THE materials for a life of Shakespeare have been gradually assembled by the industry of hundreds of scholars, extending through more than two centuries; and probably little new matter of importance remains to be discovered, except through a happy, and at present quite unforeseen, accident. The arduous labors of Professor and Mrs. Wallace in the manuscript archives of England, during the course of which they examined over a million documents, recently yielded some fresh information; yet the small number of their "finds" assures us that nearly all that we are likely to know of the personal affairs of the great dramatist has already been made public. This stagnation in discovery is perhaps responsible for the tendency, especially marked in the last decade, for writers to deal in fanciful speculation, evolving from slight evidence, or none worthy of the name, bizarre and often elaborately detailed hypotheses regarding Shakespeare's relations with his contemporaries. But the results of such ingenuity are likely to be as perilous as they are unsubstantial, and for the most part must be ignored by the biographer. On the other hand, some valuable information is now being derived from a study, largely bibliographical, of the origin of the Shakespearean texts, and of their transmission to us through the medium of the playhouse and the press. True, much remains to be done in this field of endeavor before absolutely final conclusions are established, yet the main facts — which alone are needed for a general biography — are already clear.

The labor of assembling the material for a life of the
poet having thus been virtually completed, the task that remains is properly to interpret this material. And such an interpretation, it goes without saying, should be attempted only by one who has made a detailed study of the social, the literary, and, above all, the theatrical history of the Elizabethan age. For many of the incidental and miscellaneous data we possess regarding Shakespeare in themselves carry little significance, yet may at any time become pregnant with meaning when correlated with facts derived from allied sources; other data are quite fragmentary, and have to be pieced out from the fuller records of the actors, the companies, and the playhouses, or from the literary history of the time. When, however, the scattered parts have been truly illuminated, and rightly pieced out, and then assembled—like the members of a jig-saw puzzle—in their proper order, the resultant picture should be clear and, at least in the main, self-evidently correct.

In attempting to present this assembled picture I have chiefly aimed at clarity. Accordingly, I have avoided, in so far as possible, prolonged arguments on points that cannot be settled, preferring rather to give my own interpretation of the facts, with the reasons therefor. And I have purposely omitted aesthetic criticism, since this may be found elsewhere in abundance. Furthermore, I have left detailed discussions of the sources and of the dates of the several plays to the editors of Shakespeare. These topics I have not entirely ignored, for the sources of the plays are always of interest as revealing the nature of the poet's education and the extent of his reading; and the dates of their composition, of course, are of prime importance to the biographer. Some of the plays can be exactly dated, of many the date falls within narrow limits, of a few it remains genuinely doubtful; but opinion as to the order in which the plays were produced is now fairly
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well crystallized. Although I cannot hope to win unanimous assent to the exact dates I have accepted — some of them are necessarily tentative — I have tried to judge each case in the light of all the available evidence, combined with biographical facts and general laws of probability.

Next to presenting Shakespeare's biography with clarity, I have sought to picture the dramatist against a background of contemporary theatrical life. However much we may think of him as a genius apart, to himself and to his age he appeared primarily as a busy actor associated with the leading stock-company of his time; as a hired playwright — often, indeed, a mere cobbler of old plays — writing that his troupe might successfully compete with rival organizations; and, finally, as a theatrical proprietor, owning shares in two of the most flourishing playhouses in London. Thus his whole life was centred in the stage, and his interests were essentially those of his "friends and fellows," the actors, who affectionately called him "our Shakespeare." To portray the dramatist, therefore, in the atmosphere in which he lived and worked seemed to me the correct procedure.

There remains only the pleasant duty of acknowledging the assistance I have derived from various quarters; and first comes my indebtedness to earlier laborers in the field. I regret that I have not been able in the case of every detail to indicate the scholar to whom the credit of discovery belongs. The store of Shakespearean knowledge has been slowly accumulated by countless investigators, and to assign to each one his particular contribution to the whole would be difficult, if not indeed impossible. Yet in all the more important instances I have, I believe, duly recorded in footnotes my obligation. A few outstanding sources of indebtedness demand further and special mention. Foremost among these I
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must rank Halliwell-Phillipps' monumental *Outlines of the Life of Shakespeare*, a work printing in convenient form the bulk of the scattered materials upon which every biography of the poet necessarily reposes. Without this indispensable collection, the task of examining at first hand the original documents would be well-nigh impossible. Sir Sidney Lee's encyclopaedic *Life of William Shakespeare* has also proved a mine of information; and though I have frequently found myself unable to accept its interpretation of fact, I have invariably accorded to the opinions of its distinguished author the consideration which his great reputation demands. To the labors of Professor Wallace is due, especially in the chapters dealing with theatrical history, more credit than perhaps would seem to be the case from my scanty footnotes; but so well-known are his discoveries that one may now take detailed acknowledgment to be a work of supererogation. The same may be said of the copious industry of Mrs. Charlotte C. Stopes. Finally, to the researches of Mr. Walter Wilson Greg, Mr. Alfred W. Pollard, and Mr. J. Dover Wilson, whose studies have recently illuminated the whole field of Shakespearean bibliography, the last three chapters are almost entirely indebted, as I hope the footnotes will properly indicate.

To various friends I wish to express my gratitude for aid generously rendered: to Professor Lane Cooper for reading my manuscript with the sagacious criticism which those who know him have learned to expect from his good taste and judgment; to Mr. Henry Roenne for the drawings of the Globe, which he executed as a labor of love; to Mr. Beverly Chew, the dean of American book-collectors, for permitting the reproduction of certain engravings in his library; to Mr. William A. White, of Brooklyn, for freely placing at my disposal his priceless collection of Shakespeareana; and to my colleagues,
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