

# RECOLLECTIONS OF A JOURNALIST

BY T. J. HEBBLEWHITE.

## LII.

Elsewhere, on more than one occasion, I have expressed the belief that nothing is ever irrecoverably forgotten. It is not a new belief. On the contrary, it is very, very old. But if we took it really to heart it would influence our actions and govern our conduct every hour of every day of our lives. We may seem to forget; but in delirium a man will babble of things the last vestige of the records of which had apparently been erased utterly from the tablet nearly a whole lifetime before. The very babblings in that other mysterious world of delirium prove that the records still remain. Oliver Wendell Holmes has a passage that to the majority will seem far-fetched and preposterous, and to others so startling as to be uncanny, in which the indestructibility of the record of anything that has taken place in time and space is affirmed. The curious may find it in *The Autocrat of the Breakfast Table*. Here it is: "There is nothing that happens . . . which must not inevitably, and which does not actually, photograph itself in every conceivable aspect and in all dimensions. The infinite galleries of the Past await but one brief process and all their pictures will be called and fixed for ever." He then gives an illustration with which all of us are familiar, but the awful significance of which few of us ever perceive.

In the course of reading a few months back I came on a reference to a couple of celebrated poems of other days—*Pleasures of Hope* and *Pleasures of Imagination*. The former I knew was written by Campbell, and his works are on my shelves. The latter I had read, in part only, while a youth, and memory had played a trick on me, as she had done many times previously, by drawing a veil over the author's name. True to my idiosyncrasy, I began to worry about it, and recorded these preliminary facts in my draft notes. I had just added my firm conviction that some day, as had happened before, and when probably I wasn't thinking about it at all, I would suddenly find the lost key in my fingers. In the very act of giving expression to that conviction, on the instant, like lightning from an overcharged cloud, the name Akenside flashed into the mind. Evidently while I was actually engaged in detailing the circumstances, the subconscious self had been simultaneously turning things over and, without hint or suggestion from any other source, had found what it had been in search of, a result the conscious mind had failed to accomplish in many an hour of striving for that very purpose.

Once an amateur photographer took a snapshot of that portion of the Thames known as the Pool. Within the field of vision was what had once been a steamship of the mercantile marine, but in its old age fitted up as a coal hulk. When the plate was developed the name that the vessel formerly bore came out unexpectedly and with perfect distinctness. The whole hull name included, had been painted over, probably many times, in a uniform black; but the eye of the camera saw what to the human organ was non-existent. The explanation of this seeming marvel was simplicity itself. The layers of paint were slightly thicker where the name had been, and the delicate perceptiveness of the photographic lens detected the subtle nuances of light and shade and recorded them faithfully on the sensitive plate. So with our never-ending succession of records superimposed on records on the memory. Something—the scent of a flower, the lilt of an old song, the sight of a faded letter—something, anything, acts as that infallible eye of the camera, and, all at once, we remember and sleeping associations waken from their slumber. The persistence of memory through all permutations of matter and all the ceaseless ebb and flow of the atoms of the body, like the unbroken continuity of the Ego, is evidence enough to me that the real man is spiritual essence, an inextinguishable spark of the Divine, whether we call it God of the Jewish, Christian or Mohammedan faith. Brahma of the immemorial east, or the Unknowable of modern philosophy. How beautifully W. D. Howells puts it: "The sense of this (continuity) is so pervasive that humanity refuses to accept death itself as final. In the agonised affections, the shattered hopes, of those who remain, the severed life keeps on unbrokenly, and when time and reason prevail, at least as to the life here, the defeated faith appeals for fulfilment to another world, and the belief of immortality holds against the myriad years in which none of the numberless dead have made an indisputable sign in witness of it."

I suppose every man of contemplative habit has at some time let his mind run back, disregarding of all the intervening landmarks, to what for him was the very beginning of things, trying to remember the earliest something that detached itself from the formless and the unrealised and flashed on him the primal discovery that

I am not what I see,  
And other than the things I touch.  
To some that awakening to identity and separateness comes sooner, to others later; but it comes alike to all. I was born in a small house in a short row of such. On one side was a narrow flagged passage with a flight of stone stairs leading to an upper room where the few members of a League of Foresters were wont to hold their infrequent meetings. The latter knowledge, however, was the acquisition of later years. At the end of the passage was a door giving access to a sort of lumber room whose sole means of deriving light was through the open door. My father at that time was engaged in sailing his own coastal craft, and my earliest recollection is of being in that obscure lumber room. Lying about in confused disarray were marine blocks with broken pulleys, some rusty chains and pieces of rope, and a boat's keel. I don't recollect going into the room or of coming out, but only of being in it, just once, no oftener, though no doubt I visited it many times. I should then be about three, perhaps less. Some time after my parents removed to another house, and I remember just one trifling episode in that moving from one home to another. My father was carrying my younger sister—an infant—and I, a sturdy little fellow, was trotting by his side holding his right hand. I am perfectly sure about which hand, and to this day could point to the exact spot in the village street, even to inches, where that strangely and sharply isolated event found swift entrance to my childish mind and stamped itself—albeit trivial and immaterial as it seems—indelibly on my memory. These are earliest recollections, rising like two tiny islets from an immensity of unbroken seas of forgetfulness; and yet those little islets were the peaks of submarine mountains whose hidden bases lie in impenetrable darkness. Curiously enough that was the first remembered revelation that I

had either father or sister; and that of my mother came even later and has always from those first years remained shadowy and uncertain—that sudden perception of identity and separateness which flashed on me in that old lumber room, and the one moment, opening and closing almost before time could record it, in the village street.

One of my early boyhood recollections at that new home was associated in a peculiar, one might say unique, way with the consuming passion for angling to which allusion has already been made. In the "best bedroom," dedicated, as it were, and set apart for special occasions, as the best room always was in those days, there stood a mahogany chest of drawers, prodigiously tall as seen through boyish eyes, and an imposingly massive four-poster mahogany bedstead. There was also an ancient harpsichord, too far gone to be capable of more than a thin, tinny jangle of sounds. Where it came from I never knew. Certainly not from the old home in which I was born. There was no room for harpsichords there. Probably it was got at a ridiculous, knock-down bid at the sale of the effects of some old family thereabouts. It was at such a sale of a doctor's lares et penates that my father secured the twenty-two stout volumes of the encyclopedia which I still possess and find more interesting than two-thirds of the slipshod meretricious stuff pouring incessantly from the modern press. They cost him exactly fourpence a volume, and he brought his rare bargain home in a wheelbarrow—load enough for even a gawky in the pink of condition. Whenever in those far-off boyhood's days I required a length of tough wire wherewith to arm a pike hook I used to rise the lid of that venerable harpsichord and take as much as necessary. A few years later I would have stayed my hand, feeling that there was something inexpressibly pathetic in that obsolete, tuneless instrument at which generations of dead and forgotten maidens may have sung songs as obsolete and uncared-for as itself; for it was very early in my life that, without knowing why, my heart turned to old things—old folk, old chronicles, old songs, and the old cottage-garden flowers, and to lovingly dwell in them, becoming, in some inexplicable way, part of them. That idiosyncrasy is mine to-day after nearly a whole lifetime of strenuous journalism. Strange that we should retain imperishable records of the veriest trifles as if, somehow, the shaping impulses of our lives often are the ones that seem of least account.

There are a couple of lines in *In Memoriam* which of late years have given me much serious thought. They are

The Shadow cloaked from head to foot

That holds the Keys of all the Creeds  
The axiomatic meaning was as plain as were the parables to the multitude in Holy Land; but it seemed to me that there was a hidden meaning, understandable in its completeness and inwardness only by what eastern philosophies term the initiates. Steeped in, nay indeed saturated with, the prim conventions and the pervasive atmosphere of supersensitive proprieties of mid-Victorian times, Tennyson may naturally and purposely, because of his temperament, have shrunk from giving expression in his own person to anything that might seem to even suggest or from which might be inferred a defection from the right line of strict decorum. Was the concealed speculation that I have voiced in a succeeding passage that we may reasonably and reverently believe that, deep down, under all the seeming diversities and contraries, there is eternal unity, that the radii all meet at the common centre, none greater than another, none less? I cannot say, but can only ask, Is it all a dream?

In his swansong Tennyson did not soar to the empyrean heights as Browning did in his; but there was no depressing doubt—

And though from out this bourne of Time and Place

The tide may bear me far,  
I hope to meet my Pilot face to face

When I have crossed the bar.

Browning's exultant optimism rang clarion-clear in the Epilogue to *Asolando*, published the day the poet died in Vienna—literally his last message—

What had I on earth to do  
With the slothful, with the mawkish,  
the unmanly?

—Being—who?

One who never turned his back but

Marched breast forward,

Never doubted clouds would break,  
Never dreamed, though right were

worsted, wrong would triumph,  
Held we fall to rise, are baffled to

fight better

SLEEP TO WAKE

No, at noonday in the bustle of man's

worktime

Greet the unseen with a cheer!

Bid him forward, breast and back as

either should be,

"Strive and thrive!" cry "Speed—

fight on, fare ever

THERE AS HERE."

To revert to the continuity of the Ego and the indestructibility of Memory, we are there face to face with inscrutable mysteries—stability in the midst of perpetual mutation. What may we infer—for proof is impossible, and always remain so—from them? Only, as Emerson has it, grand auguries always hovering, or the tremendous pett étre of Rousseau. The poets, or many of them, are less uncertain. Longfellow positively affirms—

There is no death, what seems so is transition.

And Browning's faith bursts

fifty times into unwavering assurance.

Here is Sir Edwin Arnold's translation of a passage from *Bhagavad-Gita*, which itself is only an episode in

India's wonderful epic poem—that inexhaustible treasure house of ancient

Brahmanic philosophy. How mean and paltry in comparison are the perishable objects about which most of us,

unnumbered years later, are daily concerned and troubled!

Never the spirit was born; the spirit shall cease to be never;

Never was time it was not; End and Beginning are dreams!

Birthless and deathless and changeless remaineth the spirit forever;

Death hath not touched it at all, dead though the house of it seems!

I have ceased to question and argue, for the ultimate truths of life are too

high, too broad and too deep to be brought within the compass of an

argument. Emerson, in his essay on Immortality, sums it up thus: "We

cannot prove our faith by syllogisms. The argument refuses to form in the

mind. A conclusion, an inference, a grand augury, is ever hovering; but attempt to ground it and the reasonings

are all vanishing and inadequate."

Is it a mere dream of phantasy, one of those formless speculations which float dimly about the mind when in a

state of idleness—not idleness, which signifies something wholly different—that all the religions that ever were

are only scaffolding—that some time, aeons hence, after life has risen from

plane to higher plane in countless succession, the scaffolding, its purpose

served, will vanish, leaving revealed in its unimaginable glory and majesty

what each beholder—Babylonian, Egyptian, Brahmin, Pagan, Christian,

even the agnostic—will intuitively recognise as the mystic temple of his

heart's desire. Is it wholly a dream?

And so, on this haunting note or

philosophic speculation, I bring to a close the labours that have occupied my mind on and off for the last twelve months or more. I did not dream at the beginning of more than a dozen articles at the most; but, once begun, memory linked itself to memory and association to association until I seemed to breathe anew the very atmosphere of the years that have gone and to hear again the sound of voices that long since sank to silence. Goulburn is only a little world, but in it have been found in miniature the impulses and forces that move the great outside world towards unknown ends and shape and direct the vast ungovernable tides of thought that are incessantly at work in the slow and undiscoverable purpose of the universe. If in my discursive intellectual wanderings I have given pleasure I am satisfied. Where I could not wholly speak well of the dead I kept silent, feeling that probably there is no single life regarding which, did we but know all, censoriousness and carping disparagement would not die ere they could wed themselves to speech.

And now, at the end of nearly forty years of absorbing journalistic endeavour—too full to allow of any distracting intruder—what seems the meekest compendium of that long and crowded retrospect, sharpened by distance to a little point? Something like this: A precocious child who, throughout a whole summer's day, has chased butterflies, and watched the white clouds drift idly by, and woven fairy legends around the common things about him, and listened to the faint whisperings of the breezes in the trees, and dreamed golden dreams which, God willing, will some day come true, and now that the evening has come has no desire but to go to sleep.

THE END.