The Ashmolean Museum.

By Falconer Madan.

THE early history of the collection for which Ashmole's building was erected belongs to Lambeth and London rather than Oxford, and is connected with the lives of three omniverous collectors, a class which we of more modern days must always regard as including some very foolish fellows, deeply ignorant of the relative importance of objects, with no ability to reject the worthless, and a gross indifference as to what they collected, provided only that it swelled their show. Now and then a great treasure fell in their way, but rubbish is a fair title to bestow on most of the objects amassed. Such, indeed, is the first and most unprofitable stage through which most collectors pass in the beginning of their labours. It is not always possible, however, to be a fair judge of what will remain rubbish, and what will acquire a distinct value hereafter. I need but instance the Horn-book, an object almost unheeded till 1860 or 1870, small hand tablets by which our ancestors mastered the primary difficulty of the alphabet, and so imbibed their first impressions of literature. Many will know that prices out of all proportion to their intrinsic value are now given for them. They seem almost all to have perished. The South Kensington Museum has but one, our late Hope Professor, Mr. Westwood, had three or four, the Bodleian had till lately but one, and that acquired as late as 1882; it now has some more. Folks have now learnt their value, and soon the fabricator of sham-antiques will be on the track. The initial idea, almost, of a museum is due to John Tradescant, whose tomb in Lambeth Church-yard contains three generations—

". . . beneath this stone
Lie John Tradescant, grandfather, father, son."

He was a Dutchman and a traveller of some experience, who in his search for botanical specimens had visited Russia, Algeria, and many isles of the Ægean, and netted a goodly amount of oddities or curios. Before 1630, he settled in England, and was regarded as a great botanist, being elected official gardener to Charles I. These curiosities were kept in a species of show-room called Tradescant's

ark, and several objects from it are still kept apart in a case within this building; objects to be gazed at with reverence, for they belong to probably the first museum established in Europe or even in the world. The main portion of the elder Tradescant's rooms was occupied by a botanical collection of great extent, but with this were several items that had interested him. The father died in 1638, and the son then succeeded to the ark of which I have been as yet successful in securing only one print from a periodical; it shows a heavy, quiet style of architecture which to me seems copied in our building in Broad Street. The son was also a traveller to the West, and visited Virginia, where he much advanced botanical knowledge. But he did more for us than this; he compiled, as every collector ought to do, a catalogue of his ark; a curious little book it is with portraits of the two Tradescants by Hollar. We thus gain a fair idea of the extent of their museum, which was a combination of natural specimens as birds, beasts, fishes, minerals, warlike instruments, dresses, and so on; in fact, the commencement of what we now call an anthropological museum joined to one of natural history. Six lines of the inventory contained in this little book will give some idea of its contents:—"An Easter egg, once belonging to the Patriarch of Jerusalem. Two feathers of the Phœnix; a bird Dodar from the islands of Mauritius, it is not able to fly, it is so big. Fifty-two wooden cups inside one another. Cherry stones with the heads of Emperors engraved on them. Chess men once belonging to Edward II.," and on page 54 a still rarer curiosity, "an umbrella," the only one at that time in England. This Dr. Murray's large dictionary will show when it reaches that word, for he was pleased to have his attention drawn to so early a mention.

The third worthy to whose life we must now turn is Elias Ashmole. He was in his younger days a chorister at Lichfield, then a solicitor practising in London. But the Civil War was a troublesome time for most people. Then we find him with a royal appointment here at Oxford with the King's party. Like an industrious person, he thought it unwise to waste his time, and matriculated to Brasenose, and devoted his time, among other things to the study of chemistry and astronomy, which latter in those days bore more of the character of astrology. He attended several meetings of friends in philosophical and astronomical study, became a freemason, and in process of time a thorough convert to astrological science. He records in his diary, which has been preserved, how

on a certain day the great secret was communicated to him, but does not tell us what it was. In money matters he was always successful, and soon amassed a huge collection of curiosities, a portion only of which remain, for decay and the neglect of the next century caused most of the stuffed birds and animals to perish. But his marriage with a Berkshire heiress was a less successful affair; she brought an action against him for cruelty, a very serious one, for the depositions of the lady filled 800 sheets; from this attack he emerged with honour, as his opponents had to confess that he had used not so much as a bad word to her. At this time he was occupying rooms behind the Temple, and shortly after we find him boarding with the Tradescants. The contents of the ark shortly after became his by deed of gift, but why the transfer was made is not very clear. I have often thought that the preface to the little book throws a light on the subject. In it the younger Tradescant says he has been urged to its publication by the importunities of two friends one of whom was then ill, and the other much harrassed by law suits. Now here I think we have a very direct reference to those 800 pages of his wife's accusations. Soon the younger Tradescant died, and the museum seemed naturally to come to their lodger, a man of kindred tastes. Shortly after he was created Windsor Herald and Comptroller of the Excise, and he became a member of the Royal Society, composed to some extent of his Oxford friends. He tried marriage a third time, after the death of his wealthy spouse, taking the daughter of Sir W. Dugdale to the altar. Next we read of a fire in the vicinity of the Temple, ultimately destroying his extensive library (the labour of thirty-three years to collect), his cabinets of nine thousand coins, and many curiosities. Luckily his MSS and gold medals were preserved at Lambeth. This event most probably confirmed an idea he had before taken of housing his valuables in a more secure manner, and we may attribute the building at Oxford to this cause; at any rate, two years afterwards the museum was commenced, but was not completed till 1682. This date is a little too late for Loggan, and we should be at a loss for an illustrator were it not for a rare engraving which plainly states Wood to have been its architect. Ashmole's character, as depicted in his diary, is a strange mixture of littleness and greatness; I have noted four consecutive items of the year 1682 which illustrate this. 1. Began to put my curiosities in hampers to send them to Oxford. 2. I took some pills. 3. The gout has fallen upon my left great toe. 4. Have got ready the last load for the barge to be despatched to

Oxford. Anthony Wood, in his "Life" so ably edited by Mr. Andrew Clarke, tells us a good deal about the museum, and describes it as a building of ten rooms, the upper storey devoted to the curiosities, the middle one to objects of natural history, and the basement he terms the "new elaboratory." It is only of late that we have learnt so much, for no history of the building exists, and till about three years ago Wood's account had not been printed. A good view of the building is above the Oxford almanac of 1800. On Ashmole's death in 1692 a banquet or repast was spread in the museum, which by that time had received the printed books of Ashmole, and was soon to have those of Aubrey and Wood. The eighteenth century apparently dealt very badly with these treasures, and it is in one sense amusing to hear Uffenbach's opinion, a German who came here in 1710. But I should first of all mention the formal and strict code of rules that were drawn up, and then we can see how the keeper of those days enforced them.

Our traveller made his first attempt to see the museum on a market day, and the room was thronged; there was much misbehaviour as anyone was admitted, even women. A few days afterward, and then not on a market day, he tried again, but came to the conclusion that the Custos was an impostor and too much given to gutting and guzzling to discharge the duties of his office. He told our friend that a stone idol was made of boiled rice, and then concludes by stating that everyone handles everything; for the payment of 6d., anyone can get admittance; children and girls run and race about, and will not be hindered. His words, it seems to me, are the index to the disappearance of and injury to so many objects in the collection.

The Ashmolean was at first the only place of scientific resort in the Universities, and its presence soon bore as fruit the Oxford Philosophical Society, which took in some of the best known names of the last quarter of the seventeenth century. The original minutes of the proceedings of that Society are now among the Bodleian MSS. It is rather surprising to find clear references to a sleeping place in the basement where the chemical experiments were conducted; it must surely have been a most insanitary arrangement. In process of time the museum experienced several accretions, and in Dr. Buckland's time it became famous for the geological lectures he delivered in it. At one period, when Paley's Natural Theology was a standard text book in Oxford, the whole of the collection was re-arranged so as to illustrate his views. Things

went on much better in the present century, but the contents soon became too many for the building, though some of them had been stored away in the upper parts of the old Clarendon Buildings. The new museum from 1848 to 1856 took off much of the pressure, and then came the mischieous craze of converting the building into lecture rooms. Of late, through the memorable generosity of Mr. Fortnum, once more the place suffered from repletion, and very pleased we must all be to see his collection and our old treasures so handsomely and securely housed as they are in this present building. I have now but a few remarks to make on my subject, one is that the best known curiosities are not Ashmole's. The sword of Henry VIII. was a present from Bodley. The great magnet was given in 1756; the Alfred jewel in 1718, but was found in 1693. The Egyptian slab, which has the oldest hieroglyph with a date attached, as yet the most noted monument of antiquity in writing, was a present from Dr. Robert Huntingdon soon after the place was opened; all these magnificent donations are the direct effect of one great gift. Secondly, as the Ashmolean was the first public museum in Europe, we must all join in hoping it will not be allowed to sink down to a mere receptacle for the phamplets of the Bodleian. But the problem what to do with it is by no means an easy one to solve; the site is so limited. Some may pass this over as a mere matter of sentiment, but sentiment or something like it has filled the Bodleian with thousands of manuscripts, and has brought together the treasures above and around us here. Money will scarcely purchase such things; such institutions flourish by the goodwill of the public much more than through any endowments. And let me finally congratulate Oxford that under the auspices of the present Keeper, Mr. Arthur Evans, there is every confidence that shortly we shall see the best of arrangement, the best of government, and the Ashmolean become a model of excellence.