Bradford Torrey

Friends on the Shelf

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HAPPY is the man who enjoys *himself*. His are the true riches. Saving physical pain and mortal illness, few evils can touch him. He may lose friends and make enemies; all the powers of the world may seem to have combined against him; he may work hard and fare worse; poverty may sit at his table and share his bed; but he is not to be greatly pitied. His good things are within. He enjoys him*self*. He has found the secret that the rest of men are all, more or less consciously, looking for,—how to be happy though miserable. It seems an easy method; nothing could be less complicated: simply to enjoy one's own mind. The thing is to do it.

Whether any one ever really accomplished the miracle for more than brief intervals at once, a skeptic may doubt; but some have believed themselves to have accomplished it; and in questions of this intimately personal nature, the difference between faith and fact is small and unimportant. It is of the essence of belief not to be disturbed overmuch by theoretical objections. If I am happy, what is it to me that my busybody of a neighbor across the way has settled it with himself that I am not happy, and in the nature of the case cannot be? Let my meddlesome neighbor mind his own affairs. The pudding is mine, not his; and, with or without his leave, the proof of the pudding is in the eating.

These not very uncommonplace reflections are suggested by the remembrance of what are reported to have been the last words of the man whose name stands at the head of this paper. He was dying before his time, in what the world, if it had happened to concern itself about so

inconsiderable an event, would have called rather squalid circumstances. His life had mostly been cloudy. The greater part of his fifty-two years had been spent in quarreling impartially with friends and foes, and, strange to say (matters terrestrial being habitually so out of joint), the logical result had followed. His domestic experiences, too, had been little to his comfort and less to his credit. So far as women were concerned, he had played the fool to his heart's content and his enemies' amusement. Of his two wives (both living), neither was now at his bedside. His purse was empty, or near it. It was almost a question how he should be buried. Withal, as a man more than ordinarily ambitious, he had never done the things he had cared most to do; and now it was all over. And being always an eloquent man, and having breath for one sentence more, he said, "Well, I have had a happy life."

Nor need it be assumed that he was either lying or posing. With abundance of misfortune and no lack of disappointment, with outward things working pretty unanimously against him, he had enjoyed himself. In a word, he remained to the last what he had been from the first, a sentimentalist; and a sentimentalist, like a Christian, has joys that the world knows not of.

For a sentimentalist is one who, more than the majority of his fellows, cultivates and relishes his emotions. They are the chief of his living, the choicest of his crop, his "best of dearest and his only care;" as why should they not be, since they give him the most of what he most desires? Perhaps we should all be sentimentalists if we could. As it is, the number of such is relatively small, though even at that they

may be said to be of various kinds, as their emotions are excited by various classes of objects.

If a man’s nature is religious, his sentimentalism, supposing him to have been born with that gift, naturally takes on a religious turn; he treasures the luxury of contrition and the raptures of assured forgiveness. Like one of the earliest and most celebrated of his kind, he can feed day and night upon tears,—having plentiful occasion, perhaps, for such a watery diet,—and be the more ecstatic in proportion as he sounds more and more deeply the unfathomable depths of his unworthiness. This, in part at least, is what is meant by the current phrase, “enjoying religion.” Devotional literature bears unbroken witness to its reality and fervors, from the Psalms of David down to the “Lives of the Saints” and the diaries of latter-day Methodism. There is nothing sweeter to the finer sorts of human nature than devotional self-effacement, whether it be sought as Nirvâna in the silence of a Buddhist’s cell, or as a gift of special grace in a tumultuous chorus of “Oh, to be nothing, nothing,” at a crowded conventicle. Small wonder that the

“willing soul would stay
In such a frame as this,
And sit and sing itself away
To everlasting bliss.”

Small wonder, surely; for, say what you will (and the remark is not half so much a truism as it sounds), one of the surest ways to be happy is to have happy feelings.

This cultivation of the religious sensibilities is probably the commonest, as at its best it is certainly the noblest form of what, meaning no offense,—though the word has been in

bad company, and will never recover from the smirch,—we have called sentimentalism. But there are other forms, suited to other grades of human capacity, for all men are not saints.

There is, for example, especially in these modern times, a purely poetic susceptibility to the charms of the natural world; so that the favored subject of it, not every day, to be sure, but as often as the mood is upon him, shall experience joys ineffable,

“Trances of thought and mountings of the mind,”

at the sight of an ordinary landscape or the meanest of common flowers.

Of a much lower sort is the sentimentalism of such a man as Sterne; a something not poetical, only half real, a kind of rhetorical trick, never so neatly done, but still a trick, and whatever of genuine feeling there is in it so alloyed with baser metal that even while you enjoy to the very marrow the amazing perfection of the writing (for it would be hard to name another book in which there are so many perfect sentences to the page as in the “Sentimental Journey”),—even while you feel all this, you feel also what a relief it would be to speak a piece of your mind to the smirking, winking, face-making clergyman, who has such pretty feelings, and makes such incomparably pretty copy out of them, but who will by no means allow you to forget that he, as well as another, is a man of flesh and blood (especially flesh), knowing a thing or two of the world in spite of his cloth, and able, if he only would (though of course he won’t), to play the rake as handsomely as the next man. A

strange candidate for holy orders he surely was, even in a country where a parish is frankly recognized as a “living”! It is a comfort to be assured, on the high authority of Mr. Bagehot, that the only respect in which he resembled a clergyman of our own time was, that he lost his voice and traveled abroad to find it.

And once more, not to refine upon the point unduly, there are such men as Rousseau and Hazlitt; not great poets, like Wordsworth, nor mere professional dealers in the pathetic, like Sterne, but men of literary genius very exceptionally endowed with the dangerous gift of sensibility; which gift, wisely or unwisely, they have nourished and made the most of, first for their own exquisite pleasure in it, and afterward, it may well be, for the sake of its very considerable value as a literary “asset.”

Rousseau and Hazlitt, we say; for though the two are in some respects greatly unlike, they are plainly of the same school. For better or worse, the English boy came early under the Frenchman’s influence, and, to his credit be it spoken, he was never slow to acknowledge the debt thus incurred. His passion for the “New Éloise” was in time outgrown, but the “Confessions” he “never tired of.” He loved to run over in memory the dearer parts of them: Rousseau’s “first meeting with Madame Warens, the pomp of sound with which he has celebrated her name, beginning ‘Louise-Éléonore de Warens était une demoiselle de La Tour de Pil, noble et ancienne famille de Vevai, ville du pays de Vaud’ (sounds which we still tremble to repeat); his description of her person, her angelic smile, her mouth of the size of his own; his walking out one day while the bells

were chiming to vespers, and anticipating in a sort of waking dream the life he afterward led with her, in which months and years, and life itself, passed away in undisturbed felicity; the sudden disappointment of his hopes; his transport thirty years after at seeing the same flower which they had brought home together from one of their rambles near Chambéry; his thoughts in that long interval of time; his suppers with Grimm and Diderot after he came to Paris; ... his literary projects, his fame, his misfortunes, his unhappy temper; his last solitary retirement on the lake and island of Bienne, with his dog and his boat; his reveries and delicious musings there—all these crowd into our minds with recollections which we do not choose to express. There are no passages in the ‘New Éloise’ of equal force and beauty with the best descriptions in the ‘Confessions,’ if we except the excursion on the water, Julie’s last letter to St. Preux, and his letter to her, recalling the days of their first love. We spent two whole years in reading these two works, and (gentle reader, it was when we were young) in shedding tears over them,

‘as fast as the Arabian trees
Their medicinal gums.’

They were the happiest years of our life. We may well say of them, sweet is the dew of their memory, and pleasant the balm of their recollection!”

The whole passage is characteristic and illuminating. Hazlitt is speaking of another, but as writers will and must, whether they mean it or not, he is disclosing himself. The boyish reader’s tears, the grown man’s trembling at the sound of the eloquent French words, and the confession of the concluding sentence (which he repeated word for word

years afterward in the essay, “On Reading Old Books”)—here we have the real Hazlitt, or rather one of the real Hazlitts.

He was strong in memory. His very darkest times—and they were dark enough—he could brighten with sunny recollections: of a painting, it might be, seen twenty years before, and loved ever since; of a favorite actor in a favorite part; of a book read in his youth (“the greatest pleasure in life is that of reading, while we are young”); of the birds that flitted about his path in happier mornings; of the taste of frost-bitten barberries eaten thirty years before, when he was five years old, on the side of King-Oak Hill, in Weymouth,[1] Massachusetts, and never tasted since; of the tea-gardens at Walworth, to which his father used to take him. Oh yes, he can see those gardens still, though he no longer visits them. He has only to “unlock the casket of memory,” and a new sense comes over him, as in a dream; his eyes “dazzle,” his sensations are all “glossy, spruce, voluptuous, and fine.” What luscious adjectives! And how shamelessly, like an innocent, sweet-toothed child, he rolls them under his tongue! Their goodness is inexpressible. But listen to him for another sentence or two, and see what a favor of Providence it is for a writer of essays to be a lover of his own feelings: “I see the beds of larkspur with purple eyes; tall hollyhocks, red or yellow; the broad sunflowers, caked in gold, with bees buzzing round them; wildernesses of pinks, and hot, glowing peonies; poppies run to seed; the sugared lily, and faint mignonette, all ranged in order, and as thick as they can grow; the box-tree borders; the gravel walks, the painted alcove, the confectionery, the clotted

cream:—I think I see them now with sparkling looks; or have they vanished while I have been writing this description of them? No matter; they will return again when I least think of them. All that I have observed since of flowers and plants and grass-plots seem to me borrowed from ‘that first garden of my innocence’—to be slips and scions stolen from that bed of memory.”

How eloquent he grows! “Slips and scions stolen from that bed of memory!” The very words, simple as they are, and homely as is their theme, throb with emotion, and move as if to music. “Most eloquent of English essayists,” his latest biographer pronounces him; and, whether we agree with the judgment or not (sweeping assertions cost little, and contribute to readability), at least we recognize the quality that the biographer has in mind.

A sentimentalist, of all men, knows how to live his good days over again. Pleasure, to his thrifty way of thinking, is not a thing to be enjoyed once, and so done with. He will eat his cake and have it too. Nor shall it be the mere shadow of a feast. Nay, if there is to be any difference to speak of, the second serving shall be better and more substantial than the first. To him nothing else is quite so real as the past. He rejoices in it as in an unchangeable, indefeasible possession. “The past at least is secure.” If the present hour is dark and lonely and friendless, he has only to run back and walk again in sunny, flower-bespangled fields, hand in hand with his own boyhood.

Such was Hazlitt’s practice as a sentimental economist, and it would take an unusually bold Philistine, we think, to maintain that it was altogether a bad one. The words that

he wrote of Rousseau are applicable to himself: “He seems to gather up the past moments of his being like drops of honey-dew to distil a precious liquor from them.” To vary a phrase of Mr. Pater’s, he is a master in the art of impassioned recollection.

It makes little difference where he is, or what circumstance sets him going. He may be among the Alps. “Clarens is on my left,” he says, “the Dent de Jamant is behind me, the rocks of Meillerie opposite: under my feet is a green bank, enamelled with white and purple flowers, in which a dewdrop here and there glitters with pearly light. Intent upon the scene and upon the thoughts that stir within me, I conjure up the cheerful passages of my life, and a crowd of happy images appear before me.” Or he is in London, and hears the tinkle of the “Letter-Bell” as it passes. “It strikes upon the ear, it vibrates to the brain, it wakes me from the dream of time, it flings me back upon my first entrance into life, the period of my first coming up to town, when all around was strange, uncertain, adverse,—a hubbub of confused noises, a chaos of shifting objects,—and when this sound alone, startling me with the recollection of a letter I had to send to the friends I had lately left, brought me as it were to myself, made me feel that I had links still connecting me with the universe, and gave me hope and patience to persevere. At that loud-tinkling, interrupted sound, the long line of blue hills near the place where I was brought up waves in the horizon, a golden sunset hovers over them, the dwarf oaks rustle their red leaves in the evening breeze, and the road from Wem to Shrewsbury, by which I first set out on my journey through life, stares me in

the face as plain, but, from time and change, as visionary and mysterious, as the pictures in the ‘Pilgrim’s Progress.’”

“When a man has arrived at a certain ripeness in intellect,” says Keats, “any one grand and spiritual passage serves him as a starting-post towards all ‘the two-and-thirty Palaces.’” Yes, and some men will go a good way on the same royal road, with no more spiritual incitement than the passing of the postman.

How fondly Hazlitt recalls the day of days when he met Coleridge, and walked with him six miles homeward; when “the very milestones had ears, and Hamer Hill stooped with all its pines, to listen to a poet as he passed.” At the sixth milepost man and boy separated. “On my way back,” says Hazlitt, “I had a sound in my ears—it was the voice of Fancy; I had a light before me—it was the face of Poetry.” A second meeting had been agreed upon, and meanwhile the boy’s soul was possessed by “an uneasy, pleasurable sensation,” thinking of what was in store for him. “During those months the chill breath of winter gave me a welcoming; the vernal air was balm and inspiration to me. The golden sunsets, the silver star of evening, lighted me on my way to new hopes and prospects. *I was to visit Coleridge in the spring.*”

Verily, the words of the dying man begin to sound less paradoxical. He *had* been happy. If his buffetings and disappointments had been more than fall to the lot of average humanity, so had been his joys and his triumphs. He had more *capacity* for joy. Therein, in great part, lay his genius. To borrow a good word from Jeremy Taylor, all his perceptions were “quick and full of relish.” Even his sorrows, once they were far enough behind him, became only a purer

and more ethereal kind of bliss. So he tells us, in one of his later essays, how he loved best of all to lie whole mornings on a sunny bank on Salisbury Plain, with no object before him, neither knowing nor caring how the time passed, his thoughts floating like motes before his half-shut eyes, or some image of the past rushing by him—“Diana and her fawn, and all the glories of the antique world.” “Then,” he adds, “I start away to prevent the iron from entering my soul, and let fall some tears into that stream of time which separates me farther and farther from all I once loved.” Whether the tears were physical or metaphorical, whether they wet the cheek or only the printed page, the man who shed them is not, on their account, to be regarded as an object of commiseration. Sadness that can be thus described, in words so like the fabled nightingale’s song, “most musical, most melancholy,” is more to be desired than much that goes by the name of pleasure, and the deeper and more poignant the emotion, the more precious are its returns.

Nobody ever understood this better than Hazlitt. His sentimentalism, as we call it, was no ignorant, superficial gift of young-ladyish sensibility. It had intellectual foundations. He felt because he knew. He had been intimate with himself; he had cherished his own consciousness. He remarks somewhere that the three perfect egotists of the race were Rousseau, Wordsworth, and Benvenuto Cellini. He would defy the world, he said, to name a fourth. But he might easily enough have named the fourth himself, had not modesty—or something else—prevented. If he had lived longer, he would perhaps have written the fourth man’s

autobiography; his formal autobiography, that is to say. In fact, though not in name, he had already written it; some might be ready to maintain (but they would be wrong) that he had written little else. By “egotism” he meant not selfishness in the more ordinary, mercantile acceptation of the word,—a lack of benevolence, an extravagant desire to be better off than others in the way of worldly “goods,”—but the very quality we have been trying to show forth: absorption in one’s own mind, a profound and perpetual consciousness of one’s own being, the habit of interfusing self and outward things till distinctions of spirit and matter, finite and infinite, self and the universe, are for the moment almost done away with, and feeling is all in all.

This, or something like this, was Hazlitt’s secret. This is the breath of life that throbs in the best of his pages. Whatever subject he handled, a prize-fight, a game of fives, a juggler’s trick, a play of Shakespeare, a picture of Titian, the pleasure of painting, he did it not simply *con amore*, or, as his newer critics say, with gusto (the word is Hazlitt’s own —he wrote an essay about it), but as if the thing were for the time being part and parcel of himself. And so, oftener than is commonly to be expected of essay-writers, his sentences are not so much vivid as alive.

More than most men, he was alive himself. In Keats’s phrase, he felt existence. There was no telling its preciousness to him. The essay “On the Feeling of Immortality in Youth,” though at the end it breaks out despairingly into something like the old cry, *Vanitas vanitatum*, is filled to the brim with a passionate love of this present world. The idea of leaving it is abhorrent to him. To

think what he has been, and what he has enjoyed, in those good days of his; days when he “looked for hours at a Rembrandt without being conscious of the flight of time;” days of the “full, pulpy feeling of youth, tasting existence and every object in it.” What a bliss to be young! Then life is new, and, for all we know of it, endless. As for old age and death, they are no concern of ours. “Like a rustic at a fair, we are full of amazement and rapture, and have no thought of going home, or that it will soon be night.” Sentences like this must have been what Keats had in mind when he spoke so lovingly of “distilled prose;” prose that bears repetition and brooding over, like exquisite verse. Some sentences, indeed, are better than whole books, and this of Hazlitt’s is one of them; as fine, almost,—as purely “distilled,”—as that famous kindred one of Sir William Temple: “When all is done, human life is, at the greatest and the best, but like a froward child, that must be played with and humored a little to keep it quiet till it falls asleep, and then the care is over.”

And since we are quoting (and few authors invite quotation more than Hazlitt, as few have themselves quoted more constantly), let us please ourselves with another sentence from the same essay,—a page-long roll-call of a sentimental man’s beatitudes, turning at the close to a sudden blackness of darkness:—

“To see the golden sun, the azure sky, the outstretched ocean; to walk upon the green earth, and be lord of a thousand creatures; to look down yawning precipices or over distant sunny vales; to see the world spread out under one’s feet on a map; to bring the stars near; to view the smallest insects through a microscope; to read history, and

consider the revolutions of empire and the successions of generations; to hear of the glory of Tyre, of Sidon, of Babylon, and of Susa, and to say all these were before me and are now nothing; to say I exist in such a point of time and in such a point of space; to be a spectator and a part of its ever-moving scene; to witness the change of season, of spring and autumn, of winter and summer; to feel heat and cold, pleasure and pain, beauty and deformity, right and wrong; to be sensible to the accidents of nature; to consider the mighty world of eye and ear; to listen to the stock-dove's notes amid the forest deep; to journey over moor and mountain; to hear the midnight sainted choir; to visit lighted halls, or the cathedral's gloom, or sit in crowded theatres and see life itself mocked; to study the works of art and refine the sense of beauty to agony; to worship fame, and to dream of immortality; to look upon the Vatican, and to read Shakespeare; to gather up the wisdom of the ancients, and to pry into the future; to listen to the trump of war, the shout of victory; to question history as to the movements of the human heart; to seek for truth; to plead the cause of humanity; to overlook the world as if time and nature poured their treasures at our feet—to be and to do all this, and then in a moment to be nothing!"

"To look upon the Vatican, and to read Shakespeare!" Once more we are reminded of Keats, a man very different from Hazlitt in many ways, but, like him, "a near neighbor to himself," and a worshiper of beauty. "Things real," says Keats, "such as existences of sun, moon and stars—and passages of Shakespeare."

Hazlitt’s nature was peculiarly intense, with the very slightest admixture of those saner and commoner elements that keep our poor humanity, in its ordinary manifestations, comparatively reasonable and sweet. His years, from what we read of them, seem to have passed in one long state of feverishness. He cannot have been a pleasant man either for himself or for any one else to live with. Self-absorbed, irascible, and proud, with little or no gift of humor (sentimentalists as a class seem to be deficient in this quality, the case of Sterne to the contrary notwithstanding; and Sterne’s humor is perhaps only an additional reason for suspecting that his fine sentiments were mostly literary), he had a splendid capacity for hating, and was possessed of a kind of ugly courage that made it easy for him to speak with extraordinary plainness of other men’s defects. If the men happened to be his friends, so much the better. He professed, indeed, to like a friend all the more for having “faults that one could talk about.” “Put a pen in his hand,” says Mr. Birrell, “and he would say anything.” Whatever he said or did, suffered or enjoyed, it was all with a kind of passion. As the common saying is, there was no halfway work with him. It could never be complained of him, as he complained of some other writer, that his sentences wanted impetus. He understood the value of surprise, and never balked at an extreme statement. Thus he would say, in the coolest manner imaginable, “It is utterly impossible to persuade an editor that he is nobody.” As if it really were! As if it were not ten times nearer impossible to persuade a contributor that *he* is nobody!

On his way to the famous prize-fight,—famous because he was there,—spending the night at an inn crowded with the “Fancy,” he overheard a “tall English yeoman” holding forth to those about him concerning “rent, and taxes, and the price of corn.” One of his hearers ventured at a certain point to interpose an objection, whereupon the yeoman bore down upon him with the word, “Confound it, man, don’t be insipid.” “Thinks I to myself,” says Hazlitt, “that’s a good phrase.” And so it was, and quite in his own line. “There is no surfeiting on gall,” he remarks somewhere, with admirable truth. He wrote an essay upon “Cant and Hypocrisy,” another upon “Disagreeable People,” and another upon the “Pleasure of Hating.” And he knew whereof he spake. Sentimentalism—the Hazlitt brand of it, at any rate—is nothing like sweetened water. “If any one wishes to see me quite calm,” he says, in his emphatic manner, “they may cheat me in a bargain, or tread upon my toes; but a truth repelled, a sophism repeated, totally disconcerts me, and I lose all patience. I am not, in the ordinary acceptation of the term, a good-natured man.” “Lamb,” he once remarked, “yearns after and covets what soothes the frailty of human nature.” So did not Hazlitt. Lamb delighted in people as such. Even their foibles—especially their foibles, it would be truer to say—were pleasant to him. In short, he was a humorist. Hazlitt’s first interest, on the other hand, seems to have been in places and things,—including books and pictures,—and his own thoughts about them. Of human beings he liked personages, so called, men who have done something,—actors, painters, authors, statesmen, and the like. As for the common run of

his foolish fellow-mortals, if their frailties were to be stroked, by all means let it be done the wrong way. The operation might be less acceptable to the patient, but it would probably do him more good, and would certainly be more amusing to the operator and the lookers-on.

No doubt the man experienced now and then a reaction from his prevailing condition of feverishness. He must have had moods, we may guess, when he saw the beauty and comfort of a quieter way of life. Indeed, he has left one inimitable portrait of a character the exact reverse of his own, a portrait drawn not bitterly nor grudgingly, but in something not altogether unlike the affectionately quizzical spirit of Lamb himself. He calls it the character of a bookworm.

“The person I mean,” he says, “has an admiration for learning, if he is only dazzled by its light. He lives among old authors, if he does not enter much into their spirit. He handles the covers, and turns over the page, and is familiar with the names and dates. He is busy and self-involved. He hangs like a film and cobweb upon letters, or is like the dust upon the outside of knowledge, which should not be rudely brushed aside. He follows learning as its shadow; but as such, he is respectable. He browses on the husk and leaves of books, as the young fawn browses on the bark and leaves of trees. Such a one lives all his life in a dream of learning, and has never once had his sleep broken by a real sense of things. He believes implicitly in genius, truth, virtue, liberty, because he finds the names of these things in books. He thinks that love and friendship are the finest things imaginable, both in practice and theory. The legend of good

women is to him no fiction.[2] When he steals from the twilight of his cell, the scene breaks upon him like an illuminated missal, and all the people he sees are but so many figures in a *camera obscura*. He reads the world, like a favorite volume, only to find beauties in it, or like an edition of some old work which he is preparing for the press, only to make emendations in it, and correct the errors that have inadvertently slipt in. He and his dog Tray are much the same honest, simple-hearted, faithful, affectionate creatures —if Tray could but read! His mind cannot take the impression of vice; but the gentleness of his nature turns gall to milk. He would not hurt a fly. He draws the picture of mankind from the guileless simplicity of his own heart; and when he dies, his spirit will take its smiling leave, without ever having had an ill thought of others, or the consciousness of one in itself!"

It would have been for Hazlitt's happiness, or at least for his comfort, if he had possessed a grain or two of his bookworm's "guileless simplicity." But things must be as they must. His name was not Nathanael. He was "dowered with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn," and it was not in his nature to be patient and easy-going, especially where anything so vitally essential as a difference of opinion touching the character of Napoleon Bonaparte was concerned. He had the qualities of his defects. If he was sometimes too peppery, he was never insipid.

Men write best of matters in which they are most interested and most at home, and of Hazlitt we may say, speaking a little cynically, after his own manner, that with all his multiplicity of topics, he wrote best about his own