CHAPTER 6.

SAMUEL JOHNSON

ONE of the best known Gawsworth worthies was Samuel Johnson, long known as " Maggoty " Johnson, who died in 1773, aged 82, and lies buried in the wood two fields north of the church. Indeed as remarked by Charles Beswick, to write of Gawsworth without some mention of Samuel Johnson, would be like producing the play of " Hamlet " without the Prince of Denmark. Johnson was a rare local celebrity of eccentric character, known also by the title of " Lord Flame," apart from that of " Maggoty " Johnson. He would seem to have been a " Jack-of-all-Trades," for with the profession of a dancing master he united that of a wit, poet, musician and a player.

The eccentric habits of the poet, combined with his curious burial place, are of so unusual a character that in former times the name of Gawsworth was rarely mentioned without its conjuring up the name of Samuel Johnson, or as he was generally known in his day "Lord Flame."

Indeed a visitor to the parish was thought by many not to have completed the inspection of the attractions of Gawsworth, unless a visit had been made to the grave of " Maggoty " Johnson. The tomb is situated in a picturesque coppice not far from the church, now the property of the National Trust.

He was a close friend of Amos Meredith, the son of Sir William Meredith, who resided at Henbury Park. Amos Meredith attained much eminence as an author and poet during the reign of Queen Anne and George I. He died at Bath in 1745.

Samuel Johnson appears to have been one of the last of the paid English jesters, those professional " Merry Andrews " whose presence was considered almost indispensable in the homes of the baronial families of old England, who, like Shakespeare's Yorick, were " fellows of infinite jest," and wont " to set the table arour with their jokes and witticisms." In addition to his being employed as jester or mirth-maker by the manorial Lord of Gawsworth, he was a welcome addition at parties given by the neighbouring county families, when he had free license to bandy his witticisms, and to utter and enact anything likely to enliven the company, and to provoke mirth and laughter.

According to John Earles, it was in the year 1729 that Johnson made

his appearance in London as a dramatic author, and was fortunate enough to secure the friendship and patronage of the Duke of Montague. The title of his play was a remarkable one. It was called "Hurlothrumbo, or the Supernatural," and was performed for fifty successive nights at the Haymarket Theatre, the author himself acting the character of "Lord Flame," the name by which he subsequently became known. Earwaker describes the drama, as "perhaps unrivalled in the English language for absurd bombast and turgid nonsense," but the news-sheet of the day praised it as the most sublime effort of human genius which had appeared for a long time.

Johnson appears to have been on familiar terms with John Byrom, the distinguished poet, who was born at Kersall, near Manchester, in 1691, and well known as the author of the famous Christian hymn "Christians Awake." John Byrom states in his diary that on the 9th October, 1722, Johnson read his play to him and some friends at Kersall, and on the 15th he went to Mr. Johnson's ball, where there was "a vast mob to see the girls come." With regard to the success of the play, Byrom records in his journal, near seven years after, April 2nd, 1729, "As for Mr. Johnson, he is one of the chief topics of talk in London. Dick's Coffee-house resounds 'Hurlothrumbo' from one end to the other. He had a full house and much good company on Saturday night, the first time of acting, and report says, all the boxes are taken for the next Monday . . . It is impossible to describe this play and the oddities out of the wayness, flights, madness, comicalities, &c. I hope Johnson will make his fortune by it at present; we had seven or eight garters in the pit. I saw Lord Oxford, and two or more there, but was so intent on the farce that I did not observe many quality that were there; we agreed to laugh and clap beforehand, and kept our word from beginning to end. The night after Johnson came to Dick's, and they all got about him like so many bees. They say the Prince of Wales has been told of 'H' and will come and see it . . . For my own part, who think all stage plays stuff and nonsense, I consider this a joke upon 'em all." "Hurlothrumbo" was played for the fifteenth time April 22, 1729, and on that occasion we find Johnson dining with the Duke of Montague, Duchess of Bedford, Lord Walpole, and others who urged him to print his play, promising their support. The excitement was so great that the scholars of Westminster School, at their election, made some verses on Johnson's play. Byrom, on the 5th of May, says, "I see a new book against Mr. Pope, with a dialogue between Hurlothrumbo and Death . . . if people talk of a thing as

inconsistent in any manner, the word is now, in short, mere 'Hurlothrumbo.'"

Johnson dedicated his play to Lady Delves and Lord Walpole, and the letters of dedication to these personages are full of such extravagant flattery and flowery language that they are worthy of notice.

"To the Right Honourable the Lady Delves.

"Madam,—

When I think of your goodness, it gives me encouragement to put my play under your grand Protection; and if you can find anything in it worthy of your Praise, I am sure the Super-naturals will like it. I do not flatter when I say your taste is universal, great as an Empress, sweet and refined as Lady Malpas, sublime as Lady Mary Cowper, learned and complete as Lady Conway, distinguished and clear as Mrs. Madan, gay, good, and innocent as Lady Bland. I have often thought you were a compound of the world's favourites—that all meet and rejoice together in one; the taste of a Montague, Wharton, or Meredith, Stanhope, Sneid or Byrom; the integrity and hospitality of Leigh of Lyme, the wit and fire of Bunbury, the sense of an Egerton, fervent to serve as Beresford or Mildmay, beloved like Gower. If you was his rival, you'd weaken the strength of that most powerful subject. I hope your eternal unisons in heaven will always sing to keep up the harmony in your soul, that is musical as Mrs. Leigh, and never ceases to delight; raises us in raptures like Amante Sposa, Lord Essex, or the Sun.

If every pore in every body in Cheshire was a mouth they would all cry out aloud, 'God save Lady Delves.' That illuminates the mind of mortals, inspires with Musick and Poetry, especially.

Your most humble Servant,

LORD FLAME.

Johnson's address to his patron, Lord Walpole, is equally extravagant in its literary style.

"To the Right Honourable the Lord Walpole.

"My Good Lord,—I return thanks to heaven, which is in you, I mean your taste, that would not continue, except it was cherished with virtue, that Parent of Eternal Love; 'tis all palate hunger after—intellectual food, generosity, harmony. The lofty lines of a sublime pen, and those beautiful perfections in you, had been the chief support in my play. All this time there are as many fine poets in England as ever there were; but they will not write, because they say there is

nothing encouraged but noise and nonsense. But I believe those bards are mistaken; for so long as the Duke of Montague, yourself, and Mr. Charles Stanhope live, fine poetry will not want encouragement. Though I have nothing to boast of in my play, yet you great men that shine among the angels did condescend to support me; and no one is more thankful than

Your Lordship's Very Humble Servant,
SAM JOHNSON.

Johnson wrote numerous other works. In 1732 he printed a play entitled "The Blazing Comet. The Mad Lovers: or the Beauties of the Poets." To this is prefixed a curious frontispiece, representing Johnson enacting the part of Lord Wildfire, holding a violin and bow in his hands and standing on stilts, which are made to resemble legs and feet. He also published a curious book with music, entitled "A Vision of Heaven," in 1738. Four other plays of his were performed, but not published. Their titles were: "Cheshire Comics," a Comedy, 1730; "All Alive and Merry," a Comedy, 1737; "A Fool Made Wise," an Operatic Comedy, 1741; and "Sir John Falstaff in Masquerade," a Farce, 1741.

The late Charles Beswick records that two manuscript plays were found in Johnson's papers after his death, and also a printed dialogue, "Court and Country." Upon a blank leaf in the MSS., in Johnson's own handwriting, is a letter, in which the following appears:—

"I heard the Duke of Montague say, that if Homer was in London in this age, and did write for the play-house, his genius would be thrown away; for the masters would not do his work the honour to look at it, I have made five operas, and all of them were performed in public; but then I was young and acted in them myself; but now I am about fourscore years old, and cannot act any more; but as this opera is much the best that ever I made, I am desirous to see it performed before I leave the world."

An amusing episode is told of Johnson being relegated to the village stocks, while in the state of inebriety, by some actor visitors to Gawsworth. This seems to have had such a pronounced effect upon him that, writing to a friend in London at the time, he says he "will have to make a retreat from his beloved Gawsworth, and leave no trace behind."

Many stories are related of Johnson who was a particularly good violinist. It is said he on one occasion nearly killed a nervous old lady

by his polite assurance that he should pay her his first visit after death as a ghost.

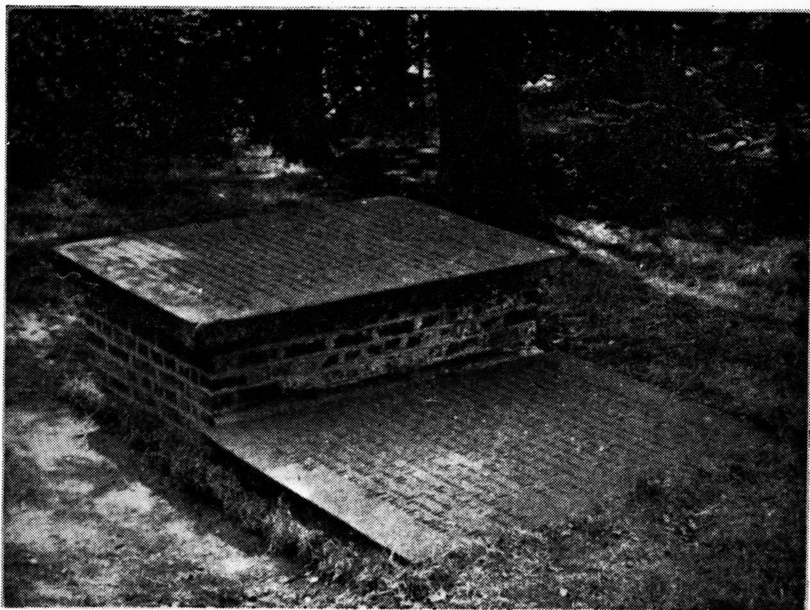
He resided in part of the New Hall at Gawsworth by the kind and indulgent permission of Lord Harrington, and died there in May, 1773, aged 82, and in accordance with his own desire he was buried in the small wood where his tomb still remains.

"The Manchester Mercury" of May 18th, 1773, in recording his death, states that "he died at the New Hall in Gawsworth, where he had lived in retirement for thirty years. His servant, who had lived with him all that time, having previously died, he desired to bury her in a wood in Gawsworth, but this was prevented by her brother. On his death, which occurred shortly afterwards, he had Christian burial in Gawsworth Churchyard, and was afterwards removed to the grave he had designed and intended for his servant."

His remains are covered by a plain brick tomb chest on the top of which is a stone slab with the following epitaph:

Under this Stone
Rest the Remains of Mr. Samuel Johnson,
Afterwards ennobled with the grander title of
LORD FLAME
Who after being in his life distinct from other Men
By the Eccentricities of his Genius
Chose to retain the same character after his Death,
And was, at his own desire, buried here, May 5th,
A D. MDCCLXXIII.—Aged 82.

"Stay, thou whom chance directs or ease persuades
To seek the quiet of these sylvan shades.
Here, undisturbed, and hid from vulgar eyes,
A wit, musician, poet, player lies.
A dancing-master, too, in grace he shone,
And all the arts of opera were his own.
In comedy well skilld, he drew Lord Flame,
Acted the part, and gained himself the name,
Averse to strife, how oft he'd gravely say,
These peaceful groves should shade his breathless clay;
That when he rose again, laid here alone,
No friend and he should quarrel for a bone;
Thinking that were some old lame gossip nigh,
She possibly might take his leg or thigh.



Samuel Johnson's grave.

The grave in the wood.

Adjacent to the raised tombstone is a large flat stone bearing the following lines, which were composed at the request of Lady Harrington about the year 1851 by the Rev. Edward Massie, who was curate in charge at Gawsworth from 1848 to 1873, and during whose tenure the church was restored.

> If chance hath brought thee here, or curious eyes,
> To see the spot where this poor jester lies:
> A thoughtless jester, even in his death,
> Uttering the jibes beyond his latest breath;
> O stranger, pause a moment, pause and say,
> " To-morrow, shouldst thou quit this house of clay,
> Where wilt thou be, my Soul? in Paradise?
> Or where the rich man lifted up his eyes?"
> Immortal Spirit, wouldst thou then be blest,
> Waiting they perfect bliss in Abraham's breast?
> Boast not of silly art, or wit or fame,
> Be thou ambitious of a Christian's name.
> Seek not thy body's rest in peaceful grove,
> Pray that thy soul may rest in Jesu's love.
> O speak not lightly of that dreadful day,
> When all must rest in joy or in dismay;
> When spirit pure in body glorified,
> With Christ in heavenly mansion shall abide,
> While wicked souls shall hear the Judge's doom,
> " Go, ye accursed, into endless gloom,"
> Look on that stone, and this, and ponder well,
> Then choose twixt Life and Death, twixt Heaven and Hell.

Visiting Gawsworth wood, and gazing upon the brick tomb which covers the remains of this old-time poet and jester, one cannot help recalling to mind the soliloquy of Hamlet over the remains of Yorick:—

> " Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well, Horatio: a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy; where be your jibes now? your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table in a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chap-fallen?"

Poor Maggoty! His last eccentric wish has been gratified, and his earthly remains lie in the beautiful wood through which he often walked in his old age.

In 1920 when the Gawsworth estate was sold the late Walter Brown of Upton Lodge, Macclesfield, purchased "Maggoty" Wood and the eccentric's grave. He restored the brick tomb-chest, re-lettered the inscriptions and gave it to the National Trust.

Recently the tomb-chest was damaged by hooligans, and when restoring the vault the slabs were underpinned from the inside.

For many years Maggoty wood with its sylvan shades has been a lovers' retreat, and the dead poet's tomb in its lovely setting has served romance in a manner which perhaps only Maggoty Johnson himself envisaged. Poets were always young in heart:

> Tread lightly, friend—a jester lieth here—
> A man whose memory Cestrians cherish well;
> Who wished nor church nor churchyard for his bier,
> And low he sleeps in this funereal cell.
>
> Could better tomb, quaint wit, rare wisdom, crave?
> What better spot than Gawsworth's wooded space?
> A myriad leaves in July's breezes wave,
> And shed their glamour o'er his chosen place.
>
> Be mine like this when earthly days are o'er;
> My dust surrounded by the trees and flowers;
> My name carved deep in antiquarian lore,
> Wherein I've spent so many fleeting hours.
>
> 'Twere thus not hard to die, and sweet my rest,
> Could I but choose the place I love the best!

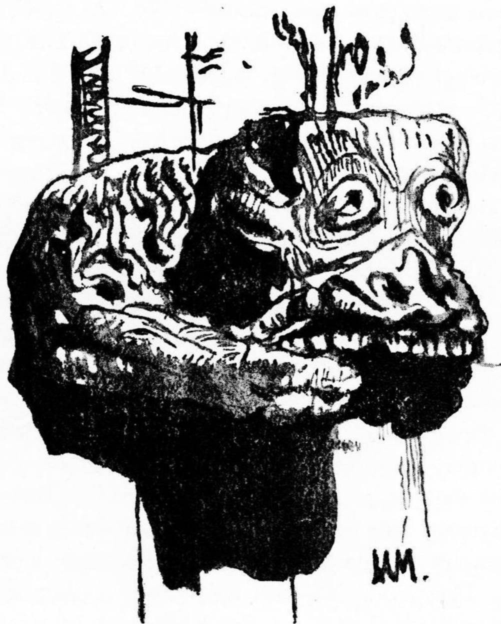
It is perhaps fitting to reprint the following extract from the Monthly Magazine of 1798:

"Lord Flame after having moved the chief part of his life in the higher circles, was, in his declining age, presented by the late Earl of Harrington (to whose family he had formerly been tutor in the art of dancing) with a small mansion at Gawsworth—a romantic village near Macclesfield, in Cheshire—where he might spend the remainder of his days in peace, and indulge his passion for the Muses in rural leisure. To this place he retired, where he was liberally supported by the annual contributions of several of the first wits of the age, and many of those families with which he had before been intimate. The nominal nobleman had been so long accustomed to hear himself addressed by this title that he at last fancied himself to be a lord,

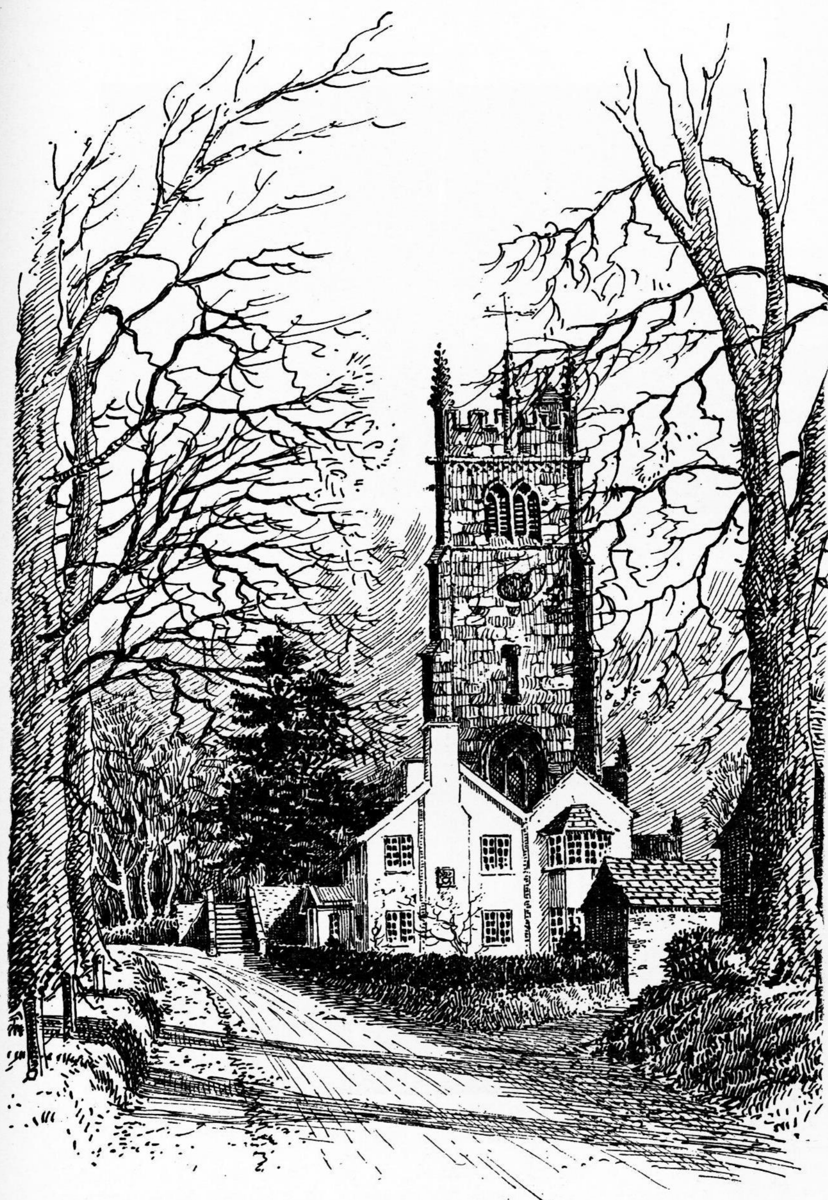
aping the manners and assuming the dignity of one descended from a long train of illustrious ancestry. His patrons—willing, perhaps, to humour the conceit—were wont to send their subscriptions not immediately to him, but to the Earl of Harrington's steward, who lived at Gawsworth, and who used to wait upon Lord Flame annually with this introductory address: " My Lord, I have brought you your rents." He was desired to wait; and his Lordship having received the money, gave him a formal receipt and dismissed him. Indeed one of his patrons, the Bishop of Chester, regularly transmitted to him personally an annual present of a pound of tea, in which were contained ten guineas; but it is probable, from several little stories told concerning him, that had the naked subscription been sent to him, undisguished and unpalliated by some such cover as the tea, he would have resented the gift intended for his subsidence as an affront. He was familiar at the tables of the gentlemen in the neighbourhood, where his lively sallies of wit made him constantly acceptable, and where he always behaved as if he was really of the rank which his title imported. The rustics still remember him, and relate with smiles many little anecdotes concerning his eccentric deportment. They all of them invariably addressed him by the title of " My lord "; but behind his back they gave him another " Old Maggoty! " He was himself of a good old age; but, notwithstanding, he had a particular dislike to old women. There was an old woman named Hannah Bailey, who lived neighbour to him, and, it is probable, had never been unkind to him, but on whom he could never look with an eye of favour. One story in particular I recollect hearing from the villagers concerning him. It is customary in country churches, when a couple has been neawly married, for the singers on the next Sunday to chant a particular psalm, thence called the " Wedding Psalm," in which are these words,—" Oh! well is thee, and happy shalt thou be." It happened that the nuptials of a village pair were thus celebrated before Lord Flame; but the hoarse music of the countrymen did not please his refined ear. When the service was over, he accosted the clergyman at the church-door with his opinion:—" I tell you what, sir, I think yonder Tom Friar would do to sing ' Oh! well is thee, and happy shalt thou be,' if the devil was married to Hannah Bailey." The rustics celebrate him as a remarkably excellent performer on the violin, which stamps an additional lustre on his name in his character of a musician. They add, too, that he himself imagined he was an uncommonly melodious singer; but the contortions of his face were so

hideous, that he was accustomed, whenever he was desired to sing, to stand with his face close to a wall, and to cover each side of it with his hands, in order to prevent every possible chance of its being seen, as otherwise it would have been sure to have diverted all attention from his song.

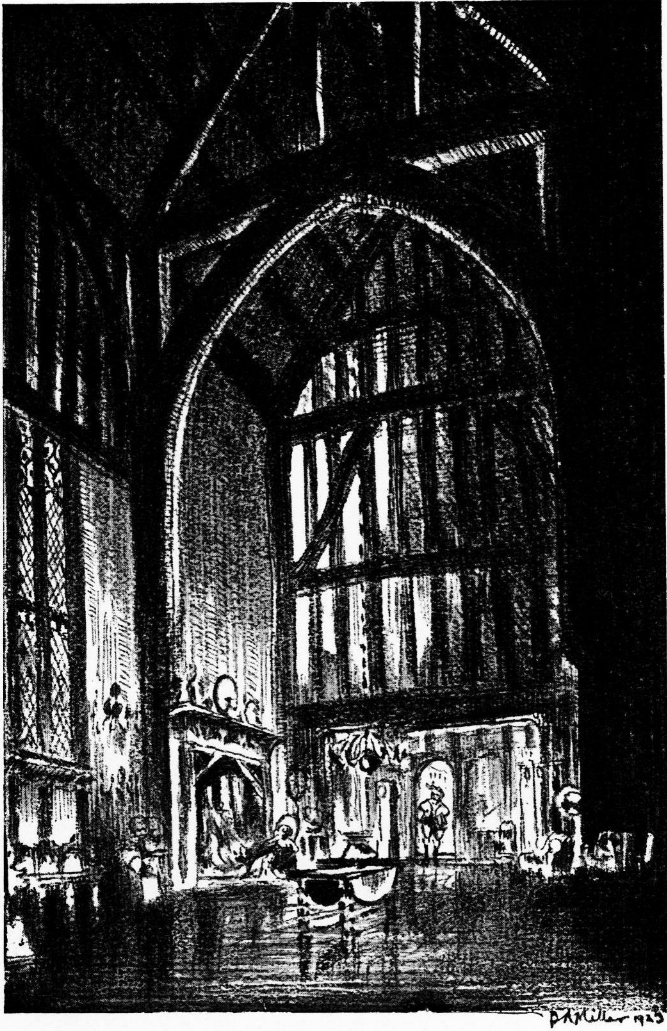
After having enjoyed the sweets of tranquility in his sequestred retreat for several years, Lord Flame was at last summoned out of this world in the year 1773. When he was on his death-bed, he earnestly requested that, after his decease, his body might not be buried in the churchyard, but in Gawsworth Wood; and he assigned as his reason for the strange request, that he was certain if he was buried in the churchyard, that, at the resurrection, some old woman or other would be quarrelling with him concerning the property of a leg or thigh-bone; and, therefore, he was determined to keep himself to himself. A vault was accordingly made for him in the wood, near a favourite spot, which had been his constant walk and haunt of meditation; and he was there buried. The neighbouring villagers, wishing to preserve the memory of so extraordinary a character, erected a small tomb over him, for which a suitable epitaph was written.



Gargoyle on South Porch.



Gawsworth New Rectory, formerly Gawsworth House, from a pen and ink drawing by Richard A. Riseley.



The Great Hall of the Old Rectory, 1905.