

## CHAPTER VII--RANDOM MEMORIES: ROSA QUO LOCORUM

Through what little channels, by what hints and premonitions, the consciousness of the man's art dawns first upon the child, it should be not only interesting but instructive to inquire. A matter of curiosity to-day, it will become the ground of science to-morrow. From the mind of childhood there is more history and more philosophy to be fished up than from all the printed volumes in a library. The child is conscious of an interest, not in literature but in life. A taste for the precise, the adroit, or the comely in the use of words, comes late; but long before that he has enjoyed in books a delightful dress rehearsal of experience. He is first conscious of this material--I had almost said this practical--pre-occupation; it does not follow that it really came the first. I have some old fogged negatives in my collection that would seem to imply a prior stage 'The Lord is gone up with a shout, and God with the sound of a trumpet'--memorial version, I know not where to find the text--rings still in my ear from my first childhood, and perhaps with something of my nurses accent. There was possibly some sort of image written in my mind by these loud words, but I believe the words themselves were what I cherished. I had about the same time, and under the same influence--that of my dear nurse--a favourite author: it is possible the reader has not heard of him--the Rev. Robert Murray

M'Cheyne. My nurse and I admired his name exceedingly, so that I must have been taught the love of beautiful sounds before I was breeched; and I remember two specimens of his muse until this day:-

'Behind the hills of Naphtali  
The sun went slowly down,  
Leaving on mountain, tower, and tree,  
A tinge of golden brown.'

There is imagery here, and I set it on one side. The other--it is but a verse--not only contains no image, but is quite unintelligible even to my comparatively instructed mind, and I know not even how to spell the outlandish vocable that charmed me in my childhood:

'Jehovah Tschidkenu is nothing to her'; {6} -

I may say, without flippancy, that he was nothing to me either, since I had no ray of a guess of what he was about; yet the verse, from then to now, a longer interval than the life of a generation, has continued to haunt me.

I have said that I should set a passage distinguished by obvious and pleasing imagery, however faint; for the child thinks much in images, words are very live to him, phrases that imply a picture eloquent beyond their value. Rummaging in the dusty pigeon-holes of memory, I came once upon a graphic version of the famous Psalm,

'The Lord is my shepherd': and from the places employed in its illustration, which are all in the immediate neighbourhood of a house then occupied by my father, I am able, to date it before the seventh year of my age, although it was probably earlier in fact. The 'pastures green' were represented by a certain suburban stubble-field, where I had once walked with my nurse, under an autumnal sunset, on the banks of the Water of Leith: the place is long ago built up; no pastures now, no stubble-fields; only a maze of little streets and smoking chimneys and shrill children. Here, in the fleecy person of a sheep, I seemed to myself to follow something unseen, unrealised, and yet benignant; and close by the sheep in which I was incarnated--as if for greater security--rustled the skirt, of my nurse. 'Death's dark vale' was a certain archway in the Warriston Cemetery: a formidable yet beloved spot, for children love to be afraid,--in measure as they love all experience of vitality. Here I beheld myself some paces ahead (seeing myself, I mean, from behind) utterly alone in that uncanny passage; on the one side of me a rude, knobby, shepherd's staff, such as cheers the heart of the cockney tourist, on the other a rod like a billiard cue, appeared to accompany my progress; the stiff sturdily upright, the billiard cue inclined confidentially, like one whispering, towards my ear. I was aware--I will never tell you how--that the presence of these articles afforded me encouragement. The third and last of my pictures illustrated words:-

'My table Thou hast furnished

In presence of my foes:

My head Thou dost with oil anoint,  
And my cup overflows':

and this was perhaps the most interesting of the series. I saw myself seated in a kind of open stone summer-house at table; over my shoulder a hairy, bearded, and robed presence anointed me from an authentic shoe-horn; the summer-house was part of the green court of a ruin, and from the far side of the court black and white imps discharged against me ineffectual arrows. The picture appears arbitrary, but I can trace every detail to its source, as Mr. Brock analysed the dream of Alan Armadale. The summer-house and court were muddled together out of Billings' Antiquities of Scotland; the imps conveyed from Bagster's Pilgrim's Progress; the bearded and robed figure from any one of the thousand Bible pictures; and the shoe-horn was plagiarised from an old illustrated Bible, where it figured in the hand of Samuel anointing Saul, and had been pointed out to me as a jest by my father. It was shown me for a jest, remark; but the serious spirit of infancy adopted it in earnest. Children are all classics; a bottle would have seemed an intermediary too trivial--that divine refreshment of whose meaning I had no guess; and I seized on the idea of that mystic shoe-horn with delight, even as, a little later, I should have written flagon, chalice, hanaper, beaker, or any word that might have appealed to me at the moment as least contaminate with mean associations. In this string of pictures I believe the gist of the psalm to have consisted; I believe it had no more to say to me; and the result was consolatory. I would go to sleep dwelling with

restfulness upon these images; they passed before me, besides, to an appropriate music; for I had already singled out from that rude psalm the one lovely verse which dwells in the minds of all, not growing old, not disgraced by its association with long Sunday tasks, a scarce conscious joy in childhood, in age a companion thought:-

'In pastures green Thou leadest me,  
The quiet waters by.'

The remainder of my childish recollections are all of the matter of what was read to me, and not of any manner in the words. If these pleased me it was unconsciously; I listened for news of the great vacant world upon whose edge I stood; I listened for delightful plots that I might re-enact in play, and romantic scenes and circumstances that I might call up before me, with closed eyes, when I was tired of Scotland, and home, and that weary prison of the sick-chamber in which I lay so long in durance. Robinson Crusoe; some of the books of that cheerful, ingenious, romantic soul, Mayne Reid; and a work rather gruesome and bloody for a child, but very picturesque, called Paul Blake; these are the three strongest impressions I remember: The Swiss Family Robinson came next, *longo intervallo*. At these I played, conjured up their scenes, and delighted to hear them rehearsed unto seventy times seven. I am not sure but what Paul Blake came after I could read. It seems connected with a visit to the country, and an experience unforgettable. The day had been warm; H--- and I had played

together charmingly all day in a sandy wilderness across the road; then came the evening with a great flash of colour and a heavenly sweetness in the air. Somehow my play-mate had vanished, or is out of the story, as the sages say, but I was sent into the village on an errand; and, taking a book of fairy tales, went down alone through a fir-wood, reading as I walked. How often since then has it befallen me to be happy even so; but that was the first time: the shock of that pleasure I have never since forgot, and if my mind serves me to the last, I never shall, for it was then that I knew I loved reading.

## II

To pass from hearing literature to reading it is to take a great and dangerous step. With not a few, I think a large proportion of their pleasure then comes to an end; 'the malady of not marking' overtakes them; they read thenceforward by the eye alone and hear never again the chime of fair words or the march of the stately period. Non ragioniam of these. But to all the step is dangerous; it involves coming of age; it is even a kind of second weaning. In the past all was at the choice of others; they chose, they digested, they read aloud for us and sang to their own tune the books of childhood. In the future we are to approach the silent, inexpressive type alone, like pioneers; and the choice of what we are to read is in our own hands thenceforward. For instance, in the passages already adduced, I detect and applaud the ear of my old nurse; they were of her choice, and she imposed them on my infancy, reading the works of others as a poet would scarce dare to read his own; gloating on the rhythm, dwelling with delight on assonances and alliterations. I know very well my mother must have been all the while trying to educate my taste upon more secular authors; but the vigour and the continual opportunities of my nurse triumphed, and after a long search, I can find in these earliest volumes of my autobiography no mention of anything but nursery rhymes, the Bible, and Mr. M'Cheyne.

I suppose all children agree in looking back with delight on their school Readers. We might not now find so much pathos in 'Bingen on the Rhine,' 'A soldier of the Legion lay dying in Algiers,' or in 'The Soldier's Funeral,' in the declamation of which I was held to have surpassed myself. 'Robert's voice,' said the master on this memorable occasion, 'is not strong, but impressive': an opinion which I was fool enough to carry home to my father; who roasted me for years in consequence. I am sure one should not be so deliciously tickled by the humorous pieces:-

'What, crusty? cries Will in a taking,  
Who would not be crusty with half a year's baking?'

I think this quip would leave us cold. The 'Isles of Greece' seem rather tawdry too; but on the 'Address to the Ocean,' or on 'The Dying Gladiator,' 'time has writ no wrinkle.'

'Tis the morn, but dim and dark,  
Whither flies the silent lark?' -

does the reader recall the moment when his eye first fell upon these lines in the Fourth Reader; and 'surprised with joy, impatient as the wind,' he plunged into the sequel? And there was another piece, this time in prose, which none can have forgotten; many like me must have searched Dickens with zeal to find it again, and in its proper context, and have perhaps been conscious of some inconsiderable measure of disappointment, that it was only Tom



Pinch who drove, in such a pomp of poetry, to London.

But in the Reader we are still under guides. What a boy turns out for himself, as he rummages the bookshelves, is the real test and pleasure. My father's library was a spot of some austerity; the proceedings of learned societies, some Latin divinity, cyclopaedias, physical science, and, above all, optics, held the chief place upon the shelves, and it was only in holes and corners that anything really legible existed as by accident. The Parent's Assistant, Rob Roy, Waverley, and Guy Mannering, the Voyages of Captain Woods Rogers, Fuller's and Bunyan's Holy Wars, The Reflections of Robinson Crusoe, The Female Bluebeard, G. Sand's Mare au Diable--(how came it in that grave assembly!), Ainsworth's Tower of London, and four old volumes of Punch--these were the chief exceptions. In these latter, which made for years the chief of my diet, I very early fell in love (almost as soon as I could spell) with the Snob Papers. I knew them almost by heart, particularly the visit to the Pontos; and I remember my surprise when I found, long afterwards, that they were famous, and signed with a famous name; to me, as I read and admired them, they were the works of Mr. Punch. Time and again I tried to read Rob Roy, with whom of course I was acquainted from the Tales of a Grandfather; time and again the early part, with Rashleigh and (think of it!) the adorable Diana, choked me off; and I shall never forget the pleasure and surprise with which, lying on the floor one summer evening, I struck of a sudden into the first scene with Andrew Fairservice. 'The worthy Dr. Lightfoot'--'mistrusted with a

bogle'--'a when green trash'--'Jenny, lass, I think I ha'e her':  
from that day to this the phrases have been unforgotten. I read  
on, I need scarce say; I came to Glasgow, I bided tryst on Glasgow  
Bridge, I met Rob Roy and the Bailie in the Tolbooth, all with  
transporting pleasure; and then the clouds gathered once more about  
my path; and I dozed and skipped until I stumbled half-asleep into  
the clachan of Aberfoyle, and the voices of Iverach and Galbraith  
recalled me to myself. With that scene and the defeat of Captain  
Thornton the book concluded; Helen and her sons shocked even the  
little schoolboy of nine or ten with their unreality; I read no  
more, or I did not grasp what I was reading; and years elapsed  
before I consciously met Diana and her father among the hills, or  
saw Rashleigh dying in the chair. When I think of that novel and  
that evening, I am impatient with all others; they seem but shadows  
and impostors; they cannot satisfy the appetite which this  
awakened; and I dare be known to think it the best of Sir Walter's  
by nearly as much as Sir Walter is the best of novelists. Perhaps  
Mr. Lang is right, and our first friends in the land of fiction are  
always the most real. And yet I had read before this Guy  
Mannering, and some of Waverley, with no such delighted sense of  
truth and humour, and I read immediately after the greater part of  
the Waverley Novels, and was never moved again in the same way or  
to the same degree. One circumstance is suspicious: my critical  
estimate of the Waverley Novels has scarce changed at all since I  
was ten. Rob Roy, Guy Mannering, and Redgauntlet first; then, a  
little lower; The Fortunes of Nigel; then, after a huge gulf,  
Ivanhoe and Anne of Geierstein: the rest nowhere; such was the

verdict of the boy. Since then *The Antiquary*, *St. Ronan's Well*, *Kenilworth*, and *The Heart of Midlothian* have gone up in the scale; perhaps *Ivanhoe* and *Anne of Geierstein* have gone a trifle down; *Diana Vernon* has been added to my admirations in that enchanted world of *Rob Roy*; I think more of the letters in *Redgauntlet*, and *Peter Peebles*, that dreadful piece of realism, I can now read about with equanimity, interest, and I had almost said pleasure, while to the childish critic he often caused unmixed distress. But the rest is the same; I could not finish *The Pirate* when I was a child, I have never finished it yet; *Peveril of the Peak* dropped half way through from my schoolboy hands, and though I have since waded to an end in a kind of wager with myself, the exercise was quite without enjoyment. There is something disquieting in these considerations. I still think the visit to Ponto's the best part of the *Book of Snobs*: does that mean that I was right when I was a child, or does it mean that I have never grown since then, that the child is not the man's father, but the man? and that I came into the world with all my faculties complete, and have only learned *sinsyne* to be more tolerant of boredom? . . .