and inspiring thing. Joined, as I have seen it joined, with simplicity and unselfishness and utter tenderness, it is the finest spirit in the world—the spirit of the great and chivalrous knight of old days. But when this mood shows itself without the kindly and gracious knightly attributes, it is a vile and ugly thing, insolent, selfish, animal.

The problem, then, which I tried to present in my book, was this: I imagined a temperament of a peaceful and gentle order, a temperament without robustness and *joie de vivre*, but with a sense of duty, a desire to help, an anxious wish not to shirk responsibility; and then I tried to depict such a character as being suddenly thrust into the shadow, set aside, as, by their misfortune or their fault, a very large number of persons are set aside, debarred from ambition, pushed into a backwater of life,

made, by some failure of vitality, into an invalid (a word which conceals many of the saddest tragedies of the world)—and I set myself to reflect how a man, with such limitations, might yet lead a life that was wholesome and contented and helpful; and then, at the last, I thought of him as confronted with a prospect of one of the deepest and sweetest blessings of life, the hope of a noble love; and then again, the tyrannous weakness that had laid him low, swept that too out of his grasp, and bade him exchange death for life, darkness for the cheerful day.

Who does not know of home after home where such things happen? of life after life, on which calamities fall, so that the best that the sufferer can do is *to gather up the fragments that remain, that nothing be lost?* This book, *The House of Quiet*, was written for all whose life, by some stroke of God, seemed dashed into fragments, and who might feel so listless, so dismayed, that they could not summon up courage even to try and save something from the desolate wreck.

To compare small things with great, it was an attempt to depict, in modern unromantic fashion, such a situation as that of *Robinson*

*Crusoe*, where a man is thrown suddenly upon his own resources, shut off from sympathy and hope. In that great fiction one sees the patience, the courage, the inventiveness of the simple hero grow under the author's hand; but the soul of my own poor hero had indeed suffered shipwreck, though he fell among less stimulating surroundings than the caverns and freshets, the wildfowl and the savages, of that green isle in the Caribbean Sea.

In the *Life of William Morris*, a man whose chosen motto was *si je puis*, and who, whatever else he was accused of, was never accused of a want of virile strength, there is an interesting and pathetic letter, which he wrote at the age of fifty-one, when he was being thrust, against his better judgment, into a prominent position in the Socialist movement.

"My habits are quiet and studious," he said, "and, if I am too much worried with 'politics,' i.e., intrigue, I shall be no use to the cause as a writer. All this shows, you will say, a weak man: that is true, but I must be taken as I am, not as I am not."

This sentence sums up, very courageously and faithfully, the difficulty in which many people, who believe in ideas, and perceive more